

A disaster in the making: Back to school in Detroit, Michigan

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Schools will reopen in Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) for students and staff on Monday, August 29. Teachers have already returned. In-service professional development and room preparation began on August 22. The district is expecting 49,000 students.

DPSCD dropped its mask and weekly testing mandates, making it optional last July 1, per the union contract. Quarantines will be for five days, with the infected school employee or student returning on Day 6 wearing a mask until Day 10 if he or she is fever free. Under conditions of the abandonment of all COVID-19 mitigations, class sizes are returning to pre-COVID levels, with no social distancing. Teachers have reported that there is a greater emphasis on putting students into groups and to focus on attendance, testing and enrollment as COVID-19 funds dry up.

These loosened requirements are a recipe for disaster and fly in the face of the reality of the uncontained spread of COVID-19.

The criminally negligent official response to the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in 1 million deaths in the United States and 20 million worldwide. In Michigan there have been more than 37,000 deaths. Detroit at one point saw one of the highest death rates in the country.

According to a December 2021 study by the Detroit Education Research Partnership at Wayne State University, *Detroit Families' Experiences with COVID-19 and School Attendance: Survey Evidence from DPSCD*, "More than 50 percent of all families in the district experienced financial, mental health, and logistical challenges during the pandemic. Thirty-four percent of DPSCD families had a family member who got sick or died of COVID-19. These hardships were reported at similar rates for students with lower and higher attendance."

One DPSCD high school teacher reported that they were told at a meeting that reduced student enrollment could mean teacher layoffs since pandemic money has dried up. This is under conditions of a national teacher shortage of 300,000!

Unlike last year, when the drastic spike in child cases and hospitalizations emerged largely as a result of school reopenings, this year schools are reopening in the midst of a major surge of the virus and an increase in child cases and hospitalizations. This summer alone, over 200 children have officially died from the virus, and child hospitalizations have recently reached the same levels as during the height of the Delta wave last September.

No mitigation measures for monkeypox

As of this writing there are at least 153 monkeypox cases in Michigan and 16,600 throughout the United States. There are no mitigation measures for monkeypox in DPSCD. In fact, the superintendent said, "As you know, in the last few weeks there has been an increase in monkeypox cases both locally and nationally. Although this is concerning, it is important to know and communicate that monkeypox is a rare disease that is rarely fatal and currently there are less than 30 cases in the city of Detroit, with one case connected to a District employee. ***It is not an airborne contagious virus such as COVID and a vaccine is available.*** ... If we are made aware of a monkeypox case through employee self-reporting or the Health Department, then we will share this information with the relevant school community or Central Office location via email or robo call. ***Younger people are unlikely to have monkeypox*** and infection requires direct physical contact, typically at the household level. If a positive case is reported, then we will deep clean the school or district environment where the individual was present." (Emphasis added.)

The claims in this correspondence are dangerous and misleading under conditions where the World Health Organization has called the 40,000 confirmed cases of monkeypox in 80 countries a global health emergency.

First of all, the claim that a vaccine is available is false under conditions where the vaccines are being rationed worldwide. There are even attempts to divide one vial into several doses, or use expired vaccines delivered to the United States years ago in the hope that they are still viable.

Second, monkeypox can also be contracted from airborne particles, and therefore the wearing of masks is critical.

Third, the number of children contracting monkeypox is steadily growing. This will, with the reopening of schools this fall, cause a proliferation of cases as students congregate in classrooms and schools with no social distancing or mask mandates.

A DPSCD high school teacher was shocked when his administrator "characterized monkeypox as an STD."

Another study from Wayne State University written in November 2019 prior to the pandemic, *Detroit's Uniquely Challenging Context for Student Attendance*, noted that long-term population change, asthma rates, poverty and unemployment rates, residential vacancy rates, violent crime rates, average monthly

temperature, and racial segregation in the city's greater metropolitan area are all significantly correlated with city-wide rates of chronic absenteeism.

"Detroit has the highest chronic absenteeism rate in the country (about 50%), and it has a uniquely challenging context for student attendance. Among cities with 500,000 or more residents, Detroit has the highest adult asthma rate (14%), unemployment rate (about 20%), poverty rate (about 38%), violent crime rate (about 20 per 1,000 people), and residential vacancy rate (27%). In addition, it has the greatest population loss since 1970 (about 50% decline), one of the lowest average monthly temperatures (about 49° F), and is among the most segregated major metropolitan areas in the country."

The election of Biden did not change the official indifference to the spread of infection and death. In fact, it intensified. The response of the Democrats at the city, state and federal levels has been to endorse Biden's "Forever COVID" plan. The role of the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association has been as loyal partners in the state apparatus in forcing children and teachers back into unsafe classrooms.

A veteran DPSCD special education teacher spoke to the WSWS:

"What's in the LOA [Letter Of Agreement]? Do we still have an LOA? I'd like to know, if we get COVID will we have five days without having to take days from our sick bank. They are not testing, or tracking. How would I know if I'm in contact with someone. I won't. We are not being protected and I think there will be a lot more cases this year. It used to be just the novel variant, then there was Delta, then there was Omicron. Now there are different variants of the Omicron variant. When we have COVID, which variant do we have? They are not testing for any of the other variants. Will we able to get Paxlovid through our insurance? The district doesn't want to pay for any of this.

"People will be covering up when they are sick, if they can, because they won't get paid to take off. Now the companies won't allow parents to take off because they need people to come to work, and they won't pay them to stay home and quarantine. People have to pay bills and take care of their families. Especially now with the price of gas and other things going up.

"Randi Weingarten's tweet is troublesome. That is why teachers are leaving the field. We didn't become teachers to give up our own lives, or to save other people's lives. I didn't sign up for the battlefield, or a war. I would have joined the military if I wanted to do that. I just want to teach.

"When did we vote for Randi Weingarten. I have never seen anyone get papers to vote, we pay AFT dues, I should vote for my national president. She is doing horribly, she is not supporting teachers at all. She is telling us to go back into the buildings. She should go to a school building for 6-8 hours and do group work before promoting us going back to school.

"The evaluations are not fair. Student growth is 40 percent of our evaluation. How can there be student growth if the students are absent.

"Because there is no testing and no sick time, everyone is going to come to school and work sick. Teachers and students. We might have more deaths, which is unfortunate. For example, we get sick and keep going to work and don't get tested, then one day we pass out, they take us to the hospital in an ambulance, put us in the ICU and then we die. It can happen that fast. That's what happened to the first Detroit bus driver who had it, everything happened so fast with him. He went into the hospital and a few days he was just dead. It's very sad."

Teachers are showing their determination to fight these conditions. There are currently 4,000 teachers, librarians, school nurses and other educators on strike in Columbus, Ohio. The first strike in 50 years. Detroit teachers must support their class brothers and sisters in Columbus and prepare for a nationwide educators' strike to stop both pandemics and to demand a giant investment in public education.

The most important thing any school employee, parent or student can do this Saturday is to come to the National Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee meeting in solidarity with the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Our meeting will hear from Will Lehman, a 34-year-old Mack Trucks worker from Macungie, Pennsylvania, who is running for president of the United Auto Workers. Will has issued a call to workers to support the striking teachers in Columbus, Ohio.

As he says, "High-quality public education is both a right and a necessity. For decades, however, both the Democrats and Republicans have left schools underfunded, forcing educators to work extraordinary hours out of sheer dedication and love of their students."

Please register for this critical meeting here.



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