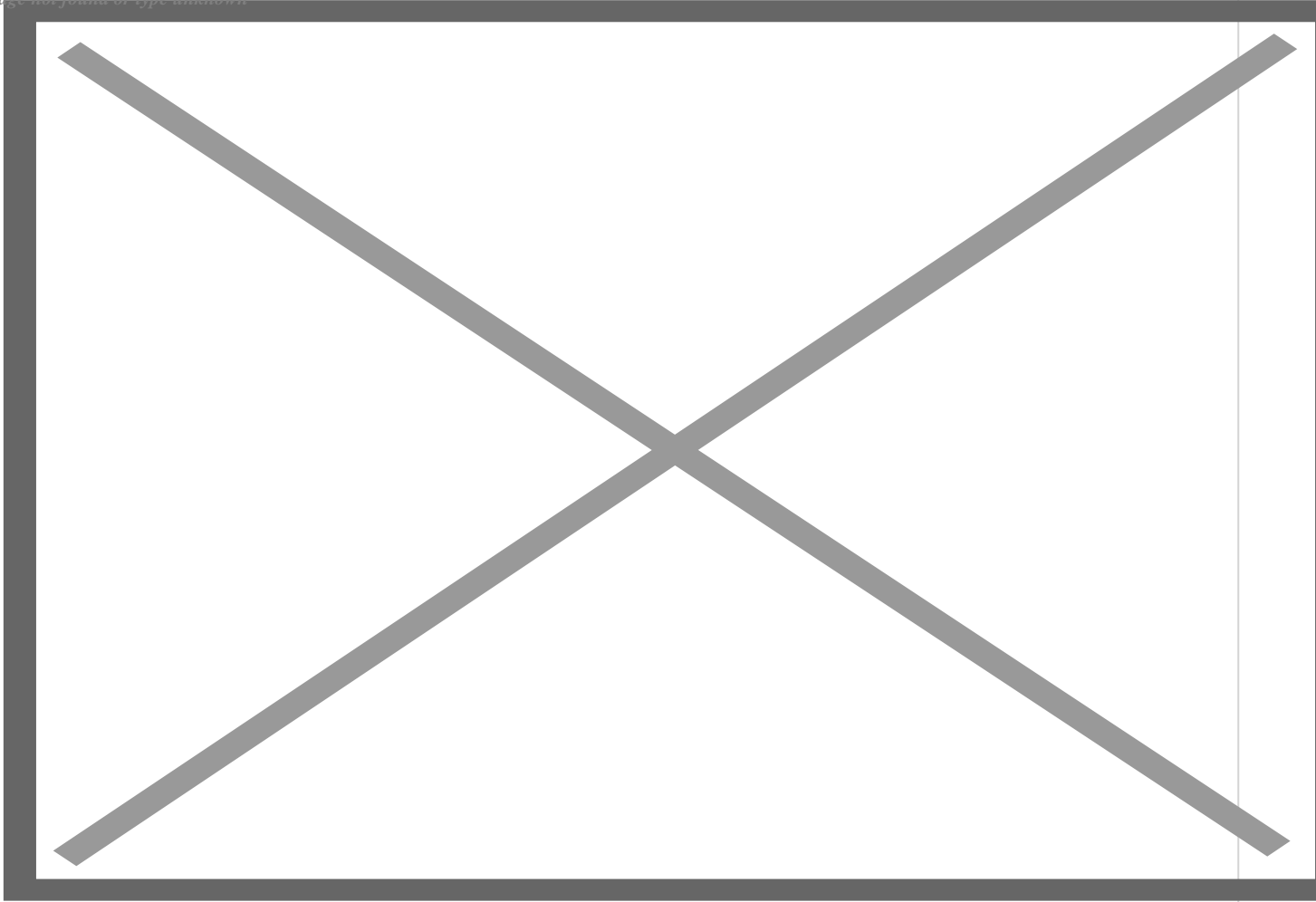


Greeks who do not send children to school face jail

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High school students queue to check COVID-19 self-test results with a teacher while entering their school in an Athens suburb on April 12, 2021 [File: Louisa Gouliamaki/AFP]

Athens, December 10 (RHC)-- Parents who do not send their children to school because of COVID-19 measures will face a two-year prison sentence and a fine, the Greek government has said – the latest move by Athens which appears to target people who deny critical features of the pandemic, such as vaccination, mask-wearing or testing.

School attendance until the age of 16 has long been compulsory in Greece, but until now, the penalty for non-enrollment was 59 euros (\$67). “We could not tolerate the phenomenon of parents keeping children from school,” Alexandros Koptsis, general secretary for primary and secondary education at the education ministry, told Al Jazeera.

“This happens for inconceivable reasons, like not wanting your child to wear a mask.” The ministry legislated an amendment to the penal code on Tuesday. “If a prosecutor deems it necessary, parents could even be deprived of custody,” Koptsis recently told a local radio station.

He told Al Jazeera this was based on standing law and was “entirely up to prosecutors.” The ministry will not pursue parents directly, but is providing headteachers with legal tools. “We are showing schools a general [policy] direction, and it will then be up to principals to call prosecutors,” Koptsis said.

Parents convicted with two-year imprisonment will not necessarily be severed from their children, because sentences of up to five years can be bought out at rates set by the courts, based on convicts’ income.

Reported cases of parents refusing to enrol their children are currently few, and the education ministry has not announced them. But ministry sources say they are in the dozens. Affected children will have to repeat a year.

Greece, which has fully vaccinated 62 percent of the total population, has been trying to close a vaccination gap with the rest of Europe, which has vaccinated 66 percent. The education ministry says half of the students aged 14 and above are now vaccinated with at least a first dose. Vaccinations for preschoolers and elementary students aged four to 11 begin on Friday.

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