What Schools Need to Know About the Coronavirus

To prepare for possible community transmission of COVID-19, the most important thing for schools to do now is plan and prepare in the event COVID-19 does appear in their communities.

WHAT IS COVID-19?

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the new Coronavirus, named COVID-19, is a respiratory illness and is related to, but not the same as, MERS and SARS, both coronaviruses. The CDC is working across the Department of Health and Human Services and across the U.S. government in the public health response to COVID-19.

Signs and Symptoms

Some of the signs and symptoms of the COVID-19 have been noted to include:

- Fever
- Cough
- Shortness of breath

It is important to note that people infected with the virus may have the above symptoms as well as other, or even no, symptoms.

How COVID-19 Spreads

Person-to-Person Spread

The virus is thought to spread mainly from person-to-person.

- Between people who are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet).
- Through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs.

Spread From Contact With Infected Surfaces or Objects

It may be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes, but this is not thought to be the main way the virus spreads.

REVIEW, UPDATE, AND IMPLEMENT EMERGENCY OPERATIONS PLANS

- This should be done in collaboration with local health departments and other relevant partners. Focus on the components of the plans that address infectious disease outbreaks.
- Ensure the plan includes strategies to reduce the spread of a wide variety of infectious diseases (e.g., seasonal influenza). Effective strategies build on everyday school policies and practices.
- Ensure the plan emphasizes common-sense preventive actions for students and staff. For example, emphasize actions such as staying home when sick; appropriately covering coughs and sneezes; cleaning frequently touched surfaces; and washing hands often.
- Ensure handwashing strategies include washing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or using a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol if soap and water are not available.

Develop information-sharing systems with partners

- Information-sharing systems can be used for day-to-day reporting (on information such as changes in absenteeism) and disease surveillance efforts to detect and respond to an outbreak.
- Local health officials should be a key partner in information sharing.

Monitor and plan for absenteeism

- Review the usual absenteeism patterns at your school among both students and staff.
- Alert local health officials about large increases in student and staff absenteeism, particularly if absences appear due to respiratory illnesses (like the common cold or the "flu," which have symptoms similar to symptoms of COVID-19).
- Review attendance and sick leave policies. Encourage students and staff to stay home when sick. Use flexibility, when possible, to allow staff to stay home to care for sick family members.
- Discourage the use of perfect attendance awards and incentives.
- Identify critical job functions and positions, and plan for alternative coverage by cross-training staff.
- Determine what level of absenteeism will disrupt continuity of teaching and learning.

Establish procedures for students and staff who are sick at school

- Keep sick students and staff separate from well students and staff until they can leave.
- Remember that **schools are not expected to screen students or staff to identify cases of COVID-19.** The majority of respiratory illnesses are not COVID-19. If a community (or more specifically, a school) has cases of COVID-19, local health officials will help identify those individuals and will follow up on next steps.

PREVENTING THE SPREAD OF RESPIRATORY ILLNESSES

Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw that tissue in the trash
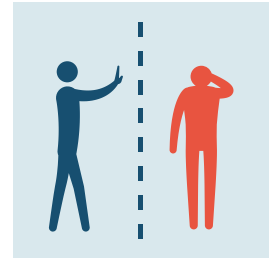
Avoid close contact with people who are sick.

Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces
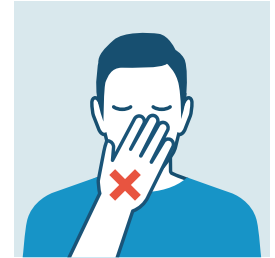
Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth
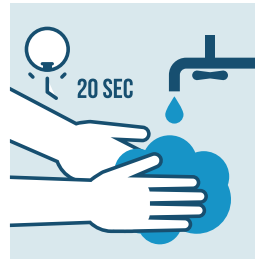
Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds

Stay home when you are sick, except to get medical care.

- Share resources with the school community to help families understand when to keep children home. This guidance, not specific to COVID-19, from the American Academy of Pediatrics can be helpful for families.
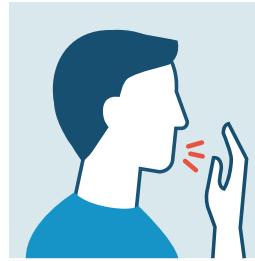
Perform routine environmental cleaning

- Routinely clean frequently touched surfaces (e.g., doorknobs, light switches, countertops) with the cleaners typically used. Use all cleaning products according to the directions on the label.
- Provide disposable wipes so that commonly used surfaces (e.g., keyboards, desks, remote controls) can be wiped down by students and staff before each use.

Create communications plans for use with the school community

- Include strategies for sharing information with staff, students, and their families.
- Include information about steps being taken by the school or childcare facility to prepare, and how additional information will be shared.

IN THE EVENT YOUR COMMUNITY HAS IDENTIFIED CASES OF COVID-19

If local health officials report that there are cases of COVID-19 in the community, schools may need to take additional steps in response to prevent spread in the school. *The first step for schools in this situation is to talk with local health officials and make determinations regarding further courses of action up to and including large event cancellations and school dismissals.*

IF AN ILL STUDENT OR STAFF MEMBER ATTENDED SCHOOL PRIOR TO BEING CONFIRMED AS A COVID-19 CASE:

- **Local health officials may recommend temporary school dismissals if a student or staff member attended school prior to being confirmed as a COVID-19 case.**
  - Local health officials' recommendations for the scope and duration of school dismissals will be made on a case-by-case basis.
- **Schools should work with the local health department and other relevant leadership to communicate the possible COVID-19 exposure.**
  - This communication to the school community should align with the communication plan in the school's emergency operations plan. In such a circumstance, it is critical to maintain confidentiality of the student or staff member as required by the ADA and FERPA.
- **If a student or staff member has been identified with COVID-19, school and program administrators should seek guidance from local health officials to determine when students and staff should return to schools and what additional steps are needed for the school community.**
  - In addition, students and staff who are well but are taking care of or share a home with someone with a case of COVID-19 should follow instructions from local health officials to determine when to return to school.

IF SCHOOLS ARE DISMISSED, SCHOOLS CAN CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING STEPS:

- **Temporarily cancel extracurricular group activities and large events.**
  - Cancel or postpone events such as after-school assemblies and pep rallies, field trips, and sporting events.
  - Discourage students and staff from gathering or socializing anywhere.
  - Discourage gatherings at places like a friend's house, a favorite restaurant, or the local shopping mall.
- **Ensure continuity of education.**
  - Review continuity plans, including plans for the continuity of teaching and learning. Implement e-learning plans, including digital and distance learning options as feasible and appropriate.
  - Determine, in consultation with school district officials or other relevant state or local partners:
    - If a waiver is needed for state requirements of a minimum number of in-person instructional hours or school days (seat time) as a condition for funding;
    - How to convert face-to-face lessons into online lessons and how to train teachers to do so;
    - How to triage technical issues if faced with limited IT support and staff;
    - How to encourage appropriate adult supervision while children are using distance learning approaches;
    - How to deal with the potential lack of students' access to computers and the Internet at home.
- **Ensure continuity of meal programs.**
  - Consider ways to distribute food to students.
  - If there is community spread of COVID-19, design strategies to avoid distribution in settings where people might gather in a group or crowd. Consider options such as "grab-and-go" bagged lunches or meal delivery.
- **Consider alternatives for providing essential medical and social services for students.**
  - Continue providing necessary services for children with special healthcare needs, or work with the state Title V Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs (CYSHCN) Program.