Principals Urged to Plan for a Possible Flu Pandemic

It's that time of year again when the number of students and staff with coughs, colds, fevers, and sneezes abounds in schools everywhere. And although it may seem more immediate to focus on how the seasonal/common flu will affect your school this year, principals should be setting their sights on the preparation necessary to combat a flu pandemic that scientists predict is due to occur.

The federal government has taken this potential health crisis extremely seriously, and numerous agencies—including the U.S. Department of Education, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the National Institutes of Health—have collaborated to help those on the local level formulate plans to prepare and respond to a possible flu pandemic.

Although this threat may seem far-removed for many principals, it is important for them, at minimum, to "begin educating themselves, their staff, their community about what a pandemic is," says Camille Welborn, special adviser on pandemic influenza to the U.S. Secretary of Education. Also, "they can be putting infectious disease preparation in place." It needs to "start now," she advises.

Flu Pandemic vs. Seasonal Flu
Some may confuse pandemic flu with common flu, but on a larger scale. However, the main difference between the two is that a flu pandemic occurs when a new influenza virus emerges for which humans have little or no immunity. Therefore, the disease can spread easily from person to person, with the possibility of more severe symptoms, more frequent complications, and a higher death toll, according to the Web site PandemicFlu.gov. Even healthy people can be at increased risk for serious complications during a flu pandemic.

Conversely, for the seasonal flu vaccines are available and most people have some immunity built up from previous exposure, making it easier to control. Typically, the very young and the elderly are...
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most at risk for serious complications.
During the last flu pandemic in 1968, there were approximately 34,000 deaths in the United States, according to the National Institutes of Health. Back in 1918, a flu pandemic killed more than 500,000 people in the United States and 20 million to 50 million people worldwide.

Since schools, especially those with younger children, can be viewed as breeding grounds for the spread of any illness—from chicken pox to the common cold—it is no surprise that school officials are being urged to take precautions when it comes to a health crisis of this magnitude. But what, specifically, should school leaders be doing?

Schoolwide Planning
Welborn says principals must be proactive in their planning. Educating yourself about flu pandemics is your first defense. Then, educate your staff and students, and stress the importance of following effective infection-prevention policies and procedures that help limit the spread of the disease. This includes teaching good hand hygiene, and cough and sneeze etiquette.

Next, Welborn advises principals to update their emergency management plans to include a section addressing pandemic influenza. The Department of Education has posted a brochure on its Web site that outlines the basic components and information that a school’s pandemic influenza plan should comprise.

“The planning for this hazard is so different because of how long this pandemic may last,” Welborn says, “but [it] definitely overlaps” with most schools’ current emergency management plans.

Welborn says principals also should contact their school district to make sure that pandemic flu planning is in the works. "The planning for this hazard is so different because of how long this pandemic may last," Welborn says, "but [it] definitely overlaps" with most schools' current emergency management plans.

Welborn says principals also should contact their school district to make sure that pandemic flu planning is in the works. Jane E. Hampton, principal of Oak Mountain Elementary School in Alabama, has been kept up-to-date on the Shelby County School System’s plans. In August, the district’s principals were shown a video produced by the state with background details of when the last flu epidemic occurred in Alabama. "It was shocking."

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Hampton said, "I was unaware of the thought of something of that magnitude happening."

Hampton soon will be receiving videos from the central office and superintendent to share with her staff, as well as instructions for preparation. "We don't want to panic," she says, "We just want to take precautions."

Roger Nyffeler, principal of Central Elementary School in Nebraska, also is taking precautions. During the summer, he worked in collaboration with the Two Rivers Public Health Department, which has been assembling a pandemic action kit for schools. "The action kit provides and addresses almost every answer to all of our questions related to pandemic flu concerns, and it provides examples of communication that we as a school district...can use to educate our public and our parents," Nyffeler says.

There is no way to prevent a flu pandemic from occurring; however, there are many steps principals can take to help control it to the best extent possible in their schools and community. With coordinated and proactive planning, principals won’t be caught unprepared in the midst of what potentially can become one of the nation’s greatest health crises in nearly 40 years.

—Vanessa St. Gerard

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