

How schools are reopening abroad

14 May 2020



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How schools are reopening abroad

In what countries are schools reopening or getting ready to resume teaching in “direct” contact with students? The answer leads to a variety of timelines, guidelines and different criteria to decide who should go back to class first. Furthermore, as one might expect, the reasoning behind the political communication about what decisions are taken, and what details are given, varies from country to country. Therefore, a distinction must be made between the nations that have already tried reopening schools (how they did it, what outcomes they achieved and what reactions they spurred); those that are about to reopen according to detailed plans or, at least, well defined guidelines; those that have announced the intention to reopen, with varying degrees of information on how they will actually go about it; and, finally, those that are not reopening for the time being.

According to the information we have gathered, which is as accurate as possible but does not claim to be scientifically rigorous or complete, we have tried to paint a picture of the situation in Europe as it evolves (with the addition of a few international cases).

The first countries to reopen – indeed, some of them never shut down – were the Scandinavian nations (Norway, Sweden, Denmark), which have begun the process by welcoming back to the classroom their youngest children.

Then, there are countries (in continental and central Europe) that are ready to reopen, in some cases starting from the classes preparing for their final secondary school exams (e.g. Germany); others have announced their will to reopen and have opted for a “mixed age” approach, but are still defining the exact method they will follow (e.g. France).

Finally, there are countries on the Mediterranean Sea (Italy, Spain) and in the United Kingdom (England, Scotland) that seem to have settled on a September reopening, unless there are sudden political accelerations or all-to-be-tested proposals are put in place – such as summer camps to make up for lost time.

Countries where schools have already reopened

Sweden

Sweden has chosen a very soft approach to restrictions since the beginning of the pandemic, also including the country’s strategy for schools. Primary and junior secondary schools have stayed open, while secondary schools and universities closed and switched to remote learning.

However, many teachers and school principals have complained that complying with the distancing measures laid out by the government was difficult, if not impossible, noting that in some cases children who lived with relatives affected by COVID-19 still sat right next to their classmates in school.



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Denmark

Denmark reopened nursery schools (3-6 years of age) and primary schools (6-12 years of age) on 14 April. In nursery schools, each class was divided into two groups with a different teacher and children were required to keep a distance of at least 2 metres. Outdoor activities have been strongly recommended, keeping classes separate. In some cases, the school day has been split into two shifts, allowing children to access the school at different times.

In primary schools, desks must be placed 1.5-2 metres apart, and lessons are also held in spaces such as gymnasiums. Students are reminded to wash their hands every two hours while in school. The limited space available inside schools has been expanded by renting garden tents, using structures made available by boy scout associations or resorting to public spaces such as parks and playgrounds.

Junior secondary and secondary schools are still closed, except for the final year of secondary school.

The decision to reopen the schools for the youngest children was contested by some parents, who feared their kids would be the first to risk contagion; these parents eventually gathered around a strong communication tool, the “My kid is not going to be a Guinea Pig” Facebook group, which now includes over 40,000 followers.

7 May update

Two weeks after nursery schools, primary schools and some businesses reopened, the reproduction number R_0 has increased from 0.6 to 0.9. However, the scientists advising the government claim this is not cause for concern: the Prime Minister has declared that the virus is under control, and that there are no plans to take a step back towards stricter lockdown measures.

14 May update

Students in junior secondary school (12-16 years of age) will return to their classrooms starting Monday 18 May.

Norway

In Norway, nursery schools reopened on 20 April; primary schools (from 1st to 4th grade) and some junior secondary schools are scheduled to follow the week after. In nursery schools, each teacher will take care of up to three children under 3 years of age, or six children between 3 and 6, in order to reduce contacts between them.

30 April update

Primary school children have gone back to school on Monday 27 April, as originally planned by the Minister of Education Guri Melby.

Some of the rules and precautions put in place are: children cannot bring toys from home, and parents cannot enter the school; staggered entrance and exit times; stations to wash and disinfect hands are set up in all school environments; specific corners are designated for coughing; interactions are limited to a much smaller number of classmates than before.

