

NEWS

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Boarding Schools Advised To Send Students Home As UK Coronavirus Cases Rise

But the government advice is still for schools to remain open as usual.

By Jasmin Gray



PA WIRE/PA IMAGES School pupils holding bags and books

Boarding schools in the UK have been advised to let students return home as the number of coronavirus cases continues to rise – despite official guidance for schools to remain open as usual. The Boarding Schools' Association (BSA) warned its members – which include Eton College, Gordonstoun School and Cheltenham Ladies College – that schools could remain responsible for pupils for a “protracted period of time” if the government decided to close schools and boarders were then unable to get home.

“BSA advises therefore that where it is currently possible for boarders to return home; this should be expedited,” the association said in a statement.

“Where it is not possible, or parents do not wish this, because of risk in the home country, it should be made clear to parents that this is likely to be a long term arrangement.”

BSA chief executive Robin Fletcher told HuffPost UK that “many overseas boarders” studying in the UK had already left schools because of the threat of Covid-19.

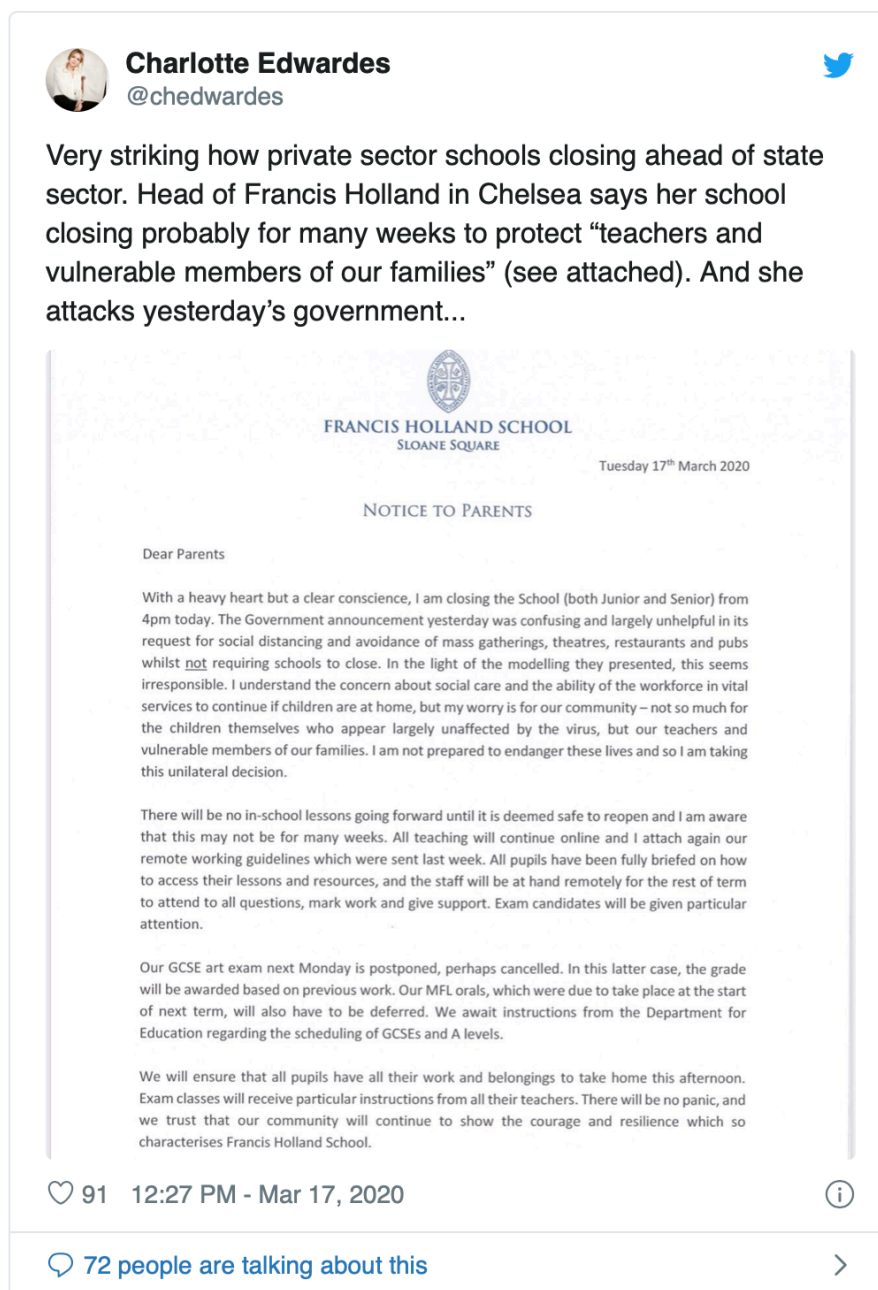
“The chief priority for all boarding schools is the safety and welfare of boarders,” he said.

