



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

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Dear School Administrators:

As schools re-open this fall, we want to thank you, your staff and school nurses for your leadership in planning for the challenges created by the novel influenza H1N1 virus this academic year. The Virginia Department of Health (VDH) and the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) are working closely together to minimize the impact of this unpredictable disease as students head back to classrooms.

VDH has confirmed the novel H1N1 virus in all regions of Virginia. The current severity of illness resulting from this virus is similar to that of the seasonal flu strains. We anticipate that the virus will continue to circulate this fall; however, it remains uncertain as to how widespread and severe influenza illness will be during the fall and winter seasons.

As we plan for flu season, there are a number of strategies to keep students and staff healthy, slow the spread of infection, and limit disruptions for learning. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and VDH do not consider school closure an effective means of controlling influenza in either a school or community, given the rapid pace of infection spread from person to person.

School closure is unlikely to be recommended unless absenteeism levels interfere with the school's ability to function (i.e., not enough teachers) or the majority of student enrollment is of individuals at high risk for flu complications. In the event your school should close, please report closure information to the CDC at:

http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/schools/dismissal_form/pdf/dismissal_form.pdf.

Based on the current severity of novel influenza A (H1N1), the following steps should be considered. Please note we will provide updated guidance should this virus cause increased severity of illness.

Here are some actions schools can take:

- Encourage faculty and staff to receive a seasonal flu vaccine as early as possible.
- Update emergency plans and contact lists. Create a plan if you do not have one now. For ideas, visit <http://www.ed.gov/emergencyplan>.
- Encourage good hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette. Teach proper hand washing techniques and provide appropriate supplies for hand washing.
- Encourage staff, parents and guardians to monitor their school-aged children and themselves for flu-like symptoms. CDC recommends staying home for 24 hours after the fever is gone without the use of fever-reducing medications.
- Develop plans that emphasize the need for students, faculty or staff with flu-like symptoms, including fever and either cough or sore throat to stay home.
- Isolate a sick student or staff member in a separate room until it is possible for them to go home. CDC recommends that they wear a surgical mask, if possible.
- Advise parents and guardians to develop contingency plans should their children become sick and need to leave school early or need to stay home.
- Track flu-like illness in students, faculty and staff. If your school experiences sudden or sustained increases in the number of people with flu-like illness, contact your local health department promptly to report this information.
- Remind sick students and staff that most people, including children, recover quickly without treatment unless there are chronic underlying conditions, such as pregnancy, asthma, diabetes, immune compromise and other diseases. If health is compromised, or in case of severe illness, call a doctor to see if antiviral treatment is appropriate.
- Stay informed. We encourage you to monitor the CDC Web site. CDC has issued new guidance for schools at its Web site:
<http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/schools/schoolguidance.htm>.
- For the latest guidance and resources for schools in Virginia, visit http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/health_medical/influenza/index.shtml.
- Meet with your local health department (see <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/lhd/>) to assure that your planning efforts are integrated and that the communication process for responding to and monitoring outbreaks of illness are clarified.

In addition to the recommended seasonal flu vaccine, a novel H1N1 flu vaccine is being prepared for use this fall. Some schools may choose to host flu immunization activities at their facilities, either during or after school hours. Private physicians, your local health department, or other organizations may also provide flu vaccination services. Information regarding the novel H1N1 vaccination program will be available through your local health department. There are no plans to require flu vaccine for school entry or attendance. If you are interested in hosting influenza vaccinations at your school, please contact Rebecca Early via e-mail at jrebecca.early@vdh.virginia.gov or telephone at 804-864-8083 or your local health department.

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The CDC Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices has recommended that certain groups of the population receive the novel H1N1 vaccine when it first becomes available. Among them are pregnant women; people who live with or care for children younger than 6 months of age; healthcare and emergency services personnel; persons between the ages of 6 months and 24 years old; and those persons 25 through 64 years of age who are at higher risk for novel H1N1 complications because of chronic health disorders or compromised immune systems.

The Virginia Department of Education and Virginia Department of Health will work together to provide you with timely information as we begin the school year. For the latest guidance and resources for schools in Virginia, visit http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/health_medical/influenza/index.shtml. Should you have additional questions Please contact your local health department, call the VDH public inquiry center at 1-877-275-8343 or Tia Campbell, VDOE school health specialist, at 804-786-8671 or tia.campbell@doe.virginia.gov.

Sincerely,



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Karen Remley, MD, MBA, FAAP
State Health Commissioner

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