Like in Denmark, not all parents were happy about the decision to reopen schools for the smallest children. According to a poll by TV network NRK, one out of four would have preferred not to send their kids back to school.



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Countries where schools are about to reopen or reopening has been announced

Finland

30 April update

Wednesday 29 April, the Prime Minister Sanna Marin announced that on 14 May primary and junior secondary schools would gradually reopen, despite the negative opinion of the OAJ teachers' union.

Furthermore, the government has specified that once teachers return to the classroom, they will not be allowed to continue the remote learning activities they had organised to replace traditional lessons; therefore, in order to pass the year, students will have to go to school and cannot stay home.

Germany

Schools are scheduled to reopen in Germany on 4 May, starting with secondary school students who are about to take exams at the end of the year, and children in the last year of primary school. Schools must plan and implement proper sanitising before reopening.

In any case, each of the country's 16 Länder has the freedom to decide how to reopen: in general, older students will go back to school first, in contrast to what is happening in Nordic countries.

In some Länder (Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, Berlin, Brandenburg and Schleswig-Holstein), 19- and 16-year-old students have already gone back to school this week to prepare for the Abitur (final exams), keeping a distance of at least 1.5 metres one from the other.

A more detailed picture of each Land's decisions is available at the following link:

<https://www.thelocal.de/20200422/state-by-state-when-will-germanys-schools-open-again>

30 April update

On Thursday 29 April, Chancellor Merkel announced that the decision whether to completely reopen schools and childcare centres or not will not be taken until after 6 May, in order to first assess the effect of restrictions being loosened in the past few days. This pause for reflection was deemed necessary after Danish authorities, on the same day, declared they had recorded a relevant increase in the basic reproduction number (the now-famous R0) following the reopening of nursery and primary schools two weeks earlier.

14 May update

Having recorded encouraging results – in terms of containment of the Coronavirus contagion after the first schools gradually opened – Chancellor Merkel was able to reopen childcare centres in Germany on Monday 11 May, and to announce that all schools will reopen before the summer holidays, at least for a short period of time.



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The Netherlands

In the Netherlands, on 11 May students will return to primary schools only “part-time”, while lessons should resume in secondary schools in early June; the government’s health consultants suggested starting with younger children as they are less subject to contracting and spreading the virus compared to older kids.

Boys and girls will be divided into two groups in primary schools, so they can be in their classrooms for only half of the normal schedule and continue with remote learning for the other half.

30 April update

The country’s major trade unions and principals’ associations have defined the guidelines to best organise children’s return to primary school on 11 May.

Having to decide between (i) teaching all students every day, dividing them into two shifts (half of the school schedule) or (ii) teaching only half the class for the whole day, while the other half is connected remotely, the latter option was preferred. Indeed, this not only minimises confusion and risk of contacts between students in the hallways, but also reduces the number of parents who need to come to the building entrance between shifts.

However, individual schools are allowed to organise school activities as they deem fit, depending on the number of students, the type of building and size of learning spaces, the teaching methods and other specific characteristics they may have to take into consideration.

Further information about the protocol and practical hygiene and safety aspects are available (in Dutch) at:

<https://po.lesopafstand.nl/lesopafstand/weer-op-school/protocollen/>

The Dutch government is also considering returning primary schools to a their full schedule in the month of June, if the gradual plan implemented in May does not lead to an increase in contagion.

This solution would sharply limit the interruption and fragmentation of learning for younger students, as they would still have 4-6 weeks of regular classes before the summer holidays.

The Dutch government has published a series of FAQs about schools reopening at:

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/coronavirus-covid-19/ouders-scholieren-en-studenten-kinderopvang-en-onderwijs>

France

In France, schools are scheduled to gradually reopen starting on 11 May. The first children to return to the classroom will be the oldest in nursery school (6-year-olds) and the youngest and oldest in primary school (7- and 11-year-olds). From 18 May, 12-year-olds and 15-year-olds in junior secondary school and students in the second and third year of secondary school will follow. Finally, the rest of the students will go back to school on 25 May.



