

Michigan teachers describe rampant illness, burnout and other dire conditions in 2021-22 school year

Our reporters
19 July 2022

The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is holding a meeting Wednesday, July 20, at 7:00 p.m. EST entitled “2021-2022: A crisis year in review for Michigan educators.” We invite all Michigan educators, staff, parents and students to attend this critical meeting and get involved in our work.

During the summer break, teachers and other school staff throughout the country have had a brief opportunity to reflect on the experiences of the 2021-22 school year. The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (MERFSC) asked teachers, para-professionals, other school staff and parents to tell us about their school year, the state of the public schools and the broader social problems they confront in their classrooms. Their answers paint a picture of harrowing conditions throughout Michigan schools.

On the continued spread of COVID-19

In Michigan, deaths from COVID-19 are even more common than they are nationwide. Across the state, at least 36,982 people have died from the virus, equal to about 370 deaths for every 100,000 people. Michigan has the 10th highest death rate per capita. In fact, right now the BA.5 Omicron subvariant is again driving up cases, hospitalizations and deaths throughout the state and across the country.

Schools throughout Michigan, like the rest of the country, were largely forced to stay open, even in the face of skyrocketing cases and infections. As for the mitigation efforts at the schools, teachers and staff report these measures were largely ineffective.

One Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) teacher described the situation at her school. “COVID-19 mitigation measures consisted mostly of contact tracing, but it stopped after a while. During contact tracing, teachers who were vaccinated did not have to quarantine for the recommended time if they had no symptoms. We all know some people were asymptomatic and could have it, so I was very upset about that.

“Social distancing was not enforced. Testing was not enforced. The kids were supposed to get tested during their lunch hour. Students were telling me they had to leave the testing location where they were in line because there were too many students. Our lunches were by grade level so it can be a couple hundred per lunch period getting tested.”

Similar situations were described in other districts throughout the state. “I was ill once with COVID. It is impossible for me to quantify how often or how many of my students were ill with COVID, other than to say that it was MANY of them. There were a lot of COVID-related absences among my 180+ students this year. As for colleagues in the building, I would say that the majority of us were sick with it at some point.”

A western Michigan public school teacher explained there was a sincere effort from staff to follow the proper protocols to keep people safe. “Contact tracing took SO much time from our administrators and office staff, but they did what they could with regard to contact tracing and quarantining, and they did adjust the protocol as requirements from the state evolved.” However, the teacher explained the problem was not primarily with adherence to the protocol but rather that the protocol was either not realistic or ineffective.

“There is ZERO way for social distancing to be enforced in a school. I had over 30 students in the majority of my classes, and it was wall-to-wall insanity in my room. This is true of most teachers. Social distancing in a cafeteria is also impossible and same for buses. So, due to the realities of being a lot of people in a small space, we were unable to separate people from one another. But a sincere effort toward complying with required protocols was maintained. ... It just was not fully effective.”

Another DPSCD teacher explained that she witnessed administrators attempting to discipline students for missing school when they were struggling with Long COVID. “One student had COVID in October, and his mother had it the entire month of December and was on oxygen at home. He was threatened with expulsion due to excessive absences. His mother worked for the district and had to take a leave due to poor health. Her Multiple Sclerosis (MS) has been exacerbated by the effects of Long COVID. She was treated like a negligent parent.”

There was widespread opposition from teachers and other education workers to the handling of the pandemic. However, the Detroit Federation of Teachers along with other unions worked systematically to demobilize and dissipate opposition. While 91 percent of teachers voted in DPSCD in favor of a safety strike at the start of the 2020 school year, there was no such vote allowed in 2021. The lack of any organized opposition led to the victimization of teachers, who requested to work virtually from home, as well as the impact of sickness and death among countless teachers, students and family members.

On standardized testing and evaluations

Despite the major disruptions to the school year caused by the pandemic, standardized testing was largely continued throughout the year. “The tests continued as if there was no pandemic, and no one was affected,” one DPSCD teacher explained.

Teachers expressed many concerns with the continuation of standardized testing, including that their own evaluations are dependent on how well their students perform.

