

Education

Education experts urge caution as pupils return to classroom

Some countries have shut schools again amid disparity on protocols for safe reopenings



In the US state of Utah, students and staff must wear a mask in school as required by state law © George Frey/Bloomberg

Andrew Jack in London 2 HOURS AGO

Schools around the world have reopened their doors or are preparing to restart, in many cases while coronavirus transmission rates are rising, provoking fresh concerns about whether and how the process should take place.

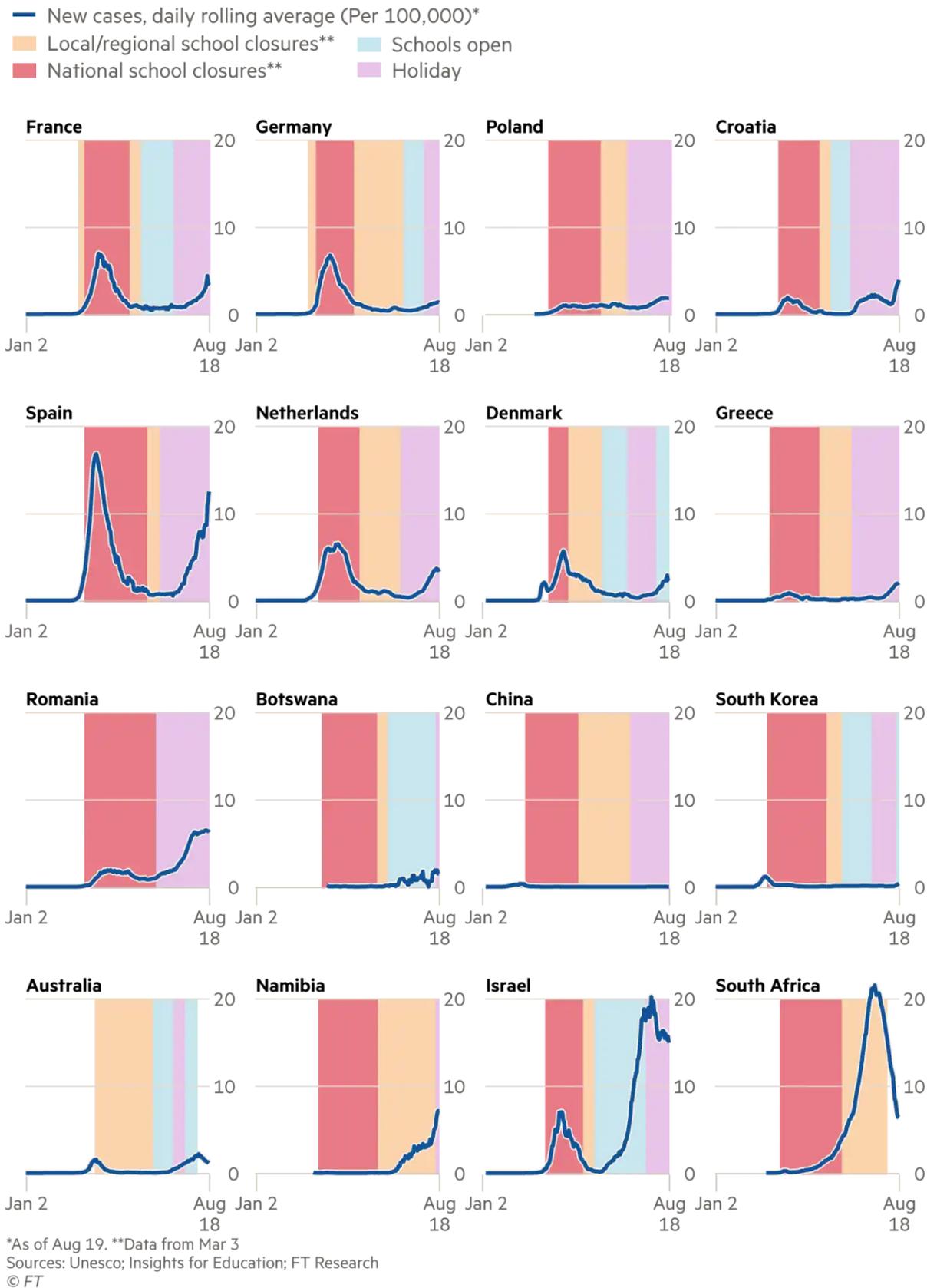
After a near global shutdown of education settings as the pandemic spread earlier this year, 22 countries have now fully reopened their schools. By mid September, 12 will do so and 55 have permitted partial reopening, using different strategies to mitigate the risk of transmission, according to an [analysis by Insights for Education](#), a Swiss-based non-profit group.

Scientific studies have largely shown the health risks to children of Covid-19 to be less severe than for adults and downplayed the role of schools in the transmission of coronavirus within communities. Meanwhile, pressure on governments has increased to reopen education systems to mitigate the long-term impact on students' learning and accelerate broader economic recovery.

But with new cases of coronavirus increasing again in countries including France, Israel, Croatia, Spain, the Netherlands and Denmark, health and education experts are calling for caution as children return to the classroom. "This is a really treacherous time," said Randa Grob-Zakhary, head of Insights for Education. "We're going to know a lot more in 3-4 weeks from now."

The group's data show that 10 countries, including South Korea and Australia, have already had to shut schools again in some regions after initially reopening. In five of those countries, classroom teaching had resumed while the average daily number of new cases was still rising. That included Israel and South Africa.

Schools return into rising infections



David Edwards, general secretary of Education International, a federation of teachers' unions, said: "There is still a huge disparity between countries who have established clear, scientifically-based benchmarks for a safe return where all involved have a say . . . and countries that are making it up as they go along based on polls, politics and pundits."

Mr Edwards highlighted concerns in the US, where he said initial teacher support for a return to the classroom had fallen sharply since President Donald Trump in July urged schools to reopen, just as infections in children began to rise in states including Georgia and Florida.

Efforts to respond to coronavirus in schools have differed in various countries, often depending on the resources of the education system. Some countries that have reopened classrooms have sought to mitigate risks by limiting reopening only to those students in exam years.

Ms Grob-Zakhary said best practices around the world included the use of masks, distancing, more teachers, heightened hygiene, digital learning, community engagement and clear, phased and flexible reopening plans. Where resources are scarce and teaching and cleaning staff are limited, or when space is restricted, increased hygiene and social distancing protocols have been harder to introduce.

In lower income countries, there has been particular concern about children and teachers dropping out of the education system entirely, with the World Bank estimating that students who have seen their education disrupted are likely to lose an average of \$16,000 in future earnings over their lifetime.

“Education is a human right [and] reopening should be a top priority,” said Stefania Giannini, assistant director-general of Unesco. Ms Giannini said an additional 24m children were at risk of dropping out of education this year because of the pandemic.

Matthew Snape, an associate professor at Oxford university’s department of paediatrics, said: “It’s really clear that children are at very low risk of Covid-19 infections. The uncertainty is around onwards transmission.

“But you have to make a decision. We should open schools, resume education and with systems in place, study and react more quickly to see what happens.”