

School Safety and Crisis

Responding to COVID-19: Brief Action Steps for School Crisis Response Teams

Schools should be prepared for local and community-wide infectious disease outbreaks. While it is difficult to predict when (or even if) COVID-19 will rise to the level of a pandemic, there are actions schools can take to be ready for such events. Schools need to work collaboratively with their local and state health departments, and be attentive to guidance offered by the [CDC](#), to determine how to ensure safe learning environments. For detailed guidance on how to develop emergency operations plans capable of addressing pandemic illnesses refer to “Preparing for a Pandemic Illness: Guidelines for School Administrators and Crisis Teams.” This document provides suggestions for the immediate school response to the threat presented by COVID-19.

SCHOOL EMERGENCY OPERATIONS PLAN

Ideally, schools have a well-developed emergency operations plan (EOP, also often referred to as *crisis response plan*) to help them respond to multiple emergencies. In 2013 the U.S. Department of Education developed a guide to support schools in developing an EOP ([Guide for Developing High Quality School Emergency Operations Plans](#)). The EOP provides information that can support pandemic illness planning. Regardless of the status of your EOP, there are a number of specific actions that school crisis response teams can take right now in response to COVID-19. These include actions taken by what are often referred to as the Communication and Warning Annex; Public Health, Medical, and Mental Health Annex; Continuity of Operations (COOP) Annex; and Recovery Annex.

COMMUNICATION AND WARNING ACTIONS

The timely distribution of crisis facts is among the most important things a school can do when responding to a threatening situation. Thus, the following suggestions are offered:

- In consultation with school and community health officials, and consistent with guidance offered by the [CDC](#), draft communication messages for school community members that provide updated information about COVID-19 and how to remain healthy. All of these communications should include current information about actions schools are taking to help ensure safety and provide guidance that empowers caregivers to help students cope with this health crisis.
- Schools should draft several communications and social media posts for (a) when the illness is confirmed in the community, (b) when a significant number of students are found ill, and (c) when schools need to close due to the illness.
- Identify multiple communication outlets (e.g., television, social media, email, letters home, voicemail) through which these messages might be shared.
- Share information for parents on how to talk to support their children regarding COVID-19 ([Talking to Children About COVID-19 \(coronavirus\): A Parent Resource](#) from NASP and NASN)

PUBLIC HEALTH ACTIONS

Promote daily preventive actions for all staff, students, and families. For example, schools should encourage students

to engage in **health-promoting behaviors** that prevent illnesses:

- Wash hands multiple times a day for at least 20 seconds.
- Don't share food or drinks.
- Give elbow bumps instead of handshakes.
- Encourage students and school staff members to eat a balanced diet, get enough sleep, and exercise regularly to help them develop strong immune systems capable of fighting illness.

Public health actions also include activities that help **reduce the spread** of infectious diseases. For example:

- Know the symptoms of COVID-19 and ensure that information is made available to the school community in developmentally appropriate ways.
- Provide training about flu transmission and control measures. Train students to cover their mouths with a tissue when they sneeze or cough and throw out the tissue immediately, or to sneeze or cough into the bends of their elbows.
- Educate employees, visitors, and primary caregivers not to come to the school if they have flu symptoms. Reinforce for families to keep sick children home.
- Establish or reinforce procedures for how families let the school know if their child is sick. These procedures should include letting the school know why the student has been kept home so as to be able to track symptoms. If children are diagnosed with COVID-19, parents must let the school know so they can communicate with, and get guidance from, local health authorities.
- School health professionals might consider interviewing flu-like illness cases for pandemic risk factors and following CDC guidelines for health professionals regarding next steps.
- Begin to conduct active surveillance to identify influenza cases (e.g., review temperature logs; triage “sick” calls, hospitalizations, staff absences, unexplained deaths).