“In a situation where schools may be worried about staffing or caring for boarders who may develop symptoms, we naturally advise them to consider allowing boarders to return home, either in the UK or overseas.

Fletcher added: “We are aware that many overseas boarders at boarding schools have already done this.” While Boris Johnson advised Brits on Wednesday to avoid all non-essential social contact in a bid to slow the spread of coronavirus, with the official death count in the UK at 71, schools have been told to remain open.

However, some parents have also pulled their children out of schools over fears their families could be infected with the virus.

Meanwhile, Francis Holland School – an exclusive fee-paying girls school in Chelsea – announced on Tuesday it was closing its doors because of coronavirus, slamming the government’s advice as “irresponsible” and “unhelpful”.



The image is a screenshot of a tweet from Charlotte Edwardes (@chedwardes). The tweet text reads: "Very striking how private sector schools closing ahead of state sector. Head of Francis Holland in Chelsea says her school closing probably for many weeks to protect 'teachers and vulnerable members of our families' (see attached). And she attacks yesterday's government..." Below the text is a screenshot of a letter from Francis Holland School, Sloane Square, dated Tuesday 17th March 2020. The letter is titled "NOTICE TO PARENTS" and is addressed to "Dear Parents". The letter's content is as follows: "With a heavy heart but a clear conscience, I am closing the School (both Junior and Senior) from 4pm today. The Government announcement yesterday was confusing and largely unhelpful in its request for social distancing and avoidance of mass gatherings, theatres, restaurants and pubs whilst not requiring schools to close. In the light of the modelling they presented, this seems irresponsible. I understand the concern about social care and the ability of the workforce in vital services to continue if children are at home, but my worry is for our community – not so much for the children themselves who appear largely unaffected by the virus, but our teachers and vulnerable members of our families. I am not prepared to endanger these lives and so I am taking this unilateral decision." "There will be no in-school lessons going forward until it is deemed safe to reopen and I am aware that this may not be for many weeks. All teaching will continue online and I attach again our remote working guidelines which were sent last week. All pupils have been fully briefed on how to access their lessons and resources, and the staff will be at hand remotely for the rest of term to attend to all questions, mark work and give support. Exam candidates will be given particular attention." "Our GCSE art exam next Monday is postponed, perhaps cancelled. In this latter case, the grade will be awarded based on previous work. Our MFL orals, which were due to take place at the start of next term, will also have to be deferred. We await instructions from the Department for Education regarding the scheduling of GCSEs and A levels." "We will ensure that all pupils have all their work and belongings to take home this afternoon. Exam classes will receive particular instructions from all their teachers. There will be no panic, and we trust that our community will continue to show the courage and resilience which so characterises Francis Holland School." The tweet interface shows 91 likes, the time 12:27 PM - Mar 17, 2020, and 72 people talking about this.

In a statement, a spokesperson for the government said that while closing schools would have a “substantial” impact on children’s education and the workforce, “the benefit to public health may not be”. “Decisions on future advice to schools will be taken based on the latest and best scientific evidence, which at this stage suggests children are a lower risk group,” they said. “The advice from Public Health England continues to be for schools to remain open, unless advised otherwise.”