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DATE: October 29, 2009
TO: Local, Tribal and Regional Public Health Officials
FROM: Rick Heffernan, MPH, Chief, Communicable Disease Epidemiology Section
Wisconsin Division of Public Health
RE: DPH school closure guidelines

This memo summarizes current Wisconsin Division of Public Health (DPH) influenza-related school closure recommendations. These interim recommendations are appropriate while the severity of illness caused by 2009 influenza A (H1N1) virus remains similar to seasonal influenza, as was the case during the outbreak last spring and so far during the 2009-2010 influenza season. If the 2009 H1N1 virus changes to cause more severe illness these recommendations could change.

Who decides to close schools for health reasons? The state health officer, the local health officer, and the local school administrator all have the authority to close an individual school or schools for health and safety reasons. As of October 21, 2009, a new provision of Wisconsin Act 42 allows local school district administrators to close schools for health and safety reasons without having to make up days to reach the state law required 180 days of instruction. Previously, make-up days could be avoided only when schools were closed by order of the local health officer, or state health officer. DPH and DPI recommend that school administrators consult with local public health officials prior to making the decision to close schools. DPH is also available for consultation.

When is school closure due to influenza appropriate? As long as the severity of illness is similar to seasonal influenza severity, the main consideration when deciding to close schools is whether illness and absenteeism impede school functioning. There is no established threshold above which schools should consider closure, however most recent school closures in Wisconsin have involved absenteeism rates above 30%. It is worth noting that Wisconsin schools occasionally close during seasonal influenza outbreaks when absenteeism reaches these levels. Mitigating factors that can affect the decision to close schools include:

- Whether absenteeism rates are increasing, stable or decreasing
- How closely ill students and staff adhere to exclusion guidelines and stay home until 24 hours after fever resolves without the use of fever-reducing medications
- The proportion of students who are at high risk of serious complications from influenza infection (e.g., pregnant teens, developmentally delayed students, students with chronic respiratory problems or neurologic disorders, etc)
- Proximity to and mixing with other affected schools, including during bus transport
- Number of ill staff who are absent and availability of substitute teachers
- Whether lesson plans will have to be repeated
- Level of concern in the community if schools stay open, or if schools close

What data are needed to make an informed decision to close a school? A simple comparison of the percent absent to normal patterns for the same time of year is enough to prompt school closure, however DPH has found the following information helpful when available: student absenteeism

during 1-2 weeks leading up to closure; student absenteeism by facility and grade; staff illness and absenteeism trends; reported symptoms and impressions of school nurse; percent of students sent home due to illness; reported laboratory-confirmed cases; reports from local clinics and hospitals regarding illness in school-age children; severity of illnesses. Few districts will have all of this information.

How long should a school remain closed? For influenza-related school closures, DPH recommends a minimum of 3 days, including weekends or holidays. This will allow time for most of those incubating the disease to become symptomatic and stay home, avoiding exposure to others during the day prior to illness onset. During times of increased influenza severity (not the current situation) CDC recommends closing schools for 5 to 7 days.

Should extracurricular activities be prohibited during school closures? CDC and DPH recommend that all extracurricular activities be cancelled or postponed while schools are closed. This includes athletic events, after-school programs, clubs, dances, socials, etc. Any decision to depart from this recommendation by allowing healthy students to participate in certain extracurricular activities should consider the potential impact on disease transmission, including whether students from ‘sick’ schools will be in contact with students from ‘well’ schools.

Does school closure reduce influenza transmission? The benefits of school closure in terms of reducing disease transmission will depend on many factors, including the extent of social mixing outside of school. When a large proportion of the school community has influenza-like illness it is reasonable to expect that closure will decrease exposures and interrupt some transmission, and that along with the passage of time and recovery of ill students, this should help absenteeism rates decline to more manageable levels. Materials that local public health and school officials may find useful to promote prevention messages among students, parents, and the community can be found under “Resources” below.

Are school officials required to notify public health when closing a school for health reasons? Yes. HFS 145 requires that any outbreak or suspected outbreak be immediately reported to the local health officer. Even when it is already clear that influenza is circulating in the community, health officers need to be aware that localized increases in illness are significant enough to close schools, particularly since children are affected. This notification can be part of the recommended telephone consult with public health. During the 2009-2010 influenza season, school officials are also required to report closures due to illness to the CDC’s national school dismissal monitoring system at http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/schools/dismissal_form/.

Should DPH be notified of health-related school closures? Yes. HFS 145 requires local health officers to report any outbreak or suspected outbreak immediately to DPH. DPH asks that local health officials use the **DPH regional offices** as their first point of contact for 2009 H1N1-related school closures.

Resources: Wisconsin school closure guidance, absenteeism monitoring tools, template letters and communication toolkits can be found in the “H1N1 Flu information for Schools” section of pandemic.wisconsin.gov. CDC guidance can be found in the “Guidance for Child Care Programs, Schools, Colleges and Universities” section of www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/guidance/