



A Union of Professionals

# Is Your Workplace Ready for COVID-19?

## Guidance for **Local K-12 Leaders** on Information Requests and Requests to Bargain

MARCH 19, 2020

COVID-19 is a worldwide pandemic impacting every aspect of society, especially in our K-12 communities. Is your school district prepared? Do you have a voice in how any plan is implemented?

**This document will outline some basic questions to pose to the employer and steps to take to have the union's voice heard in the process.**

It is vital that districts and schools be prepared for any emergency, but especially now during this pandemic. Employer plans and protocols need to address all aspects of this outbreak, including early identification of suspected cases and reduction of potential exposure to the virus within schools; determination of who are considered to be essential personnel and what essential services will need to continue; the implications of online learning for staff and students; whether classified employees will be compensated during school closures, etc.

Whether your labor-management relationship is cooperative or not, assessing preparedness for highly infectious disease cases in your school is an important first step.

As a local leader, you should be a part of any planning for an outbreak and should request a bargaining session with your employer to discuss readiness. Health and safety issues are mandatory bargaining subjects, so employers have a legal obligation to disclose information and bargain on this issue.

The following checklist, adapted from the Department of Health and Human Services' School District (K-12) Pandemic Influenza Planning Checklist, is a helpful resource in setting the agenda for a meeting with employers; it contains basic questions and actions local union leaders should pursue with the district. **You are entitled to know everything about the district's plans.**

Ask who specifically has the authority for declaring a public health emergency at the state and local levels and for officially activating the district's pandemic response plan.

**For additional information, contact Amy Bahruth with AFT Health Issues at 202-879-4731, [abahruth@aft.org](mailto:abahruth@aft.org).**

Find these resources and more at [www.aft.org/coronavirus](http://www.aft.org/coronavirus)

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The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of 1.7 million professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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## Policies and Procedures

- Are there written policies and procedures in place, such as a crisis management plan, for infection control and occupational health that specifically address readiness for a potential pandemic outbreak? If so, please provide a copy of all such policies and procedures. If not, are there specific plans to develop such policies and procedures, and when will they be provided to the union?
- Are there any essential personnel identified in the plan? Who are they, and what are their roles during an outbreak?
- As part of the development of the district's crisis management plan, all relevant stakeholders in the district (e.g., lead emergency response agency, district administrators, local public health representatives, school health and mental health professionals, teachers, food service directors, and parent representatives) should be included on the committee.
  - a. This committee is accountable for articulating strategic priorities and overseeing the development of the district's operational pandemic plan. The union should be considered a key stakeholder in the development of these policies and procedures. You should formally request that the union have designated representatives on the planning team. This would be specific union-appointed representatives separate from staff who may be on the team in their work capacity (e.g., school nurse, teacher, custodial staff, etc.).
  - b. Has the district included local and/or state health departments and other community partners in establishing organizational structures, such as the Incident Command System, to manage the execution of the district's pandemic plan? If not, why not? And when will these relationships be established?
- Are there systems, policies or procedures in place for early identification and isolation of suspected or confirmed COVID-19 cases at schools? If so, please provide details about all such systems, policies and procedures. If not, are there specific plans to develop such policies and procedures, and when will notification of these be provided to the union?
  - a. Who will be charged with putting this policy into operation at each school?
  - b. What policies are in place related to the transportation of ill students?

## Elements of Good Plans and Policies

Once you have access to district plans, look for the following elements:

- Does the pandemic plan include the requirements of students with special needs (e.g., students from low-income families who rely on school food services for daily meals), those in special facilities (e.g., juvenile justice facilities) as well as those who do not speak English as their first language? If not, when will the plan be revised to include these considerations?
- What is the procedure to ensure regular and rigorous environmental cleaning and decontamination of surfaces and equipment? What protections will be put in place for the individuals providing this service?
- What chemical disinfectants are likely to be used for decontamination? Will Safety Data Sheets be available for any disinfectant applied in schools? Will staff receive hazard communication training for new disinfectants and thorough training on appropriate use?
- Has the district worked with the local health department to address provisions for psychological support services for staff, students, and their families during and after a pandemic?

- Has the district implemented an exercise/drill to test the pandemic plan and to discover gaps in its implementation so the plan can be regularly improved?
- Has the district developed scenarios describing the potential impact of a pandemic on student learning (e.g., student and staff absences, school closings, extracurricular activities) based on having various levels of illness among staff and students?
- Has the district developed alternative procedures to ensure continuity of instruction (e.g., web-based distance instruction, telephone trees, mailed lessons and assignments, instruction via local radio or television stations, etc.) in the event of district school closures?
- Has the district developed a continuity-of-operations plan for essential central office functions, including payroll and ongoing communications with students and parents?
- Has the district worked with the local health department to implement infection-prevention policies and procedures that help limit the spread of infectious disease at schools (e.g., promotion of hand hygiene, cough/sneeze etiquette, etc.)?
- Has the district secured sufficient and accessible infection-prevention supplies, such as soap, alcohol-based/waterless hand hygiene products containing at least 60 percent alcohol, tissues and receptacles for their disposal?
- What are the district's policies and procedures for staff and student sick leave unique to a pandemic (e.g., non-punitive, liberal leave, etc.)?
- What is the communication plan for disseminating information to staff, students and families; and does the plan ensure language, culture and reading-level appropriateness?
- Is there a plan in place to test platforms (e.g., hotlines, telephone trees, dedicated websites, and local radio or TV stations, etc.) for communicating pandemic status and actions to school staff, students and families?
- Is there an educational session planned for explaining the pandemic plan to staff and outlining the roles of those responsible for implementing the plan?

For a variety of reasons, many employers shy away from discussions about workplace health and safety issues. With the potential of COVID-19 cases surfacing in education settings, it is more important than ever for local leaders to insist on knowing the level of preparedness in the workplace and ensure that adequate protections are in place.

Our members have the right to a workplace where adequate infection-control practices and personal protective equipment keep them safe from exposure to hazards like COVID-19, and our labor laws obligate employers to discuss these matters. As a union, we can engage in a solution-driven dialogue with employers that will ensure staff and students are protected from COVID-19 exposure in the workplace.