

Europe begins going back to school: France and Holland become latest countries to reopen classrooms, with young children to return in small groups May 11 ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

France and the Netherlands are the latest European countries planning to re-open schools after a weeks-long break because of the coronavirus pandemic.

French primary school children are due to return to school on May 11 with a maximum of around 15 children per class.

Older children will return a week later on May 18, but schools will only be allowed to resume if they meet strict health conditions.

Dutch children will also start to return on a 'part-time' basis from May 11 and can start playing sports together as soon as April 29.

Some German children are back at school already as they prepare for exams, while others will return in the coming weeks as the country's 16 states set their own rules.

By contrast, the UK government says there is no date lined up for the end of school closures in Britain.

In France, education minister Jean-Michel Blanquer said pupils would return gradually over a three-week period starting with the youngest children on May 11.

Some secondary schools and trade schools will resume on May 18, with a view to having most of the school system operational again from the week of May 25.

Blanquer said back-to-school arrangements would be discussed with local authorities, teachers' unions, parent groups and advisory bodies.

'It will be absolutely necessary to work with small groups,' Blanquer said, saying the maximum class size would be around 15.

Schools were closed on March 16, although some schools have stayed open as daycare facilities for the children of key workers such as nurses and police officers.

President Emmanuel Macron says it is important to restart school as soon as possible for children in low-income families.

French universities will remain closed until after the summer break.

In the Netherlands, prime minister Mark Rutte said pupils would return to classrooms on a 'part-time' basis at primary schools and nurseries on May 11.

Children will be allowed to take part in sports training from April 29, while high schools have been told to prepare to resume teaching on June 2.

Rutte said the cabinet had taken the decision on primary schools because government scientists had concluded that young children seemed to be less likely to contract and transmit the virus.

However, Dutch primary schools must halve the size of classes, meaning that children will attend school around half the time.

Online teaching will continue the rest of the time, the government said.

At the same time, Rutte is keeping bars and restaurants shut until May 20 with public events banned until September.

Rutte told the nation: 'Caution now is better than regret later.'

Health officials said the number of coronavirus patients being treated in intensive care units across the country had dropped by 71 from a day earlier, the biggest single-day decline since the outbreak began.

In Germany, school policy is decided by the 16 states - some of which have already allowed small numbers of pupils to return.

In contrast to Holland and France, German authorities have prioritised older children who are preparing for summer exams.

Those children started returning to schools in Berlin and the eastern state of Saxony this week. Other states are delaying the resumption of teaching until May 4.

In Berlin, 16-year-olds will follow the oldest 19-year-olds back to class a week later, with other age-groups following in stages over coming months.

'I believe the students are ready for their final exams now,' said Antje Luekemann, headteacher of Berlin's Steglitz High School.

Students this week arrived wearing face masks and disinfecting their hands with sanitiser before sitting down at widely spaced school desks.

'The longer the uncertainty lasts, the more difficult it will be to keep them motivated and that's why I believe it's very important that we received the go-ahead for these exams,' Luekemann added.

Austria, which has enjoyed similar success to Germany in flattening the curve, is similarly planning to resume teaching for school leavers in early May.

Chancellor Sebastian Kurz said other children would start returning to classrooms in an unspecified step-by-step process beginning on May 15.

Spain has yet to authorise a return to school, but the country's education minister says there could be teaching over the summer if it is not possible before then.

'The school year ends in June, but there will be a summer programme if health conditions allow,' Isabel Celaya said. 'A plan of school support so that children can be outdoors, exercising and learning.'

Health minister Salvador Illa said his ministry was monitoring the epidemiological situation to decide when and how to let children outside.

'We know that confinement is a challenge for [children] and their families,' he said.

Spanish children have been shut inside more completely than in other countries, because exercise is not a valid excuse to leave the house in Spain.

That rule is now being relaxed to allow children to take walks and accompany their parents on essential trips to buy food or medicine.

'This is a government that listens and next weekend I will issue an order allowing children under 14 to take walks from Sunday, April 26,' Illa told a news conference yesterday.

The health ministry will announce details on when and where children can walk in the coming days, he said.

Some schools and daycare centres have already re-opened in Denmark, despite some opposition from parents.

'I won't be sending my children off no matter what,' said Sandra Andersen, the founder of a Facebook group called 'My kid is not going to be a Guinea Pig'.

'I think a lot of parents are thinking, why should my little child go outside first?,' said Andersen, the mother of two girls aged five and nine.

In Norway, the youngest children started returning to pre-schools on Monday a month after being sent home because of the pandemic.

After the pre-schools this week, primary schools will reopen their doors to the youngest pupils next Monday.

As in the Netherlands, authorities said they ordered the reopening because children have seemingly been less affected by Covid-19.

'Going to pre-school is safe,' education minister Guri Melby has repeated leading up to the reopening.

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