

High school seniors to return to school next week

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A teacher of a sixth-grade class, teaches an online class from an empty classroom in Borame Elementary School in Seoul, Friday. South Korea has introduced online classes for elementary, middle and high schools to ensure the safety of teachers and students during the coronavirus pandemic. /Yonhap

By Bahk Eun-ji

The education and health authorities will forge ahead with their plan to reopen schools for high school seniors next week, despite a recent spike in COVID-19 infections involving teachers and students, officials said Friday.

High school seniors are expected to return to school May 20, while those in other grades will return to school gradually over the following weeks.

"The Ministry of Education (MOE) is expected to proceed with its plan to reopen schools for high school seniors next week. The health authorities have been conducting strict disinfection of school facilities in preparation for their return," said Vice Health Minister Kim Gang-lip in a regular briefing at the Government Complex in Sejong.

For other students, the MOE said a further delay is "under consideration" and depends on developments over the weekend.

"For high school seniors, we are not considering an additional delay for the reopening of schools, scheduled May 20, because they have to take the university entrance exam this winter," said Vice Education Minister Park Baeg-beom in a separate briefing Thursday.

According to the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC), 27 new cases of COVID-19 were detected Thursday, with 22 of them being local infections, bringing the nation's total number to 11,018. Of the new cases, 17 were connected to people who went to bars and clubs in Itaewon between April 24 and May 6, according to the KCDC.

As of noon Friday, a total of 153 people have tested positive in connection with the Itaewon outbreak, including 90 club goers and 63 of their family members and coworkers, indicating that secondary and tertiary infections from the nightclub cases have already emerged. In addition, a teenage student and his mother in Incheon were confirmed to have contracted the virus after the student's teacher at a private institute spent time in Itaewon clubs and later tested positive.

The recent surge in infections pushed the education ministry to postpone school opening several times.

The latest decision to delay was made earlier this week following the outbreak in Itaewon. Initially the ministry planned a phased reopening nationwide starting Wednesday, in line with its relaxed social distancing measures that went into effect May 6.

Many parents have raised concerns over whether schools are ready to be opened and how effectively disease control measures will be carried out in classrooms.

As of Friday, more than 200,000 people have signed a petition filed on the presidential office website, calling for another delay. The government has to respond to petitions that gain more than 200,000 signatures within a month.