

Schools reopening has not triggered rise in Covid-19 cases, EU ministers told ^[1]

France's education minister says it is more of a risk keeping children at home

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EXCERPTS

The reopening of schools in 22 European countries has not led to any significant increase in coronavirus infections among children, parents or staff, a videoconference meeting of education ministers from around the EU has heard.

With a debate raging in the UK over the risks of allowing children back into the classroom, some member states are planning summer lessons to aid pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Of the 22 countries where schools have reopened in waves over the last month, 17 have only allowed children to return to kindergarten settings, primary schools and final years of secondary level as part of a tentative lifting of the lockdowns imposed to tackle the coronavirus pandemic.

Twenty countries have ensured that pupils leaving secondary school have been able to take examinations albeit in amended formats.

The vast majority of the reopened schools have been open for just a fortnight, however, prompting Blaženka Divjak, the minister for education in Croatia, which holds the EU's rolling presidency, to suggest that the positive results need to be treated with some caution.

Denmark became the first European country to tentatively reopen its nurseries, kindergartens and primary schools on 15 April after a month-long closure despite significant resistance from parents who accused the government of treating their children as "guinea pigs".

Divjak, speaking in a press conference at the end of the meeting of ministers, said the lack of significant increase in cases or any other negative impact should also be seen in the context of the special measures taken to make schools as safe as possible.

She said: "What has been emphasised very strongly is that these schools [have] very highly guarded conditions like smaller groups than in normal classes, usually groups of around 15 and ... very close cooperation with health ministries and epidemiological services on a national level to provide schools and teachers and parents with very detailed recommendations on how to deal with the new situation.

"So far we haven't heard anything negative about the reopening of schools but it is probably too early to have final conclusions on that."

The update on the state of play in the 27 EU member states came as France's education minister told parents it was more of a risk keeping their children at home than sending them to school now the strict lockdown had ended.

Jean-Michel Blanquer was speaking as a second wave of pupils returned to secondary schools. Blanquer said the government's priority was to avoid youngsters who struggle at school or at home becoming "collateral damage" of the Covid-19 crisis.

At the start of the second week of the easing of France's strict eight-week lockdown, it was the turn of the two lower secondary school years to return to classes but only in "green" areas on the Covid-19 map where the virus has stopped circulating widely and hospital intensive care units are not under pressure.

The Paris area is still "red" on the map along with a large part of eastern France, where pupils at secondary schools – known in France as "colleges" – were told to remain at home.

About 145,000 pupils from the two lower high school classes – 6ème (ages 11-12) and 5ème (12-13) – were expected back in class in 4,000 secondary schools in the green zones on Monday.

After visiting a secondary school in the Eure district in western France, Blanquer sought to reassure parents worried about allowing their children back.

"There are always worries and questions, but even so we should not push school to one side in this current difficult period, because there will be terrible damage if we lose a generation of children who have been stopped from going to school for several months," Blanquer told journalists.

“It’s important to underline today’s good news ... the return to school is happening progressively, and not everyone is going back at the same time, but it’s a start and an important start.”

Blanquer added he hoped to be able to reopen schools in the red zone and classes for older pupils in secondary and high schools soon.

In an interview with RTL radio, Blanquer revealed that 70 cases of Covid-19 had been diagnosed since 40,000 primary and nursery schools reopened last week.

“It’s inevitable this sort of thing will happen, but it’s a minority,” he said. “In almost all the cases, this happened outside of the school.”

Blanquer said the schools concerned had closed but added that not going to school was more of a risk than the virus.

“Many doctors say it is less dangerous to go to school than to stay at home. Our children mustn’t be the victims of collateral damage of our health measures,” Blanquer said. He said 70% of pupils were still following classes at home, but that an estimated 500,000 youngsters were in danger of “dropping out”.

“This phenomenon is my main worry and above all it affects children from disadvantaged backgrounds. We have to get society used to going back to school. It’s not a minor issue; it’s fundamental.”

A decision when to open the other secondary school years and lycées will be taken by the end of this month, with a possible return at the beginning of June. Most schools break up for two months of summer holidays at the beginning of July.

About 25 Covid-19 clusters have been reported since the end of the French lockdown on 11 May, but the health minister, Olivier Véran, has said it will be two weeks before the authorities know if there has been a second wave of cases.

A total of 28,108 deaths have been attributed to the coronavirus in France since March.

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