

Widespread opposition to unsafe reopening of schools and day-care facilities in Germany

By Andy Niklaus and Ulrich Rippert
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At the beginning of the week, the state of Saxony resumed unrestricted full operations at primary schools and day-care centres—without minimum distance requirements, class and group reductions or the compulsory wearing of masks. The state government—a coalition of the Christian Democrats, Social Democrats and Green—under Michael Kretschmer (CDU) is thus specifically opposing the current federal hygiene regulations.

Primary schools are operating their normal classes. Children attending day-care go to their normal group. There is neither any dividing up into smaller groups nor staggering attendance times. Minimum distance and face masks are expressly not prescribed. Group separation only takes place between individual classes through staggered break times, which usually works only to a limited extent and does not reduce the risk of infection without any professional disinfection happening in between.

No additional coronavirus tests are being provided. Instead, parents must provide a daily written assurance that neither their child nor other people in the household are displaying COVID-19 symptoms.

Christian Piwarz (CDU), the responsible state minister, justifies this completely reckless policy with the argument that distancing rules are “de facto not feasible” at schools and day-care centres. Politicians therefore had only two options, he claimed. Either abandoning day-care facilities and to a large extent the teaching at elementary schools—and possibly for a long time to come—or waiving the distancing rules. The Saxony state executive decided in favour of reopening schools and day-care centres and against the distancing rules.

School children, toddlers and their parents are thus once again in close, daily contact. They are being forced to move about during rush hours on public transport. And if they do not need to follow social distancing or face masks in school and day-care, why then on the train and bus?

A storm of protest broke out when this decision became known. The parents of a 7-year-old primary school pupil in Leipzig filed an emergency suit with the Administrative Court to prevent the school from reopening without observing the minimum distance of 1.5 metres, which was upheld. Minister Piwarz immediately appealed to the Higher Administrative

Court and stuck to his aggressive reopening plans.

The court temporarily suspended the obligation to attend school, so it is left to parents and students to decide on school attendance themselves. However, this decision is also extremely limited, because with the reopening of schools and the start of regular classes, the offer of online lessons has largely been eliminated.

Piwarz justified his decision with unsurpassed cynicism. His main concern was the “well-being of the children.” They should not “be allowed to fall by the wayside in the crisis,” he stressed. Small children needed care from specialists and primary school children were often overwhelmed by digital teaching, the minister said.

He is receiving support from the CDU’s coalition partners in Saxony. The Greens describe the reopening of schools as “an important step towards more educational justice” because the coronavirus crisis “mainly affects children from socially disadvantaged families.” The Social Democrats (SPD) praise the measure as a great relief for parents, especially single parents.

In reality, it is about the profit interests of big business and the resumption of production. The employers’ associations have long been calling for schools and day-care centres to be opened up again to allow parents to be released from childcare and return to work. Workers are being forced to resume work on production lines and in offices facing the same criminal methods and in completely unsafe conditions which now expose pupils, teachers, children and carers to the virus without protection and is turning schools into virus incubators.

Mr. Piwarz is a right-wing Christian Democrat who, five years ago, attacked the chancellor’s refugee policy and fully represents the interests of the business associations. Saxony’s brutal reopening of schools is at the forefront of the campaign to resume production in all areas.

Because this ruthless and criminal policy is meeting with resistance, it is being accompanied by an intensive political and media campaign to play down the seriousness of the coronavirus pandemic.

On Tuesday, four medical societies published an appeal calling for kindergartens and schools to be reopened immediately despite the coronavirus pandemic throughout

Germany. In their joint statement, the German Society for Hospital Hygiene, the German Society for Paediatric Infectiology, the German Academy for Paediatric and Adolescent Medicine and the Professional Association of Paediatric and Adolescent Physicians in Germany wrote, “Day-care centres, kindergartens and primary schools should be reopened as soon as possible”—“without restrictions.”

The reason given for this is the following: “Especially in children under 10 years of age, the current data speak for a lower rate of infection, as well as for a significantly lower rate of infection.” In contrast, the social and health consequences of closure are serious.

These professional associations thus contradict the warnings and clear recommendations of Christian Drosten and other virologists, who stress that previous studies do not give the all-clear regarding the risk of infection and spread of the virus by children and adolescents.

A look at the authors also makes it clear that the appeal by the professional associations is not aimed at the welfare of children, but at the welfare of the trade associations. For example, the head of the Institute for Hygiene and Public Health, Prof. Dr. Martin Exner, is co-author with the virologist Hendrik Streeck of the controversial Heinsberg study, which claims a very low mortality rate of the coronavirus pandemic and advocates the accelerated relaxation of safety measures.

A second author, Dr. Peter Walger, is spokesman of the board of the German Society for Hospital Hygiene (DGKH). He had already called for the immediate opening of day-care centres and primary schools in the *Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung* at the end of April. His statements left no doubt even then that his concern was a return to work. He said, “The damage caused by the closures of day-care centres and primary schools is enormous. The emergency provisions only cover a small part of the damage. Thousands and thousands of fathers and mothers are not working because their children are not being looked after. If we wait any longer, the secondary effects will escalate.”

The media hype surrounding the right-wing coronavirus demonstrations is also directed against resistance to the government’s loosening of the lockdown and herd immunity policies.

Although the right-wing extremist protests are rejected by a large majority of the population, they receive great attention in the media and from politicians and are systematically boosted. As with the far-right anti-immigrant Pegida demonstrations, top politicians and state representatives make pilgrimages to the right-wing marches.

In Dresden, Saxony’s state premier Michael Kretschmer personally attended along with the few hundred demonstrators. He demonstratively wore no face mask and disregarded the distancing rules.

Franziska Schubert, leader of the Green parliamentary group in the Saxony state parliament, also paid her respects to a

coronavirus demonstration in Zittau. She carried a sign saying, “Ready to talk.” Afterwards, she told the media she was against “sweeping judgements” and demanded that the call for relaxing the lockdown be taken seriously.

Her colleague, Green member of the European Parliament Christin Melcher, explicitly defended Piwarz’ decision and his false reasoning. She said, “I welcome the reopening of schools and day-care centres. It is an important step towards normality for our children. The lack of direct communication with fellow pupils and teachers has put a great strain on the learning situation of our children.”

The reaction of many teachers, students and parents is completely different. On social media, fear, anger and indignation are spreading.

On Twitter, Johann van de Bron writes, “What does reality look like? The virus is not gone. We have hundreds of times more people infected than when the first wave broke out. Children are just as infectious as adults. In France, 40 percent of all pupils and teachers in a school have become infected. Both students and teachers report catastrophic conditions in schools. Public transport is a hotbed of disease that spreads the infection between schools. Outbreaks are already occurring in many schools.”

Pora writes, “It’s time for students, teachers and parents being sacrificed to fight back!” The claim that children are less at risk and less likely to become carriers of the disease is completely unfounded. “There are studies that say the opposite, what is the basis for what they claim?! Why is there so little testing? Think!”

A week ago, when the plans of the state government became known, teachers and students of the Kurt Masur Primary School in Leipzig wrote a protest letter to Education Minister Piwarz and declared that it was “in no way comprehensible” that “intentionally,” the infection prevention measures “prescribed in private and public spaces” were being “overridden.” The complete reopening of “one of the largest elementary schools” in Saxony would have completely unforeseeable and possibly catastrophic consequences.

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