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EUROPE

Covid-19 Is Creeping Into Europe's Schools

Schools are reporting thousands of cases in some of the continent's biggest coronavirus hot spots



About 35% of France's outbreaks of three or more cases are in schools or universities. A high-school in Rennes in western France.

PHOTO: DAMIEN MEYER/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By [Noemie Bisserbe](#) in Paris and [Giovanni Legorano](#) in Rome

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There's a new front in Europe's fight to contain the coronavirus pandemic: the classroom.

Parents across the continent sent their children back to school a month ago after officials insisted there was scant evidence the virus would spread among children in school. Now schools are reporting thousands of cases in some of Europe's biggest coronavirus hot spots.

The rising numbers are an early-warning sign for the U.S., where schools that opened for in-person classes across the country are trying to prevent clusters at a time cases are trending higher nationally.

More than a third of the U.K.'s 1,700 coronavirus outbreaks, defined as at least two cases, in the four weeks through Sept. 27 occurred in educational settings. About 35% of the 1,070 outbreaks under investigation in France are in schools or universities. Spain, home to Europe's biggest epidemic, reported Covid-19 cases in 4.5% of its schools as of Sept 24.



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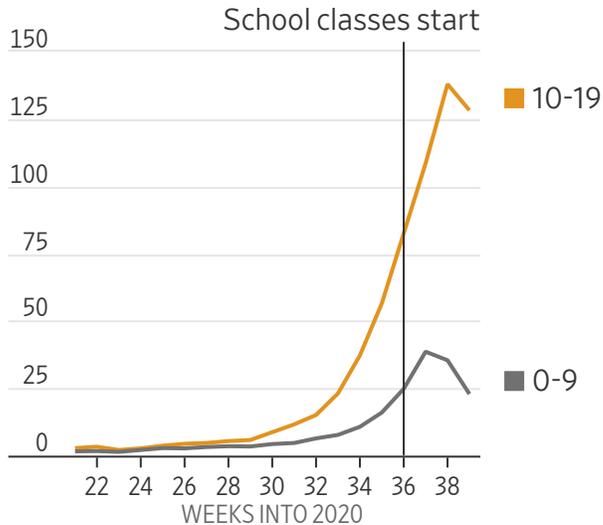
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In Italy, where the virus' resurgence has been much slower, the government reported 2,438 cases among elementary, junior-high and high-school students as of Oct. 3, compared with 809 two weeks earlier. Germany hasn't reported national data showing the impact of the virus on its school system, but public-health authorities said this week it appeared that the pandemic hasn't had a great impact on schools since they reopened.

Youth Uptick

France's incidence rate of Covid-19 among children, especially teenagers, has increased since they returned to school.

France incidence rate per 100,000 residents, by age group



Source: French Health Agency

Authorities have responded to some of the outbreaks by quarantining classes or, on rare occasions, shutting down entire schools. In most cases, however, European officials and many parents have pushed their schools to remain in session, saying the social and economic cost of missing school is too high.

Sending students home, particularly young ones, forces parents to miss work. It also **compounds the educational setbacks** that millions of children suffered this spring when they were forced to home-school for months. Classroom closures hit children from low-income households particularly hard because their parents lacked flexible work schedules.

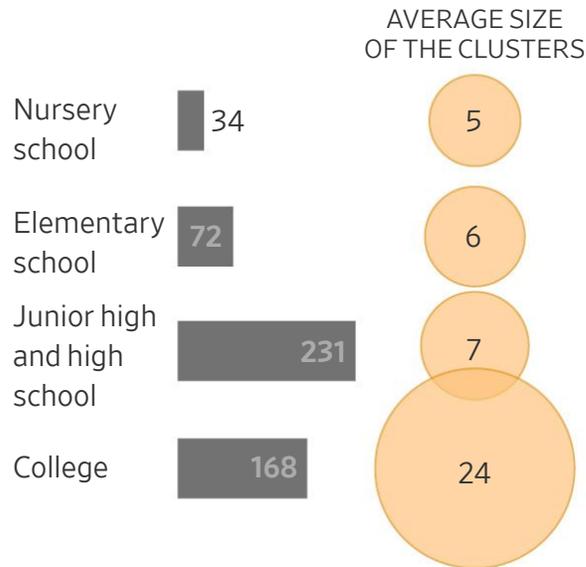
“The best thing we can do for children during times like this is to send them to school,” France’s education minister, Jean-Michel Blanquer, said in an interview.

Part of the challenge governments face is tailoring policy to counter a virus that behaves differently across various age groups. Early data suggests adolescence is a turning point. In France, the incidence of the virus for children between the ages of 10 and 19 reached a weekly average of 129.2 per 100,000 from Sept. 28 to Oct. 4, compared with 56.5 in the last week of August before school resumed. For children younger than 10, the incidence rate rose only to 21.9 from 16 during the same period.

Outbreaks in French Schools

Nearly half of the clusters in educational settings are in junior high and high schools.

