

French court bans smoking area in high school

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A French court ruled Thursday that a high school outside Paris must stop allowing pupils to smoke on its premises, banning a security measure adopted by many schools since jihadist attacks on the capital in November.

The original move to allow smoking inside school grounds was a bid to stop high school pupils crowding on pavements outside to grab a quick smoke between classes, which authorities and some parents feared could make them a target for attacks.

The Paul Lapie high school in Courbevoie, a northwestern suburb of Paris, is one of three taken to court by anti-smoking groups, who are up in arms at the decision to allow teenagers to smoke in schools a decade after the practice was banned.

The administrative court said the school's principal must "ensure the respect of public health laws banning smoking in school establishments."

Education Minister Najat Vallaud-Belkacem said she would ensure the ban is applied in all schools.

She said the authorisation to light up inside school grounds had been an "exceptional" measure, and that students would once again have to leave the premises to smoke.

State of Emergency

Shortly after the November 13 attacks on Paris nightspots and the national stadium which left 130 dead, the Islamic State group issued threats against French schools.

Under the state of emergency imposed after the attacks, a circular signed by both the education ministry and interior ministry was sent to schools urging them to avoid having pupils gather outside their premises.

Some schools then sent out letters to parents about new dedicated smoking areas, even specifying that ashtrays would be provided.

While many supported the idea, as a way to avoid children becoming sitting ducks for terrorists, it created outrage among anti-smoking groups.

Pressure group Non-Smokers' Rights (DNF), which filed the complaint along with another anti-tobacco group, said the ruling would set a precedent.

"This is the confirmation of the illegality of all smoking zones in high schools, including in open-air spaces," the DNF's Stephen Lequet said of Thursday's court ruling.

A study in June 2015 showed that one in three 17-year-olds smoke daily in France.

Last week Vallaud-Belkacem caused outrage when she tried to suggest that as a solution to the security versus smoking debate, "during this period of heightened security, high school students must simply be asked not to smoke".

'We feel abandoned'

This idea was criticised as "unrealistic" by the main school principals' union SNPDEN, which accepted the court ruling but felt it had been let down by the education ministry.

"We have been placed in a difficult situation, this circular allowed us to create special zones inside schools. We feel abandoned now," said SNPDEN national secretary Joel Lamoise.

Lamoise has argued that "the terrorist risk is much greater right now than the health risk. Between two diseases we are trying to deal with the worst."

But for Corinne Depagne, a mother and pneumologist in the central city of Lyon, that is an outrageous view in a country where 200 people die a day from smoking-related disorders.

Depagne has filed criminal charges against her 16-year-old son's school in a separate case.

She told AFP that security fears were "not a reason to let them smoke inside".

"We are not going to let them bring a bottle of vodka inside because it is dangerous to drink on the pavement," she said.

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