

Michigan legislature passes bill that would keep kids in schools without teachers

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A bill has passed the Michigan state legislature which would allow any school district employee with a high school diploma or equivalent to act as a substitute teacher through June 30, 2022. It now requires the signature of Governor Gretchen Whitmer, a Democrat, to become law.

If Whitmer signs it, substitute teachers across the state will no longer be required to have a teaching certificate, nor a 2-year, 60-credit Associate's Degree from a college or university, nor any personal knowledge or experience whatsoever in the subjects they are teaching.

The State Senate passed the bill by a margin of 23–13, with the yes votes of 19 Republican senators and 4 Democrats.

While clearly representing an attack on the right to high-quality public education, the legislation is most of all a blatant attempt to undermine teachers' recent successful efforts to force the closure of schools to stop the spread of COVID-19, a situation which superintendents and state officials now refer to dishonestly as a "teacher shortage."

Notwithstanding official efforts to downplay the danger of the virus and pretend the pandemic is nearly over, Michigan is in the midst of its second Winter of Death. For the past two weeks, Michiganders have been dying from COVID-19 at a rate of more than 100 per day, in a state with a population of just under 10 million.

On December 3, Michigan hit an all-time high of 11,186 daily new COVID-19 cases, exceeding the peaks reached either last winter, before vaccines had been developed, or in the spring when the more-contagious B.1.1.7 variant exploded in the state. Now, the even more contagious Omicron variant is spreading in Michigan and surging around the world. This variant

has developed new properties in its spike protein which lets it infect people who have had two or even three vaccine shots.

Last the American Association of Pediatrics (AAP) recorded 11 new deaths from COVID-19 among those age 19 and under. In Michigan, 29 children have now died from the disease since it first emerged.

Under these conditions growing numbers of teachers in Michigan and across the US have refused to go in. Several districts were forced to extend the Thanksgiving break, which predictably resulted in an immediate reduction in the daily new case rate in Michigan. Other districts have reverted at least partially to virtual learning.

The bill on Whitmer's desk would empower districts to keep schools open in the face of such teacher opposition by essentially transforming other school staff into strike-breakers.

According to the legislation, any school district employee with a high school diploma will be allowed to serve as a substitute teacher. Whitehall District Schools Superintendent Jerry McDowell told the *Detroit Free Press* that bus drivers could teach in between their morning and afternoon routes!

This would represent the complete transformation of schools from institutions of learning into nothing more or less than holding pens for working class youth and cesspits of infection and community spread of SARS-CoV-2.

While introduced by Republicans, the bill is entirely in line with the policy of the Biden administration, who—like Trump before him, and like governments around the world—places the capitalist right to profit above not just public education and mental health, but above workers' very lives, by intentionally allowing the virus to spread, kill, mutate and reinfect the

population indefinitely. During the pandemic millions have died, but billionaire wealth has skyrocketed.

The bill shows decisively that the policy of keeping schools open amid a raging pandemic is motivated not by a desire to prevent “learning loss,” let alone to protect the mental health of children, as is cynically claimed by school boards and the pro-corporate unions like the American Federation of Teachers. How could children possibly learn with no teachers, and their spirits thrive amid mass infection and death?

In Michigan in particular, schools have frequently been the source of the absolute majority of recorded COVID-19 outbreaks in the state. It is a fact that the daily new case rate in Michigan has never decreased except when schools have been closed.

As scientists have explained, schools are perfect environments for community spread of an aerosolized virus like SARS-CoV-2, which is transmitted not just through moisture droplets that fall to the ground, but which also hangs in the air for hours like cigarette smoke. In-person learning requires that teachers and students from different households across the community gather in small, badly-ventilated classrooms all day and exchange contaminated air with one another, before returning home to exchange air with their families, who in turn go to different workplaces or schools and repeat the cycle. This process circulates COVID-19 throughout the community.

Along with workplaces, schools are central battlegrounds in the fight to eliminate COVID-19 and end the pandemic. This is because, on the one hand, capitalists must keep schools open in order to keep working-class parents at work; and on the other, schools are a key source of community spread, and therefore must be closed as a part of any scientific plan to end the pandemic.



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