



Pandemic Planning for Schools

Keep it simple

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How can public schools possibly prepare for a pandemic that would touch every aspect of society, while keeping the plan simple enough to effectively implement? It was a question the United States Department of Health and Human Services posed last year, though in truth we'd already wondered the same thing.

Following the suggestion of several state and local health agencies, we decided to explore just what kind of an impact a pandemic could have on state and local resources, as well as on our district's general operations. After meeting with health, logistics,

and emergency preparation experts, we determined it would be staggering.

Emergency planning in our large urban-suburban school district in DeKalb County, Ga., and the subsequent execution has taught us three very valuable lessons: be thorough; repeatedly convey the plans to staff; and

make the plan easy to understand and follow.

THE DETAILS

By definition, a pandemic's reach is widespread. Even so, most pandemics unfold piecemeal and in no particular order. This suggests that schools will have to respond in stages, unlike an emergency that requires an immediate and defined response.

But therein lies yet another challenge for schools: how to develop a pandemic response plan that can be phased in.

The DeKalb County School System Pandemic Response Protocol includes esca-

lation and de-escalation phases. A confirmed report of a pandemic triggers the first stage, activation. That notification is a signal to all school principals to closely monitor student and staff attendance, scrutinize field trips, and require approval from the DeKalb Board of Health to enroll new students from or near the infected area. Even at this early stage, we share information with parents.

In the second stage, when the pandemic spreads closer to our community, the School System Incident Command Center (SSICC) is placed on standby. Updated information sheets about the pandemic, its symptoms, and prevention guidelines are provided to staff and parents and the information is posted on the district's website.

When the pandemic actually hits our community, the SSICC is fully activated with open lines to the DeKalb Board of Health. Field trips are halted, as are all extracurricular activities. School buses and schools are sanitized daily, based on the board of health's guidelines.

Student and staff attendance is reported daily to the SSICC. The district's website is updated frequently and a district pandemic hotline—manned by school social workers—begins operations.

At this point, it is possible that some schools will be closed. Low staff and student attendance will make the pandemic's growth sporadic, as will the tendency of parents to keep their healthy, unaffected children at home to avoid exposure. As the district moves into this phase of the pandemic, study packets and cable-channel lesson plans will be available for students and parents.

Anticipating that a state of emergency could be declared during a pandemic, when all public schools are closed, our district is in the advanced planning stages for a "virtual school system," where students at nearly every grade level will have a menu of online lesson plans to select from.

The goal is to have this capability available to students for up to three months. Lap-

tops will be available for parents to check out, on an as-needed basis, and students may use school and/or public library computers. Lessons will continue on the cable channel.

As we move into the pandemic containment stage, when the state of emergency is rescinded, schools will begin the de-escalation phase. How to start school after a major crisis is one of the most overlooked stages of any emergency. If the school system has not been fully operational for several weeks, administrators will need to implement a re-opening plan that is much like the plan followed for the start of the school year.

After getting clearance from the DeKalb Board of Health and the State Department of Human Resources to reopen, human resources will conduct a staff availability assessment of each department and school, with all schools, centers, and buses undergoing an inspection.

Staff will return a few days prior to a full reopening for orientation and status check. The SSICC will remain active until the district is up and running.

During this de-escalation stage, and throughout the entire pandemic event, the district will communicate with the public through radio, television, phone messages, and the district's website. Staff and student attendance will be closely monitored and reported to the central office on a daily basis.

School counselors, psychologists, and social workers will work with staff and students as needed. Each central office staff member will be assigned schools to monitor and identify needs. Student work completed during the pandemic will be reviewed by the district's department of instruction and factored into the delivery of grades.

Once the schools are fully functional and the crisis has passed, SSICC will convene for a debriefing to assess the Pandemic Response Protocol and its implementation. Regional focus groups will provide feedback from schools and the community.

All of the information will be gathered and studied by the district's department of

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research and evaluation. The results will be shared with the SSICC, the DeKalb Board of Health, and the community.

School systems must understand today's reality and plan accordingly. No educator or parent ever imagined an incident like the Columbine shootings could have occurred. No U.S. citizen ever imagined a terrorist event like 9/11 could have possibly happened. To this day, the nation is still dealing with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the 2005 season of storms that devastated communities in the Gulf Coast.

Frankly, school districts were not prepared for any of those events. Now is the time to prepare for the coming pandemic. Educators must heed the words of U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt: "Pandemics are global in nature, but their impact is local. When the next pandemic strikes, as it surely will, it is likely to touch the lives of every individual, family, and community. Our task is to make sure that when this happens, we will be a nation prepared." ■

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