



# Preparing Schools for a Pandemic

The strength of any community's emergency response plan is based on the assumption that every entity within the community is prepared and ready to take on key roles and responsibilities. Schools are no exception.

School communities play an integral role in protecting the health and safety of their staffs, students and families. With the threat of a pandemic related to the avian flu on the horizon, schools must stand prepared to respond. The good news is that many schools do not need to start from scratch, but only have to modify or expand their existing school safety or crisis response plans and partnerships.

Recently, U.S. health officials reported that the lethal avian flu that is spreading rapidly around the world could soon infect wild birds and domesticated flocks in North America. (The infection of birds by itself would not create a public health emergency. The concern is when the disease mutates to a strain that can easily be transmitted from human to human.) U.S. health officials also emphasized that the responsibility of preparedness falls mostly with local officials—as is the case in nearly every type of natural disaster or crisis event.

This curriculum update is another element of the training and technical assistance associated with the COPS in School initiative sponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

This document serves to:

- define the nature of a pandemic threat;
- highlight critical information; and
- suggest critical planning actions.

To prepare for a pandemic, schools must first educate themselves about the unique challenges associated with such a crisis. Schools must also:

- partner with public health officials to manage and share credible information;
- educate staff, students and families about personal health and hygiene practices;
- participate in community preparations; and
- prepare for an interruption to the education process should a pandemic occur.

Many schools already engage in effective partnerships within the community, including law enforcement. With the threat of a pandemic, it will become important for schools to reach out and establish working relationships with hospitals, public health agencies and other medical service providers.

(Visit <http://www.pandemicflu.gov> for information provided by the federal government regarding pandemic threat and avian influenza. Background information included in this article can be found at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/> and on the web site of the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia at [www.chop.edu/consumer/jsp/division/generic.jsp?id=82098](http://www.chop.edu/consumer/jsp/division/generic.jsp?id=82098).)

## What is a pandemic?

A pandemic is a global disease outbreak. It is an outbreak of an infectious disease that spreads worldwide or at least across a large region. A disease or condition is not a pandemic merely because it is widespread or kills a large number of people. A pandemic requires three conditions:

1. the emergence of a disease new to humans;
2. an agent that infects humans causing serious illness; and
3. an agent that spreads easily and is sustained.

Notable pandemics throughout human history included diseases such as small pox, bubonic plague, cholera, typhus, measles, whooping cough, and influenza. History has shown that influenza pandemics occur about three times every century.

## What is the current concern?

On-going concern about possible pandemics include the spread of the ebola virus, HIV, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), and the avian influenza, also called the bird flu.

Of current concern is H5N1, a subtype of avian influenza virus that has killed birds in more than 30 countries in the Middle East, Asia, Europe and Africa since 1997.

H5N1 is highly contagious among birds. Birds with the H5N1 virus have also infected mammals such as

pigs, tigers and cats. Of particular concern is the fact that since 1997 more than 120 people worldwide have been infected with the virus, and nearly 50 percent of these people have died from the virus. (These people caught bird flu from infected birds, not other people. A pandemic would not occur until the disease mutates to the point that it is spread from person to person.)

In May 2005, scientists urgently called upon nations to prepare for an avian influenza pandemic that could potentially strike as much as 20 percent of the world's population. Some predictions indicate that if the avian flu becomes a pandemic, it could be as devastating as the 1918 Spanish flu that killed more than half a million people in the United States and between 20 million and 50 million people worldwide.

The federal government, states, communities and industry are taking steps to prepare for and respond to a pandemic of any kind.

### How might a pandemic affect communities and schools?

A pandemic is likely to be prolonged and widespread. People must prepare for the possibility of their lives being disrupted in significant ways, even if they do not actually become ill.

A pandemic could require temporary changes in many areas of society, such as schools, work, transportation and other public services. Businesses, community services and schools need to be prepared to manage if a significant portion of their work force could not come to work because they are sick or taking care of others. In some cases, schools and many businesses would be closed, and church activities and sporting events would be canceled.

Other disruptions caused by a pandemic could include:

- restrictions on public gatherings;
- bans on travel to certain locations;
- reduced services provided by hospitals, transportation venues, banks, government offices, and post offices;
- the rationing of groceries or limited food stocks;
- quarantines; or
- depleted fuel and energy supplies.

An informed and prepared public must take appropriate actions to decrease their risk during a pandemic.

### How can people protect themselves?

To avoid the risk of contracting the disease during a

pandemic, people are urged to take certain precautions and make changes to their normal routines to minimize the risk of infection.

The use of universal protective measures are recommended to help slow down the spread of an influenza outbreak among people. These include:

- **Hygiene** — frequent and careful handwashing, especially when there has been contact with other people or with potentially contaminated surfaces.
- **Social distancing** — limiting person-to-person contact by travelling less, working from home, or closing public facilities. People are strongly urged to stay home when they are ill.
- **Respiratory etiquette** — covering one's mouth and nose when sneezing or coughing. (Current thinking suggests coughing or sneezing into the crook of one's arm is preferable to using one's hand which may further spread germs through contact with other people or objects.)
- **Wearing masks** — protecting oneself from airborne germs or containing the spread of germs by covering the mouth and nose with a mask. (No mask can provide a perfect barrier, but the wearing of masks can serve to remind people not to touch their faces particularly when hand-washing facilities are not available.) School officials are advised to check with local health authorities for specific recommendations regarding the wearing of protective masks at school.

### School Pandemic Influenza Planning Checklist

On February 28, 2006, Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Michael Leavitt released the following planning checklist for school districts. Developed by HHS and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the checklist can assist local educational agencies in developing and/or improving plans to prepare for and respond to an influenza pandemic.

