

“Risking the lives of our youth and their families is something we must no longer allow”

Detroit educator denounces unsafe school reopenings

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“Chronic illness will no doubt adversely impact the quality of life and educational outcomes of some of my brightest students, debilitate their caregivers, and exacerbate the teacher shortage,” a Detroit Public School Community District (DPSCD) educator told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Alana indicated why so many teachers, parents and students are horrified by the insistence of DPSCD, the largest district in Michigan, that schools must reopen face-to-face. DPSCD was forced to close for in-person learning on December 16 as the citywide test positivity rate hit a staggering 40 percent. The district was one of the only major cities to delay the reopening of schools throughout January during the ongoing Omicron surge of COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations and deaths.

With buildings closed, case rates in the hard-hit city dropped to 20 percent. While the drop in cases was a vindication of the need to keep schools closed and ramp up remote learning, DPSCD is reversing course and scheduled reopening this week, only interrupted by a snow storm. Automakers throughout the region are struggling to keep assembly lines running and Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer and Mayor Mike Duggan have applied maximum pressure on schools to stay open so parents can work.

Only 36 percent of Detroit residents have received two doses of vaccine, which guarantees that reopening schools and workplaces will only bring more death and suffering. As Omicron continues to rampage, opposition to in-person schools has grown.

Alana commented, “Until we know more about the trajectory of Long COVID, we cannot in good faith

claim that in-person learning is safe. I worry about these children. They suffer trauma. What if they bring it home to their caregivers and they don’t recover? These families often rely on the grandparents. If they are incapacitated, it’s a big problem.

“Before the pandemic, the schools were already a war zone. This has made mental health much worse. But we’re told to get back to ‘business as usual,’ that’s really traumatizing. Children are overwhelmed, feeling they have to live up to expectations. Grades are awful this year. They don’t understand how to handle it all.

“The whole vaccination campaign was not well done. The way they touted the vaccine actually created skepticism. And all kids aren’t vaccinated. But a country as large as China did much better. They have a collective mentality, unlike the individualism we have that is so rampant.”

Commenting on the wave of struggles to keep schools closed, which the unions have opposed and sought to isolate, Alana said, “I was so happy to see the number of student walkouts. For them to do this, and on such a big scale, is amazing. I feel underrepresented by my union. There’s been no opposition by the union at all. Every teacher knows this is not safe, there’s not one in the DPSCD that believes they are safe!”

Asked about the conditions under which she is teaching, Alana said, “I taught virtually all last year, and although I felt uneasy about it, returned in-person this fall. In public education, we somewhat accept empty promises for what they are, but when it comes to the safety of students and staff, empty promises are unacceptable.

“I was forced to change classrooms to a smaller classroom at the beginning of the year. The sign on my door once said the capacity was 16, and then one day there was a new poster which said 25. As the year has progressed and new enrollments trickled in, somehow I now have classes of 30, which are cramped even by pre-COVID standards.

“I have two working windows in my classroom. I requested an air purifier, but never received one. Why do you even need to request it? They should just come into each room and give you one. We have an older building and the ventilation is poor.

“There are many students who come to school sick. There is a huge lack of transparency in case reports; students and staff receive no notification of positive cases in the building. The only way of monitoring cases is by looking at the weekly data on the district’s website, which is somehow always less than the number of teachers out. A letter is sent home to just the students in the classroom where there is a positive case.”

Alana detailed the impact on her and many other educators, “Since I see multiple classes, I have had multiple exposures which I was never notified of. I had the misfortune of catching COVID early in the pandemic, and have had chronic health issues from Long COVID since then.

“My health issues with Long COVID have gotten much worse through the course of the year, and I am terrified to go back into the classroom. I felt a weird anxiety, fatigue, insomnia and migraines for awhile. Now I’ve got chronic infections that don’t go away. The way my brain works feels much less efficient now. Even in the medical field, doctors don’t often recognize or understand Long COVID.

“Long COVID is now a big part of the labor shortage, with 1.6 million full-time workers out of work due to symptoms and 19 million are affected. Yet they sweep it under the rug! They claim it is ‘mild.’

“The media has grossly downplayed the severity and prevalence of Long COVID and has painted it as temporary, but persistent symptoms, rather than a chronic illness. It is more akin to HIV than chronic fatigue. This is deeply concerning, not only for myself, but the future health of my students and colleagues.

“The working class and youth are bearing the weight of the world on our shoulders. We have sacrificed our

health, safety, security, well-being, and our lives to uphold a system which continues to deny our pain and suffering, and tells us that the only cure is the disease itself. It is of great urgency to speak our truths, and give ourselves permission to heal, not just as individuals, but as a society. We as a people must come to a consensus between what we wish we had, and what we cannot allow.

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For information on joining the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees or forming a committee in your area, contact the WSWs.



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