

# COVID-19 in EEB1: current situation, outlook and possible mitigating measures

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# COVID-19 in EEB1: current situation, outlook and possible mitigating measures

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# Introduction

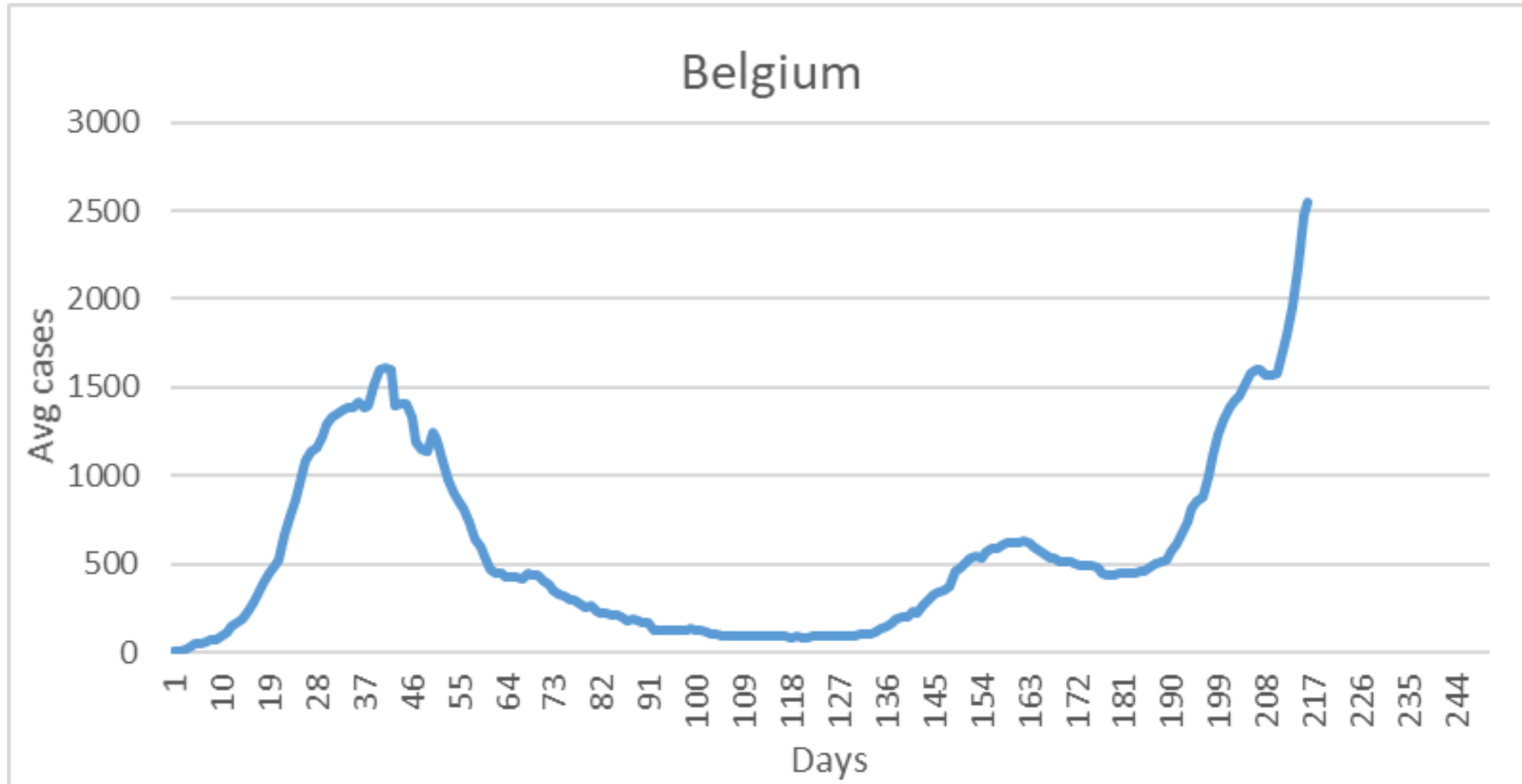
- COVID-19 epidemic caught the world by surprise in early 2020.
- As summer holidays ended, restrictions were eased and schools and universities re-opened, cases and fatalities increasing in a large majority of European countries.
- Belgium has been particularly affected by this, and EEB1 has seen an increasing number of cases.
- Need to consider the response of the school and role of APEE

