

Detroit youth stage “die-in” to demand more school counselors

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21 April 2022

A group of Detroit-area high school students, organized in the 482Forward Youth Organizing Collective, staged a “die-in” at Martin Luther King High School on Saturday, April 16. The protest and accompanying press conference called attention to the lack of school counselors amid an unprecedented mental health crisis among children and teenagers.

The students chanted, “Mental health is a human right; Fund our counselors, do what’s right,” holding signs including, “This is life or death for us.” They then lay on the concrete for 11 minutes in silence to underscore the appalling lack of counselors.

When last tallied in 2019, Michigan’s ratio of mental health professionals-to-students was second-worst in the US, with one counselor for every 691 students. Only Arizona had a higher ratio.

Nearly half of all Michigan K-12 schools, 400 out of 900, had no full-time counselor at the time of the 2019 study. This state of affairs pre-dated the pandemic, but COVID dramatically intensified the growth of depression and anxiety—and especially grief—within the population.

Under the impact of the ruling elites’ “herd immunity” policy of mass death and infection, diagnoses of depression have reportedly tripled, with disproportionate impacts on those with lower incomes. More than 200,000 American children have now lost a parent or primary caregiver to COVID-19, one of the most stressful events that a child can experience.

During the die-in, multiple students spoke to the impact that the lack of mental health services in schools has on them. A freshman at Lincoln Park High School, Stacy Gonzales, told the group, “This issue hits close to home. We do *not* need more funding for policing in our schools. We are facing a day-to-day rollercoaster of emotions. Our health is on the line, and we need to be taken seriously.” She related her personal crisis with family issues and the difficulty of sharing this with the school counselor. But

after only 15 minutes, the counselor had to move on, Gonzales told the protesters.

Denby High School student Louis Mason echoed the point, “I’m fighting. Mental health plays a huge role inside of our schools. It’s very sad that we don’t have access to actual help. We all struggle with barely having the energy to get out there because of ... the struggles we face behind closed doors. I’m a victim of all this.”

“What it boils down to is that we don’t have enough professionals in our buildings to proactively help students,” said Terri Tchorzynski, president of the Michigan School Counselor Association, to the *Michigan Advance*. Tchorzynski said the shortage is caused by a lack of funding, not a lack of availability of counselors.

The American School Counselor Association recommends states have one counselor for every 250 students, a standard that only 14 percent of schools nationally presently meet, according to *Education Week*. Nearly 40 percent of all school districts, enrolling 5.4 million students, also did not have a school psychologist in the first full year of the pandemic. Just 8 percent of districts met the National Association of School Psychologists’ recommended ratio of one school psychologist to 500 students.

“When a student needs a counselor or mental health support, and one is not available, then our state government has failed that student. This lack of support means more problems for all students, lower academic performance and sadly can lead to tragic outcomes,” added Emily Gonzalez, also a student at Lincoln Park High School.

Tragedy has become all too common. Last December, 15-year-old Ethan Crumbley carried out a mass shooting at his suburban Detroit high school in Oxford. The event, itself a reflection of a broken mental health system and a deep-seated social crisis, further traumatized students across the entire metro area. Nationally, nearly half of

school and district leaders said that their school or district is getting more threats of violence by students than in the fall of 2019, according to an *EdWeek* survey last December.

The approach by state and national government in allowing the pandemic to rage, refusing to close schools and require all available mitigation measures, amounts to felonious “child abandonment”—whose definition often includes “failure to provide adequate care.” It is not surprising that a poll of high school students revealed that 44 percent felt “persistently sad or hopeless” in 2021, with 37 percent experiencing “poor mental health” during the pandemic. Suicide has risen to the second leading cause of death for adolescents and young adults, surpassed only by motor vehicle fatalities.

The die-in served to launch a petition drive sponsored by the Democratic Party-aligned 482Forward, calling for doubling the number of school counselors and mental health supports in the state. The petition asks for an appropriation of \$300 million from the state legislature and Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer.

But this petition, like many similar iterations from students across the US, will fall on deaf ears. The governor’s current budget proposal provides nowhere near the already inadequate request by 482Forward, only \$120 million for mental health professionals, up from Fiscal Year 2022’s disastrous \$53.9 million.

At the hands of both Democratic and Republican politicians, Michigan’s mental health system has suffered “deaths by a thousand cuts” over years, according to the Community Mental Health Association of Michigan (CMHAM). As a result, the state provides inadequate resources for opioid crisis support, suicide prevention, autism services, mental health crises, and public health services through Medicaid, pointed out a recent CMHAM report.

By contrast, the state’s coffers have always been wide open for the “Detroit Three” automakers. The vast sums handed out to the corporate elites expose the sums requested for mental health as a mere pittance.

Whitmer’s new budget proposal adds a whopping \$500 million to the \$1 billion Strategic Outreach and Attraction Reserve (SOAR) Fund for big business. More than \$666 million of these funds were earmarked for General Motors last January. This adds to the \$2.28 billion in tax credits approved by the legislature in 2020 for the profitable corporation.

Young people demanding their rights to mental health care, well-funded schools and wrap-around services

should not be deluded by big business-funded organizations like 482Forward, a front for the Democratic Party and unions.

The “collective” exists to peddle the age-old illusion that the Democrats can be pressured into reforms. It organizes meetups with state legislators and lobbying, looking to co-opt and recruit potential “youth candidates” for capitalist party politicking. None of these initiatives have had the slightest effect on the ongoing de-funding of education or the lavish payouts to corporate elites—nor will they ever.

Biden, along with the entire political establishment, has cynically claimed that the protection of the mental health of children was a central reason for the reckless reopening of schools during the pandemic. Yet Biden’s recent spending bill for the 2022 fiscal year significantly low-balled funding for education and provided only a meager increase in funds for student mental health, failing to adequately fund the necessary mental health services students need across the US.

Make no mistake, there is no way forward via the two political parties of big business. Having presided over more COVID death than Donald Trump, President Joe Biden and the Democrats are now carrying out a war against Russia, a nuclear power, and gearing up for World War III. Domestically, a bipartisan class war of austerity, disease and increased exploitation is being waged by the financial elite against workers and youth.

Just a few months ago, students at King High School walked out to demand COVID safety, with student protests continuing nationally. It is time to unify the struggle for a future free of war, poverty, climate change and the pandemic with the struggles of workers erupting around the world.

Young people must draw the necessary lesson of the dead-end of capitalist politics and make the decision to join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) to fight for a socialist future. To take forward this fight, we urge you to attend the online May Day meeting!



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