

An Open Letter to Austria's Minister of Education



Tanja Maier

Follow

Sep 16 · 8 min read

Dear Dr Fassmann,

I am the mother of three children who attend gymnasium in Vienna. We survived the lockdown, distance learning, and then part-time school on A/B schedules in two different schools. I was quite concerned when you said in July that we could plan for a “normal” school start in September, but I gave you the benefit of the doubt.

Our family was on our best behaviour this summer. We cancelled a planned vacation in Montenegro due to the Level 6 Reisewarnung, and made a pricey and rainy Urlaub in Österreich instead. We wore N95 masks everywhere indoors, even after the rules were loosened

this summer.

A day trip to Venice was an eye-opener. We saw that Italy was getting on with daily life with everyone in masks, and it was working. Italians and holidaymakers were all taking the virus seriously, and still managing to enjoy themselves.

We drove three hours back to Carinthia, and corona denial was everywhere. The contrast couldn't have been starker. There were no masks anywhere, and when we wore ours in indoor spaces, people gawked at us like we were crazy.

My children have been back at school for 7 days. Two classes at their school are already in quarantine. It is only a matter of time before others follow. There are children or teachers at home waiting for tests in *each* of my children's classes. One teacher couldn't get through on 1450 after an entire day of calling.

Yesterday, we received an emergency two-page email with covid-19 procedures and instructions from the school director, who must be totally overwhelmed with the job of mass contact tracing and pandemic management, something he certainly never signed up for as an educator.

And as your ministry controls education at the federal level, school directors cannot individually mandate

mask-wearing and other smart preventative measures such as optional distance learning. Local solutions are good in a crisis, but local leaders need to be empowered in order for this to work. That leadership has to come from you in a small country with a federal system.

Your back to school “with optimism” isn’t working and we aren’t even two weeks in to the school start here in Vienna. The situation is dangerous.

It is also becoming increasingly apparent to anyone who knows people in these age groups that much of the community spread in Vienna is now unsurprisingly concentrated amongst the most social creatures in our society: teenagers and young adults.

In this context, it is reckless to send older children to sit in full classrooms without masks. By doing so, each of our families and the teachers are exposed to the most careless behavior of the students in each class.

Unlike in 1918, today we have a choice. We are so lucky to have the internet. Distance learning went really well at our school. There is no reason that children aged 10+ should be forced by the government (because distance learning has not been offered as an option unless a student has a pre-existing medical condition) to sit in classrooms without masks, thereby

exposing themselves to the risk-exposure of 27 other families and a half-dozen teachers.

You don't need me to tell you that the traffic lights (whichever one you want to pick, the government's or the special one for schools) are a joke because they are not backed by any actual changes to measures and regulations. They only give residents of Austria another opportunity to laugh. And the coronavirus doesn't read the colour scheme before it jumps from host to host. It is color-blind. Sadly, the broken light also leads to people in general taking the coronavirus situation a lot less seriously.

I'm sure you would agree that science is important and we should all be making data and fact-based decisions. I am indeed emotional because I am a mother who doesn't want her children to get sick, but I am also a rational thinker, and believe we should observe what is and isn't going well in other countries.

In short, we need to be more like Canada, otherwise we will soon face a situation like Israel. If you wait until hospitals get close to full capacity to make changes, that is far too late, like trying to fight a roaring house fire with a little bucket of water. Even countries like Germany, which have had far greater success than Austria in controlling spread of the coronavirus, are dealing with several outbreaks and localized school

closures.

So what to do?

Mask up in classrooms. If my 6 year-old niece in 1st grade in an Ohio public school can wear a mask all day long, older children in Austria can do it too. My niece is lucky to live in a state where the governor issued strict mask orders. Masks are mandatory inside every school and every workplace in Ohio. Aerosol spread is real. Masks may not prevent all infections, but they can really help reduce the viral load if people do become infected. Less viral load equals milder illness. And when I say masks, I mean real ones, not those ridiculous, transparent plastic visors or mouth guards that some in Austria are wearing. For a closer-to-home example, just look what happened in one Vienna theatre without masks. Aerosol transmission will take place in classrooms, and the baby elephant cannot prevent it. Masks really do help.

