

The New York Times' crude attempt to pit Detroit parents against educators as pandemic rages

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The *New York Times* published an article last week under the headline, "Schools are closing classrooms on Fridays. Parents are furious." The December 8 article, datelined from Detroit, claims that there is a groundswell of opposition from working-class parents to any rollback of in-person schooling even as COVID-19 cases in the city and state spread out of control.

It is well known the "parent organizations" leading the charge against temporary school closures are dominated by right-wing groups, largely made up of more affluent middle-class people who also oppose mask and vaccine mandates. The *Times* article conceals this fact and tries to paint a picture of working mothers up in arms over the difficulties of making last-minute child care arrangements to protect their jobs. The implication is working parents and their children would be fine if school officials only stopped coddling up to teachers and their supposedly unfounded concerns over COVID-19 outbreaks and staffing shortages.

To spin this tale, the *Times* assigned Giulia Heyward, a former intern for CNN and *Politico* and freelancer for "left-liberal" publications like the *Atlantic*, *Huffington Post* and the *New Republic*. Heyward is currently part of the selective *Times* fellowship program for "up and coming journalists."

She begins her article:

Caitlin Reynolds, a single mother, was happy that her son, L.J., was finally settled into fourth grade after a rocky experience last year with remote learning.

Then, on Wednesday, Nov. 17, an announcement: Detroit public schools would close their classrooms every Friday in December. There would be virtual school only.

On Friday, a follow-up announcement: School was also canceled starting that Monday, for the entire week of Thanksgiving. This time, there would be no online option.

"You need to take the kids back out again?" Ms. Reynolds said. "How is that not going to be harmful to these students?"

It must be stated that Detroit's "virtual Fridays" are the exception to the rule. New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago and other large urban school districts, along with the vast majority of smaller ones continue to run fully in-person classes, despite rising school and community infections. This criminal policy is enforced by the Biden administration, Democrats and Republicans on the state and local levels, with the full and active support of both teacher unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

The *Times* reporter searches far and wide for any other examples of

temporary school closures, no matter what the cause. Six other Michigan districts extended the Thanksgiving break, she says, and three districts in Washington, including in Seattle, unexpectedly closed on November 12, the day after Veterans Day. The Brevard school district in Florida used leftover "hurricane days" to close the entire week of Thanksgiving, she says. Finally, "In Utah, the Canyons School District announced that all of its schools would go remote one Friday a month from November until March, equivalent to more than a week of school."

The closures, Heyward says, have sent parents scrambling for child care and forced school districts to "summon the wherewithal" to supervise remote learning. Beyond that, she says, "many parents are worried that with additional lost days of in-person school, their children will fall further behind."

The words "COVID-19" or "pandemic" are hardly mentioned in the *Times* article. One would not know that daily new cases in Michigan have doubled since October, spiking from a weekly average of about 4,000 per day to more than 8,000 a day. Deaths have followed suit, rising from an average of 51 a day to more than 100. According to the Michigan Health & Hospital Association, COVID-19 hospitalizations jumped 88 percent during that same period.

As of December 9, nearly 7.2 million children have tested positive for COVID-19 since the onset of the pandemic, including 2.1 million since the opening of most large school districts in the first week of September, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. COVID-19 cases among children are extremely high: Over 164,000 child cases were added during the week ending December 9, an increase of nearly 24 percent since the prior week. For the 18th week in a row child COVID-19 cases are above 100,000. Children made up 23.6 percent of reported weekly COVID-19 cases.

None of this is of any concern to the *New York Times*. According to Heyward, "School districts cited various reasons for the temporary closings, from a rise in Covid-19 cases to a need to thoroughly sanitize classrooms. But for many schools, the remote learning days—an option that did not exist before the pandemic—are a last-ditch effort to keep teachers from resigning. They are burned out, educators said, after a year of trying to help students through learning loss, and working overtime to make up for labor shortages."

To further downplay the danger of COVID-19 in classrooms, Heyward spoke with AFT President Randi Weingarten. The *Times* reporter says Weingarten attributes teacher shortages to the toll that "battles in the classroom—over mask mandates and critical race theory"—failing to mention that 2,084 teachers and other school employees have lost their lives since the beginning of the pandemic, according to the Twitter account @LostToCovid. "What you hear from teachers is that it's been too much," Weingarten told the *Times* reporter. "And they're trying the

best that they can.”

In fact, Wingarten has been Biden’s chief enforcer and has aligned herself with the right-wing parent group “Open Schools USA” to beat back the resistance of educators to the homicidal “herd immunity” policy.

According to Heyward, “These temporary closures, though, may only hamper relationships with parents at a moment when tensions in many districts are already high.”

The entire purpose of the *Times* article is to drive a wedge between educators, parents and students. This occurs precisely at the point when there is growing sentiment to implement virtual-only teaching to stop community spread and save lives.

The line of the “liberal” *Times* is nearly identical to the December 1 article, “Parents, students take a back seat as school districts announce last-minute closures,” published by the Michigan Capitol Confidential, a “free market news” source run by the DeVos and Koch family-funded Mackinac Center for Public Policy. The article castigates school officials for using COVID-19 and teacher shortages as “excuses” to close schools and skirt Republican efforts to punish districts for implementing virtual learning by stripping them of state funding.

