

France relaxes Covid rules in schools despite 'exponential' rise in national infections

Elementary and primary classes will now only shut when at least three pupils test positive, up from one under previous rules



By Henry Samuel Paris 21 September 2020 • 5:57pm

France is to relax Covid self-isolation rules in elementary and primary schools despite seeing an “exponential” rise in infections across most of the country, with the education ministry insisting younger pupils are not contagious.

Under a new protocol that takes effect on Tuesday, when a child tests positive for Covid, the class it has been attending can “continue as normal for the other pupils, who are no longer considered contact cases,” said the ministry.

Until now, local health authorities could oblige all pupils in a class with an infected child to self-isolate for seven days and prove they are negative before returning to school or confirm they have had no symptoms in that period.

Now pupils will only be obliged to self-isolate if at least three classmates from different families test positive, the new rules stipulate. It is then up to local health inspectors to decide whether further action is required.

The relaxed measures also mean that mask-wearing elementary or primary school teachers who come into direct contact with an unmasked child who tests positive are not considered contact cases and thus “will no longer be invited to self-isolate”, said the ministry.

The changes come after France’s scientific council, HSCP, ruled that “children run a low risk of catching a serious form of Covid and are not very active in transmitting (the disease)”.



France is to controversially relax rules on sending classes home if a pupil tests positive Credit: CHARLES PLATIAU/REUTERS

Currently, some 89 elementary and primary schools around France are shut due to Covid outbreaks and “around 2,000 classes” have been closed, according to Jean-Michel Blanquer, the education minister.

“We should see the number of shut classes go down. Less children will be sent home as a precautionary measure,” he said.

In the UK, by comparison, least 30 schools have closed completely, while more than 300 class groups have been sent home after outbreaks. Pupils with coronavirus symptoms must return home, take a test and self-isolate for 10 days. The local health protection team then decides whether to close the entire class or school.

With infections rising in France, the government reportedly wants to limit the number of absent teachers and pupils, already likely to go up due to seasonal illnesses like colds and flu.

“There’s no point sending pupils home or even shutting entire schools at the first alert,” said health minister Olivier Véran. “We can’t throw children out if they have a cold.”

Parents’ associations have expressed concern about a stop-start school year with entire classes being sent home at the drop of a hat. Remote learning is patchy at best. They are also worried about childcare as many employers are asking staff to return to the office rather than home-work.

“We’ll no doubt avoid a certain number of conflicts with families,” said Gilles Langlois, headmaster of a Parisian school with the SE-Unsa union.

But the new rules have triggered controversy among teachers, with the top primary union warning that “the decision to maintain education whatever it takes runs the risk of exposing pupils, teaching staff and users to contamination”.

“We get the impression the virus stops at the school gates,” said Guislaine David of Snuipp-FSU union. “Children (under 11) don’t wear masks. They mix in class; even if they are less contagious, they are all the same.”

“The risk we’re taking is not to inform parents anymore of the existence of cases in school and that the virus spreads inside families because there can be asymptomatic cases.”



French under-11s pose a very low infection risk, rule health experts, who are relaxing rules on self-isolation in schools Credit: ALAIN JOCARD/ AFP

French health authorities reported 10,569 new confirmed cases on Sunday, down from the previous day's record increase of 13,498. The number of deaths from the disease rose by 12 over the preceding 24 hours to 31,585. While rolling seven-day hospital admissions rose slightly, intensive care admissions remained stable at 593.

Some experts warn France is in a second wave. On Monday, Germany expressed concern about the situation and Italy said it would make testing compulsory for people travelling from Paris and some other areas. But epidemiologists say higher French case numbers are also the result of a six-fold surge in testing since the process became available without charge or prescription.

The French rules are more relaxed than in Spain, where a single positive among a class bubble, typically for young children under 10, means the entire class must observe a two-week isolation period. For older pupils, who are meant to maintain a safety distance with their classmates, only those considered close contacts must self-isolate as a precaution.

The closures have created a tough dilemma for working parents, as only those whose child has tested positive have the right to paid leave.