Whitchurch High School - Cardiff

DCSF Pandemic Frequently Asked Questions

The following selected question and answer advice was posted on the teacher net website updated 14th May 2009 prepared by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). It may or may not conform exactly to Welsh Assembly Government Advice but serves to answer some of the frequently asked questions from school communities.

http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/educationoverview/flupandemic/

Reference should also be made therefore to the WAG website

http://wales.gov.uk/topics/health/protection/communicabledisease/swine/?lang=en

1) Closures of schools

i. **Should schools be closing now?** At this time schools should be operating normally. If a child is suspected of having a virus that might be swine flu — even if the child is currently out of school - the school will take advice from the local public health advisers. It is not anticipated as a first response that the school would automatically close.

ii. **What if it becomes a pandemic?** The fact of a pandemic being declared (World Health Organization alert level 6) would not change the situation. Schools should still remain open until they are advised to close: either by their public health advisers for reasons specific to the school; or if the Government determines that the risk to children is such that all schools and settings should close when the pandemic reaches their area.

iii. **Why might schools close?** Influenza spreads rapidly in schools and settings. If they close at the right time, it could significantly reduce the spread of infection and the number of children infected.

iv. **Are we being too cautious shutting schools when the virus is relatively weak?** Schools are acting on Health Protection Agency (HPA) advice. We do not know how dangerous or spreadable this virus is. It is right to be cautious. In his statement to the House on 7 May, Health Secretary Alan Johnson said 'All clinicians say it would be totally irresponsible (not to close schools where pupils have the virus)...We do not know enough about this virus yet. We don't know how it can mutate.'

v. **What notice of closure can schools expect to receive, and from whom? Who will tell parents? And will closure be immediate?** If schools were advised to close when the pandemic reached their area, the local authority would advise the head teacher when this happened and the advice thus became applicable. In that situation, any closure would be expected to take effect from the end of the day when that message was received from the local authority, unless staff shortages made it impossible for the school to operate safely for the day — unlikely in the early stages of a pandemic. Where possible, it would be helpful for the school to contact parents during the day to advise them of the coming closure, so that parents could start to make plans. They should otherwise give them the information when they collect children at the end of the day and/or give children letters to take home.

vi. **What teaching and learning should pupils receive when schools are closed?** Where schools are closed for an extended period in a flu pandemic students should be provided with a reasonable degree of teaching and learning and if schools operate a virtual learning environment they should use it to set, distribute, receive and mark homework.

vii. **Who would make the decision to close a school?** The power to close a school lies with the local authority/governors. They may delegate the decision to the head teacher. If considering closing a school in a situation like this, we would also expect them to take advice from the local Health Protection Agency.

viii. **Who decides if schools across a whole local authority should close?** In a severe pandemic, the Government may advise all schools in a local authority to close when the pandemic reaches their area. The power to close would still lie with the local authority/governing body and they would be expected to follow advice on such a critical issue.

ix. **What legal powers do local authorities have to close schools?** As the employer of staff and under powers relating to the control of school premises, local authorities can direct the closure of community, community special, voluntary controlled and maintained nursery schools in the case of an emergency. Local authorities must take careful advice from the local HPA before choosing to close all their schools.

x. **Will a young person be eligible for Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) payments if their learning provider has had to close?** In such a circumstance, we would expect the learning provider to use its discretion in taking the appropriate action. This may include setting work to be completed at home or making arrangements for learning to take place at another provider or location. In such circumstances, providing that normal EMA conditions are met, EMA payments would continue.

2) Staying safe whilst open

i. **If a pupil or a member of staff has come back from Mexico, should they return to school, or stay away for a few days in case of infection?** They should come into school if they have no symptoms, even if they have been in contact with a suspected case (unless they have been given specific advice to the contrary by a medical practitioner).

ii. **Should schools continue to go on school trips?** There is no reason why schools should not continue to go on school trips both in this country and abroad. If the trip is abroad we recommend that the school look at the latest available information on the **Foreign and Commonwealth Office website**.

iii. **What should we do if a child becomes ill on a school trip?** If a child on a school trip were to develop symptoms of the virus we recommend that teachers in charge of the pupils follow the emergency procedures as set out at chapter 10 of the **Health and Safety of Pupils on Educational Visits guidance**.

iv. **While schools remain open in a pandemic (because it's a less severe pandemic, or because the pandemic has not yet reached their area), how can they keep children safe?** Normal good practice to reduce the spread of any infection should continue i.e. washing hands, using tissues, etc.

v. **The DCSF's infection control guidance suggests that protective equipment should be used by those dealing with a sick child. In our school we cannot obtain facemasks. What should we do — should we close as a precautionary measure?** Schools should not be closing at this stage unless specifically advised to do so by public health advisers. The most effective step at this stage would be to promote good hygiene practices to children and staff: washing hands and using tissues safely.

