



September 2009

Dear Parent/Guardian:

I hope your school year has gotten off to a happy and healthy start. The focus of this letter is on the "healthy" part. As I am sure you are aware, the H1N1 flu virus and its possible impacts have been high-profile topics in the national news during the past few months. Health professionals, government officials, and educators in Whatcom County have also been working together to plan ways to deal with the flu.

In the Ferndale School District, our number one concern is the health and safety of our students. Therefore, I am writing to share with you the latest information we have about the flu.

During the first two weeks of school, we have seen a small increase in flu-like student illnesses. However, most health care providers and agencies are no longer differentiating between H1N1 and other types of flu, so we don't know exactly which students have what type of flu. Most of the children who had flu over the summer went through 3-5 days of moderate or severe flu symptoms, but following the flu they bounced back and are now doing fine without further complications.

As we stated in our August communication to families, influenza outbreaks typically occur no earlier than mid-December. This year, however, the virus remained active over the summer, and we have been told that we may see school outbreaks this fall. Health officials estimate that as many as 40-50% of our students might contract some type of flu during the next few months, especially since the H1N1 virus appears to be disproportionately affecting children and young adults. At this time, the H1N1 virus does not appear to be causing severe disease in people, with the exception of those with asthma or other underlying health conditions. However, this could change.

We know that the first available vaccines will be delivered to Washington State health agencies in early-October, with additional vaccines arriving each week after that. We understand from State health officials that the vaccines will be optional. Families will decide whether their children receive the vaccine.

I want to assure you that we have staff who are monitoring the flu situation throughout the district each day. We also have staff working on the possible issues our school district might face because of the flu, like not enough substitute teachers on a particular day. Finally, we are working closely with the Whatcom County Health Department to make sure we have the best possible resources and expertise.

Here are some of the things you can do:

Watch your child for flu symptoms, which include the following:

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|---|----------|----------------|-------------------------|---------------|-------------|------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Fever (100+ degrees Fahrenheit, 37.8+ degrees Celsius) | 2. Cough | 3. Sore throat | 4. Runny or stuffy nose | 5. Body aches | 6. Headache | 7. Feeling tired | 8. Vomiting or diarrhea |
|---|----------|----------------|-------------------------|---------------|-------------|------------------|-------------------------|

NOTE: Having one or more of the above symptoms does not necessarily mean a person has H1N1 or even the flu.

Don't send your child to school if he/she is sick. If your child is sick at school, he/she will be moved away from other students and supervised in a separate part of the school until you or another emergency contact can pick him/her up. Your child might be asked to wear a mask in school while we wait for you to arrive.

Make sure your contact information is up-to-date. If your child becomes seriously ill (with a fever of 104 or higher), we will make every effort to contact you to gain permission to use fever-reducing over-the-counter products such as chewable Tylenol. Because each child can respond differently to things like Tylenol, we will not give these products without approval from you or your health care provider. If your child becomes seriously ill and we are unable to reach you, an emergency contact, or your child's health care provider, we will call 911 to have your child taken to the emergency room at St. Joseph's Hospital.

Make a family plan. Think about how you or your emergency contact will be able to pick up a sick child from school as soon as possible after being notified by school staff members. Figure out how you will arrange for you or another responsible adult to care for your ill child for several days if it becomes necessary.

Keep your child home for 24 hours after he/she no longer has a fever (without using fever-reducing drugs). This will reduce the number of students who are infected with the H1N1 virus or other illnesses.

Minimize your child's contact with others during their illness. Many children -- especially teenagers -- like to socialize with friends at the end of illnesses. They think they're well enough to do "just a little socializing." By keeping them away from others until 24 hours after their fever breaks, you can help reduce the spread of the flu.

Call your child's school as soon as possible if your child is ill. If they have flu-like symptoms, tell the secretary something like "My child is home with the flu. She started vomiting last night." Although we don't need a long story, some specific information will help us in our monitoring efforts across the county.

Have your children wash their hands frequently. If they are not near a sink, they should use a hand-sanitizer like Purell whenever possible. Our district provides some of these products and materials in school. In this time of high demand, we would welcome donations of hand sanitizer bottles or hand-wipe containers to your child's classroom as well.

Continue teaching your child the importance of cough/sneeze etiquette. Health officials recommend using and disposing of a tissue when one is available, or coughing into one's arm or sleeve when there is no tissue.

Monitor all health information from the school district and the health department. This is particularly important for parents/guardians of children with significant health needs (diabetes, asthma, cardiac problems, etc.). If your child does have a significant health concern, you might want to consider -- in consultation with your child's physician -- keeping him/her home for a few days during a flu outbreak to minimize his/her risk. For more information about the flu, you can visit www.flu.gov, or call 1-800-CDC-INFO.

We will notify you if there are any major changes to our district's strategy to prevent the spread of flu. The best place to get information about the Ferndale School District is on our website, although you can also call your child's school.

Our children need their schools and families to work together in the coming months to keep them as healthy as possible. Thank you for working with us on this important issue.

Sincerely,

Linda Quinn, Superintendent
Ferndale School District