

## Coronavirus

## Masks in class?

## Many questions raised as students go back to school

BERLIN, Aug 9, (AP): Masks during class, masks only in the halls, no masks at all. Distance when possible, no distance within same-grade groups, no distance at all.

As Germany's 16 states start sending millions of children back to school in the middle of the global coronavirus pandemic, the country's famous sense of "Ordnung" has given way to uncertainty, with a hodgepodge of regional regulations that officials acknowledge may or may not work.

"There can't, and never will be 100% certainty," said Torsten Kuehne, the official in charge of schools in Pankow, Berlin's most populous district where 45,000 students go back to school Monday. "We are trying to minimize the risk as much as possible."



Scheeres

Germany has won plaudits for managing to slow the spread of the coronavirus quickly, efficiently and early, but the opening of schools is proving a new challenge as the country struggles to balance the concerns of anxious parents and children, skeptical scientists, worried teachers and overtaxed administrators.

With U.S. President Donald Trump pushing for American schools to reopen in person and on time even as the country nears 5 million confirmed coronavirus cases, and other countries moving ahead with plans to resume classes despite rising infections, many eyes are on the real-life experiment offered in Germany to see what works and what doesn't.

The UN said this week that as many as 100 countries have yet to announce a date for schools to reopen, and Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned of a possible "generational catastrophe" in education. He urged that restarting school be made a "top priority" once countries have the coronavirus under control.

Germany has seen some 217,000 confirmed cases and 9,200 deaths, and brought down a peak of some 6,000 new daily infections in March to the low hundreds. Numbers have been creeping back up, however, and topped the 1,000 per day mark in recent days for the first time in about three months.

Israel attempted a full reopening in May, at a time when the coronavirus was widely thought to have been beaten in the country, only to suffer new outbreaks that led to schools being shut down again and a surge in the spread of the virus nationwide. In South Africa, four grade levels were restarted in June but then closed back down when the country's virus cases surged.

As Berlin prepares to send its nearly half-million students back to school on Monday, many fear something similar could happen.

## Concerns

"The concerns are enormous, because the schools are hotspots," said Doreen Siebernik, who heads the Berlin branch of the GEW teachers' union. "I know that there are pupils coming to school who have contact with hundreds, with thousands of people every day."

Berlin's plan includes requiring students – and teachers – to wear masks in hallways, but not during instruction or in the playground. Sports, music and drama will be allowed, but with restrictions, like requiring choir members to keep at least 2 meters from one another.

Berlin's minister for education Sandra Scheeres said "it's not possible in a school" to always keep students 1.5 meters (5 feet) from one another, but that the distance should be kept if feasible. Students are to be kept in "cohorts" – groups that should not mix – so that if there is an outbreak, only those affected would need to be quarantined.

The state government recommends those groups don't mingle outside school either, but it was not clear how that could be enforced.

"There are conflicting priorities, health protection on the one hand, which is very important to us, and on the other hand that we want to ensure the right to education of every single child," Scheeres said.

A Berlin Institute of Technology study on coronavirus transmission concluded that classrooms should be ventilated for a full 15 minutes every half hour. Scheeres' current plan calls for windows to be opened following each 45 minute class.

Dr Isabella Ecklerle, head of the emerging viruses research group at the University of Geneva, said there was still a lot to learn about how children are affected by the coronavirus and transmit it, but that it was clear from school openings in other countries they could spark wider outbreaks.

"If we go back to the normal school day now clinging to wishful thinking that children do not play a role in the pandemic, that will come back to haunt us," she said. "Instead of ideologically charged discussions, we need pragmatic concepts to get us through the winter."

In a sharply-worded open letter to Scheeres and the city's mayor, Marco Fechner, a father of two and parent representative in the Pankow district, noted that many classroom windows don't open, and that the government has stricter mask rules for supermarkets and its own offices than schools.

He urged the administration to focus more resources to permit some learning from home, so that class sizes and contact could be kept to a minimum.

"This decision is absolutely incomprehensible to me as a father, and I fear for the health of my children and our relatives," Fechner wrote.

Similar concerns are playing out elsewhere, like in Scotland where schools also are due to reopen on Tuesday. There is uncertainty about whether measures to increase hand washing and social distancing – with limited mixing between classroom groups but no mandatory masks – will work.

Berlin's back-to-school guidelines are middle-of-the-road among German states.

The first students to return, in the northeastern state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, had no mask requirement but the "cohort" principle was in place and the education minister said mask regulations were in the works. In a worrisome sign, two schools were temporarily closed Friday after new cases of coronavirus were detected.

Students over age 10 who returned to school in Hamburg on Thursday were required to wear masks, but could take them off once seated in classrooms.