   Health Protection Agency advice to the general public is that the only people who currently should stay away from school or work are: those confirmed as having swine flu, those being investigated as probable or possible cases, and pupils of a school where cases have been confirmed who are themselves symptomatic.

   Looking ahead to a possible pandemic, we would advise parents to keep at home any child with possible flu symptoms, and would advise schools and settings to turn away any symptomatic child. In those circumstances, if a child falls ill while in the school or setting and a member of staff is looking after the child until the parents can collect him or her, that member of staff should encourage good respiratory hygiene on the part of the child, and take particular care with their own hygiene. If no facemask is available, the member of staff should try to keep one metre away from the child whenever possible; if the child is young, staff will want to be reassuring towards the child while keeping a distance from him or her. Staff should wash their hands thoroughly if they have been near the child.

vi. **What if pupils refuse to attend schools, will they be punished for truancy?** While schools are open parents should send their children to school unless they have any symptoms. They will be advised if the school is to close and what to do then. These decisions will be made in the light from advice by health professionals with expert knowledge who will always have the interests of pupils in mind. We urge parents not to withdraw their children unless given this advice. It would be for local authorities to decide on any action against parents keeping healthy children off school.

3) Reopening schools that have closed on HPA advice

i. **How will schools and group early years and childcare settings closing on Health Protection Agency (HPA) advice know when it is safe to reopen?** When advising that a school or setting should close to prevent the spread of swine flu, the HPA will advise how long that closure should be for. The norm will be 7 days, based on the current view of the incubation period of this virus. During the closure, the HPA will monitor and investigate any cases among pupils of the school concerned. Shortly before the school is due to reopen they will advise if it should reopen or extend its closure.

ii. **What should staff of schools do when a school reopens? Are there special precautions to take?** We would advise all schools to take particular care with hygiene procedures (hand-washing and use of tissues) — not just for this virus, but to help reduce the spread of a range of viruses. In schools that have reopened after closing on HPA advice, we would ask staff to keep the health of pupils under surveillance and report any concerns to the HPA.

iii. **What if a pupil is confirmed to have swine flu after a school reopens?** The HPA will assess the circumstances as it would with the first case in a school or setting, and advise them whether to close again or remain open.

iv. **Should pupils be asked for a 'fit to return' notice before being readmitted to school after they have been ill with swine flu?** No. Swine flu is not a notifiable illness, and pupils returning to school and settings should be treated the same as they would be for any other illness. Unnecessary requests for 'fit to return' notices will take up GPs' appointments, in turn delaying the treatment of others.

4) Advice and guidance for parents

i. **Is it better for children to catch swine flu now in order to build up their resilience to potentially more harmful strains in the future?** We are still learning about this strain of swine flu and who is most at risk of complications. The Health Protection Agency therefore strongly advises people to avoid intentionally infecting themselves or their children with the virus, for their own safety and the safety of any vulnerable people they may unintentionally infect.

   Even with mild flu, complications can occur, leading to more serious illness. With this in mind, it would be wrong not to take all necessary precautions against swine flu and limit its spread.

ii. **Should I send my child to school (or early years and childcare setting)?** While schools and settings are open parents should send their children to school unless they have any symptoms. They will be advised if the school is to close and what to do then. These decisions will be made in the light from advice by health professionals with expert knowledge who will always have the interests of pupils in mind. We urge parents not to withdraw their children unless given this advice. It would be for local authorities to decide on any action against parents keeping healthy children off school.

iii. **What could working parents do if their child's school or childcare setting was closed for an extended period? Would they have to stay off work?** We appreciate that closures would present a challenge for working parents, but believe they would agree with a decision taken to reduce a significant threat to their children's wellbeing.

   Parents would have to make other arrangements for looking after their children. Some might be able to work from home, work flexible hours, or use informal childcare arrangements with a relative or friend.

iv. **Could employers with a significant proportion of parent workers establish their own childcare provision?** Any advice to close group childcare settings would apply to such a newly established nursery as much as to any other establishment, so it would not be helpful for employers to do this. Also, any such new facility would have to be registered which could not be completed at very short notice; they would have to check that relevant welfare requirements are met before confirming registration.

   Parent workers staying off work to look after children will have a severe impact on the economy and on essential services. We have drawn this issue to the attention of employers so that they can plan for this eventuality. It will have an impact on all sectors, but with good planning we believe that impact to be manageable.