

Michigan Democrats end K-12 school COVID safety measures, following Biden's CDC

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As schools reopened across Michigan after Labor Day, districts have abandoned mask mandates, COVID testing and quarantine requirements for people exposed to COVID. Many schools are coupling these dangerous pro-business policies with shortened quarantines and isolation periods for children and educators stricken with the virus.

This is despite the unremitting growth of the national and global death toll, the horrors of debilitating Long COVID, and the fact that over 10 million children have lost a parent or caregiver to the disease.

In Michigan, as nationally, both US teachers unions have either directly signed on to the ending of disease mitigation or facilitated it. In the state's largest K-12 district, the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) agreed to a June 30, 2022 end-date for mandatory masking.

There is no mention of COVID-19's existence, much less policies for disease protection, on the Michigan Education Association's web page, going back throughout 2022! The deaths of educators are not tracked or even memorialized by the unions.

Shedding crocodile tears over "learning loss," the unions and politicians also studiously ignore the reality of Long COVID and the trauma of losing family members, in their haste to prove their service to the Democratic Party and Wall Street. Above all, they are focused on protecting their dues stream and "seat at the table."

Meanwhile Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer, Democratic Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan, et al. are supporting the climbdown by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on quarantine and masking guidelines—the better to keep parents on the job and support the profits of the automakers and Michigan's businesses—and insisting on a return to unsafe school buildings.

In the state's largest districts, including Detroit, Grand Rapids, Dearborn, Royal Oak, Lansing and Kalamazoo, virtually all mitigation has ended. They are implementing the CDC's shortened quarantine guidelines requiring COVID-positive students to stay home for only five days and be masked to day 10.

These changes in regulations are not the result of safe conditions, but of economic priorities. In fact, last week, the number of COVID-19-positive patients treated in Michigan hospitals rose to 1,227, the highest since Omicron's peak last February. Case positivity in the state is between 20 and 25 percent of those tested, and has been since late July, indicating the disease is far more prevalent than can be gleaned from the limited reporting.

In 2022, 6,727 more COVID deaths have been reported in the state officially, pushing the annual death rate to more than 10,000. As of last week, 34,818 Michiganders have perished from the preventable infection. Due to increasing failure to identify COVID as the cause of death (people are supposedly dying *with* COVID, rather than *because*

of COVID), these numbers are undercounts.

Lizzie, a Detroit teacher reported, "Last week, we had three teachers out. One definitely was COVID-positive. His five days were up on Thursday, but he posted on Facebook that he is still not feeling well. It's his second time with COVID and surely the new variant. There are lots of sick students, but no acknowledged cases. Masks are 50/50 for students and 35/65 staff."

Another DPSCD educator added, "I received my fifth notice of a COVID-positive student in my class today. She self-reported to me. There's no official reporting any more so who knows who else she infected and if she'll even tell peers she sits by that they should test. I had a lot of students with 'sniffles' or 'sinus issues.'

"Students have returned from the five-day quarantine wearing masks under their noses and completely unaware that the CDC says to mask with a well-fitting mask for five more days. I'm sure some of these students are still contagious.

"We all have to demand both protection and accountability. We need to take matters in our own hands because the DFT is facilitating the spread of the virus. Our union rep sent out an 'oops I had COVID' letter after the teacher prep days, but his conclusion was to think about what we want to do as individuals. He wrote that the district didn't seem inclined to put forward mitigations.

"What's the point of the union? To tell us what the district wants?"

"I advocate for students to wear masks, but I can't mandate it," said Lizzie. "Especially if they are sick, coughing and sneezing, I try. One of my students went home very sick, she had COVID. I fear they won't even call it COVID anymore, it will be pneumonia or flu. I heard a parapro [paraprofessional worker] died, but you just hear it in passing. Also a 40-year-old vice principal suddenly died; very sad. But information is minimal or nonexistent."

She concluded, emphasizing, "The fight for timely information on cases is a central part of the Zero COVID program of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (ERFSC)."

Under Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer, Michigan COVID-19 reporting of cases at school ended March 11, then school-related outbreaks reporting was discontinued June 21, 2022. Reporting does exist for newly-reported school-age cases across the state, but the statistics are very slow and unactionable. Current numbers show 208 new cases as of August 31, an obvious undercount.

Whitmer, who is up for reelection this year, is fully in line with Biden and the entire Democratic Party's adoption of the "let it rip" policy. This has resulted in more loss of life under Biden than during his predecessor nationally, and the same is true in Michigan. The state has suffered 25,119 deaths between 2021 and 2022, out of a horrific total of 38,121.

These numbers alone underscore the importance of MERFSC's absolute independence of both political parties of big business and the unions. We urge educators to draw the lessons of this bitter three-year experience and take special note of the role of the Democratic Party, which has dominated southeast Michigan for decades.

