

July 27, 2020

Dane County Board of Health

CC: Public Health Madison & Dane County

CC: Dane County Board of Supervisors

CC: Dane County Executive Joe Parisi

CC: Alderpersons of the City of Madison

CC: City of Madison Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway

Dear Members of the Board of Health of Dane County,

I am writing today to ask that the Board of Health immediately close down non-essential businesses and gatherings to prevent further community spread of COVID-19, so that we can allow K-12 schools to safely reopen for in-person instruction as soon as possible.

I'm an infectious disease epidemiologist, a resident of Dane County and a parent of two elementary-aged children in the Madison Metropolitan School District. At UW-Madison's Applied Population Laboratory, I study how infectious diseases spread in populations. I have two graduate degrees in public health and my research is currently funded by a grant from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

Since moving to Phase 2 reopening, we have seen a large and sustained increase in the amount of SARS-CoV-2 circulating in the community. The increase started on approximately June 18th, over four weeks ago, just after Dane County moved to Phase 2 of the [Forward Dane reopening plan](#). Public Health Madison & Dane County responded by making targeted changes to the public health order, but they have not resulted in local control of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Bars and gyms remain open, and private parties and other high-risk gatherings continue to be allowed, yet [press releases](#) from our department of public health indicate that these activities are responsible for many of the cases now circulating. In addition, the same press releases have indicated that many cases are among younger county residents living near campus. [These same age groups are likely to have high-contact jobs in the service industries and work directly with children](#), so they have considerable opportunity to pass COVID-19 to other populations.

Meanwhile, several school districts in Dane County have announced that they will not resume in-person instruction -- *which is absolutely essential to the health, safety, and education of our young people as well as our economic recovery prospects* -- because the amount of disease circulating in our community means they cannot come back to school safely. I agree with them. Given the current number of COVID-19 infections in our community, there is no way to open schools for in-person instruction without risking an outbreak in schools. It is essential to gain control of the outbreak in Dane County in order to open schools.

Having schools open for in-person instruction, with priority on the youngest grade levels and those who require access to supportive services, should be our absolute highest priority. Working parents depend on our younger children being in school in-person in order to be active participants in the economy. Some working parents are being asked to choose between losing their jobs or going to work and leaving their young children home alone. Many students depend on school for meals, structure, supervision, safety, services, and social support. Virtual learning will also exacerbate opportunity gaps because privileged families are more likely to have a parent at home or be able to hire a caregiver / tutor. In short, virtual learning undermines our economy and cements social inequality. Virtual learning will only exacerbate Dane County's shameful position as one of the United States' worst regions for racial disparities in education and health.

To summarize the last few paragraphs: Allowing adults to congregate in bars, restaurants, gyms, retail locations, and private parties is *absolutely not* essential and is actively compromising the health, safety, and education of the children of our county, particularly the most vulnerable. This is a major failure of the social contract. It is insanity.

Looking ahead, Dane County expects to welcome back tens of thousands of university students in the first week of September. Most of these students are in the age group that has already demonstrated significant capacity to spread COVID-19 in social settings. Without intervention, the return to campus life in September is all but guaranteed to exacerbate a problem that has already harmed our county's economic welfare and social justice goals, and could lead to the need to continue virtual K-12 instruction through the entire 2020-2021 school year.

For these reasons, my cosigners and I ask you to return Dane County to a forward-moving direction by directing PHMDC to immediately prohibit non-essential, high-risk gatherings in public and private settings. Local, in-person businesses are an important building block of our community, but at this critical moment in managing the local outbreak of COVID-19, we must consider the social health and economy of Dane County more broadly. In-person public education is a critical function of society. It is foundational for our social and economic welfare, the health, safety, development and education of children, and for racial justice, and there is no way to return to in-person instruction without risking an outbreak in schools [until we get control of the outbreak in the community](#) more broadly. **A return to more rigorous restrictions on gatherings until we have control of the outbreak is necessary.**

Thank you for your attention.

Signed,

Malia Jones, PhD, MPH

Associate Scientist in Health Geography, [Applied Population Laboratory at UW-Madison](#)
Editor in Chief, Dear Pandemic on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#)

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