

Denmark first in Europe to reopen schools after coronavirus lockdown^[1]

Denmark began reopening schools on Wednesday (15th) after a month-long closure over the novel coronavirus, becoming the first country in Europe to do so.

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EXCERPTS

Denmark began reopening schools on Wednesday after a month-long closure over the novel coronavirus, becoming the first country in Europe to do so. Nurseries, kindergartens and primary schools were reopening, according to an AFP correspondent, after they were closed on March 12 in an effort to curb the COVID-19 epidemic.

However classes are only resuming in about half of Denmark's municipalities and in about 35 percent of Copenhagen's schools, as other have requested more time to adjust to health protocols still in place. All are expected to reopen by April 20. In the centre of the capital Copenhagen, some 220 pupils up to the second grade arrived at the Norrebro Park Skole, welcomed by their teachers who waved Danish flags. Children in the third and fourth grade will follow on Thursday.

The children quickly settled into the reorganised classrooms designed to comply with strict new sanitary guidelines. "I feel great, really good about the kids going back to school," Caroline, a 38-year-old and mother of two, told AFP. Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen made a surprise visit to Lykkebo Skole in Valby outside Copenhagen to watch the event.

"I'm wildly impressed," she told the TV2 news broadcaster. "The children are very happy to see their classmates again."

Frederiksen said that she understood that the extra precautions around the reopening were "a hassle" for both parents and children.

She later wrote about her visit on her Facebook page. "Several of the children described how hard it was not to be able to give their best friends a hug simply out of happiness to see them again," she wrote. "That's something I can understand."

In early April the country's centre-left government announced that schools would be reopened "on the condition that everyone keeps their distance and washes their hands." But while schools are gradually reopening, bars, restaurants, hairdressing and massage parlours, shopping centres and discos remain closed, and gatherings of more than 10 people are banned.

Schools are required to ensure that a distance of two metres (about six feet) is maintained between desks in classrooms and recesses must be organised for small groups. A headache for teachers is that they must ensure that pupils are never in groups of more than two while inside and five outside.

Socially distanced teaching

To adhere to guidelines, the school in Norrebro has divided the classes into two or three groups, limiting the number of students in a classroom to 12. Bottles with hand sanitiser are never far away to encourage students to clean their hands regularly.

"We have the space because we're using the classrooms usually used by the older grades who are working from home now," said headmaster Henrik Wilhelmsen, adding that it would present an issue when older students also return. Some parents have opposed the reopening of schools, citing health concerns. A petition dubbed "My child is not a guinea pig" has garnered some 18,000 signatures.

According to the petition's organisers, "children can easily carry the disease without getting sick." Wilhelmsen told AFP that around 15 parents had informed the school that they would not bring their children back. Others however trust their government's judgement. "I think we're all going to be sick at one point and they told us the children are going to be less sick and affected by this virus," said Caroline, the mother. Middle and high school students, will continue remote classes and are only expected to return to classrooms on May 10.

As of Tuesday, Denmark had 6,691 confirmed cases of the new coronavirus and 299 deaths. The country has banned gatherings of more than 10 people and bars, restaurants, hairdressers, shopping malls and clubs have been closed. Before Denmark, Austria was the first European country to unveil its roadmap for a return to a "new normal".

On Tuesday, it allowed small non-food shops to open up, while maintaining social distancing rules and requiring masks to be worn in shops

and on public transport.

Austria plans to keep schools, cafes and restaurants closed until at least mid-May.

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