

"How can a child die, and we get no communications?"

Parents speak out against reopening of Detroit elementary school amid a cluster of “mystery” illnesses

Our Reporters
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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) has reopened the doors to Marcus Garvey Academy today amid a cluster of what is being referred to as “mysterious flu-like illnesses.” The still largely unidentified cluster of illnesses has killed one kindergartner, Jimari Williams, a boy who celebrated his 6th birthday just two days before passing on April 26.

The Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) has responded to the crisis with utter callousness towards the lives of its students and educators.

Sarah Johnson, a parent whose daughter attends Marcus Garvey Academy, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that parents were “left in the dark” as the “mysterious flu-like illness” swept through the school.

“I found out about the ‘flu-like symptoms’ last Tuesday, from the *Detroit News*. It was very late in the evening when the school called and cancelled classes. They never gave the details about Jimari or the severity of what’s been happening. There was nothing about the children hospitalized.

Johnson continued: “Not until Friday did I learn about Jimari. Four days earlier the school had posted a memorial flyer saying a student had passed. It was just a picture, no explanation or anything.

“In fact, they never mentioned him or his passing in any of their communication with parents. They also didn’t specify which age groups had been exposed; all of that came out in the media.”

At a virtual DPSCD meeting, held for parents last Friday, the district admitted that they did not know what illness killed Jimari. They also admitted that they had not been able in the vast majority of cases to identify the precise illness that was responsible for sickening the children.

According to the latest reports, 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.

Alycia Merriweather, the Deputy Superintendent External Partnerships, Enrollment & Specialty Programming for DPSCD, used the meeting to tell parents that the building has been cleaned against an illness or illnesses they have not identified; that masks would not be required; that no virtual learning option was available; and that no systematic testing was in place.

Many parents left the meeting feeling more concerned and angry than they were before.

“I watched part of the meeting on Friday,” Johnson explained, “but it was immediately clear that they had no intention of giving responses outside of their official PR (Public Relations) strategy.

She continued, “It’s very disappointing that they refuse to acknowledge Jimari. When a former student was murdered in the shooting at Michigan State University earlier this year, they made sure to inform parents. However, over a week after Jimari’s death they still haven’t offered public condolences. Their whole handling of the situation has been completely heartless and it seems like they’re more concerned with managing negative publicity than with keeping students safe.”

Another parent, Stacey Grimes, has a daughter who went to school with Jimari. Grimes explained that Jimari’s death is the first time she has had to explain death to her daughter. She commented: “It’s too soon for the kids to be going back to school. I don’t like it. We are hoping it isn’t like covid was.”

Many parents expressed deep concern that the school would not mandate masks under these circumstances.

“The school communicated that they have masks available free of charge and that parents should encourage children to wash their hands frequently as if we’re the ones in control of what happens in the school,” Johnson explained. “In the past, I was told that they put masks on kids when their noses begin dripping snot, so it’s unclear why they won’t put them in masks as a serious illness passes through the school.”

Commenting on the broader context of the crisis Johnson said, “I think this is indicative of the whole pandemic. Society has gone back to normal to where any illness takes place, they act like it’s not COVID, act like it’s all normal, and that we shouldn’t take precautions. It’s callous and it’s gaslighting. I’ve lost friends and family friends to COVID.

“I don’t think they would have shut down the school if a student hadn’t passed away. It seems they were doing all they could stay open, waiting so late at night. They tell us at 9:30 p.m. at night and we have to make plans for the next day. They wanted to cover this up, and they are still trying to. It’s bad PR.

“They want the kids in school, so parents are on the job to keep the so-called economy running. They will sacrifice as many people as needed. How can a child die, and we get no communications?”

Mia Bynum, a parent of two children at the school, told the WSWS: “I think it is too soon to be back in the school. My condolences go out to the boy and his family because he didn’t get a chance to live his life.”

She went on to express uncertainty about the effectiveness of the school cleaning, saying, “That [the cleaning] is not enough because there could still be more sick kids because some parents send their kids to school with runny noses and coughs. I just feel that it is too soon to open things. This happened in two locations where they had this outbreak. It’s not fair.”

She continued, “I’m still scared to send my kids to the school even though they said they sanitized and cleaned it. I have a child that is autistic, and one that has asthma. It’s a scary situation. It could happen to anybody. And I feel like by this occurring maybe the kids should be back online since it is near the end of the school year to avoid something like this happening again.”

A father dropping off his child at school expressed a sentiment that no doubt many others feel: “It’s all about the money. You and I both know that.”

The callous indifference of DPSCD to the health and well being of the students and educators of Marcus Garvey, as well their families and the surrounding communities, sadly, should come as no surprise. DPSCD is playing out of the same playbook used to force the reopening of schools at the height of the pandemic, with the backing of both political parties and the trade union bureaucracy—which it should be noted, has remained completely silent on the crisis.

The *WSWS Educators Newsletter* urges parents and educators to join the fight for safe schools.

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.

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