

Germany's official COVID-19 contagion policy puts hundreds of thousands of students and educators at risk

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The amendment to Germany's Infection Protection Act, passed last week, reinforces the government's reckless contagion policy in schools and threatens the health of thousands of students and educators.

New COVID-19 infections in Germany have averaged around 20,000 per day in recent weeks. That is more than three times the total at the peak of the first lockdown. According to the latest report by the renowned Robert Koch Institute (RKI), coronavirus infection figures have increased among younger people, largely due to the opening up of schools.

The RKI assesses the threat to the health of the population as very high. Particularly threatening are the increasing mass outbreaks in day-care centres, schools and workplaces. This is especially dangerous against the background of the rapid spread of British, South African and Brazilian variants, which are more contagious and frequently lead to severe health consequences, including among younger people.

Since autumn, 335 pupils, 129 teachers and 182 other educators are reported to have been hospitalised because of COVID-19. Three teachers and six education care staff have died from the disease. The number of unreported cases is much higher, with information only available for those officially registered as infected.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has already reported, the government's coronavirus "emergency brake" is utterly ineffective. It stipulates that nationwide in-person classes will continue as long as the seven-day incidence figure for infections does not exceed 165 per 100,000.

Scientists have been saying for months that this level is much too high. When German schools were due to reopen after summer holidays last year, the RKI recommended schools adopt reduced alternate teaching rotas based on an incidence of 35 and to revert to online, distance teaching when the incidence reached 50.

The fact that the value of 165 is purely arbitrary and has no scientific basis can be seen from the fact that only 170

districts closed schools despite high infection levels after the "emergency brake" was applied much too late. In addition, according to the RKI, incidence levels among 5-14-year-olds, i.e., the group that goes to school, is significantly higher than among the rest of the population. For this younger age group, the incidence is above 165 in 277 regions and between 100 and 165 in 93 regions.

In the state of Saxony, where schools remained open before the emergency brake came into effect, irrespective of infection levels, the incidence rate among 15- to 19-year-olds was 367 last week. The highest level was in the Zwickau district with 579. In the city of Chemnitz, the incidence among 10- to 14-year-olds reached a record level of almost 700.

Final year classes, special schools and emergency care for children that far exceeds what is absolutely necessary are exempt from closure in all federal states, even after the emergency brake came into force. Many federal states have in addition decided on their own exceptions to the nationally agreed measures.

In the states of Bavaria, Lower Saxony, Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt, grade 4 and final grade students remain in alternating classes, regardless of the incidence rate. In Bavaria, Lower Saxony and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania schools had previously been closed at an incidence of 100, which means the emergency brake has no effect and amounts to an easing of the lockdown in these states.

In the state of Hesse, grades 1 to 6 returned to alternate teaching last Monday, with grade 7 due to return on May 6.

Schleswig-Holstein, which currently still has the most schools closed and the lowest incidence of all the federal states at 75, plans to bring all grades back into alternate teaching on May 3.

Baden-Württemberg, which introduced alternate teaching for all grades at the end of the Easter break, is currently recording the biggest increase in new infections, an increase

of 14 percent last week alone. The state government had already set an incidence limit of 165 before the emergency brake was introduced, but according to the Education Ministry this was only “to give schools a better chance to plan for a further opening up.” This opening up has already begun, with physical education classes for grades 11 and 12 once again being held in person.

In Brandenburg, grades 1 to 6 will remain in alternating classes until May 3, even if the incidence rate of 165 is exceeded. From May 3, grade 9 and final students are also due to return to in-person teaching.

The most relaxations in pandemic regulations have been made in the state of Thuringia, which is governed by a so-called red-red-green coalition (Social Democratic Party, Left Party and the Greens). The state currently has the highest incidence rate in Germany. Although only five out of 23 districts in the state are below an incidence of 165, all 10th-12th graders will continue in-person learning.

With incidence rates far above 165 prevailing in some districts, Berlin continues to keep schools open for grades 6, 9 and 10 as well as for final grade students.

Already at the beginning of the second wave of infections, school openings were justified on the basis of lies and deceptions, combining the deliberate withholding of studies demonstrating the true rate of infections in schools and the promotion of unscientific studies depicting the absence of outbreaks in what were deserted institutions.

Once again, this policy is being promoted with criminal energy. Already in March, SWR media reported that the district of Calw was deliberately removing “traceable” mass outbreaks from its incidence statistics to lower the level and make the case for opening up.

In addition, delays in reporting new infections leads to a temporary lowering of incidence rates, which in turn means that regulations linked to the incidence rate are delayed or do not come into force at all. Scientists such as the epidemiologist Dr. Ralph Brinks are already warning of an undermining of incidence values.

The extent to which incidence values are manipulated became apparent immediately after the emergency brake was passed. In Berlin, according to *Die Welt*, on day two of the new rules, seven out of twelve districts no longer reported any new cases and another district reported virtually none. The district of Lippe, which reported an incidence of 200 just a few days before, suddenly reported an incidence of 162 when the new guideline came into force.

In the last few days and weeks, similar reports have accumulated in the regional press. In the district of Sächsische Schweiz, the official incidence number dropped from 230 to 164.9. Saarbrücken even reported an identical incidence of 164.9 three days in a row. In the district of

Kleve, the reported incidence rate dropped from 164 to 158 and in Mönchengladbach from 154 to 114.

As a consequence, there is growing anger among students, teachers and workers. Elke, a teacher from Lower Saxony, told the WSWS about the situation in schools: “We are all unhappy, we are not allowed to strike and live in fear when we are in school.”

Before the Easter break, with infection figures climbing rapidly, schools were opened up again, with all grades attending alternating classes in the last week before the holidays. Elke reported: “I have a total of about 250 pupils I teach, and I participate in almost every year group. So, everything gets mixed up for me, and sooner or later I’m exposed to contagion from almost every class in the school.”

The policy of compulsory testing in schools is also no real safeguard, as Elke says: “This is the next disaster! We are not vaccinated and are supposed to do tests with pupils without a mask. This policy led to protests in Lower Saxony’s schools after it started a few weeks ago. I don’t think much of this testing either, it is much too unreliable. At most it can be a secondary safeguard if you are vaccinated.”

In this respect no support can be expected from the main political parties or the trade unions: “We teachers are all afraid of contagion and feel abandoned by the politicians, especially by our top boss, Education Minister Grant Hendrik Tonne. The fact that we were exposed to a danger to our lives was of no interest to anyone, not even the GEW (teachers trade union) Lower Saxony issued any statement.”

In order to oppose the deadly opening up policy, teachers and students must organise themselves independently of the trade unions and the established parties. The Network of Action Committees for Safe Education and the Network of Action Committees for Safe Workplaces meets every second Monday at 7:30 p.m. (CET). Sign up here, become a member of our Facebook group and fight to build action committees at your schools and institutions!



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