

Michigan governor signs bill to keep K-12 classes open by using non-teaching staff as substitutes

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On December 23, Michigan's Governor Gretchen Whitmer, a Democrat, signed House Bill 4924 into law, allowing any school district employee in the state to serve as a substitute teacher from now until the end of this school year in June, 2022.

Though her press release is titled "Gov. Whitmer Signs Bill to Address Substitute Teacher Shortage," in fact the law does not address any of the issues driving away waves of teachers and substitute teachers—above all the dangers of the still-raging pandemic. Instead, it simply provides a legal mechanism to keep children in schools without them.

Whitmer wrote in a signing statement, "Everything we have learned in the last year and a half demonstrates that our kids need to be in school, in person, every school day," an astonishing claim given that over 800,000 Americans have now died from COVID-19 and K-12 schools have been Michigan's worst source of community spread.

By allowing schools to operate without teachers, the law explodes the argument, championed by both big business parties and American Federation of Teachers union President Randi Weingarten, that the huge number of COVID-19 outbreaks recorded at schools must be weighed against "learning loss" experienced by children who attend class virtually.

Teachers, students and parents must be warned: with the extremely contagious and vaccine-evading Omicron variant projected to infect 3 billion people globally in the next three months, including 140 million Americans, once again overwhelming hospitals and health systems, the ruling class is preparing to keep schools in person no matter what.

The Michigan law is completely in line with the

policy of the Biden administration, which is to allow COVID-19 to spread indefinitely. Other recent maneuvers by institutions across the US which will fuel the spread of the virus include the sudden move by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), after intense lobbying by the airline industry, to reduce quarantine time to five days; the ending of New York City's policy of quarantining entire exposed classrooms in September; and the continuation of in-person schooling in Chicago even though cases have already reached the artificially high bar set by the unions and Mayor Lori Lightfoot.

And while there is still no vaccine for those age five and under, Omicron has been shown to be particularly harmful to children. In Gauteng Province, South Africa, where the variant first emerged, there was a huge increase in child hospitalizations, especially for those five and under. New York City has seen child hospitalizations quadruple in the month of December. On December 28, 544 children with COVID-19 were admitted to hospitals across the US, shattering the previous record set the day before, 421.

Throughout the pandemic, teacher opposition to the pandemic played a role in causing some Michigan school districts to go virtual or to close temporarily in the face of COVID-19 surges. In Detroit, teachers in the state's largest district initially forced the district to remain virtual for the entire 2020-2021 school year (although it was constantly chipped away and finally upended). Nearby Grosse Pointe North High School was shut down by a wildcat teacher sickout in April of this year.

Throughout November, several districts or individual schools across the state went virtual or cancelled

classes due to teacher and staffing shortages, including Grand Rapids Public Schools, Galesburg-Augusta Community Schools, and Waterford Mott High School. Other districts extended Thanksgiving Break as daily new cases in Michigan reached above 10,000.

Earlier this month, teachers and support staff at The School at Marygrove (TSM), a public school in Detroit, conducted a sickout to demand improved safety measures after the Oxford school shootings, and virtual-only classes to protect educators, students and their families from COVID-19.

With Michigan's new law, schools could be prevented from going virtual even in the face of educators' opposition, so long as districts can pressure a sufficient number of bus drivers, custodians and cafeteria workers to cover the infected classrooms. The law provides that if these workers normally make less than the wage of a substitute teacher, they will be paid the higher rate for accepting the role for the day.

While stating that an individual who declines employment or assignment as a substitute teacher "must not be terminated from his or her existing employment or assignment and must not be subject to retaliation solely for declining the employment or assignment," school and local authorities will no doubt resort to such threats to find replacements.

One Michigan teacher told the WSWS, "Our bus drivers and cafeteria staff may be wonderful people, but they should not be teaching. I bet you wouldn't feel too confident with a random passenger or stewardess flying a plane. You can expect trouble in the flight... Imagine who will be desperate enough to get on the plane.'

On social media other teachers are expressing support for collective action by all educators to shut the schools and protect lives. Responding the CDC's decision to reduce quarantining guidelines, one Detroit teacher wrote, "I'm done with Biden and Whitmer too. We talked about Trump so bad but sadly our administration, locally and nationally, are doing the same thing. It was Delta Airlines who requested these new rules about shorter isolation time."

Another wrote, "So, the response to an even more infectious and contagious variant is to REDUCE quarantine as to not disrupt work. Does anyone see the similarities to slavery here?" Another worker replied by calling for strike action.

The ruling elite and both political parties are

oblivious to the needs of children. They only want to keep schools open as a child-minding service so working-class parents can continue to be exploited for profits. Michigan's auto plants in particular, themselves cesspools of COVID-19 transmission, are desperate for workers, with shifts frequently unable to start because of the shortage of workers.

The new law resembles other measures taken across the US to paper-over staffing and teacher shortages amid the pandemic. Northwest School District, near St. Louis, Missouri, recently hired 20 of its own high school students part-time to cover nine positions in maintenance, food service, and before-and-after-care, in some cases paying them less than the state's minimum wage. In October, the national guard was called in because of a bus driver shortage in Massachusetts.



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