

# **Pandemic Influenza Planning for Schools Social Distancing Strategies by Pandemic Phase**

The World Health Organization has identified three periods of a pandemic: interpandemic period, pandemic alert period and the pandemic period. Each period has corresponding phases. The phases reflect the progression of influenza from the animal population to the human population, from overseas to the United States and localities.

## **Pandemic Influenza Periods and Associated Phases**

### **Interpandemic Period (Phases 1 & 2)**

Phase 1- No new influenza subtypes have been detected in humans.

Phase 2- No new influenza subtypes have been detected in humans. However, a circulating animal influenza virus subtype poses a substantial risk of human disease.

### **Pandemic Alert Period (Phases 3, 4 & 5)**

Phase 3- Human infection(s) with a new subtype, but no human-to-human transmission.

Phase 4- Small clusters with limited human-to-human transmission. Spread is highly localized.

Phase 5- Larger clusters but human-to-human spread is still localized, suggesting that the virus is becoming increasingly better adapted to humans.

### **Pandemic Period (Phase 6) –flu in the USA and/or localities**

Phase 6- Increased and sustained transmission in the general population. Stage six includes recovery and preparation for subsequent waves.

## **Authority to Close Schools**

The *Code of Virginia*, the Constitution of Virginia, and the Virginia Administrative Code provide the authority to close schools or institute quarantine as follows:

- The Governor of Virginia has the authority to declare a state of emergency when the safety and welfare of the people of the Commonwealth require the exercise of emergency measures due to a threatened or actual disaster (*Code of Virginia* at § 44-146.17(7)).
- The State Health Commissioner has the authority to require quarantine and/or isolation under exceptional circumstances involving any communicable disease or public health threat (*Code of Virginia* at § 32.1-43).

- The ability of local school boards and superintendents to close school is inherent in the power given to them in Article VIII, Section 7 of the Constitution of Virginia.
- The Board of Health has the authority to close schools in order to prevent a potential emergency caused by a disease dangerous to public health (*Code of Virginia* at § 32.1-42).

## **Social Distancing**

Social distancing describes the physical distance between individuals or groups in society. Social distancing refers to focused measures to increase social distance, or activity restrictions, such as increasing distance between student desks, canceling sports activities, and closing schools. Early social distancing strategies may reduce exposure, infection and spread of influenza. School divisions should identify and implement social distancing strategies appropriate to pandemic phases. A step down approach for social distancing will be discussed in each phase of the pandemic.

## **School Closure**

The decision to close schools is complex. Therefore, it is not feasible to give a one-size-fits-all answer to the question, “When should schools close?” Division superintendents and school boards, in consultation with local health directors, are in the best position to assess the needs of the community when determining when schools should close. Communication and coordination with local businesses is suggested to ensure an adequate workforce and appropriate parental supervision of children. Prolonged disruption of the education system could severely impact other key social structures (i.e., conflicts for working parents, high absenteeism in the workplace, structures critical to the pandemic response).

Community actions may significantly reduce illness and death. Triggers for closing school may include increased absenteeism, decreased instructional and support workforce, students kept at home out of fear, the number and severity of cases of influenza in the community and surrounding area, inability to get needed supplies (i.e., food, heating oil, no public transportation), and the need to use the facility for other purposes.

The CDC has prepared *Interim Pre-pandemic Planning Guidance: Community Strategy for Pandemic Influenza Mitigation in the United States- Early, Targeted, Layered Use of Nonpharmaceutical Interventions*. This document outlines school closure depending upon the Pandemic Severity Index. The Pandemic Severity Index is based upon the case fatality ratio (the proportion of deaths among clinically ill persons). This document provides valuable guidance. However, waiting for the case fatality ratio will severely diminish the advantages of early social distancing efforts to contain and control the spread of disease. Death rate data would be available too late to impact school closure

decisions. Therefore, the VDOE recommends a tiered approach to social distancing strategies. Closing schools is a form of social distancing and should be considered during the Pandemic Period but is not the only strategy available to school divisions. Closing schools will only be an effective social distancing strategy if coordinated with local businesses and community operations so that students stay at home.

## **School Closure Strategies by Pandemic Phase**

### Interpandemic Period (Phases 1 & 2)

- Confirm that the pandemic plan is complete and has been recently reviewed.
- Provide community education regarding pandemic influenza and the school's pandemic flu response plan.
- Promote prevention strategies such as hand washing and coughing/sneezing into the sleeve or tissue.
- Identify social distancing strategies to put in place for your school division should you have to use them.

### Pandemic Alert Period (Phases 3, 4 & 5)

- Review staffing plan and activate utilization of substitutes and volunteer staff as appropriate.
- Increase disinfection of the building.
- Place hand sanitizer outside each classroom.
- Increase social distancing strategies: move desks further apart, maintain space between people when walking in the hallways, and other strategies to decrease large numbers of students intermingling such as suspending programs held in the school auditorium, canceling sporting events, and eating lunch in the cafeteria.
- Prepare the community for altered school schedules or school closure.
- Prepare taped lessons and/or finalize methods for continuing instruction in case of school closure (i.e., public television, internet).
- Finalize procedures for implementing social distancing strategies such as, rotating teachers instead of students, modifying school hours/days of operation, or complete school closure.
- Provide frequent training for school staff in procedures and protocols.

- Implement infection control measures such as isolation of students with a new cough and fever.
- Increase communication with parents and the community.

#### Pandemic Period (Phase 6)

- Offer a range of options for schools to meet the needs of individual school divisions and communities as dictated by the severity of the pandemic in the locality:
  - Suspend large gatherings
  - Rotate teachers to classrooms instead of students mixing (especially at the secondary level)
  - Modify school hours/days of operation (i.e., students with last names A-J come to school Monday and Wednesday, students with last names K-Z come to school on Tuesday and Thursday)
  - Stagger school hours (split days or weeks)
  - Complete school closure
  - Implement alternate methods of instruction
- Implement procedures to identify and report suspected and confirmed cases of pandemic influenza.
- School divisions must plan for the reopening and continued operation of schools. Plans must be communicated with parents and the community.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of alternate instructional methods and modify for subsequent waves of disruption.

## Conclusion

The advantages of closing school must be weighed against the impact on the community. Closing schools will only help to decrease the spread of a pandemic if other meeting places, such as local shopping malls, are closed as well. Social distancing options may provide alternative strategies to closing school or may provide a phased approach to school closure. School divisions need to have clear guidelines in place to ensure smooth implementation of their plan in the event of a pandemic event.