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916.850.7300

Preparing and Responding to a Viral Outbreak in School

By Eric Lucero

Viral outbreaks occur yearly in every community with some garnering more attention than others. Examples of viral outbreaks include norovirus, chickenpox, measles, influenza, and most recently the novel coronavirus. Whether it is localized to one community or has been elevated to a pandemic level, schools have an important role in slowing the spread of a viral outbreak.

Schools serve students, staff, and visitors from throughout the community. All of these people may have close contact in the school setting, often sharing spaces, equipment, and supplies with one another. It is important to note that certain communicable diseases require mandatory reporting to local public health departments. A list of such communicable diseases can be found on the [California Department of Public Health website](#). In these cases, school districts should seek guidance from their local public health department.

School districts are encouraged to include viral outbreaks in their comprehensive school safety plans, which are required to be updated each March with input from local first responders and community stakeholders. Teachers are often at the front line of any type of viral outbreak, so ensuring they are aware of your plan is crucial.



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Ensure the district's emergency operation plan and the comprehensive school safety plans includes the following best practices:

Before a Viral Outbreak:

- Connect with your local county office of education and health department to review or develop a viral outbreak plan for your sites. Share plans with staff, parents, and students
- Support flexible attendance and sick leave policies for students and staff
- Develop a monitoring system to alert the local health department about large increases in absenteeism
- Identify strategies to continue educating students if schools close (for example, web-based instruction and e-mail)
- Plan ways to continue student services (such as, meal and social services) if schools close

During a Viral Outbreak:

- Put your plans into action, as needed
- Communicate plan again with staff and parents
- Track student absenteeism due to viral (flu-like) symptoms
- Encourage students and staff to practice good hygiene
- Provide supplies (such as tissues, hand sanitizer, and soap)
- Clean and/or sanitize frequently touched surfaces and objects (such as computers, hand rails, bathrooms, and door knobs)
- Designate a room and mode of transportation for sick students and staff

After a Viral Outbreak:

- Discuss and note lessons learned
- Improve your plans accordingly
- Maintain community partnerships
- Test and update your plans regularly

For additional questions, please contact [Risk Control](#).