

After teacher dies of COVID-19 in rural Michigan, Detroit educators call for unified fight against unsafe school openings

The Detroit Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
2 October 2020

The following statement was released by the Detroit Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee after the tragic death of Michelle McCrackin, an educator in rural Michigan and mother of five, from COVID-19.

In early September, the Detroit Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee formed our organization with a clear statement declaring, “It is not safe to reopen Detroit schools.” We insisted that educators, students and parents should not lay down their lives in a poorly designed, underfunded and deadly experiment whose sole aim is to get children out of their homes so their parents can be sent back into the factories and other workplaces to produce corporate profit.

From the beginning, our committee called on educators across the state to join us to prevent the spread of the deadly disease, which infects its victims whether they are from urban, suburban or rural areas and no matter what their race, gender or ethnic background.

We have now learned of the first death of an educator in Michigan since the reopening of schools for the fall semester. Michelle McCrackin, an educator and 53-year-old mother of five, died last week in Carson City, a rural town of 1,100 residents in central Michigan. Michelle died just three days after calling in sick at the Carson City-Crystal Area School District (CC-C), a small district with around 900 students located 135 miles northwest of Detroit.

The Detroit Rank-and-File Safety Committee offers its deepest condolences to Michelle's family and co-workers. We pledge to step up our fight to unify educators across the state around demands that put the well-being of our children, co-workers and

communities first.

The Carson City-Crystal schools opened on August 24 with about three-quarters of its students attending in person. A month after opening, the first infection was reported. One week later, Michelle was dead and 15 other staff and students tested positive. The schools are now under remote learning only.

Michelle had worked in the small district for 14 years, most recently as a Title I Reading Specialist working in grades 1-6. She was described as “beloved” by school officials. From a farming family, she is reported to have had no health conditions putting her at increased risk. That she succumbed so quickly to the disease only underscores the acute danger staff and students face across the state.

Marcus Cheatham, director of the mid-Michigan district health department, told *Bridge Michigan* that well over half of school districts in the three Central Michigan counties he covers have had to quarantine students because at least one student tested positive. This area, including Carson City, is “on fire,” Cheatham said, with state officials “starting to lose our grip on what’s going on, because there are so many outbreaks in so many parts of the community.” This included an outbreak at a senior facility near Carson City.

In September, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer reversed her order to stop contact sports at state high schools, and games resumed in mid-September. This included CC-C, which played against another league team while the outbreak was in the school.

Whitmer, a Democrat, was given her marching orders from GM, Ford and other corporations to reopen the schools. In the weeks since they reopened, cases are

once again on the rise in many areas of the state, putting Michigan on a list with 31 other US states whose cases and deaths are rising again. It is alarming that a relatively small district like Carson City-Crystal, which local health department said it “did everything right,” has produced the state’s first teacher death of the fall.

Michigan has reported 46 K-12 schools with new or ongoing outbreaks. This is not the total number of infections in schools, however. The state defines “outbreaks” as “two or more cases that share exposure on school grounds that come from different households.”

Cases are ticking up as more schools open even as positivity rates are over 3 percent. Opening school buildings, many of them a half-century old or more, with poor ventilation, are creating new vectors for the spread of COVID.

Like CC-C, the schools in Detroit were opened under the so-called hybrid model of in-person and remote learning. The Detroit Federation of Teachers agreed to this, despite the fact that 80 percent of parents said they wanted remote-only, and an overwhelming vote by teachers to authorize a strike over the unsafe opening of the schools. The DFT is now pushing a deal with the district that continues in-person classroom instruction along with “learning centers” inside the schools where paraprofessionals are compelled to supervise students working online.

The authorities claim that they are concerned about the emotional well-being of children who do remote learning from home. But a suburban Detroit reading teacher and supporter of our committee pointed to the deep psychological scars children suffer if they lose a teacher.

“If your teacher dies, it’s an emotional setback that will affect everything else in their lives. A reading specialist would be very close to the children they teach because of the nature of the job. For example, I am not working one-on-one right now, but I have just five kids at a time in my remote reading instruction.

“For any teacher, even in a regular classroom, these are their babies. So, for the child in small groups or one-on-one, the bond is very close. It is also likely that in the small district where she worked a teacher would have the same child for multiple years. This would make her death felt even more.”

The Detroit Rank and File Safety Committee calls for a general strike to stop the unsafe opening of schools and workplaces.

Our demands include:

- The immediate closure of all public, private and charter schools. Schools must remain closed until the rank-and-file safety committees, working in conjunction with trusted scientists and public health experts—not only the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHH)—can ensure the safety of children, teachers and school employees.

- Every student and teacher must be provided with up-to-date computer technology and internet access for virtual instruction immediately. This technology must include working webcams and microphones.

- Rapid on-site testing once a week for all faculty, students and staff. Registered nurses must be stationed at every school, authorized to oversee testing and robust contact tracing. Working alongside educators organized in the rank-and-file safety committee, they must ensure that safety protocols are fully enacted. Teachers have the collective right to refuse to work under unsafe conditions.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee has been formed to take forward this fight across the country, with committees already established in New York City, Los Angeles, Detroit, Texas and other locations. We urge all educators and parents to join the committee and contact us today to establish a local or statewide committee in your region to carry forward this struggle. Also join and share our Facebook page.



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