

Reports of spread of British B.1.1.7 COVID-19 variant in Michigan

Demands intensify for resumption of in person learning in Michigan by March 1

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Michigan Democrats, backed by the corporate media, are ramping up pressure to reopen schools by March 1, the “recommended” deadline set by Governor Gretchen Whitmer for the resumption of in-person instruction. The planned February 24 reopening of the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD), the state’s largest, is being used as the model to open larger Democratic-administered districts around the state.

At a press conference February 17, Whitmer’s Chief Medical Executive Dr. Joneigh Khaldun, confirmed that there are 157 cases of the B.1.1.7 COVID-19 variant in the state, which originated in the United Kingdom. Only Florida (433) and California (195) have more confirmed cases of the variant, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

There are 90 cases in the Ionia, Michigan prison, 39 in Washtenaw County and 10 in Wayne County, including three cases in Detroit. Other confirmed cases have been found in Kalamazoo (4), Calhoun (4), Clinton (2) and one each in Charlevoix, Eaton, Kent, Macomb, Sanilac, St. Clair and Van Buren counties.

While current vaccines are said to be effective against the B.1.1.7 variant, it is believed to be 50 percent more contagious than the current dominant strain of COVID-19. More infections from a faster-spreading virus will cause more deaths.

Reopening Michigan schools under these conditions is criminal. Earlier this month, epidemiologist Dr. Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota and a former member of the Biden administration coronavirus task force, speaking on NBC-TV’s “Meet the Press” warned that there would be a “surge” of the new variant in the next 6 to 14 weeks, which would produce “something that we have not seen yet in this country.” While a temporary drop in infections might give the appearance of “blue skies,” he said, “I see a category five hurricane or higher 450 miles offshore.”

Both Whitmer and Dr. Khaldun suggested that the rollout of vaccines would make it safe for teachers and students to return to schools. Like other states, the distribution of vaccines, many of which are produced in Michigan, has been chaotic and

plagued by shortages and other problems.

Last week, it was reported that 23 students from Lakeville High School, in Genesee County, tested positive for COVID-19. Health officials said 90 percent of the affected students contracted it from a wrestling match. The district tried to dodge responsibility by saying the match was a “non-school sanctioned” event that took place in Wisconsin and Ohio rather than Michigan.

The campaign by politicians and the media to reopen schools is intensifying as the Biden administration pushes for “five days a week” in his first 100 days. This is under conditions where one considers that at this time last year, there were only perhaps a few dozen confirmed cases in the US of COVID-19, but was to quickly escalate to over 1 million by the end of April.

The opposition of teachers to return to in-person instruction has drawn anger from both big business parties. US Congressman Tim Walberg, Republican from Michigan’s 7th Congressional District, asserted in an op-ed column in the *Lansing State Journal*, “We need to put students first and reopen schools now.” Claiming that the science says it is safe to reopen, he cited Dr. Uzma Hasan from New Jersey who said, “The mental health crisis caused by school closing will be worse than COVID.” This sounds eerily like Thomas Friedman’s “The cure can’t be worse than the disease.”

An article from the Manchester, Michigan magazine, *Manchester Mirror*, quotes Jennifer Brown, the superintendent of Cadillac, Michigan schools with 3,100 students. Schools there have been operating fully in-person since September, except for the state-mandated closure of high schools in November. Boasting how the district’s 166 educators were forced to disregard health and safety concerns, Brown writes, “Our staff never wavered in meeting student needs in our community. They were great.”

On January 11, as part of the campaign to counter teacher opposition to this policy, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, on Governor Whitmer’s orders, put teachers on the list of Phase 1B eligible recipients to be vaccinated along with people over age 65 and essential and

frontline workers. This action was taken while health officials are still trying to immunize health care workers and others who were part of Phase 1A of the rollout of the vaccine.

The story is co-written by Ron French who, in a later article in *Bridge Magazine*, scolds the Lansing, Ann Arbor and Kalamazoo school districts for ending in-person instruction last March and remaining closed.

Barbara, a veteran public school teacher in Michigan, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the need to keep schools virtual.

“Our school currently is still screen-to-screen. When the pandemic began we had to figure how to get arts and physical education to kids. Music for kindergarten through 8th grade is asynchronous. Physical education and art are supposed to be synchronous. Music teachers are still expected to do visits to classrooms. We have five schools and 48 teachers. I cannot teach singing and music face-to-face. We know that COVID-19 is aerosolized. We have to report how many classrooms we go into. I go into 24 rooms about every two weeks.

“There has to be a waiting period from the first to second [dose of the] vaccine, and then after the second vaccine until it is effective. I am hearing that it’s three to six weeks. So throwing us back into schools even with the vaccine, there is still a waiting period. Even then, the children are not going to be vaccinated.”

Asked about the drive to reopen schools, the teacher said, “I think they are dreaming. They are getting pushed by saying ‘we gotta reopen schools and get the kids back in school.’ It is a dangerous idea. Also, think about the people that are higher risk than I am, and yet we are getting the vaccines first.

“We would love to be back in school. I just don’t think it’s realistic. Looking at the science means not putting us back in the classroom. I hope that we can remain virtual.

“I think everybody has to be safe. We have to follow the science.”

At the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where graduate students struck in September to keep schools closed and prevent the spread of the virus, there are 39 cases of the B.1.1.7 variant. Washtenaw County, where Ann Arbor is located, experienced a recent right-wing media feeding frenzy and campaign promoting in-person instruction in the K-12 schools.

According to the Michigan Department of Education website, many of Michigan’s school districts are already open for in-person instruction. As of January 2021 there were:

- 399 districts which offer an in-person option, with students learning *either* online *or* in-person
- 81 districts that offer an option where some students receive *both* in-person and online instruction *or* online instruction only
- 8 districts where *all* students receive some instruction in-

person *and* some online

- 18 districts are fully in-person, where every student comes to school for in-person instruction every day

- 291 districts are fully remote or online

These numbers are volatile because of regular outbreaks of the virus, particularly in the Upper Peninsula, and more recently with the newer variant in Ann Arbor and perhaps in Lakeville. The scandalous attempt to force teachers and students back into classrooms to be infected continues, despite studies globally that have shown that closing schools are among the most significant measures that can be taken to reduce infections and deaths from the virus.

Nothing could be further from the truth than saying “that it is safe” to have schools open, even if every teacher is vaccinated. Children are a significant factor in the spread of COVID-19. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control has openly acknowledged that children are susceptible to the virus and do transmit the disease. Even British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has been forced to admit that “the problem is schools may nonetheless act as vectors for transmission, causing the virus to spread between households.”

Nevertheless, the state and the teachers unions peddle the lie that schools are safe.

Michigan educators have united with educators across the US and internationally to heroically resist the homicidal policy of “herd immunity.” We encourage educators to join and build the growing network of rank-and-file safety committees as part of a global movement initiated by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*. End the subordination of human life to the drive for corporate profit. Join today!



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