

Background

Novel H1N1 (referred to as “swine flu”) is a new influenza virus causing illness in people. This new virus was first detected in people in the United States in April 2009. This virus is spreading from person to person worldwide, probably in much the same way that regular seasonal influenza viruses spread. Illness with the new H1N1 virus has ranged from mild to severe. While most people who have been sick have recovered without needing medical treatment, hospitalizations and deaths from infection with this virus have occurred. The symptoms of H1N1 flu virus in people include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. A significant number of people who have been infected with this virus also have reported diarrhea and vomiting.

It is projected that communities across the nation will experience a significant increase in H1N1 cases as we approach the flu season. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are estimating that 30 to 50 percent of the population may get sick with H1N1. Given this projection, Providence Schools will remain vigilant in taking the necessary actions to reduce the spread of illness in our schools and district offices, thereby negating any interruption to learning; provide families and staff with timely, appropriate information about the status of flu illness in the district; and have contingency plans in place in the event that we experience excessive staff and student absences due to illness.

Collaboration with Public Health Agencies

To ensure that we have the most up-to-date information regarding the virus and that we are prepared and making decisions that are aligned with the directives from local and national public health and education agencies, Providence Schools will maintain regular communication and collaboration with the following agencies:

- Providence Emergency Management Agency
- RI Department of Health
- RI Department of Education
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- US Department of Health and Human Services

Required Actions to Prevent the Spread of Illness

The CDC has determined that prevention remains the most effective way to stop the spread of illness. All schools and departments must adhere to the following preventive measures to ensure healthy and safe school and work environments:

- Educate and encourage students and staff to cover their mouth and nose with a tissue when they cough or sneeze. Also, provide them with easy access to tissues and running water and soap or alcohol-based hand cleaners. Remind them to cover coughs or sneezes using their elbow instead of their hand when a tissue is not available.
- Remind teachers, staff, and students to practice good hand hygiene and provide the time and supplies for them to wash their hands as often as necessary.
- Clean surfaces and items that are more likely to have frequent hand contact such as desks, door knobs, keyboards, or pens, with cleaning agents that are usually used in these areas.
- Encourage early medical evaluation for sick students and staff at higher risk of complications from flu. People at high risk of flu complications who get sick may benefit from early treatment with antiviral medicines.

- All staff members should be aware of the signs and symptoms of the illness and immediately refer students to the school nurse for observation.

Communication Protocols

Notification Procedures

1. In the event the School Nurse is informed by either staff or a parent that a student or staff member is exhibiting the symptoms of the H1N1 illness, s/he will immediately notify the principal and Donna O'Connor, Nurse/Health Services Administrator and exclude the individual from the general population.
2. The School Nurse will examine the staff member or student to determine whether s/he is in fact exhibiting the symptoms.
3. The Nurse/Health Services Administrator will notify the Superintendent's Cabinet, Level Directors and Andre Thibeault, Operations Director. The Chief Communications Officer will notify the School Board, Mayor's Office and other City officials, as appropriate. The Chiefs will notify their staffs, as appropriate.
4. The principal will notify school staff, as appropriate, so that they may initiate precautions to minimize exposure to other students and staff.

Communication with Staff and Families

The district will maintain regular communication with staff and families regarding any updated information received from local and national public health agencies; the current status of H1N1 in the district, and specific cases, as necessary. We will utilize the following communication vehicles to disseminate information:

- Providence Schools Web site, www.providenceschools.org
- Written letters and/or e-mail messages
- ParentLink telephone messages
- Media outlets

Daily Absenteeism Reporting

Per the Department of Health, the district will continue to electronically submit daily absenteeism figures to the RI Department of Education, who will in turn submit these data to the RI Department of Health. Additionally, school nurses will report any possible disease clusters (two or more students in the same classroom with the same illness) directly to the District Health Office at 456-9317 and the RI Department of Health at 222-2577.

Exclusion of Sick Students and Staff

Students and staff who exhibit flu symptoms will be sent home by the school nurse. Sick students will be immediately moved to a separate room until their parents arrive at school to pick them up.

All staff are to treat information about sick individuals confidentially in accordance with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).

School Closings

At this time, due to the mildness of H1N1 overall, both the CDC and the RI Department of Health do not recommend closing schools to prevent the spread of illness.

As we get into the flu season, Providence Schools will monitor confirmed cases of the H1N1 flu and determine whether it is necessary to close school(s) on a case-by-case basis, in collaboration with the RI Departments of Health and Education.

Contingency Planning

A district task force representing all key areas of the school district has been convened and will meet regularly to ensure that the district has appropriate contingency plans in place in the event that we experience high absenteeism among students or employees. Issues to be addressed include staffing coverage, classroom management and minimizing disruption to student learning.

Vaccines

The CDC and other public health agencies have not provided definitive information regarding the availability of the H1N1 vaccine. As we obtain this information, we will communicate with our staff and families, as appropriate.