

Although it is impossible to predict when the next pandemic flu might occur or its severity, it is a known fact that schools tend to be affected by outbreaks more than other settings because school children transmit illnesses easily to one another. Rather than the three “R’s” normally associated with education, school administrators are encouraged to remember the three “T’s” to prepare their school community for a possible pandemic flu.

According to Education Secretary, Margaret Spellings, "There are three key steps to take: One, TALK to your local health officials and work together to develop a plan. Then secondly, TRAIN your teachers and administrators to implement the plan. And finally, TEACH students and parents so they understand what to do in the event of a pandemic."

Secretary Spellings recommends that schools develop strong partnerships with their community partners to develop an effective plan that could be integrated into existing emergency management plans.

In response, school districts in Idaho have participated in Pandemic Flu Summits presented at the local level by health departments across the state to plan and prepare for a potential pandemic and to begin establishing partnerships.

Issues addressed during these flu planning summits, included the need for schools to prepare for possible school closings, staff and student absences, potential budget strains, creative means to maintain the learning environment, and the possibility that schools may need to be utilized as make-shift hospitals or mass vaccination sites.

Key considerations schools took away from these summits included the following.

- Determine necessary policies/procedures for school closing, since school closure has proven to be an effective means of reducing overall illness rates within communities. School closures may range from several weeks to an extended period of time.

- High transmissions among school populations, combined with a lack of immunity and no vaccine availability for at least several months, could result in extensive absenteeism for both students and staff. Administration could be forced to extend the academic year in addition to spending additional funds for substitute teachers and sick leave for staff.

- Other school-related and extra curricular activities may be cancelled. Public and social gatherings will be discouraged or banned and emergency staffing plans or flex scheduling may need to be implemented.

Schools can disseminate infection prevention information to teachers, students, parents, and the local community to help limit the spread of illness. Social distancing or measures to discourage people from coming in close contact with each other may also be implemented to reduce the spread of the disease.

Schools can implement a surveillance system in partnership with health departments to track rapid increase of absences due to illness and/or communicable disease.

Possible alternative uses of school buildings during a pandemic, such as for mass immunization clinics or hospitals.

Accommodations for students with special needs, such as low income students who rely on the school food service for daily meals, those who have physical handicaps, and those who do not speak English as their first language will need to be addressed.

Schools should plan for continuity of instruction with alternative learning strategies in the event of school closures, such as web-based instruction; providing electronic tests; and instruction via local radio or television.

As the center of community life, it is essential that educators collaborate with state and local officials to prepare for a potential pandemic. Steps taken now will lessen the impact of such an occurrence, or may be adapted to enhance school preparedness in order to face any challenge.

“Partnerships between public and private entities are the way it should be, especially when it comes to something as important as protecting our children against contagious or infectious diseases,” said Jonathan Cline, Area Director of Elementary Schools for the Caldwell School District. “Everyone in the community benefits from such partnerships.”

Existing contingency plans are recommended for school districts by the U. S. Department of Education (Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide For Schools and Communities, <http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/emergencyplan/crisisplanning.pdf>).

The U. S. Department of Education, in partnership with the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, developed a pandemic flu checklist for schools. The checklist is available at : <http://www.pandemic.flu.gov/plan/school/schoolchecklist.html/>.

The U. S. Department of Education has resources, tools, and examples of emergency response and crisis planning available at www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/emergencyplan/pandemic/index.html.