

- Good afternoon. Today is Wednesday, October 7th, 2020. My name is Michelle Shoresman, and I'd like to welcome you to San Luis Obispo County's Weekly COVID-19 Media Briefing. This afternoon, we have four speakers. We will begin with San Luis Obispo County Superintendent of Schools, Dr. James Brescia. He will be followed by Shandon Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Kristina Benson, and Superintendent of Cayucos Elementary and Coast Unified School Districts, Scott Smith. And we will conclude with County Health Officer, Dr. Penny Borenstein. County Administrative Officer and Emergency Services Director, Mr. Wade Horton is also here and available to take your questions. Thank you to our American sign language interpreter, Robin Babb. And now SLO County Superintendent of Schools, Dr. James Brescia.

- Good afternoon. And thank you once again to the County of San Luis Obispo for inviting us to join here today to give you an update on the schools throughout our county. Our County Health Officer, Dr. Penny Borenstein has affirmed schools within our county have the option to increase modified in-person instruction according to the criteria listed in the State's COVID-19 blueprint for a safer economy. According to the State of California, we can increase in-person instruction once our county has remained in the red tier for at least two weeks. Prior to reopening, our schools must submit a plan for modified in-person instruction to County Public Health for review and consultation.

All of the schools in our county are following these guidelines. Per the State's reopening framework, schools that open during this time will continue to work with public health if conditions change and take appropriate steps to ensure safety. The County Public Health Department continues to work closely with the San Luis Obispo County Office of Education, our districts, charters, private and parochial schools as we all continue to increase in-person services. Many of the local districts have agenda items before their governing boards this week to approve local reopening plans. If you have questions about your district, your charter, private or parochial school, please consult the school's website to review the reopening plans. All schools continue to work closely with public health on this process and throughout the pandemic with the goal of providing our county youth the best education we can through this pandemic.

In regards to childcare, several districts are working closely with nonprofit and government childcare providers to continue service and to meet safety protocols. Thank you to the community foundation, First 5, local school districts, the Moca

Foundation, and other local childcare providers for continuing to subsidize childcare costs during the pandemic. We continue to accept donations on the County office website for COVID mitigation. As far as protective equipment and actions, additional shipments are being received this week and distributed to all of our school districts throughout the county. And we will begin distribution to private and parochial schools the following week. Most of our districts have experienced some type of COVID-19 exposure. And I wanna compliment our employees throughout the county for following the safety protocols and taking mitigation steps to prevent further exposure. In closing, I ask for all of your help and support, because it requires all of us to continue taking the right precautions to reduce the transmission in our communities and allow us to continue increasing in-person services. Today, I have Dr. Kristina Benson, who is the Superintendent of Shandon, and Scott Smith, who's the Superintendent of Cayucos and Coast School Districts to share with you about their local plans. Thank you. And my colleague, Dr. Kristina Benson.

- Good afternoon. At Shandon Joint Unified School District, we are currently participating in small group cohorts for our students. Our cohorts are no greater than 14 students with two adults, and in most cases they're smaller than that. The cohorts are at all sites in the school district. On October 20th, my school board will relook at the opening plan, the reopening plan, and decide whether or not to change the cohort procedure that we currently have. Do you have any questions for me? Okay. I'd like to introduce my colleague, Scott Smith.

- Thank you, Dr. Benson. My name is Scott Smith. I'm the superintendent for Coast Unified School District and Cayucos Elementary School District. Right now I'm really proud of what our district has been doing to serve students during distance learning. But we are making cautious steps towards in-person services. Right now we're looking at finding out how we can continue to provide some wrap around in-person services for students while they are in distance learning to make cautious steps forward for students who are struggling right now in distance learning. But just because we can move towards in-person instruction and the gate is open for us to do so doesn't mean we're gonna run through that gate, right? We're gonna take cautious steps towards in-person services so that we can make sure that we protect the learning continuity and educational continuity of our instructional programs. The last thing we want is to be pulling students back and forth between instructional programs. So thank you. That's, at this point, where we're moving and

it's similar to where Shandon is with the Learning Pod Model and supporting students through those small group learning pods. And that's all I have. Thank you. And Dr. Bornstein is up next.