Another Detroit teacher explained, “Our evaluations required us to do group work. How do you social distance in our small classrooms and do group work with 3 or 4 students working together, or even partners? It’s impossible! However, we were penalized on our evaluations if we didn’t do group work. This is of a piece with the Common Core state standards and the standardized testing during the pandemic. Neither the standardized testing of the students nor the evaluations of teachers, 40 percent of which is based on those standardized tests, was fair. It was a cruel exercise to make deeper attacks on education under the guise of ‘failing schools’.”

Another teacher said, “I’m not on a radar to be bothered so I’m just marked ‘effective’ each year and expected to be ok with that. It’s a hoax, really. I was observed for 12 minutes this school year and four minutes last school year via Zoom.”

Another pointed out, “The whole teacher evaluation system is designed to get you and put the blame on someone. There’s a lot more going on than the elements measured in the teacher evaluation tool. Folks don’t want to admit that there’s multiple factors in reality. So if someone has to take the blame it’s often the principal and then the teachers.”

On working conditions and teacher burnout

Even before the pandemic, teacher burnout had become a widespread issue throughout the country as thousands of teachers continued to leave the profession every year. A report issued in February 2022 from the National Education Association (NEA), however, showed that this trend was greatly exacerbated throughout the pandemic years. The report said staff shortages led to increased levels of burnout, and that of those surveyed, 55 percent of educators were planning on leaving the field earlier than they originally planned.

A special education teacher explained how this crisis found expression at her school. “Fortunately, our special education program was just fine, but our general education program definitely felt the effects of it. We had three teachers leave mid-year, and we struggled to fill those positions. We only had one substitute teacher for the entire building, so while we were waiting for new hires, the students were split up into other classrooms. In the end, we were only able to fill two of the three open positions.”

Explaining what lies behind the mass burnout, one teacher said, “We are leaving the position in droves because we are overstressed, underpaid and undervalued.”

She went on, “We have administration and ‘leaders’ in Lansing who put pressure on our students and us to perform on standardized tests that do nothing to show a student’s worth or how much they’ve learned. If those students don’t click enough correct buttons on those

tests, our evaluations go down.

“Our schools are underfunded, so we use money from our own underfunded paychecks to make up for that. Everything that goes wrong in the schools is the teachers’ faults. So what advantages are there to sticking around when we can go work elsewhere for more money and a heck of a lot less stress?”

Another teacher said, “This school year has been a lot. Teachers never signed up to ‘protect and serve,’ and that’s what they are making us do. If it’s not safe for Ford and Blue Cross and some state employees to be in office, why is it safe for teachers and students to be in a building?”

A Bloomfield Hills science teacher said that teachers are leaving for other jobs that pay more and have less stress. “Teachers are micromanaged by administrators. Class sizes are bigger. Canned curricula are being bought and forced to be used. High school is encouraging new grading practices and unenforced attendance policy, but teachers are still accountable for student learning.”

The Portage teacher explained, “We were dreadfully affected by a lack of substitute teachers this year; it was definitely a crisis, especially because people had to be out due to illness more than is customary. Our special education program (in my building) lost one person (she resigned) at the end of this year. I have been surprised that there haven’t been more retirements and resignations lately, but most of us simply don’t have that choice. We have to make a living.”

She continued, “People are simply TIRED. They were tired before the pandemic, and they are even more worn down and burned out now during the pandemic. More and more responsibility is being laid at the feet of teachers: food, clothing, behavioral issues that they have neither the time nor training to address, lack of special education support for kids who need it most, enormous class sizes, expectations that a strong relationship will be built with all students while creating customized/differentiated lessons and activities for—literally—hundreds of students per day, negotiating SEL [Social Emotional Learning] lessons/learning for students, making sure that students show growth in ways that are quantifiable ... The list goes on.

“In my district at least, teachers have 48 minutes of planning time daily. The pressures of each day squeezes me tight, and I am a seasoned, level-headed professional. I get to school over an hour before students report, I work through my plan and my lunch, and spend more time at the end of the day and multiple hours on weekends just trying to keep my head above water...

“Everything is rushed and interrupted, and we continue to be told to ‘practice gratitude’ and to ‘engage in self-care.’ This is not possible when you feel like you are sitting in a burning building all day long. We are in fight-or-flight mode all day, every day. When it’s done, we just have to slog through the wreckage and start over ... patiently, creatively, in a hurry ... all over again.”



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