



School and Child Care Dismissal or Closure for Control of Pandemic Influenza
Whatcom County Health Department Policy Statement
September 9, 2009

Criteria for school and childcare dismissal

Decisions on ordering school and childcare dismissal or closure will take into consideration

- the severity of the pandemic,
- the prevalence and change in incidence of influenza in our community,
- estimates of effectiveness of dismissal as a method for controlling influenza transmission within our community,
- estimates of the disruption that school and childcare closure will cause, and
- consistency with the consensus of opinion among public health agencies.

WCHD will consult and coordinate school and childcare dismissal or closure with the Washington State Department of Health and other local health jurisdictions in Washington State.

Washington law grants local health officers authority to take measures to control the spread of communicable diseases (WAC 246-100-036). WAC 246-110 addresses contagious disease control in schools and childcare centers. WAC 246-101 (Notifiable Diseases) describes the responsibilities of schools (246-101-420) and childcare centers (246-101-415) in the control of these diseases. Under severe conditions, it may be necessary to dismiss students or close facilities in order to control the transmission of disease. As a home rule state, the Local Health Officer is responsible to make the final decision about closure and dismissal recommendations (WAC 246-110-020).

Current policy

The 2009 H1N1 pandemic influenza virus is, as of the date of this policy, relatively mild in severity. Given the experience in Washington State in Spring 2009, the Washington State Department of Health and the local health jurisdictions in Washington developed a consensus on school and childcare dismissal in response to this pandemic. Based on the mild severity level and widespread prevalence of the novel influenza, it was decided that school dismissal in response to single cases or clusters of cases is not indicated. School dismissal or closure will be ordered by the health officer only in the context of increased pandemic severity and the imposition of widespread social distancing measures, including closure of public gatherings (schools, athletic events, performances, etc.) Closure is also indicated if absenteeism of staff interferes with safe operation of the school or center. In such circumstances, the level of absenteeism that is a threshold for safe operation is to be determined by school or center authorities rather than the health officer.

Exclusion and infection control

Guidelines on infection control within schools and childcare centers and exclusion of sick children and staff are reviewed or generated by WCHD and directed to schools, childcare centers, and clinicians. For more specific information about exclusion, refer to the Whatcom County Health Department School and Childcare Exclusions for Control of Communicable Diseases Policy, January 2009.