The impacts and challenges of COVID19 at the start of the new school year

A report by the European School Heads Association (ESHA) based on the data provided by ESHA members between 31.08.2020 and 04.08.2020.

After an almost general emergency school closure for the first time in Europe during spring it was to be expected that the beginning of the new school year would be a great challenge for all stakeholders. We have asked the members of the European School Heads Association to provide us with data on how different countries are dealing with this situation, intending to provide some information and overview of various national approaches in Europe for all decision-makers on the different strategies, inspiring practices with a view to finding common solutions for shared problems that are still unsolved.

The online questionnaire was answered by 19 ESHA members from the following countries. Some countries provided multiple responses which were combined. The responses were from the following countries:

Denmark, The Netherlands, Norway, Germany, Iceland, Croatia, Ireland, Scotland, Belgium (Flanders), Bulgaria, England, Germany (State of North Rhine-Westphalia), Italy (Sicily)

This report has three main sections.
1. Overview of the situation in primary schools.
2. Overview of the situation in secondary schools.
3. Overview of the general national situation in education.

## Overview of the situation in primary schools[1]

First, ESHA members were asked when their primary schools will open for the new school year. Some of them have already opened in the first part of August (Denmark, Germany, Scotland), some in the second half of August (Norway, some schools the Netherlands, Iceland, Ireland), some are starting in September (England, some schools the Netherlands, Croatia, and Sicily)

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[1] The age of the students attending primary school is in the range of 4 to 15 in different countries.

Almost all respondents except one from Denmark, claimed that education will be fully resumed in the schools. ESHA members from Italy and Bulgaria highlighted that although contact teaching is the current situation, in case of an increase in the number of those testing positive for COVID-19, schools need to be ready to switch to online education during the school year.

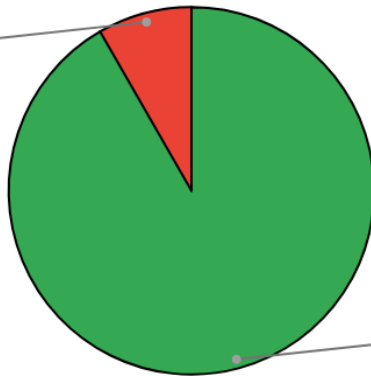**Will pupils have 100% education time at school?**

No
8,3%
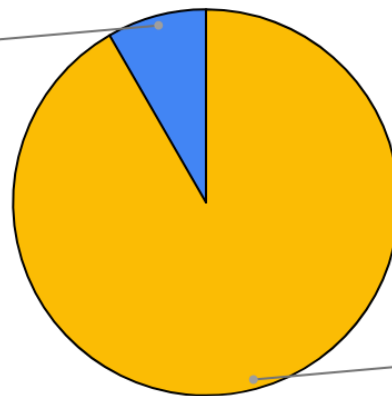
Yes
91,7%

**Are (most) school buildings prepared to receive all pupils?**

No
8,3%

Yes
91,7%

According to ESHA members, most school buildings are ready to accept all pupils, except in Sicily (There is a lack of suitable spaces, structures and tools to guarantee the children´s safety) and North Rhine-Westphalia in Germany [2](Hygiene regulations are not being met in every community and in many places, classrooms can't be ventilated). Although in the Netherlands our respondents claimed that the school buildings are properly equipped, ventilation can be a challenge.

As most schools will be operating mainly face to face in all countries from which we have received responses, the issue of whether pupils who cannot attend education in school because they are sick or are at high risk of contracting COVID-19 will have access to online education is a crucial question. Except for Denmark, where they probably will not be able to offer an online alternative for the youngest students , schools are ready to offer online education to those pupils who cannot attend

