

# Germany: Open schools, day-care centres and businesses increase risk of new coronavirus variants

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New daily coronavirus infections are rising steadily again in Germany, as well as in France, Poland, Austria, Denmark and the Netherlands. Previously, the numbers of infections and deaths had fallen to a level corresponding to the peak of the first wave.

The R-value, which indicates the incidence of infection eight to 16 days ago, is currently back at 1.26 (compared to 0.96 only three days ago). Although only 7 percent of the population has received an initial vaccination and of these people only one in two is fully immunised, the federal and state governments are systematically lifting the remaining protective measures. In this way, they are setting the course for mass fatalities that goes far beyond what has happened so far.

The widespread and comprehensive reopening of primary schools three weeks ago has resulted in the incidence rate among primary school children officially exceeding the average rate for the population as a whole for the first time. Among 0-to-four-year-olds, the incidence rate has risen from 48 to 60 in 100,000 within one week, according to the RKI's current situation report. Among five-to-nine-year-olds, the incidence rose from 54 to 72 and among 10-to-14-year-olds from 51 to 62.

In the German capital Berlin, the incidence rate among children under four years of age has more than doubled in the past fortnight. Among five-to-nine-year-olds, it rose from 41 to 77 and in the 10-to-14-year-old age group from 32 to 75.

Robert Koch Institute (RKI) head Lothar Wieler described the increase in cases of infection among the under-15s since mid-February as "very rapid." At the same time, he noted that more outbreaks were currently being observed at day-care centres than in the period before Christmas, when a wave of 1,000 deaths per day occurred.

A map compiled by a teacher from North Rhine-Westphalia, providing a geographical overview in which reports from parents and teachers are entered, lists a total of 147 "school clusters" for the period "from February 2021," including 58 infection clusters with "3 to 9 infections" and at least five mass outbreaks "with 10 or more infected persons." In the same period, 110 "day-care clusters with mutated virus strains" were reported.

In an interview with the *Rhein-Zeitung*, Leipzig epidemiologist Markus Scholz reported a "tripling of infections" in Saxony and urgently warned against further school openings: "In our state, not even four weeks after schools reopening, we see the number of

cases exploding among children and adolescents."

At the press conference, RKI's head Wieler also explicitly named the B.1.1.7 variant, which is now responsible for a total of 55 percent of infections, as a possible reason for the explosion of infections at day-care centres. A recent publication in the *BMJ* (formerly the *British Medical Journal*) concludes that the virus strain is more contagious than the original type and is associated with a 64 percent higher mortality.

Yet despite the exponential spread of this highly dangerous variant and hundreds of outbreaks at day-care centres and schools, the deadly reopening policy is to be further intensified in the coming days and weeks. After the chairperson of the Conference of State Education Ministers, Britta Ernst (Social Democratic Party, SPD), declared on Friday that there was a nationwide "consensus" to bring all pupils back to school "before the end of March," the state governments are outdoing each other with their life-threatening reopening plans.

In **North Rhine-Westphalia**, for example, schools are to reopen completely as early as March 15. This is despite the fact it is "quite possible" that there "will be no testing for pupils in the coming week," as Education Minister Yvonne Gebauer (Free Democratic Party, FDP) flatly declared. For the 2.5 million pupils in the state, they plan to provide a total of 1.8 million tests by the Easter holidays.

From **Berlin**, the *Tagesspiegel* reported on Friday that the Greens, the Left Party and SPD-led education administration agree to implement "the reopening of schools to all classes" as soon as possible, i.e., without the necessary protection. By Tuesday, grades four to six are to be attending school again.

Meanwhile, in **Baden-Württemberg**, ruled by a coalition of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Greens, fifth and sixth graders are to return to in-person learning in full classes today, without protection against infection and without mass testing. In **Saxony**, too, the 240,000 pupils in secondary schools are to return to school without regular testing, although state Education Minister Christian Piwarz (CDU) had promised the timely provision of tests only a few days ago. There is not even a voluntary testing option for grades 5 and 6.

**Bavaria** is even planning to open primary schools in "coronavirus hotspots," i.e., in districts and cities with a seven-day incidence above the devastating mark of 100 cases per 100,000.