According to the checklist, building a strong relationship with the local health department is critical for developing a meaningful plan. (See <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/schoolchecklist.html>)

#### 1. Planning and Coordination

- Identify the authority responsible for declaring a public health emergency at the state and local levels and for officially activating the school district's pandemic influenza response plan.
- Identify for all stakeholders the legal authorities responsible for executing the community opera-

tional plan, especially those authorities responsible for case identification, isolation, quarantine, movement restriction, health care services, emergency care, and mutual aid.

- As part of the district's crisis management plan, address pandemic influenza preparedness, involving all relevant stakeholders in the district (e.g., lead emergency response agency, district administrators, local public health representatives, school health and mental health professionals, teachers, food services director, and parent representatives). This committee is accountable for articulating strategic priorities and overseeing the development of the district's operational pandemic plan.
  - Work with local and/or state health departments and other community partners to establish organizational structures, such as the Incident Command System, to manage the execution of the school district's pandemic flu plan. An Incident Command System, or ICS, is a standardized organization structure that establishes a line of authority and common terminology and procedures to be followed in response to an incident. Ensure compatibility between the district's established ICS and the local/state health department's and state education department's ICS.
  - Delineate accountability and responsibility as well as resources for key stakeholders engaged in planning and executing specific components of the operational plan. Assure that the plan includes time lines, deliverables, and performance measures.
  - Work with your local and/or state health department and state education agencies to coordinate with their pandemic plans. Assure that pandemic planning is coordinated with the community's pandemic plan as well as the state department of education's plan.
  - Test the linkages between the district's Incident Command System and the local/state health department's and state education department's Incident Command System.
  - Contribute to the local health department's operational plan for surge capacity of health care and other services to meet the needs of the community (e.g., schools designated as contingency hospitals, schools feeding vulnerable populations, community utilizing the school district's health care and mental health staff). In an affected community, at least two pandemic disease waves (about 6-8 weeks each) are likely over several months.
  - Incorporate into the pandemic influenza plan the requirements of students with special needs (e.g., low income students who rely on the school food service for daily meals), those in special facilities (e.g., juvenile justice facilities) as well as those who do not speak English as their first language.
  - Participate in exercises of the community's pandemic plan.
  - Work with the local health department to address provision of psychosocial support services for the staff, students and their families during and after a pandemic.
  - Consider developing in concert with the local health department a surveillance system that would alert the local health department to a substantial increase in absenteeism among students.
  - Implement an exercise/drill to test your pandemic plan and revise it periodically.
  - Share what you have learned from developing your preparedness and response plan with other school districts as well as private schools within the community to improve community response efforts.
- 2. Continuity of Student Learning and Core Operations**
- Develop scenarios describing the potential impact of a pandemic on student learning (e.g., student and staff absences), school closings, and extra-curricular activities based on having various levels of illness among students and staff.
  - Develop alternative procedures to assure continuity of instruction (e.g., web-based distance instruction, telephone trees, mailed lessons and assignments, instruction via local radio or television stations) in the event of school closures.
  - Develop a continuity of operations plan for essential central office functions including payroll and

on-going communication with students and parents.

**3. Infection Control Policies and Procedures**

- Work with the local health department to implement effective infection prevention policies and procedures that help limit the spread of influenza at schools in the district (e.g. promotion of hand hygiene, cough/sneeze etiquette). Make good hygiene a habit now in order to help protect children from many infectious diseases such as flu.
- Provide sufficient and accessible infection prevention supplies (e.g., soap, alcohol-based/waterless hand hygiene products, tissues and receptacles for their disposal).
- Establish policies and procedures for students and staff sick leave absences unique to a pandemic influenza (e.g., non-punitive, liberal leave).
- Establish sick leave policies for staff and students suspected to be ill or who become ill at school. Staff and students with known or suspected pandemic influenza should not remain at school and should return only after their symptoms resolve and they are physically ready to return to school.
- Establish policies for transporting ill students.
- Assure that the school district’s pandemic plan for school-based health facilities conforms to those recommended for health care settings. (Refer to [www.hhs.gov/pandemicflu/plan/sup4.html](http://www.hhs.gov/pandemicflu/plan/sup4.html)).

**4. Communications Planning:**

- Assess readiness to meet communication needs in preparation for an influenza pandemic, including regular review, testing, and updating of communication plans.
- Develop a dissemination plan for communication with staff, students, and families, including lead spokespersons and links to other communication networks.
- Ensure language, culture and reading-level appropriateness in communications by including community leaders representing different language

and/or ethnic groups on the planning committee, asking for their participation both in document planning and the dissemination of public health messages within their communities.

- Develop and test information platforms (e.g., hot lines, telephone trees, dedicated web sites, and local radio or TV stations) for communicating pandemic status and actions to school district staff, students, and families.
- Develop and maintain up-to-date communications contacts of key public health and education stakeholders and use the network to provide regular updates as the influenza pandemic unfolds.
- Assure the provision of redundant communication systems/channels that allow for the expedited transmission and receipt of information.
- Advise district staff, students and families where to find up-to-date and reliable pandemic information from federal, state and local public health sources.
- Disseminate information about the school district’s pandemic influenza preparedness and response plan (e.g., continuity of instruction, community containment measures).
- Disseminate information from public health sources covering routine infection control (e.g., hand hygiene, cough/sneeze etiquette), pandemic influenza fundamentals (e.g., signs and symptoms of influenza, modes of transmission) as well as personal and family protection and response strategies (e.g., guidance for the at-home care of ill students and family members).
- Anticipate the potential fear and anxiety of staff, students, and families as a result of rumors and misinformation and plan communications and mental health support activities accordingly.

Prepared by the National School Safety Center, Westlake Village, CA, March, 2006. This project was supported by Cooperative Agreement #2002-SH-WX-K001, awarded by the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view or opinions contained within this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.