Will those pupils who will not be able to attend education in school because they are sick, or high risk have access to online education?
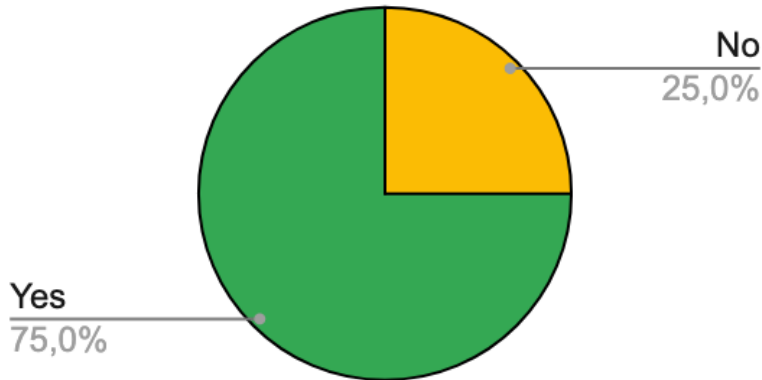
Yes
50,0%
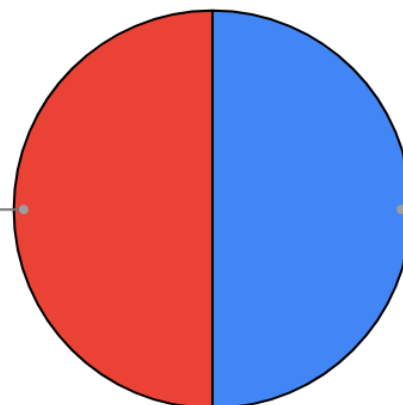
No
50,0%

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[2] : In Germany school systems are different from federal state to federal state

school. In Ireland, lessons were offered during the national lockdown on TV to supplement the schools online offering when pupils forced to stay home.

Is there a National Protocol available for primary education?

No 25,0%

Yes 75,0%

There is a national protocol on primary education and primary special needs education as well according to all respondents in their countries, except in Germany, where education is a federal responsibility, thus protocols are on the federal state level.

ESHA members were also asked about daily practices adults and children will have to follow because of the pandemic in school.

Social distancing between pupils is mandatory in the classroom in England, Ireland, Bulgaria, Italy, Croatia, and Denmark but not in other countries.

Is it mandatory to keep distance between the pupils in the classroom?

Yes 50,0%

No 50,0%
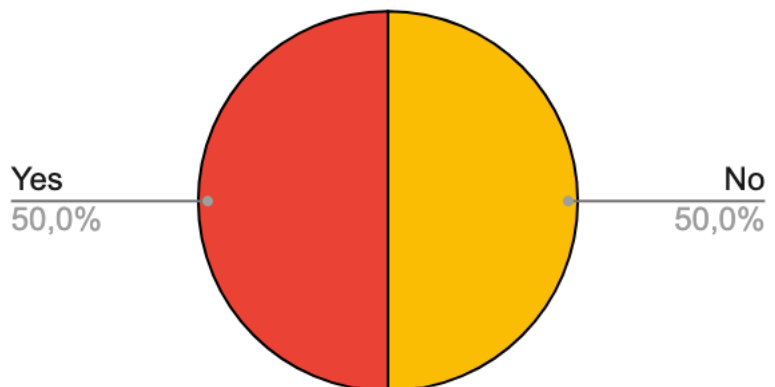
Is it mandatory to keep distance between pupils in the rest of the school building?

No 25,0%

Yes 75,0%
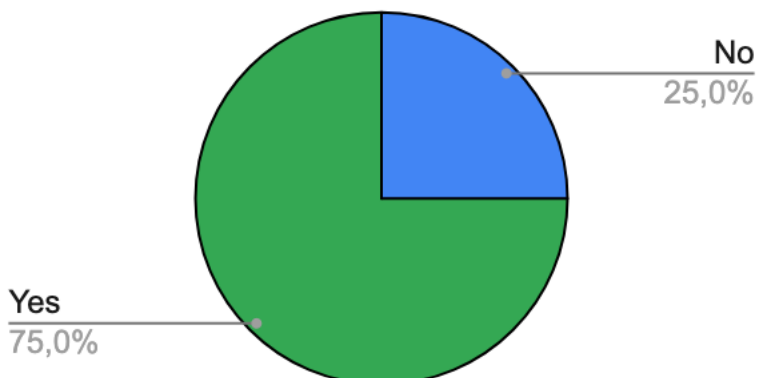
There are different practices concerning the rest of the school building. Social distancing will be required in the rest of the school building in addition to the previously mentioned countries in Norway, Germany, and Scotland, where pupils from different classes in the same grade do not have to keep the distance, but the different grades are separated from each

other. The same regulation applies for schoolyards, except in Croatia, where social distancing is not required.

Different rules apply to adults as social distancing is mandatory for all adults in the school, with the exception of Iceland.

