

COVID-19 infections force the closure of schools in Michigan

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The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is organizing the fight against unsafe conditions in schools. We urge all educators and parents throughout the state to register today for our next meeting at 2 p.m. EDT this Sunday, October 31, and invite your coworkers, family and friends!

Across Michigan, fully reopened K-12 schools continue to be severely impacted by COVID-19. According to the latest data released Monday, another 76 outbreaks took place in schools, resulting in the infection of at least 428 students and staff. While this is a slight decrease in the weekly number of new outbreaks, the state's Department of Health and Human Services continues to monitor 497 active outbreaks, up 18 percent from last week, affecting at least 5,186 students and staff. K-12 schools were once again the largest single source of COVID-19 outbreaks in Michigan workplaces.

On Wednesday, Superintendent of Ann Arbor Public Schools (AAPS) Jeanice Swift announced that all schools in the district will be closed Monday, November 1, “[i]n order to confidently and safely staff our buildings every day we are open for classes...” The move follows a number of one-day building closings in the district due to staffing shortages. On Monday, AAPS closed A2 STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics) to in-person instruction and moved classes online for the day due to a staffing shortage.

Two high schools, Huron and Skyline, as well as Forsythe Middle School, were closed last Friday for the same reason. Without stating the obvious fact that COVID-19 is spreading through the district, Superintendent Swift attributed the shortages of teachers and staff to “high levels of staff illness and absences across all of the AAPS.” Swift said last Thursday, “This is an emergency measure made necessary due to numerous unfilled positions across the district and an inability to fully staff our schools for tomorrow.”

Earlier this fall, Ann Arbor's Pittsfield and Burns Park elementary schools were closed to in-person instruction after the Washtenaw County Health Department identified COVID-19 outbreaks at the schools. In October alone, 44 students and staff at Huron High School have contracted the disease.

A look at the Ann Arbor Public Schools COVID Dashboard reveals that between October 1–22, 174 students and 35 staff reported testing positive for COVID-19. The total number of Ann Arbor students and staff that have come down with the virus so far this school year is 265. As this data represents self-reporting, the actual numbers could be considerably higher.

Staffing shortages in the Ann Arbor schools and across Michigan include a shortage of substitute teachers, with 20 percent more positions going unfilled compared to previous school years, according to Brian Dunn, director of EduStaff, an agency that contracts out substitute teachers in the state.

“Schools are competing with every single business out there, not just each other,” Dunn told the *Detroit Free Press*. “They’re competing with every business on every corner that’s looking to hire somebody.”

In Wednesday's announcement, Swift briefly acknowledged that staffing shortages “will be exacerbated during this COVID time.” However, she concluded the announcement by emphasizing “the critical importance of having our students and staff together in school every day we can safely do so.”

Of course, Ann Arbor is not alone in Michigan, either for staffing shortages or for school closures openly attributed to COVID-19. On October 22, the Detroit Public School Community District announced that Bates Academy would be closed to in-person instruction and that classes would move online until Monday, November 1, because of “multiple” cases of COVID-19.

Significantly, the announcement of the closing at Bates

Academy assigned responsibility for the closure to “concerns raised by staff and families.” Clearly, there is a growing mood of opposition at the school in response to the surge of infections. This opposition must be developed and rooted in a scientific understanding of COVID-19 and how it spreads.

On Sunday October 24, the *World Socialist Web Site* held a global online webinar, “How to Stop the Pandemic,” which featured highly-regarded scientists and workers dedicated to the elimination of COVID-19. The event put forth the proposition that the COVID-19 pandemic can and must be brought to an end.

Much of the material presented at the webinar concerned the effects of COVID-19 on children and the young, including a terrifying presentation by epidemiologist Dr. Deepti Gurdasani on the effects of persistent illness—Long COVID—on the lungs, the brain (particularly on emotions and memory) and other organs. Dr. Gurdasani stressed that a person who had mild symptoms and has “recovered” can, after seven to twelve months, develop serious damage to their lungs. Multiple scientists on the panel noted that in this regard the disease resembles a lasting affliction, like polio, more than it does the flu.

The prevalence of Long COVID in children is not well understood. Nevertheless, studies have suggested that children are at least as susceptible to Long COVID as are adults. The first study of this phenomenon was conducted by the University of Gemelli in Italy in 2020, which found that one-third of a sample group of children still reported one to two symptoms four months after infection. One quarter of the children displayed three or more symptoms.

The UK Office of National Statistics reported in February 2021 that 9.8 percent of children between the ages of two and 11 and 13 percent of children 12 to 16 still displayed at least one symptom five weeks after infection. A more recent study reported in June of this year, conducted by epidemiologist Dr. Pia Hardelid of the University College London, found that 4.6 percent of children still exhibited symptoms four weeks after infection. Such information is not well publicized in the corporate press, and for good reason. If such information were widely known, parents would quickly force the shutdown of schools.

The political pressure to keep schools open is tremendous. It emanates all the way down from President Biden, who upon taking office declared that all schools must reopen by Easter. It emanates from Wall Street and from the Republican and Democratic parties who serve

Wall Street’s interests, and it emanates from state and local politicians, from powerful business leaders and from right-wing parents groups, such as Ann Arbor’s Reasonable Return to in Person Learning.

Parents and teachers concerned for the health and safety of their children, their students and themselves must not count on school administrators for protection. Nor must they put any hope in the treacherous teachers unions. After all, it was American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, herself a multimillionaire, who last summer made clear to every assembly of teachers she addressed that returning to virtual instruction in the fall was out of the question. In one speech in May, Weingarten proclaimed, “There is no doubt: Schools must be open. In person. Five days a week.” Her reason? “Parents rely on schools, not only to educate their kids, but so they can work—like the three million mothers who dropped out of the workforce during the pandemic.”

It is only on themselves that staff and families can and must rely to combat the homicidal policy of reopening schools and workplaces during a raging pandemic that the ruling class insists upon. In Michigan, across the US and globally, industrial workers, educators and other workers are forming rank-and-file committees, democratic bodies of workers wholly independent of the corporatist trade unions. The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was formed last year to organize the fight against unsafe school reopenings. We urge all educators and parents in Ann Arbor, Detroit and throughout the state to register today for our next meeting at 2 p.m. EDT this Sunday, October 31.



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