

Europe is going back to school despite recent virus surge

August 27 2020, by Angela Charlton



In this Wednesday, Aug. 12, 2020 file photo, parents wait with their children for the start of their first day of school in Gelsenkirchen, Germany. Despite a spike in coronavirus infections, authorities in Europe are determined to send children back to school. At least 41 of Berlin's 825 schools reported virus cases as classes resumed this month, and thousands of students have been quarantined around the country. But Germany is determined not to close schools anew, so they're sending individual students or classes into quarantine instead. (AP Photo/Martin Meissner, File)

A mother and her three children scanned the school supplies in a Paris supermarket, plucking out multicolored fountain pens, crisp notebooks – and plenty of masks. Despite resurgent coronavirus infections, similar scenes are unfolding across Europe as a new school year dawns.

Virus or no virus, European authorities are determined to put children back into classrooms, to narrow the learning gaps between haves and have-nots that deepened during lockdowns – and to get their parents back to work.

Facing a jump in virus cases, authorities in France, Britain, Spain and elsewhere are imposing mask rules, hiring extra teachers and building new desks en masse.

While the U.S. back-to-[school](#) saga has been politicized and chaotic, with a hodgepodge of fast-changing rules and backlash against President Donald Trump's insistence on reopening, European governments have faced less of an uproar.

And even though the virus has invaded classrooms in recent days from Berlin to Seoul, and some teachers and parents warn that their schools aren't ready, European leaders from the political left, right and center are sending an unusually consistent message: Even in a pandemic, children are better off in class.

France's [prime minister](#) promised Wednesday to "do everything" to get people back to school and work. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson called reopening schools a "moral duty," and his government even threatened to fine parents who keep kids at home. Italy's [health minister](#) abruptly shut down discos this month with one goal in mind—"to reopen schools in September in complete safety."



In this Monday, Aug. 3, 2020 file photo, teacher Francie Keller welcomes the pupils of class 3c of the Lankow primary school on their first school day after the summer holidays in Schwerin, Germany. Despite a spike in virus infections, European authorities are determined to send children back to school. (Jens Buettner/DPA via AP, file)

As both a parent and a teacher, Mathieu Maillard has plenty to worry about before French schools reopen Tuesday. The number of virus infections per 100,000 people has grown five-fold in France in the last month.

How will his 5-year-old daughter keep a safe distance from preschool friends she's so excited to see for the first time in six months? How will he gain the trust of his high school students, from one of Marseille's

roughest neighborhoods, if he has to police their mask use?

But overall, Maillard thinks it's time to go back. School "has to start up again at some point," he says. "The health risk exists, but the risk of not putting children in school is even bigger."

During lockdown, he said, some students never joined his online French literature classes. Some had no place to work, or no computers, just telephones they used to send blurry photos of handwritten work.



In this Thursday, Aug. 13, 2020 file photo, students of the Robert-Koch vocational college sit with face masks in the classroom during computer science lessons in Dortmund, Germany. Despite a spike in coronavirus infections, authorities in Europe are determined to send children back to school. At least 41 of Berlin's 825 schools reported virus cases as classes resumed this month, and thousands of students have been quarantined around the country. But Germany is determined not to close schools anew, so they're sending individual students or classes into quarantine instead. (AP Photo/Martin Meissner, File)

