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# Pennsylvania Pandemic Planning Toolkit for Schools

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**E**mergency response planning is not new for schools. As early as July of 1988, Pennsylvania law was enacted to require that “every school district, in cooperation with the local Emergency Management Agency (EMA), shall develop and implement emergency preparedness plans.” (35 Pa C.S.A., 7171, et seq). Over the years, these plans have evolved from focusing primarily on school violence into planning for all possible hazards. Pandemic influenza is the newest hazard to be considered by schools and included in their all-hazard plans. The Pennsylvania Pandemic Planning Toolkit for Schools has been developed by the Pennsylvania Departments of Health, in collaboration with the state’s Department of Education, to serve as a starting point in this planning process and to provide valuable resources to assist schools in implementing their plan. The toolkit has been organized by the four phases of the National Incident Management System (NIMS) model and can be located on the Pennsylvania Pandemic website, [www.pandemicflu.state.pa.us](http://www.pandemicflu.state.pa.us), under the “School” tab.

## National Incident Management System

NIMS provides a flexible framework, a standard language and a set of standardized processes and procedures that will facilitate government and private organizations at all levels working together to manage crises in a more efficient

manner. During times of crisis, schools rely heavily on the assistance of local community responders and agencies. However, this relationship needs to be established and cultivated long before the crisis occurs. Working with these local agencies now will decrease fear, anxiety and confusion and improve the response during a crisis. Presidential directives from 2003 established a single, comprehensive National Incident Management System through the use of the NIMS model by all federal departments and agencies receiving federal preparedness funds. Since schools are an integral part of their local government, NIMS preparedness is essential to ensure that first responder services are delivered to schools in a timely and effective manner.

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Planning for any hazard within a school requires involvement by a team of school and community members, and planning for a pandemic is no exception. Step One involves using the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Planning Checklist for Schools (2006) (See July 2006 NASN Newsletter, Pages 19 and 20, or visit <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/school/schoolchecklist.html>) to assess a school’s readiness for responding to a pandemic or other infectious disease crisis. Once the checklist is completed and areas are identified that require fur-

ther action, the team utilizes Step Two, the Pennsylvania Pandemic Action Planning Tool. This tool, adapted with permission from the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department, Washington (2006), allows the user to take the areas identified from the checklist that require further action and place them in a spreadsheet so that individuals can be assigned specific tasks, available resources can be identified and next steps can be listed. The Action Planning Tool is flexible in the sense that, following a school’s assessment, some action items may need to be added, while others deleted. Once this tool is completed, the assigned individuals can go to Step Three, the Pennsylvania Pandemic Planning Template and Resources. Here, one can find phase by phase (prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery) access to critical focus areas, as well as a myriad of resources that can be used to develop the details of a school plan that is flexible, functional and process oriented. Key focus areas are:

1. **Education:** Administration and key staff members need to be educated about the NIMS. The toolkit offers numerous resources, including access to free online courses, a power point and pamphlets. Educational resources for students, staff and families include: posters and fact sheets to identify flu symptoms and prevent the spread of flu, curriculum, video, posters to promote handwashing and cough and

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sneeze etiquette and general preparedness activities.

**2. Surveillance:** The toolkit provides guidance for schools to develop means to monitor student/staff absences and illnesses, employ social distancing strategies (curtail large group gatherings) or consider closing the school. Surveillance could also include monitoring the travel of staff and students, as well as screening visitors and foreign exchange students for illness.

**3. Communication:** Schools are encouraged to utilize existing communication channels to provide timely information to parents and the community. Consistent and accurate messages are important for every hazard addressed by schools and reinforces the need for involvement with local Emergency Management Agencies.

**4. Infection Control:** Provided in the toolkit is guidance regarding blood-borne pathogen precautions, including the use of personal protective equipment. Schools are reminded to review and possibly revise existing policies and procedures regarding disinfection and cleaning.

**5. Collaboration:** Many schools in Pennsylvania are designated as shelters for the American Red Cross, points of dispensing for administering immunizations and antiviral medications by

public health and overflow sites for local hospitals. Again, the toolkit offers significant guidance to schools in collaborating with local Emergency Management Agencies to make sure that efforts are coordinated with community efforts to ensure an effective response should a pandemic occur.

**6. Mental Health Concerns:** An often forgotten, but very important, component of pandemic planning is dealing with mental health concerns of students and staff when school resumes. Guidance and links to resources in the toolkit illustrate various ways schools can address such concerns: education; mobilization of crisis response teams; assessment, counseling and referral; and safe rooms.

## Conclusion

The Pennsylvania Pandemic Planning Toolkit for Schools provides a step-by-step process that assists schools in their ability to be prepared for a pandemic or communicable disease outbreak. The toolkit can be accessed at [www.pandemicflu.state.pa.us](http://www.pandemicflu.state.pa.us) under the "School" tab.

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