

School Closures and Closure Management Practices in Response to Covid-19

An international Comparison

30th April 2020

Background

Since January 2020, much of the world has taken extraordinary steps to curb the transmission of Covid-19, a newly discovered strain of Coronavirus. The actions taken have resulted in the widespread shutdown of businesses, public spaces and buildings, including schools.

This briefing paper sets out how some countries have begun to ease lockdown measures and begin to reopen schools. It should be noted that there are significant differences between the education systems included in this paper, as well as how Covid-19 has been managed by their governments. This paper was prepared on the 30th April 2020. All facts and details were correct as of that date.

World Health Organisation Advice

In March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) issued general advice for states with reported Covid-19 cases to follow. It should be noted that this advice is generalised and therefore does not discuss school closures specifically, but does include some basic steps that schools and school management can take to reduce the spread of disease.

- “Update or develop school emergency and contingency plans. Work with officials to guarantee schools are not used as shelters, treatment units, etc. Consider cancelling any community events/meetings that usually take place on school premises, based on risk.
- “Reinforce frequent handwashing and sanitation and procure needed supplies. Prepare and maintain handwashing stations with soap and water, and if possible, place alcohol-based hand rub (hand sanitizers) in each classroom, at entrances and exits, and near lunchrooms and toilets.
- “Clean and disinfect school buildings, classrooms and especially water and sanitation facilities at least once a day, particularly surfaces that are touched by many people (railings, lunch tables, sports equipment, door and window handles, toys, teaching and learning aids etc.) Implement social distancing practices that may include:
 - “Staggering the beginning and end of the school day
 - “Cancelling assemblies, sports games and other events that create crowded conditions
 - “When possible, create space for children’s desks to be at least one metre apart
 - “Teach and model creating space and avoiding unnecessary touching”¹

In order to determine the feasibility of reopening Scottish schools, consideration must be given as to how schools could follow the WHO advice, as well as determining what practices and protocols could be implemented to best suit children and their families.

¹ World Health Organisation, “Key Messages and Actions for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools” (March 2020) https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/key-messages-and-actions-for-covid-19-prevention-and-control-in-schools-march-2020.pdf?sfvrsn=baf81d52_4

China

China was the first country to record the Covid-19 virus on 27th December 2019. By the 21st of January China had begun to lockdown the city of Wuhan and initiate restrictive measures across the country. To date China has recorded 4,633² fatalities from Covid-19, although there has been widespread criticism of China's recording of the disease.

Following a slowdown of reported cases, some schools in the farwestern provinces of China opened in mid-March with 1.5 million final year students returning. There was a nationwide shutdown of all schools in January, which forced learning online.

Another eight provinces and cities have since reopened schools for high school and college entrance exams. Hubei province and Beijing are still yet to announce plans to reopen schools.

A variety of changes have been made to observe the necessary social distancing measures as Chinese students go back to school. These include wearing masks, customised school transport, and designated routes to classrooms. Some students pass through thermal imaging cameras and have their temperature checked on their way in. Supervisors are in place at some high schools to assist students during socially distanced lunch breaks, with many canteens being set up like exam rooms, and some schools have put dividers between desks to separate students.

Concerns remain about the extent to which the spread of coronavirus in China has been curbed in the long term, with many concerned about a possible second wave. Activists have warned that families are unable to express concerns about their children returning to school, and that their health could be put in danger.³

Germany

The government imposed the lockdown on 22 March, shutting schools and banning gatherings of more than two people outdoors. Germany's hotels, restaurants and cafes are to remain shut, as are sports and leisure facilities.⁴ Germany went into lockdown a day before the UK and has to date recorded 6,467 fatalities compared to 26,097 associated deaths in Great Britain.⁵

Normal school operations in Germany will gradually restart through phased re-opening as of 4 May. This process will start with the oldest primary school children and students set to graduate or take exams. Exams and revision have been allowed to take place in schools since 20 April, starting in Saxony and North Rhine-Westphalia. High school exams are also taking place in Berlin and

² Statista, "Number of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) deaths worldwide as of April 30, 2020, by country" <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1093256/novel-coronavirus-2019ncov-deaths-worldwide-by-country/>

³ The Telegraph, "As coronavirus lockdowns ease, this is how other countries are gradually reopening schools" <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2020/04/20/coronavirus-lockdowns-ease-countries-gradually-reopening-schools/> (Last accessed on 30th April 2020)