# Introduction – COVID-19 epidemiological facts

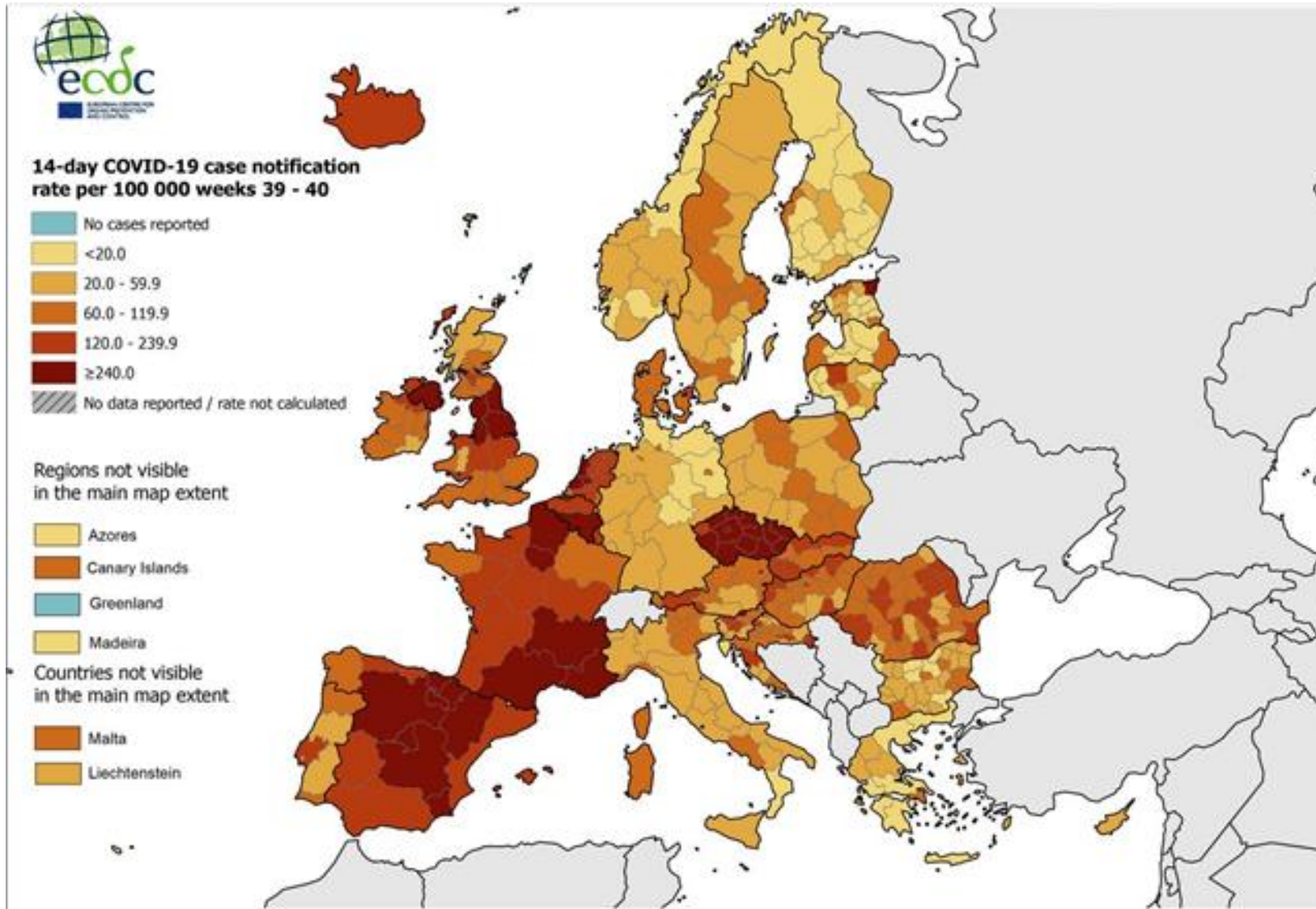
- COVID-19 is typically mild for children
- However children can contract and transmit COVID-19 and are more likely to be asymptomatic, so harder to detect
- Children expected to be less likely to be infected and transmit COVID-19 than grown-ups. However, infectiousness increases with age and teenagers above 14 years of age are similar to adults
- Environments such as schools and buses are environments where long periods of time are spent in crowded conditions with poor ventilation. These conditions are very favourable for COVID spread.
- Scientific debate still ongoing

