

Covid school closures: is the Swiss way sustainable?



Mass pool saliva testing is taking place in many schools © Keystone / Gaetan Bally

School closures are detrimental to pupils and should only be used as a last resort, say the authors of a new study. But rising Covid cases mean that even Swiss schools should prepare for possible closures, they warn.

December 3, 2021 - 12:01

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Switzerland, unlike its neighbours Germany and Italy, has largely kept its schools open during the coronavirus pandemic. Schools have only been in shutdown once - in spring 2020 compared with an overall 5-7 months in Germany.

Measures like distancing, handwashing and ventilation are in place, but masks have not been widely worn in primary schools during the new school year.

“We would argue from an educational perspective not to close down schools in sake of the potential for the risk for certain pupils,” said Stephan Huber, head of the [Institute of the Management and Economics of Education \(IBB\)](#) at the [University of Teacher Education Zug](#), and co-author of the study. So far, the Swiss approach has been the right one, he and his co-author concluded.

As part of the IBB’s [School Barometer](#), Huber and colleagues looked at 32 studies on schools during the pandemic from 11 countries - including Switzerland - to assess the impact of school shutdowns. The results have been published in the journal [Die Deutsche Schule \(article in German\)](#).

Learning loss

The report found that school shutdowns led to a learning loss of between 1-5 months among pupils. Maths suffered more than reading.

But not all pupils were affected to the same extent. “Pupils from lower socio-economic family backgrounds generally do worse with lockdowns as they of course have less technical equipment and are generally more less supported by their families,” Huber told SWI swissinfo.ch. “We see the greater impact among pupils from less privileged family backgrounds.”

In addition, another review study of the School Barometer by Huber and colleagues found that closures also impacted pupils’ social, emotional and motivational wellbeing and that around a third of parents reported strains from homeschooling. This was published in the journal [Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft \(article in German\)](#).

Swiss way going forward?

But is the Swiss way sustainable? The number of new coronavirus infections in the country has been rising: it stood at more than 9,500 as of Thursday. There has also been a spike in corona cases among

pupils, many of whom are too young to be vaccinated. Vaccination in Switzerland is non-compulsory from 12 years old. According to the [latest official figures](#) the age groups 4-9 and 10-19 are particularly affected (with 747 and 1,218 cases respectively per 100,000 inhabitants as of Thursday, the highest values among the age groups listed). The situation has already prompted some cantons, which are in charge of educational matters in Switzerland, into reintroducing masks in primary schools or to step up voluntary mass corona testing in schools.

On Tuesday the government announced that it was considering making mass testing in schools obligatory (rather than voluntary) as part of plans to tighten national Covid rules. The move has been put out to consultation with the cantons. A decision is expected later on Friday.

School closures, while not currently on the table, cannot be ruled out completely, Huber says.

“With what is happening at the moment, with numbers rising again, it’s a big discussion,” said Huber. “There are educational arguments to keep the schools open for the sake of the pupils and also for the parents, and particularly for those children who need more support from teachers. Schools can compensate to a certain degree less privileged situations when it comes to learning. Schools must do everything possible to apply the hygiene standards needed, as this is also part of their education mission.”

Preparation is also key, he said. “What schools face - not only in Switzerland but everywhere - is what happens if schools are closed or classes go into quarantine? What happens if we have a national lockdown? They have to prepare for distance learning, to use digital or other technology to keep educational going.”

In particular need of support in terms of resources are “high-risk” schools, with higher numbers of pupils from underprivileged backgrounds – predominately in urban areas in Switzerland, the professor said. This was also highlighted in the very [first results and recommendations of the School Barometer](#).

Official view

For now, it seems that Switzerland will keep to its present course. “The primary goal is to ensure that school operations remain as undisturbed as possible,” said the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH) in its latest recommendations on how to deal with the coronavirus in schools, [issued on November 26](#).

“Quality education is a right and a necessity. The low morbidity of SARS-CoV-2 infections among children does not justify drastic and widespread measures,” it said in a document aimed at cantonal health and education authorities.

Repetitive mass saliva testing in schools is key. This reduces the incidence through isolation of individual cases, thus avoiding the need for class or school closures, the document explained. The government will continue to cover the costs of these voluntary tests, it said.

But further measures like compulsory mask wearing could be introduced if the situation could not be brought under control, the document continued.

Meanwhile the debate continues in the country about how best to control the situation in schools; the main teaching union has called for [more coordinated school measures](#) across the country (each canton has its own corona concept for schools), whereas parents’ groups like [BildungAberSicher](#) want stronger health measures in schools like mask wearing and CO2 monitoring.

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