

# Michigan's spring break plateau shows a lockdown could stop pandemic surge

Zac Corrigan  
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Michigan remains the hottest pandemic hotspot in the US, where the more-contagious B.1.1.7 variant is now rampant in every part of the state and daily case rates have remained above 70 per 100,000 for nearly two weeks. Intensive care units (ICUs) are at 84 percent capacity, the highest in the nation, and COVID-19 patients fill 22 percent of all adult beds in Michigan's hospitals, which are rationing healthcare to make room for more.

After the decline of the fall/winter surge in January, B.1.1.7 arrived in Michigan and took hold as school districts across the state were returning to in-person learning. The number of Michiganders who were confirmed COVID-19 positive each day surged from a low of 1,045 on February 20 to more than 7,000 by April 9. Though it still leads the nation, Michigan appears to have reached a plateau between 7,000 and 8,000 daily new cases for now.

Significantly, this leveling-off coincides with a sharp reduction in the number of outbreaks reported at K-12 schools and school sporting events during and following the spring break, which saw schools across Michigan closed for either the last week of March or the first week of April on a district-by-district basis. Schools have accounted for far more outbreaks in Michigan than any other setting since the new surge began in late February.

Schools and school sporting events were the only places in Michigan where the rate of new outbreaks declined over the past two weeks, and it was a huge decline. Outbreaks traced to schools fell from an all-time high of 81 per week on April 1, to 43 on April 15—a 46 percent drop over just two weeks. School sports outbreaks also fell by one quarter over the same period, from 28 to 21 weekly outbreaks.

On the other hand, at factories, nursing homes,

retailers and restaurants—which of course did not observe spring break—all these settings continued to see rising numbers of outbreaks over the same two-week period. For the first time this year, the worst vector of spread in Michigan was manufacturing and construction jobs, with 47 outbreaks last week, the highest number yet recorded in this setting by the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS).

The situation in Michigan's auto plants in particular has spiraled out of control, where management long ago abandoned its piecemeal safety protocols. At Stellantis' Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit, workers stopped production last Friday after yet another worker tested positive.

The numbers show that closing schools for spring break immediately blunted the skyrocketing trajectory of the pandemic in Michigan. At the same time, keeping factories, workplaces, nursing homes and restaurants open resulted in a continued increase in the spread of COVID-19 in those settings. The strong indication is that a coordinated shutdown of schools, workplaces and in-person shopping and dining would bring an end to Michigan's surge and suppress the spread of the virus.

While these official numbers are known to be an undercount, the trends clearly show what workers, teachers and students know from their daily experience, packed like sardines into badly ventilated schools and workplaces at the meaningless CDC-recommended distance of three to six feet: schools and workplaces are driving the spread of COVID-19, and they must be closed in coordination with a vaccination program in order to end the pandemic.

But far away from the schools and factories, in the rarified heights where Governors and "authoritative"

journalists are to be found, a false narrative prevails, one in which the abject refusal of the government to close schools and workplaces in the face of a surging new variant goes totally unmentioned, and instead it is supposedly reckless workers and youth, defying masking and social distancing guidelines, who are to blame for the continuation of the pandemic.

Sunday on NBC's *Meet the Press*, host Chuck Todd made a show of grilling Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer on her failure to "not be bullied into not following the science," as she had vowed to do when ordering Michigan into a limited shutdown last summer. But the conversation focused exclusively on secondary measures like capacity restrictions on restaurants and mask mandates, never mentioning schools or factories. Whitmer was allowed to falsely state that "this virus could be contained by the simple act of wearing a mask."

Another major news source blacking out the issue of COVID-19 in Michigan's schools and workplaces is the *New York Times*. The *Times*' page "Tracking Coronavirus in Michigan: Latest Map and Case Count" includes a section called "Outbreak clusters," which completely omits K-12 schools and almost all workplaces while falsely presenting colleges, prisons, nursing homes, and two meatpacking plants as the main sources of outbreaks. The word "school" does not even appear on the page, and no auto plants are included in any category.

Whitmer and the media are ignoring outbreaks at schools and factories and keeping them open on behalf of Michigan's ruling elite. In order to shut them down, workers would have to be provided with a subsidized income while they remained safely at home until the pandemic has passed. Instead, billionaire wealth has increased an astonishing 60 percent since the pandemic began, based on the policy that workers must return to work, and their children must therefore return to school buildings, no matter the body count.

The other big lie about Michigan's pandemic surge is that the Democratic Governor's hands are tied by Republicans in the state legislature, whose devious legal maneuvers have permanently removed her emergency powers. A state supreme court decision in October ruled that the two laws she was citing in executive orders were invalid. "We don't have the exact same tools in our toolbox," Whitmer now

complains at every opportunity.

In fact, the governor has plenty of other "tools" at her disposal. Most obviously, the MDHHS issued a "Gatherings and Face Mask Order" on November 15 which states, "Gatherings at public, nonpublic, and boarding schools for the purpose of conducting in-person instruction, sports, and extracurricular activities serving pupils in grades 9 through 12 are prohibited." The order also closed bowling alleys, casinos, gyms, and other venues, while leaving K-8 schools open.

A January study from the University of Michigan estimated that these high school closures and restrictions on indoor gatherings prevented over 100,000 cases of COVID-19 and as many as 2,800 deaths last winter. But now the order has been replaced by an updated version which allows schools to remain open at all grade levels.



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