

Masks the subject as virus-wary schools reopen across Europe

September 1 2020



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Millions of students headed back to class in France, Belgium and England on Tuesday as European schools cautiously reopened amid rising coronavirus cases in several countries, with face masks often

mandatory.

Officials have drawn fire from parents and teachers worried that strict social distancing and other protective measures will not be enough to prevent a second wave of Covid-19.

But many governments insist that the greater risk is young people losing out on crucial in-person lessons, and that keeping kids at home for distance learning puts too big a burden on working parents.

'A little weird'

"I do not underestimate how challenging the last few months have been, but I do know how important it is for children to be back in school, not only for their education but for their development and well-being," Britain's Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said.

The UN's education agency UNESCO warned that just half the roughly 900 million primary and secondary students restarting school from August to October will actually be allowed back in classrooms.

"Hundreds of millions of students" face the threat of continued school closures which have already lasted many months, the agency's director general Audrey Azoulay said in a statement late Monday.

In France, some 12.4 million students returned to classrooms Tuesday, with masks required for all teachers as well as students over 11.

'So happy'

"It doesn't bother me to wear a mask, even if it does feel a little weird," said Marie, who was starting her first year of middle school in the

southern French city of Marseille.

"We're so happy that our kids are going back to school," said Sabrina, a mother of two, as she dropped her children off at their school in Lille, northern France.

But many teachers were less enthusiastic. "How can we connect with children when half your face is hidden behind a mask?" said Julie Siata, who teaches English at another Marseille school.

In the northern French city of Amiens, 25 middle school students were quarantined after a teenager in their refresher course last week tested positive for the virus.

The French government said that parents whose children had to be quarantined might be able to get time off work to look after them, but hoped that it would not come to that.

Greece delay

Pupils also returned Tuesday in Belgium, which has suffered one of the highest rates of coronavirus deaths in Europe.

Masks are required for those aged 12 and older, and must be kept in a protective case or pouch.

"You can't risk having the mask contaminated when taking it off to eat," said 12-year-old Martin as he headed to school in Brussels, adding that he was "stressed" about the new protective measures.

In England and Wales, where school openings as well as start times are being staggered this week, teachers are urging parents to avoid lingering with other parents after drop-offs.

German schools reopened last month, as did many in Scotland which has control of its school system.

Greece said Tuesday that it would delay the return to school, initially planned for September 7, by a week.

Spain will require all students 6 and older to wear masks when classes resume next week, and urge them to wash hands at least five times a day.

'Safer in schools'

"I believe fathers, mothers, and the education community can be sure that their sons and daughters, that school employees, will be much safer in schools than in other places," Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez told Cadena Ser radio.

"But there is no zero risk," he acknowledged.

In Italy, where the virus first struck in Europe, concerns are growing that school reopenings set for September 14 could prove too risky.

Three regions in southern Italy have already pushed back openings to the end of this month.

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