

Michigan teachers conduct wildcat sickout against in-person learning, cuts to pandemic safety measures

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Teachers in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit, conducted a job action this week to fight against deadly school reopenings. One-hundred sixteen teachers called in sick across the school district on Wednesday, April 28, including 47 at Grosse Pointe North High School (GPN), in a coordinated “sickout.” Administrators at GPN were forced to gather students in the gym while they scrambled to find substitutes.

Michigan leads the US by far in the rate of daily new COVID-19 cases. The state’s rate of 47 new cases per 100,000 people per day is 60 percent higher than the next worst state, Minnesota. K-12 schools are the source of more outbreaks than any other settings, according to data from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS). However, schools remain open for face-to-face learning across the state on a district-by-district basis.

The sickout came two days after a school board meeting during which teachers asked to switch from full in-person learning to a hybrid model due to the ongoing statewide surge. Instead, the board voted 6–1 to not only continue full in-person instruction, but to also *reduce* the definition of “close contact” from six to three feet for the explicit purpose of keeping more students in the classrooms as the pandemic continues to spread.

The Grosse Pointe rule change, effective immediately, means that now when students or teachers test positive for COVID-19, only those who came within three feet of them are to quarantine or participate in contact tracing. This defies both the MDHHS and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which call for contact tracing and quarantining after exposure at six feet.

Also at Monday’s board meeting, GPN teacher Sean McCarroll delivered a powerful resignation speech, which has been viewed more than 63,000 times in three days on YouTube. “You’ve done more damage to our students, our district, and our profession in the last 12 months than we’ve seen in the last decade,” he said to board members.

Grosse Pointe Public School System (GPPSS) Superintendent Gary Niehaus supported the board’s decision. Dismissing the danger of infection, he said in a statement on Tuesday, “The numbers of students generated by the six-foot contact tracing were unsustainable. By those standards, a single COVID-positive high school student, in our seven-period day, could quarantine 15–50 students.”

The actions of these teachers to stop in-person learning to save lives have taken place outside of the trade unions, which have not lifted a finger to protect teachers or shut schools to slow the spread of the deadly disease. Grosse Pointe Educators Association (GPEA) union president Christopher Pratt confirmed to Fox 2 news that the sickout was not a union-sponsored activity.

Following the sickout, the independent group of teachers issued a press release signed “Concerned GPPSS Teachers.” It states that “the recent decision by the Board of Education to go against federal, state, and local recommendations regarding contact tracing and quarantine procedures...was made despite the objections of the district’s teachers, building administrators, and support staff.”

“Just last week,” the statement continues, “over 100 teachers co-signed a letter begging for help in our efforts to support our students. The letter—read by every

board member and district administrator—received no response. Facing the insurmountable disappointment, neglect, and contempt from the district, many of our staff members felt the need to take this time to regroup.”

The wildcat sickout of Grosse Pointe teachers is not the only recent independent action by Michigan workers against the unsafe conditions imposed by management and the state at workplaces and schools. On April 16, workers at nearby Jefferson North Assembly Plant—a Stellantis auto factory on the east side of Detroit—staged a protest and stopped the assembly line when a worker was sent home after testing positive for COVID-19. The entire shift was sent home early.

Conditions in Michigan’s schools resemble those in the auto plants with workers and youth packed closely together into badly ventilated spaces all day where an aerosolized virus like COVID-19 spreads rapidly. It is a matter of public record that schools and factories have been the top two sources of COVID-19 outbreaks in Michigan every week since late February when the latest surge began.

Michigan’s current surge is linked to the emergence of the B.1.1.7 variant, which is more contagious than wild-type COVID-19 and thrives among children. On April 29, a record 91 children were hospitalized across the state with severe COVID symptoms, more than twice the highest number seen in either the initial surge or the 2020 winter surge. Yet Governor Gretchen Whitmer continues to refuse to order a lockdown of schools and workplaces.



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