

LEADERSHIP UPDATE

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A publication for Alberta's school administrators

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H1N1

With the imminent arrival of the fall and winter flu season, employers across Alberta are implementing contingency plans for managing the effect of the H1N1 strain of influenza. Given the critical role played by schools and their potential to be particularly hard hit by the disease, many school boards have been proactive in developing policy and protocols for managing outbreaks of this new strain.

Since the H1N1 flu was first identified in April 2009, health authorities around the world have been tracking its spread. Last June, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared the outbreak a pandemic, an indicator of the rapid global spread of the disease rather than its severity. The last time the WHO declared a global pandemic was in 1968, when the so-called Hong Kong flu made its way from East Asia around the world.

Canada has already experienced the first wave of the H1N1 flu in the spring and summer of this year. The second wave is expected to make itself felt as early as mid-October. While the ultimate effect of the disease will depend on a variety of factors, some authorities are estimating that as many as 35 per cent of the school population may come down with the disease.

In the worst cases, H1N1 influenza can result in hospitalization and in rare cases death. The vast majority of people who contract it, though, will suffer typical flu symptoms such as fever, coughing, headaches, muscle or joint pain, sore throat, chills, fatigue and runny nose. Usually, recovery without medical intervention takes about a week.

**Nearly
all men
can stand
adversity,
but if you
want to test
a man's
character,
give him
power.
—Abraham
Lincoln**



Q & A
GORDON THOMAS,
Executive Secretary

Q: What is the position of the Alberta Teachers' Association on the H1N1 pandemic?

A: This is fundamentally a health issue, and the response of school boards and teachers to this or any other disease outbreak should be informed by the best available medical information. As always,

the primary objective of any policy or decision at the board or school level should be to protect the health and safety of students, teachers and staff.

Association staff has prepared the following questions and answers to help teachers deal with the arrival of the H1N1 flu.

Where can I find information about H1N1 influenza and schools?

Alberta Health Services has posted information on its website (www.albertahealthservices.ca) that provides information and guidance for schools. Additional information for school administrators can also be found on the Alberta Education site (www.education.alberta.ca).



How will I know what my school board is planning to do in response to the pandemic?

Almost all school authorities have developed plans for managing the potential effect of the H1N1 influenza on schools, and most have already made these plans available to teachers and school administrators. As an employee of the school authority, you have a right and obligation to be informed about the school authority's policy because it might affect your professional or work practices. Ask your principal for a copy of the relevant policy.

Should I take on responsibility for cleaning or other health-related custodial work?

Custodial duties, including cleaning surfaces, are not the responsibility of teachers. In fact, teachers should not undertake such work. It is the responsibility of the school authority to hire staff to perform this function to maintain a safe and hygienic work and learning environment.

Can I be required to take on different teaching or supervisory assignments?

It is likely that, as the result of staff and student absenteeism and a potential shortage of available substitute teachers, classes, instructional activities and supervision schedules may be reconfigured. Assignments may need to be altered in response to these emerging circumstances, and teachers would be expected to make reasonable accommodations. There are limits, however, and, in accordance with Section 8 of the Code of Professional Conduct, a teacher is required to bring to the attention of the principal and protest "the assignment of duties for which the teacher is not qualified or conditions which make it difficult to render professional service."

Is the school board or health authority required to advise me or members of my school community if there is an H1N1 outbreak in my school?

No. Health authorities have indicated that they will not provide such notification and, in fact, will not even test people who demonstrate H1N1 symptoms to confirm the presence of the disease except in severe cases where such a test may be needed to inform medical treatment. Not that this matters—the disease is likely to be widespread. You should assume that, over the course of the pandemic, you will be exposed to people who have the disease, some of whom may not have any apparent symptoms, and you should take appropriate precautions to limit your risk of infection.

If I become ill myself, what should I do?

Go home and stay home until you are well! If you have contracted a communicable disease, you have an obligation to avoid exposing students and staff to infection. Some school boards have even gone so far as to issue an explicit directive that sick employees should stay home. Of course, if your condition warrants, you should seek medical attention. You are under no obligation to disclose to your employer the nature of your illness and should refrain from providing such information.

Am I required to report for work if there is an outbreak of H1N1 in my school?

Yes. Teachers are required to report to school as usual. Except in truly exceptional cases, the mere presence of the disease in the school is not sufficient grounds for a teacher to be absent, because the risk posed by the disease to the typical adult is moderate and manageable. At this time, neither the Public Health Agency of Canada nor Alberta Health Services is recommending the closure of schools, even if there are confirmed cases of H1N1 influenza virus identified in a school.

Can I be required to prepare lesson plans in advance for use in the event that I become sick?

It is reasonable to expect that you would have year and current unit plans in place and that your daily lesson plans would be up to date. It is also reasonable for the principal to request that teachers prepare one or two days of emergency plans for use in the event of unanticipated absence. Teachers should ensure that their current plans and mark records are accessible to the substitute or supply teacher covering their class. Your focus should be on getting well.

Can I be required to prepare alternative lessons for absent students?

No. In the event of an outbreak in a school, widespread absences over an extended period are to be expected. It would be unreasonable to expect a teacher to prepare alternative lessons customized for every absent student. Besides, if a student is absent with the flu or any other illness, he or she should be able to rest and recover at home without being concerned about completing work sent from school. It is expected that once absent students have returned to school, the teacher would help them catch up on the learning they missed.

What should I do if I am pregnant or have some other particular risk factor?

If you are at particular risk, such as being pregnant, or having a compromised immune system or a history of respiratory disease, seek advice from your doctor about how to manage the condition and then act on this advice. In some cases, it might be necessary for your employer to limit your risk by assigning you to alternative duties at a site where you are less likely to be exposed to the disease.

What if there is a chance that my bringing home the flu from school might put a member of my family at risk?

If you are worried about infecting someone in your family, contact your doctor to assess the risk. If it is determined that there are sufficient medical grounds for you to absent yourself to protect another person, contact the Association for further assistance before advising your employer.

What should I do if I am absent because of illness but cannot get to the doctor to obtain a note as normally required?

In many collective agreements, a school board may exercise discretion in requiring teachers to provide a medical certificate if they are absent because of illness. Given the demands that will be placed on doctors during a pandemic, it could be difficult for teachers to get an appointment. And it would be irresponsible to force infected teachers to go out in public and to tie up medical resources simply to get a doctor's note. Accordingly, a responsible school board would be expected to waive any policy or provision in the collective agreement requiring provision of a doctor's certificate in these circumstances. If your employer insists that you obtain a note, document and report your attempts to make a doctor's appointment. Should the issue become contentious, contact the Association for assistance.

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Hyatt Regency Hotel, Calgary



Leadership Essentials
FOR ADMINISTRATORS

Open to administrators within the first two years of their appointment or administrators new to the province of Alberta. There is no registration fee, space is limited; apply early. Registration forms are available at www.teacher.ab.ca, Resource for School Based Administrators, Leadership Essentials for Administrators.

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The Alberta
Teachers' Association