Is Your Workplace Ready for Coronavirus?

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

COVID-19, the new highly infectious viral disease may be coming to your area. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention predicts that COVID19 outbreaks will pop up in the U.S. with very little warning. Should an outbreak occur in your community, it’s likely that schools will be closed for the duration of the outbreak. However, there may be transmission of the virus before schools are systematically closed.

It is important that districts and schools be prepared for an outbreak or pandemic. Schools should prepare for the potential spread of this virus by developing plans and protocols to cope with all aspects of an outbreak, including early identification of suspected cases and reduction of potential exposure to the virus within schools.

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 influenza response plan.

**Policies and Procedures**

1. 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?
2. Are there any essential personnel identified in the plan? Who are they, and what are their roles during an outbreak?

3. 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.

   - 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.).

   - 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 influenza plan? If not, why not? And when will these relationships be established?

4. Are there systems, policies or procedures in place for early identification and isolation of suspected or confirmed coronavirus 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?

   - Who will be charged with putting this policy into operation at each school?

   - 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:

1. Does the pandemic influenza 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?

2. 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?

3. 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?

4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?

7. 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?

8. Has the district developed a continuity-of-operations plan for essential central office functions, including payroll and ongoing communications with students and parents?

9. 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.).

10. 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?

11. 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.).

12. What is the communication plan for disseminating information to staff, students and families; and does the plan ensure language, culture and reading level appropriateness?

13. 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?

14. 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 coronavirus, 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.

Be sure to check out our COVID-19 toolkit for more information about the virus and how to protect your workplaces and members. For additional information, contact Amy with AFT Nurses and Health Professionals at 202-879-4731, abahruth@aft.org.