

If flu strikes, school will be made up

Written by Mark Jaeger

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Northern Ozaukee School Board says school year will be extended in H1N1 outbreak

Northern Ozaukee School District officials have yet to send their first child home with flu symptoms this year, but they have a plan in place should the much-feared swine flu outbreak hit.

The School Board set a plan into place Monday for dealing with an H1N1 flu epidemic.

Supt. Bill Harbron said he supports the current thinking that schools should remain open during a localized flu outbreak unless a significant portion of the students or staff are absent.

“We have been sharing information with parents since last year about how to deal with the H1N1 flu, including the recommendation that anyone showing symptoms stay home from work or school until there is no sign of fever for 24 hours without medication,” Harbron said.

Using that standard, he conceded it would be difficult to keep school open if half the staff is home with the flu.

According to health experts, the greatest risk of a widespread flu outbreak is between the start of school and January, Harbron said.

The district has an additional 4.5 days built into its calendar that can be used for emergency school closure, although those days are usually reserved for treacherous winter weather.

Harbron said days lost to a flu epidemic will not be counted against the state-mandated 180 days of classroom instruction if schools are closed by the local health department.

If district officials order schools closed, those days would have to be made up once the 4.5-day cushion is used up.

School Board members did not make that same distinction, agreeing that students should expect to make up lost days once “snow days” are exhausted regardless of who orders the schools closed.

“Hopefully we won’t have to use this policy, but we have to realize if there is a flu outbreak it could be a long-term situation,” Board President Paul Krause said.

In a worst-case scenario, Krause said it is conceivable schools could be closed for several weeks in response to a local flu outbreak.

“What do we do if we miss a ton of school, like three weeks? Do we make it all up to the state minimum?” asked board member Stacey Stark.

Needing to make up such a large block of time could be challenging, especially with the district’s use of a trimester calendar.

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Board members decided flexibility will be key in determining how make-up days should be scheduled.

Because class schedules change each trimester, officials said, the start of a new session will need to be delayed until the missed days from the preceding trimester are made up.

Depending on how many days are lost to flu, the extra days will be taken from spring break or added on to the end of the school year, the board said.

"It is hard to adjust the calendar until we know how many days we need to make up, but the idea is sound," Harbron said.

The district is posting the latest flu updates on its Web site, and district nurse Pat Robinson is keeping track of the reasons for student absences to determine if the flu is taking root locally.

School officials have also surveyed families to determine who has Internet access, in case on-line teaching is needed. Teachers are developing general lessons that can be sent home with students in the event of a long-term closure.