Create fast-track testing for teachers. My daughter just started gymnasium this year, and by week two she was without a class teacher because her teacher couldn't get through on 1450 after an entire day spent calling the number in vain. Teachers are the backbone of our education system, and if they can't get tested quickly, and many get sick, even distance learning won't work anymore. Don't forget — distance learning worked during the lockdown in part because no one had the

opportunity to get sick, as the lockdown happened so quickly, and teachers found themselves healthy, at home, and able to work.

Send the Oberstufe home to learn online. Teenagers past a certain age (depending on the strictness of their parents) are going to meet up with their friends. As any parent of a teen will tell you, this will still happen, *no matter what*.

There was a private party last weekend in Vienna involving teens from at least three different schools that has led to many now waiting for covid-19 tests and quarantine measures after at least one attendee tested positive.

And guess what? Some parents even drove their children home from the party, knew it was happening, and didn't care. To be fair, under your government's covid-19 regulations, there wasn't anything technically illegal about the private gathering.

So the virus, fresh off the plane from Sardinia (I am totally hypothesizing here with a tinge of envy as we didn't even get to swim in the sea this summer), has already found its way with lightening speed into several schools in Vienna.

Now multiply this times all the teenagers in the country, and you can be assured that without masks or distance learning, covid-19 will spread like wildfire

amongst older teens. By sending Oberstufe home to learn online, you at least keep those infections out of schools.

Make distance learning an option. Parents must be permitted to say that they don't want to risk sending their children to in-person learning in full classrooms without masks. There must be an option, in the year 2020 with all the technology we luckily have available, for parents to opt for distance learning for their children. This was an option back in May/June, and we used it for our youngest. Her teacher sent me the assignments, and she did them at home. We observed the case rate in Vienna, and when we felt comfortable, we let her return to her Volksschule class. I understand that not all parents can take care of their children during the day, but making this an option would help reduce the number of children sitting in classrooms. It would also send a real, important signal that this is a pandemic, it is not normal life.

Empower school directors at the local level to make quick, real time decisions for their own schools.

Response time is critical. The federal government has crippled the response by overly centralising decision making. The slow back and forth between federal, Bundesland, city and bezirk...by the time anything happens, weeks pass without action. Let school directors take measures on their own, they know better

than anyone what is happening on the ground in their classrooms. And by all means give them the science to do so! This report by your government on ventilation and the role of masks for schools is a good start.

You don't have to be afraid, the science is there to back you up on making these decisions. The decisions are not to be taken lightly, but it is far wiser to take responsible action now rather than sending over 1 million school children in Austria and their teachers into a game of Russian roulette, the coronavirus version, each time they enter their classrooms this fall and winter.

Yes, this situation is unprecedented. Yes, it is terrible and no one expected things to blow up so quickly. But here we are, and it's up to you to show real leadership at this moment. Your actions will save lives. Beyond saving lives, they will also protect young people against the very real long-term serious health side effects of surviving covid-19, something we are only now beginning to get a glimpse of.

Imagine the headlines if you don't do anything. We are now seeing exponential growth in Spain and France.

Both countries have quickly learned that children can and do spread covid-19. Spain's children aged 6 and up are wearing masks in school. French children over the

age of 11 must wear them too. Austria is presently ignoring the science behind aerosol transmission of covid-19.

The positivity rate is one of the best indicators we have to understand how much community spread a country or region is experiencing. The chart below speaks for itself. In the Balkans, during the worst of their outbreaks, countries had positivity rates of 10% and higher. Some U.S. states experiencing some of the worst outbreaks in the world reached 20%. 5% is a big warning sign.

Sept 15, 2020

New York City managed to reduce its positivity rate down to below 1% and even then is still giving parents the option of choosing distance learning. About half have chosen this option.

New York has done much better than Madrid, and scientists are now pointing to indoor dining as a major difference between the two cities.

Austrians have been brazenly dining indoors since May and attending large weddings and other indoor events, so we collectively have no protections in place against community spread. There is also no mandate for masks in the workplace (yet!), so most parents aren't protected either.

Full classrooms without masks for children aged 6–18

in the context of Austria's fast rising covid-19 outbreak is like driving down a highway at 200 km at night without a seatbelt or headlights.

You have an opportunity to slow down the car, put on a seatbelt, and turn on the lights. Please use it.

p.s. as I write this, just saw that Germany wants to declare Vienna a Risikogebiet: