

“We are just numbers on a spreadsheet”

## Detroit students organize protest over school reopening plans

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Students in the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) system are engaging in a virtual protest today in opposition to the district’s back-to-school plan. Students are organizing a virtual “sick out,” where students do not log in to online learning for the entire day, to call attention to their demands.

A document circulating online among students—“What can I do to fight for DPSCD students?”—explains the motivations behind the action: “The district has not held up the standards they proposed when they first began planning our online school year... When students express dissatisfaction with the way the pandemic has been handled so far they are met with popular talking points of the administration, not the empathy or motivation for change we expect from a district claiming to fight for us.”

Students are particularly concerned about the requirement that they be in front of their screens for up to eight hours straight under the current online learning plan. The students are also demanding funding for extensive programming to support student mental health, removing the requirement to use cameras during online classes, and to provide extensive training to students and teachers in the proper use of a select number of apps and online programs.

The protest is just one indication of the growing anger among students and teachers at the reckless and underfunded reopening policies of schools across the country. One student from Cass Tech High School, Hafiza, told the WSWs that she was protesting because the school district has “failed students at every turn.”

In an open letter posted to her online learning platform, Hafiza noted the various attempts to browbeat

students and teachers back to the classroom. She explained that DPSCD tried to convince students to return to schools “by claiming that this virus would not affect our age group.” She also exposed Superintendent Nikolai Vitti’s claims that during summer school sessions the classrooms were being cleaned regularly and that the ventilation system had been fixed.

Hafiza wrote that the school staff reported that they “were forced to clean themselves because no one came to clean for them. The staff then exposed how the district lied about reconstructing the ventilation systems, to which the board has not responded.”

The DPSCD opened officially on Sept. 8, following a partially open summer school session. The reopening plans, which included a “hybrid” combination of both in-person and on-line classes, was sanctioned through an agreement between the Detroit Federation of Teachers and school Superintendent Nikolai Vitti.

In signing the deal, the DFT ignored the 90 percent vote by teachers to carry out a “safety strike” against herding students and educators back into dangerous classrooms and the polls of parents that showed 80 percent wanted online instruction only. There have already been nearly 3,000 deaths from the coronavirus in Wayne County, which includes Detroit.

Makenna, a sophomore at the School at Marygrove, part of the DPSCD, told the WSWs about the reality of virtual learning: “Everyone is overwhelmed at the amount of time the students and teachers are required to be in front of a screen. It is taking a toll on students’ mental health.”

She continued, “It’s clear that the district is mostly image-motivated and monetarily-motivated and not concerned primarily about the well-being of students

and teachers.”

Makenna explained that some days her teachers cannot participate in an online class because they are so overwhelmed at home trying to take care of their own kids at the same time. “Teachers are definitely our allies in this fight,” Makenna explained. “We are facing the same issues.”

Speaking to the broader issues involved, Makenna said she felt the current situation facing students is rooted in the way public education is handled more broadly. “Our schools are already so underfunded and decrepit. And all the decisions about public education are made not from a student well-being perspective but from a data perspective.” She concluded, “We are just numbers on a spreadsheet. No one is concerned about the stress that comes along with tests, they only care that we get ‘A’s.’”

Many of the students who spoke to the WSWS said they felt online learning was being deliberately sabotaged by the school district in order to lay the basis for reopening the schools again for in-person learning in a few weeks.

While the protest has been driven by students, it has also been endorsed by the Detroit Area Youth Uniting Michigan (DAYUM) and Black Lives Matter In All Capacities (BLMIAC), who are seeking to frame the issue of the school reopenings as an entirely racial question in line with the politics of the Democratic Party. A press released put out by these groups states that the aim must be “to stop the draining and unequal online schools targeted at Black students.”

In fact, what is involved is not an attack on “Black students,” but on workers and working-class students of all races. Throughout the country, and indeed internationally, the ruling class is attempting to force the reopening of schools as part of an overall policy of driving workers back to work. Governments throughout the world have adopted a policy of “herd immunity”—that is, letting the virus spread without restraint, no matter how many hundreds of thousands or even millions of people die.

The Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality are fighting to unify the entire working class of all races against the homicidal policies of the ruling elite.

To organize this struggle, teachers in Detroit have formed the Detroit Educators Rank-and-File Safety

Committee, as part of a network of committees to link up the struggles of students and teachers in Detroit with a broader struggle of the working class across the country.

The statement announcing the official formation of the committee explains: “We, the Detroit Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, are opposed to laying down the lives of educators, students and parents for profit or participating in a poorly designed, underfunded, deadly experiment that puts our community at unnecessary risk.”

We urge Detroit public school students and educators who want to broaden their struggle to defend public education, and to save lives, to join the Detroit rank-and-file committee today and get involved in our youth and student movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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