

# Germany's school openings throw fuel onto the pandemic's fire

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The number of people infected with COVID-19 is rising rapidly in Germany. Only five of the country's nearly 300 administrative districts currently report no new infections. Since the unrestricted opening of all schools as well as the wider economy, infections among adolescents and young adults have risen sharply.

On Saturday, there were almost 2,300 new infections, the highest figure since April, and on Tuesday, another 1,821 were registered. According to the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), at least 9,396 people have died of SARS-CoV-2 since March.

The Bavarian cities of Munich and Würzburg are heavily affected, exceeding the critical seven-day level of 50 infected persons per 100,000 inhabitants. The same applies to the cities of Remscheid and Hamm in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), Germany's most populous state. Other large cities such as Gelsenkirchen and Cologne as well as the Berlin district of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg are approaching this level. Berlin as a whole is severely affected and, with a seven-day incidence of 22.8, ranks first in Germany, ahead of Bavaria (20.2) and NRW (15.8).

In Bad Königshofen (Lower Franconia), all schools and day-care centres were closed on Tuesday. The number of infections there had risen rapidly after a wedding celebration. At the celebration itself, 17 of 78 guests were infected, which in turn could have infected 400 contact persons. On Tuesday morning, 12 more positive results (from 270 tests) from the contact persons were already available.

Since the unrestricted opening of businesses, and above all of schools and day-care centres, the number of infections among young people between the ages of 14 and 35 has risen in particular. In Bavaria, one in two newly infected people falls into this age group.

A recent study from Boston has shown that coronavirus is also highly dangerous for this group. The study, which was reported in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, analysed the course of the disease in 3,222 young adults who were admitted to a hospital in the US with COVID-19. It was carried out by doctors and scientists at the large teaching hospital that belongs to Harvard University.

The study showed that 21 percent of the 3,222 in-patients had to be transferred to intensive care, 10 percent needed artificial respiration and 2.7 percent died. Some of those affected had certain pre-existing conditions, such as obesity or high blood pressure, but this was by no means true of all of them.

Worldwide, the number of coronavirus deaths is approaching 1 million, and many more millions of people will face health

problems in the long run, perhaps for the rest of their lives, because of COVID-19. In the US, 200,000 people have now died, and in Europe, the numbers are rising again at an alarming rate. There is a record increase in Spain and France, as well as in the Czech Republic and throughout Eastern Europe.

According to the WHO, which also lists Russia as one of 53 European countries, 5 million SARS CoV-2 cases have been registered in Europe so far. 228,000 COVID-19 patients have died. According to the WHO, 40,000-50,000 new infections are detected in Europe every day, which is quite comparable to the US, where last week there were on average 45,000 new infections daily.

Nevertheless, all governments around the world mercilessly insist on keeping schools open in the interest of the economy. This is also driving the pandemic in Germany. The danger of an exponential spread is currently increasing once more, as can be seen from the reproduction figures. Since the beginning of September, the R-value has been constantly above 1, with an upward trend.

This was most recently the case in June, over several weeks, when outbreaks became more frequent among contract workers in slaughterhouses and agriculture. At Tönnies, more than 2,000 slaughterhouse workers were infected with COVID-19. Forty of them had to be hospitalised with severe symptoms, and some have not recovered to this day.

At schools, on the other hand, it was loudly announced at the time, that such outbreaks, or "super spreading events" as at Tönnies, could never happen. Children were allegedly the "brake blocks of the pandemic," as the Saxony Education Minister Christian Piwarz (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) claimed in July.

Nobody dares to recall this today. The unrestricted opening of schools is proving to be the driving force behind the pandemic. Due to outbreaks at schools, more than 20,000 pupils and several thousand teachers are currently in quarantine in the three federal states of Bavaria, North Rhine-Westphalia and Hesse alone.

In North Rhine-Westphalia, 7,000 pupils and 580 teachers are in quarantine, according to the NRW Ministry of Education. Of these, 238 pupils and 46 teachers have tested positive. In Bavaria, 8,800 students and 771 teachers have to stay at home. By Sunday, 383 children and young people and 48 teachers were reported infected. And in Hesse, the Ministry of Education in Wiesbaden reported that over 4,700 pupils and 480 teachers were in

quarantine at the end of last week.

