

Easing up: US and Europe grapple with when to reopen schools

April 28 2020, by Angela Charlton, Elena Becatoros and Nick Perry



A worker passes public school buses parked at a depot in Manchester, N.H., Monday, April 27, 2020. New Hampshire public school children continue to be taught with remote learning, while buildings are closed to students through the end of the academic year due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)

The question of when to reopen schools looms large as European countries and U.S. states draw up plans to restart their battered

economies.

Despite alarm among some teachers, parents and mayors, France detailed plans Tuesday to start opening schools on May 11, with limits on class size and rules requiring face masks. Hard-hit Italy intends to keep schools closed until September. And in the U.S., where President Donald Trump said states should seriously consider resuming classes before the end of the academic year, dozens have said it would be unsafe for students to return until the summer or the fall.

Elsewhere around the world, the virus appeared all but vanquished in New Zealand. Australia opened the beach in Sydney. Brazil was emerging as a new hot spot for infections. And new doubts were raised over whether Japan will be able to host the already postponed Summer Olympics next year without the development of a vaccine.

Germany, widely praised for its handling of the outbreak there, reported an uptick in the infection rate since some small businesses were allowed to reopen just over a week ago. But it was too soon to say whether the easing of the restrictions was to blame.



People with shopping pass by a closed bar in Madrid, Spain, Tuesday, April 28, 2020. Official statistics show that Spain's unemployment rate rose to 14.4% in the first quarter of 2020, reflecting only the partial impact of the new coronavirus pandemic in Spain's job market. Spain's left-wing coalition government is poised to announce Tuesday further steps to ease the 7-week lockdown, one of the world's strictest. (AP Photo/Paul White)

The number of confirmed infections worldwide has risen to over 3 million and the confirmed death toll has topped 210,000, according to Johns Hopkins University. The true toll is believed to be much higher because of limited testing, differences in counting the dead and government concealment.

Italy, Spain, France and Britain accounted for more than 21,000 virus-

related deaths each, while the U.S. has more than 56,000, the highest in the world.

Although the coronavirus seems to affect children far less seriously than adults, many officials, teachers and parents are concerned about the health risks that school openings could pose.

Some point to the difficulties of ensuring that children stick to social distancing and frequent hand washing, and to the dangers for teachers.

But many parents would struggle to return to work without schools being open, hampering efforts to counter the world's deep economic slump.



Surfers enjoy a sunrise surf at Sumner Beach as level four COVID-19 restrictions are eased in Christchurch, New Zealand, Tuesday, April 28, 2020. New Zealand eased its strict lockdown restrictions to level three at midnight to

open up certain sections of the economy but social distancing rules will still apply. (AP Photo/Mark Baker)

French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe announced that elementary schools will reopen May 11 and high schools May 18. He said all high school students will have to wear masks, and class sizes will be capped at 15.

Joel Wilmotte, mayor of the French town of Hautmont, went on Facebook to list seven reasons he is not ready to open the schools, including ill-equipped teachers and cleaning staff and opposition from parents.

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis outlined his government's plan for a gradual lifting of the lockdown there, saying high school seniors will restart classes on May 11, followed a week later by students in lower grades. Elementary schools and kindergartens will remain closed, and might open on June 1 "only if we are absolutely certain that the course of the epidemic is waning," he said.



An employee wearing a face mask works on a door of a Yaris car at the Toyota car factory in Onnaing, northern France, Tuesday, April 28, 2020. Workers are returning the Toyota factory as the country tries to carefully restart an economy deeply damaged by virus confinement measures. First, the workers are being tested for the virus, given protective equipment and taught how to protect themselves from infection in the workplace. Then some of the plant's 4,500 employees start back to work. (AP Photo/Michel Spingler)

In Italy, the decision to keep the schools closed until the fall could make it harder for parents to return to work. Typically grandparents in Italy are fallback baby sitters, but they are now off-limits because they are vulnerable to the virus.

Emer McCarthy, who works in the Vatican's child protection office,

tweeted that Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte had addressed a lockdown exit "for everyone except Italy's children. Incredible. No mention of schools, childcare options, nothing. But football yes. #ChildrenNotSeenNotHeard."

In Germany, where the virus has claimed about 6,000 lives, Lothar Wieler, the head of the Robert Koch Institute, said the number of people infected by every person with COVID-19 has risen from 0.7 before the lockdowns were eased to a still manageable 0.96.

Wieler urged Germans to keep abiding by social distancing, wearing masks while on public transportation or shopping and staying at home when possible.



