

Democrats push for reopening of Detroit schools as auto companies cite worker shortage

James Vega, Debra Watson
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Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) superintendent Nikolai Vitti and the Detroit School Board took a major step toward restarting in-person education, announcing plans last week to reopen Learning Centers February 24. In an email to staff, and a robocall to families, Vitti announced that Detroit Public Schools will reopen Learning Centers at all schools throughout the district on that date. Learning Centers provide supervision on site by school staff.

The reopening of Learning Centers is a wedge designed to get schools opened and teachers back into the buildings.

Michigan Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer, in line with the demands of the Biden administration, has pledged to get all schools in the state operating with a face-to-face option by March. Statewide, more schools now have some form of in-person learning since the New Year holiday and Governor Whitmer has already allowed the resumption of indoor contact sports.

Support workers, who make up a large portion of the total Detroit school staff, were told to report back to work on February 22 following the mid-winter break. This includes principals, assistant principals, deans, clerical staff, para-educators, school service assistants, noon hour aides and others. The announcement of the reopening came the same day that in-person dining at Michigan restaurants resumed after more than two months.

Last fall teachers in Detroit voted 91 percent not to resume in-person instruction. The Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) then assisted DPSCD in pushing some teachers back into the buildings with a promise of a \$750 per quarter bonus. The small number of teachers who agreed to go back manned the Learning Centers and schools for the small fraction of students whose parents opted for in-person instruction.

Teachers who worked online elected to increase their workload rather than risk infection or death. Those teaching online have student loads that can be as large as 80 students,

compared to teachers doing in-person instruction who have as few as 11 students.

Nevertheless, as cases skyrocketed, all DPSCD classes had to be moved back to online instruction in mid-November. The same happened in other districts across Michigan that had opened either for all in person instruction or sought to lower classroom density by offering a hybrid form of education.

The DPSCD website alleges its policies are motivated by sympathy for families. It states, "The reopening of Learning Centers will provide direct support to DPSCD families who need schools to be open in some capacity so their children can benefit from supervised in person support."

In reality, a major driving force behind the school reopenings are the demands of the auto companies, which complained as early as October of a 10-15 percent absentee rate due to COVID-related illnesses and parents staying home to care for children.

According to thedetroitbureau.com, which bills itself as the "Voice of the Automotive World," the automakers are sounding alarms about the worker shortage. They wrote in late December that after the resumption of auto production in May "the tempo of production was slowed by absenteeism and parts shortages created by the pandemic."

The labor shortage has been exacerbated by the fact that many workers are opting to retire rather than work in unsafe auto plants. Meanwhile, temporary workers have been harder to find. As a result, auto companies have been lobbying to have their employees designated "essential workers."

Bowing to the demands of the Biden administration and big business, the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) is pushing for teachers to return to classrooms. Just a few days ago Biden's new CDC director, Rochelle Walensky, insisted teachers return even if they cannot get vaccinated.

At a February 2 meeting of the Detroit school board, the widespread technological problems with the poorly made

and cheap computer tablet devices “donated” by the Skillman Foundation and DTE were exposed. Those families who could afford it purchased other devices, while many students simply use their mobile phones. This is despite the district’s promotion of “Technology Hubs.”

Speaking at the board meeting, Lakia Wilson, Executive Vice President of the DFT said absolutely nothing about the ongoing pandemic or the district’s plans for reopening in-person instruction in March. Instead, she merely made a proposal to suspend teacher evaluations for the year.

James, a lifelong Detroit resident and leading member of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, spoke at the school board meeting about the district’s plans to force teachers back into schools: “There is no such thing as a safe return as the pandemic reaches a new more deadly phase. Chicago teachers are leading the fight and we need to unite educators and all workers across the country to prepare a general strike to close schools and nonessential production and fully compensate workers. This is a fight against Biden and the Democratic Party, which like Trump, want children back in schools, not to address their needs, but to get their parents back to work making corporate profits.”

The DFT and American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which are aligned with Biden and the Democrats, claim that a compromise can be reached that will protect teachers while meeting the demands for an early reopening of schools. However, this is impossible under conditions of the unchecked spread of the virus.

Contrary to the false claim that children are not susceptible to COVID-19, many children have been crippled or have even lost their lives from the virus in Michigan. For example, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, an asymptomatic carrier of COVID-19, 10-year-old Dae’shun Jamison, was hospitalized for over a month after developing MIS-C, a severe disease primarily seen in children, that develops after a COVID-19 infection. He had his right leg amputated due to the complications. Due to the state’s back-to-school and back-to-work policies 1,400 children in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula contracted the virus.

According to data released Monday, February 8 by the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) 116 students and staff were infected in new coronavirus school outbreaks at 29 locations among the state’s pre-K-12 schools. By definition, the outbreaks are related to school attendance.

Although MDHHS releases this information, they have not, to date, released the numbers of children who have died in Michigan from the coronavirus. The *Detroit Free Press* reported that MDHHS acknowledged five COVID-19-related deaths last October, but would not release anything further. Those five include a two-month-old

baby and a five-year-old kindergarten student from Detroit, Skylar Herbert, whose parents were first responders in the city.

Across the US, there has been a growth in the rate of pediatric hospitalizations in recent months. According to a study published in *JAMA Pediatrics*, hospitalization rates among children in 22 states rose from 2 per 100,000 to 17.2 per 100,000, or almost nine times, between May 15 and November 15, 2020.

As some schools in the state reopened after the New Year holiday, the number of outbreaks and the resulting persons infected are approaching the peak seen in schools at the height of the infections and death rates in the wave that swept the state in November. More than 100 school locations and just over 600 cases among staff and students were reported connected to new and ongoing outbreaks at pre-K to 12th grade school locations by state officials on February 8. These rates compare to cases found in schools in early November, as a fall wave peaked with exploding numbers of cases and deaths in the general population.

To reiterate, there is no such thing as a safe return under conditions where the pandemic is entering a new, more deadly phase with the emergence of more virulent strains and the disorganized and inept distribution of vaccines.

The DFT and AFT, which are aligned with Biden and the Democrats, claim a compromise can be reached to protect everyone’s interests. There is nothing to negotiate; the teachers are standing up for all workers and their families. The Democrats, unions and corporations want schools open regardless of the human toll. The struggle must be taken out of the hands of unions. We urge teachers to join the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to unite workers to stop this reckless policy. Join us at wsws.org/edsafety.



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