

Against public opposition, Michigan Democrats and Republicans push for unsafe reopening of schools

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Like states across the US, Michigan is preparing to reopen public schools under wholly unsafe conditions. Both Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer and the Republican-controlled legislature have fully committed to the resumption of in-person schooling, in line with the demands of automakers and other big businesses. Both wings of the political duopoly are preparing their own half-measures on safety which will lead to a devastating spread of the lethal coronavirus.

As the COVID-19 pandemic rages out of control throughout the country and increasingly in Michigan, the state continues to reel from the economic impact of mass unemployment and declining tax revenues. Michigan faces an education budget shortfall of unprecedented proportions, estimated at \$2.39 billion for the 2020–21 school year, which does not include additional costs associated with infection control measures for the reopening of schools estimated at \$1 billion.

Michigan's average number of new cases per day is now 241, one and a half times greater than the previous seven-day average of 146. Almost a quarter of the state's counties are among the top 20 percent nationally for deaths per 1,000 residents. The University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation has projected that the state will have the fourth most COVID-19 deaths nationally this fall as infections mount.

Currently, not a single US state meets the White House's original guidelines for reopening schools—declining cases over 14 days and adequate testing, contact tracing and hospital surge capacity. Nevertheless, Trump has demanded the schools be opened “ASAP” to herd workers back to work and fuel Wall Street's demand for profit-taking.

Whitmer, who played a critical role in the national back-to-work campaign when she opened auto production on May 11, has responded to the spike by pressing forward with the reopening of the economy, even allowing an annual mass swim party near Detroit to proceed while deflecting responsibility for the inevitable further rise in infections to residents. Uttering platitudes, urging Michiganders to “Be vigilant. Be smart. Be safe,” she has promised a “robust” plan for school reopenings by June 30.

It is the national policy of both the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association (NEA) to actively collaborate in the unsafe return to school as long as they can maintain their “seat at the table” and dues-revenue stream.

NEA Vice President Becky Pringle testified June 15 at the House Committee on Education and Labor about “how to reopen K-12 school buildings safely.” The word “test” did not occur once in her remarks.

This Tuesday, Michigan Republicans issued a “Return to Learn” initiative. Unsurprisingly, it was essentially copied from the pro-privatization lobby group Great Lakes Education Project, lavishly funded by Trump Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and Wall Street. The main emphasis of the proposal is online education and standardized testing, while eviscerating state standards. Online education is a highly lucrative avenue both for the tech industry, for-profit content producers and virtual charter schools.

Moreover, on Thursday the US Department of Education issued its final rule on CARES funding, specifying that states can choose between distributing money only to Title I schools and low-income students in private schools, or to all schools with a set-aside for private institutions. In other words, the CARES funding has been turned into a device to funnel public money into private and parochial schools.

The unsafe return to school is an entirely bipartisan plan, with big business clear that there will be no more money for schools. The Trump administration has stated that even the entirely inadequate funding proposed in the HEROES bill, a public relations effort by the Democrats, is “dead on arrival.”

The “Return to Learn” proposal by Michigan Republicans requires all elementary school students to attend school in person every day, a measure with which Democratic-run Detroit schools concur. Likewise, both plans agree that older children can stay at home alone and learn online while their parents are at work. Among the many Michigan districts that have already released plans for reopening that offer some combination of distance and on-site learning, not one could be found by this reporter which includes COVID-19 testing of everyone seeking entrance to school buildings.

“Return to Learn” encourages schools to develop “robust” distance-learning plans, redefining attendance to mean “engaged in learning” rather than “present in a classroom.” In practice, this means students only need be marginally involved in their lessons from home, having “checked in” once a day with their teacher. It is also a lower threshold that teachers may be expected to reach with a much greater number of students per day, suggesting that

this could be used to justify the firing of numerous teachers. It maintains standardized testing immediately following the student's return in the fall to assess "where a student needs additional help" after the widespread trauma of virus casualties, economic devastation and months of home isolation.

