

# STATE OF ALASKA

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## **Guidance on School Closures for Alaska Schools Due to Novel H1N1 Influenza May 5, 2009**

**This statement informs administrators of Alaska's school districts, teachers, parents and students that the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, along with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), is recommending a new approach to school closures in response to the novel H1N1 influenza strain circulating in the United States.**

Following the identification of a novel H1N1 influenza strain, the CDC had recommended consideration of temporary school closure with the first recognized cases of this influenza virus among students, faculty, or staff. At the onset of this outbreak, national and state public health officials believed it prudent to close affected schools while they learned more about the characteristics of this new disease and the strategy for community measures to prevent illness. School closures in other states appear to have helped to decrease spread of infection in the schools and provided valuable time to gather information about this influenza strain.

Based on new information that the novel H1N1 influenza strain is not causing unusually severe flu at this time, the CDC no longer recommends that communities with suspected or confirmed cases of novel H1N1 routinely consider closing schools or child-care centers. Instead, the CDC is recommending measures that keep students, faculty and staff with symptoms of flu out of schools and child-care facilities during their illness and recuperation. Specifically, the CDC recommends early identification of ill students and staff, good cough and hand hygiene, and staying home when sick. **The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) supports this approach to dealing with cases of the novel H1N1 influenza in schools.**

Recommendations for disease control measures in the community, including schools, are informed by what we know about the illness and how it's spread, and the practicality and consequences of the measures, including personal, family and community disruption. Information from other states suggests that the severity of illness from the novel H1N1 influenza strain is not greater than the typical seasonal influenza that circulates in our community every year.

In short, school closure makes less sense at this time in the outbreak given what we are observing about disease transmission and the severity of illness currently associated with this novel H1N1 influenza virus. As the illness becomes more common in a community, individualized school closure based on reports of diagnosed cases will be less effective, in addition to being impractical, as a control measure. Laboratory diagnosis, which is the basis of case reporting, will identify a smaller and smaller proportion of total cases as demand for testing outstrips capacity and as many students and other people in the community with mild illness do not seek medical attention. Closing the schools where cases happen to be diagnosed, while leaving most schools

with undiagnosed cases open, does not make sense as an ongoing influenza control strategy in a community.

School closures create disruption for student learning and hardships for family budgets, particularly in these difficult economic times. In addition, school closure would not be in accordance with the U.S. national strategy for pandemic influenza, which recommends ongoing community-wide closure of all schools and daycare centers *during outbreaks of severe influenza strains* and in combination with other restrictive measures. At the present time, this outbreak with the novel H1N1 influenza strain does not appear to be severe.

### **Recommendations to Decrease Influenza A H1N1 in Alaska Schools**

- Each morning, all parents/caregivers should assess all family members and especially all school-age children for symptoms of influenza (fever and cough or sore throat) or other symptoms that might be influenza.
- Each morning all school faculty should assess themselves for symptoms of influenza.
- Students or faculty with influenza-like illness (fever and cough or sore throat) should stay home and not attend school. **All sick students and faculty should stay out of school for at least 7 days even if their symptoms resolve sooner. Students and faculty who are still sick at 7 days should continue to stay home from school until at least 24 hours after they have completely recovered.**
- Schools should screen students and staff for visible signs of possible influenza illness upon arrival at school by observing students for signs of influenza illness.
- Students and staff who appear ill at arrival or become ill at school should be promptly isolated and sent home.
- People who are ill should stay home and not go into the community unless they need medical care. Ill students should not attend alternative child care where they may expose uninfected children.
- As always, situations can be individualized and school authorities may close school at their discretion. Parents may use their judgment regarding the risk and benefits of sending their children to school during this influenza outbreak as they would during a seasonal influenza outbreak.
- Schools will not be routinely ordered closed on the basis of a diagnosis of suspected or confirmed cases of novel H1N1 influenza. As is our practice with seasonal influenza, schools may be closed if larger numbers of students or faculty become ill and school functioning becomes disrupted.

The nation is still in the early stages of this outbreak and the situation may change. DHSS will continue to monitor information both locally and nationally and continually assess whether changes are needed in these or other influenza disease control measures.

DHSS continues to conduct surveillance for cases of novel H1N1 influenza and will keep school districts and communities informed about the current status. We need to remember that even “routine” seasonal influenza can be a severe disease. Each year in the United States, more than 200,000 people are hospitalized for flu-related complications and about 36,000 people die from flu-related causes. Given this fact, unfortunately, as in every influenza season, we need to be prepared for the possibility of additional cases including severe cases and even deaths. Preventing the spread of influenza requires all of us – schools, families, businesses, and government – to cooperate and work together.

**Useful Resources:**

Alaska pandemic flu web site

<http://www.pandemicflu.alaska.gov/>

School pandemic planning checklists

<http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/school/index.html>

Control of Pandemic Flu Virus on Environmental Surfaces in Homes and Public Places

<http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/individual/panfacts.html>