

Following unexplained death of kindergartner, Detroit elementary school reopens amid cluster of “mystery” illnesses

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For the closure of Marcus Garvey Academy until a safe return can be ensured! For full transparency to educators and parents!

The Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) is reopening Marcus Garvey Academy today amid a cluster of what is being referred to as “mysterious flu-like illnesses” that have left dozens sickened, three hospitalized and one kindergarten student dead. Nearby day care center, Focus: HOPE, which has also experienced a mass outbreak of illness is also reopening today.

The kindergartner who died, Jimari Williams, was just six years old. The cause of death for Jimari is still unknown. One can only imagine the depths of shock and grief this death has caused the parents, family, friends of Jimari and the broader community. Under these tragic and disturbing circumstances, DPSCD and the Detroit Health Department have responded with utter callousness.

Consider the timeline of events:

The cluster of illnesses reportedly began sometime in mid April. Six-year-old Jimari, a student of Marcus Garvey Academy, died in the hospital on Wednesday, April 26. Despite the hospitalization and death of this student, and the other illnesses, the Detroit Health Department was not notified of the cluster until Monday, May 1. School cleaning began that day. The school was not closed until Wednesday, May 3.

On May 4, Focus: HOPE publicly claimed that their outbreak was Hand, Foot and Mouth disease, though the Detroit Health Department never confirmed this.

On May 5, at a poorly advertised DPSCD virtual meeting for parents and educators at Garvey, it was revealed that the school system had not identified the majority of the illnesses; there would be no mask mandate in the school; and that no systematic testing was taking place. In fact, only two of the cases had been confirmed as Haemophilus influenzae, a broad name for any illness caused by bacteria called H. influenzae, which can be extremely serious.

A number of critical points must be made regarding the nature of this crisis and the response of DPSCD and the Detroit Health

Department.

First, it is a staggering if unsurprising fact that the word “COVID-19” does not appear in either the statement of the Detroit Health Department, the statement from DPSCD, or virtually any news report on the situation. During the virtual meeting on May 5, COVID-19 was only mentioned once, in the context of explaining to a parent why they would *not* be mandating masks at the school.

COVID-19, the disease which has claimed the lives of more than 1.1 million people in the US, including more than 2,200 children, has been virtually eliminated from the lexicon of the political establishment.

The absence of the word COVID is no mistake or oversight. It is a political calculation. To admit that this cluster of illnesses could be an outbreak of COVID-19 or related to COVID-19 would require the admission that COVID-19 does in fact remain a real threat to the lives of millions of workers and children. It would be an admission that President Biden’s decision to end the public health emergency which has been in place since the start of the pandemic, and dismantle the few health protections that were left in place, has nothing to do with public health and everything to do with protecting private profit.

Regardless of whether or not this cluster of illnesses turns out to be COVID-19, the actions of DPSCD and the Detroit Health Department demonstrates to workers, parents and students the complete disregard of school district officials for the safety of students and educators and their right to the latest information.

Secondly, the few token measures taken by the district to address this crisis are entirely inadequate to ensure a safe return to school. At the virtual DPSCD meeting, Alycia Merriweather, the Deputy Superintendent External Partnerships, Enrollment & Specialty Programming for DPSCD, spent the majority of the meeting rereading the same powerpoint slide, merely showing that the building has been cleaned. At no point did Merriweather address the possibility that the illnesses could be transmitted through the air, as is the case with COVID-19, in which case the cleaning efforts, while probably much needed, would not aid in the protection of students and educators.

The district also announced that they are providing a preventive medication for those who meet “special qualifications.” When Merriweather was asked about the mystery “preventive medication” at the virtual meeting, she responded that she was not

sure what it is, saying, “from my understanding it is an antibiotic.”

Moreover, when asked directly by a parent whether or not the illness or illnesses have been identified and confirmed, she booted the question to a colleague who stumbled over her answer:

First of all, kids are ill. As Merriwether said earlier, children get ill and can’t come to school or get sick at school all the time. This illness or illnesses that we are seeing we are not attributing to anything specific. All we know is that we have had some cases of H. influenza.