Due to an outbreak of COVID 19, one grammar school in Saarland is also currently closed. The Geschwister Scholl Gymnasium in Lebach, Saarlouis district, is another example of the fact that the infection is spreading rapidly within schools. As the website news4teachers reports, two teachers and one pupil tested positive there at the beginning of September. As a result, at least 18 coronavirus infections have been detected at the school so far. Now, 900 students, teachers and staff and their families have to remain in quarantine until September 25.

Major COVID-19 outbreaks have also occurred within a school in Giessen and Rostock and before that in Hamburg-Winterhude. In Giessen in Hesse, the Liebig School is affected with 14 infections; the outbreak has also spread to a neighbouring daycare centre. Before this, 33 pupils and three school employees in Hamburg had already been infected with COVID-19, but the school was not closed.

In Rostock (Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania), the Hundertwasser Comprehensive School was completely closed on September 17, and 800 pupils and 80 teachers were sent into quarantine. Following the positive test of a sick teacher, the virus was initially detected in nine pupils and three other teachers. Further series of tests are still ongoing.

Rostock's school minister, Left Party politician Steffen Bockhahn, threatened to fine anyone who his security service did not find at home during the quarantine. He recommended that parents should "leave their children alone in their room, pass in food and otherwise limit contact to the bare essentials. ... To be clear: The children concerned will not leave the flat."

The minister from the Left Party is a telling example of the harsh tone with which the education politicians of all parties are now ordering around the affected children and their parents. Just a few weeks ago, these same politicians had announced with deep conviction that it was safe to open schools, that they could not be hotspots, and that children very rarely fell ill from the coronavirus.

Even now, when the outbreaks in schools refute this, politicians continue to claim that, since the number of deaths has not (yet) risen sharply again, there is no cause for concern. Above all, there must be no new lockdown.

This was also the statement of the latest Schools Conference, to which Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU), Federal Education Minister Anja Karliczek (CDU) and Social Democratic Party (SPD) leader Saskia Esken invited the Education Ministers of the federal states. "All of us in the country cannot want our children to have to stay at home for weeks on end again," said Karliczek, the headmistress of the school, in an attempt to whitewash this policy.

The conference promised headmasters and teachers €1 billion for the digital upgrade of schools. However, the grand coalition of the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats has been promising this for weeks. In August, a €500 million programme for the purchase of on-loan equipment for needy pupils was already announced. Now a further €500 million is to be added to equip teachers with service laptops and schools with IT administrators.

This is at most a drop in the ocean. With such promises, politicians are mainly trying to divert attention away from their own responsibility for the disaster that is about to hit schools.

While they have digitally equipped the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) with billions from the coronavirus pot, they idly allowed the summer holidays to pass by. Pupils and teachers had to return unprepared at the start of school to the same deteriorating schools that had been neglected before the pandemic.

Although it would have been very possible to do so, schools were not equipped for safe operation. The necessary purchase of air exchange units, CO2 meters and filter systems in the classrooms was described as "too expensive" (NRW Education Minister Yvonne Gebauer). Topics such as establishing small, fixed learning groups, the expansion of classrooms, distance rules and wearing masks in the classroom fell by the wayside, just like blanket testing.

"We will have problems with the unrestricted opening of schools, as it has taken place in the meantime." This is the assessment of the Charité virologist Christian Drosten, who has finally made a clear statement against the unprotected school reopenings.

In an interview with the *Tagesspiegel*, Drosten addressed the many existing options, such as renting halls or marquees to provide wider distances between pupils and staff, or the questions of "whether occupational safety allows constant draughts, and what fans would cost." Much time was wasted, he bitterly noted. "May, June, July, August—you could have had four months."

His colleague, Isabella Eckerle, a virologist and head of the Centre for Viral Diseases at the University of Geneva, went even further when she told the *Tagesspiegel* on September 21 that it was "only a matter of time before the numbers in hospitals start to rise." Coronavirus was still dangerous, warned Eckerle: "The virus has not changed. Most of us haven't had it yet and are not immune."

In contrast to all the establishment parties and the media, since the end of the summer holidays, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) has been calling on teachers, pupils and workers in all sectors to set up independent action committees to prepare a general strike against the reopening of schools and the policies of the ruling class. In its statement, the SGP said, "the hundreds of billions of euros that have gone to the banks and corporations and are being spent on armaments and war must be used for education, health care and providing full pay." Teachers, parents, and students have already started to put this into practice.

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