# Epidemiological situation in Belgium

Evolution of the number of cases



# Epidemiological situation in Belgium



# Epidemiological situation in Belgium

- During the first wave Belgium suffered one of the highest numbers of cases and fatalities relative to its population
- Currently exponential growth in cases, hospitalisations and deaths. Hospitals delaying operations to maintain 25% of ICU capacity for COVID-19 patients
- Positivity rate currently above 10% (17% in Brussels), above 5% WHO threshold. Testing capacity overwhelmed.
- Belgium classified by ECDC at highest risk level. Amongst highest number of cases per population in EU in this second wave too.

# Epidemiological situation in Belgium

- The higher the transmission in society, the higher the risk of transmission in schools.
- This has clear implications for the European Schools
- As transmission in Belgium increases, the risk for schools increases as well
- **This suggests that the measures to reduce transmission within schools may have to be increased as transmission in Belgium increases**



# COVID-19 Belgian school guidance

- EEB1 has applied Belgian guidance designed by Sciensano
- Priority to keep schools open with full in situ learning (yellow code)
- Restricted testing of cases
- Restricted definition of high-risk contacts

# COVID-19 Belgian school guidance as implemented in EEB

- EEB1 has applied this Belgian guidance in the same spirit
- Disinfection and hygiene rules
- No distancing or masks for primary and maternelle children;
- No spreading out of classes into more spacious surroundings;
- Use of distance learning is reserved for exceptional cases, where teachers are quarantined.
- Little attention given to ensuring adequate ventilation.

# COVID-19 Belgian school guidance as implemented in EEB1: definition of contacts

- Definition of high-risk contact very restrictive in Belgian guidance, distance main factor, assumes masks 100% protective
- As long as minimum distance is kept or masks are worn, secondary students and teachers in classroom considered low-risk contacts.
- For primary students, students and teacher are low-risk contact
- For maternelle students only teacher deemed to be a high-risk contact

# COVID-19 Belgian school guidance as implemented in EEB1: definition of contacts

- Belgian guidance falls short of the higher standards of the European Centre for infectious Disease Control (ECDC): pupils and teachers in enclosed space for >15 minutes are high-risk contacts .
- Highly relevant to EEB1: crowded classrooms and in secondary students grouped by section, but also by subjects
- **EEB1 should consider updating its close contact definitions in line with the best practice as identified by the ECDC, particularly given its high student density and use of school buses**

# COVID-19 Belgian school guidance as implemented in EEB1: Ventilation

- EEB1 has implemented relatively few ventilation measures
- Aerosol transmission means that COVID-19 can build up in the air if a crowded indoor space is shared for long periods of time
- Use of masks and good ventilation are key to preventing this type of spread

# COVID-19 Belgian school guidance as implemented in EEB1: Ventilation

- Flemish authorities now provide detailed advice on good ventilation in schools against COVID-19
- Schools recommended to use CO<sub>2</sub> meters to monitor quality of ventilation in classrooms (Co<sub>2</sub> below 900 ppm)
- Mitigating measures can be cheap (opening windows and doors at intervals) or expensive (air purifiers, as in some German schools)
- **EEB1 should be proactive in implementing these recommendations**

