

Germany is reopening all schools despite rising coronavirus infections

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According to scientific studies, the lockdown in the spring saved millions of lives throughout Europe. Now, however, since the end of the summer vacations, schools and day care centres are being reopened with virtually no restrictions, although the number of daily coronavirus infections almost quadrupled from early July until mid-August.

In mid-August, when voluntary testing among those returning from travel abroad and in the vicinity of schools increased significantly, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) reported about 1,500 new infections daily. In the first days of September, the seven-day average remains over 1,200 cases per day: On Wednesday, 1,256 new infections were registered in 24 hours and on Thursday, 1,311. The COVID-19 death toll in Germany reached 9,400 on Thursday, with eight more deaths on Wednesday alone.

Across Europe, the number of infections topped four million this week, with devastating case numbers in Russia, Spain and the UK. In France, too, up to 5,000 new infections are currently being registered daily. In the whole of Europe, around 216,000 people have died of the disease so far.

For some weeks now, more and more young people, children and adolescents have been infected with the dangerous COVID-19 disease. The average age is at its lowest level since the beginning of the pandemic.

On Tuesday, Charité virologist Christian Drosten resumed his NDR podcast. He confirmed that the rising number of cases since July is real and not just, as is often claimed, due to the increase in tests. The actual frequency of infections in the population is probably underestimated. “It may be that the RKI underestimates the virus,” said Drosten.

He warned that a critical threshold could quickly be reached because of new infections. One should “not close one’s eyes” to this. He outlined a situation in which, as is currently the case in France, there are significantly more cases every day.

Systematic contact tracing and isolation are of course important. But if this gets out of control, the health authorities will have to react, once again imposing a lockdown and restricting contact and travel, he said. It is

already foreseeable that “we will have more hospital admissions in a month’s time. If we wait until the intensive care units are full, it will be too late.”

The virologist explained that “this infectious disease spreads very strongly in clusters”; that it is in “temporal and local clusters” that infections accumulate. He emphasized that, although we do not always know exactly where the virus is, we do know quite well what contributes to its further spread: “The more people are in a room, the better the virus can spread,” said Drosten. Fifteen to 20 people who stay close to each other for a long time in one room can become a dangerous cluster. The virologist cited fitness studios, family celebrations, unofficial techno concerts or similar situations as examples.

Even more important, however, is what he did not explicitly mention: the reopening of schools and day care centres. The danger here is obvious: the currently overcrowded day care centres and the general in-person teaching in schools without social distancing and the compulsory wearing of masks in class will inevitably lead to numerous new infections.

Figures produced by the teachers’ group #BildungAberSicher (#EducationButSafely) shows that there have already been around 600 cases of infection at schools and 179 at day care centres in Germany since the reopening of schools. In the most recent case, at the Freiherr von Stein secondary school in Düsseldorf, 20 students tested positive for coronavirus after a school trip. They belonged to a group of 55 students who had gone on a four-day bus trip through Upper Bavaria in mid-August.

On Monday, a teacher in Templin (Brandenburg) also tested positive. On the same day, Bremen (Lower Saxony) reported two cases of coronavirus among the city’s students. On Wednesday, a ninth grader in Hesse fell ill with COVID-19, whereupon the affected school in the Hersfeld-Rotenburg district sent the entire teaching staff and 111 students into quarantine.

Increasingly, teachers, educators and parents are being forced to accept the reopenings against their will, or to send

the children to school if they do not want to lose their jobs, places at university or the children's access to education. In Berlin, some teacher trainees are confronted with being deprived of the teaching materials they need to study their additional subjects if they do not participate in classroom instruction.

Politicians from all parties in the Bundestag (Germany's federal Parliament) are pushing through the risky reopening policy with the help of the trade unions, especially the GEW and Verdi. In North Rhine-Westphalia, the state government under Armin Laschet declared the compulsory wearing of masks in class on September 1 to be irrelevant. On August 27, three days earlier, GEW state chairwoman Birgit Koch had published a statement in which she criticized the compulsory wearing of masks in classrooms as a serious obstacle to teaching.

The GEW has not raised a single demand for coronavirus protection in the current collective bargaining round covering two-and-a-half million public employees. Instead, prominent union members such as Verdi member Ulrich Mägde, who is also the Social Democratic Party (SPD) Mayor of Lüneburg, are pushing through the attacks on teachers and education staff as negotiators for the municipal employers.

In Berlin, the senator (state minister) for education, Sandra Scheer (SPD), also a Verdi member, stands for the merciless enforcement of school reopenings. While she herself is working from home, she strongly criticized the Gerhart Hauptmann high school, which suspended classes for a day due to a coronavirus outbreak. It was "disproportionate to close down entire schools at once," the senator admonished.

The policy of reopening schools is accompanied by a shrill propaganda campaign trivializing the risks. A blatant example of this is a guest commentary in the *taz*, the Green Party's house journal, jointly written by Dieter Janacek, a Green Party member of the Bundestag, and Kristina Schröder (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), Merkel's former federal minister for family affairs. Schröder represents the neoliberal think tank INSM (New Social Market Economy Initiative), a lobbyist for business associations.

"Every society must take a certain risk during the pandemic," the two demand, "otherwise we would not be able to act at all." And even more explicitly, "The millions of working hours lost weaken our economy." They put profits above lives when they write, "There will also be infections within schools and kindergartens... As a society, we should be prepared to accept this to a certain extent this time."

They justify their inhuman demands with phrases such as, "The younger the children, the lower the risk of infection,"

and "today, we know that the risk of healthy children falling seriously ill due to an infection is almost zero." This is reminiscent of US President Donald Trump, who insists on reopening schools because children are "definitely immune to this disease."

These are all flat-out lies. As is now known, not only can children spread the virus for weeks at a time, but they are at risk and can die from COVID-19, or the infection can leave them with lifelong damage.

According to a European-wide study, which *Die Zeit* reported at the end of June, four of 582 sick minors between the ages of three and 18 years died of COVID-19. A significant number of the young patients developed a severe illness and 8 percent had to be treated in an intensive care unit.

In a series posted on the *World Socialist Web Site*, physician Benjamin Mateus has compiled scientific findings that can help educators, students and workers protect themselves and join the common struggle against the virus. In particular, he has clearly refuted the claim that children are immune to COVID-19 or are not contagious.

Regarding government propaganda and the reopening policies motivated by economic interests, Mateus writes that this is "not a policy based on science, but a political endeavor phrased in scientific jargon to lull the population to adapt themselves as fait accompli that which was preventable and remains still stoppable."

But, he continues, this requires recognizing "that on a global scale, socialism is the cure for eradicating this pandemic, a disease that erupted as a byproduct of conditions created by capitalism."



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