Is it mandatory to wear masks in the classroom?

Yes
16,7%

No
83,3%
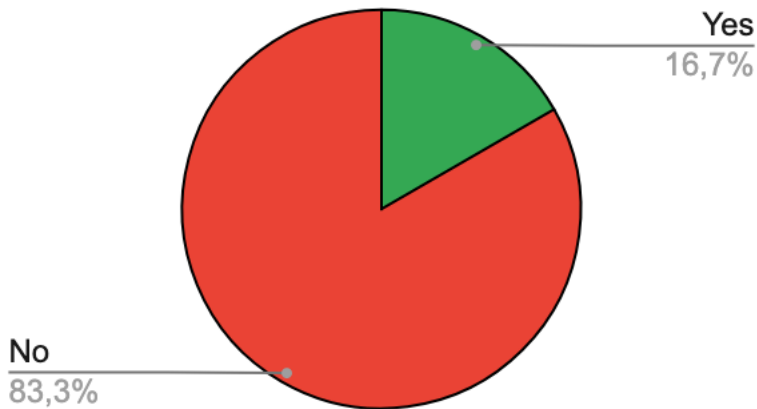
Masks will have to worn by all pupils in Italy and Belgium in the classroom it is optional in Bulgaria. In Croatia pupils in 5-8th grade will have to wear a mask if the 1,5m social distancing is not possible or if they are vulnerable. In Scotland, it is recommended for adults where 2 m social distancing is not possible for 15 minutes or more.

For the rest of the school building and schoolyard, slightly different regulations apply. In England, individual school heads can require people to wear masks, and it is mandatory for adults in Germany.

In Germany, the Netherlands, and Denmark some extra safety measures can also be required, such as screens or gloves. In Italy, the regulation is still unclear for adults. In England, individual schools can introduce stricter regulations than the national protocol.

Is it mandatory to wear masks in the school building?

Yes
41,7%

No
58,3%
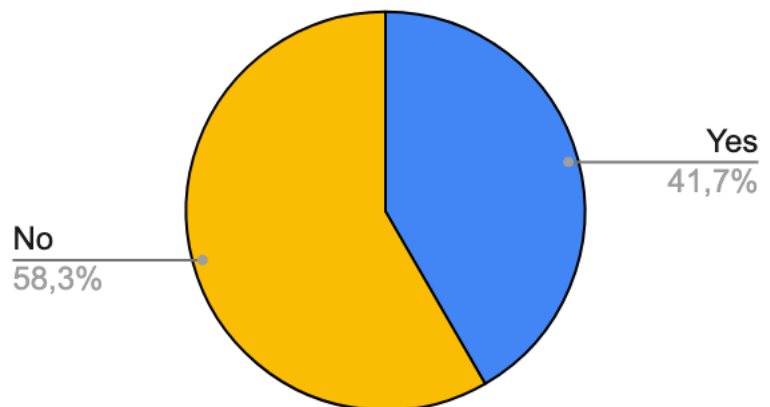
The question whether a European level COVID procedure for primary schools would be beneficially divided the respondents.

Do you think a European level COVID procedure for primary schools would be beneficial?

Yes
33,3%

No
66,7%
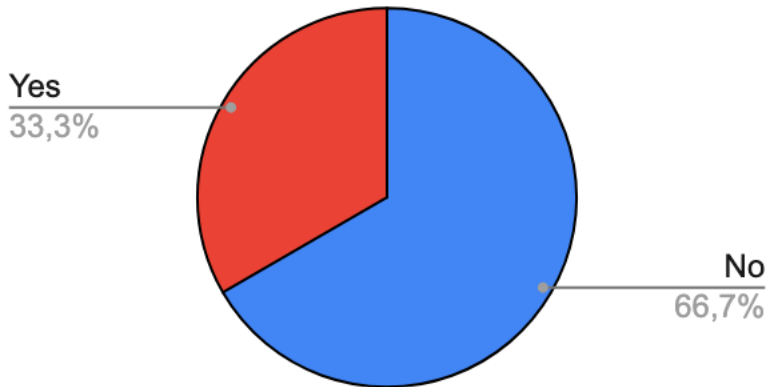
The contra arguments are:
- I think it all depends on the values of the society and the schools and I don´t see that schools across Europe have such a common base set of values. Schools operate in a very different ways across Europe.
- Its national regulations that operate today and I think a common system would be complicated.
- I think it is best if national governments make their own health policies now.
- There are too many differences in maximum sizes, classroom sizes, the availability of additional teachers, access to digital devices, and the availability of broadband connections, to give general guidance. It might be possible though to have European schools adopt the WHO social distance and hygiene protocols as a recommended European Standards for best practice.
- Schools are already back and guidance has changed in some ways a couple of times already. Overlaying a different catch-all protocol would likely cause confusion rather than calmness.
- Both the COVID-19 situation and the school systems are too different from country to country.
- There are just too many differences between the school systems. Good practices are more than welcome!
- There will be local instructions that are tailored to the national schools.
- Depends on each system and building and the protocols issued from governments.