A Red Cross worker checks people's temperatures during the measures against the new coronavirus at the main entrance of a lower court complex buildings in Athens on Tuesday, April 28, 2020. Lower courts and the state property registry reopened Tuesday, beginning an easing on lockdown measures due the COVID-19 in Greece, where infection rates have remained relatively low. A broader and staggered easing program will start on May 4. (AP Photos/Thanassis Stavrakis)



A staff member wearing a face mask against the spread of the new coronavirus works at a restaurant in Tokyo Tuesday, April 28, 2020. (AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko)



Homeless men stand against the wall on the street of downtown Johannesburg, South Africa, Tuesday, April 28, 2020. Many have lost their income as South Africa is under a strict five-week lockdown in a effort to fight the coronavirus pandemic. (AP Photo/Themba Hadebe)



People wearing protective face masks to help curb the spread of the new coronavirus walk by human sculptures on display outside an art gallery in Beijing, Tuesday, April 28, 2020. The Chinese city of Wuhan that was the original epicenter of the pandemic again reported no new coronavirus cases or deaths Tuesday and its hospitals remained empty of virus patients for a second straight day. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)



Surfers walk onto the sand to prepare to enter the water at Bondi Beach in Sydney, Tuesday, April 28, 2020, as coronavirus pandemic restrictions are eased. The beach is open to swimmers and surfers to exercise only. (AP Photo/Rick Rycroft)



Exile Tibetan Buddhist nuns stand apart as they wait in a queue to receive free ration distributed by a Tibetan Buddhist monk during lockdown to curb the spread of new coronavirus in Dharmasala, India, Tuesday, April 28, 2020. (AP Photo/Ashwini Bhatia)



Inmates gather around the corpses of other inmates during a prison riot in Miguel Castro Castro prison, in Lima, Peru, Monday, April 27, 2020. Peru's prison agency reported that three prisoners died from causes still under investigation after a riot at the prison. Inmates complain authorities are not doing enough to prevent the spread of coronavirus inside the prison. (AP Photo/Rodrigo Abd)



Louisa Boyer, a provisional election judge, reviews paperwork at a voting center at Edmondson High School as voters arrive to cast their ballot in the 7th Congressional District special election, Tuesday, April 28, 2020, in Baltimore. The election to fill a seat left open by the death last October of Congressman Elijah Cummings has been dramatically reshaped by the coronavirus outbreak. (AP Photo/Julio Cortez)



A man with a face mask against the spread of the new coronavirus walks in front of Miraitowa and Someity, mascots for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and Paralympics at a park in Tokyo Tuesday, April 28, 2020. Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe expanded a state of emergency to all of Japan from just Tokyo and other urban areas as the virus continues to spread. (AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko)



Medical staff of the Polizu maternity hospital listen to a violinist playing to entertain them and the patients in Bucharest, Romania, Tuesday, April 28, 2020. Raluca Raducanu, a young violinist, played a mix of rock and classical pieces during an under one hour performance outside the hospital. (AP Photo/Andreea Alexandru)



Clerks wear face masks to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus as they wait for customers at the entrance to a restaurant in Beijing, Tuesday, April 28, 2020. The Chinese city of Wuhan, which was the original epicenter of the pandemic, again reported no new coronavirus cases or deaths Tuesday and its hospitals remained empty of virus patients for a second straight day. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)



A man wearing a mask sits next the coffin of his mother as he's transported by a cemetery worker in a full protection suit to her burial site at the Nossa Senhora das Gracas cemetery in Duque de Caxias, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Monday, April 27, 2020. The woman's body was previously being held in a refrigerator for confirmed and suspected victims of of COVID-19, according to the administration of the cemetery. (AP Photo/Silvia Izquierdo)



A worker at the ECCA laboratories hangs mouth masks in the Clean Mask Decontaminating Room in Merelbeke, Belgium, Tuesday, April 28, 2020. The converted shipping container holds 1500 masks and runs on a six hour disinfection cycle with a hydrogen peroxide dry mist. With mouth masks in short supply for healthcare workers in Belgium against coronavirus (COVID-19), innovative solutions have been made to deal with the crisis. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo)

New Zealand reported just three new infections Tuesday. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said people have done an incredible job of breaking the chain of transmission but cautioned they need to remain vigilant.

"There may still be some smoldering ashes out there, and they have the potential to become a wildfire again, if we give them the chance," she

said, quoting a microbiologist.

Her government loosened its lockdown, which had shuttered schools and most businesses. Surfers hit the waves at dawn, builders returned to construction sites and baristas fired up espresso machines.

In Australia, hundreds returned to the water after Sydney's iconic Bondi Beach reopened to swimmers and surfers. Still, people can use the beach only during daylight and must keep their distance from one another. Australia has recorded 83 virus deaths, fewer than what most U.S. states have reported.

But the virus is still a long-term foe. The president of the Japan Medical Association, Yoshitake Yokokura, said he thinks it will be difficult to hold the rescheduled Tokyo Summer Olympics even in 2021 without an effective coronavirus vaccine.

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