

German schools become coronavirus hotspots: 300,000 students in quarantine

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The enormously high infection rates in Germany leave no doubt that the “partial lockdown” imposed by the federal government is not slowing down infections, even slightly. Although COVID-19 deaths are rising dramatically and hospitals are on the verge of collapse, the federal and state governments in Germany are continuing their policy of “herd immunity.”

At 21,866 on November 12, new infections were slightly below the peak of 23,399 on November 7. However, this is not necessarily due to fewer infections, but rather to a lack of laboratory capacity—with declining numbers of tests performed and delays in reporting due to the severe overloading of health authorities. While the number of laboratories processing tests remained unchanged, the percentage of positive results last week was 7.26 percent. Eight weeks earlier, it had been 0.77 percent.

Numerous cities and municipalities are reporting new daily highs. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI)—the German government’s health agency—has recorded more than 700,000 proven infections. The number of deaths is also rising, with 261 reported on a single day. The situation in intensive care units is dramatic. On a single day, the number of patients requiring artificial respiration rose by 37. Physicians largely agree that capacities will be exhausted by the beginning of next month at the latest.

To conceal the true extent of the infection, Federal Health Minister Jens Spahn (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) has presented a “new coronavirus strategy.” Accordingly, only those who have symptoms, belong to a risk group or work in the nursing and health care sector, for example, should be tested. “And someone who has no symptoms and is otherwise a contact person does not need to be tested,” Spahn told the ARD programme “Report from Berlin” on Sunday evening.

This attitude is criminal. It has been proven that even without acute symptoms, serious health consequences can occur because of an infection, which is why a credible collection of data is essential for pandemic control. Since the

spring, it has been known that laboratory testing capacities would not be adequate if the number of infections rose higher. Nevertheless, nothing has been done about it. Now, the government is using this circumstance to push the figures downward in its calculations.

Even in old people’s homes and nursing homes, which have been severely affected since the beginning of the pandemic and where outbreaks usually have fatal consequences, there is insufficient testing. Rapid coronavirus tests are to be used in the facilities to relieve the burden on laboratories. “Staff shortages and sometimes long delivery times make implementation difficult,” however, as the television network WDR reports. In North Rhine-Westphalia alone, a thousand residents and just as many nursing staff in old people’s and nursing homes have become infected with the pathogen.

Although several studies show that the closure of schools, day-care centres and non-essential businesses effectively slows down the increase of infections, governments in Germany and Europe flatly reject such action.

Despite the warnings made by numerous scientists, schools should remain open “come hell or high water,” according to Heinz-Peter Meidinger, president of the Teachers’ Association. Yet schools are becoming breeding grounds for the virus. While 50,000 pupils were in quarantine at the end of September, the number has now risen to more than 300,000. Also, around 30,000 teachers are currently in quarantine. This is only the tip of the iceberg. According to current antibody studies, more than six times as many school children have become infected than was previously assumed.

Politicians of all parties support the continuation of targeted screening. It is correct to maintain in-person teaching as long as possible, according to the chairperson of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder (federal states), Stefanie Hubig (Social Democratic Party, SPD). Susanne Eisenmann (CDU), state education minister in Baden-Württemberg, declared that there was no “reason for panic.”

The Ida-Ehre-Schule in Hamburg-Eimsbüttel has recorded

the largest outbreak at a school in Germany to date. A spokesperson for the school authorities announced that a total of 55 people had tested positive. The affected pupils came from 25 classes, which have now been completely quarantined by the health authorities. Teachers, students, and parents have strongly criticized Hamburg's Education Senator (state minister), Ties Rabe (SPD). Rabe is considered a hardliner, and despite rising coronavirus numbers, he continues to be a fervent advocate of in-person teaching. According to the *Hamburger Abendblatt*, he is "at peace" with himself despite the disastrous number of infections.

In Austria, where the authorities again reported more than 7,500 new infections on Wednesday, leading scientists from various disciplines have issued a statement calling for a "much stricter lockdown" and an "immediate closure of all schools."

Among the signatories are the mathematician Peter Markowich, computer scientist Georg Gottlob and physicists Christoph Nägerl and Erich Gornik—all of them winners of the Wittgenstein Prize, the highest scientific honour in Austria. The scientists see "according to all the scientific evidence, for weeks, Austria is moving unchecked into the catastrophe of overloaded hospitals, where doctors have to make triage decisions and let patients die untreated."

The closing of schools would be "certainly a significant contribution" and "one of the most effective individual measures of all." They conclude, "All those who are now speaking out against school closure must say that they are in favour of triage [i.e., treating some patients and letting others die], at the latest by November 18." Although the number of infections in schools is also rising rapidly in Austria, the government of the conservative Austrian Peoples Party (ÖVP) and the Greens supports in-person teaching.

In Germany, too, federal and state governments are well aware that schools and day-care centres are bases for the spread of COVID-19. For example, Federal Education Minister Anja Karliczek (CDU) told the *Rheinische Post*, the regional daily paper, on Tuesday that "full attendance at classes" was "naturally" associated with the "danger of mutual infection ... which can also be carried home."

Tübingen's Mayor Boris Palmer (Greens) is among the most aggressive advocates of a policy of keeping schools and day-care centres open. Last week, Palmer said that it was "fundamentally important" to "keep schools and day-care centres open" and added, "But this will inevitably lead to a greater number of coronavirus infections among the younger generation."

Palmer went on to explain that those who were no longer of working age are particularly at risk. "We simply have to

be clear: People over 80 have died [at a rate] 500 times that of those under 40. This virus is extremely age discriminatory. Complaining about it is of no use." He appealed to the "personal responsibility" of old and previously ill people to behave with caution amid the spreading pandemic. The "concern that coronavirus could be more deadly than influenza," Palmer said, falsely, had "not been confirmed."

At the time of the first peak of the pandemic, Palmer had already expressed the deeply foul view on a Sat.1 television network breakfast talk show that in German hospitals, "people [may be saved] who would have died in six months anyway—due to their age or previous illnesses."

Thuringia's Prime Minister Bodo Ramelow (Left Party) has also taken the lead among the lockdown opponents and expressly praised the Swedish government's herd immunity policy.

Despite clear findings on the benefits of using face masks, there is no obligation to wear them in the classroom in Thuringia's schools—just as in most other German states. In contrast to schools in some other states, those in Thuringia also receive no support whatsoever for the purchase of air filtration systems—even though the state parents' and student representatives had demanded them in the wake of falling temperatures.

As public broadcaster MDR reported, the Ministry of Education will "not financially support the purchase of air purifiers in schools." A spokesman for the education ministry told the station that "no state funds are available for this" and that a corresponding support programme was "not known" to the ministry. Education and Sports Minister Helmut Holter (Left Party) added that the state's special funds were also "all accounted for."

Meanwhile, Michael Bauer, head of intensive care medicine at Jena University Hospital, warned that the number of COVID-19 patients in intensive care units in Thuringia could double in the next two weeks.



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