Pro arguments are:
- Information exchange would be useful, School systems and areas in Europe vary widely; nevertheless, I think we can all learn useful things from each other.
- The school needs precise, clear, detailed, and unified directives for children so young and with so much still to learn.
- It would be safer if we all have common rules, like in other areas.

- In England, there have been many political U-turns and school leaders would like clear and consistent guidance. School leaders are not experts in health procedures and would appreciate clear and consistent advice
- The problem of COVID-19 is global and we need to have a common frame.

## Overview of the situation in secondary schools [3]

Secondary school starting times vary for the new school year in different countries, some of them have already opened in the first part of August (Denmark, Germany, Scotland), some in the second half of August (Norway, some schools the Netherlands, Iceland, Ireland), some are starting in September (England, some schools the Netherlands, Croatia, and Sicily).

Education will be provided mainly in schools for secondary school pupils. In Belgium, it depends on the current level of risk. In Germany and Denmark, it is a mix between online and in-person education. In Bulgaria, and Italy respondents highlighted that depending on how the virus situation changes, a switch to online education might be required.

Will pupils have 100% education time at school?

No
16,7%

Yes
83,3%

Are (most) school buildings prepared to receive all pupils?

No
16,7%

Yes
83,3%
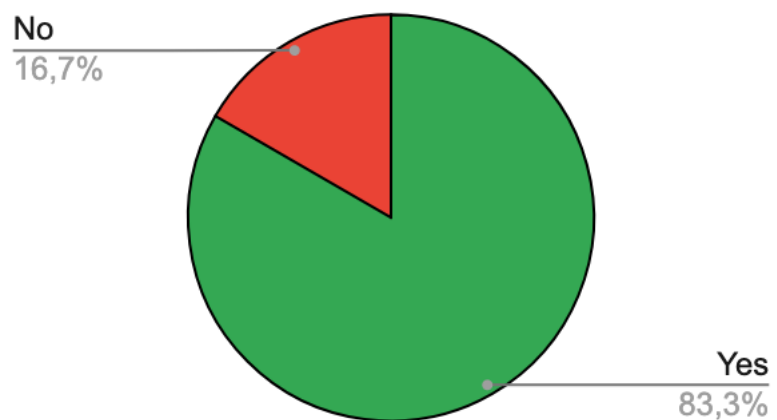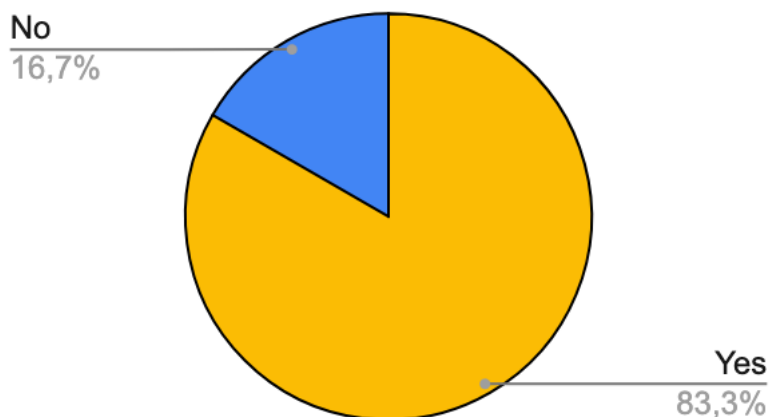
Not all secondary school buildings are ready for all the students though, ventilation and possibly inadequate classroom sizes. The lack of enough facilities for hygiene requirements, are possible issues in Germany, Denmark, Iceland, and in Sicily.