⁴ BBC News, "Coronavirus: Germany relaxes shop closures" <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-52352443> (Last accessed 30th April 2020)

⁵ Statista, "Number of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) deaths worldwide as of April 30, 2020, by country" <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1093256/novel-coronavirus-2019ncov-deaths-worldwide-by-country/>

Brandenburg. Due to how Germany is governed, states have chosen to reopen schools at different times, with some reopening in the last week of April, while others have chosen to wait until May.⁶

As per the WHO advice German schools have enforced practical distancing measures in the classroom while staying open for the children of workers and emergency service personnel. In Brandenburg, there is a strict one-and-a-half metre rule in place. Schools have been told they must present plans for how they will ensure hygiene and social distancing. This has been criticised by those who fear German schools do not have adequate soap, disinfectant, or PPE.⁷

Denmark

From 15th April, hundreds of thousands of children returned to schools which have been left to decide for themselves how to implement the two-metre distancing rule. This decision was taken after daily coronavirus deaths steadily declined from their peak.⁸ To date Denmark has recorded 443 Covid related fatalities.⁹

Classes have been split in two across much of the country, with a teacher for every 10 or 11 students. Even for some classes, children are being sent outside as much as possible, with children being asked to play in subgroups to avoid the virus spreading as much as possible. Some students now have shorter school days in order to allow resources to be shared. At primary schools, desks are being placed six feet apart and some lessons are now held in more spacious gyms. Regular hand washing throughout the day is encouraged, with some schools instructing children to wash their hands at least every two hours while in class, although masks are currently few and far between.

The World Health Organization has cautioned countries like Denmark against reopening their societies too quickly for fear of reviving the pandemic before it is properly stamped out. Denmark has a far lower reported death rate than many countries in Europe but death statistics can be incomplete during an outbreak, and disease experts warn the pace of new cases can easily pick up again.¹⁰ These concerns led some parents to create Facebook groups protesting the reopening of schools, fearing their children were being sacrificed to save the Danish economy, and have accused the Danish Government of using their children as guinea pigs.¹¹

⁶ The Telegraph, "As coronavirus lockdowns ease, this is how other countries are gradually reopening schools" <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2020/04/20/coronavirus-lockdowns-ease-countries-gradually-reopening-schools/> (Last accessed on 30th April 2020)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Statista, "Number of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) deaths worldwide as of April 30, 2020, by country" <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1093256/novel-coronavirus-2019ncov-deaths-worldwide-by-country/>

¹⁰ The New York Times, "In Denmark the Rarest of Sights: Classrooms full of students" <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/17/world/europe/denmark-schools-coronavirus.html> (Last accessed on 30th April 2020)

¹¹ The Telegraph, "As coronavirus lockdowns ease, this is how other countries are gradually reopening schools" <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2020/04/20/coronavirus-lockdowns-ease-countries-gradually-reopening-schools/> (Last accessed on 30th April 2020)

Sweden

During the Covid-19 outbreak primary and junior high schools in Sweden have been kept open, although senior high schools and colleges have been closed and gatherings of more than 50 people banned. To date Sweden has recorded 2,462 deaths in relation to the coronavirus disease.¹²

This decision was made in light of evidence suggesting younger children are not a major source of transmission for coronavirus. More than 900 teachers and school staff wrote to one Swedish newspaper earlier this month arguing that it is impossible for schools to observe the distancing suggestions, and saying that in some cases children with infected family members are still attending classes.¹³

Swedish citizens have been called on to practice social distancing through choice, rather than because of a state decree. The government has resisted calls from the World Health Organisation to impose stricter measures, which would include closing all schools. Regular hand washing and keeping a distance from others in public places are among the recommendations that have been made to try to slow the spread of the disease.

Spain

Spain's lockdown has been one of the toughest in the world and children were not allowed to leave their home for any reason, until the 26th April. On the 29th April the Spanish Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez, announced a four-phase plan to ease the restrictions on civic life in Spain. Broadly, the timeline that Spain has set out is as follows:

- 11th May – small businesses and hotels can open, but social distancing will remain in force. Religious services can also resume on a limited basis, at no more than one third of the building's capacity
- Mid-May – Restaurants can start opening their terraces, but must not be more than 30 per cent full during the first phase
- Late-May – Theatres and cinemas will reopen, but must be no more than a third full
- End of June – Shops can open at half capacity, with shoppers keeping two metres apart
- Late June – Beaches are expected to reopen
- September – schools expected to reopen (although no details have been released detailing how this will be done)¹⁴