Number of clusters identified since May



Note: As of Sept. 28

Source: French Health Agency

European policy, however, is all over the map, especially when it comes to wearing masks in the classroom. While the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control published a report to guide health experts working with schools, countries have adopted their own policies.

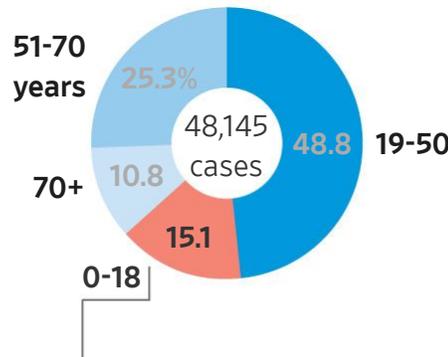
The U.K. has no requirement for wearing masks in schools, no matter the grade, while Spain requires masks for all students that are 6 years old and above. In France, the mask requirement begins in junior high with exceptions carved out for the lunch table and gym class. In Italy, students and teachers of all grades are required to wear masks until they take their seats in class. Some schools, however, have begun asking children to wear a mask even when they are seated.

“We are not able to get this very simple message through: If you wear the mask at school and take it off immediately after leaving school, it is useless,” said Gina Antonetti, a high-school headmistress in Fondi, in southern Italy.

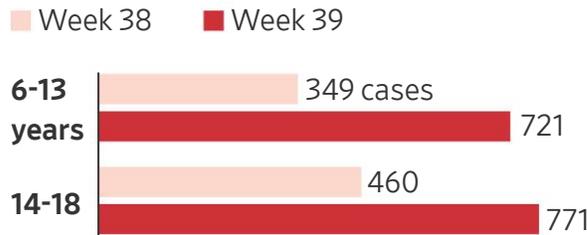
Reopening Rise

The spread of Covid-19 is increasingly affecting younger people

Proportion of Covid-19 cases notified in Italy in the last 30 days, by age group



Cases in recent weeks are much higher than they were at the start of school



Sources: Italy's National Health Institute (cases in the last 30 days); Italy Education Ministry (cases in recent weeks)

Italy also has blanket rules for quarantining classmates whenever a student tests positive for Covid-19, no matter the student's age. Architect Eleonora Bottin, who lives in the northeastern city of Vicenza, said her 5-year old son was forced to stay home after a classmate tested positive.

"They've only started school four weeks ago and we are already there," Ms. Bottin said. "Who knows how many times it will happen again."

In France, the government is recalibrating its approach. Authorities are no longer systematically enforcing a rule that requires schools with more than three confirmed cases to shut down, Mr. Blanquer said.

Students are also no longer sent home if a classmate or teacher tests positive as long as they were wearing masks at the time of the contact. That change allows junior high and high schools, where masks are mandatory, to remain open.



French Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer said, 'The best thing we can do for children during times like this is to send them to school.'

PHOTO: VINCENT ISORE/IP3/ZUMA PRESS

"If children were not at school, they would probably be taking part in activities that are more conducive to the spread of the virus," Mr. Blanquer said.

Some French teachers, however, question whether the government's approach is too relaxed, especially in a country that is now home to the second-largest number of cases in Europe

Jacques Alemany, a high-school teacher in the northern city of Calais, said authorities have kept teachers in the dark about how much the virus has spread. At least three cases of Covid-19 have been reported at his school. He found out one of his students was infected after receiving an email from her asking for homework.

"Authorities seem to think that the virus stops at the school gate," Mr. Alemany said.

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What can American school systems learn from the European experience? Join the conversation below.

French teachers also say they haven't been given adequate resources to keep the virus at bay. Students often share a desk, making it hard to socially distance, and most schools don't have the equipment or staff to check children's temperature before they enter the school.

“I am not an FBI agent. If parents send their children to school when they are sick, there’s no way for me to find out,” said Hugues Poirier, the headmaster of a junior high school in Neuilly-sur-Marne, a Paris suburb.

“The number of infections in French schools is not particularly substantial,” Mr. Blanquer said. “Children have a right to education, and it’s a priority,” he added.

Paola Motte, a 15-year-old student in the suburbs of Paris, said it has been hard getting used to wearing a mask throughout the school day. There are some exceptions.

“I do not understand why in gym class we can all take it off even if we are indoors, make a human pyramid and throw around a Frisbee,” she said.

Several of her classmates were recently quarantined after coming into contact with an infected person. They all tested negative. “We are all going to catch it at some point,” she said.

Christophe Chapuis, who runs a high school of more than 2,300 students in Bourg-en-Bresse, near Lyon, said children and teachers are happy to be back in school and are adjusting to the new rules.

So far, half a dozen children at the school tested positive for the virus, and another 15 children were sent home because they were in close contact with an infected person, Mr. Chapuis said.

“There’s nothing sadder than an empty school,” Mr. Chapuis said.

—*Jason Douglas in London contributed to this article.*

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