Michigan K-12 schools see 74 new COVID-19 outbreaks as opposition to in-person learning builds

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The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and the IYSSE at the University of Michigan are holding a meeting this Wednesday, January 19 at 7p.m., "The growing movement to close schools and stop the pandemic." To register and attend the meeting, click here.

Like many states across the US, Michigan is experiencing record infections from the Omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2, dwarfing previous highs in the COVID-19 pandemic, with schools remaining the primary source of outbreaks and transmission across the state.

Last week, Michigan officials identified at least 185 new COVID-19 outbreaks across the state. Counting the 380 prior outbreaks recorded, the state now has 565 total ongoing outbreaks. Michigan currently averages over 18,000 cases a day, up 36 percent from two weeks ago, while hospitalizations are up 19 percent. K-12 schools lead the settings responsible for the latest outbreaks, representing 74 of those reported last week, followed by childcare/youth programs, which account for 23.

The most horrific outbreaks last week took place in Midland, Michigan, with the city's H.H. Dow High and Midland High School reporting 121 and 108 cases, respectively. Western High School in Bay County saw the third largest outbreak of 100 cases last week. This map depicts the ongoing outbreaks across Michigan.

A recent report from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services on the state of the pandemic before Omicron became the dominant variant underscores the terrible toll that has been enacted on Michiganders over the past two years. The report found that COVID-19 infections hospitalized nearly one in every 100 Michiganders and has killed one in every 300. Shockingly, one in six Michiganders is confirmed to have contracted COVID-19.

Infections among Michigan children between ages 0-9 increased 343 percent over the last nine months compared to the first year of the pandemic, while the number of children ages 10-19 infected with the virus increased 139 percent. In the first weeks of 2022, the Omicron variant's spread is exacerbating the preexisting crisis of the surge from the Delta variant. Already, by January 14, 140 pediatric patients had been hospitalized in Michigan with cases of confirmed or suspected COVID-19.

While school district leaders and capitalist politicians continue to flagrantly claim that COVID-19 only "mildly" affects the youth and does not spread through schools, the reality of the situation is asserting itself. On January 11, after a two-month hospitalization, healthy 17-year-old Kalamazoo Central High senior Taigan Bradford succumbed to the virus.

While not confirmed, Taigan's mother suspects her daughter became exposed and infected with the virus at her school. Since resuming in-person classes from winter break on January 3, Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS) has recorded at least 170 new COVID-19 cases among students, not including faculty. At Taigan's funeral, her mother stated that she is urging KPS leaders to end in-person learning and return to virtual learning.

Last week, as part of a nationwide and international upsurge of struggles by students and educators against the unsafe conditions in schools, dozens of students attending Okemos High School carried out a walkout last week. Okemos, Michigan, is just outside Lansing, the state's capital. For months, concern over the Okemos schools' COVID-19 policies circulated on social media.

In comments to the WSWS, teachers from Detroit voiced their solidarity with the larger upsurge of struggle among students. Rochelle, a teacher in northern Michigan, stated, "I am proud of the students advocating for themselves, their teachers, and the communities the schools serve. It is disgusting how districts refuse to offer remote learning options.

"It appears as if there is collusion between politicians and union leadership to force face-to-face learning regardless of the death, and all other disruptions it causes. It is not about learning with lockouts like in Chicago. Many schools are so short-staffed that students are herded into gyms or auditoriums because so many staff are out sick. If only we could hold all of those that refuse to take proper health and safety measures responsible when we have vast numbers of children and workers that have long term health conditions as a result of COVID."

Casey, a teacher in Detroit, commented on the school reopening policies, stating: "Where are our common sense and basic human decency? Instead of rational decisions, many of our leaders, at various levels, continue the blatant effort to protect corporate interests and profits. That's our love for 'Business as usual,' even though we put our elders and medically frail in jeopardy, and risk new mutations of the virus.

"A few school districts have gotten it right, shifting from in-

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person to online learning, but many districts are just blundering about with half measures and excuses, mollifying tired parents with claims that this variant 'isn't so bad.' Meanwhile, they are risking the lives of children and families. For what? Stubbornness? Greed? True ignorance? This is long overdue – SHUT DOWN ALL THE DAMN SCHOOLS! Distribute resources to get all our children online. It must be done, or today's ignorant refusal to bend will cause the deaths of cherished caregivers and significant educational loss and emotional pain."

