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Local school districts ready to battle potential flu outbreaks

By Katherine Ullmer, Staff Writer
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CENTERVILLE — As children head back to school this month, they'll find added emphasis on good hygiene, hand washing, and other preventative measures as districts work to prevent or halt the spread of the H1N1 flu.

But they won't likely see schools automatically shutdown unless outbreaks are severe.

"Last year, the recommendation was that we would close school if we had a suspected case," said Centerville School Superintendent Tom Henderson. Now, once a case is confirmed, the school district would consult with the Public Health department to get some direction, he said.

"The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has re-thought their position on closing schools and what needs to be done," said Frank DePalma, superintendent of the Montgomery County Educational Service Center in Dayton.

Last April's relatively unknown H1N1 flu virus brought the closing of schools in several states including Ohio. The CDC updated its guidelines on Aug. 7 giving schools across the nation more control over when schools have to shutdown. A decision to close schools has to be balanced with "the risks of illness among students and staff with the benefits of keeping students in school," the new guidelines state.

Federal officials found last spring that dismissing school often meant students were being left home alone, missing meals and their education.

To update Montgomery County school superintendents on the new guidelines, DePalma said the Educational Service Center has invited Bill Wharton, spokesman for Public Health-Dayton & Montgomery County, to the superintendents' monthly meeting on Aug. 18. Wharton will talk about coordinating district procedures if a student is diagnosed with H1N1.

"Part of our job here is to be sure we work with the superintendents to be prepared if there is an outbreak of the flu," DePalma said.

Wharton said health officials don't know how severe the H1N1 (swine) flu may be this year, but "we know the number of cases of flu goes up in the fall."

Local school superintendents contacted said they plan to emphasize prevention and to monitor students closely for flu-like symptoms this school year.

Robert Gentis, director of student services for the Northmont school district, and Sue Gunnell, assistant superintendent for the Huber Heights school district, both said they plan to work closely with school nurses.

“We have no immediate plan to close school buildings unless under (Public Health) guidance, knowing it’s in the best interest of the staff and students,” Gentis said. If flu cases become extreme, Northmont has One Call Now, an automated phone message service that allows them to call everyone in the district, he said.

The system could also be used to give out class assignments should the schools close, he said. The district also have a Web site for providing information and have been collecting e-mail addresses of students to use if needed, he said.

“We’re hoping it doesn’t come to that,” he said.

Preventative measures such as frequent hand washing, using tissues to catch coughs and sneezes, not touching one’s eyes, nose and mouth, to prevent the spread of germs, are still on the CDC’s recommendation list, Wharton said.

Teachers should monitor hand washing to make sure youngsters wash with soap and water for about 20 seconds, he said. They should make sure there are boxes of tissues in the classroom and that common areas frequently touched by many, such as door knobs, handrails, and elevator buttons, are cleaned and sanitized regularly.

Sick children should be kept from well children in separate rooms until their parents can come pick them up, he said.

Centerville schools have been following good hygiene all along, Henderson said. There are signs in school rest rooms explaining proper hand washing. All rooms have boxes of tissues and many teachers have hand sanitizers on their desks, he said.

“It’s going to be interesting to see how the fall goes,” Henderson said. “I don’t know what we’re in store for.”

The new guidelines recommend early immunization against seasonal flu, and vaccination against H1N1, once that vaccine is available, which should be by mid-October, according to Kathleen Sebelius, Health and Human Services Secretary.

Previous guidelines recommended children or staff with flu-like illness stay home from school for seven days after symptoms began, but that has been reduced to 24 hours after the person no longer has a fever.

Under more severe flu conditions and in child care facilities for children under five years of age, the seven day period is still recommended.

It's extremely unusual to have flu cases as early as August, yet the flu has been sporadic in Ohio, so people should get prepared for what may be coming this fall, said Kristopher Weiss, spokesman for the Ohio Department of Health.

"Stay home from work if sick and keep kids home from day care if they're sick," he said.