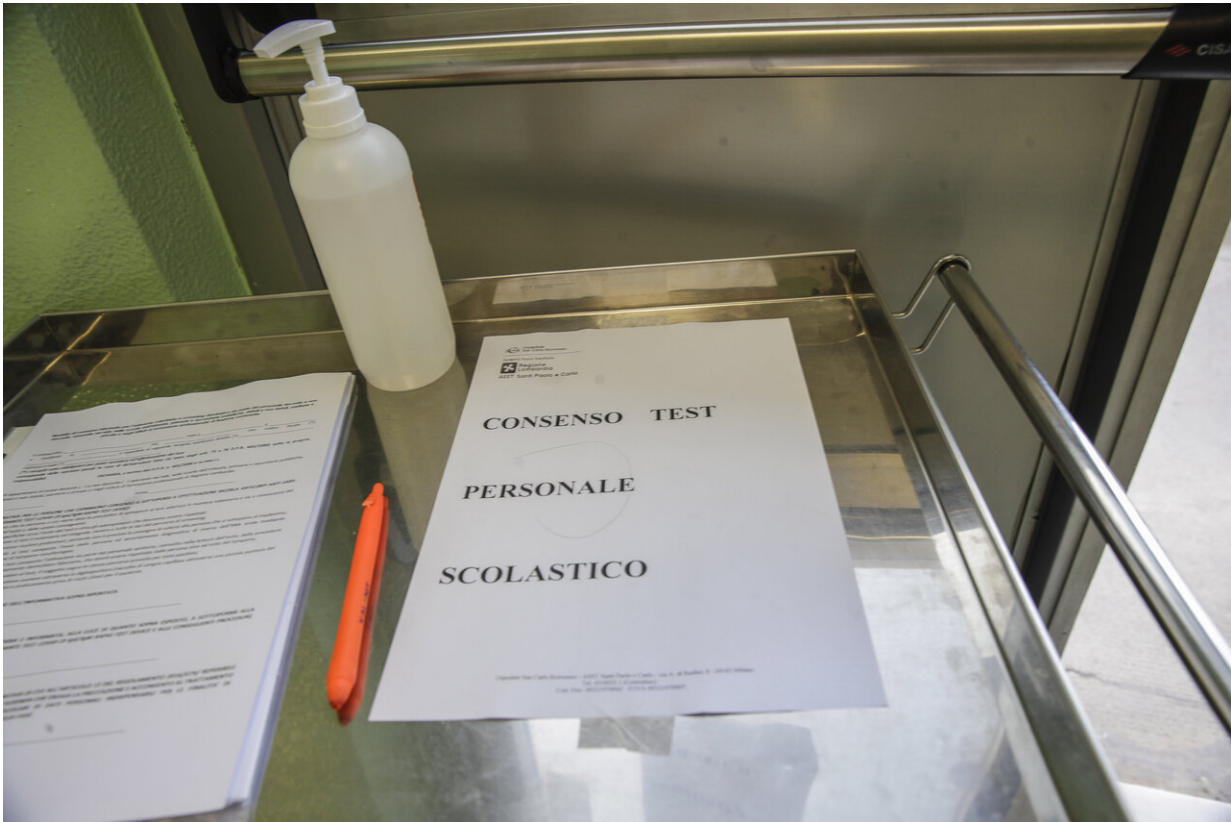
"Our students really, really need school," he said. For some of those growing up in an environment plagued with violence and drugs, school "is a place where they can breathe."

Unlike the U.S., many European schools reopened at the end of the last term, offering lessons for the fall.

Among measures in place: hand-washing stations, one-way corridors, staggered starts and lunch times. Some regions are giving out free laptops, in case of new lockdowns. Many countries require masks in school, but rules vary on where to wear them and from what age.

In southeast London, father of three Mark Davis is looking forward to schools reopening in early September but is vexed about what will happen if there's a new virus wave.

"Everyone is gunning for this (return to school), but it's no good just hoping for the best," he said. "Plans need to be put in place."



Papers to be signed by school workers to give their consent for a blood COVID-19 test are seen at the San Carlo Hospital in Milan, Italy, Wednesday, Aug. 26, 2020. Despite a spike in coronavirus infections, authorities in Europe are determined to send children back to school. Italy, Europe's first virus hot spot, is hiring 40,000 more temporary teachers and ordering extra desks, but some won't be ready until October. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno)

So far the government says schools will only close as a last resort. But parents say the government's message hasn't been clear.

Most of the U.K.'s 11 million students haven't seen a classroom since March, and reopening schools tops the political agenda. Britain has 41,515 virus-related deaths, the highest confirmed toll in Europe, and Johnson's government has been strongly criticized for its handling of the

pandemic.

Some European schools are planning or considering a hybrid academic year, with some physical classes and some online. But most are aiming for full in-person classes.

That's in line with guidance by global organizations like UNICEF, which said Thursday that at least a third of the world's schoolchildren were unable to access remote learning during lockdowns. It warned that "the repercussions could be felt in economies and societies for decades."



