

# Wisconsin Education Association Council: Calls for statewide school gating criteria

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The Wisconsin Education Association Council is calling on the state Department of Health Services to impose gating requirements for schools to use in making decisions about whether to hold classes virtually or in-person.

“All students and educators, regardless of where they live, deserve to learn and teach in safe conditions,” said WEAC President Ron Martin, and eighth grade teacher. Three months into the school year, it’s clear that school districts require consistent criteria applied evenly across the state, instead of district-by-district decisions that are increasingly inconsistent and unsafe, Martin said.

“We’re nearly through the first semester of school, and the inconsistencies in what’s considered safe for schools are growing,” Martin said. “The spread of COVID is rampant. WEAC is prepared to defend our position in the face of any opposition to protect students through science-based health and safety measures.”

WEAC, whose members are public school teachers and education support professionals, have been involved in discussions with state leaders since March, bringing forward educators’ recommendations for safety operating schools. After nine months, Wisconsin is a leading hotbed of COVID cases and while there have been statewide restrictions, no comprehensive action has been prescribed for schools. It is within the department’s legal authority to impose statewide, binding and effective metric to be applied by all school districts in making decisions about appropriate instructional models during the COVID-19 pandemic, Martin said.

WEAC recommends DHS adopt the model developed by the Harvard Global Health

Institute and require all school districts comply with this metric. The Harvard Model uses case incidence as the primary, threshold metric. If the case incidence rate suggests in-person instruction could be appropriate, then key performance indicators including contact tracing and testing capabilities are reviewed in identifying appropriate instructional models.

“The priority of the state’s top public health agency must be keeping our communities safe until this pandemic is under control,” Martin said. “Enforcing consistent gating criteria is a responsible solution, grounded in science and public health.”

By adopting the Harvard Model and requiring its application in schools throughout the state, DHS will ensure that decision-making in schools is not based on politics or external pressure but upon scientific factors designed to curb the spread of COVID-19.

“Wisconsin educators will continue to go the extra mile so students thrive in online classrooms and to help families adjust to virtual learning,” Martin said. “We want nothing more than to be with our students in person, and consistently applied gating criteria will get us there faster.”

### **Cases Surging in Wisconsin**

- The positive percentage of new COVID cases has reached a new high this week, with a 36.4% positivity rate over a seven-day period, suggesting many more cases than reported, and over 90 percent of ICU hospital beds are in use.
- According to the DHS, the seven-day average of new cases per day has grown to 6,426. Wisconsin has reached a total of 317,820 confirmed cases and almost a quarter of those are still active.
- The latest White House Coronavirus Task Force report shows Wisconsin has the third highest infection rate in the nation.
- All but seven Wisconsin counties have “critically high” burden rates. The remaining Wisconsin counties have “very high” burden rates.
- DHS is conducting 676 *active* outbreak investigations in educational facilities. DHS reports a total of 868 outbreak investigations in educational facilities, indicating 78% of reported outbreak investigation are currently active.
- The infection rate in Wisconsin children ages 4-17 has more than tripled since August 30.

## **Lack of State Criteria for Schools**

- More than half of local health departments WEAC reviewed have not developed any school-specific criteria for moving between instructional models, and many school districts under the jurisdiction of these health departments without metrics do not appear to have developed their own decision-making frameworks.
- There is a lack of uniformity and consistency in gating criteria among those local health departments that have developed criteria.
- Application of the gating criteria developed by local health departments is discretionary, and many school districts choose not to apply it.
- Where school districts have developed their own gating criteria unjustified differences exist between neighboring communities.
- Where school districts have developed their own metrics, they change or disregard them to justify their decision to permit in-person instruction.
- Schools are remaining open under unsafe conditions.
- The lack of mandatory statewide criteria for schools has led to decision-making that is not based on science and has resulted in divisiveness in local communities.

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