

Feds Advise Schools to Remain Open During Potential H1N1 Outbreak

Elementary and middle-level schools should stay open this fall even if some children become ill with the H1N1 virus, unless they serve a large population of students with underlying health issues, advise federal officials in guidelines issued to help principals and health officials prepare for a potential resurgence of the illness and the seasonal flu.

They cite new information suggesting that the disruption caused by closing schools outweighs the potential benefits of doing so. "It is now clear closure of schools is rarely indicated," said Thomas Frieden, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Even if H1N1 is in the school, there are measures we can take to protect the students, to protect the staff and allow learning to continue."

This past spring when the H1N1 virus spread across the U.S, more than 500,000 kids were affected by school closings, Education Secretary Arne Duncan said, adding that if some schools must close, principals and district officials should develop plans to "keep learning going" for students who must remain at home for several days. CDC guidelines for schools follow.

Under conditions with similar severity as in spring 2009:

- Students and staff who become ill should be isolated in a room separate from others until they can be sent home. The CDC recommends that they and their caregivers wear surgical masks.
- Make sure staff and families know that individuals should stay home when sick, wash hands frequently with soap and water, and cover noses and mouths when coughing or sneezing.
- Routinely clean areas that students and staff touch often. Special cleaning with bleach and other nondetergent-based cleaners is not necessary.
- Advise parents of children with asthma, diabetes, and compromised immune systems, among other underlying health conditions, to speak with their health care provider as soon as possible.
- Consider dismissal if a school community has a large population of "medically fragile" students.

Under conditions of increased severity compared with spring 2009:

- Check students and staff for fever and other flu symptoms when they get to school, separate those who are ill, and send them home as soon as possible. Be vigilant in identifying students and other staff who appear ill during the day.
- Advise high-risk students and staff to stay home when the flu is circulating in the community, but make plans to continue educating students at home through instructional phone calls, homework packets, and Web-based lessons, among other approaches.
- Ask students with ill household members to stay home for five days after the first day the first household member became ill.

- Increase distance among individuals by moving desks farther apart and canceling classes that combine children from different classrooms.
- Require people with flu-like illness to stay home for at least seven days, even if they have no more symptoms. If people are still sick, they should stay home for 24 hours after they have no symptoms.
- Work with health officials to balance the risks of flu with the disruption dismissals will cause.
- Make plans for reactive dismissal if a school cannot maintain normal functioning, such as if significant numbers of students come to school despite recommendations that ill children remain at home.
- Use preemptive dismissals to decrease the spread of flu or if it causes severe disease in a significantly larger proportion of those affected.

For more information, go to www.naesp.org or www.flu.gov. ■

Let's Fight Flu Together!

Prevent and minimize the flu in your school this fall by setting up an on-site vaccination clinic, courtesy of a members-only benefit offered through a partnership between NAESP and FluBusters, a national company that provides on-site preventive health and wellness services.

At no cost to you, FluBusters will provide schools with educational materials and fliers for communicating to parents and the community, offer your staff and community members the opportunity to schedule an appointment online, and work with your school nurse or another local nurse to provide the vaccinations.

Register your school today by calling toll-free, 866-FLU-BUST and be sure to mention you're an NAESP member to receive this free service. Find details online at www.flubusters.com/naesp.

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