

An educator speaks out: “My heart hurts for my kids.”

Flint, Michigan schoolchildren and educators: Poisoned by lead, devastated by COVID

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The children of Flint, Michigan have been doubly ravaged—by lead poisoning and more than two years of SARS-CoV-2 infections and deaths. Now in the sixth wave, COVID cases in Flint’s Genesee County are rising by 69 percent, and despite ongoing outbreaks, schools remain open face-to-face. At the same time, a lawsuit now alleges that the city’s young people “acquired brain injuries” due to ingestion of lead.

The contamination of Flint’s water at the hands of General Motors, Governor Rick Snyder, and the entire city, state and national Democratic and Republican establishment exposed nearly 30,000 schoolchildren to lead, a neurotoxin that attacks developing brains and nervous systems.

The current class action lawsuit, one of many, targets engineering consultants contracted by the city (Veolia North America and Lockwood, Andrews & Newnam) during the 2014 switch to Flint River water. It has brought to light some of the devastating and widespread educational and mental health challenges the city’s children and their teachers face.

Testifying on May 10 and 12, neuropsychologist Mira Krishnan provided evidence that Flint children are suffering brain injuries due to being subjected to lead-in-water.

Dr. Krishnan, a specialist in neurodevelopmental disorders and impacts of complex trauma, examined four children, who she said exhibited hyperactivity, impulsivity and weaknesses in various subject matters in the classroom. Such problems can amplify over a lifetime. One of the children, she said, showed impairments that “very rarely would be seen in a random sampling of children from the community ... who didn’t have some sort of brain injury.”

The terrific price inflicted on these young people is more the rule than the exception in Flint. According to a report in the *New York Times*, a staggering 70 percent of the students evaluated by the city’s Neurodevelopmental Center of Excellence have required school accommodations for issues like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia or mild intellectual impairment.

“We have a school district where all that’s left are damaged kids who are being exposed to other damaged kids, and it’s causing more damage,” Stephanie Pascal, a 23-year veteran teacher, told the *Times*.

Cindy, a Science, Technology, Engineering & Math (STEM) specialist in the Flint Community Schools (FCS), spoke to the WSWs about the difficulties faced by educators and students as a result of COVID, the short-staffing of schools and the lead poisoning.

“This has been a disappointing experience. It is my first year here. It is important to know so many well-educated, amazing people working in FCS. They are supportive of the students and work hard to accommodate all these unfortunate events. But their hands are tied.

“COVID has changed everything. I’ve never witnessed anything like this before; staff even from the central office are missing. Teachers are leaving frequently and shopping around [for better jobs]. We started the school year short-staffed,” she related.

The city’s students have lost parents, caregivers and teachers to the pandemic, compounding a deepening social crisis. The site of the 1936-37 GM sit-down strike by autoworkers, by 1960 Flint, along with Detroit, had the highest per capita income in the nation. After decades of plant closings, the city now has a 41.2 percent poverty rate.

So far this year, at least two Flint school workers have succumbed to the pandemic: Brownell STEM academy kindergarten teacher Casey Purdy, 40, on January 2, and Freeman Elementary school security officer James Stephen Jr., 56, on January 28.

Purdy was briefly in the news earlier in the pandemic when she took on a second job to help her students buy school supplies. “The reason why I work a second job is to help them get stuff at their house if their parents can’t buy it, you know, backpacks or anything I can buy it,” she said in August 2021.

These deaths were not inevitable but were a conscious political decision from the Biden administration and the teachers’ unions to ensure that parents remained on the job.

“We know, of course, that in-person learning is better,” Cindy said. But Flint Community Schools had prepared for remote learning, she said, and could have offered an alternative.

“The school had ensured a one-to-one device [for internet-based classes] ratio for students. All students either had a device or we delivered one to their homes. Even though we had the capacity to be virtual, they made us stay open face-to-face anyway.

“When the media went ‘negative’ on virtual learning, the

district decided it couldn't take more negative media and would never go virtual again."

In fact, the overriding concern for the business and political establishment was getting children back in school so their parents could return to work to make profits for GM and other corporations.

Cindy pointed to the impact of teachers being forced out of the profession. "I was hired to be a STEM facilitator to help with the development of programs, curriculum, and project-based learning at the school-wide level. But there was no science teacher for the eighth grade. From Day 1, I was assigned to substitute. Then another sub was brought in on Day 2 and 3. On Day 4 of the school year, I was made the long-term sub. That lasted until November.

