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Europe's Schools Are Closing Again

As U.S. authorities debate whether to keep schools open, a consensus is emerging in Europe that children are a considerable factor in the spread of Covid-19.



By Ruth Bender

BERLIN—As U.S. authorities debate whether to keep schools open, a consensus is emerging in Europe that children are a considerable factor in the spread of Covid-19—and more countries are shutting schools for the first time since the spring.

Closures have been announced recently in the U.K., Germany, Ireland, Austria, Denmark and the Netherlands on concerns about a more infectious variant of the virus first detected in the U.K. and rising case counts despite lockdowns.

While the debate continues, recent studies and outbreaks show that schoolchildren, even younger ones, can play a significant role in spreading infections.

“In the second wave we acquired much more evidence that schoolchildren are almost equally, if not more infected by SARS-CoV-2 than others,” said Antoine Flahault, director of the University of Geneva’s Institute of Global Health.

Schools have represented one of the most contentious issues of the pandemic given the possible long-term impact of closures on children and the economic fallout from parents being forced to stay home.

The recent shutdown of schools was especially dramatic in England. U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson initially planned to keep elementary schools there open after the Christmas break, but changed course amid soaring infections. After one day back, schools were closed until further notice. Plans to gradually reopen high schools through January were also scrapped.

“The problem is not that schools are unsafe for children,” Mr. Johnson said last week. “The problem is schools may nonetheless act as vectors for transmission, causing the virus to spread between households.”

As recently as November, European policy makers were adamant that schools would generally remain open through the current wave of infections, with short-term closures limited to single schools or classes whenever new cases were identified.

In the U.S., measures have varied widely, with many districts extending remote learning recently while others moved to reopen classrooms despite record levels of infections and deaths related to Covid-19.

In New York City, where parents, teachers and city officials have been fighting for months over whether schools should open or close, officials have in recent weeks erred on the side of leaving them open. Mayor Bill de Blasio last week said some 100,000 students and school staff showed a much lower positivity rate in tests than anywhere else in the city, meaning that “the safest place to be in New York City is, of course, our public schools.”

Yet scientists in Europe say that the latest research suggests otherwise. Mr. Flahault said an antibody survey conducted by researchers in Geneva in May and December, using thousands of random samples, found that children of age 6 to 18 were getting infected as often as young adults. The study has yet to be peer reviewed.

One reason for this: The Swiss city’s schools have been open since the summer, while restrictions have been placed on adults, meaning schoolchildren played a bigger role in transmitting the virus during the autumn surge, Mr. Flahault said.

In Austria, a nationwide survey by universities and medical institutes found that children under 10 showed a similar rate of infection to those between 11 and 14, and that the children in general were getting infected as often as teachers, said Michael Wagner, a microbiologist at the University of Vienna who oversees the study.

“That is very different to what has been claimed for months, that younger children are

less frequently infected,” said Mr. Wagner. The study, funded by the government, regularly analyzes samples from up to 15,000 children between the age of 6 and 15, as well as teachers who show no symptoms.

Scientists also point to data from the U.K.’s Office for National Statistics, which conducts a weekly random survey of the population. Just before the Christmas break, when schools were still open, the positivity rate among children was higher than in most adult groups, especially in those older than 11.

German virologist Christian Drosten said in his weekly podcast that the study “pretty much answers the question of how children contribute to the pandemic.”

At least 30 cases of the more contagious U.K. variant were discovered at an elementary school in the Dutch village of Bergschenhoek, near Rotterdam, in December. Tests carried out on some 750 children, teachers and their relatives found that roughly 10% were infected with the virus. The local municipality on Wednesday began testing all 62,000 residents above the age of 2 to find out more about how the variant spreads.

In Germany, researchers found that a majority of some 40 cases at a school in Hamburg in September were likely linked to a single person, which some scientists say highlights the risk of schools becoming Covid-19 clusters.

Still, many policy makers across Europe say schools are safe. The European Center for Disease Prevention and Control states on its website that while clusters have been reported in all types of schools, such outbreaks have been relatively rare. Statistics also show that children rarely fall seriously ill after contracting the virus.

In France, which was the center of an autumn surge in Europe but later managed to curb infections while keeping schools open, Prime Minister Jean Castex on Thursday ordered a nationwide 6 p.m. curfew but said it was a fundamental goal to keep schools open. The country is now imposing stricter rules for school canteens, banning indoor sports and stepping up testing in schools.

Austria, one of the first European countries to shut schools in November, plans to reopen them gradually from Jan. 25, but in staggered systems and with millions of test kits distributed to reduce the risk of infection.

Education Minister Heinz Faßmann told Austrian radio that it was impossible to keep children and society completely isolated for too long.

Mr. Wagner, who oversees the Austrian survey, said opening schools while the U.K. variant spreads in Europe bears a big risk. “We should be careful now,” he said.

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