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Dear Vermont Educators:

Novel influenza A (H1N1) – first known as swine flu – has not gone away. This new flu is still in Vermont and the rest of the country during the usually flu-free weeks of summer. We expect that the H1N1 virus will be circulating, along with the regular seasonal flu viruses, during this fall and winter season. Public health experts expect to see more illness from the new flu than this past spring, and more school-centered outbreaks. However, the timing, spread and severity of influenza illness is still uncertain.

Based on our experience this spring and summer, we know much more about this new flu virus than we did when it was first detected in April 2009. We know that the new flu virus especially affected children in schools, camps and other group settings. We also know that closing schools to minimize exposure to the flu is not the best choice in most cases, and may have undesired consequences such as students being left at home alone.

Following is a summary of new guidelines, updates and information to help us all *keep children safe, and keep children learning*:

Now is the time to plan for the new flu season.

New guidance for schools is now available from the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC). This guidance was designed – in consultation with public health and education officials nationwide – to promote a safer environment for students and staff and reduce exposure to influenza during the 2009-2010 school year. Our shared goal is to keep schools open, slow the spread of the regular seasonal flu and the new H1N1 flu, and limit the disruption of day-to-day activities and learning.

If you haven't done so already, now is the time to organize planning teams, with school nurses playing a key role. The complete new guidance, along with a communication toolkit that is ready for schools to adapt for use now, is available at www.flu.gov and www.healthvermont.gov. For your convenience, attached from the toolkit is a checklist called *Know What to do about the Flu: Action Steps for Schools* that should be of immediate use.

Some of you may have already been working with Vermont's *Pandemic Flu School Action Guide*. The Health Department is in the process of reviewing and updating this guide and materials to be consistent with the latest national guidance.



Continue to stress the actions everyone can take to keep illness from spreading:

- Cover your nose and mouth every time you cough or sneeze. Use a tissue and discard after use, or cough into the crook of your elbow.
- Wash hands often and well, using soap and water, for as long as it takes to sing the “ABC” song. If soap is not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Make it clear that you expect anyone who is sick to stay home – or be sent home. For now, anyone who is sick with flu-like illness should stay home and away from others *for at least 24 hours after the fever is gone*, without using fever-reducing medicines like acetaminophen or ibuprofen. This includes administrators, teachers, staff, students, parents and visitors.
- Reinforce this information with announcements, lessons, postings throughout the school, and send reminders home with students. Posters and resources are included in the school communication toolkit and at www.healthvermont.gov.
- Re-think actions, awards, physical layouts, etc. that do not support good health habits. Examples: Make sure that time is allowed for handwashing and that it is made convenient. Do not reward students or staff for perfect attendance. Plan a separate room for sick children who are waiting to go home.
- Help families identify children who are at high risk for flu complications and could benefit from early evaluation by their physician if they develop the flu.
- Encourage everyone to get vaccinated against the regular, seasonal flu as soon as vaccine is available.

Review plans and procedures for dismissing students from school – just in case.

Recommendations in the new guidance for schools are based on the extent and severity of illness in the community. If the new flu severity is similar to what has been seen in the spring and summer, schools should plan on staying open and taking steps to slow transmission within schools. However, schools may decide to close for a short time for logistical reasons – such as high numbers of teachers absent – or for a longer time if the illness becomes more severe or extensive. We recommend that this decision be made in consultation with the Department of Health.

Schools that do close will be asked to report to the national School Dismissal Monitoring System. This is a new system designed by CDC that will be adopted in Vermont. It is intended to keep daily surveillance on school closings as a result of flu from around the country. When a school decides to close, we will ask the school to immediately complete a school dismissal form and e-mail it directly to CDC. The Department of Health and Department of Education will automatically be notified when a school has decided to close. A few schools will be asked to test this system within the next few weeks.

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Now is also the time to plan for continuity of learning, and how the school can still be used even if classes are dismissed. The Department of Education is exploring ways to make use of current channels (such as wikis and Sharepoint) to share curricula, and Vermont Public Television educational programming that may be appropriate.

A vaccine to protect school-age children against the new flu may be ready this fall.

The federal government is taking action to develop a safe and effective vaccine to protect against the 2009 H1N1 flu virus, and clinical trials have already begun. If all goes well, some limited amounts of vaccine may be coming to states sometime this fall. The Department of Health is planning for the possibility of offering vaccinations to priority groups, including students in schools. Schools may very well make ideal staging areas for administering the vaccine, and we are working together to plan for school-based vaccination clinics at some locations.

Please remember and pass along the information that vaccination for this or any flu is voluntary, NOT mandatory.

Stay tuned for more information.

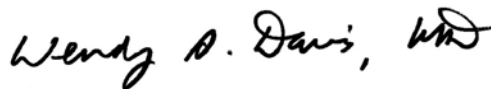
We are committed to keeping you advised of new information and recommendations as the school year progresses. Look for regular updates through the Department of Education's *Weekly Field Memo*.

Refer to www.healthvermont.gov and www.flu.gov for current public information and resources, or dial 2-1-1.

Sincerely,



Armando Vilaseca
Commissioner
Department of Education



Wendy Davis, MD
Commissioner
Department of Health