

As battle intensifies over Detroit reopenings, K-12 schools now number one source of COVID-19 outbreaks in Michigan

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K-12 schools are now the largest source of new COVID-19 outbreaks in Michigan. In the first week of March, the state recorded 47 separate outbreaks at K-12 schools in which a combined 221 students, teachers and staff tested positive for the virus.

The same week, 24 more outbreaks took place at daycare centers and “youth programs,” a category that includes school sports. Together, the 71 school- and youth-related outbreaks accounted for more than 40 percent of all new outbreaks in Michigan during a week in which about 7,000 new COVID-19 cases were reported and more than 100 people died from the disease.

Schools easily beat out the next largest categories, which were Manufacturing and Construction, with 27 outbreaks, and Long-term Care Facilities (nursing homes), with 14. The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, which reported these figures on March 8, defines an outbreak as “two or more COVID-19 cases with a link by place and time indicating a shared exposure outside of a household.”

COVID-19 is not only continuing to spread through schools, workplaces, and communities, but new and more dangerous variants of the virus are becoming dominant. On Sunday, Dr. Michael Osterholm warned on “Meet the Press” that the B.1.1.7 variant, first discovered in the UK, is especially infectious in school settings, adding that large clusters of infections have been connected with the resumption of high school sports. Michigan has detected 422 cases of B.1.1.7 already, the second-highest figure for any state.

At least 89 Michigan children who have tested positive for COVID-19 have also developed Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C), a horrific condition in which a child’s heart, kidneys, brain and other organs swell and malfunction. Ten-year-old Dae’shun Jamison of Shelby, Michigan, tragically lost all four limbs before beating MIS-C

last month. Fourteen-year-old Honestie Hodges from Grand Rapids did not survive.

Despite these enormous dangers, the large majority of students across the state are now receiving in-person instruction, including 100 percent of students in Northern Michigan and the Upper Peninsula. Other parts of the state have a “hybrid model” which unsafely combines in-person and virtual learning as a step toward full reopening.

As the bodies continue to pile up, Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer is leading the charge to fully reopen schools, claiming in a February 24 press conference that “without schools, the economy is hamstrung,” because “working families are spread too thin.”

This is a reference to parents who have left the workforce so their children can remain safely at home in virtual classrooms. Later that day, Ann Arbor Public Schools reversed its decision to remain virtual for the remainder of the school year, instead demanding its teachers return starting March 25.

The battle for Detroit

A critical battle is currently raging over Michigan’s largest school district. Located at the center of the American auto industry, the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) has over 5,000 teachers and 50,000 students. Large outbreaks have taken place at auto plants across the city, and teachers have refused to return to deadly school buildings.

In August, members of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) union voted by over 90 percent to authorize a “safety strike” in opposition to demands that they return in-person by September 8. But the corporatist DFT refused to call a strike and instead signed a “Letter of Agreement” with hated

superintendent Nikolai Vitti, which offers teachers a \$750 bonus to return in-person while allowing them to choose to remain virtual on an individual, teacher-by-teacher basis.

Since then, teachers have been surveyed each quarter to ask if they wish to return. The vast majority have repeatedly responded in the negative.

Vitti has now taken up an extraordinary campaign of lies and intimidation to try to force teachers back into the schools. For the last week, the message has been sent out repeatedly in the local press as well as in robocalls to parents, that “all schools and grade levels will return to in-person learning on March 8.”

That date has now passed and such a full-scale reopening failed to take place. Facing insurmountable opposition from educators, administrators across the district were unable to open their schools.

At the Detroit School of Arts high school, only two of 40 teachers agreed to return. The principal was forced to call parents to a meeting to explain that they should ignore the reports about a March 8 return, because it was not happening at their school.

At Cass Technical High School, the largest school in the district with 2,400 students, principal Laura Phillips announced at a staff meeting that zero teachers were willing to return. The building has instead been opened as a so-called “learning center,” where children are sent when their parents cannot afford to have them stay home. There, supervised by paraprofessionals—who, unlike teachers, can be fired for refusing in-person work—they receive food for the day and virtual instruction on a laptop from a teacher who is safely at home.

Detroit is the poorest big city in the United States, where about half of all children already lived in poverty before the pandemic. Yet the large majority of parents continue to oppose in-person learning. Just five percent of Cass Tech parents said they wanted their children to return.

Instead of organizing this massive opposition among educators, parents and students, the DFT has lent its support to Vitti’s efforts. DFT President Terrence Martin said in a statement to the press on March 1 that the “decision for Detroit Public Schools Community District to have face-to-face learning as an option was a decision made based upon the current data available.” He declined to state precisely what he was referring to, but it certainly couldn’t have been the data from the state of Michigan showing that K-12 schools are the number one source of COVID-19 infections.

Despite this, Martin complained that Detroit teachers “still have a level of fear and are not totally comfortable with a return to face-to-face instruction.” His solution? “We’re going to need services relative to trauma, we need mental health services.”

In the midst of this campaign of lies, the Michigan Caucus of Rank-and-file Educators (MICORE), a pseudo-left faction of the DFT that hosts one of the state’s largest and most active teacher Facebook groups, shut down their forum for three days last week, silencing discussion by its 10,245 members. They replaced it with a link for teachers to send a letter appealing for the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) of Michigan to intervene.

Readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* will recall that in September of 2020 a wildcat strike against forced in-person instruction by 1,200 graduate students at the University of Michigan was shut down 24 hours after AFT-Michigan president David Hecker was brought in to take over negotiations.

Vitti and the unions are under enormous pressure to open Detroit’s schools by hook or by crook. A year ago this month, the North American auto industry ground to a halt when workers in Windsor and Detroit refused to work amid the first COVID-19 surge. Today, the auto companies are still struggling to force workers back into their disease-infested factories. As the fourth quarter of the school year approaches on April 21, the pressure to reopen is acquiring a fever pitch.

To prepare for the battles ahead, educators need organizations which they control, and which link them up not only with other educators and parents, but with autoworkers and all sections of workers who oppose the deadly return to schools and workplaces. Only through this unity can the working class fight to shut down schools and non-essential production, stop the pandemic, and force the reallocation of resources necessary to provide everyone a decent income and safe working conditions.

This is why the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was founded in August, 2020, with local and statewide committees forming in Michigan, New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, Northern California, Texas, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Alabama, and a growing number of cities and states. This network is connected to rank-and-file committees in auto plants throughout Detroit and across the Midwest. For more information on how to join or help build a committee, visit wsws.org/edsafety !



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