“I just don’t want my kids to get sick at all”

Grosse Pointe, Michigan, parents protest against district’s lifting of mask mandate in schools

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On Monday, dozens of parents staged a protest outside the Grosse Pointe Public School System Board of Education meeting, denouncing Superintendent Jon Dean’s unilateral decision last week to lift a mask mandate, social distancing, COVID-19 testing and all other mitigation measures in the district’s schools. As with thousands of districts across the US, Grosse Pointe, Michigan, is slated to fully reopen for in-person instruction on September 7, with no remote learning option for students.

In support of the protest, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters distributed copies of the perspective, “Children’s lives matter! Stop school reopenings!” and interviewed parents, educators and students who participated. Most parents simply wanted universal masking and an option for remote learning, but there was a layer that supported the call that has been continually issued by the WSWS for a global shutdown of schools and nonessential workplaces until the COVID-19 pandemic is eradicated.

Nicole, who works as a nurse at a long-term care facility, has an 11th grader, a 4th grader and a 1st grader in the district. She described the potential risks to students, commenting, “Sending them back to school now without masks is ridiculous.” She added, “The Delta variant is far more contagious and infectious among vaccinated people. This is the first time many kids are really getting affected by this. My sister works at Children’s Hospital in Detroit, they are seeing more kids and they’re sicker and younger now, whereas they weren’t before.” She noted, “This number of child hospitalizations haven’t been seen before in the pandemic, because now we’re putting our kids at risk.”

Nicole described the horrific experiences she has gone through during the pandemic, stating, “I cried every day, multiple times a day, for months. I worked in long-term care, mostly with elderly patients. All of my patients died, all of them. COVID would just come into the facility, take over everything and kill them all. This was at the start of the pandemic when the hospitals were full, and we couldn’t get them the care they needed.”

While Nicole feels that schools can be reopened safely with strong mitigation measures, she agreed that to fully contain the pandemic would require a globally coordinated emergency response. She stated, “If we had just shut everything down a year and a half ago, we would be in a much better place than we are now. And they didn’t.”

Another educator, who works in nearby Detroit Public Schools (DPS) but lives in Grosse Pointe, told the WSWS, “Considering that our under-12 population has not had the opportunity to receive the vaccine, common sense says until all parties have been able to receive the vaccine that we should leave the masks on. I have elementary-aged children, and it’s really the new Delta variant that has me concerned.”

She added, “I would like an online learning option, that would make sense. Our superintendent is using hyper-local data to make these decisions that are ineffective to stopping COVID. I’m more nervous than last year. Teachers here are saying they are cycling 400 students per week in elementary school. Unvaccinated students and teachers are compromised. You just want to drop off your kids and have teachers go to work without getting sick.”

The educator was moved by autoworkers in Detroit and internationally, who in March 2020 engaged in wildcat

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strikes against the dangerous conditions of the pandemic. Connecting this to the wildcat sickout strikes conducted by Detroit teachers in 2015–2016, she said, “Workers need to do something collectively. Taking advantage of workers is not okay. With the pandemic, we are seeing that parents, teachers, the working class are coming together. I remember the WSWS from 2015, you helped us when we had our sickouts and walkouts in Detroit.”

Robin, a parent of a five-year-old and a four-year-old, held her younger child out of preschool last year and kept her five-year-old learning remotely. She said, “Obviously my kids can’t get vaccinated, so I was really hoping that they were going to make masks required and promote social distancing and use the desk shields. I want my kids to be in school and have a normal time, but with the Delta variant and they can’t get vaccinated, I’m not willing to risk it. I know that kids are getting sicker with the Delta variant, and more are dying, and I just don’t want my kids to get sick at all.”

Robin commented, “If they’re not going to require masks, they definitely should offer a virtual option for every grade.”

The protest continued inside the school board meeting, with parents demanding “Show us the data!” Many spoke out during the public comments portion of the meeting, but the superintendent and school board did not change the masking policy or re-implement any mitigation measures.

High school students also came in support of the protests. Farrah, a senior, told the WSWS, “I’m vaccinated and don’t have kids, but I’m concerned as an empathetic person who worries about the health and safety of other people. I don’t want others to get sick. Variants keep on coming partially because not enough people are vaccinated. I know a lot of people who got COVID. I know one person who was older that died from it and another family member in her twenties who has long COVID.”

A parent who wished to remain anonymous told the WSWS, “This hits close to home. A friend of mine was diagnosed and she’s now clutching her pillow and getting new symptoms every day. She told me, ‘I won’t see you for a while, keep your kids safe.’ She took precautions very seriously. My family is vaccinated other than my young children, coming into the building is not ideal even with masks.”

When asked about the need for the broader shutdown of schools and nonessential workplaces globally, she said, “I support that. It’s incredibly taxing on people and there are other considerations like your job and child care with staying safe. These policies for the rich were true for a lot of things even before the pandemic.”

She contrasted the actions of the board to the concern of teachers and students, stating, “They really have a long history of defying what’s necessary. They have this arrogance pretending it’s all gone, and they can do what they want with our children’s, teachers’ and staff’s lives. They lessened the social distancing when there wasn’t room to give. The administration believed that we were ‘over-quarantining,’ which is just absurd.”

Having participated in a protest in April against the district’s lifting of social distancing measures, she added, “The board rightfully brags about our teachers. When you see teachers speak against them, they’re disregarded. What does that say? How can we retain these teachers? My child had in-person and online, both were great. Overall, teachers and students didn’t have a problem with masks. It’s an important part of our lives. They use hyper-local data and claim we are in a bubble in Grosse Pointe. We are linked with the surrounding cities, working and interacting with these communities.”

She added, “I can’t reconcile social distancing and avoiding crowds and sending my child in a classroom of unvaccinated kids. Last year, it spread in the classrooms even with masks. We pulled our kids to go to virtual after one of the kids in the class got COVID. There’s no way to justify sending him to school. I’m not fear-mongering my child but keeping him and others safe.”

The drive to reopen schools, which began under the Trump administration, has vastly escalated under Biden. All along, it has been motivated solely by the economic interests of the financial oligarchy. The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was established last year, in unity with similar committees across the US and globally, to fight against these policies and to protect the health and lives of children, parents, educators and all workers. We urge all Grosse Pointe parents, educators, students and community members to sign up today to join and help build this committee.

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