A boy plays in front of a store selling children's school stationery, backpacks, protective masks and hand sanitizers in Madrid, Spain, Monday, Aug. 24, 2020. Poster in Spanish reads '2020, the return to school most wished for. We want to go back to school'. Despite a spike in coronavirus infections, authorities in

Europe are determined to send children back to school. Schools in the Spanish capital are scheduled to open on Sept. 4. (AP Photo/Paul White)

Medical experts say the risk of opening schools depends on how widespread COVID-19 infections are in the community and what safety measures are taken.

Evidence suggests young children don't spread the disease very easily, while kids aged 10 and up may transmit as easily as adults. But experts say more conclusive proof is needed. And even though children appear less likely to get infected than adults, severe cases and deaths have occurred.

Amid an unexpected new wave of infections in hard-hit Spain, officials are scrambling to adapt plans to reopen schools Sept. 4.

They include hiring 11,000 additional teachers, building makeshift classrooms in schoolyards to gain space, and creating "bubbles" of students who are allowed to mix with each other but not with outsiders.

But teachers' unions decry funding shortages and have called for strikes starting next week.



In this Thursday, Aug. 13, 2020 file photo, students of the Robert-Koch vocational college sit with face masks in the classroom during computer science lessons in Dortmund, Germany. Despite a spike in coronavirus infections, authorities in Europe are determined to send children back to school. At least 41 of Berlin's 825 schools reported virus cases as classes resumed this month, and thousands of students have been quarantined around the country. But Germany is determined not to close schools anew, so they're sending individual students or classes into quarantine instead. (AP Photo/Martin Meissner, File)

Italy, Europe's first virus hot spot, is hiring 40,000 more temporary teachers and ordering extra desks, but some won't be ready until October. And many parents and teachers remain in the dark about exactly how it will work when most schools reopen Sept. 14. They notably wonder how overcrowded, run-down schools can ensure one-meter (three-foot) distances and smaller class sizes.

"They are in over their heads," said Cristina Tedesco, a parent

representative for a high school class in Verona province.

Germany may serve as a cautionary tale, or an example, for its neighbors.

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A medical worker distributes papers to teachers and school staff waiting for a blood COVID-19 test at the San Carlo Hospital in Milan, Italy, Wednesday, Aug. 26, 2020. Despite a spike in coronavirus infections, authorities in Europe are determined to send children back to school. Italy, Europe's first virus hot spot, is

hiring 40,000 more temporary teachers and ordering extra desks, but some won't be ready until October. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno)



A young girl wearing a face mask walks past a store displaying a coronavirus information poster and selling children's school stationery, backpacks, protective masks and hand sanitizers in Madrid, Spain, Monday, Aug. 24, 2020. Despite a spike in coronavirus infections, authorities in Europe are determined to send children back to school. Schools in the Spanish capital are scheduled to open on Sept. 4. (AP Photo/Paul White)



A school teacher sits for a blood COVID-19 test at the San Carlo Hospital in Milan, Italy, Wednesday, Aug. 26, 2020. Despite a spike in coronavirus infections, authorities in Europe are determined to send children back to school. Italy, Europe's first virus hot spot, is hiring 40,000 more temporary teachers and ordering extra desks, but some won't be ready until October. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno)



A medical worker calls teachers and school staff for a blood COVID-19 test at the San Carlo Hospital in Milan, Italy, Wednesday, Aug. 26, 2020. Despite a spike in coronavirus infections, authorities in Europe are determined to send children back to school. Italy, Europe's first virus hot spot, is hiring 40,000 more temporary teachers and ordering extra desks, but some won't be ready until October. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno)



A woman and a young boy stop to pick up information leaflets at a store selling children's school stationery, backpacks, protective masks and hand sanitizers in Madrid, Spain, Monday, Aug. 24, 2020. Despite a spike in coronavirus infections, authorities in Europe are determined to send children back to school. Schools in the Spanish capital are scheduled to open on Sept. 4. (AP Photo/Paul White)

Schools remained shut in most of Africa, Latin America and in some of the world's most populated nations including India and Bangladesh. In the U.S., some school districts are planning a mix of in-person and online learning to help maintain social distancing. Other districts are starting classes online only.

Denmark this week saw an unusual endorsement for reopening schools.

Its second-largest city, Aarhus, sent all high school students home after a spike in virus cases, but the teens pushed back, saying they don't learn as much online.

Protesting Monday, they held signs reading: "I just want to go to school."

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