

Greece reopens schools amid new wave of COVID-19

George Gallanis
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Schools in Greece reopened Monday, a move that will lead to a new surge of COVID-19 among children and in the wider population. Infection rates in young people are already very high. According to the Ministry of Health, more than 12 percent of all cases occur among those aged under 17 and 38 percent among 18-to 39-year-olds.

After the New Democracy (ND) government ended lockdown restrictions mid-May, cases began to surge to record levels. The largest wave of cases were in August, with many days breaking the 3,000 mark of reported cases and a record of 4,608 daily infections on August 24. On average, 2,171 new COVID-19 infections are still being reported each day with numbers steadily rising. On Monday, 2,279 cases were recorded, but just 24 hours later rose to just short of 3,000 cases (2,919).

These numbers must increase significantly after this week as schools, colleges and universities reopen. ND Education Minister Niki Kerameos told *Skai TV* that the government's priority is face-to-face teaching in all educational institutions.

The government is requiring teachers and lecturers to present a certificate of full vaccination, or proof of having contracted coronavirus within the last six months, or a negative laboratory test result that must be presented to the schools twice weekly.

Such mitigations will not stop the spread of the Delta variant, which can partially evade immunity provided by the vaccines, and is vastly more transmissible, producing viral loads roughly 1,000 times higher than the initial virus.

The government is forcing students back into the classroom, dropping remote learning options. "It is not justified for a student to be absent from class because parents are afraid to send him to school because of an

outbreak in the class," Kerameos said. Like her counterparts in Europe and around the world, the education minister categorically rejects school closures.

"Before, we still had school classes closed to protect students' families from spreading the virus. But now most are vaccinated and if not, they have the option to do it immediately," Kerameos claims. She and her ilk were never concerned about protecting the public from the virus, only about "saving the economy," meaning the profits of the corporations. For this schools must remain open so to allow parents to work.

The most basic quarantine measures have been thrown out. Kerameos announced that a classroom would be closed only if more than half the children in the class contracted COVID-19. "The infected person's contacts will not be quarantined, but a laboratory test will be done."

Athina Linou, an epidemiologist and professor at the National and Kapodistrias University of Athens, reacted to the move in horror. This is "not right at all", she told *ANT1*. "If we know that 11 children are sick, then probably at least five more are also sick. At some point, those 20 kids will go home, pass the virus on to siblings, parents, grandparents, friends, maybe a household helper and a neighbour. That means one class can infect another 100 to 150 people, given the transmissibility of the new variant. Add to that the tutorials and activities."

She warned, "Of the 100 children who get sick, 10 percent will get very, very sick. And a certain percentage, whether they get seriously ill or not, will have long-term after-effects, for a year, for two years. That's going to create an explosive situation in the daily lives of families."

With classes too large, rooms too small and children still unvaccinated, Linou previously described the

opening of schools and kindergartens as “criminal”. She told *Skai* that the ministry was ignoring “that we have a much more contagious virus” and that schools were closed most of the time last school year. “It’s terrible that we’re not taking action. The same goes for public transport, in the workplace the issue of home offices needs to be addressed again. It’s a difficult situation.”

Nikos Tzanakis, the Professor of Pulmonology at the University of Crete’s medical school, speaking to iatropedia.gr, this week estimated that coronavirus will infect 30,000 to 50,000 children. “We believe that 25-30 percent of children will come in contact with the virus. Assuming that we have a transmissibility specific to the Delta virus, this means that one third of these children will be infected, that is, around 30 to 50 thousand children will be infected.”

Mathematical modelling research at the University of Crete found that if 50,000 children are infected with the virus, 1.5 percent are likely to develop more severe symptoms and may require hospitalisation. Tzanakis warned, “We are dealing with a strain that ‘hits’ children very hard”. While during the pandemic, hospitalizations in paediatric departments did not exceed 240, it could not be excluded that they could reach 300 and even more than double to 600 cases.

George Pavlakis, a doctor and academic, advised before schools returned, “The smartest policy would be to make a huge effort to bring down the cases even with a lockdown. Another solution would be not to start schools next week or to have the lesson outside, not to have the children in the classrooms”. Cases could reach a record 4,000 a day, said Pavlakis as he warned that “the Delta mutation should be treated as a new pandemic, because of the huge difference in infectivity.”

The growth of cases will be made worse with Greece’s health system already under enormous strain. Doctors are decrying low capacities and major staff shortages in the pandemic. On August 31, all five intensive care doctors at the Rethymno hospital on Crete submitted their resignations due to exhaustion from being overworked. “We have been sounding the alarm for a long time in several letters, but the management not only ignores us completely, but also burdens us with additional tasks every day,” they said.

A few days prior, the heads of Rethymno’s Intensive

Care Unit, the Emergency Department, the Department of Pathology and the Department of Pulmonology addressed an open letter to the directors and the public: “We are in the second year of the pandemic and despite the assurances of the management, we are working with the same staff.” A few holes had been “plugged” by untrained staff, which “is not enough”. In addition to their departments, they are also supposed to support a new COVID clinic. The staff are treating corona patients on their wards, even though they do not officially have beds dedicated to COVID patients.

The head of the intensive care unit at Papanikolaou Hospital in Thessaloniki, Nikos Kapravelos, warned a week ago on Open TV, “The hard part is still ahead, the disease is progressing faster this time.” More than 95 percent of the available COVID beds in his intensive care unit were already occupied, with only a few beds left for patients with other conditions. “When we consider that holidaymakers are still returning, schools are opening and many remain unvaccinated, it’s not good news,” said Kapravelos.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Parties internationally are fighting for the strategy to eradicate COVID-19 through the building of rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace.

Only the closing of schools and non-essential workplaces, combined with extensive public health measures, testing, tracing and vaccination can bring an end to the pandemic. This programme stands in contrast to the agenda of the capitalist parties, who, with the aid of the trade unions have herded children and educators back into classrooms, based on a herd immunity policy and “mitigation,” relying primarily on vaccination. The fight for the implementation of the necessary safety measures must be organised independently of these organisations. This means the establishment of Rank-and-File Safety Committees of educators, students, and parents throughout Greece.



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