- Thank you. Thank you to our superintendents. So let me start, as I always do, with where we are in this county. With respect to our numbers of cases, they continue to tick up modestly, but still at that level, that's averaging close to 20 cases a day. So yesterday we had 24 cases and that puts us at 3,779. We continue to be in very good shape. This week is as good as we've been for a very long time. Three individuals in the hospital, none in intensive care. And we haven't had any additional deaths. since I last came before the public. Our blueprint status has held steady. We continue in the red tier. So what that means, again, to remind folks is it is the second least restrictive tier. So we were in purple for a few weeks, meaning most of our businesses had to be closed. In the red tier, our businesses can be open at a certain capacity with modifications and we continue there into now our third week, we are starting in the red tier status.

In order to get to the next tier, which would be orange, and allow our businesses to open more fully, we have to bring our case numbers down even more. So we meet the test positivity metric. In fact, we are once again seeing the yellow tier level for test positivity less than 2% countywide, but our case count remains in the above four cases per hundred thousand population. That's where we would need to get and stay for two weeks in order for us to progress to the next level. And that we would have to do for two consecutive weeks. So we're able to move to the orange tier now that we've been in red for three weeks, but we cannot make that movement until we see our case counts drop along with our lower test positivity rate where we have had a lot of success.

So once again, I just will remind folks it is within our community's hands and power to make these changes that whereby we continue to drive down the ability to see cases drive down the amount of community transmission through the protective measures that we've been saying over and over again, which is wear a face covering, keep your distance from people not in your household, don't mix together in large numbers, or, you know even limited numbers, keep it very small and tight, wash your hands frequently, stay home when you're sick. These are the actions that we all need to take. We continue to see most people, most businesses doing everything that they need to do and lots of people moving through the county. The

weather's nice. We like to see people outdoors exercising, but to do so in these ways that we continue to talk about.

So the one major change and why you're seeing such a focus today with school personnel here is after two weeks in the red, that happened yesterday, our schools may open for in-person instruction beyond the elementary school grades. So previously we had approved 13 waivers for private and parochial schools only and only for in-person instruction for elementary schools. All of our school districts now may move forward with reopening. They may do so in any way that they choose to. You've heard a couple of examples, and that could be K through 12. It can be smaller numbers. It can be a hybrid system. It can be, you know, lots of different ways at schools and their Boards are looking at and their school communities of parents and staff.

We are still allowing, however, for the elementary school waiver process, which is slightly more formal in that it is an application and it must be very definitive about which grades and how they're going to operate within those elementary school grades. And we send that information to the State and the school system must post their waiver application and plan on their website. It is not terribly different than what we are asking of our schools related to reopening. Many of the school districts back in June, July had sent reopening plans. We are asking them if they are planning to move forward to brush those off, to have those school board meetings, to engage all of their constituents, and to share a revised and updated plan with public health for our review and consultation so that we can work together in ensuring that all of the State guidance related to school in person instruction in the various environments: elementary school, middle school, high school, and some of the wraparound services, youth sports, et cetera, are all being adhered to with respect to state guidance.

So that is what's happening with our schools to let you know that we have already received six requests from private and parochial schools to open more broadly. These are schools that had already submitted a waiver and they are planning to expand. And we do have one public school submission. It's a charter school. And so that review is undergoing as well, but not withstanding the opportunity to open. We also have just received a two way, three now, as of today, requests for waivers for these school districts, Paso Robles, Pleasant Valley, and Atascadero to move forward with elementary school opening under the waiver process.

With respect to the blueprint, I do want to address the health equity metric that has been talked about for a number of weeks, and finally has been put into effect. And I'm happy to report that our county is one of a limited number of counties that is meeting the requirement for the health equity metric. And what that metric is to ensure that those census tracts or areas of the county that have worse likelihood for lesser health outcomes, because of a variety of characteristics about that place, be it the housing situation, the transportation situation, access to healthy food, access to health care. It's a whole constellation of characteristics that defines each of our census tracts by a number across the spectrum. The lowest quartile of each of those ranked census tracts are designated in this metric as needing to achieve the same test positivity rate or better than the county as a whole in order for our county to move forward into the next or less restrictive tier.

