

January 29, 2021

Dear Oregon Legislature,

My name is Carolina Amador. I am a mother of 3 and a community pediatrician in Corvallis, Oregon and have been practicing for 18 years. For the past 16 years, I have been practicing in a community health center serving the needs of children and families who are most vulnerable. I have also been a part of Benton County's School review team working in collaboration with schools regarding re-opening plans. In that role, I have been deeply involved with reviewing data as well as state guidelines. In the midst of that, I have continued seeing patients in a primary care setting. These experiences have allowed me to see the impact of the pandemic from different perspectives. While there are still so many uncertainties, two things remain clear. First, COVID has unveiled many wounds in our society and one that I'm most concerned about is *inequities*. Second, in large part, children and adolescents are not doing well in a general sense with respect to physical and mental health and we have other public health crises evolving rapidly as a consequence of the pandemic.

As a pediatrician, I am seeing a massive increase in:

- Young children exhibiting concerning behaviors related to sensory deprivation and lack of personal contact with their teachers and peers
- Parents (especially women) either neglecting their work or neglecting their child because working, mothering, and home teaching cannot be done simultaneously.
- Older children with escalating anxiety and depression. It is rare for me to see an adolescent with a negative depression screening. Coupled with this, identification of children with significant mental health problems is reduced as well as access to mental health supports.
- Adolescents who just simply stop showing up and are well on their way to dropping out of high school. Dropping out of high school is life changing, as we all know.
- Children who initially experienced boredom which has transformed into apathy and now, complete withdrawal
- Deep sorrow and loneliness

When the pandemic began, inequities began growing exponentially from the start. Now that we are 11 months in, I am seeing that adverse effects on mental and physical health are permeating the entire population. Remote learning works well for a small percentage of children and that should be continued. Families whose children need in person education have not had options.

With respect to school re-opening, we have been largely focused on getting younger children back to school first, which is appropriate in many ways. They are less able to really learn over long periods of time remotely. However, now that we are approaching one year of school closure, I am seeing that we have exhausted the stamina of older children and adolescents who need peer interaction for brain development and identity formation. The identification of adolescents who are having significant mental health problems, including suicidality, is greatly diminished as well.

I realize that returning to school while protecting our teachers and school staff is exceedingly challenging. The risk of COVID is not going away anytime soon. I was so grateful to see so many our teachers receive their first vaccination yesterday but the impact of vaccination will take a while and we cannot let so many more months go by without addressing these crises. Now that it has been a year, we have studies, experiences, and expert advice indicating that this can be done in a way that mitigates risk tremendously. Oregon has some the best COVID rates in the nation coupled with some of the most stringent health and safety protocols. We cannot let the health of our children continue to deteriorate. It is clear that when schools practice health and safety protocols with fidelity that the risk of COVID-19 among students and staff is greatly diminished.

We have the framework in place. Vaccinations have started. Health and safety protocols are mandated. We must prioritize our children. We must find creative solutions. I believe that parents, teachers and leaders in this state have the capacity and the will to address these very complex issues.

Thank you so very much for all of your hard work and dedication to improving the health and wellness of all Oregonians, and especially children.

Carolina Amador MD, MPH