In the next few weeks, the maximum number of students allowed to be in the classroom at the same time will be defined; however, local and regional authorities will have a certain degree of flexibility in deciding how and when to organise school reopenings; certain areas will continue to enforce a complete lockdown, complemented with remote learning.

30 April update

Important details have been added to clarify initial announcements, with a partial slowdown due to the contrasts between the government and the scientific board advising on the emergency situation, which was in favour of not reopening until the autumn.

Nursery and primary schools should reopen on 11 May as scheduled, but parents will be allowed to choose whether they want their children to return to the classroom or not; junior secondary schools will reopen the following week, but only in the Departments that were least affected by COVID-19; the decision on how and when secondary schools should reopen has been postponed, with the date being pushed to early June at least.

As regards social distancing measures, classes should be divided into groups of approximately 15 students, desks will be spaced out and children will be required to wash their hands at the entrance, before leaving school, and between classes; students in junior secondary school and older will also have to wear facemasks.

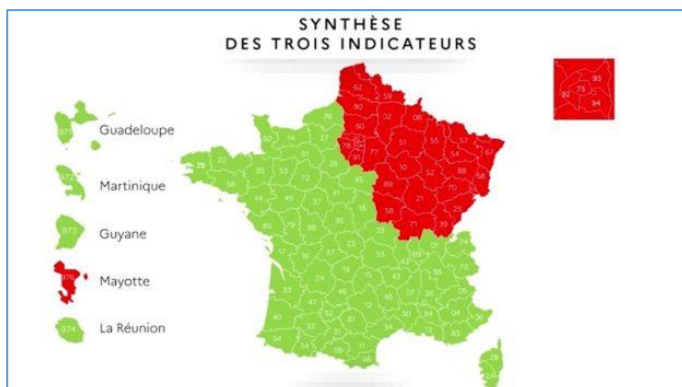
7 May update

Nursery and primary school teachers have criticised some of the measures laid out by the government, pointing out that compliance with some of the rules is impossible when working with small children: sanitising every toy after it has been picked up and used by any of the children is not feasible, as is explaining to small children that they must keep their distance while talking and playing with each other. Over 300 mayors in the Île-de-France region have written an open letter to President Macron to voice their doubts on the actual feasibility of safe reopening.

14 May update

On Tuesday 12 May, children in nursery school and primary school were welcomed back to the classroom in the “green” areas of the country (the least affected by the spread of the Coronavirus). Families can decide whether they want to send their children to school or not. Should the number of requests exceed the capability available according to distancing measures, essential workers’ children will be given priority.

In Paris and all the other “red” zones, schools will reopen on Thursday 14 May exclusively for essential workers’ children.



“Green” and “red” zones in France



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Austria

On 21 April, Prime Minister Kurz announced that secondary schools would reopen in early May, and other school levels would gradually follow after 15 May.

30 April update

Starting on 4 May, students in their last year of secondary or vocational school will be the first to go back to school, in order to prepare for the final exams that will begin mid-month according to a revised format; this first wave of reopenings will regard approximately 100,000 students.

The next phase of the reopening is scheduled to begin on 18 May, if the anti-crisis unit advising the government approves, and will regard over 700,000 students attending primary and junior secondary schools.

Finally, on 3 June, if the status of the contagion allows, approximately 300,000 students will be allowed to return to their secondary and vocational schools.

Nursery schools in Austria should reopen on 18 May, allowing parents to decide whether to take their children back to school or not, in particular for children in the last year.

Social distancing rules will entail the division of each class into two or more groups: students will attend lessons in their classroom half of the week, with schools entrusted with the organisation of different shifts (choosing between two options: Group A attending Monday through Wednesday and Group B attending Thursday through Saturday; or alternating days during the week).

As regards health and sanitation rules, students will have to wear facemasks on their commute to school and during breaks, but not during lessons. Teachers can wear facemasks if they want to.

The full press release (in German) is available at:

<https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/Ministerium/Presse/20200424.html>

Switzerland

In Switzerland, nursery and primary schools reopen on 11 May, while secondary and vocational schools should reopen on 8 June. The Federal Council will take its final decision on 29 April.

