

Reopening of schools in Norway: Briefing Paper

Context

Schools Closed Across the Globe - one response to the global pandemic and part of wider lockdown strategies was for (most) countries to close their schools in a bid to stop or lower the risk of infection spreading. [The Map of school closures in responses to COVID-19](#) illustrates how many days, from one to over a hundred after the first case was recorded, it took countries across the world to respond by closing schools.

Many countries are now considering the question of whether to reopen their schools in the immediate or longer-term future as part of the `Recovery` phase. Some like [Denmark](#) have done so already, with a gradual process starting on 15 April 2020, and many others in Europe and beyond are considering the proposition. According to [UNESCO](#) about 40% of schools have now reopened world-wide. (1 May 2020). The dilemma countries face is a trade-off between rebooting their economies against the threat of increasing the risk of more Covid-19 cases, or worse, increased amounts of deaths. This dilemma is exacerbated by considerations of what school reopenings might look like, if they do.

Sweden, interestingly, is not part of the school reopening debate as it took the decision not to close schools and whilst lockdown measures were put in place, they were some of the least restrictive in Europe, with playgrounds, restaurants and shops remaining open. They based that decision on the relatively low amount of Covid-19 cases and a low death rate. However, most parents kept their children at home and about half of the workforce stayed there as well. The recent spike in cases in Sweden has led some commentators to query if the Swedish authorities might reconsider their approach. However, leading health experts in Sweden's Public Health Agency suggest possibly not, pointing to the similar [low] number of daily cases overall and a lack of pressure on health services.

Introduction

Sweden's neighbour Norway took a different approach and announced on 12 March 2020 [the closure of all kindergartens and schools](#).

It has subsequently reopened its kindergartens on April 20, followed by primary schools for children in grades 1 through 4 on April 27, 2020. In addition, some upper secondary schools have reopened for second- and third-year pupils in vocational education programmes.

The [Norwegian Education Directorate](#) has issued specific and separate guidance for `supervisors` on preventing infection spread in reopening kindergartens, primary and secondary/high schools. This focusses on `three pillars` of health, hygiene and contact between people. Training has been provided so that `local authorities, other school owners and employees receive clear, reliable information on what they need to do`. There is also clear and accessible information for parents on school arrangements. They too, are expected to contribute to infection prevention, with a set of guidelines outlining their prospective role. Some children are not required to return to school; those who are at special risk and those who live with family members who are at special risk. They will, however, continue to receive remote schooling.

Therefore, the following information represents a **distillation of the current (the Norwegian Authorities will update as necessary) available school guidance** and a concentration on operational examples, which might inform decision making within the Scottish education system.

Table 1: Extracts from `Supervisor on infection control for school steps 1-7 and secondary and high school during the covid-19 outbreak 2020`.