Another parent then asked: “What virus are you trying to eradicate in the school? What cleaning solutions are you using?” Again the DPSCD response was that they do not know what they are even attempting to eradicate with their unspecified cleaning solutions.

The attitude of DPSCD towards students, parents and educators amounts to a collective shrug: “Nevermind the fact that a six-year-old child has died and we don’t know why. We are sending kids back to school and whatever happens, happens.”

There is a mountain of outstanding questions on the minds of all parents and educators, the most obvious of which remains: What killed Jimari Williams? Remarkably, Williams’ death was not mentioned by any DPSCD member during the virtual meeting. Parents in attendance at the meeting were permitted to ask questions only through the chat function. A DPSCD member then selected which questions to ask the officials on the call.

In one disturbing exchange, the DPSCD member selecting questions began reading one that inquired about William’s death. One moderator cut her off nervously exclaiming, “That is a media question ... this is not a media meeting.” A student died, very likely from the same illness sweeping through the school and DPSCD’s official attitude is: “It’s not our problem.”

No grief counseling or memorial has been organized by DPSCD in the wake of this tragic death, instead they are doing everything they can to sweep it under the rug.

One parent asked, “Why did it take so long for schools to close?” Merriweather and others had no meaningful response outside of reiterating the timeline of events.

Another parent, no doubt expressing widespread sentiment, asked: “Will virtual learning be an option? This conversation does not make me feel comfortable sending my kid back to school.” Unsurprisingly, virtual learning is not offered.

When one parent asked if sick kids were being evaluated for other illnesses, presumably in addition to H. influenza, the district representatives replied vaguely: “Sick kids are being evaluated by other providers,” saying that it was up to the discretion of whatever physician the child visited. In other words, there is no systematic testing being done on sick children. How DPSCD or the Detroit Health Department is planning on discovering the source of the illness, without systematic testing, is left to the imagination.

Multiple parents asked why masks will not be required at the school. It was at this point that COVID-19 was finally mentioned, and only to say that since COVID-19 protocols were no longer in

place, the district policy is that masks are only optional.

Amid the vague communications from the Health Department and DPSCD, and the obvious political maneuvering, one thing is clear: Marcus Garvey Academy and the Hope day care center are not safe to reopen. Parents and educators who are rightly outraged over the response of DPSCD in particular must understand that the real allies in the fight to keep themselves and their children safe are the educators, other parents and the broader working class.

The Detroit teachers union that claims to represent Marcus Garvey Academy teachers has remained totally silent on this crisis. DPSCD has proven time and time again that their alliances ultimately lie with the Democratic Party political establishment.

Critical demands must be raised urgently to ensure the safety of children, teachers, other school staff and their families. First, there must be full transparency of all information related to this crisis shared immediately with parents and educators. Systematic testing must be put in place for all students, educators and those with whom they have been in contact, in order to determine the cause of the illnesses. No return to school should take place until the illness has been eradicated and the proper measures put in place to make the school safe for all.

Moreover, the crisis in Detroit must be understood not as an isolated event but as part of the ongoing global fight against COVID-19 and for a policy of defending life rather than profits. COVID-19 is not over. According to Data Tracker, 2,032 children ages 0–17 have died from COVID-19, *57 of whom were added in January 2023 alone*. Moreover, among children, the CDC has found that those previously infected with COVID-19 were at higher risk of a number of serious and potentially life-threatening conditions affecting the lungs, heart, veins and kidneys. Additionally, over 9,300 children have been afflicted with multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C), a serious condition associated with COVID-19.

The political establishment is even less prepared than it was before the outbreak of the pandemic to deal with any serious illness.

If order to protect the lives of educators, students and the broader community, there must be a fight organized independently of the trade unions and both political parties.

This fight is already well under way in the Detroit area, led by independent rank-and-file committees established among educators, autoworkers, and other sections of the working class. If you have any information or comment on the outbreaks of illness in Detroit or other areas, we urge you to contact us immediately. We urge all those who wish to get involved to contact the WSWs Educators Newsletter and get involved in the fight to save lives!



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