Those students who are not able to visit the school in person because they are in a high-risk group or are currently sick will have the opportunity for an online alternative according to all country representatives filling out the questionnaire.

[3] The age range in secondary schools is between 10 and 19 years.

There are national protocols on secondary education and secondary special education in every country, except in Germany where education is a federal responsibility. In Italy, it isn't clear enough on a day to day practices.

The daily practices and safety procedures are slightly different than in primary school. Social distancing for pupils in the classroom is required in Croatia, Iceland, and Belgium, in England as much as possible, in Ireland 2 m is required or 1 m when masks are worn. In Scotland, it is not required but recommended for students of age 14 or older.

Is it mandatory to keep distance between the pupils in the classroom?

No
38,5%

Yes
61,5%
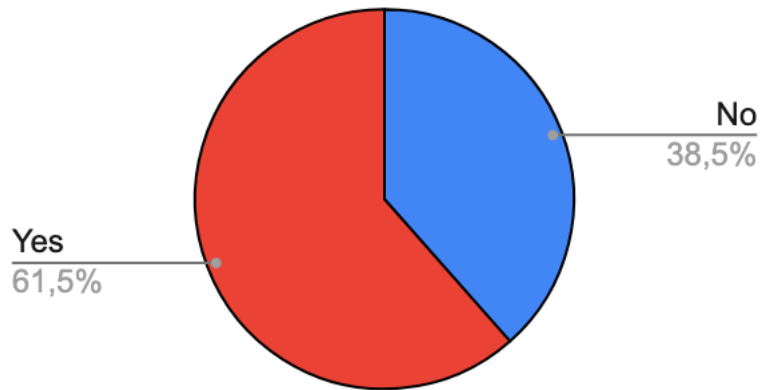
Regarding the rest of the school building some stricter regulations apply and social distancing is required in all countries, except in the Netherlands and Scotland. In Germany, a respondent claimed that although social distancing is required, it is not possible. Social distancing isn't mandatory however in the schoolyard in Bulgaria, Iceland, and Belgium, and some Danish schools.

For the adults in the school different regulations apply, except for some schools in Denmark, it is required in all countries.

Is it mandatory to wear masks in the classroom?

Yes
41,7%

No
58,3%
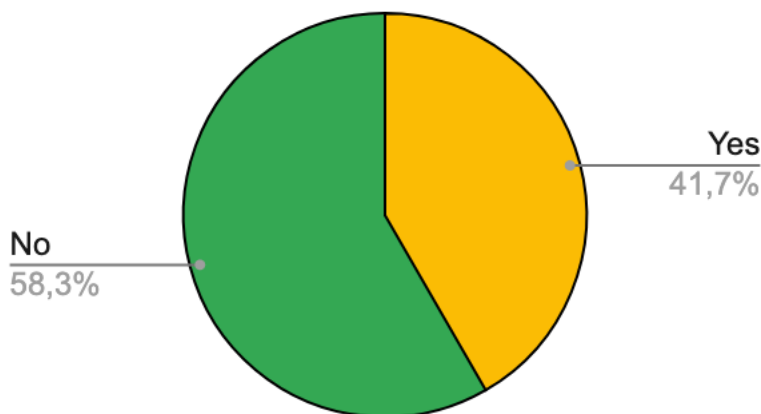
Masks have to be worn in the classroom in some Danish schools, in Sicily, Ireland, Germany and Belgium, and in Croatia if the distance is less than 1 m.

Regarding the rest of the school building, in England in areas of high infection rates face marks will be required in other areas of the school at the discretion of the Headteacher. In Scotland face masks are recommended for public areas and where physical distancing is not possible both for staff and older pupils. Face Masks are

Is it mandatory to wear masks in the school building?

