

# Macron lifts mandatory masking in French primary schools

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Beginning last Monday, masks for primary school children in 47 French departments are no longer compulsory. Classes will also no longer be closed for seven days following the detection of a positive case. Instead, all class members will be tested, with only those who are positive or who refuse the test sent home.

For now, these measures are being implemented in departments that recorded incidence rates of less than 50 cases per 100,000 inhabitants in the preceding week. However, in 23 of the 47 departments selected for these measures the incidence rate among primary school-aged children is above 50 cases per 100,000. This shows that even with mandatory masking, schools have already become primary vectors for the spread of the virus since reopening in September.

Masks greatly reduce the chance of infection and are one of many crucial measures for stopping contagion. They should be worn in all crowded environments until there are no cases. However, the wearing of masks will not end the spread of the virus in schools. Even with masks thousands of children are being infected at school every week in France and internationally, some of whom will needlessly die.

So far, at least 10 French children have died of COVID-19, including six since June. Eight thousand youth under the age of 19 have also been hospitalized from COVID-19, including 2,000 since June.

Announcing the new policy last week, Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer told *France Info*, “we are launching an experiment in dozens of departments.” The government is fully aware that infections will grow en masse. The “experiment” is whether a policy of “immunity by infection” amongst children who are unvaccinated will provoke mass social opposition.

The Macron government’s policy continues the de facto herd immunity policy it has pursued throughout

the pandemic. Although the capitalist media widely presents the pandemic as over, opposition to this deadly policy remains widespread.

On Tuesday, *Le Monde* published an open letter against the move to remove masks in schools, signed by a number of leading scientists, individual parents and parent groups in France, such as Forgotten Families and Schools. Citing data from the effects of school reopenings in the UK, Canada and the US, it stressed that the removal of masks will accelerate infections amongst children and their families. It also drew attention to the long-term consequences of COVID-19 infections for children, including damage to vital organs and cognitive development.

Undoubtedly the Macron government is looking enviously at England, where schools returned in September without mandatory masking or class closures following a positive case. This has led to at least 10 child deaths from COVID-19 since September. In America, where similar conditions dominate, 22 children died from COVID-19 in the last week alone.

While the authors undoubtedly intend to save children’s lives, their conclusions are a political and scientific dead-end; they accept the government’s diktat that schools must remain open at all costs, even though schools cannot be opened safely amid mass transmission of the virus. Yet the letter states: “In the face of the highly contagious Delta variant, it is crucial to keep schools open and safe by adopting and maintaining measures to minimize the transmission of SARS-CoV-2.”

Macron’s policy has nothing to do with a scientific fight to eradicate the virus. His professed concern for the psychological well-being of children—thousands of whose relatives have died from the pandemic due to the official policy of spreading the virus—is a fraud.

Macron's policy is driven by French corporations' demands for business operations to continue as usual, and thus for students to be in classrooms so that their parents can work.

The authors call for the maintenance of compulsory mask-wearing for all age groups and investment in high ventilation equipment for all classrooms. While these measures are necessary to contain the virus, they will not by themselves eradicate the virus and stop infections in schools.

The infectiousness of COVID-19 and the Delta variant make it essential that schools be closed as part of a society-wide lockdown to eradicate the virus. Even with the measures proposed, the virus will still spread, mutate into new strains and kill students, teachers, and their families.

Implicit in the open letter's argument is the false notion that keeping schools open will protect children's mental health. Mental health and educational quality are critical concerns, but a policy of mass infection or even one of partial mitigation of the virus cannot address them. What could be worse for children's mental health than constant fear of being infected with coronavirus and transmitting it to loved ones?

The best way to ensure children's physical and mental health is by implementing stringent scientific measures to end the pandemic once and for all, as quickly as possible. This can also rule out future disruptions to their education and the further degradation of children's mental and physical health.

Speaking to the WSWS webinar in August, "For a Global Strategy to Stop the Pandemic and Save Lives!", Dr. Małgorzata Gasperowicz of the University of Calgary explained that aggressive public health measures could eradicate the virus in two months. In this short period, all children must have access to high-quality computers and internet and their parents receive full income. This has been shown to be viable in practice by China, where scientific policies led to the suppression of multiple outbreaks of the Delta variant in recent months.

Since the pandemic began, the French government, like its counterparts across Europe, has been guided by nothing but the profit interests of the corporations and billionaires. In January and February 2020, when reports from China showed how deadly the virus was and that basic social distancing restrictions were halting

the spread of the virus, the Macron government ignored basic scientific advice.

Similarly, schools were proven to be major vectors for transmission of the virus during the first wave. Nevertheless, in September 2020, January 2021, and May 2021 the Macron government reopened schools, fueling further resurgences of the virus. From September 1, 2020, to the end of the school year, an additional 80,000 people died from COVID-19 in France.

The Pasteur Institute warned in early September that even with higher rates of vaccination than at present, the infectiousness of the Delta variant coupled with the tendency of respiratory viruses to thrive in colder conditions could lead to a peak of hospitalizations exceeding those reached in 2020. In August, the World Health Organization warned of 236,000 additional COVID-19 deaths in Europe by December 1.

In the coming months, hundreds of thousands of lives, including those of many children, depend on the struggle for a scientific policy to eradicate the virus. Throughout the pandemic, the education unions and nominally "left" opposition parties have actively supported the Macron government's herd immunity policy.

The only way forward is to orient toward the working class, the only social force that can impose a policy based on science and social equality, not corporate profits. This means a political break from those forces complicit in mass death, and the building of independent rank-and-file safety committees in schools and workplaces.

On October 24, the *World Socialist Web Site* is hosting an international online webinar, featuring an international panel of scientists, who will explain the science behind the policy of eradication, as well as workers and parents who have played a leading role in the resistance to the policy of "herd immunity." We urge students, parents, teachers and other workers to register for this event today.



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