

# Michigan State University student speaks out against in-person learning amid record COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations

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In late December, Michigan State University (MSU), the largest university in the state with over 50,000 students, announced it would host all classes virtually for the first three weeks of the spring semester amid the surge of the Omicron variant and record COVID-19 cases. While conditions continued to worsen in Ingham County, with 38 deaths and both hospitalization and test positivity rates increasing by 2 and 34 percent, respectively, over the last two weeks, MSU announced a return to in-person classes starting January 31.

In mid January, while MSU was using virtual instruction, MSU student Katarina Keeley felt increasingly worried about the dangers of a return to in-person instruction. Katarina described her feelings at the time to a reporter from the *World Socialist Web Site*: “I thought it was going really well [virtually], and also I just started feeling paranoid about going back in person. Especially when there were a lot of cases in Ingham County.”

Wondering if other students had the same concerns, Katarina posted in a Class of 2023 Facebook group, asking if anyone preferred continuing online schooling.

Katarina’s post received overwhelming support from students who shared her same concerns. Katarina decided to email MSU President Samuel L. Stanley, asking for the administration to consider providing a virtual learning option for students. Katarina said she waited for a little over a week for a reply from Stanley and received no response. She decided to turn the email into a petition demanding a virtual learning option at MSU.

Speaking on her decision to turn to a petition, Katarina said, “I wanted other people, if they did support [a virtual learning option], to see that it wasn’t just me, it was a lot of other MSU students that wanted this as well.”

Over the past two weeks, Katarina’s petition has garnered significant support from students, parents and staff, receiving over 1700 signatures. Many students who signed Katarina’s petition voiced their concerns regarding the reckless reopening of MSU in the petition’s comments. One student, Amanda, speaking on the dangers students face on campus wrote, “As a student, with some health issues, I am terrified of getting sick. I heard a student in the hallway of my class coughing loudly and it brought me to the realization that covid could be anywhere on campus. I am signing because of how mandatory in-person classes might harm other people’s health.”

Voicing the particular threats faced by disabled and immune-compromised students and faculty, another signer, Brooke, wrote: “Being immunocompromised had completely changed the way I view in-person classes during this pandemic. ... We have done this in the past, and this first three weeks ... I want to feel safe and healthy. Even with all the vaccine and booster mandates, my at-risk exposure is still higher by returning in person.”

Katarina is deeply concerned for students and teachers who are at a higher risk of illness and death: “There are people who have a disability who benefit from the online option. I know the argument is that people learn better in person, and that might be true for some people, but for others, it might not be. I’m just surprised because MSU is supposed to be inclusive and make sure everyone is succeeding.”

Sahar, a student who lives with her spouse while attending MSU, described horrific personal experiences caused by in-person instruction in a comment supporting the petition: “... I don’t feel safe being in class. I got covid two times and the second time it was terrible and I cried the whole 5-6 days I couldn’t eat or sleep. As a student who lives with her husband, I was very worried about my husband getting the covid. He has to work to pay for our life and getting covid caused him to stay home ten days and he wasn’t feeling good at all also we had some problems with life expenses.”

MSU’s only COVID-19 precautions, like many other colleges, include loosely-enforced masking mandates, vaccination and booster requirements, and weakened quarantine measures. As of this writing, MSU has reported 59 cases in the first week of in-person classes, likely a severe undercount due to the lack of a campus-wide testing and tracing program.

Shortly after her interview with the WSWs, Katarina reported that one of her professors tested positive for COVID-19.

MSU’s policies are in lockstep with a broader agenda, directed above all by the Biden administration, to falsely promote the Omicron variant as “mild” while normalizing mass infection and death. The media, trade union bureaucrats and college administrations have also continued to claim the return to in-person classes is essential for safeguarding students’ mental health and the betterment of their education.

Katarina denounced these lies as ridiculous: “I don’t like that. It’s like 2020 didn’t even happen. ... I’m shocked by this response... It’s shocking that they’re not allowing us the option. ... I

wonder if people are just saying that so people won't worry again. We should prioritize our education, but if there's anything I learned from 2020, it's that we should prioritize our health as well."

Katarina also noted that she knew several fully vaccinated co-workers and a roommate who contracted COVID-19 while on campus.

She went on to explain her own experience with COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021:

My aunt has a more sensitive immune system and during the pandemic, I was living with her. Honestly, I barely left my house, I just did not want anything to happen to her. She's not very old, but she is in the age range of being more at risk. A few months ago I had another aunt who is a nurse who caught COVID. My sister recently caught COVID too, and I think she's still recovering. ... My sister has other mental and physical health issues and she doesn't leave her house that often, so when she told me she got COVID I was pretty shocked. ... Even if they say this variant [Omicron] is mild, what if people, like my sister, have previous health issues that make it more difficult?

Speaking further on the ruling class policy of allowing the virus to rip through the population, Katarina argued:

You can't tell me there aren't effects [from COVID] that can still damage someone later in life or affect people later on. ... Look at all the deaths that happened in 2020 because of COVID and how many people died of COVID. Even if they say this is a milder variant who's to say there won't be a stronger variant? Everything that's happening [protests and petitions] at MSU and other universities, it's pretty powerful to see students take a stand for what they believe in but, again, it's really devastating to see what it's come to. I guess it really shows what you were saying about how these universities are just doing this to make money.

Over the last several weeks, K-12 schools, colleges, and nonessential workplaces in roughly a dozen states, including Michigan and New York, ended daily reporting of COVID-19 cases altogether. Katarina expressed tremendous concern over these criminal actions, stating, "I feel like it just allows colleges like MSU to say 'look everything's fine' and encourage what they're doing. ... That's shocking and disgusting. You have to keep track of these things [cases and deaths] to make things better. I don't want people to start giving up and think everyone's going to get sick; that's just not a good mindset."

As with all colleges and universities, MSU has an immediate financial motivation to reopen. Katarina commented on this point, noting a rather revealing interaction with her own school: "I was

speaking to an adviser of a program that I'm in, and I was asking how her department was reacting to them being back in person, how do they feel. She said she understands how [MSU] makes a lot of money from students living in the dorms. I was appreciative of the honesty, but it's just like, is that really what you want to say?"

Alongside rent, MSU's lucrative sports programs provide another incentive behind their drive to sacrifice lives and health.

Katarina went on to note the brutal reality bearing down on students facing the return to in-person classes in colleges and K-12 schools. "It's like they just need a body there and everything's fine. They say to just get through the day and everything will be alright. Especially with college campuses, it's not like there's not going to be parties ... Some people don't want to be in a classroom with someone who might've gone to a party over the weekend. You don't know what they could have. It's almost like a paranoia."

Katarina's petition is one of the latest entries in a growing wave of protests, open letters, and petitions against the ruling class's homicidal profit-driven reopening policies.

Speaking on these developments, Katarina said, "I didn't realize there were so many other protests, like at UCLA. It's really cool to see students stand up and fight for what they believe in, but it's sad to see that it had to come to this. ... I hear things like 'oh, people are just having these protests and petitions because they're lazy and don't want to go to class,' and I just don't understand. ... The whole point of this is to prevent something worse from happening ... It's almost like a movement. I didn't realize all the stuff that would come out of it. I'm really grateful to all the students who support it and didn't think it would be what it is now."

*The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) encourages students and high school youth to contact us today to share the conditions in your school and to get involved in the fight against the pandemic.*



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