

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Preparedness Guidance for Schools

By **G. Frederick Compton, Jr.**

On March 5, 2020, the Northshore School District in the State of Washington announced that all of its schools were closing for up to 14 days due to the presence of COVID-19 in their community. On March 9, 2020, three individuals in Cuyahoga County tested positive for COVID-19 and Governor DeWine has declared a “state of emergency.”

This communication is intended to suggest some areas of your operation that should be reviewed and made part of a Communicable Disease Protocol in your school district. With national and international information regarding COVID-19 changing daily, it seems appropriate to take reasonable steps to address any health crisis that may occur in your community. Additionally, your district and board of education will want to be ahead of any issues and in a position to communicate your preparedness to the community. The following suggestions are not intended to be all-inclusive, but, instead, represent some of the protocols that are commonly considered by schools contemplating a communicable disease event.

- Determine in advance what objective criteria would you use to make the decision to close schools due to a COVID-19 risk;
- Have a written and detailed response plan for any health risk that may affect the operation of your school district;
- Coordinate with your local health officials and school health care professionals in the development of those response protocols;
- Monitor on a daily basis updates on the health risks associated with COVID-19 at the websites for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Ohio Department of Health (ODH);
- Proactively encourage and support hygienic practices (hand washing, hand sanitizers, reporting any signs of contagion) by students, staff and visitors;
- Develop a detailed contingency plan for student instruction if there is a need to close schools for an extended period of time;
- Engage your teaching staff and support staff for input in the preparation of any contingency plan;
- Develop a specific contingency plan for the provision of special education and related services for students who are under an IEP or a 504 Plan;
- Encourage the families in your school district to be cautious about sending their children to school if they or anyone with whom the children have had contact demonstrate certain signs of illness as suggested by your local health care professionals;

- Encourage employees in your school district to be cautious about coming to work if they or anyone with whom the employees have had contact demonstrate certain signs of illness as suggested by your local health care professionals;
- Determine in advance whether extracurricular activities shall be discontinued or modified when a school is closed in response to a communicable disease concern;
- Identify and advise any outside users of school facilities that the facility could be closed in response to a communicable disease concern and that their use of the facility shall also be cancelled for the period of time the facility is closed;
- Monitor on a daily basis the absenteeism of students and staff and alert local health officials if there is a sudden increase in absenteeism;
- Have and maintain a supply of products and supplies used in the control of a communicable disease such as cleansing sprays and liquids, disposable towels, masks, hand soap, alcohol-based hand sanitizers and appropriate signage that may be needed;
- Determine if there is a heightened cleaning technique that needs to go into effect and, if so, when that technique would go into effect;
- Develop a written plan to address the provision of nutritional meals to eligible students during any extended school closure;
- Review all planned excursions by students for exposure to a communicable disease such as arenas, lecture or concert halls, senior citizen centers, etc.;
- Consider asking students where they and their families spent their Spring Break as an effort to anticipate issues related to exposure;
- In conjunction with your local health care professionals, prepare and prominently display placards concerning precautions to use for the reduction of the risk of infection;
- When in doubt contact your local health care professionals, ODH or CDC for guidance; and
- Above all else make every effort to avoid panic in your schools and community by being prepared and acting based upon fact and not fear.

Please contact any of the listed attorneys regarding the potential impact of this issue on your district. We welcome any questions.

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