

Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer pushes unsafe reopening of Michigan schools

By Mitch Marcus
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Last week, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer released her “Return to School Roadmap,” which demands the reopening of schools even as COVID-19 cases are spiking in the state and expected to surge again in the fall. The Democratic governor’s program largely adopts state Republicans’ reckless “Return to Learn” outline released a week earlier.

Whitmer also released the outline of a budget deal with the Republican-led legislature to fill a \$3.2 billion budget shortfall for the fiscal year that just ended through deep cuts to state employees and school districts. The state still faces an overall \$3 billion shortfall for the 2020–21 fiscal year, not including additional funding needed for vital pandemic containment and protection measures.

For the 2019–20 fiscal year, the state deal includes \$512 million in funding from the CARES Act to cover coronavirus protection measures, far lower than the estimated \$1 billion that is required. It entails \$256 million in direct cuts to state funding for K-12 public education, which translates to average cuts of \$664 from the \$8,111 total per-pupil spending across the state. Additionally, Michigan schools face a massive \$1.2 billion shortfall for the coming school year, which translates to another \$700 cut in per-pupil spending, bringing the combined total for both years to 16.8 percent in cuts, a devastating blow to public education.

Districts across the state are already slashing their budgets, including \$10.6 million from Grand Rapids Public Schools, which will eliminate 111 jobs. Kalamazoo Public Schools plans to cut \$7.4 million from their budget, including cuts of 1.33 percent to salaries above \$11 per hour. Districts across the state, including Detroit, Ann Arbor, Chelsea, Ypsilanti, Lincoln and Portage, are dipping into or depleting any cash reserves they had.

Michigan, as with all other states, is currently experiencing a spike in COVID-19 cases due to the premature, bipartisan back-to-work drive. Covidusa.net reports that at 428 cases per day on average over seven days, Michigan is experiencing a 59.7 percent increase in new cases from two weeks ago. As with much of the country for which studies show an enormous undercounting of COVID-19 deaths, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services reports 3,346 deaths from the virus in April, but 4,907 more total deaths than in April 2019. This 19.5 percent jump in non-COVID identified deaths likely include many miscategorized as, among others, pneumonia and the seasonal flu, which showed a jump of 26 percent from April 2019 to April 2020.

Nevertheless, stating that she is “optimistic that we will return to in-person learning in the fall,” Whitmer is making it clear that she is determined to reopen schools even as cases spike and schools will likely serve as new and powerful vectors for community transmission of the virus.

With high levels of absenteeism among industrial workers—out of concern about contracting the disease and also the lack of child care—the drive to reopen schools across the US is necessary for the ruling class to continue to pump out profits from workers needed to pay for the massive bailouts of the stock market and giant corporations. On Monday, US President Donald Trump tweeted, “SCHOOLS MUST OPEN IN THE FALL!!!” While it is filled with all sorts of rhetoric about safety and public health concerns, Whitmer’s plan to reopen schools is an expression of the same class imperatives of the corporate and financial elite that Trump so crudely expresses.

Whitmer’s plan is dependent upon an unscientific regional and even sub-regional assessment of risk, not bearing in mind the porous nature of school district, county and state boundaries. The plan was developed by Whitmer’s appointed 25-member Return to School Advisory Council, which involved only two teachers and was chaired by Tonya Allen, CEO of the pro-corporate Skillman Foundation. Allen and the foundation have been heavily involved in school privatization and restructuring of public education in Detroit.

Under the Roadmap, districts are required to have three plans ready depending upon which phase they are in of the politically driven Michigan Safe Start Plan. In Phase 3, “Flattening of the curve,” and below, districts must implement their remote learning-only plan; in Phase 4, “Improving,” schools must open for in-person instruction while implementing “more stringent required safety protocols”; in Phase 5, “Containing,” schools are open for in-person instruction with only “moderate required safety protocols.”

At present, most of the lower peninsula of Michigan is in Phase 4 of the Safe Start Plan, with the northern part of the state in Phase 5. During Phase 4, all students in grades 6–12 are required to wear a mask in classrooms and common areas. Students in grades K–5 must wear masks in common areas but are not required to do so in the classroom if they remain there throughout the day. Teachers must always wear a mask. School staff, students, and bus drivers must wear masks.

