

Scramble for childcare in Madrid as schools closed over coronavirus ^[1]

The regional government has added a two-week shutdown of nurseries, schools and universities to its defence measures

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EXCERPTS

Schools in Madrid are beginning a two-week shutdown after a decision taken by the regional government to arrest the spread of the coronavirus left parents in and around the Spanish capital urgently trying to arrange impromptu childcare.

Spain has so far confirmed 1,646 cases of the virus – 782 of them in the Madrid region – and 35 deaths. Nurseries, schools and universities closed on Tuesday and will remain shut until 23 March.

All public events involving more than 1,000 people have also been banned in Madrid, two areas of the Basque country, and the neighbouring region of La Rioja. The central government has also stopped all flights from Italian airports.

The announcements came as the far-right Vox party apologised for holding a 9,000-person rally in Madrid on Sunday and confirmed that its general secretary had tested positive for the coronavirus and gone into voluntary quarantine.

In parts of Madrid, where many people have begun stockpiling food, water and toilet paper, parents picking up their children for the last day of school for a fortnight expressed qualified support for the regional government's initiative.

"I've only just found out about the shutdown," said Carmen Delgado, a shopassistant collecting her eight-year-old son from Nuestra Señora de las Nieves school in northwest Madrid.

"Who's going to look after all the kids now? I'm lucky because I work afternoons so I can look after my son in the morning and my husband can look after him in the afternoon."

While Delgado agreed with the shutdown, she feared it may have triggered panic.

"I've just been to Lidl and people are panic-buying food and water. I'm still quite calm but maybe that's because I've only just found out."

While some people joked on social media about grandparents turning off their phones to escape childcare duties and whether the capital's children should be dropped off at the prime minister's residence in Madrid or the home of one of his deputies, others felt precautions should have been taken sooner.

"It should have happened a week ago because the cases are rising exponentially," said José Sato, another parent at the school. "Given the mortality rate, I'm calm at the moment, but it's worse for our parents and older people."

Most of those stocking up on Tuesday afternoon appeared to be older people who were taking few chances when it came to fridges, freezers and store cupboards. Multi-packs of toilet roll were also flying off the shelves.

"It's worse than Christmas – the supermarket is just rammed," said a middle-aged woman who was queuing for meat at the nearby indoor market.

"I'm calm but I can understand people panicking because they think they'll be locked down. They're saying it'll only be 15 days of school closures, but I think it will stretch on."

The woman said she was washing her hands and using antibacterial gel after using public transport but was more concerned about her pet than herself. "I do worry about how I will walk my dog if I have to self-isolate," she said.

The butcher serving her confirmed that business was good – "but not for the reasons we would have liked" – while a nearby poulterer felt the school shutdown had served little purpose beyond provoking panic.

"People think the world is ending," he said. "They're going mad."

Not all shops, however, are profiting amid the coronavirus outbreak. Many of Madrid's Chinese-run grocers and bazaars have pulled down

the shutters and taped up signs saying they are closed for holidays.

One Chinese shopkeeper whose store was still open said the mass shutdown had nothing to do with holidays.

“They’re closing because they’re scared of the virus, and because customers are staying away,” she said.

In a nearby greengrocer’s, a Spanish woman complained: “I saw a Chinese woman in the supermarket who was all wrapped up to protect herself,” said the woman. “We couldn’t see her face but we knew she was Chinese because of her voice. And she was wearing a face mask – like we’re going to infect her when they’re the ones who have infected the rest of us.”

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