

## PREPARING FOR PANDEMIC FLU



egardless of whatever skepticism one might have about whether a pandemic flu will outbreak in the near future, Congress has appropriated \$3.8 billion to help the nation prepare. If (or as the experts say, when) a pandemic occurs, school districts will be affected and therefore must be prepared. Pandemic planning is happening on an international, federal, state, and local level, albeit in some instances at a slow pace. NSBA recently surveyed 1,900 National Affiliate school districts about whether they have adopted pandemic flu plans yet. Eighty-eight districts responded. Nine percent indicated they have adopted pandemic plans, while 28 percent indicated they have some kind of disease surveillance capacity. The purpose of this article is to describe resources available to help school districts devise effective pandemic flu plans.

Putting together a good pandemic preparedness plan for a school district may seem like an insurmountable task and even an exercise in futility. After all, no one knows how bad the next pandemic will be. In short, it is difficult to imagine, much less plan for, the innumerable issues that could present themselves in the event of a pandemic of varying degrees of severity. Nevertheless, it is probably most crucial that plans be made at the local level—particularly the school district level. U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Michael O. Leavitt explains why: "By definition a pandemic is defined as a global event. In reality, a pandemic is a local crisis worldwide. It can happen in every state and every city and every town at almost the same time."<sup>1</sup> For more information about pandemic flu, see the box below.

Probably the most important step to take when creating a school district pandemic plan is coordinating with the local health department (or the local government agency responsible for implementing the state pandemic plan at the local level). Each state has developed a state pandemic flu plan which specifically delineates the roles and responsibilities of the state and local health departments. For example, the local

health department may decide when schools will be closed and when and how schools will be used to treat people affected by the pandemic. In short, your school district will work closely with your local health department in the event of a pandemic, and having coordinated plans will make it more likely that dealing with the crisis will go smoothly. Probably the second most important step to take when creating a pandemic plan is informing all stakeholders—particularly school staff, parents, and students—about the existence and contents of the plan.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss all the issues that should be contained in a school district pandemic flu plan, the box on the next page lists some of the relevant legal and practical issues. Below are resources which

**A pandemic** is a global disease outbreak. A flu pandemic will occur when a new influenza virus emerges that people have little or no immunity to, for which there is no vaccine. If the flu can be spread easily from person-to-person, it can sweep across the country and around the world quickly. The last three pandemics, in 1918, 1957, and 1968, killed approximately 40 million, 2 million, and 1 million people worldwide, respectively.<sup>2</sup> Of most recent concern is the "highly pathogenic avian H5N1 virus," which as of March 2006 had spread to 37 countries on three continents, infecting 175 people, 96 of whom have died.<sup>3</sup> While very few humans have contracted avian flu, and to date there has been no sustained human-to-human transmission of the disease, the concern is that H5N1 (or another virus) will evolve into a virus capable of human-to-human transmission. If no vaccine is available to stop the spreading of a virus transmitted human-to-human, a pandemic may be inevitable. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, currently there is no commercially available vaccine to protect humans against the H5N1 virus seen in Asia, Europe, and Africa.<sup>4</sup>

school districts and school attorneys might find helpful as they create pandemic plans. Many of these resources are available on the U.S. government's official pandemic influenza website at [www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also has established a helpful pandemic flu website at <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/index.htm>. Before determining what roles and responsibilities a school district must assume to deal with a pandemic, the roles and responsibilities of the federal, state, and other local governments must be understood. The resources below should provide much of this information.

### Implementation Plan for the National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza

The IMPLEMENTATION PLAN outlines the federal government's national plan for preventing, detecting, and responding to a pandemic. More specifically, it discusses the federal government's role in dealing with a pandemic; international efforts; steps the federal government is taking to produce and stockpile vaccines and anti-viral medicines, protect public safety, protect private sector institutions; etc. At 233 pages, this document is an ambitious read. However, the executive summary of the IMPLEMENTATION PLAN provides a short, big pic-

ture view of international, national, state, and local pandemic planning. Likewise, the IMPLEMENTATION PLAN fleshes out the details of the federal government's NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR PANDEMIC INFLUENZA, which is a 17 page document describing pandemic planning in general terms based on three pillars: preparedness and communication; surveillance and detection; and response and containment.

- Download the IMPLEMENTATION PLAN at [http://www.whitehouse.gov/homeland/nspi\\_implementation.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/homeland/nspi_implementation.pdf)
- Download the NATIONAL STRATEGY at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/homeland/nspi.pdf>

A shorter, simpler document that lays out how the federal government is spending money appropriated for pandemic planning is HHS Secretary Michael O. Leavitt's PANDEMIC PLANNING UPDATE. Of the \$3.8 billion Congress has appropriated to planning for the pandemic, \$3.3 billion was allocated to HHS. With this money, HHS intends to: monitor disease spread to support rapid response; develop vaccines and vaccine production capacity; stockpile antivirals and other countermeasure drugs; coordinate federal, state, and local preparation; and enhance outreach and communications planning.