While paying lip service to health professionals’ guidelines for

six-foot distancing, social distancing policies are to be decided individually by the 587 school districts with the understanding that “class sizes should be kept to the level afforded by necessary spacing requirements.” That is, desks are to be spaced six feet apart where feasible. On buses, even at Phase 4, there are no limits to the number of students per bus, though all will be required to use hand sanitizer when boarding. In other words, in the overcrowded and understaffed classrooms and buses of most public schools, social distancing will be nonexistent.

The guidelines mandate that disinfecting of buses must be done after every trip, and common areas such as libraries, computer labs and art rooms must be cleaned between every class, as must all desks in every classroom after every period. No additional funds for custodial staffing or cleaning supplies were allocated to meet this colossal expansion in need.

Expressing the skepticism of parents regarding these ineffective requirements, one parent commented on MLive, “I may be a gambling man when it comes to sports, but not when it comes to the lives of the folks in my household. Under no circumstances will I allow my children to break quarantine until the pandemic ends or until there is a vaccine that proves to be effective.”

Whitmer’s press conference occurred as a University of Michigan survey found that one-third of Michigan parents might not send their children back to school in the fall due to coronavirus concerns. When asked for her reaction to the survey, Whitmer said those parents were not only from Michigan but also Illinois and Ohio, and that Michigan parents would now be assuaged having seen her plan.

Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) Superintendent Nikolai Vitti tweeted that the impoverished school district “will make a few adjustments to align with the requirements to submit our plan in advance of the deadline.” A parent responded to this, saying, “How in the world do you keep kids apart in overcrowded schools? This is lunacy. The virus is supposed to spike in the fall.”

Adding to the confusion and apprehension surrounding the reopening of schools and the rising number of cases in Michigan, Whitmer announced that two of the eight regions of the state were moving backward on the Risk Levels Map, which was thought to determine a region’s placement on the Safe Start Plan. Lansing was moved from Level 4, “Medium Risk,” to Level 2, “High Risk,” and Grand Rapids was moved from Level 4 to Level 3, “Medium-High Risk.” Whitmer neglected to explain that this bore no relation to those regions’ position on the Safe Start Plan, which remained unchanged at 4, thereby allowing the continued relaxation of business and social activity.

Various media outlets, including Fox 2 and WXYZ, published stories, later edited or retracted, that those two regions would now have greater restrictions re-imposed due to their being moved lower on the Risk Level Map. However, Zach Pohl, Communications Director for Whitmer, tweeted in response to heated demands for clarification from reporters that such news reports were “not accurate,” and that “the MI Safe Start Map reflects health risk. It does not reflect the phases of reopening the economy. The Lansing and Grand Rapids regions remain in Phase 4 of the MI Safe Start plan.”

This initiated a wave of denunciations from reporters and residents alike on Twitter. One person commented, “With all due respect, this is really confusing! If reopening is related to health risk, why wouldn’t the health risk and economic reopening phases match?”

The driving force behind both the reopening of the economy and the schools is the profit interest of the corporate and financial elite, not the health of millions of people. Operating on behalf of General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler, Whitmer allowed the reopening of auto plants in mid-May, even though they are non-essential and are located in regions that were still in Level 3, full quarantine.

In their efforts to reopen schools and the broader economy, the Michigan political establishment has the full support of the state’s largest teacher union, the Michigan Education Association (MEA), and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT)-Michigan, whose presidents Paula Herbart and David Hecker sit on Whitmer’s back-to-school council. Both unions are wholly subservient to big business and the Democratic Party and seek to contain the building opposition among teachers and all education workers.

Even before the pandemic, there was widespread opposition among educators against the bipartisan austerity and school privatization policies, with more than 700,000 teachers and other educators involved in a wave of militant strikes in 2018–19. This anger, which took the form in many cases of initial actions independent of the unions, will only intensify as the health of teachers and students are sacrificed as part of the reckless back-to-work campaign. In addition, there will be enormous opposition to the demands for new budget cuts after both corporate-controlled parties found trillions to bailout Wall Street and other giant corporations.

Educators must oppose the reckless reopening of schools and the broader economy demanded by Trump, Whitmer and all their accomplices. The lives and safety of workers and students must take precedence over the profit motive of the capitalists. To assert their own interests, educators must form independent, rank-and-file committees at every school and neighborhood, to unite with the broader working class in a struggle against the capitalist system, which is the root cause of the catastrophe created by the pandemic.

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