7 May update

The Swiss government has confirmed that compulsory education schools – for students up to 16 years of age – will reopen on 11 May; each canton will decide how to implement the reopening, within the framework provided by national health and social distancing guidelines (available at the following link: <https://www.bag.admin.ch/bag/en/home/krankheiten/ausbrueche-epidemien-pandemien/aktuelle-ausbrueche-epidemien/novel-cov/empfehlungen-fuer-die-arbeitswelt.html>).

Cantons such as Zurich, Vaud and Fribourg have opted to divide classes into smaller groups and organise lessons on alternate days until the end of May; in the Geneva canton, primary school students have been divided into two groups attending either in the mornings or in the afternoon.



German-language cantons and Ticino have instead decided to go back to a full schedule after two days of testing, when classes will be divided into groups in order to practice health and distancing measures.

The lack of a common solution between cantons has been criticised by the school principals' association as well as by some of the teachers' unions (SER, LCH), worried by how parents may react to this varying approach.

14 May update

Primary schools and junior secondary schools reopened early this week and some areas of the country have adopted a soft approach to distancing measures, allowing all students to return to the classroom at the same time. Indeed, the Minister of Education of Basel-Stadt, one of the German-speaking cantons to have followed this approach, declared that dividing classes into smaller groups and staggering schedules would not have helped parents at all, making teachers' work even more complicated instead.

French-speaking cantons have been more prudent, confirming the will to reopen gradually (with classes divided into groups, which will alternate in the classroom) and to lift precautionary measures during next week, in order to return to the pre-Coronavirus school routine if possible.

Countries where schools will not reopen in the short term

Spain

Although there is no official update about schools reopening in Spain, the Minister of Education has suggested summer programmes might be organised for open-air didactics.

14 May update

The Spanish government has devised a plan to lift the lockdown in four phases, following an asymmetrical but coordinated schedule in which each province will progress faster or slower depending on the territory's health conditions.

Although schools are scheduled to reopen in September, Prime Minister Sanchez has not ruled out the possibility that some nursery schools might reopen in the last week of May to help the families where parents can neither work from home nor leave their children home alone. However, during a meeting on 14 May, regional governors expressed serious doubts on the feasibility of guaranteeing social distancing measures with such young children, and stated they believe nursery schools and childcare centres should stay closed until September.

During the second phase of the plan, students in their last year of secondary school who want to return to the classroom will be allowed to do so, in order to best prepare for their final exams and university admission tests.



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Great Britain

There are no updates on when schools may reopen in England, but the ASCL (Association of School and College Leaders) seems prone to start with secondary school students who are preparing their GCSE and A-level exams, and students in the last year of primary school.

However, schools have remained open in the past few weeks (since 23 March) for more vulnerable students and those whose parents work in “key” positions; teachers continue to work remotely, from home.

In Scotland, it appears schools will not reopen before the summer holidays.

7 May update

Prime Minister Boris Johnson might soon announce the reopening of English primary schools, starting with students in the last year and, only later, younger children. Secondary school students preparing their GCSE and A-levels should follow. The government’s scientific advisors are currently evaluating the scenarios this plan could lead to: if they will forecast a satisfactory slowdown of the contagion, England might start its Phase 2 on 1 June.

However, the government’s intention to reopen schools earlier clashes with the requests made by the union that most strongly represents primary school teachers (the National Education Union), who insist on clearer health and organisational guidelines and more accurate estimates of the consequences the reopening may have, in terms of contagion and deaths, for teachers and school administration staff.

14 May update

The British government is verifying whether the conditions are fulfilled to allow students in the first and last year of primary school back to the classroom from 1 June; teachers’ unions and the national medical association, however, have expressed their contrary opinion due to the effect this may have on the contagion curve.

The plan shared with the unions includes measures such as gradual reopening, dividing classes into groups of up to 15 students, and staggered schedules meant to limit the number of students present at the same time and the risk for contagion.

