

Guidance for the Control of School-based Influenza Outbreaks
Philadelphia Department of Public Health
June 10, 2009

Assessment of Situation:

The Philadelphia Department of Public Health (PDPH) is working closely with the Philadelphia School District and schools across the city to ensure the health of children as the novel H1N1 strain of influenza is affecting our community. In recent days, we have observed a significant increase in illness in Philadelphia caused by this new strain of influenza. School-aged children are affected more than any other age group.

Influenza is spread easily from person to person through close contact, and community-wide transmission is expected to be high for several weeks. PDPH is working with officials at the School District to limit the spread of influenza in schools, and to keep schools open. The rationale for this approach is:

- This current strain of influenza appears to be similar in severity to the seasonal influenza that occurs each winter.
- Closing of schools where there are children who have influenza has not been proven to stop the spread of the flu, particularly in densely populated urban areas where children are likely to interact with each other outside of school, such as in community and recreation centers and other non-school locations.
- At this point in the epidemic, the uncertain benefit of school closure must be weighed against the certain costs and problems that school closure will create:
 - Loss of instructional time and educational opportunities for children
 - Temporary suspension of meals (breakfast and lunch) provided through school-based programs for a significant number of children in Philadelphia (which are critical for their health and good nutrition).
 - Loss of income and/or employment for parents and caregivers who rely on schools for childcare.
 - Risk of many unsupervised children during a school day
 - Potential spread of influenza from exposed children to others while the children are not in school

Control Plan:

To ensure the health of Philadelphia's children, the Philadelphia School District is working with PDPH to take significant measures to limit the spread of disease in schools. The recommended influenza control strategy consists of the following components:

1. Screening and Immediate Exclusion of Ill Students and Staff from School:

- All school staff (administration, faculty, and nurses) should be familiar with the symptoms of influenza. Staff should actively seek to identify children who have fever (100° F or higher), cough, sore throat, and other respiratory symptoms of influenza. These children should be immediately excluded from the classroom and referred to the nurse for evaluation.
- School nurses should evaluate children with respiratory symptoms suggestive of influenza. Nurses must be able to check temperatures and assess symptoms.
- Because of the high level of influenza cases in the community, children who have symptoms of influenza (e.g., influenza-like illness) can be assumed to have this infection, particularly if there are other cases in the school. They do not require laboratory testing to confirm that they have influenza.
- Any student with suspected influenza should be physically separated from other children in the nurse's office and immediately sent home with a parent or guardian, according to usual school procedures. These children may not ride the school bus home.
- For children who have influenza-like illness and underlying medical conditions (e.g., asthma, diabetes, physical disability), the school nurse should request that parents take these children to their personal physician for evaluation and consideration of treatment with an antiviral medication. These children are at higher risk for complications of influenza than previously healthy children.
- Any child or staff person with influenza-like illness should remain home for at least one week (7 days) after onset of symptoms. Children may return to school before the 7-day exclusion is complete only if accompanied by a note from a physician that confirms diagnosis other than influenza or influenza-like respiratory illness.
- Faculty and staff should self-monitor for signs of flu-like illness and not report to work if ill.

2. Physical Separation for Influenza Containment in School:

- After consultation with School Nurse, Nurse Coordinator, and PDPH, cancel or postpone all gatherings that bring students from different classes into close proximity, e.g., assemblies, meetings, sporting events.
- Cancel field trips that involve transporting children on buses.
- Cancel after-school events, concerts, meetings, etc. for the school.

- Alter meal schedules to reduce crowding in the cafeteria. Promote allowing students to eat meals in classrooms.
- Cohort medically fragile children with dedicated staff.

3. Environmental Controls for Limiting Spread of Influenza in the School

- School should promote respiratory hygiene practices, cough etiquette, frequent hand washing, limited sharing of personal items, etc. This can be done by classroom instruction, signage, or through other creative means.
- Schools should make sure that there are ample supplies of soap and paper towels in bathrooms. Supervision of hand washing for children in younger grades is encouraged.
- Hand sanitizer and tissues should be readily available in every classroom and office.
- Schools should be cleaned, as per usual routine, with special attention to frequently touched surfaces (e.g., rails and doorknobs).
- The use of masks for personal protection is not encouraged.

4. Education of Students, Parents, and Staff:

- General information should be conveyed to the school community regarding the transmission of influenza in the school. Information should include the following:
 - how influenza is transmitted
 - signs and symptoms of influenza
 - description of the school's exclusion policy for children ill from suspected influenza
 - importance of respiratory hygiene in preventing transmission of influenza
 - indications for seeking medical evaluation for influenza-like illness in a student
 - recommendation for parents of children with chronic medical problems to seek medical advice from their healthcare provider regarding antiviral treatment or prophylaxis