The bill proposes a one-time \$500 bonus to "frontline teachers" since they have been "flexible and innovative in a time of unprecedented change." The plan also stipulates that the school year will now start before Labor Day, and the number of snow days will be cut by two-thirds since remote learning can now occur.

There is overwhelming opposition by parents and teachers to the unsafe reopening of US schools. A poll released by Politico/Morning Consult on June 24 found a majority of Americans "somewhat uncomfortable" or "very uncomfortable" with reopening K-12 schools in the fall. Sixty-five percent of parents felt that schools should remain closed until they are certain there is no health risk, even if it means students fall farther behind, according to a poll conducted by the 74. EdWeek Research Center likewise showed 65 percent of educators say schools should stay shut to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

One high school teacher posted on Facebook, "Would it make more sense—logistically, fiscally, medically—to spend our time improving our delivery of remote instruction and actually PLANNING for that for one more semester (rather than flying by the seat of our pants), instead of every school spinning their wheels like crazy trying to figure out a plan for reopening that 'may' work, even though it's likely we'll face another round of closure and a return to remote instruction at some point next year?"

Another replied, "I agree with you. Administrations at every level want parents at work. That is all they want since they are being pressured to keep the economy open. However we are not the babysitters for other professions. We are professionals ourselves!!!! Many parents will NOT send their children to school because they feel it is not safe. Some will because they have to work. Some will send sick children because they just do. And we will bear the brunt of society once again unless we take to the streets."

"Agree a million percent," said another educator who noted that they teach in a high school built in 1929, adding, "Windows don't open. HVAC [heating, ventilation, air conditioning] system is old. Water on the bathrooms doesn't run well. 25-40 kids in a class. We can't feasibly go back in a safe environment. But they will do it and we will be screwed."

The Tri-County Alliance for Public Education (TCA), an organization of state superintendents, issued a letter to the governor stating that a minimum of \$1 billion in new funding would be required merely to cover the cost of masks, gloves, thermometers, cleaning supplies, online connectivity and continued food distribution. Yet as one commenter in the *Detroit News* noted, "These estimates don't include the cost of spreading students out to allow for social distancing."

To keep the children socially distanced throughout the building and on the bus rides to school are not incidental costs. An *EdWeek* report, "Too Expensive to Re-Open Schools? Some

Superintendents Say It Is," gives the example in one district where social-distancing on school buses would entail a quadrupling of routes, costing an overwhelming \$4.5 million.

Another glaring omission of the TCA estimate is the lack of testing for COVID-19. As leading health authorities have consistently stated, mass testing along with contact tracing and isolation is key to containing the virus.

For their part, the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) has released a plan which calls for limiting class sizes to 20, turning cafeterias and auditoriums into classrooms, and the possibility of high school students attending in-person every other week. This plan calls for limiting the school day to the state-mandated minimum of six hours and further drastic curtailment of subject matter by "increasing focus on literacy, math, and other core classes," while sacrificing the arts, music and physical education.

DPSCD Superintendent Nikolai Vitti has stressed that the alternate schedule proposed for some larger high schools would not be offered to elementary students because parents have to work. Staff would be required to submit a negative COVID-19 test, but students would not be tested. Vitti justified this decision by claiming that universal testing requirements would "create an additional burden on families and that student testing could reduce enrollment." Instead, they would be "trained in hand-washing."

The current social and economic crisis is developing after decades of the bipartisan defunding of education across the US, which has already rendered many school buildings unsafe, created overstuffed classrooms and eliminated all manner of artistic and educational enrichment. As of 2018, half of Detroit school buildings were rated unsatisfactory, with a projected cost to repair at between \$500 million and \$1.4 billion. Many of these schools have inadequate ventilation, making them more likely to become vectors for the disease.

The protection of life and the defense of public education falls to the working class. As the Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Joseph Kishore noted in his election statement, "The assault on public education since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic has been unprecedented in scope and ferocity. As with every aspect of the pandemic, the full brunt of the crisis is being imposed on the working class, while trillions are squandered on Wall Street and the financial oligarchy." He called for educators to "take matters into their own hands" and "form committees in every school and neighborhood to determine how and when schools should reopen." We urge educators to study the SEP program and get involved.



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