What is the current SARS-CoV-2 policy in Michigan schools?

Mask mandates: Whitmer lifted the statewide mask mandate for schools in June 2021, allowing districts to create a patchwork of ineffectual measures. Joining DPSCD in abandoning mask mandates this year are other large Michigan districts including Grand Rapids, Dearborn and Lansing Public Schools. Last year, 75 percent of schools nationally required masks; this year it is practically unheard of.

Social Distancing: Some districts are still claiming social distancing is being practiced or can provide protection. This is entirely ineffectual window-dressing. Flint's updated guide encourages staff to support social distancing among students "as much as possible," but doesn't specify a distance. Lansing recommends that students and staff maintain 3 to 6 feet of distance from one another also "when possible."

Clean air: SARS-CoV-2 is an aerosolized virus which spreads across rooms. Indoor air quality is a life-and-death issue within schools. But the number retrofitted with adequate HVAC systems for aerosol protection is infinitesimal. In fact, it is so rare, that when one school in Ohio did so, it made the national news. For the most part, teachers are left on their own to open windows, buy HEPA filters, or make their own Corsi-Rosenthal boxes.

Virtual options: The 2022-23 school year has also seen the ending of K-12 virtual options across the US and within Michigan. While DPSCD did not end its virtual school, it is restricting admission even further this year, claiming it is doing so to combat "absenteeism."

Nationally, 94 of 100 large school districts said they offered remote learning options last year; but 35 have ended them this year, according to the Center for Rethinking Public Education.

Testing: The Biden administration's "Test To Stay" plan, itself an unscientific policy to allow exposed children to remain in school, collapsed during the Omicron surge at the beginning of 2022. Schools were incapable of performing even the limited tests due to lack of supplies or personnel.

Now, many Michigan districts, including Detroit, Dearborn, Flint, and Lansing, have stated they will not test students or staff exposed through close contact. The schools claim only that tests may be available for sick children.

Mark, another DPSCD educator, pointed to the rapid spread of the virus. "Only about one-quarter of the staff are masked, and only a handful out of my 100 students. One of those masked students told me that both of her brothers just contracted COVID, with one losing his senses of taste and smell. She is pretty scared now for them and for herself."

He emphasized that teachers were on their own to protect their lives and the lives of their students. "The district provided us with air purifiers last year but they do not have HEPA filters. But they also allotted us \$200 to spend at a school supply website on classroom supplies. Fortunately I found a HEPA air purifier on that site, but it used up most of my funds for classroom materials, so I am continuing to buy what I need out of pocket. But when the air purifier arrived, it didn't work!

"I'm continuing to feel powerless as I watch the number of empty seats in my classroom increase pretty dramatically in only the second

week of school. And of course there's no explanation from the administration. There has not been one COVID alert distributed to the school's community so far this year.

Also endorsing the fight of the rank-and-file safety committee, Mark reflected, "As the administration has been saying ad nauseam, COVID and attending to the pandemic-related needs of the children is a thing of the past and we are moving 'full steam ahead' with all of the pre-pandemic academic, attendance and behavior expectations."

A Michigan educator in a different district echoed Mark's anger: "I do have students with runny noses that I suspect have it. It is frustrating. I open my windows, I have an air purifier on the other side of the room, and I am no longer convinced that it will help with the transmission. BA.5 is far too contagious.

"Did I tell you it finally got our family in July? My husband brought it home and we still haven't been able to figure out [from] where. My husband and I both received Paxlovid but our young adult children did not. We had every symptom except difficulty breathing and, thankfully, were not hospitalized. My son had it for seven days, I had it for eight, my daughter for 11 days, and my husband rebounded and had it for 16 days.

"But the CDC says it's ok to rejoin society after five days. We were all contagious still!! It makes me so mad."

This complete abandonment of children, educators and staff is bipartisan state policy, embraced by Democrats, Republicans and unions alike. It must be reversed by the working class, through the formation of independent rank and file safety committees at every work site, neighborhood and school. The mad drive for profit cannot be allowed to impose endless mass death and disability. Moreover, the fight for a scientific Zero-COVID strategy across the globe must be combined with the struggle against inflation, war and exploitation.

Will Lehman, a socialist autoworker, is running for UAW president in order to assist workers in developing a network of rank-and-file committees to fight for our interests. This is a powerful example for all educators and students on the way forward.

As Will explains, all the great problems we confront—rampaging disease, the attacks on public education and public health, unprecedented levels of social inequality, an escalating global war, the danger of fascism and dictatorship, environmental degradation—require the mobilization of the entire working class against capitalism.

We urge you to make the decision today to join and build the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees in Michigan and other areas.



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