



August 3, 2009

Dear School Superintendents and District Health Officers,

We are sure the reports of H1N1 (Swine Flu) continue to create some questions and concerns in our school districts. Georgia's Division of Public Health reports that our state continues to have cases of H1N1 and that the current high levels of H1N1 in the southern hemisphere indicate that the virus may become more widespread in our state during the fall and winter. However, current data indicates that the severity of the illness caused by the H1N1 virus is NOT increasing.

The Georgia Department of Education is working very closely with the Georgia Department of Community Health (DCH), particularly Dr. Pat O'Neal, the State Director of Emergency Preparedness, Dr. Susan Lance, the State Epidemiologist, and Michelle Conner, the Director of the Public Health Immunization Program. In accordance with the Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) recommendations, DCH will start a broad campaign soon to encourage Georgia citizens in high-risk groups, such as school-age children, to get vaccinated.

Together, we would like to share the following information and recommendations with each school superintendent and public health district officer:

1. In anticipation of the continuing spread of the H1N1 virus, DCH has already begun revising and augmenting the Public Health Mass Vaccination Plan to incorporate potential use of additional vaccinators from private and public sectors, but the final vaccine distribution decision will be made by the CDC. Local health clinics and private physicians will be major distribution points for mass vaccinations. The decision whether to use school sites to augment the mass vaccination efforts for children is under consideration now. If schools are identified as points of distribution for H1N1 vaccinations, local public health officials will contact school superintendents and, together with state health officials, will assist in coordinating the logistics and resources to accomplish this.
2. If a vaccination distribution plan is implemented, CDC has determined that school-age children are a top vaccination priority group. *However, the CDC has determined that any vaccination campaign will be voluntary.*
3. Persons with the H1N1 virus present the same symptoms as seasonal flu; however, persons with pre-existing medical conditions, such as asthma, may have the same complications with H1N1 as they would with seasonal flu.
4. We strongly encourage all school districts and local public health officials to work together to develop and strengthen communications plans before the flu season arrives. Please remember that having flu symptoms does not necessarily mean that a person has the H1N1 virus; it could be the seasonal flu. However, the spread of each virus could result in significant numbers of student or staff absences.

5. We ask that all school districts develop a plan to report any 10 percent decline in average daily attendance to local public health officials. This will help public health tracking and analysis of the flu virus and its impact on schools. We also encourage all to review the newly released “School Dismissal Monitoring Protocol” that was jointly released by the CDC and the U.S. Department of Education on July 30, 2009. (Please see the attachment).
6. In addition, the seasonal flu vaccine will be available in August, and we are encouraging its use, as well, by teachers and students.

“Social Distancing” and Other Strategies

We recommend that you think about and plan for social distancing in case the H1N1 and/or seasonal flu virus spreads. Social distancing is the practice of putting physical distance between people to prevent or reduce the spread of a virus which could include modifying your school programs and activities (i.e., cancelling school assemblies, spacing student desks further apart, limiting group gatherings and activities between classes).

It may also be wise to ask local public health officials to discuss the symptoms of the H1N1 virus and seasonal flu virus with your staff. Then encourage students and staff with the symptoms to remain at home. Some school districts have established a “screener” protocol where staff members monitor students and staff members for flu symptoms each school day, so symptomatic students or staff can be sent home.

The Possibility of School Closures

It is a difficult topic but there has been much discussion about the possibility of closing schools if students or staff members become ill with the H1N1 and/or the seasonal flu virus. The CDC is positioned to offer recommendations to schools, but in most circumstances the final decision as to whether or not to close schools will be made by the local school board with input from local and state public health officials. Some school closures may be based on operational interruption due to a significant percentage of student and staff absences, while some school closures may be based on a recommendation of public health to reduce the virus spread. We strongly recommend that you plan for both types of closure scenarios by working closely with your local public health officials. Our goal is to avoid school closure and disruption of classes unless there is a significant change in the severity of the illness associated with the H1N1 virus.

More Information and Assistance

Additionally, we want to provide you with some resources that will be helpful to inform and educate your parents, students and staff and will help you identify what you can expect or consider when dealing with the flu virus. The Georgia Department of Education has created an H1N1/pandemic information webpage that is updated regularly. You can access it at <http://tinyurl.com/gadoeflusite> .

The Georgia Department of Education will continue to provide whatever information we have to school systems as quickly as we possibly can. In the meantime, please feel free to contact Dr. Garry McGiboney if you have specific questions or concerns and to report any circumstances that impact your school

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operations. He can be reached at gmcgiboney@doe.k12.ga.us, or (404) 656-7552 (office) or (678) 637-1261 (cell).

Public Health and Healthcare Information about H1N1 and the Flu Season are available at the following websites:

- Department of Community Health www.dch.georgia.gov
- Public Health <http://health.state.ga.us>
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services www.flu.gov
- Consumer healthcare info www.georgiahealthinfo.gov

Coming attractions: DCH will provide call center access to information for the public shortly.

While this type of news can get sensational at times, it is important to keep people calm and provide them with the facts that we have. We encourage you to stay in close contact with your local boards of health and to let us know what we can do to support you.

Thank you for all you do for the students of Georgia.

Sincerely,

Kathy Cox
State School Superintendent
Department of Education

Rhonda M. Medows, M.D.
Commissioner and State Health Officer
Department of Community Health

Attachment: School Dismissal Monitoring Protocol from CDC and DOE

cc: Governor Sonny Perdue
Dr. Pat O'Neal, State Director of Emergency Preparedness
Dr. Susan Lance, State Epidemiologist
Herb Garrett, Executive Director, Georgia School Superintendent Association
Stuart Bennett, Executive Director, Georgia Association of Educational Leaders
Jeanne "Sis" Henry, Executive Director, Georgia School Board Association