

# A risky game with health and lives as schools reopen throughout Germany

Gregor Link  
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Millions of children and hundreds of thousands of teachers are beginning to return to schools. Full attendance is mandatory, with everything that goes with it—overcrowded classrooms, cancelled lessons, run-down sanitary facilities and crowded public transport and school buses on the way to school.

At the same time, the number of new COVID-19 infections in Germany is at its highest level since the introduction of protective measures. In the last two days alone, 1,226 and 1,445 people were infected with the deadly coronavirus. In the USA, where a patient dies every one and a half minutes of the virus, parents or students now have to sign a statement exempting the school management from any liability if a child at school falls ill with COVID-19 and dies.

Against this background, German government spokesman Steffen Seibert outlined two goals in dealing with the pandemic at a press conference in Berlin on Wednesday. “One is to keep the economy running as well as possible and the other is to get schools and the entire educational system back on track.” Seibert did not explain how many deaths this policy will cause—and the journalists present did not ask him.

Seibert was summing up the attitude of the entire ruling class. On Saturday, in a joint statement, four major business associations declared with remarkable frankness, “It is high time that the regular operation of Berlin schools starts again.” It is “in the interest of employers and their employees” to send children back to school as soon as possible.

The return of children to school so that parents are available for work sets the course for a further devastating spread of the pandemic, which will cause countless new deaths and unspeakable suffering. More and more studies show how dangerous it is to resume attendance at school. The claim that children are not infected or do not pass on the virus has been clearly refuted.

In the USA, 97,000 children tested positive for coronavirus in the last two weeks of July alone, and according to a recent report by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the number

has risen to 338,000 since the beginning of the pandemic. The German state governments are preparing for similar conditions by reopening schools.

In Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, where schools opened already at the beginning of last week, a grammar school in Ludwigslust and a school in Rostock had to be closed again because teachers and students tested positively. There were similar cases in Hamburg.

In Berlin, where classes resumed on Monday, coronavirus infections have been detected at eight schools, as the Senate (state) Education Administration informed local radio station rbb. One, the Gerhart-Hauptmann-Gymnasium in Treptow-Köpenick with 800 students, was closed again on Thursday.

In North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany’s most populous state, where the school year only began on Wednesday, a day-care centre in Dortmund and an elementary school in Essen were closed again due to coronavirus infections. Other schools remained open despite positive tests.

Nevertheless, the state governments are ruthlessly reopening schools. In Schleswig-Holstein, which is governed by the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Greens and the Free Democratic Party (FDP), even teachers with a medical certificate showing they are at risk are being forced to teach. Of 1,600 teachers belonging to coronavirus risk groups, only 32 have been exempted from teaching. All others must teach, even if an infection means a possible death sentence for them.

In North Rhine-Westphalia, where 200,000 teachers and 2.1 million pupils returned to classrooms on Wednesday, there is compulsory school attendance even for children of high-risk parents. “As a matter of principle, pupils are obliged to take part in face-to-face teaching. The general provisions on compulsory schooling and participation apply,” the NRW Education Ministry states.

State Education Minister Yvonne Gebauer (FDP) has already openly admitted that COVID-19 victims are an integral part of her school reopening concept. “We cannot protect people from falling ill with COVID-19,” she said in a radio interview. There will “always be diseases.” The

government can only ensure that “our hospitals are prepared, that enough intensive care beds are available, that enough ventilators are available. But we cannot protect all people.”

With more than 2,370 new infections in the last seven days (413 new infections within one day alone), North Rhine-Westphalia now has the highest infection rate in Germany, with around 52,600 cases. In Bochum in the Ruhr Area, the number of new infections per 100,000 inhabitants, averaging 30 over the last seven days, is dangerously close to 50, at which point a regional lockdown is imminent.

“What I can’t get into my head, is regular schooling in the face of rising infection rates, demonstrably even during the holiday season,” Martina R. from North Rhine-Westphalia commented on Facebook. “Actually, for at least three weeks, lessons should be designed in such a way that as few people as possible are infected. Previously ill people, for example, should generally be taught in home-schooling, the rest in a mixture of attendance and home-schooling, especially smaller groups are necessary.”

With a view to the new infections in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Hamburg, Martina added, “It is already apparent that regular [school] operations cannot function in this way. Politicians have no conscience—and children cost money, but do not contribute anything to the coffers, nor do they have a lobby. In any case, regular operations have nothing to do with science.”

NRW Education Minister Gebauer and State Premier Armin Laschet (CDU), who are hated for their particularly ruthless coronavirus policies, represent the only state government to have felt compelled to make wearing masks compulsory, introduced at short notice, but not for primary school pupils. In all other federal states—including Thuringia, which is led by the Left Party—the regulations do not mandate the wearing of masks.

Brigitte, a teacher from Rhineland-Palatinate, explained to the *World Socialist Web Site*, “So far, officially on Monday, in our state, we will continue with limited regular classes. What exactly this means was not clear before the holidays. More detailed instructions will not be available until tomorrow. Otherwise: full classes, frequent airing, wearing masks outside classrooms in the corridors and the schoolyard. In classes—where it is already quite cramped—there should be no compulsory wearing of masks. I was usually happier to go to school on my first day than this year.”

Brigitte’s colleague Maria reported similar conditions in Hesse. “Before the holidays, the Education Ministry issued a ‘timetable’ that classes should be similar to those before the coronavirus. That means full class sizes and a full timetable—but hand washing should be maintained. Whether or not masks should be compulsory in the schoolyard is to be

decided by the respective school management. There was no progress towards digitalisation. We’ll start again on Monday, and I doubt that anything will come of it.”

Scientific studies from Israel and Japan, as well as investigations by the Berlin Charité, have proven that conditions such as those found in classrooms, gymnasiums and changing rooms pose a particularly high risk of so-called “cluster infections” and “superspreading” events, in the course of which, hundreds of people fall ill within a very short time.

Barbara, a high school teacher from Lower Saxony, said in an interview with the WSWS, “A mass outbreak at school—that would mean school closures—just like a mass outbreak in the city. We had that in June and therefore had to teach online for two more weeks.”

Although Barbara’s secondary school is also scheduled to resume regular operations next week, she has not yet received any information about how lessons are to be organised in concrete terms or what measures are to be taken. “Yesterday we received our lesson plans. Timetables are not yet ready. I would be happy if we had to wear masks compulsorily in class and in the teachers’ rooms for the first two weeks. Many colleagues and students have been on vacation—that’s pretty scary to me personally.”

The case of Bavaria shows just how far-reaching the efforts of the state governments are to get back to business as quickly as possible in the interests of making profits. There, the state health office had not informed 44,000 holiday returnees of their results until yesterday, who had voluntarily had themselves tested for the coronavirus since 30 July. Among those tested were about 900 infected persons, who had thus remained undetected for days.

The same information policy is also being applied in schools. Ricarda, who is due to return to her school next Monday, told us, “I don’t even have a timetable. The school management is waiting for new instructions until the last minute. I have already set up the desks individually. Then, during the introductory days, I will do a targeted Iserv training [online training system] with the students, in case the school is closed again. Students should bring their equipment and I practice with them. I hope that’s enough.”



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