No
41,7%

Yes
58,3%

mandatory for all in some Danish schools and in Croatia, Germany, Sicily, Ireland, Belgium, and Bulgaria. However, they are required in the schoolyard in Germany, Sicily, Germany, some Danish schools and in England in the headteacher makes the decision on the waring of them.
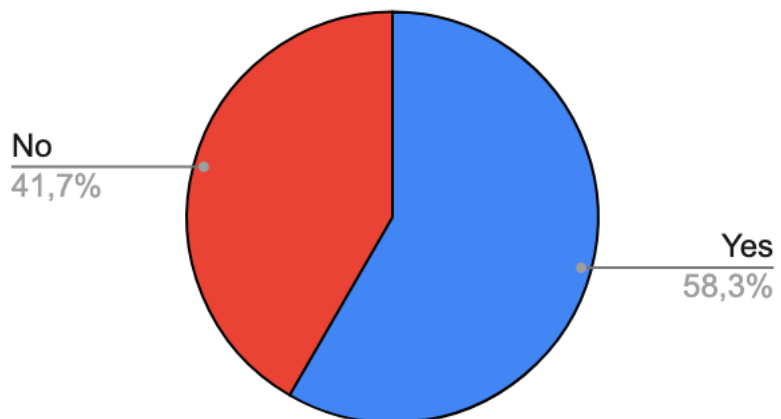
Some extra safety measures, such as gloves or screens will be required in Iceland at arts and vocational subjects, there is extra attention concerning hand hygiene in several countries. In Ireland Pupils and staff should perform hand hygiene: on arrival at school, before eating or drinking, after using the toile, after playing outdoors and when their hands are physically dirty or when they cough or sneeze. In England school heads have the authority to require extra safety measures to be respected in schools. The same rules apply for school staff, with special attention to some special topics such as health in Norway where extra safety measures are required.

On the question of whether a European level COVID procedure for secondary schools would be beneficial, there was no agreement between the respondents.

Do you think a European level COVID procedure for secondary schools would be beneficial?

Yes
41,7%

No
58,3%
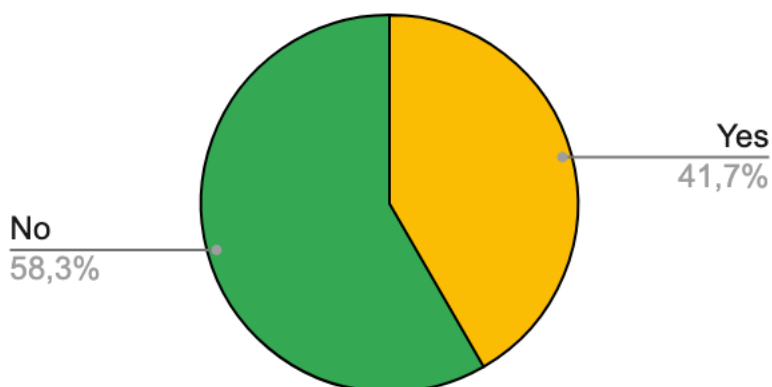
Pro arguments are

- People follow the situation in Europe. The differences in approach and insights are no longer explainable.
- It would be safer if we all have common rules, like in other areas.
- Equal regulation makes it easy to follow.
- The problem of COVID-19 is global, and we need to have a common frame.
- The school needs precise, clear, detailed, and unified directives.
- Currently, in England, there has been much advice that is contradictory and there have been several political U-turns such as the issue of wearing face masks. Heads would appreciate clear constant advice.

Contra arguments are

- See comments on primary education
- Too difficult to handle.
- Exchange of information is valuable but not all procedures would work in all countries.
- -   There are too many differences in maximum sizes, classroom sizes, the availability of additional teachers, access to digital devices, and the availability of broadband connections, to give general guidance. It might be possible though to have European schools adopt the WHO social distance and hygiene protocols as a recommended European Standards for best practice.

The general national situation, strategies, and difficulties regarding COVID19

We have asked our members to provide what **strengths** they identify in their country's education response to COVID 19.

- **Scotland**: Clarity.

- **Norway**: Kohorts: each student is part of one group, extended cleaning, staying home when sick.

- **Germany**: quick return to school (end of April 2020), special groups for children of working parents, digital learning improvement

- **Denmark**: quick response and a closedown in early spring. Nationwide discussions about distance and hygiene. A unified country who follow guidelines, agile, digital tools are not foreign, the government has secured: instructions for schools, financial support, and general instructions for all Danes.

- **The Netherlands**: common sense, swift change to online learning/teaching with access for a large percentage of the pupils, great cooperation in schools and between schools and with all others involved (publishers, etc), good policy changes developed with all stakeholders, involving decisions about the final exams, etc., Use of ICT in distance education; they have put the pupils' interests first; collaborative learning in how to do distance education

- I**reland**: The unified approach and the decisiveness of the government in implementing school closures. The co-operation between the Department of Education and the stakeholders in education in planning for State Exams. The co-operation between the Department of Education and the stakeholders in education in planning for the re-opening of schools.