State Education Minister Michael Piazolo spoke of a “pilot experiment” with additional tests, but strictly rejected “compulsory testing,” i.e., a systematic investigation of the incidence of infection. In **Rhineland-Palatinate**, where the incidence rate is currently lower than in other federal states, the government had introduced alternate in-person and at home teaching for primary school pupils on February 22.

These policies threaten countless lives and fly in the face of any scientific assessment of the pandemic.

Virologist Melanie Brinkmann told the press on Thursday that she was “appalled” by the decision to “open up schools—without a testing concept—given the current high incidence rates in Germany.” She said the current decision was an “intellectual insult to everyone,” which would lead to “intensive care units filling us up” and the country “rushing” into a third wave. “I feel let down there as a citizen with old parents, on the one hand, and three school-age children, on the other.” Back in February, Brinkmann had warned, in the event of extensive reopenings, 180,000 people under the age of 60 in Germany would not see the next spring—including children.

The prestigious medical journal *The Lancet* published an open letter from scientists on Wednesday titled, “School reopening without robust COVID-19 mitigation risks accelerating the pandemic.” The letter cites modelling studies by the University of Warwick and Imperial College London that suggest the school reopening scenarios proposed in the UK will be associated with “at least 30,000 more deaths from COVID-19.” The scientists conclude, “Reopening fully in the setting of high community transmission without appropriate safeguards” provides “fertile ground for virus evolution and new variants.”

A commentary by immunology professors Daniel Altmann and Rosemary Boyton in the medical journal *BMJ* further warns of the risk of COVID-19’s long-term effects on children (“Long COVID syndrome”) in light of the schools reopening. The article refers to national research according to which 79,000 of those affected by Long COVID in the UK are “less than 19 years old.” The symptoms are similar to those of older people: “fatigue, shortness of breath, joint pain, rashes, headaches.”

The authors also recall the “high prevalence of asymptomatic spread” among children and adolescents and point out that the resumption of classes was always accompanied by “jumps in the R-value.” Overall, the researchers say, children play “a significant role” in carrying the virus “into the community and to older relatives.” The *BMJ* had called the government’s pandemic policy “social murder” in February, citing the writings of socialist Friedrich Engels.

“I seriously wonder who doesn’t notice the connection between the day-care/school reopenings and the case numbers rising again,” educator Raphael W. told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “As an educator, how are you supposed to feel about working every day with children from whom you can’t keep your distance? Even before coronavirus, many children came to school or day-care sick. If I wanted to work with serious illnesses and potential risk of infection, I would have chosen a different profession. The kids are the only reason I still do the work at all.”

“Parents and educators find out a day in advance what the phase

is for the next three days,” Raphael continued. “Instead of adjusting our salary to the importance of our job, we are asked to put our health, our lives and those of our loved ones on the back burner. Add to that the bad press that constantly screams ‘open up!’ and suggests that we are lazy. The fact that educators have one of the highest incidence rates, don’t keep their distance and can’t demand it because of the children doesn’t occur to them.”

Raphael’s experience is supported by comprehensive health data. Recent figures from Techniker-Krankenkasse (TK)—the largest public health insurance company in Germany—have confirmed that workers in social professions have the highest risk of contracting COVID-19.

For example, nurses, educators and occupational therapists are more than twice as likely to be on sick leave due to coronavirus than the average person with health insurance. Special needs teachers, doctors, social workers and paramedics are also particularly severely affected. Teachers, who are not covered by the TK statistics, are just below day-care workers, according to figures obtained by the authorities from broadcaster NDR. A study by health insurer AOK in October had come to comparable results.

While contact restrictions apply in the private sphere, “I am forced to have contact with 200 households per week while on duty,” says teacher Simone E. in a Facebook group for teachers from all over Germany. “Because of the lack of pre-quarantine, I was not able to celebrate Christmas with my elderly parents. I am still very angry about that.”

Before Christmas, Simone reports, “we teachers mutated into auxiliary police officers: Mask checks, supervision, toilet guard, following up contacts—with all the conflicts that entails. I won’t do that any more, I’m not a soldier.” The few rapid tests available “provide relative safety for three to five hours and yet only serve to pull the wool over parents’ eyes,” Simone concludes. “I don’t do that kind of thing.”

Instead, Simone advocates the continuation of at-home teaching: “Distance learning is the finest hour for the quiet ones and a fiasco for class clowns. My students can learn well in distance learning. They also dare to write and say more at home than in the group.”



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