The organized struggle of teachers, staff, students and workers from every industry must halt the bipartisan campaign to reopen schools for in-person classes. In each district, the teachers unions have conspired against the interest of educators and students to force them back into unsafe schools. Everything depends upon the independent initiative of educators, students and parents uniting to enforce a switch to remote learning as part of a broader strategy to end the pandemic, which is the central aim of the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.

The following is a general overview of the policies and conditions of Michigan's largest school districts. Educators and students in these districts: make plans to attend tonight's meeting, "*The growing movement to close schools and stop the pandemic.*"

Detroit Public Schools

DPS is the largest school district in Michigan, with almost 50,000 students and over 100 schools. Following the winter break, DPS announced the delay of in-person classes and a temporary switch to virtual learning between January 3 and 5. The delay has lengthened week after week, with the latest planned return to in-person learning set for January 24. New concretized requirements for a return to in-person learning include mandatory testing for employees and consent by students to weekly saliva testing, with indoor masking requirements.

Currently, DPS has a virtual learning option, automatically enrolling students who do not submit their consent for weekly testing by January 31. Most recently, seemingly in a last-ditch effort to boost in-person enrollment above its current level of 74 percent, DPS announced a two-week grace period past the January 31 deadline for consent form submissions.

DPS Superintendent Nikolai Vitti has made it clear repeatedly in public statements that DPS ultimately aims to return to in-person classes as fast as possible. Vitti cited the mass staff shortages as the primary reason in-person learning is currently untenable. The threat of a social explosion from mass infections if schools did reopen looms over DPS, already having 20 percent of students quarantined from the previous semester.

Dearborn Public Schools

The Dearborn school district is the third largest in the state, with roughly 21,000 students enrolled. Since the return from winter break on January 3, Dearborn schools have been in-person, only allowing virtual learning options for those who signed up for the program by June 8, 2021. Dearborn school athletics are also continuing with little restriction.

Like many districts returning to in-person learning across the state, Dearborn announced it would update its quarantine policies to meet the new guidance from the MDHHS and state. Following the unscientific guidelines released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the new measures reduce the quarantine period and allow asymptomatic individuals who have a negative test by day five to return to school. Vaccinated individuals do not have to quarantine, while those exposed to infected individuals no longer count as close contacts.

Testing, which is not systematized in the schools, shows dozens of infections across the district in the first weeks of the semester, yet the school's dashboard only records cases contracted outside of schools.

Ann Arbor Public Schools and University of Michigan

AAPS is the fourth-largest district in Michigan, with roughly 18,000 students enrolled across 32 schools. After canceling classes on January 3 and 4 and implementing a short switch to virtual learning at the beginning of the second semester due to staffing shortages, most AAPS schools, excluding three understaffed high schools, returned to in-person learning on Tuesday, January 18. Like Dearborn public schools, AAPS has changed its quarantining and tracking requirements to meet the new state and federal recommendations.

The University of Michigan's local campus fully reopened earlier this month, bringing over 48,000 students from across the state, country, and internationally to Ann Arbor for in-person instruction. By the end of the first week of January, U-M reported over 1,600 cases on its COVID-19 dashboard, including over 500 Michigan Medicine (formerly the University of Michigan Health System) health care workers.

While the Omicron variant rips through students and faculty, over 1,900 faculty members have taken a courageous stand against the order of U-M leadership and hosted classes online. This action follows the publication of two open letters from students and staff urging a reconsideration of U-M's policies. This week, students and faculty published a new petition, which continues to gain signatures in the hundreds each day, urging U-M to provide the choice to move classes online.

Grand Rapids Public Schools

While GRPS planned to reopen to in-person learning on January 3, significant staff shortages forced the district administration to transfer to virtual learning for the first week back from winter break. The following week remained online after the district reported 23 percent of all teachers, 50 percent of paraprofessionals, 50 percent of secretaries, and 30 percent of the school board being out due to COVID-19, either as positive cases, close contacts, or expected infection awaiting test results. As of Tuesday, January 18, GRPS schools have fully reopened for in-person learning with masking requirements.

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