

French government ends social distancing requirements in schools as classes set to resume

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The Macron administration has released new guidelines for school reopenings at the beginning of September that slash social-distancing requirements for teachers and students.

The document was quietly produced on July 9 and reportedly circulated to educational institutions on July 20, without any public announcements. Media reports cited the document for the first time over the weekend.

The new guidelines state that “in closed areas (classrooms, workshops, libraries, canteens, boarding rooms, etc.), physical distancing is no longer obligatory where it is not physically possible or would not permit the return of all students.” As many teachers have commented on social media, since classrooms typically contain up to 35 students, the rule that distancing will be eliminated if “is not physically possible” for the return of all students means it will apply nowhere.

Students above 11 years old are required to wear masks if they cannot maintain a distance of one meter from one another. Teachers are only required to wear a mask if they are “less than one meter” from students. This directly contradicts scientific evidence that the virus spreads via aerosolized particles which spread far further than one meter in the air. The new guidelines add an exception for teachers in crèches for young children, who are no longer required to wear a mask under any conditions.

There are also no longer any restrictions on inter-mixing of students in different classrooms or year levels, which otherwise limit the spread of the virus among students inside the same school. The guidelines simply state that schools “organize the daily schedule and activities to limit, as much as possible, large mixing and crossings.” There is no requirement that

additional public transportation be organized to limit physical contact between students.

This analysis of the back-to-school plans makes clear the fraudulent and essentially homicidal character of the Macron administration’s policy. The government is pursuing this policy well aware that it will accelerate the ongoing resurgence of the virus once schools reopen in September. Students will become infected; their parents, family members and teachers will catch the virus from them; and many more people will die due to these policies.

The guidelines have provoked widespread outrage among teachers on social media. Hundreds of comments have been posted by teachers on the “Red Pens” Facebook group in the past two days. “It’s shameful,” wrote Jean-Paul. “They talk of respecting the health measures even outdoors, but here, in the classroom, not a single protective measure... Scandalous... Murderers.”

“Distancing is no longer obligatory when it is not possible. Let’s make this clearer: No distancing and let’s let the children infect each other,” commented Isa. “And let them infect the adults,” replied Mary.

“It’s obvious that with the return of schools, there will be numerous clusters affecting students and teachers first of all,” said Mina. “There already was one in my school in June although everyone was wearing a mask and was keeping their distance from one another. One has to expect many local school closures and no more general shutdowns.”

The Macron administration has not made any attempt to explain the obvious contradiction between the relaxation of social-distancing measures in schools at the same time as it admits that the virus is resurgent in

France and across Europe.

The total number of cases has now surpassed 20 million around the world, with more than 700,000 dead. In Europe, the World Health Organization issued a new warning this weekend of a resurgence of cases in countries where lockdown measures have been eased since the spring. Spain has gone from an average daily infection rate of 132 in June to over 1,500 in the first 10 days of this month.

In France, more than 4,500 cases have been detected in three days. The number of people in hospitalization rose from 383 on Friday to 396 on Sunday. Nicolas Peju, the assistant director general of the Regional Health Service in the Île-de-France region around Paris, reported Sunday that the number of daily cases in that region exceeded 500 in recent days, compared to 100 at the end of June. “We are at the beginning of a rebound of the epidemic,” he said.

The school reopening policy is motivated not by scientific considerations but the naked financial greed of the French corporate and financial elite. Any restrictions on a full return of all students into classrooms are to be ended, to free parents to return to work and keep producing corporate profits. The same interests underlie the school re-openings underway internationally, including by the Trump administration in the United States, in Britain, Germany and beyond.

French Prime Minister Jean Castex has explicitly stated that there will be no general confinement in France as occurred in March. Castex declared last month that a confinement “stops the spread of the virus, of course, but from an economic and social standpoint it’s a disaster.”

In other words, the deaths of tens or hundreds of thousands cannot stand in the way of corporate profits.

The government is relying on its close collaboration with the trade unions to enforce this homicidal policy. The major trade union federations have all made clear they will do nothing to prevent the reopening of schools in September. The SUD trade union released a statement on Monday in response to the latest school guidelines, declaring that it would “display great vigilance concerning the evolution of the health situation,” and “calls on staff to do everything to protect their health in their workplace.”

The school guidelines justify the ending of distancing requirements by referring to “reassuring data

concerning the impact and transmission of the coronavirus among children.” This is a flat-out lie. While young people are statistically less likely to die from the virus than older adults, there is no scientific consensus that they transmit the virus less actively. Some studies indicate that children are more active propagators than adults. The long-term impact of the virus on young people also remains not understood.

A recent study from South Korea was based on testing and tracing of nearly 60,000 people who had come into contact with infected people. They found that for people who lived with patients 10 to 19 years old, 18.6 percent contracted the virus—the highest rate of transmission of all age groups.

A July 30 research letter in the journal *JAMA Pediatrics* reviewed tests of 145 patients with mild to moderate COVID-19 symptoms within one week of contracting the virus. They found children aged five to 17 exhibited similar levels of viral nucleic acid in their upper respiratory tract as adults. Young children aged under 5, however, had 10 to 100 times more SARS-CoV-2 in their respiratory tract than the older cohorts. The researchers note that pediatric studies “have reported a correlation between higher nucleic acid levels and the ability to culture infectious virus.”

The development of a struggle against the school reopening policy cannot be left in the hands of the trade union federations, which are collaborating actively with the Macron government. Teachers must instead establish their own independent rank-and-file safety committees in every school and workplace, as the starting point for waging an independent organizational and political offensive uniting the entire working class. The organization of a safe and rational response to the pandemic means a political fight for a workers government and socialist policies based on social need rather than private profit.



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