
What can Schools do to Address Concerns about Coronavirus?

By Joseph B. Urban / Feb 27, 2020

Late winter into early spring brings with it an increase in the number of cases of contagious illnesses such as flu, colds, sinus infections, and pneumonia. Schools turn into veritable petri dishes of possible infections. This year, adding to the list of concerns is 2019 Novel Coronavirus – 2019-nCoV (or “Coronavirus”). The media has spent a great deal of time addressing the spread of the virus. This, logically, leads to questions about how schools and employers should deal with coronavirus.

The mortality rate of coronavirus is not precisely known. However, coronavirus is highly contagious and has a long latency period before symptoms appear, and thus it has the potential to infect a large number of people. Thus, it is imperative for schools to be prepared.

Below, this article will discuss the latest developments related to coronavirus, followed by general advice and recommendations from health authorities about coronavirus and infectious disease protocols as they impact students and families.

General Background

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), “on January 31, 2020, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex M. Azar II declared a public health emergency (PHE) for the United States to aid the nation’s healthcare community in responding to [coronavirus].”

Further, while coronavirus has been seen to spread by person-to-person contact in the United States, especially among those who have close contacts with those returning from abroad, “the virus is NOT currently spreading in the community.”

However, the CDC concludes that person-to-person spread could continue in the United States, possibly resulting in high rates of infection which could severely load the healthcare system. Id. While there is not a current vaccine, the CDC is working with federal, state, and local health authorities to address the spread of Coronavirus while a vaccine is being prepared.

The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services has advised that health care providers who encounter patients who present with symptoms that are consistent with the coronavirus and have a recent travel history that includes mainland China or have had contact with a person who was confirmed to be infected with coronavirus should report the situation to the local health department, which will determine whether the individuals should be tested for coronavirus.

Those individuals who are tested positive will be asked to stay in their home and limit contact with others until test results are received and a diagnosis is made.

Coronavirus and Students

As far as students are concerned, we recognize the anxiety that families face when so much emphasis has been placed upon quarantine. Not only does this create fear of academic loss or stagnation, but it also disrupts child-care plans for working parents. Neither the CDC nor the MDHHS have called for any large-scale quarantine anywhere to date. It is possible quarantines could be directed in the future.

The situation that schools are currently facing is addressing students who are returning to school after having been abroad in countries where the coronavirus has spread, particularly China, South Korea, and Italy. Some health authorities are suggesting (not requiring) that persons who have been abroad, especially to mainland China, South Korea, Italy, or who come into contact with those who have been abroad in those countries impacted by the virus, remain home for 14 calendar days (the quarantine period currently being used in specific coronavirus situations), and obtain a medical examination to rule out infection with the coronavirus.

Should a school have a student or students who fit this criteria, it is recommended that the school district make accommodations for such students, such as receiving homework assignments and notes/recordings from classroom lectures and instruction.

Additionally, school districts, ideally in collaboration with their intermediate school districts and their county medical departments, may wish to consider changes to district and building-level practices and/or policies to conform to possible emergency plans in the event of a potential coronavirus pandemic. Such possible considerations include:

- How information regarding the disease and its impact locally, and the appropriate response to it, will be provided to students and their families
- Whether and when to cancel school events, including athletic contests, extracurricular events, field trips, travel and the like
- Whether and how to exclude individual students from school, as well as what accommodations to make so that learning may continue and
- Whether and when to suspend school in one or more buildings, and how academic progress may be supported and fostered during such suspension

School districts may wish to consult with their counsel regarding the specific steps of implementing the above recommendations.

Conclusion

Much has been made in the media about coronavirus and the potential dangers it generates. It is important to maintain a proper perspective and to look to reputable sources of information. School Districts can best serve their students, communities, and staff by educating these constituencies as to the health risks posed by coronavirus, what can be done to prevent the spread of the virus and any changes in school practices and operations that may need to be undertaken to ensure that the virus is contained and does not spread.