# COVID-19 Belgian school guidance as implemented in EEB1: move to code Orange

- Belgian schools are currently in Code yellow (full in-situ learning)
- Belgian community authorities have invested political capital in keeping Code yellow
- This may not be sustainable. Increasing political pressure as the situation is not consistent with the description of Code yellow (“limited COVID-19 outbreaks”) and more consistent with at least that for Code orange (“generalised community transmission”)
- **EEB1 needs to be ready to move to code Orange when required by the Belgian authorities (secondary would move to hybrid in situ – distance learning)**
- Belgian legislation allows Belgian schools and universities to voluntarily move to code Orange to reduce risk to their students and some of them have indeed done this. This may be also be a possibility for EEB1

# COVID-19 Belgian school guidance as implemented in EEB1: move to code Orange

- Belgian schools are currently in Code yellow (full in-situ learning). Belgian community authorities have invested a great deal of political capital in keeping Code yellow
- This may not be sustainable. Increasing political pressure as transmission in the community increases. Current situation not consistent with the agreed Code yellow description (“limited COVID-19 outbreaks”) and closer to Code orange (“generalised community transmission”)
- Code orange would involve hybrid learning with 50% split between in situ and distance learning for S3 onwards, full in situ learning for everybody else. Distancing within the school would be reinforced
- **EEB1 needs to be ready to move to code Orange when required by the Belgian authorities**
- Belgian legislation allows Belgian schools and universities to voluntarily move to code Orange to reduce risk to their students and some of them have indeed done this. This may be also be a possibility for EEB1 as it would automatically lead to greater distancing within the school and buses