Also, attend to the **school building** itself. For example:

- Consider changing the air conditioning system filters; during the day, where possible, increase ventilation.
- Following each school day, the school should be thoroughly ventilated and cleaned. This can be done by opening all doors and windows or turning the air conditioning or heating systems up.
- Ensure that school administrators can control access to the buildings. Each school should have a plan to close certain entrances and exits, and to monitor others. To prepare for disease outbreaks, identify a main entrance and an indoor area where students and staff can be screened prior to moving to classrooms or other areas of the school.

MEDICAL ACTIONS

If they have not already done so, school health professionals should:

- Assess adequacy of infection-control supplies and review distribution plan.
- Identify areas within the school facility that can be used for isolation and quarantine.
- Develop plans for stockpiling and distributing infection-control supplies.
- Initiate screening for flu-like illnesses at the front desk and nurses' offices.
- Isolate and send home staff or students with flu-like symptoms, utilizing supervised isolation areas in the school—access to this room should be strictly limited and monitored (i.e., parents picking up their ill children should be escorted to and from the isolation area), and a carefully monitored student checkout system should be activated.

MENTAL HEALTH ACTIONS

School personnel should provide caregivers with [information regarding how to address the stress](#) that might be generated by COVID-19. In addition to being told who to contact if they want help addressing their child's anxiety about this virus, they should be advised that striving to find ways to make the danger associated with COVID-19

more predictable and controllable reduces how threatening their children will view the situation. Specifically, youth should be provided with developmentally appropriate information that (a) helps them to accurately gauge the threat presented by this disease and (b) reduces their risk of getting sick. In addition, giving students concrete things they can do to keep themselves and others healthy will reduce stress. And finally, highlight the actions that adults are taking to ensure student safety. See the companion document “[Preparing for Infectious Disease Epidemics: Brief Tips for School Mental Health Professionals](#).”

CONTINUITY OF OPERATIONS ACTIONS

Administrators should begin to consider how they would maintain essential operations should COVID-19 affect their school. Previously issued guidance, provided by the U.S. Department of Education, titled [Preparing for the Flu: Department of Education Recommendations to Ensure the Continuity of Learning for Schools \(K–12\) During Extended Student Absence or School Dismissal](#), will support such considerations. Among the issues this emergency operations plan (EOP) should address are the continuity of learning activities (e.g., how to continue learning activities if there are school closures or extended absences), order of succession and delegation of authority (e.g., who makes decisions should school administrators get sick), how to maintain essential school operations (e.g., what are the essential activities that must not be interrupted, such as payroll, and how will they be maintained during school closures), and guidelines for school staff members (e.g., who needs to continue working even during school closures).

RECOVERY PLANNING

Finally, begin to consider actions that would be taken should COVID-19 actually be present within a school. The companion document “[Preparing for a Pandemic Illness: Guidelines for School Administrators and Crisis Response Teams](#)” provides such guidance.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Preparing for a Pandemic Illness: Guidelines for School Administrators and Crisis Teams: <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crises/preparing-for-a-pandemic-illness-guidelines-for-school-administrators-and-school-crisis-response-teams>
- Preparing for Infectious Disease Epidemics: Brief Tips for School Mental Health Professionals: <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crises/preparing-for-infectious-disease-epidemics-brief-tips-for-school-mental-health-professionals>
- Talking to Children About COVID-19 (coronavirus): A Parent Resource: [https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crises/talking-to-children-about-covid-19-\(coronavirus\)-a-parent-resource](https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crises/talking-to-children-about-covid-19-(coronavirus)-a-parent-resource)
Interim Guidance for Administrators of U.S. Childcare Programs and K-12 Schools to Plan, Prepare, and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/specific-groups/guidance-for-schools.html>
- Handwashing and Hand Sanitizer Use at Home, at Play, and Out and About: <https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/pdf/hand-sanitizer-factsheet.pdf>
- How to Disinfect Schools to Prevent the Spread of Flu: https://rems.ed.gov/Docs/How_to_Clean_and_Disinfect_Schools_to_help_Slow_the_Spread_of_the_Flu.pdf

For more information related to schools and physical and mental health, visit www.nasponline.org and www.nasn.org

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