

Schools may serve as swine flu immunization centers

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By [Greg Toppo](#), USA TODAY

Schools across the USA could serve as mass vaccination sites this fall if [swine flu](#) makes a strong comeback, officials briefed Thursday in Washington said. Federal officials are preparing to issue updated guidelines Friday on the troublesome new flu bug.

About two dozen officials representing education associations, unions and child care providers got an advance description of the guidance in a briefing at the [U.S. Department of Education](#).

One of the officials, [New York State United Teachers](#) president Dick Iannuzzi, said it's "highly likely" that schools will be used for student vaccinations. "That would be the optimum place to have that happen," he said, noting that there was "consensus in the room" about the wisdom of using schools as vaccination sites.

It was less clear, he said, whether schools would serve the same function for wider communities nationwide.

Federal officials put "a much stronger emphasis — stronger than I've heard in years" — on encouraging school districts and local health departments to open schools as immunization centers, said Amy Garcia, executive director of the National Association of School Nurses. "If we're facing a difficult flu season, having this kind of conversation up front will help protect kids and will save lives."

At a swine flu summit in Maryland last month, Education Secretary Arne Duncan said schools "are natural places" to offer flu vaccines, even if schools rarely offer vaccination clinics.

Meanwhile, educators nationwide are waiting to hear whether the federal [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) will recommend that schools close down if a large outbreak hits. The CDC probably will discourage widespread closures unless absolutely necessary, based on recent statements from Duncan.

Last spring, when the swine flu, or H1N1 virus, first struck, federal health officials advised schools with suspected cases to shut down for about two weeks. After investigators found that the bug was milder than expected, the CDC said parents should keep infected children home for a week instead.

At the swine flu summit, Duncan said closing schools should be "a last resort, not a first resort." This week, he said districts should use common sense. "If you have one child sick, that's one thing. If you have a whole host of children getting sick, that's another."

But Duncan also said schools should figure out how to keep students learning if they must close for extended periods.

After attending Thursday's briefing, Garcia said she was "really pleased at the collaboration of [Health and Human Services](#), the Department of Education and the [Department of Homeland Security](#). We think that will go a long way toward there being much more consistent messaging to parents."

The cooperation "will reduce some of the confusion" that schools and families experienced last spring around school closures and home confinements for sick children.

The new swine flu guidelines, Garcia said, will resemble that for seasonal flu, with schools requiring that students be allowed back in school 24 hours after their fever has cleared without the help of fever-reducing medication such as Tylenol.

"This is consistent with what school nurses have done for years with all kinds of infectious illness," she said. "They're going to treat this flu as they would the seasonal flu."

The guidelines could change if this fall's swine flu "mutates or becomes more virulent," she said.

At July's swine flu summit, Health and Human Services Secretary [Kathleen Sebelius](#) told state health workers, "We know a mass vaccination program of even modest scale will involve extraordinary effort on your part."

First in line probably would be school-age children, young adults with risky conditions such as asthma, pregnant women and health workers, she said. Unlike regular seasonal flu, swine flu seems more dangerous to these groups than to older people.

Like Garcia, Iannuzzi welcomed the [Obama](#) administration's willingness to work cooperatively among agencies and with education groups.

"It sounds like their thinking is in the right direction," he said. "Let's hope it stays there."

Contributing: The Associated Press

http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2009-08-06-swine-flu-schools_N.htm