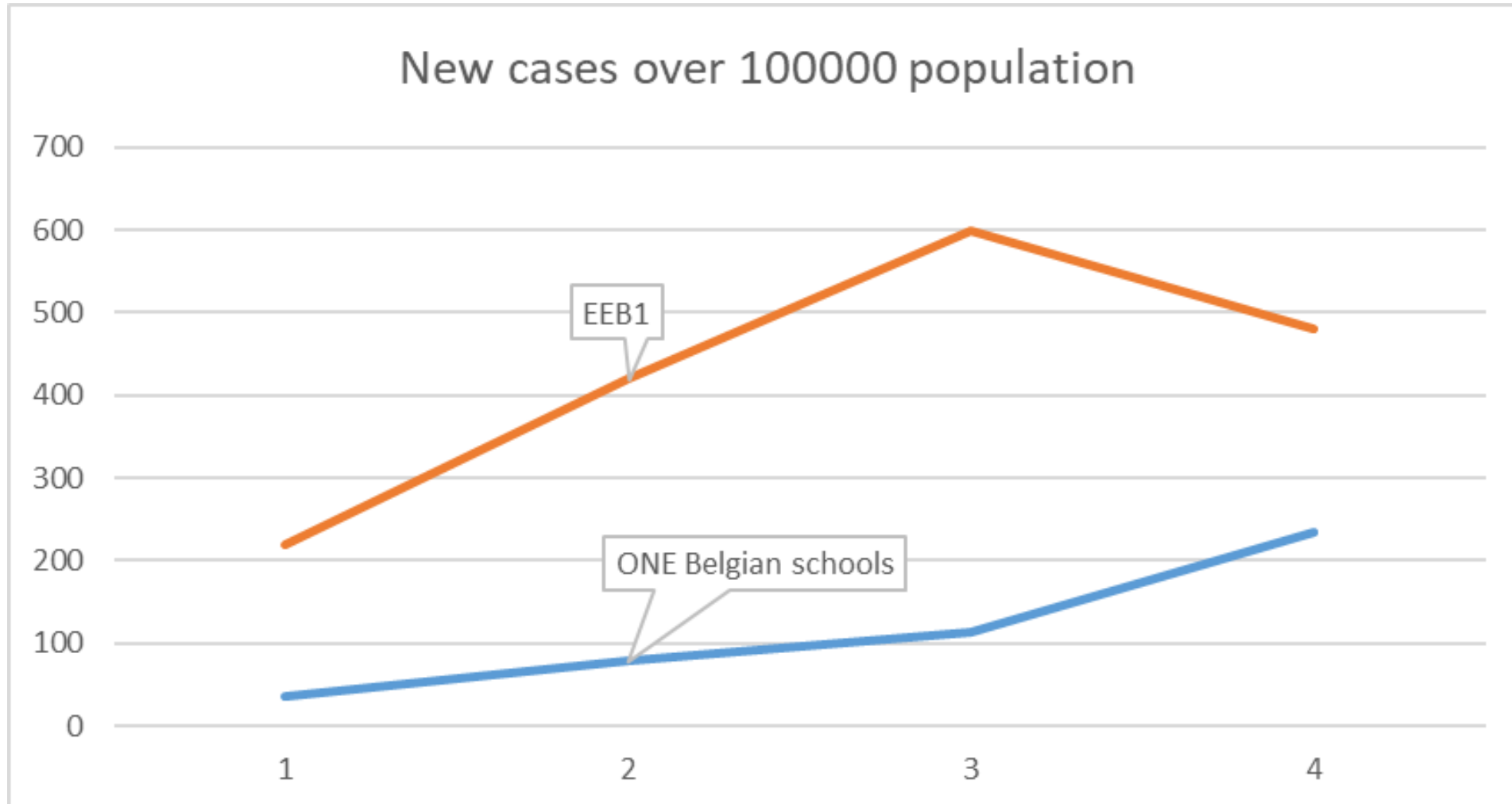
# Epidemiological situation in EEB1

- Since the beginning of the school year, EEB1 has informed parents weekly of the number of new cases detected
- This transparency is to be praised
- Overall numbers appear to be relatively low and EEB1 communications are upbeat: School administration expects to continue current arrangements, perceived as successful
- However, analysis of the data so far gives rise to concerns

# Epidemiological situation in EEB1

| EEB1                                 | EEBI POSITIVE CASES TO DATE |           |           | WEEK TOTAL | Weekly cases per 100,000 | EEB1 Risk level weekly cases | 14-day cases per 100,000 | ECDC risk level 14-day cases | Belgian Francophone Schools<br>14-day cases per 100,000 |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------|------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|---|
|                                      | PRI+SEC teachers            | PRI pupil | SEC pupil |            |                          |                              |                          |                              |   |
| Week 1 (7-11 Sept)                   | 1                           | 2         | 0         | 3          | 60                       | >50                          |                          |                              |   |
| Week 2 (14-18 Sept)                  | 4                           | 3         | 1         | 8          | 160                      | >120                         | 220                      | >120                         | 36  |
| Week 3 (21-25 Sept)                  | 2                           | 3         | 8         | 13         | 260                      | >120                         | 420                      | >240                         | 80  |
| Week 4 (28-2 Oct)                    | 3                           | 4         | 10        | 17         | 340                      | >120                         | 600                      | >240                         | 114   |
| <b>Week 5 (5-9 Oct) - incomplete</b> | 0                           | 0         | 7         | 7          | 140                      | >120                         | 480                      | >240                         | 235   |
| <b>Cumulative Total</b>              | <b>10</b>                   | <b>12</b> | <b>26</b> | <b>48</b>  |                          |                              |                          |                              |   |

# Epidemiological situation in EEB1



14-day COVID-19 case incidence in EEB1 vs ONE Belgian schools, based on data as of 9<sup>th</sup> October

# Epidemiological situation in EEB1

- Cases are relatively high compared to Belgian schools and according to ECDC risk thresholds and CDC school guidance
- Increasing trend (last week's data is incomplete)
- Data confirms increase in cases in Belgium and Brussels is leading to increased cases in EEB1
- **As the situation deteriorates in Brussels, controlling COVID-19 cases in EEB1 will become increasingly difficult and new measures may be necessary. Standing still is unlikely to be sufficient.**

# Conclusions

- The situation is very serious. Exponential increase in cases in Belgium and in EEB1 show that new measures are likely to be necessary to curb spread of COVID-19 in school
- Best practice ventilation recommendations and high-risk contact definition should be strongly considered
- A clear plan for move to code orange should be developed
- Further proactive measures should be identified by school to enable cases within the school to remain under control