- Download PANDEMIC PLANNING UPDATE at <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/pdf/pandemicflu20060313.pdf>

### Pandemic Influenza Planning Checklists

Attached as an appendix to the IMPLEMENTATION PLAN (but worth mentioning separately) are planning checklists HHS and CDC have created for a number of entities, including school districts. THE SCHOOL DISTRICT (K-12) PANDEMIC INFLUENZA PLANNING CHECKLIST contains about 35 steps school districts should take to plan for a pandemic including: putting a plan together that involves relevant stakeholders and delineates roles and responsibilities; developing procedures to continue instruction; implementing procedures to limit the spread of influenza; developing a plan to disseminate information to stakeholders; etc. To the extent that school districts are employers, schools may also want to consult the BUSINESS PANDEMIC INFLUENZA PLANNING CHECKLIST. Likewise, to the extent schools may be parents' primary resource about pandemics, schools may want to distribute to families the PANDEMIC INFLUENZA PLANNING CHECKLIST FOR INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES.

- Download the SCHOOL DISTRICT (K-12) PANDEMIC INFLUENZA PLANNING CHECKLIST at <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/schoolchecklist.html>
- Download the BUSINESS PANDEMIC INFLUENZA PLANNING CHECKLIST at <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/businesschecklist.html>
- Download the PANDEMIC INFLUENZA PLANNING CHECKLIST FOR INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES at <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/planguide/checklist.html>

### State Pandemic Plans

All states have created pandemic flu plans that identify the roles and responsibilities of state and local health departments. Specifically, the

### The following is a list of just a few of the practical and legal issues a pandemic flu plan should contemplate:

- Who is in charge of administering the school district's pandemic plan, and what are the roles and responsibilities of others who will implement parts of the plan?
- What steps will the district take to stop the spreading of influenza?
- What products does a district need to have on hand to stop the spreading of influenza?
- In the event of a pandemic, how will sick students be identified?
- How will sick students be transported home?
- Where will sick students go if they cannot be transported home immediately?
- What special requirements will students with disabilities and English language learners need during a pandemic?
- What plans have to be made ahead of time if the local health department intends to use the school as a medical facility during a pandemic?
- How will the district communicate with parents and other stakeholders during a pandemic?
- How will students, particularly those without access to technology at home, continue to be educated during a pandemic?
- Do privacy laws affect what student health information school districts are able to disclose to the local health department and others?
- Will the school district adopt a more liberal employee leave policy during a pandemic?
- Will employees be paid if they are unable to work during a pandemic or if the school is closed?

state plans discuss surveillance activities; communicating strategies; plans for acquiring, storing, and distributing vaccines and antiviral medicines; etc. To a lay person, the state plans can seem vague and technical. However, to the extent the state plans delineate the roles and responsibilities of the local health department, the roles and responsibilities of school districts become clearer. For example, under the WISCONSIN PANDEMIC INFLUENZA PREPAREDNESS plan, the local health department is to develop a plan to close and re-open schools and monitor absentee rates in schools if feasible.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, Wisconsin school districts must be aware of their local health department's plan to close and reopen schools and include it in the school district's pandemic plan and be prepared to provide the local health department with absentee data if it is requested.

■ Download state plans from the 50 states at <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/tab2.html>

### Additional resources

Pandemic influenza planning is still in its infancy. The local health department located in your client's community may have a pandemic plan, which may be available on its website, or may be in the process of developing a plan. The local plan, like the state plan, will help school districts determine the roles and responsibilities they should address in the district's pandemic plan. Also, your state's school boards association may have put together resources on pandemic planning. For example, the Missouri School Boards Association is offering an Internet-based, video broadcast entitled, "The Facts on Pandemic Flu: Keys for Schools in Planning, Preparedness, and Procedures," on June 14, 2006. This broadcast may be of interest to school districts and school attorneys across the country. Download the brochure describing this event at <http://www.msbanet.org/pdf/>

*pandemic\_brochure\_Acct4210.pdf*. Finally, CDC is currently working on a toolkit intended to help school districts devise effective pandemic plans. NSBA is participating in its creation. **I&A**

### End Notes

- 1 DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES, PANDEMIC PLANNING UPDATE 2 (Mar. 13, 2006).
- 2 HOMELAND SECURITY COUNCIL, NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR PANDEMIC INFLUENZA 1 (Nov. 2005), available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/homeland/nspi.pdf>.
- 3 DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES, PANDEMIC PLANNING UPDATE 1 (Mar. 13, 2006).
- 4 Pandemicflu.gov, General Information - Vaccination and Treatment for H5N1 Virus in Humans, <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/general/> (last visited May 18, 2006).
- 5 BUREAU OF COMMUNICABLE DISEASES, DIVISION OF PUBLIC HEALTH, DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND FAMILY SERVICES, WISCONSIN PANDEMIC INFLUENZA PREPAREDNESS (Apr. 2004), available at [http://dhfs.wisconsin.gov/preparedness/pdf\\_files/WIPandemicInfluenzaPlan.pdf](http://dhfs.wisconsin.gov/preparedness/pdf_files/WIPandemicInfluenzaPlan.pdf).