

Schools Should Prepare for Coronavirus Outbreaks, CDC Officials Warn

By Mark Lieberman

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Schools need to prepare for a nationwide surge in cases of the coronavirus that's currently wreaking global havoc and could disrupt daily life in some communities, federal officials warned Tuesday.

"You should ask your children's schools about their plans for school dismissals or school closures," Nancy Messonnier, a director at the Centers for Disease Control, said during a press briefing on Tuesday. "**Ask about plans for teleschool.**"

Messonnier warned at that time that her agency is confident an outbreak will occur in the United States and is now mulling "exactly when this will happen and how many people in this country will have severe illness." A few hours later, federal officials, including Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar, sought to downplay the urgency of the earlier warning from CDC officials.

She also said she'd already contacted her local superintendent asking about the district's plans in the event of an outbreak.

The disease, which originated in China last month, has claimed more than 2,600 lives and affected more than 77,000 people worldwide. Fourteen people in the U.S., plus 40 passengers on the Diamond Princess cruise ship, have confirmed cases of the illness, for which typical symptoms include fever, cough and shortness of breath, according to the CDC. In the last week, people in Italy, South Korea and Iran have died from the virus.

Tuesday's warning from the CDC marks an abrupt shift in tone from the agency, which has largely remained circumspect about the threat level for the U.S. The risk assessment on the CDC website still says the "immediate health risk from COVID-19 is considered low" for the average American, though it **warns that a global "pandemic" declaration** could shift the forecast. The World Health Organization on Monday declined to declare a pandemic but cautioned that it may reverse that decision as more information arrives.

Hospitals have begun stockpiling resources in case the threat worsens, and [K-12 schools in the U.S. are sending home letters to parents](#) urging frequent hand-washing and keeping sick children home from school until they're fever-free for 24 hours without medication. Several schools have also canceled field trips to China as well as Chinese exchange programs.

Steps Schools Can Take

During past outbreaks like the "swine flu" of 2009, the CDC asked AASA, the School Superintendents Association, to assist in spreading the word to school districts, according to Dan Domenech, the association's executive director. The association is preparing to answer that request from the CDC as soon as it comes in, Domenech said.

The first step schools should consider, Domenech said, is establishing a process for determining whether students are contracting the virus and a system for reporting updates to health officials.

“If it’s serious enough to close schools, we have something today we didn’t have back then: We have the technology that does allow students to be able to stay home and do work online,” Domenech said.

Earlier this month, the heads of the two national teachers’ unions called on the Trump administration to provide more direct guidance to schools on how to respond to the virus’ growing threat.

Students in Rensselaer Central Schools in Indiana got an early preview of sorts for the district’s response to a widespread infection. The week of Jan. 20, an outbreak of flu sent absentee rates in the district’s middle and high schools soaring above 20 percent. Before health officials could formally request a shutdown, the district closed Thursday and Friday of that week, according to Curtis Craig, superintendent of schools.

The district had previously been deploying e-learning in the event of inclement weather. Craig said the biggest key to success in unexpected e-learning situations is to have adequately prepared students and teachers prior to the emergency.

“If you can run the kids through some online practice while they’re here at school, it’s much much better. If online isn’t completely different than what they’re doing in school, that’s even better,” Craig said. “If the kids are used to going to a student management system to go online to submit their assignments, submitting their assignments online, then it’s not a completely different experience for them.”

It won’t be possible to pre-empt or even alleviate illness-related anxiety, Craig says. His team saw concerns about the local flu outbreak bubbling up on social media shortly before the decision to close for two days.

“It very may well have caused our absence rate because people saw that and thought, since the school’s sending this, it must be bad,” Craig said.

“In the longer term, we want people to look to the school sites for accuracy and information,” he continued. “I guess I would rather have that increase of people being cautious, and for them to know that the school is going to put out accurate information for them, and the parents can decide.”

This story was updated to reflect additional response from federal officials.

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