

Reopened schools close across France as coronavirus found among students and staff

By Will Morrow
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Two weeks after the reopening of schools and ending of lock-down restrictions came into force in France on May 11, schools are being forced to close again after students and teachers have tested positive for coronavirus.

The closure of schools only underscores the criminal indifference and recklessness of the reopening policy pursued by the Macron administration with the backing of the trade unions and the political establishment, in line with other governments across Europe and America.

There is no official record provided on the number of French schools that have closed since they reopened on May 11. On May 18, Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer admitted that 70 schools had either closed or postponed reopenings after a student or staff member tested positive. As symptoms most commonly do not appear until several days after a patient becomes contagious, an untold number of other staff and students were placed at risk of infection as a consequence.

After admitting to the large number of schools that had closed, Blanquer blithely declared that this was “inevitable,” and that “the fact that a school has had to close should not be a concern,” since the first cases in the wake of the reopening would have to have been contracted prior to the reopening of schools. However, this only makes clear the danger that the schools will become a major propagator of the virus as the impact of ending lockdowns on the spread of the virus begins to be felt.

After elementary schools and kindergartens had reopened on May 11, secondary schools opened for students in years 7 and 8 on May 18, and the two higher-year levels will return at the beginning of June. Since Blanquer’s statements, there have been no

further statistics provided by the government, but limited news reports in the week since indicate that many more schools have been forced to close, including three secondary schools in their first week back.

On Sunday the François-Mitterrand secondary college in Fenouillet, near Toulouse, announced on its website that it would close until June 2 to allow for a cleaning of the premises after a staff member tested positive. Health authorities are conducting tests on their contacts.

In the central city of Tours, the Jean-Philippe Rameau secondary school close after a student in the seventh grade tested positive. The school’s announcement stated, “After an investigation by the Regional Health Service and the school medical staff and while waiting for the outcome of tests of teaching staff, school management...and students who were alongside the student who tested positive, the department council and the academic directors in l’Indre-et-Loire are taking the decision to close the school.” The closure is effective from May 25 to June 1.

Last week, in the same city, a primary school had been closed after a student in grade 5 tested positive, after having shared a classroom with four other students and a teacher on May 14 and 15. All classes at the school have been stopped while the building is being disinfected.

There is no national government policy requiring the closure of schools when a case is detected; the decision is left to local authorities. In some cases they have closed schools, but in others they have only asked students from the class of the infected student to remain at home.

Last Wednesday, May 20, an administrative staff

member at the Simone-Veil secondary school in Sablé-sur-Sarthe tested positive for the coronavirus. They had been involved in the preparations for the May 18 reopening of the school along with other teachers. The school was not closed, however, with the under-prefect for La Flèche Jean-Michel Delvert declaring that since “Sablé is not a cluster, the school will not be closed.” Another staff member who worked in the building with staff and students on May 15, 18 and 19 has since been tested positive.

Secondary schools that opened on May 18 can have up to 15 students with a teacher in a single classroom, making it impossible to maintain adequate social distancing. Teachers have also published posts on Facebook groups protesting the lack of protective equipment for themselves and their students.

One secondary school teacher wrote on Facebook yesterday, “I saw the opening of secondary classes: A non-certified tissue mask for half the day, an optional mask for students, up to 15 students per classroom with the teacher for hours.”

The teacher continued, “I’ve seen the health conditions in stores this weekend. Serious masks for the sellers, plexiglass walls at the counters, disinfecting everything, wet wipes, antibacterial gel available at the entrances, and no more than two or three customers per store, with masks sometimes required. The employees nonetheless seem nervous. I just saw the reopening of classes in junior high. A non-certified tissue mask for half the day, an optional mask for students, up to 15 per classroom with the teacher for hours, no cleaning wipes but a cloth and cleaning product, not disinfectant, to be used without gloves. It seems on the news that the teachers are anxious. The only compensation for the lack of plexiglass protection is the wall of contempt for their conditions by the minister, echoed by all the media.”

The Macron administration has made no attempt to square the fact that students in classrooms are contracting the virus with the government’s claims, used to call for reopening schools, that young people do not transmit the disease. That is because its policies are not based on a scientific programme to combat the virus but are dictated by the drive of the corporate and financial elite to force the population back into their workplaces so that the flow of corporate profits can be resumed. Children are sent into classrooms so their

parents can be freed to work. The loss of additional thousands of lives is for the government not a matter of significant concern.

The government is depending entirely on the support of the national trade union federations to suppress massive opposition among teachers to the compulsory reopening of schools. While polls consistently showed more than two-thirds of teachers opposing the reopening, unions have refused to call any strike action to reject the reopening drive. Instead they worked to isolate teachers, insisting only on teachers’ individual right to withdraw their labour if they are personally forced to work in unsafe conditions.

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