



*The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Executive Office of Health and Human Services
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To: District Superintendents
Superintendents of Public and Nonpublic Schools
Administrators of Charter Schools
Principals
Other Educators
Child Care Providers
After School Program Officials
Resident School Administrators

From: John Auerbach, Commissioner of Public Health
Mitchell Chester, Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education
Sherri Killins, Commissioner of Early Education and Care

Date: May 5, 2009

Re: **Updated Guidance on School and Child Care Facility Closures
in Massachusetts Related to Swine-Origin Influenza A H1N1**

This update is to inform you of significant changes in the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) recommendations on closing schools or child care facilities during the outbreak of swine-origin influenza A H1N1. Based on our ongoing communication with the CDC, MDPH is revising its recommendations for school or child care closure. **Rather than closing individual schools or child care facilities based on the diagnosis of cases of swine-origin influenza A H1N1 in students or staff, MDPH recommends a policy focused on keeping all students with symptoms of influenza out of school and related school activities during their period of illness and recuperation, when they are potentially infectious to others.**

The specific elements of this new policy are detailed in the policy statement that is enclosed, but please note the following six key points:

1. The most fundamental step to take is for faculty and other school or child care facility staff to assess themselves for signs of influenza and stay or go home if sick.
2. Schools and child care facilities should consider methods to inform parents that they should keep ill children at home. MDPH is also using every opportunity at our disposal to get this message out to parents as well. We are enclosing a fact sheet for parents that you might find useful in your communication with parents. This will also be posted on the MDPH swine flu website, www.mass.gov/dph/swineflu.

3. If parents do send a sick child to school or child care, staff should check for flu symptoms and then send those ill children home.
4. With this change in policy, it will be even more important for MDPH, schools and child care facilities to work together to ensure that absenteeism is monitored and reported. School nurses, student health centers or other school or child care authorities should report higher than normal absenteeism to your local health department or to the **MDPH at 617-983-6800**.
5. **Consistent with the new guidance, cancellations of school related activities, such as dances, sporting events or other gatherings are not required if school is not closed.** As with other public gatherings, MDPH strongly recommends that sick people not participate and that attendees engage in the good health and hand washing hygiene it has been promoting.
6. We strongly encourage you to consult with your local board of health and MDPH as you consider closing a school or child care facility or cancelling other school related activities so that you can be sure that you have the most up-to-date data to inform your decision.

As in our prior memo, we strongly encourage the following:

1. **Become aware of the facts.** Staff and parents should be encouraged to visit the CDC's new web site at www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/, which provides excellent guidance on avoiding influenza and on how to care for a sick person at home. Please check the DPH web site, www.mass.gov/dph/swineflu, for updates. In addition, DPH has its own regularly updated blog at www.mass.gov/blog/publichealth.
2. **Practice good health hygiene.** Disease transmission can be significantly reduced by taking the following actions:
 - Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hand cleaners are also effective.
 - Practice good "cough etiquette" by coughing or sneezing into a tissue, or into your elbow instead of into your hands.
 - Try to avoid close contact with sick people.
 - If you get sick, stay home from work or school and limit contact with others to avoid infecting them.

In addition, we are offering several resources in support of your efforts to help prevent the spread of this new influenza.

- General fact sheets for swine-origin influenza A H1N1
- Specific fact sheets for parents about swine-origin influenza A H1N1
- Guidance on how to care for someone with influenza at home
- General advice on how to cope with the stress of this new influenza outbreak
- Advice for parents about how to talk to their children about the influenza outbreak

If you have any questions about swine influenza, its presentation, diagnosis or control, please call the **MDPH Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at 617-983-6800**. We will be posting our latest guidance on the MDPH website at www.mass.gov/dph/swineflu and will be communicating via the Health and Homeland Alert Network (HHAN), conference calls and list serves. This is an evolving situation and recommendations may change as more information becomes available. Our agencies will continue to provide guidance as the situation changes. Thank you for your patience and for your help in spreading the critical message about the importance of prevention.