So, as I mentioned earlier, our case count needs to come down to a level that we can move forward into orange, but also we now are keeping an eye on our test positivity rate for the county as a whole as well as this lowest quartile of census tracts to make sure that we are not leaving any community behind in terms of the impact on those more vulnerable places. We are, as I said, meeting that metric. In fact, our countywide metric for test positivity is in the yellow range. That same metric is just above the threshold into the orange range. If we were to be able to have our countywide test positivity rate as well as these additional census tracts have that lower test positivity rate in the yellow tier, that would be another way in which we could move forward in this county into the orange tier. So we're putting a lot of energy into that. We're working with a wide variety of stakeholders addressing homeless issues, addressing vulnerable communities, addressing the farmworker communities, places that we have seen higher impacts not just in our county but across the nation so that we can have an even playing field.

And lastly, I want to talk about Halloween. As I had mentioned, the last time we have, we committed to issuing Halloween guidance if the state's guidance as promised was not forthcoming, we did not receive that guidance as we had hoped to last week, so we did go ahead on Friday and issue Halloween guidance. It's really quite simple. We are asking of our community to treat Halloween in the same ways as we've been asking consistently to take these same protective measures of travel only with your household, keep distance from people, wear masks. So how does this play out with Halloween? Well, if you're going to make the decision to trick or treat, which is a higher risk than simply celebrating your holiday at home with your

family, with decorations, with cakes, with, you know, scavenger hunt, all these other ways that you could celebrate Halloween but we recognize that there are people who are still committed to the traditional trick or treating. If you are going to do that, then we ask that you wear a face covering, not just a costume mask, that you do so only with household members, that you stay away from crowded communities, that if you are the giver of the treats, that you do so in safer ways by maybe just leaving the treats out on your doorstep. Or if you do hand it to someone, do so at a distance with a grabber or a slide. And we have put a hard stop, however, on large events, entertainment. Indoor or outdoor haunted houses tends to be a tradition around Halloween, and we're requesting, not requesting, simply telling the community to please not do those things this year. So that's really all I had to say as to what's going on in our community at this time. And all of us are available for questions.

- [Man] Dr. Borenstein, you mentioned the case rates continue to have around 20. I think I counted about 21 in the last week. I know I've asked this before, but to get to the orange, 'cause if you're asking county needs to drop even more so, what kind of numbers are we looking at in terms of proceeding to the orange?

- 13 to 14 cases on average per day. And the reason we have successfully stayed in red is also attributed to our higher testing volume. So once again, our case rate was adjusted on the basis of us having one of the higher testing rates in the State of California. We don't wanna just rely on lots and lots of testing, but it is effective as a way of assuring better that you are capturing all of the positive cases.

- [Man] Yeah, in regards to the equity metric, you know, the website [readyslo.org](https://readyslo.org) has evolved over the months and that everyone, not everyone, a lot of people like to look at those numbers see where the county is at. Is that something that is now being posted onto the website? It's a complicated formula, it sounds like. So is that something that people have an ability to check out how the county's doing in that area?

- Yeah, so right now the health equity metric is available on the State's website. And we are in the process of rejuvenating our website to capture that information as well.

- [Woman] As we're tuning in, we're pretty close to, you know, the purple metric given our case rate. Is there a plan for what schools will do if we do end up going back to the purple?

- Yeah, and I can have Dr. Brescia addressed that as well. I will just tell you that when a county moves from red to purple and does have school systems open for in-person instruction, that is not an automatic close the schools. There are some other things around testing and, you know, ensuring that we do more to keep our eyes on what's going on and some metrics that are built in to the school's plans, but I can certainly let you.

- Dr. Borenstein met with all of our school district's private and parochial schools online last week and discussed that question. So should we move back? Should we have more restrictive conditions within the county than each local jurisdiction is, each local agency would be talking with public health about what's appropriate? So even though the state is saying you can continue to move forward, that would be in consultation with public health and of course our bargaining units, our unions, our employees and families

- I just wanna add to that to just, because we get this, we get a lot of those questions understandably from families and staff, is there are specific metrics that we would be looking at. Again, they're not absolutes, but three or more clusters in a school might lead to a school closure. 5% of that entire school campus' population being infected is one of the metrics we'd look at when multiple schools are having outbreaks at the same time. 25% of the schools in the district would be a sentinel metric for consideration of closing the district at that point.

- [Man] What would you say are the biggest hurdles or roadblocks that our county needs to overcome in order to reach that orange tier?