Northern Ireland

7 May update

Students are not expected to return to school until September, with a gradual approach in compliance with strict scientific and health criteria. Before it can announce an exact date, the government requires a series of measures to be put in place – including part-time lessons, personal protection equipment supplied to all school personnel, and social distancing in classrooms, cafeterias and even during the daily commute to school.

Prime Minister Peter Weir has also declared Northern Ireland will not be influenced by the decisions England takes.



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The situation outside Europe

Canada

7 May update

Québec was the first province in the country to bring teachers and administrative staff back to work, in preparation for the reopening of nursery and primary schools on Monday 11 May; Ontario should follow the next week. However, parents are not required by law to send kids back to school.

In Canada, each province is free to decide if and when schools should reopen: some have not officially shared a date and plan for reopening yet, while others have confirmed schools will remain closed until after the summer.

The main measures put in place for students returning to the classroom are: groups limited to 15 children; nursery school teachers must wear facemasks; school busses will carry fewer children; individual workstations will comply with distancing standards, and students will not be allowed outside the classroom all day; common rooms and leisure areas (cafés, gyms, bookstores and labs) remain closed; music classes and physical education are suspended; lunch must be brought from home.

USA

In the United States, approximately 35 States have decided to shut schools down until the end of the school year (end of June). On 22 April, Governor Cuomo stated it is highly unlikely that schools in New York State will reopen before the school year ends.

More details on the approach taken in each State are available at the following links:

<https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/map-coronavirus-and-school-closures.html>

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2020/04/coronavirus_and_schools_state_guide.html

China

China reopened its first schools around mid-March in the most Western areas of the country, only for the students in their last year (approximately 1.5 million students). Various safety measures were implemented, including the use of facemasks, transportation dedicated exclusively to students and *ad hoc* itineraries to get to classrooms; some schools also use thermographic cameras to measure people's temperature at the entrance.

So far, 8 provinces have reopened schools in order to organise admission tests for secondary school and university. The Hubei, Beijing and Shanghai provinces still have not announced their plan for reopening (though one should be implemented sometime between 27 April and 11 May).



30 April update

In Shanghai, students in their last year of junior secondary or secondary school have returned to the classroom. In Beijing, students preparing for the admission tests for university in July have been allowed back to school.

In Wuhan, the epicentre of COVID-19 contagion, schools are getting ready to welcome junior secondary school students on Wednesday 6 May.

Japan

7 May update

Japan was hit by the Coronavirus emergency during the holidays for the end of the school year, between 25 March and 7 April. Prime Minister Abe decided to not extend the break and delegated to local authorities the decision on how and when to reopen.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Health has released its guidelines on how to guarantee maximum safety during the reopening: open windows during lessons, desks placed at a certain distance, daily temperature checks and mandatory facemasks in school.

In general, regions initially acted uncoordinatedly; however, following the sharp rise in the number of positive cases of COVID-19, on 16 April Japan declared the state of emergency, which gave each prefecture in the country the authority to shut schools down. According to estimates, approximately 40% of schools at all levels have resumed teaching as of today.

On 4 May, Prime Minister Abe extended the state of emergency for another month.



New students at the inauguration of the school year in Yokohama. Photo The Asahi Shimbun/Getty Images



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Taiwan

Schools in Taiwan reopened in late February: students and teachers wear facemasks, desks have been pulled further apart, windows and air vents are always kept open. Sports activities, including physical education in school, have been suspended. If two or more cases of COVID-19 are detected in the same school, all lessons must be cancelled as a precautionary measure.

Hong Kong

Schools are currently closed in Hong Kong.

Singapore

Singapore had kept schools open until 8 April, but took a step back when COVID-19 cases increased tenfold in one month.