It appears Heyward, using this article as the basis for her hit piece, set out on a fishing expedition to find parents to back up her concocted story. On December 6, the *Times* reporter posted a request on the Detroit Public Schools Community District Facebook page for comments from parents of DPSCD high schoolers about the remote Fridays. But the responses were not what the reporter expected or wanted.

One parent, Shawnte Simmons, wrote: “Yes! They need to make Fridays permanently virtual. These numbers are getting higher and higher. All schools should be virtual actually every day.”

Another, Rosalie Lawrence, added, “I think it’s a great idea, 2 days is enough for face to face right now during this pandemic. I like that it allows a balance between virtual and face to face teaching.”

Taylor Vernise posted: “My daughter is in the virtual school and she said to me that she is glad she is not face to face. She hears from her friends how bad it is in the building with no social distancing and mask are not staying on.”

The *Times* reporter deliberately excluded these comments.

After the article appeared, Detroit parents and educators responded with disgust. Kathleen Wright wrote on the DPSCD page, “Ugh this makes me so angry. My middle school drama majors had a workshop fri with Broadway and film actors from NYC whom they’ve been able to work with a few times throughout virtual school—a perk to virtual learning! It can be done well!”

While Heyward excluded any voices of teachers from her article, educators quickly expressed their opinion on the DPSCD page. “This is BS. Schools close for the safety of children. Teachers are freaking exhausted. Some are now long haul covid patients. ... some lost family and are still grieving. We are so tired. I just got over covid. Which I caught at school, and I came back ASAP but I am drained.”

Another summed up the real motives behind keeping the schools open, writing “politicians” and “employers see schools as warehouses for children. ... Get kids into schools so we can get our worker bees back in the workforce making big guys trillionaires.”

On the *Times*’ own site, teachers denounced the hack job. One educator from New Jersey wrote, “This article is shameful and poorly reported. It pits teachers against parents, which is dangerous and unproductive.” Another denounced “anti-teacher articles from the NYT” that encourage “infighting of progressive parties (teachers and parents)...”

The decision by Detroit school officials on November 17 to introduce “virtual Fridays” in December was done reluctantly. Earlier that day, hundreds of students and teachers walked out of Martin Luther King High School after at least seven teachers and many more students were infected. Protesters said the number of COVID-19 cases was being underreported,

social distancing had failed and there was no deep cleaning at the school.

After consulting with the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) union over how to prevent further protests and job actions by educators, Detroit Schools Superintendent Nikolai Vitti issued a message to school personnel, declaring, “After listening and reflection on the concern of school-based leaders, teachers, support staff, student and families, regarding the need for mental health relief, rising Covid cases and time to more thoroughly clean schools; and reviewing strategy to address these concerns with the school board, I have decided to shift district wide instruction on December 3, 10, and 17 (all Fridays) to online learning.”

The wholly inadequate measure—which allowed the contagion to spread in classrooms, halls, cafeterias throughout the rest of the school week—failed to quell growing demands to convert back to virtual learning as cases spiked. Two days later, on November 19, Vitti announced schools would be closed November 22 and 23, effectively shutting the schools for the entire week of the Thanksgiving holiday.

The concerns of school officials and DFT bureaucrats were not unfounded. Within days of schools resuming after the Thanksgiving break, educators in Detroit began a sickout demanding improved security measures after the November 30 school shooting at Oxford High School and virtual-only classes to protect themselves and their students against the surge of the pandemic, including the more infectious Omicron variant.

The School at Marygrove educators took the action independently, but DFT officials, who had repeatedly ignored these safety concerns, moved in rapidly to try to quell the rebellion. They sent in high level union and administration officials to feign concern over the long disregarded grievances.

The *New York Times*—the mouthpiece of the Democratic Party political establishment and the Wall Street financial aristocracy, which it serves—cannot permit even the most limited school closures to save lives. Their motto is: “Give them an inch, and they’ll take a mile.” If officials retreat in the slightest to the safety concerns of educators, parents and student, this contagion of resistance, which they deem more dangerous to their interests than COVID-19, will spread to New York City, Los Angeles and Chicago. If working-class parents are home helping their children learn from the safety of their own homes, the labor shortage will be worsened, wages will go up and the entire house of cards on the New York Stock Exchange could come tumbling down.

This sordid affair reveals the real role of the *Times* and other corporate media. From the beginning of the pandemic, they have sought to pollute public opinion, justify the murderous back-to-school and back-to-work policy and protect profits, not lives.

For the truth, educators, caregivers and other workers must look to the *World Socialist Web Site*, which is organizing a Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic to expose the political and economic forces behind the policies which have allowed the uncontrolled transmission of the virus that has killed millions worldwide.

To save lives, educators must appeal not to the corporate media, the big business politicians and bought-and-paid-for union bureaucrats but to their fellow workers in the factories and other workplaces, which are also being hit by outbreaks of the deadly disease.

We urge educators in Detroit and Michigan to join the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. Register to participate in this Friday’s meeting at 4:30 p.m. EST (3:30 p.m. CST) to organize educators and workers throughout the Midwest to demand the closing of schools and nonessential businesses, the necessary resources for high-quality virtual learning, and the public health measures to finally eliminate COVID-19.



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