- You know, thank you for the question. We get asked this a lot, and unfortunately I don't have anything new to offer except the same, you know, tired messaging of if we all do our part, and it really does mean everyone. We've seen it play out in other communities, in Washington where some people saying, you know, but I was diligent. But if there are individuals who are not and create the conditions for us to continue to spread, whether it's our youthful population or people who refuse to wear a mask or people who are gathering at large parties, those are the conditions that are gonna keep us having these higher numbers of cases. So I continue to say the same things over and over again to our community is this is not gonna last a lifetime but we do need to and get our schools open. We need to get people back to business, and so we need to have our cases low enough that we don't put at risk the entire community's ability to move forward.

- [Man] And so everyone does their part. What sort of timeline do you foresee then getting into orange and eventually the lowest tier?

- You know, in theory, it could be two weeks from now in orange. And if everything went really well, best case scenario could be three weeks after that getting to yellow. I know that there are many constituencies especially in the events arena that are saying that still doesn't get us where we need to be. This is a pandemic, it's gonna be ongoing until we have absolutely solid effective treatment for everyone or vaccination that yields herd immunity. Think we're still in quite a few months away from either of those. But we can, you know, people are traveling, people are doing things with their families, camping, outdoor activities, just, you know, we need to skip some of the usual events that we're used to for another period of time.

- [Man] I've got a question either for you or Dr. Brescia. I can ask you, first of all, what are you seeing in terms of the schools that have reopened here in the county, state, and across the nation in terms of spread?

- It's variable. The amount of spread in different communities. Again, I think it's very much dependent on, and that's why we are asking the schools to work with us to make sure that they're implementing best practice scenarios. And I think some school districts across the country, especially when the community transmission is low, are doing a very good job of maintaining in-person instruction and other places are having a much harder time. It really is related to where you are in the scale of how much transmission is going on. As we get into winter, we're more concerned that people will be indoors more, we'll see more of this. So we may be going through this back and forth for some period, but we would like to just be moving forward. I do think it's possible.

- [Man] And, Dr. Brescia, I do have a question for you as a separate question. And I know this is kind of impossible to answer. No, it's not one size fits all, but I know parents are just eager. There's so many different school districts. Realistic timeline for people to see their kids go back inside classrooms. I know it's variable, but what can you offer in terms of what potentially could happen in school districts around the county?

- Sure, I think as we continue to be safe as a community and drive down the virus, you will see all of our schools increase their in-person services. You heard from two colleagues today that have already started that, plans were on line with Atascadero, in Paso Robles to increase theirs, as well as San Miguel this week. So I would

anticipate seeing more increased services towards the end of October. And if our numbers stay the same, that would continue to increase, but it is different in each local jurisdiction. Each local school district board approves that plan in consultation with public health. I can tell you that we are, our goal is to get back to in-person instruction. That is the most effective tool in our educational tool belt for as many children as possible. So I know I can't point to a date on the map. I mean, if Dr. Borenstein and I could do that when Vegas reopens, we'd be there immediately.

- [Woman] Any questions?

- Thank you all for being here again today. You can still get all our county's COVID-19 information on [readyslo.org](https://readyslo.org) and from our phone assistance center and our public health information line. We continue to offer free, safe, and easy COVID-19 testing at a number of locations around the county. Same and next day appointments are often available. You can get all the details about times, dates, and locations on [readyslo.org](https://readyslo.org). Just a few other new announcements for today, a reminder to save the date for upcoming public drive through flu clinics on October 21st from one to 5 P.M. in Arroyo Grande and Atascadero. Nasal spray vaccine will be available at those sites for those that are between two and 49. More details are available on the county's website at [slocounty.ca.gov/flushots2020](https://slocounty.ca.gov/flushots2020). Our county phone assistance center will be closed along with all other county offices on Monday in observance of Columbus Day. And the county services will resume as usual on Tuesday, October 13th. Finally, starting today, we encourage the public to view these briefings live online at [keyt.com](https://keyt.com) and [ksby.com](https://ksby.com). They will also broadcast live on cable channel 13. Shortly after each briefing, we will post the videos on our SLO County Public Health Facebook page as well as the County of SLO YouTube channel. And as always, these briefings will be rebroadcast on public's access channel 21 at 8 A.M., 5 P.M., and midnight until the next briefing occurs. Thank you all for being engaged and informed. Be kind, and we will see you next Wednesday at 3:15.