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## **School District Crisis and Emergency Management for a Potential Pandemic: FAQ**

**Crisis and emergency management** is the detection, prevention, and management of critical events and emergencies. By working together, schools and community partners can focus on crisis and emergency preparedness, including efforts to build a positive, prevention-based, school culture. This document is intended to serve as a resource for crisis and emergency planning surrounding the coronavirus and other possible pandemic situations.

For additional questions, please reach out to [center4safeschools@nsba.org](mailto:center4safeschools@nsba.org).

### **What do I need to do to get prepared?**

Focus on getting organized. If you have set up your crisis management team, then preparedness is a simple pivot. If you have *not* set up this team, then here is what you need to do immediately:

**Organize your team:** Get your pandemic crisis management team (PCMT) pulled together. Your district school crisis team should be made up of a board member, the district communications lead, the superintendent, the principals of each of your schools, a legal representative, a nurse, a counselor, a public health official, and a law enforcement official. Your PCMT will want to implement the following:

- Identify a coronavirus manager
- Build a coronavirus planning team
- Begin monitoring the virus's expansion
- Plan the build out of a comprehensive plan

### **Once I am ready to activate my team, what activity should we focus on first?**

If your PCMT is up and ready start, the first action you will want to do is assess the risks. Your team will be most effective in preparing for the coronavirus if they understand the probability and consequences of unfavorable events. Your team will need to identify individuals, schools, and operations most likely to be affected, then gauge their vulnerability. The entire staff will need to have a clear sense of the risks they face across the district. It is critical to understand how the virus can spread and its potential effects.

Before and during an outbreak, expect schools to be closed by public health organizations to help prevent the spread of the virus. To help assess the risks, consider the following:

- Meet with public health officials
- Identify all potential exposure points for the district
- Identify schools and facilities that could be closed

### **Should my district identify and test certain individuals?**

Districts can recommend that staff and students be tested if they have significant reason to believe those individuals may be infected. However, be careful not to target certain individuals or groups. Additionally, there is a key provision in The American Disabilities Act preventing the targeting of students.

### **What is expected of the district when dealing with the coronavirus?**

The most important role that the district will maintain is ensuring employee and student safety. In preparing for the coronavirus, be sure to take all precautions to safeguard staff and students from predictable office and classroom hazards. Protecting the health of staff and students is not only paramount for safety reasons, but it also reduces potential district costs and helps to forestall critical disruptions.

Infection control measures are key activities for prevention. If you do not already have an infection control measures plan for offices and classrooms, be sure to get one.

Here are some actions to consider:

- Develop and/or implement infection control measures
- Increase social distance across offices and classrooms
- Identify ways to separate schools from vendors and suppliers
- Be prepared to separate essential staff

### **Will dealing with the coronavirus impact my current policies?**

Understand that pandemics can challenge your district's regular policies. Therefore, you will need to prepare policies focused on pandemic outbreaks. New or revised policies may be needed to address issues that could arise, including extended medical leave, leave to care for sick family members, or bereavement leave. Keep in mind that concern about lost wages is the largest deterrent to self-quarantine.

A special category of policies could address temporary employees needed to keep schools operating. Examine the current provisions for hiring, paying, and offering benefits to temporary employees and consider temporary employees for extended periods. Consider the following:

- Develop and/or refine employee leave policies
- Develop employment policies during a pandemic
- Prepare plans to support employees during a pandemic
- Prepare or refine district continuity plans
- Prepare to adapt operations

### **Should the district focus only on shuttering schools?**

No. The district will need to focus on how to maintain teaching capabilities. We live in the age of constant connectivity. The PCMT will need to identify the most appropriate tool for remote learning. Be sure to understand that an outbreak could keep schools closed for an indefinite period. The PCMT should select a teleconferencing tool of choice and offer training to teachers and students. This can help in possibly achieving no downtime for the school year. The district also should plan for students who may have limited or no internet access at home.

### **Should the district lean on public health officials in helping staff and students understand the coronavirus?**

Yes and no. You absolutely should secure as much information as possible from public health officials related to understanding the virus. However, it is the role and responsibility of the district to ensure the information is effectively communicated to staff and students. Staff and students are empowered when they understand risks and how to manage them. In preparing for the virus, informing staff and students of the threat and planned infection control measures helps them understand how they can protect themselves. Clear messages and frequent communication are essential. Consider the following:

- Develop or implement communication methods
- Share risk information
- Advise on all infection control measures and policies
- Make sure to keep all stakeholders informed during an outbreak
- Make sure that all key stakeholders receive consistent information

**As an additional resource, the letter below can be used as a template for district communication to families regarding next steps for mitigating the risk of, and planning for, a potential pandemic.**

I am writing to provide you with an update on XXXX's preparedness plan for the COVID-19 virus.

As you are probably aware, the COVID-19 virus has spread to XXXX, and will likely be in XXXX in the foreseeable future. As scientists are learning more about the virus, we are following those reports and tracking developments.

As a result of the potential impacts, we may expect upcoming events to be canceled. In areas where COVID-19 has been widespread, governments have taken steps to contain the outbreak by canceling school and public events to keep people from being together in community spaces. Some of these actions may very well happen in the future here in XXXX, so we also are preparing our plans for the possibility of distance learning.

In preparing ourselves for prevention and action, these are the steps we are taking:

- Increasing the frequency and depth of our cleaning routines at school. As with other outbreaks in the past, XXXX takes measures to increase the number of times that bathrooms, doorknobs, handrails, etc., are disinfected, and we are also using stronger cleaning elements (more bleach-based products).
- The medical office will be sending students home if they are observed to have symptoms of COVID-19 (which are very much the same as the flu or cold). While this may be inconvenient for parents, we feel that keeping sick students away from healthy students will be important. We also may be making temporary modifications to our attendance policies if this occurs.
- XXXX will be reviewing our emergency response measures and how we communicate different levels of action. We will be using the World Health Organization's Infectious Disease Decision Making Matrix as a guideline.
- XXXX will be preparing distance learning plans. Teachers and principals will be communicating with students and parents as far as what they should expect to do in the event of a short or longterm school closure.

Here is what parents should be doing in preparation:

- Keep sick children at home.
- Think about childcare plans in the event of a school closure.
- Test your technology at home. Can you access the parent portal on our website? Elementary Parents – XXXX, Secondary Parents – XXXX. If not, please reach out to the school for help. These will be vital resources for you and your child.
- Communicate with the school and your child's teachers if you have any questions or need additional support.
- Prepare other types of home-learning activities, especially PE, fitness, and outdoor activities. Your children move around a lot at school - you should plan to build in play and movement if they are at home for an extended period.
- Don't panic. Be prepared but stay calm.

If you have suggestions or comments, please send them to XXXX. We will continue to keep you updated on any new information or additional plans for the district. In the event we do need to go to alternative schooling methods, we will all need to be patient with each other as we work to find solutions as quickly as possible with our students', staff's, and communities' safety in mind.

Sincerely,

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