"After that, I became the building sub until Christmas. I was in and out of different classrooms. Over Christmas, the technology teacher quit, so I became the long-term sub for the technology teacher. We lost the seventh-grade math teacher and our sixth-grade self-contained teacher," she said, explaining that she was therefore unable to perform the job she was hired to do.

The teacher exodus has become a tsunami nationally. The homicidal policy of full in-person learning driven by the needs of Wall Street, the ending of all official mitigation measures, the notorious chronically low pay of educators [as of 2019, starting pay for Flint teachers was \$35,339 a year] and impossible workloads have combined into the proverbial "perfect storm."

Cindy pointed to the crying need for resources in the cash-strapped district. "We have no special education-certified teacher in my building, only paraprofessionals. The paraprofessionals are running classrooms and not getting paid accordingly. They are dealing with cognitively impaired and emotionally impaired students.

"Students whose IEPs [Individualized Educational Plans] call for either 'push-in' support or 'pull-out' help, aren't receiving those services. This has been ongoing all year. We are not in compliance with IEPs.

"I understand this is a statewide and nationwide issue. It's everywhere. What happens when these students need someone who knows how to relate to their situation? They're going to possibly be aggressive or act out," said Cindy.

The short-staffing of special education teachers and lack of resources are beyond the breaking point across the US. President Biden had promised to provide full funding for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which funds Special Education (SPED), but now there is supposedly no money for the program. At the same time, Biden and Congress have rushed to provide \$53 billion for the US-NATO war against Russia.

The IDEA was passed in 1975, promising that the federal government would provide 40 percent of the cost of supporting special education students. Nevertheless, Congress has never covered more than 20 percent of the cost. Today it is less than 16 percent. This underfunding creates higher per-pupil costs for districts with more SPED students, and less resources overall.

Cindy said the lack of staff is compounded with lack of security. "We don't have enough security; they're not trained and they're worn out. They are essentially thrown into the buildings, and they escalate most incidents." She concluded, "These are children in

survival mode, just reacting to stay above water. My heart hurts for my kids."

Lisa A. Hagel, the superintendent of the Genesee Intermediate School District, explained to the *Times* that the impact of neurotoxins to children worsens over time. "What the research says is that as they get older, and the cognitive demands get harder, we will start to see the demands get higher, and the resources aren't going to be there."

"We're suspending everyone, behavior is out of control," Cindy said, describing the near unbearable conditions. "There is no consistency that's needed. There is a big difference from the beginning of the year until now; nothing is consistent. We don't have the staff to give the kids what they need. They can seem okay in the classroom, but when they enter the hallways, the restroom, the lunchroom [they lose control]."

The teacher said she attempted to raise this problem with her union but to no avail. "I don't feel comfortable speaking to my union rep. I don't feel I have been heard by them. They're not very knowledgeable about how to solve things. They like to blame the administration and then let it drop.

"I reached out to the MEA [Michigan Education Association], and I was ignored for the first month. After I started emailing more aggressively, I got a response. The union said they were unaware [of the situation], and they would talk to the board. It's not safe.

"The School Board is adamant that we will stay face-to-face. The union rep is silent again. There are 4-8 teachers out now, many with COVID. Others are just exhausted. It's been a hard year all around.

"How dire it's becoming! I don't expect it to get better in the Fall. COVID has highlighted what was already broken before. It makes no sense that we won't take care of the people that are trying to hold our children. The well-being of our students is not at the center.

"The topic we don't talk about is the lead poisoning. It's not considered as a factor in the learning gap. As of now, 80 percent of our 6-8 graders are reading at a third grade level or lower. It's horrific. That's not a 'learning gap,' and it's not just the effect of COVID.

"The lead is not talked about. When it's raised, 'Let's not forget about the lead,' we are told, 'Oh, right,' and then we move on. We know the mental and physical effects. We have filtered water now in the schools, but no one talks about why.

"It's political, and at what cost? It's easier to shuffle people around, to forget. It's 'just Flint.' We are beyond reform. We need a revolution to change education. An overhaul. Our children aren't learning."

We urge all Flint teachers, special education workers and public school employees to take the initiative in the fight against COVID and for the defense of public education. Join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee here.



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