

Michigan teachers, students face double threat from school reopenings: contaminated water and COVID-19

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With school openings in Detroit, Dearborn, and other districts in Michigan scheduled for March 1, the date recommended by the administration of Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer, teachers and students will be confronted with another serious health threat in addition to COVID infection: unsafe water.

A recent article posted on the Chalkbeat.org website detailed the hazards posed by water that has been sitting stagnant in schools' pipes, in some cases since last March. The report points to the alarming dangers of unsafe drinking water in Michigan public schools and provides yet another example of the dangerous consequences of the drive to reopen schools. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the threat of contaminated water provides one more reason why schools should remain virtual through the end of the school year.

In a glaring example of ruling class indifference to the lives and health of educators and students, Michigan's state government recommends, but does not require, that school water pipes be thoroughly flushed with fresh water at the end of summer vacation, a period of about 10 weeks. Many of the schools that are proposed to reopen have sat unused for 11 months. The dangers that can be remediated by the methodical flushing of pipes include removal of bacteria, such as legionella, and lead, which can be leached from the pipes.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Elin Betanzo, an environmental engineer who heads the consulting firm Safe Water Engineering and who played a critical role in exposing the lead-in-water poisoning in Flint. In 2015 she alerted her long-time friend, pediatrician Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, to test children for lead at a time when all public officials were declaring that "the water is fine."

Flint is known the world over for the water crisis that

began there in 2014, with the impact continuing up to the present day. For 18 months lead-contaminated water poisoned men, women and children while public officials and the media claimed the water was safe for drinking, cooking and bathing. Thirteen Flint residents officially died from Legionnaires disease; however, one study suggests that 119 deaths attributed to pneumonia during the time the city relied on the contaminated Flint River water were likely due to undiagnosed Legionnaires disease.

Betano spoke about the dangers of reopening school buildings where the water pipes have been stagnant since last March. "In Michigan, and in the entire country for that matter, there is no requirement for safe drinking water in public schools," she said. "There's no definition of what is compliant, nor are there procedures to mandate regular testing or measures to carry out methodical flushing."

Reopening the schools after they have been closed for many months, with only minimal maintenance, will have serious and possibly deadly consequences. When new water isn't pumped into school pipes for weeks at a time, necessary anti-corrosive treatments dissipate, allowing bacteria to form and lead to get into the water. Lead is a dangerous neurotoxin that can attack any system in the body when ingested, even in low doses, stunting developmental growth and impacting behavior. An estimated 9,000 Flint children were poisoned by lead.

"Most school plumbing systems in Michigan contain some lead," Betanzo said. "No amount of lead is safe; period." In addition to lead poisoning, Betanzo warned, "Micro-organisms grow in stagnant water, such as legionella. The symptoms of Legionnaires disease are very similar to COVID-19 because it is contracted through inhalation and affects the lungs. Who wants this

to happen to a child? It is not only the children who are impacted, but those who are 50 years old and up who are at risk, which means the teachers and school staff. We're not being pro-active on requiring safe water in the schools where children normally spend so much of their lives."

In the Chalkbeat article, Betanzo is quoted as saying that "[d]uring the extended shutdown, there may not be corrosion control treatment left. If a school is opening and expecting kids to be drinking the water, they should have been flushing 12 weeks prior." A recent survey of 252 Michigan school administrators found that most of the schools involved (51 percent) either do not flush their pipes or "don't know" whether they flush their pipes. Michigan has 587 school districts, the majority of whose plumbing systems contain lead.

An educator in the Birmingham, Michigan district told the WSWS, "The timing of a full face to face return in March in our district coincides with a letter sent to all families detailing the remaining high levels of legionella, especially found in the two high schools at BPS (Birmingham Public Schools). The chlorine treatment did little to reduce the legionella. At Groves and Derby, 79 and 18 taps of Legionella pneumothorax were found. This is especially concerning as this is the type that causes Legionnaires disease, a disease with symptoms similar to COVID. So kids are returning to buildings where they may be afraid to wash their hands and where there is no potable water. Not a safe combination during this pandemic, especially as new, more contagious variants continue to invade our community."

Of course, the fact that teachers and children returning to Michigan schools this year will likely be exposed to unsafe water begs the question of whether they should be returning in the first place. The science says they should not. The primary study that the advocates of school reopening rely on, the Journal of American Medicine's "Wisconsin study," is seriously flawed in that it has no way of estimating the spread of COVID from asymptomatic carriers. More recent international studies have established that children contract the virus at the same rate as young adults, are often asymptomatic, and do spread the disease to their teachers, families and communities.

Although the political establishment and media pundits cynically bemoan the harms of virtual learning, the real purpose of reopening schools during the pandemic is to warehouse children in order to free parents to return to unsafe working conditions to produce profits for corporations. The unprecedented levels of corporate debt

accumulated during the pandemic and the massive stock market bubble must be paid back by the intensified exploitation of the working class.

As Betanzo points out, the threat of contaminated water from pipes that have been sitting unused for almost a year is not unique to Michigan schools, but will be replicated in other states in the absence of federal regulation of water safety.

Another social crime is in the making. The lack of resources expended to update or rebuild dilapidated water systems in public school buildings in Michigan and throughout the country is the predictable result of the prioritizing of profits over human lives. Given the unsafe, potentially deadly, quality of the water in schools, as well as the certainty of in-school transmission of COVID-19, it would be criminal to reopen school buildings this year.

To defend themselves against the back-to-school policy, a policy correctly condemned by the British Medical Journal as "social murder," teachers must have new organizations of struggle. These organizations must take the form of rank-and-file safety committees that are completely independent of the teachers unions, such as the Michigan Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, which are working hand in glove with the political establishment in many US states and internationally, but must multiply and grow to give educators the unity they need to battle the considerable political and economic forces arrayed against them. Teachers, join or build a rank and file safety committee in your school to defend your students, yourselves and your communities.



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