

Michigan high schooler contracts COVID-19 after being forced to take in-person SAT test

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14 December 2020

A Bloomfield Hills, Michigan physician is speaking out on behalf of a 17-year-old Bloomfield Hills High School student who suffered for more than two months from COVID-19, apparently contracted while taking the SAT college admissions test in-person. The girl had repeatedly requested to be excused from the test rather than take the chance of contracting the disease or potentially infecting her mother who is at-risk.

Instead of providing an accommodation, the district told the senior she would not graduate if she failed to report, so she sat for the test in person as required. The child took the test wearing two masks, one over the other, but despite these attempts at precautions she contracted the virus. The student was then forced to quarantine herself in her room, away from her mother for over two months, to protect her family. “She’s doing much better now,” her mother told the *Detroit Free Press*. She said that most of her child’s symptoms have abated, although severe fatigue was a long-term problem.

The family has publicized her case through their physician to preserve anonymity, while warning others not to be pressured into taking college entrance exams. The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee fully opposes these reckless testing policies, which are clearly very dangerous. Our committee is fighting to mobilize the working class across industries to demand the shutdown of schools and save lives.

In a statement on December 11, our affiliate, the Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, specifically noted, “The state government’s claim that they are conducting... tests out of concern for students’ welfare is fraudulent. Sending students back to school buildings during a pandemic will needlessly put thousands of lives at risk, including those of teachers proctoring the exam.”

Michigan state requirements actually that students take the SAT to graduate. Ignoring the rising caseloads in the state and falsely invoking Michigan law, Bloomfield Hills School District officials brazenly insisted to the family that the test was mandatory.

A district spokesperson justified the policy to the media, saying, “the vast majority of our students in the class of 2021 took the test” on the same day, September 23. According to the *Detroit Free Press*, the physician who spoke out about the 17-year-old’s infection also reported that two of the girls’ friends who took the SAT that day “had extremely similar symptoms, all within 12 hours of each other, and this certainly indicates a common source.”

The pandemic is out of control in Michigan, as it is across the US. Throughout the state, there has been a huge uptick in test positivity rates following school openings in late summer and fall, under the administration of Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer. Currently, schools for K-8 students across Michigan remain open, with only high schools closed to in-person learning.

Last Friday saw 5,157 new confirmed cases and 61 new COVID-19 deaths across the state. Bloomfield Hills is located in Oakland County, where cases presently stand at 53 per 100,000. The district is now entirely virtual. Bloomfield has reported 38 staff and 45 student infections, yet no “outbreak” has been declared under the state’s constrained definition.

Michigan has mandated that districts publish these records, but they are hopelessly dis-aggregated, presented district-by-district to make true monitoring of school cases throughout the state all but impossible. In addition, districts use all sorts of different platforms to present the data on their websites.

The district and state are not the only culprits in this terrible story, which developed under pressure from the federal government. In early September, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos refused to extend the federal waiver on the requirement that 95 percent of eligible students take a college “assessment test.” In Michigan, the SAT is part of the Michigan Merit Exam, and is used to meet federal legal guidelines.

In other words, this child and her family were victimized by the callous disregard of the local school district, the Democratic Whitmer administration, and the fascistic Trump administration, all of whom were operating in the interests of the hugely profitable testing industry.

Since the Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind, federal law has made annual standardized testing the linchpin of schooling. “Lower performing” schools, as increasingly measured by “bubble” tests with multiple choice questions, are ruthlessly punished and eventually turned over to private operations through charters and edu-businesses. These horrific—but profitable—anti-education policies were profoundly intensified under the Obama-Biden administration with Race to the Top.

One of the chief beneficiaries of this reactionary policy has been the College Board, the company which administers the SAT, originally the Scholastic Aptitude Test. At \$49.50 each (or \$64.50 with essay), the SAT was taken by 2,220,087 high school graduates in the class of 2019, netting well over \$110 million in one year. There are extra fees for various charges like “wait-list tests” resulting in costs which may run up to \$200 or more for a single test.

College Board also sells the PSAT (preliminary SAT) and Advanced Placement tests (\$94 each) in a battery of subjects which lure students with possible college credit for passing exams. It also has an Accuplacer test, pre-Advanced Placement programs, a financial aid application service (cost of \$25 each, plus \$16 for every school to which they submit the profile) and other preparation services, at various fees.

College Board partners with openly pro-privatization big business operations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundations. The former CEO until 2012 was William Gaston Caperton, known as the focus of an angry 11-day teachers strike in West Virginia in 1990. As governor, he used an injunction to end the strike based

on worthless pledges to call a special session to address school funding. He netted \$1.3 million at College Board in 2009.

As a result of the long federal policy of requiring endless testing, most states like Michigan have incorporated College Board mandates into their state policies, ensuring a steady, if not growing, pipeline of students.

Without this high school senior’s family and physician courageously raising the alarm, what happened in Bloomfield Hills would never have been known. Undoubtedly there are many other similar cases across the US. We urge all Michigan educators, parents and students to join the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today to join the fight to close all non-essential businesses and schools until the pandemic is contained, while ensuring full economic compensation for all workers affected.



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