

Michigan governor pushes for school reopenings as Ann Arbor school board reverses decision to remain virtual

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The drive to reopen schools in the state of Michigan has reached an advanced stage. In a press conference Wednesday, Democratic Governor of Michigan Gretchen Whitmer announced that 85 percent of Michigan school districts are currently open to in-person learning and that she is “pleased that 97 percent of the school districts will be reopened by March 1st.”

In listing her reasons that “remote learning is not sustainable,” Whitmer unwittingly revealed that the real purpose has little or nothing to do with the plight of children. “Without schools, the economy is hamstrung,” Whitmer said. “[W]orking families are spread too thin,” she added, in reference to parents who have left the workforce while their children remain safe at home in virtual classrooms.

Whitmer is responding in particular to the needs of the auto industry, which has been plagued with absenteeism and high turnover.

While feigning concern for the grim milestone of more than 500,000 deaths in US, with 16,389 in Michigan, Whitmer downplayed the continuing risks of the pandemic to the lives of teachers, school workers and students. The tragic case of ten-year-old Dae-Shun Jamison, for example, went unmentioned by Whitmer. The Grand Rapids child has had to have both legs and hands amputated due to complications from Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C), a syndrome which has affected thousands of children after they became infected with COVID-19.

In recent weeks, there has been an unexplained surge in cases and deaths among children suffering from MIS-C,

with the proportion of those patients admitted to hospitals who need intensive care increasing to 90 percent. Over 2,000 children have suffered from MIS-C in the US during the pandemic, and 30 have died, according to CDC figures. Moreover, little is known about the long-term effects of COVID-19 on children, making school reopenings a medical experiment involving over 50 million students nationally.

Whitmer cited only one study to the claim that schools do not spread COVID-19, conducted by Michigan State University and published in December, which is riddled with caveats and reservations. In reality, studies have established that children contract COVID-19 at the same rate as young adults. Whitmer’s arguments are based on the rejection of science.

The governor only paid lip service to the looming catastrophe of contaminated water in school buildings that have not been used in eleven months, saying merely that “steps must be taken” to minimize the risk. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has reported, pipes that have held stagnant water for even weeks at a time can incubate bacteria—such as legionella—and leach lead into the water.

Whitmer made no mention of the fact that Michigan has 157 confirmed cases of the B.1.1.7 “UK” variant in twelve counties, the third-highest in the US. One of the main centers of the B.1.1.7 variant is in Washtenaw County, home to the University of Michigan, where graduate students went on strike last autumn to protest the dangers of not containing the pandemic. The Graduate Employees Organization strike was ended abruptly and betrayed through the collaboration of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the Democratic Party, which feared that the strike could become a catalyst for a far broader movement of educators against the reopening of schools and colleges.

On the same day as Whitmer's press conference, the school board of one of the largest districts in the state, the Ann Arbor Public Schools (AAPS), reversed its decision the previous week to remain virtual for the remainder of the 2020-21 school year. Meanwhile, the Detroit Public Schools began resuming some in-person learning this week.

The AAPS Board voted unanimously to force teachers back into the city's K-12 classrooms through planned stages beginning March 25. The Biden and Whitmer administrations' push to reopen the schools, combined with virulent hostility to virtual learning in the local media and a right-wing "re-open" advocacy group were major factors in the reversal. The decision was justified by the new guidelines issued by the CDC on February 12, which are politically motivated by the Biden administration to create conditions to put the children in school buildings so that parents can return to unsafe factories and workplaces to pump out profits for Wall Street.

The procedure of Wednesday's AAPS School Board meeting, held in two portions, was entirely anti-democratic. Its purpose was to suppress any opposition to in-person classes and to stampede teachers and students back into potentially life-threatening environments. At the noon portion of the meeting the AAPS Board, prior to the evening's public meeting, voted to begin the reopening.

The format of the public discussion in the evening meeting was a farce. There was, in fact, no public discussion or possibility for real-time contributions from the public. Participants had to submit statements three hours ahead of the meeting, and board members limited the reading of each statement to only 15 seconds. The result was a string of about 150 sentence fragments from 205 written submissions. A full report, however, was read, from an AAPS advisory committee, which laid out only how best to return to in-person learning for special needs students.

No coherent case was heard in the meeting regarding the dangers of reopening schools. Moreover, comments were largely from those who supported the reopening and closely reflected the views of the so-called "grass roots" Ann Arbor Reasonable Return group, which had appealed on Facebook two days prior to the meeting for their supporters to flood the AAPS Board with written comments advocating an end to virtual-only learning.

Their comments packed the submissions, giving the false appearance that the majority of the Ann Arbor teachers, school workers and parents are in favor of a

return to the classrooms. In fact, there is widespread opposition. One Detroit teacher told the WSWS that only 62 out of 700 students in her school returned this week.

The majority of the written submissions in the Ann Arbor meeting spoke only of the supposed unfairness of virtual learning to children and of the urgent need to reopen. Concern about COVID-19 was routinely labeled as "fear," with one commenter going so far as to say that the mental harm to children caused by virtual learning went "far beyond the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic."

In an email to the AAPS community Wednesday, Superintendent of AAPS Dr. Jeanice Swift characterized the board's vote as a response to the "need" to return to in-person learning, making much of the provision that every teacher will supposedly have the "opportunity" to be vaccinated by March 24, and that parents will retain the option of virtual or in-person learning for their children.

At the school board meeting, which Swift attended, no serious discussion was proposed on any significant matter related to public health and safety. One point of such a discussion would have been that even if teachers are vaccinated, students can still contract and spread the disease at school and bring it home to their families. Rather than engage with any of the public remarks, brief as they were, the majority of board members chose to sit silent throughout the meeting.

Educators and school communities throughout the country face well-funded and well-organized adversaries in the struggle over school reopenings. It is vital that teachers and support staff join together to build rank and file educators safety committees, independent of the class-collaborationist unions. Such committees are springing up in state after state. To join with your state's rank and file committee, or begin such a committee in your school and your state, visit wsws.org/edsafety.



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