In Germany's most populous state, North Rhine-Westphalia, 2.5 million students face the country's strictest measures as they return on Wednesday, including a mask requirement while in class.

Federal Health Minister Jens Spahn said Germany's staggered returns and different approaches will help determine what works and what doesn't.

Meantime, schools and districts have been improvising their own solutions to conform with voluminous government guidelines.

In Berlin's Pankow, Kuehne has been talking with school lunch suppliers all summer to work out a plan to serve meals at staggered times, and in classrooms, to avoid large groups in the cafeteria.

"I wouldn't say I'm worried, but I see the very, very big challenges ahead of us as school authorities, schools and parents," he said.



National Health Service (NHS) workers march from St James' Park to Downing Street, London, Aug 8, as part of a national protest over pay. Nationwide protests on Saturday are calling for government to address what they claim is many years of reduced wages, and are calling for a voice in plans for public sector pay increases. (AP)



People wear face masks to help curb the spread of the coronavirus as they ride their bikes along the Champs Elysees avenue in Paris, as France gradually lifts its Covid-19 lockdown. Parisians enjoying in the sun since travel and movement restrictions were lifted. (AP)



Speranza



Meloni

## Europe

**Elderly couple, baby dead:** An elderly couple and an 8-month-old baby have been found dead and dozens have been trapped in their homes and cars as a storm hits the island of Evia in central Greece, police said Sunday.

Police say the couple, 86 and 85 years old, were found unconscious in their flooded home Sunday morning, in the seaside village of Politika, about 100 kilometers (62 miles) north of the capital Athens. The baby was found in a ground floor apartment in the same village. The local mayor reportedly said that the baby and its family were not local residents and were on holiday there.

Many residents have climbed to the rooftops of their homes and the fire service has sent a rescue helicopter to the area.

Heavy rain started falling at about midnight Saturday and firefighters responded to over 50 fires caused by lightning. The fire service said it was also called to rescue dozens of people and help many others drain flooded homes. (AP)

**Masks made mandatory:** The glamorous French Riviera resort of Saint-Tropez is requiring face masks outdoors starting Saturday, threatening to sober the mood in a place renowned for high-end, free-wheeling summer beach parties.

More cities and towns, especially in tourist areas, are imposing mask requirements as France's coronavirus infections creep up again, with more than 2,000 new cases reported on Friday – the biggest single-day rise since May.

The uptick corresponds with France's summer holidays, when vacationers head off in droves, often to seashores, for festive gatherings with family and friends.

As of Saturday, wearing a mask outdoors is also compulsory in some crowded parts of Marseille, France's second-largest city.

Paris is expected to announce similar measures in the coming days.

In Saint-Tropez's famed resort, a top spot for the international jet set, several restaurants had to close for two weeks after some staff tested positive for the virus.

## Britain

## Military asked to help stem migrant crossings

## UK medics protest, seeking pay raise

LONDON, Aug 9, (AP): Hundreds of health care workers rallied in British cities on Saturday, demanding that the Conservative government acknowledge their hard work and dedication during the coronavirus pandemic with a hefty pay increase.

In London, demonstrators – most wearing masks and observing social distancing – marched to the gates of Downing Street, the home and office of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, chanting, "Boris Johnson, hear us shout! Pay us properly or get out!"

Britain's medical workers have been hailed as heroes during the pandemic by both the government and the public. But some say a decade of public spending cuts by Johnson and previous Conservative prime ministers has left the state-funded National Health Service struggling to cope.

A placard carried by a protester in Glasgow, Scotland, said "Enough empty praise. (Give us) a fair raise." Another read: "Who saved you, Boris?"

Johnson himself contracted COVID-19 and spent three nights in intensive care at St. Thomas' Hospital in London. He later thanked the staff there for saving his life.

Nurses, care assistants and junior doctors are angry that they were left out of plans to give an above-inflation pay raise to almost 1 million public sector workers because they have a different contract with the British government.

Dave Carr, a critical care nurse at St. Thomas' Hospital, said working through the outbreak was "the hardest thing I've ever done in my life and we're all exhausted."

"We're on our knees, absolutely on

our knees. And on top of it they give 900,000 public sector workers a pay rise – and I haven't got a problem with that – but they carve us out," he said. "I'm absolutely fuming. Tired and fuming. We've had enough."

Meanwhile, Britain's military said Saturday it has been asked by the government to help prevent people from reaching the UK from France in small boats, after a surge in the number of vessels making the dangerous journey.

The Ministry of Defense said it had received a request from the Home Office to "support UK Border Force operations in the Dover Straits." The department said it was "working hard to identify how we can most effectively assist."

