



Circular Letter 47/2009

To: BOARDS OF MANAGEMENT OF PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS AND THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICERS OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION COMMITTEES

Sourcing Information on and Responding to Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 within Primary and Post-Primary Schools

Pandemic (H1N1) (*more commonly referred to as Swine Flu*) is a new flu virus which has been circulating worldwide since April 2009 and its incidence has been increasing steadily since then. The new flu virus can spread easily from person to person.

All schools should re-open as scheduled. The Department of Education and Science is currently advised by the health authorities that the pandemic is anticipated to be moderate and that school closures for public health reasons are unlikely to be required. The normal rules in relation to staff absenteeism apply in the case of Pandemic (H1N1) 2009.

While the primacy of responding to this public health issue rests with the health authorities, a societal and cross sectoral response is required as part of the implementation of the National Pandemic Influenza Plan. The Department of Education and Science's role is to communicate to the education sector, public health information and advice on this pandemic flu. We receive our public health advice from the Health Service Executive (HSE) and the Department of Health and Children. We have over the past few months been working closely and co-operatively with the HSE and the Department of Health and Children and will continue to do so.

The Department has also been engaging with the management bodies of schools so that we can provide the most relevant information to schools that address any sector specific issues. Information to schools is available on the Department's website, www.education.ie. On the right hand side of the homepage you can download the *Information Sheet for Schools and Colleges and Centres of Education on Pandemic (H1N1) 2009*.

This information will assist and guide schools to update their plans to encourage and facilitate everyday actions that can help prevent the spread of this pandemic flu; and be able to respond to symptoms and cases of this flu. Attached are the five most important things that schools should know and do, **at this time**.

In the case of students or staff with underlying medical conditions the HSE currently provides information on their website which addresses the issues that may be of concern. At present, the HSE is working to enhance and expand on this information. The HSE will also be addressing any additional information that may be required for students with special needs both in mainstream and special schools. We understand that this information will be available shortly on the HSE websites www.hse.ie and www.hpsc.ie. This information will also be made available on the Department's website.

It is anticipated that the content of the Department's information sheet will change over time to reflect updated public health advice and additional queries. When this happens the Department will make every effort, including through the *esinet* system, other electronic means and the management bodies of schools to alert schools that the information has been updated. The updated information will at all times remain on the homepage of the Department's website, as above. Schools should continue to check the website on a regular basis.

Apart from this information, other public health information is available. Links to these are also available on the Department's website and include:

www.swineflu.ie Schools can download useful posters and general information in various languages from this website.

www.dohc.ie Provides daily updates on the pandemic.

www.hpsc.ie Provides posters and documentation for educational settings

The HSE has established a 24 hour Flu Information Line **Freephone 1800 94 11 00**. This provides up to date recorded information on Pandemic (H1N1) 2009.

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20th August, 2009

What Are the Five Most Important Things that Schools/Colleges Should Do to help reduce the spread of Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 in the population?

Schools/colleges should continue to operate normally unless advised by their local Department of Public Health in the Health Service Executive (HSE).

Schools/Colleges, as far as possible, should encourage and facilitate everyday actions that can help prevent the spread of germs that cause respiratory illnesses like Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 including:

- ❖ **Raise awareness** - schools/colleges can encourage good prevention awareness by putting up posters on respiratory etiquette and hand hygiene. Some posters are available on the website, www.swineflu.ie. You can access a full set of posters by clicking on the attached link www.hpsc.ie and select *posters* under the *Educational and Child care settings* link. Posters can be printed in black and white, if a colour printer is not available.
- ❖ **Respiratory Etiquette** - promote students and staff to cover their mouth and nose with a paper tissue when coughing or sneezing. If no tissue is available they should cough or sneeze into the inside of their elbow. A tissue should be used only once and disposed of quickly and carefully (a dustbin is fine). Waste, including used tissues, may be disposed of in the normal way. There is no need to take special precautions in the handling of such waste.
- ❖ **Hand Hygiene** - students/staff should wash their hands with soap and water. Hand drying facilities must not be shared between people. Hence the type of hand drying facilities that can be used include paper towels (which are disposed of into waste bins), hot air hand dryers, roller towels, or students and staff members could be asked to bring in and use their own individual towels.
- ❖ **Routine cleaning** - wash hard surfaces such as kitchen worktops, door handles, etc with a normal household cleaner as the virus can live on these surfaces.
- ❖ **Recognize the symptoms and plan response** - schools should familiarize themselves with the symptoms by checking the information available on www.swineflu.ie Schools should identify the arrangements to be made for looking after pupils/students showing symptoms while waiting for parents/guardians to collect them. Schools should have in place a communications plan including contact details of parents. They should also be aware of when and how to contact their local Departments of Public Health (e.g. in the event of a cluster of cases.). Details of the nearest local Department of Public Health can be found at www.hse.ie/eng/Find_a_Service/Public_Health