- **Croatia**: Small number of COVID cases in pupil population, National Protocol, teaching scenarios: Module A, B, C.

- **Belgium**: flexibility of the school, digital skills of the teachers, online support.

- **Bulgaria**: The Ministry of Education and Science in Bulgaria has developed guidelines for the operation of schools during Covid-19. They describe general and recommended measures. Additional educational measures are introduced.

- **Sicily:** distance learning, collaborative learning, flexible organization.

- **England**: Full return for all pupils from the start of autumn term Commitment to only close schools as a last resort. The professionalism of the workforce in showing determination and adaptability in dealing with the crisis.

Some **good practices** mentioned by ESHA members are the following:

- **Norway**: Kohort, digitalization, extended cleaning

- **Denmark**: well-prepared teachers, well-equipped teachers, and students, trust, regulations for schools

- **The Netherlands**: common sense and trusting on experts, we did not have our national final exams, it was left to the schools to graduate pupils this also happened in the transition from primary to secondary education lots of students stepped in to help pupils in secondary education with their schoolwork, All student got a device; all children from parents in crucial professions and children with special need could continue to go to school all lockdown; teachers learned to teach with new (ICT) didactics.

- **Ireland:** The level of adaptability and flexibility shown by school leaders and teachers in their response to the COVID19 crises. The levels of cooperation between the education

stakeholders in developing and facilitating a common response to education challenges as they arose. The provision of an education channel on national TV which delivered classes to primary students during the school closure.

- **Croatia:** Special needs education with assistants in the classroom or online, TV lessons and digital materials (open source), e-school project - online education

- **Bulgaria:** There is an approved list of chronic diseases, based on which students can go to distance learning. In the case of chronic diseases of the parents, children can also choose to temporarily switch to distance learning. Additional educational measures are introduced

Although there were some great and quick responses, to the challenges of the virus, the respondents could identify plenty of areas in their countries´ education system where this new situation highlighted the **need for improvement.**

- **Norway**: Digitalization for all students, quality of the education in a digital environment, resources to differ education

- **Germany**: digital education, Digitalisation, network, home-schooling

- **The Netherlands:** equity, flexible education time; working together with partners such as the municipality, medical, youth care, preschool etc.
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- **Ireland:** The need for a better communications policy between the Department of Education and school leaders. The need for a full national emergency/contingency plan for a reoccurrence of national school closures. The need for additional support for school leaders in terms of additional administrative staff and middle leader availability during the summer months.

- **Belgium**: digitalization, protection of the teachers, uniformity of regulations

- **Bulgaria:** The quality of distance learning. Technical support for socially disadvantaged children. Protocols for working with children with special educational needs.
- **Sicily:** Disability, Cultural disadvantage, Socio-economic disadvantage.
- **England**: Awarding pupil grades for qualifications, Lack of leadership at the national level, Friction between Government and teacher unions not always working together in the interest of pupils and workers in education

In this challenging situation, school heads have a great responsibility, thus one of the survey aims was to map what support is given to them. Unfortunately, many respondents claimed, that school heads were left without proper support and guidance, and they could only rely on peer-support.
There was some help in though in the following countries:

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- **Ireland:** Support and guidance was given to school leaders by the (NAPD)National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals at post-primary and IPPN at the primary level and the sharing of information from ESHA members on the situation in their countries. The provision of online meetings facilitated by NAPD which allowed the school leaders to give voice to their concerns and receive updates on the planning for schools reopening. The provision of additional staff and finance and guidance by the Department of Education to facilitate the reopening of schools.

- **The Netherlands**: the VO-raad (school association) and AVS (trade union of school leaders), information

- **Germany:** administration of education

- **Croatia**: Only support of the Ministry of science and education and local authorities

- **Bulgaria**: Guidelines for the operation of schools in the conditions of Covid-19, General and recommended measures and solutions, National electronic library with developed lessons for distance learning, Detailed instructions for the disinfection algorithm

- **England**: Professional Associations such as NAHT, Local authority support - however, this quality of this varies from area to area

In case of any further comments or questions, contact ESHA at luca.laszlo@esha.org
We are also happy to share the raw data with you.