Grades and Cohorts	Example of Organisation Per Week
<p>Steps 1 - 4. Class, (ages 6-10) For example, a class can be divided into two cohorts with up to 15 children per cohort.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In principle, an employee should follow her/his cohort • The cohorts should switch classrooms to the minimum extent possible • The cohort can work together for the practical implementation of the school day, preferably outdoors • Employees from cohort 1 can help in cohort 2, and vice versa • The cohorts (who do not work together) should have different play areas outside • The cohorts should also be maintained at leisure break/time • Cohorts 3 and 4 should be organized similarly • Initially, cohorts 1 and 2 should not be mixed with cohorts 3 and 4, etc. The cohorts may pass each other and be in the same area for a short amount of time (up to 15 minutes) • The cohorts (who do not work together) can stay in the same room if there is a minimum distance of two meters between the cohorts over a longer period.
<p>Steps 5 - 7. Class, (ages 10-13) For example, a class can be divided into two cohorts with up to 20 children per cohort.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employees should come to the classroom so that the cohort does not need to change rooms • The cohorts should switch classrooms to the minimum extent possible • Pupils and staff within a cohort should strive to keep one metre distance • Cohorts 1 and 2 can work together for practical implementation of the school day, preferably outdoors • Employees from cohort 1 can help in cohort 2, and vice versa • The cohorts (who do not work together) should have different play areas outside • Cohorts 3 and 4 should be organized similarly • Initially, cohorts 1 and 2 should not be mixed with cohorts 3 and 4, etc. The cohorts may pass each other and be in the same area for a short amount of time (up to 15 minutes) • The cohorts (who do not work together) can stay in the same room if there is a minimum distance of two metres between the cohorts over a longer period.
<p>Secondary Class (ages 13-16) and High School Class (ages 16-18/19) For example, the teacher density norm for the youth level is 20, this is a good starting point for group sizes, but upper secondary does not have the same norm. However, it is recommended to limit the size of student groups where possible.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Larger gatherings should be avoided • Facilitate teaching in smaller, regular groups (possibly cohorts). The groups may change composition weekly after a weekend (at least two days without contact between staff and students) • Employees should come to the classroom so that the class does not need to switch rooms where possible • Use larger premises where possible • All students should have their own desk/workplace to ensure a distance of at least 1 metre. Where students do not have their own desk, the workplace is secured with some distance to others • Avoid congestion on the way in and out of the classrooms, cloakrooms and toilets • Optionally, create markings on the floor to ensure distance between students in classrooms, corridors, cloakrooms and other areas where congestion may occur • Increased use of outdoor activities and outdoor teaching • Groups/cohorts can pass each other and be in the same area for a short amount of time (up to 15 minutes) • Consider the use of rooms in relation to the number of students in the cohorts • Facilitate the combination of digital teaching and physical attendance at school.

Source: Translated and Adapted from Norwegian Education Directorate Guidance, April 2020

Subject Specific Guidance Infection Protection exists for Physical Education (PE), Music, Food & Health (F&H), Arts & Crafts and Library use. In terms of PE the guidance focusses on maintaining distance as much as possible, e.g. avoiding contact sports, avoiding post-exercise showers or if necessary, students should remain in their cohorts. For most of the other subjects, the guidance for both primary and secondary sectors emphasises the necessity of limited sharing of equipment and strict cleaning routines for shared tablets, computers, keyboards and learning materials. In terms of F & H, good hygiene is paramount, avoiding non-cooked foods and alternative teaching e.g. offering home assignments.

Additional Special Needs (ASN) Pupils:

- Where it is difficult to regulate distance to others, the most important measure will be to limit the number of close contact to each student and (same members of) staff for example, by having smaller groups.
- The extent of the offer beyond the reduced opening hours must be considered in each case and based on the needs of the children and the parents.

Transport and Arrival/Pick-up – this is very similar to the guidance on reopening schools in Denmark, in that it suggests limited use of public transport for staff and students and if schools have a school bus, students should sit in alternate seats. If there isn't a school bus, then should consider options/plans for securing such a service. Schools should arrange distributed meeting places outside of school before the school opens, to avoid congestion. Parents should not come into the school building unless necessary. The Directorate recommends schools assign each small group of students an assembly point in the schoolyard to meet at different times.

Food Service – this is similar to Denmark in that guidance is mainly targeted at distancing and hygiene; students should not share food, they should eat at their desks in their groups whilst maintaining distance between each student and groups should eat at different times, (if in dining room).

Summary

Overall the measures are directed at reducing the number of students in a school at the same time (by group) and distributing students while in school to help keep them apart. Although the authorities recognise the difficulty of maintaining this with young children. Like other countries who have reopened schools or are considering it, there are key stakeholders, such as some parents and trade unions who have concerns over student and staff safety, in addition to questioning reopening arrangements and the nature of the education offer. These are concerns which will undoubtedly be replicated across the world as countries begin the slow journey back to recovery and in these very uncertain times the decision when and how to open schools will not be one taken lightly.

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