

Mass COVID-19 infections of children follow Macron's reopening of French schools

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As in the United States and across Europe, the Macron government's policy of keeping schools open throughout the coronavirus pandemic is continuing to produce the mass infection of children.

The government announced last Friday that 2,366 classrooms had been closed over the previous week, down from 3,299 the week earlier. A classroom is closed only in primary school upon the detection of a single case. In total 6,383 students tested positive for the virus, down from 9,748 the week earlier.

The total number of daily cases for all age groups remains at over 5,700. This is down from approximately 20,000 daily cases one month ago on August 23. However, while the warmer weather combined with the impact of vaccinations have temporarily reduced case numbers, scientists are continuing to warn that the ending of social distancing measures is preparing a new wave as autumn begins, that could well be as deadly as last year.

The reopening of schools has already led to a significant surge of the virus among children. In its latest national bulletin published on September 23, Public Health France reported that the incidence rate among those aged 0-9 was 94 per 100,000 people this week, compared to 73 for the general population. Last week was the first time in the previous 10 weeks that the incidence rate for this age group was higher than the population at large. The incidence is highest among children aged 6-10.

The government is in fact responding to the spread of the virus in schools by loosening social distancing protocols. On Wednesday, September 22, government spokesman Gabriel Attal announced that masks will no longer be compulsory in primary schools as of October 4, in departments where the incidence rate is below 50 per 100,000 people. There are currently 40 departments

where this would apply.

Yesterday, Prime Minister Jean Castex announced that the Macron government would be "experimenting" with a new health protocol in a number of school districts. Under the new policy, a case detected in primary school will also not close the class, but only result in the testing of all students in the classroom and the sending home of positive students. It will result in additional delays that will allow even more time for the virus to spread among students.

These events make clear the importance of the October 1 school strike call made by UK parent Lisa Diaz, a member of the SafeEd4All group who works with the UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. "We need collective action, and we need to keep raising awareness," Lisa told the WWS. "Because the politicians have failed us. The unions are failing children. The claim that children are not so affected by this is a lie."

In France, the Macron government's own scientific advisory council is predicting a new wave of the pandemic, particularly among school-aged children. On September 13, the Scientific Council provided the government with an update, noting the "the absence of vaccination protection among children less than 12 years old and the still weak vaccination rate of those from 12-17 (67.1 percent with a single dose and 53.6 percent with total vaccination)." The report was only made public last week.

It called attention to "a significant viral circulation in the general population ... with incidence rates among the 0-9 and 10-19 age groups elevated in certain regions (such as in Provence-Alpes Côte d'Azur, with 300 cases per 100,000 people, and 428 in the Bouches-du-Rhône.)"

In the last week of August, more than 10,000 cases

were reported among those aged 0-9, and more than 20,000 among those aged 10-19, compared to 300 and 3,100, respectively, for the same age groups at the same time last year.

The report refers to the development in the United States of “a sharp rise in paediatric hospitalisations tied to the Delta variant (5 times in June and August), particularly among the 0-4 ages (10 times over the same period)” which “could be tied to the rise in incidence in this population but also to the increased paediatric severity [of the variant.] Also, an increased viral circulation among minors could lead to a major growth in long Covid among children ...”

The document warns that contaminated children could make up 35 percent of cases and 5 percent of hospitalisations in the course of the coming weeks. At even current hospitalisation rates, this would mean the hospitalisation of many hundreds of children.

But other scientific modelling predicts a course of development that is even more grave. On September 6, the Pasteur Institute published modelling projections of the development of the spread of the Delta variant, under varying assumptions of immunity rates within the population. It found that even with a total vaccination rate of 70 percent for 12-17 year olds, 80 percent for 18-59 year olds and 90 percent for those over 60, daily hospitalisations would exceed 5,200 people in a new wave within the coming months, higher than during the first and second waves of the virus.

Simon Cauchemez, the Pasteur researcher and a member of the Scientific Council, noted that these results “can be surprising” given current vaccination rates, “but during the first wave, we estimate that five percent of the French population were infected—no doubt less among the most fragile, who had fewer contacts—and this was sufficient to overwhelm the health system. Even with a coverage of 90 percent among the oldest people, which means there would be 10 percent of vulnerable people, meaning three times as much as the infected population during the first wave.”

The Pasteur Institute modelling, moreover, is based on an R value of 5 for the Delta variant, which they note is on the lower end of current estimates.

Under these conditions, Macron is proceeding with the ending of social distancing measures. Last week, the government also indicated it would consider ending the “health pass,” which effectively mandates

vaccination for travel to public places on a region-by-region basis.

Macron’s policy is dictated by the interests of the corporate and financial elite. Social distancing measures are being ended using the justification of partial and insufficient vaccination because this is required to ensure that corporate operations can continue. Children are being kept in overcrowded classrooms so that their parents can continue to work. This not only ensures that many tens of thousands of people will die unnecessarily but increases the danger of the development of new variants.

Macron has relied on the support of the political establishment, including the nominal opposition of the Socialist Party and Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s Unsubmissive France, as well as the nominal right Republicans and Le Pen’s National Rally, to implement this policy of mass death. It has also depended upon the support of the trade unions, which have enforced the reopening of schools in unsafe conditions.

The alternative to this policy as advocated by the Socialist Equality Party is the policy of eradication of the pandemic on a global scale. This necessarily would include the closure of nonessential workplaces and schools until the spread of the virus has been stopped, the population vaccinated, with coordinated measures internationally to eliminate the virus.



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