Berlin Senate imposes education cuts and encourages the contamination of the city schools

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Having already drastically slashed financing for the capital's schools and left pupils completely exposed to the coronavirus, the Berlin Senate, a coalition of the Social Democratic Party, the Left Party and the Greens, is now planning further cuts in the education sector. The latest austerity measures reveal the contempt on the part of the "red-red-green" Senate for the fate of children and young people.

Vitally needed school expansion and renovation measures already planned for implementation by 2026 are to be postponed by up to five years in order to achieve the savings target set by the Senate. In effect, this means further cuts that will worsen the already catastrophic conditions in Berlin's schools.

Over this period some districts will have to accept cuts of several hundred million euros. This means that not only will urgently needed additional school places not be available, but the failure to renovate dilapidated buildings will result in the loss of existing places. Many children are already unable to attend their local primary schools due to building deficiencies and lack of renovation. Long distances to school, overcrowded classrooms, alternative lessons in small consultation rooms or fabricated containers are a sad fact of life for more and more pupils and teachers.

During the last election campaign, the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party declared that the education system in the city was a priority concern and would be expanded. In the COVID-19 crisis, the various parties justified the return to face-to-face teaching by expressing their concern for pupils' education, stating that children and young people lacked opportunities for proper education at home. The Senate's current policy makes clear that these promises were brazen lies.

In March, the Berlin Senate passed its budget for 2022 and 2023 and agreed on massive cuts. It reduced the two-year budget from more than 78.3 billion euros to 76.6 billion (38.7 this year and 37.9 billion next year). The focus of the savings was, among other things, on the education system.

Initially, the annual disposition fund for individual schools was to be cut to 3,000 euros. Due to massive protests by school headmasters and parents' associations, the Senate had to withdraw its plan.

Now, however, cuts amounting to around one billion euros will be enforced within five years. These cuts result from the commitment agreed by the Berlin Senate to interdepartmental "lump-sum reduced expenditure of more than four billion euros," according to the finance department headed by Senator Daniel Wesener (Greens). When the budget was passed, Wesener had already announced that "it was not possible to include war in the budget," intimating that funds for the proxy war against Russia could entail further cuts in the city's education, health and social services.

The city's schools are already in a deplorable state. Last Thursday, less than two days before the start of the new school year, it was announced that the Anna Lindh Primary School (one of Berlin's largest primary schools with 700 pupils) would remain closed due to mould infestation that had already appeared in 2017. All of the school's pupils and 100 members of staff have been forced to move to an office building more than three kilometres away.

In the densely populated districts of Berlin-Lichtenberg, Reinickendorf, Marzahn-Hellersdorf and Berlin-Mitte there are no more free school places. In the borough of Pankow, pupils were accommodated only by "moving closer together" (Education Councillor Dominique Krössin, Left Party). In Berlin-Mitte and Marzahn-Hellersdorf, pupils have had to move into containers. According to the district councillor, Torsten Kühne (CDU), there is a shortage of places totalling 15 primary school classes, i.e., equivalent to four entire primary schools. There is also a shortage of places at secondary schools, which is why pupils are distributed to other districts.

In the district of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg there is a

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shortage of 1,000 primary school places. Here the problem will become even more acute, according to district councillor Andy Hehmke (SPD), because the partial closure of three schools is imminent. In addition, not a single new school place is planned for the 7th to 10th grades in the next few years. Berlin's grammar schools also have no more leeway. In many schools, pupils from refugee families in initial "welcome classes" have had to move out of their previous premises.

It is already clear that children and young people will freeze in schools this winter. The education senator explicitly ruled out "the little ones freezing," but in order to save energy at schools, the administration announced a "tight energy management" to "limit the costs to some extent."

The education administration left unanswered questions about whether heating and the supply of hot water will be cut back in the midst of the pandemic: "The Senate is currently examining various energy-saving options in order to be prepared in the event of a restricted energy supply. At this stage, no statements can be made on individual measures."

The shortage of qualified teaching staff, which goes back many years, continues to worsen. In addition to the massive recruitment of untrained personnel in the last two years, retired teachers have been rehired to replace missing teachers. Some 325 retirees have already returned to school. Nevertheless about 1,000 teaching positions remain unfilled.

Lykka, a secondary school pupil in Kreuzberg, told the *Tagesspiegel* newspaper: "Over the whole year, about a third of my German lessons have been cancelled!" and "some take private tuition because of the many lesson cancellations." Less able pupils and children from low-income families are particularly hard hit by the teacher shortage. She continued, "Actually, our school would like to enable learning in different groups but that would require two teachers per course. That is almost never possible."

Every fourth child in Berlin comes from a household affected by poverty or at risk of poverty. At the beginning of the year, the poverty rate in Germany's capital was 16.4 percent. In view of soaring inflation as a result of the pandemic policy, the country's participation in the NATO proxy war in Ukraine and the resulting energy emergency, the poverty rate will increase drastically.

Primary schools are particularly affected by staff shortages. For the 37,000 school beginners expected at the start of the school year (the largest increase in first graders since 2005), 1,415 new teachers are needed, but there are currently just 180 newly trained primary school teachers and 400 untrained entrants.

This means that the proportion of qualified teachers at primary schools is falling once again. Last school year, this proportion was already precarious, for example at the Hans Rosenthal Primary School in Berlin-Lichtenberg, where there were only 12 colleagues with full pedagogical training for every 34 teachers.

Added to this are poor sanitary conditions—missing soap dispensers, broken washbasins, unusable toilets—as well as windows so dilapidated that they threaten to fall on the pupils' heads and cannot be opened properly. Due to the financial situation, schools are likely to have "prioritised" only the worst defects during the summer holidays.

This alone shows the Senate's complete contempt for pupils and teachers. The expected autumn wave of coronavirus infections as well as the growing spread of monkeypox viruses will once again find an ideal climate to proliferate in schools. The Senate was not even willing to install air filters across the board. Only "statistically" does every class have a filter, according to the Senate. Often, however, these are not installed or in use for construction, personnel or financial reasons.

In the face of growing criticism of the Senate's irresponsible policy, Education Senator Astrid-Sabine Busse (SPD) and the city's mayor Franziska Giffey (SPD) confront pupils, parents and teachers with outright hostility.

Arrogantly rejecting the criticism of teachers and parents, Busse declared in an interview with the *Tagesspiegel*: "Of course, you can always focus on deficits. There will always be deficits", but "not everyone" is affected. "Individual fates are often looked at. But I have been working in 'school' for far too long to know that not everyone can be satisfied, as pupil and teacher, and well as experience good learning successes," Busse said.

She added: "Education is a topic where everyone thinks they have a say. No one would discuss an upcoming operation with surgeons like that" and also "not scold them so much. In the field of education, people do that 24 hours a day," the SPD politician stated.

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