## Tough

Britain's Conservative government has talked tough after dozens of crossings by migrants during recent weeks of warm summer weather. On Thursday, 235 people landed or were brought ashore from boats in the English Channel, a record number for a single day. Britain's Coastguard said it was responding to "a number of incidents" in the Channel on Saturday.

Home Secretary Priti Patel has said the Royal Navy could be called in to prevent boats reaching UK waters, though other senior officials and politicians say that could be impractical and potentially dangerous.

Jack Straw, who served as Home Secretary during a previous Labour government, said "it will only take one of these dinghies to capsize and everybody to drown ... for there to be a hullabaloo, including in the Conservative Party, and for the policy to have to be reversed."

The area where mask-wearing is mandatory includes the picturesque port, the open-air farmers market and the narrow streets of the old town lined with chic shops and art galleries. A 135-euro (\$159) fine applies to those who don't comply. The measure does not apply to children under 11.

France has already made mask-wearing mandatory in all indoor public spaces nationwide. (AP)

## EU updates safe travel list:

The European Union Friday published an updated list of non-EU countries whose nationals can travel to the European bloc from Saturday.

Based on the criteria and conditions set out in the recommendation, as from August 8 EU member states should gradually lift the travel restrictions at the external borders for residents of the following third countries, said an EU statement today.

The 10 countries included in the updated list are Australia, Canada, Georgia, Japan, New

Zealand, Rwanda, South Korea, Thailand, Tunisia and Uruguay, plus China subject to confirmation of reciprocity.

Morocco was removed from the updated list published today.

The EU's original "safe list" published in early July had 14 non-EU countries, plus China with a reciprocity condition. Algeria, Serbia and Montenegro were removed from the list earlier.

The list will continue to be reviewed regularly and, as the case may be, updated, said the EU statement.

The criteria to determine the third countries for which the current travel restriction should be lifted cover in particular the epidemiological situation and containment measures, including physical distancing, as well as economic and social considerations, it said. (KUNA)

**Spanish police hit discos:** Facing a new surge of coronavirus infections, one Spanish town is deploying special police units to nightclubs to

enforce health regulations to stop the virus from spreading.

The small beach town of Fuengirola near Málaga on Spain's southern coast has sent police to its nightclubs – which are a magnet for young people seeking summer fun – to keep them from becoming virus breeding grounds.

"The police pressure that is carried out is essential so that people who are resistant to the law end up complying with it," police officer Jorge Moreno told The Associated Press, adding that since June 15, police have issued 2,000 sanctions for not complying with health regulations.

The special unit of 24 officers ensures that both workers and party-goers comply with the mandatory order to wear face masks and that clubs keep tables far enough apart to maintain social distancing between groups.

Nightclubs have been repeatedly cited by regional health authorities as sites of contagion. Northeast Catalonia has ordered them shut down.

Spain is struggling to keep an uptick in infections in check after it had managed to control an initial nationwide outbreak that forced the government to impose a strict three-month lockdown. (AP)

The health ministry on Friday reported the country's highest daily increase in new infections since the lockdown ended in June, with 1,895 cases recorded – some 200 more than the previous day. (AP)

**BBC radio host quits:** British radio host Sideman quit the BBC on Saturday over the corporation's decision to include a racial slur in a news report about a racist attack.

Sideman, who appeared on music station Radio 1Xtra, said in an Instagram post that broadcasting the word "feels like a slap in the face to our community." The comedian and broadcaster,

whose real name is David Whitley, said that "with no apology (from the BBC) I just don't feel comfortable being aligned with the organization."

The BBC included the word when reporting last month on a violent attack on a young Black man in Bristol, a city in southwest England. The attackers are reported to have yelled the offensive term as they ran into the 21-year-old with a car.

The victim needed hospital treatment for a broken leg and other injuries.

The BBC has defended the decision to use the word, saying it wanted to convey the racist nature of the attack and "gave adequate warnings that upsetting images and language would be used."

## Hostage-taking at bank ends:

An apparently armed man who took six hostages at a bank in the French port city of Le Havre on Thursday surrendered after nearly six hours, police said.

The 34-year-old with a history of mental problems freed the hostages one by one as the drama unfolded. The last captive was released shortly before the hostage-taker turned himself in, a police official said.

The hostage-taker was apparently armed with a handgun, but it was not immediately clear whether the weapon was real or fake.

A special police intervention unit brought into the Normandy city from Paris spent hours negotiating with the hostage-taker before he turned himself and was arrested.

The official in France's national police said the man was known to have psychological problems. However, the official did not confirm French media reports that the man had put forth confused demands. The official could not be identified by name, in keeping with French custom. (AP)



Picture taken on Aug 5, shows pupils wearing masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19 walking to class to begin their school day in Godley, Texas. Germany's 16 states start sending millions of children back to school in the middle of the global coronavirus pandemic. (AP)