

Belgian high schoolers demand to get back in-person learning

January 13 2021, by Samuel Petrequin



Students and relatives stand at the main entrance of the school Athénée Léonie de Waha in Liege, Belgium, Tuesday, Jan. 12, 2021. Fed up with the COVID-19 restrictions keeping them at home most of the time, students in the last two years of high school in the city of Liege launched an online petition asking for more in-person class time. The students' efforts paid off Tuesday following an online meeting with Mayor Willy Demeyer and education officials in the city. The officials pledged to revisit the current COVID-19 protocol in a bid to get the 16 to 18-year-olds in-person instruction at least half-time starting Monday. (AP

Photo/Valentin Bianchi)

A late-stage side effect of the coronavirus pandemic has turned up in Belgium, where a group of teenagers is begging to go back to school.

Fed up with the COVID-19 restrictions keeping them at home most of the time, students in the last two years of a high school in the city of Liege launched an [online petition](#) asking for more in-person class time.

"It's been six months now that we have been going to class only once a week," the students enrolled at the Athénée Léonie de Waha wrote last week. "Get ready, and open your ears: We want to go to school more often. Yes, yes, you heard it right!"

The students' efforts paid off Tuesday following an online meeting with Mayor Willy Demeyer and education officials in the city, which is known for its universities. The officials pledged to revisit the current COVID-19 protocol in a bid to get the 16 to 18-year-olds in-person instruction at least half-time starting Monday.

Months of learning exclusively or mostly online took a toll on the school's more than 200 students, the petition writers said. Concerned that prolonged [distance learning](#) would eventually derail their academic progress, they complained about the lack of social interaction and a growing loss of motivation sitting alone in front of their computers.



The main facade of the school Athenee Leonie de Waha is seen in Liege, Belgium, Tuesday, Jan. 12, 2021. Fed up with the COVID-19 restrictions keeping them at home most of the time, students in the last two years of high school in the city of Liege launched an online petition asking for more in-person class time. The students' efforts paid off Tuesday following an online meeting with Mayor Willy Demeyer and education officials in the city. The officials pledged to revisit the current COVID-19 protocol in a bid to get the 16 to 18-year-olds in-person instruction at least half-time starting Monday. (AP Photo/Valentin Bianchi)

"We could not take it anymore," [student](#) Lena Piazza told The Associated Press. "With the fatigue and the loss of concentration, many people were about to disengage."

Piazza said she felt like "an old person" with headaches, pain in her neck and a lot of stress.

Since the start of the pandemic, academic studies and accounts from parents and teachers in many countries have highlighted the global challenges of remote learning. But as confirmed coronavirus cases keep soaring across Europe and authorities face a more contagious virus variant and overwhelmed hospitals, a general return to regular schooling is not foreseen for months in many countries.

In Italy, students and parents have protested continued school closures, with some high schoolers declaring an online "strike" on Monday. Most Italian elementary and [middle schools](#) remained open for in-person learning throughout the fall, but high schools shifted back to remote learning at the end of October.



Students of the school Athenee Leonie de Waha and relatives leave at the end of their classes in Liege, Belgium, Tuesday, Jan. 12, 2021. Fed up with the COVID-19 restrictions keeping them at home most of the time, students in the last two years of high school in the city of Liege launched an online petition asking for more in-person class time. The students' efforts paid off Tuesday following an online meeting with Mayor Willy Demeyer and education officials in the city. The officials pledged to revisit the current COVID-19 protocol in a bid to get the 16 to 18-year-olds in-person instruction at least half-time starting Monday. (AP Photo/Valentin Bianchi)

The Liege students had an advantage in getting officials to take their pleas seriously. They attend classes at a school that employs the alternative pedagogy developed by French educational reformer Celestin Freinet. His philosophy rejected the traditional lines of authority in schools, holding that children's views should be taken into account.

Athénée Léonie de Waha Director Rudi Creeten said the students had his support in their battle to attend school in person more often. He said they had shown patience and dedication to remote learning over the past months but started to "suffer" recently.

"Their struggles to go through the current situation have been heard," Creeten told the AP. The decision made Tuesday "opens a door. It says that we can trust the youth."

In Belgium, like in other countries, decisions whether to close or open schools vary greatly, depending on the course of the pandemic, on whether schools are public, private or church-run, and which grades are involved. At Léonie de Waha, only the oldest students were restricted to attending school once a week.



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A woman and a child stand at the main entrance of the school Athenee Leonie de Waha in Liege, Belgium, Tuesday, Jan. 12, 2021. Fed up with the COVID-19 restrictions keeping them at home most of the time, students in the last two years of high school in the city of Liege launched an online petition asking for more in-person class time. The students' efforts paid off Tuesday following an online meeting with Mayor Willy Demeyer and education officials in the city. The officials pledged to revisit the current COVID-19 protocol in a bid to get the 16 to 18-year-olds in-person instruction at least half-time starting Monday. (AP Photo/Valentin Bianchi)



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The virus has played havoc with education across the continent, with schools opening and reclosing often at short notice and the status of crucial student exams constantly in flux.

French schools went back full-time in September and have largely remained that way, even after new virus restrictions were imposed nationwide in October. Britain closed schools last week in response to surging numbers of new infections, although the children of essential workers still can attend in person.

In Spain, most students returned to [school](#) following the Christmas and New Year's holidays. But the unprecedented weekend blizzard that left 20 inches of snow in much of Spain has led many regions to cancel all classes at least until Wednesday.

And in Germany, where infections are also soaring, authorities in Berlin backtracked last week on plans to partially resume in-person teaching, following protests from parents, teachers and the federal government.

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