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Link to the news items (and countries) referenced in the article:

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2020/04/20/coronavirus-lockdowns-ease-countries-gradually-reopening-schools/>

(SWEDEN, GERMANY, CHINA, TAIWAN)

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/these-european-countries-are-starting-to-end-their-lockdowns/>

(DENMARK, NORWAY, GERMANY, SWITZERLAND)

<https://www.ft.com/content/de2027d4-5153-462b-a38d-75b7a5ddad17>

(DENMARK, NORWAY)

<http://www.rfi.fr/en/europe/20200415-germany-to-prolong-coronavirus-lockdown-until-3-may-some-easing-in-sight-covid-19-merkel>

(GERMANY)

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8244211/France-Holland-latest-nations-open-schools.ht>

(GERMANY, FRANCE, THE NETHERLANDS, AUSTRIA, SPAIN)

<https://www.thelocal.fr/20200421/what-we-know-about-frances-plan-to-reopen-schools>

(FRANCE)

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-austria/austria-plans-to-reopen-bars-and-restaurants-in-easing-of-coronavirus-lockdown-idUSKCN2231J9>

(AUSTRIA)

<https://www.thelocal.ch/20200420/why-do-the-school-re-openings-in-switzerland-raise-concerns>

(SWITZERLAND)

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-spain/spain-considers-summer-school-for-quarantined-children-coronavirus-deaths-rise-idUSKCN21Y1CS>

(SPAIN)

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/apr/21/older-pupils-should-be-first-when-englands-schools-reopen>

<https://www.edinburghnews.scotsman.com/education/when-will-schools-scotland-reopen-schools-remain-closed-until-least-summer-holidays-says-john-swinney-2503989>

<https://www.bbc.com/news/education-52377277>

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https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/coronavirus-schools-reopen/2020/04/18/0c3dfcb6-7e61-11ea-84c2-0792d8591911_story.html

(CHINA)



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https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/coronavirus-schools-reopen/2020/04/18/0c3dfcb6-7e61-11ea-84c2-0792d8591911_story.html

(HONG KONG, SINGAPORE, USA)

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/24/nursery-but-not-as-they-knew-it-norway-adjusts-to-life-after-lockdown>

(NORWAY)

<https://www.lastampa.it/esteri/2020/04/28/news/coronavirus-oltre-3-milioni-di-casi-nel-mondo-e-211-mila-morti-1.38771832>

<https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-france-reveals-plans-to-ease-covid-19-lockdown-measures-11980124>

(FRANCE)

<https://nos.nl/artikel/2331460-kabinet-wil-basisscholen-voor-zomer-weer-helemaal-open.html>

<https://nos.nl/artikel/2331348-advies-basisschoolleerling-geen-halve-maar-hele-dag-naar-school.html>

(THE NETHERLANDS)

<https://www.bbc.com/news/education-52469939>

(UK)

https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/govt_finnish_schools_to_reopen_from_14_may/11329714

(FINLAND)

<https://www.ft.com/content/dfd893d5-40a0-4645-87fb-471b0f5e7ad0>

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https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/education-_no-unified-plan-for-re-opening-swiss-schools/45730990

(SWITZERLAND)

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/01/children-as-likely-to-spread-coronavirus-as-adults-says-scientist>

(FRANCE)



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<https://www.thelocal.dk/20200430/reopening-denmark-has-increased-rate-of-infection-spread-ssu>

(DENMARK)

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/coronavirus-countries-schools-education-covid19-reopen-classroom/>

(JAPAN)

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/may/03/revealed-year-six-primary-school-pupils-may-return-on-1-june>

(ENGLAND)

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-52572814>

(NORTHERN IRELAND)

<https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/when-will-school-resume-what-we-know-province-by-province-1.4923667>

(CANADA)

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/10/world/europe/reopen-schools-germany.html>

(GERMANY)

https://english.elpais.com/spanish_news/2020-05-14/for-spains-youngest-students-no-going-back-to-school-this-academic-year.html

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<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/may/12/plans-to-reopen-schools-on-1-june-in-jeopardy-as-education-unions-tell-staff-not-to-engage-with-preparations-1>

(ENGLAND)

<https://www.thelocal.fr/20200512/france-starts-to-reopen-schools-but-many-kids-still-at-home>

<https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/08/852808030/french-education-minister-says-school-reopenings-will-be-done-very-progressively>

(FRANCE)

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https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/covid-19_good-marks-for-first-day-back-at-swiss-school/45753910



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(SWITZERLAND)

<https://www.bbc.com/news/explainers-52575313>

www.fondazioneagnelli.it



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