¹² Statista, "Number of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) deaths worldwide as of April 30, 2020, by country" <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1093256/novel-coronavirus-2019ncov-deaths-worldwide-by-country/>

¹³ The Telegraph, "As coronavirus lockdowns ease, this is how other countries are gradually reopening schools" <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2020/04/20/coronavirus-lockdowns-ease-countries-gradually-reopening-schools/> (Last accessed on 30th April 2020)

¹⁴ The Scotsman "Spain coronavirus lockdown: four-phase plan for lifting Spanish lockdown revealed - and if you'll be able to travel there this summer"

The strict measures have helped to reduce the transmission of the virus, but the prime minister Pedro Sánchez has warned that there will be a very slow return to “a new normality”. To date Spain has recorded 24,275 deaths linked to Covid-19, the third highest in Europe.¹⁵

France

It has been reported that children in French schools are expected to return in staggered year groups, with no more than 15 pupils allowed in each class. Primary pupils aged from five to 11 are expected to be the first to go back on 12th May, one day after the end of a strict nationwide lockdown. The following week older children in selected years at secondary schools and lycée would return. All classes would be back by 25th May.¹⁶

The French Government has stated that their aim is to have primary school children back in “small groups”, probably of “less than 10 pupils”. The plan is likely to prove challenging for headteachers in public schools, where classes of 30-plus pupils are common.¹⁷

The wearing of face masks is a key part of the French planning in easing the lockdown measures. In schools, France's kindergarteners will not be expected to wear masks unless they start showing symptoms during the school day. Middle school children (aged 11-15) will be expected to, however, and the government has said it will make masks available for students who can't access them.¹⁸

President Emmanuel Macron has disregarded his scientific advisors' recommendation to keep schools closed until September and some head teachers have said they may refuse to reopen their schools. A number of parents told French media they will not send their children back to school.¹⁹

France issued official lockdown measures at roughly the same time as the UK, and has recorded 24,087 fatalities, one of the highest fatality rates in Europe.

<https://www.edinburghnews.scotsman.com/health/coronavirus/spain-coronavirus-lockdown-four-phase-plan-lifting-spanish-lockdown-revealed-and-if-youll-be-able-travel-there-summer-2537352> (Last accessed 30th April 2020)

¹⁵ Statista, “Number of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) deaths worldwide as of April 30, 2020, by country”

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1093256/novel-coronavirus-2019ncov-deaths-worldwide-by-country/>

¹⁶ The Guardian “Lockdown eased: Netherlands and France plan to re-open primary schools”

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/21/lockdown-eased-netherlands-and-france-plan-to-re-open-primary-schools> (Last accessed on 30th April)

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ The BBC “Coronavirus: France mandates masks for schools and transport”

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-52459030> (Last accessed on 30th April 2020)

¹⁹ The Telegraph “France and Italy to ease lockdown as Spain finally allows children outside”

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/04/26/france-italy-ease-lockdown-spain-finally-allows-children-outside/> (last accessed on 30th April)

Italy

Schools have been closed in Italy since an executive order on 4th March. It was the first country in Europe to close all schools and universities, a decision that was made just before the peak of its outbreak.

Italian parents are taking it in turns to carry out babysitting duties for children who are off school to avoid having grandparents come into contact with children. The current lockdown measures there are set to continue up to at least 4 May, and it is thought that schools will remain closed long beyond that until the new academic year in September²⁰, although some non-essential workers in the forestry and technology industries have already returned to work amid signs that Italy has managed to make some progress in flattening the curve of the virus.

Italy has recorded the highest number of Covid related deaths in Europe, at 27,682. The UK currently has the second highest number at 26,097.

Conclusions

There are many factors to be considered when determining when to reopen schools. Many of the schools that have already reopened have reported far fewer cases than the UK, and no country as yet as resumed education as normal, as social distancing must be observed as per the WHO guidance to avoid a rise in cases, or a “second peak”.

Where schools have reopened, even partially, they have faced criticism from parents and teachers who do not believe that the school environment is safe enough for them to return. In order to reopen schools in Scotland before the wider roll out of a vaccine, class sizes must be kept small to allow social distancing and high standards of hygiene must be observed. As per the WHO guidance sporting activities, assemblies and any other activities that create crowds must be prohibited.

²⁰ Reuters “Italy to reopen factories in staged end to coronavirus lockdown”
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-italy-conte-idUSKCN22807C> (Last accessed on 30th April 2020)