

# PLANNING FOR PANDEMIC FLU

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*Policy Alert*

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## **What is pandemic flu?**

Pandemic flu is a widespread influenza, affecting large numbers of people. For some time, state and national health authorities have been proactively planning for the possibility of an international flu outbreak caused by one of the avian or bird flu virus strains. More recently, outbreaks of the H1N1 flu in Texas and other states are dominating health authorities' attention and have highlighted the need for advance preparation. Whether the next pandemic flu stems from the bird flu virus, H1N1 flu virus, or another virus, authorities agree that there will be another major flu outbreak. It is simply a matter of time.

## **What are authorities doing about pandemic flu?**

Federal and state authorities have developed resources to help state and local governments cope with a possible pandemic flu outbreak.

In May 2006, the federal government released [\*The Implementation Plan for the National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza\*](#). This plan includes more than 300 actions for federal agencies and sets clear expectations for state and local governments, as well as nongovernmental entities. In addition, the federal government appropriates significant funding for pandemic preparedness. The overall strategy involves developing international health surveillance and containment efforts, medical stockpiles including vaccines and antiviral medications, and infrastructure to produce emergency supplies of vaccines, if needed.

At the state level, the Texas Department of State Health Services' (TDSHS) [\*Pandemic Influenza Plan Operational Guidelines\*](#) seeks to minimize a serious influenza outbreak through statewide coordination. This document was updated July 6, 2008. The state plan involves many of the same elements as the federal plan. Planning and communication, including use of an incident command system, are featured prominently in the state model.

## **What should school districts do about the possibility of a pandemic flu outbreak?**

Authorities are asking one thing from leaders in areas as diverse as law enforcement, business, animal husbandry, and education: Be prepared.

Pandemic flu represents a new challenge to emergency planners. Most emergencies are short in duration but may be massive in impact, such as hurricanes, tornadoes, or floods. The damage caused by the emergency can be crippling—facilities may be compromised and day-to-day activity might cease for a time, but then communities can work together, pool resources, and rebuild. A pandemic flu would represent a different sort of challenge because a communal response is contrary to combating the illness. During a pandemic, people cannot gather together; they must remain isolated to prevent the spread of disease. Moreover, a “top down” response, one in which emergency responders concentrate in an area in crisis to provide aid, will not be possible or advisable. In the event of an outbreak, it is likely that no state, region, or community would be unaffected. Emergency responders will be less able to focus resources because the virus may be everywhere. Being prepared at the local level, therefore, is a priority.

## Where do I start?

Every district should develop a pandemic plan. The TDSHS [Pandemic Influenza Plan Operational Guidelines](#) suggests that the pandemic plan be part of the district's overall Emergency Operations Plan. To begin with, a pandemic plan should be composed of the following elements recommended in government-sponsored planning resources: an incident command system, a communication plan, a surveillance system, a plan for disease prevention and education efforts, and a continuity plan. In the event of a pandemic, the planning steps involved in each of these elements must remain flexible to respond to events as they emerge.

**Incident Command System:** The incident command system identifies roles and responsibilities for health officials, school officials, and law enforcement in advance of a pandemic. Lines of authority must be drawn before the emergency. For example, the authority for declaring a public emergency at the state and local levels must be identified, along with the school officials who will activate the pandemic plan. If possible, it is a good idea to identify more than one person responsible for carrying out individual parts of the plan since it is possible that key members may become ill as the pandemic unfolds. Essential to the incident command system is the development of a central command structure that establishes lines of authority and common terminology and procedures.

**Communication Plan:** The communication plan identifies audiences and key messages, focusing on clear, accurate, and timely information. A pandemic will unfold over time. Experts predict at least two waves of a pandemic, with each wave lasting six to eight weeks. A good communication plan will bring needed information to the school community in advance of an anticipated pandemic wave and will continue to provide information as people become sick. If school closure becomes necessary, developing alternative lines of communication with students and parents, such as Web sites, e-mails, and briefings, will become more important than ever.

**Surveillance System:** In this instance, a surveillance system refers to illness surveillance. School health personnel, in conjunction with state or local health departments, must be able to identify and track unusual patterns of student absences due to illness. The rapid detection of unusual changes or trends in student health may mitigate the effects of a new influenza virus.

**Disease Prevention and Education Efforts:** On average, each person who becomes ill will likely transmit the virus to two others. To reduce the odds, good hygiene will be fundamental to infection control. Basic habits such as effective hand hygiene and cough or sneeze etiquette will become vitally important. A district may want to consider instituting a rigorous custodial cleaning regimen, one in which door knobs, hand rails, desks, and buses are disinfected daily. A district will want to ensure that infection control supplies such as soap or alcohol-based hand hygiene products are available. If staff or students become sick at school in the midst of a pandemic, they should be sent home. Contingency plans for transporting ill students should be formulated.

**Continuity Plan:** One of the realities of pandemic flu is that schools may be closed for indefinite periods of time. The development of strategies such as Web-based instruction and mailed lessons and assignments to ensure continuity of instruction is fundamental. The plan must also take into account continuity of basic operations

such as payroll, communications, and premises security. Even if schools do not close, it is likely that a substantial number of staff will fall ill; consequently, schools must be prepared for a high percentage of employee absence. Additionally, if the pandemic is severe, supply chains may be disrupted. Stockpiling items such as hand sanitizers, masks, and other infection control items in advance of a pandemic is essential. Finally, in the event of a school closing, a district may be forced to restructure its school calendar, with appropriate guidance from TEA.

### **Where do I find additional information?**

Planning for a pandemic influenza outbreak is challenging since the timing, nature, and severity of the outbreak cannot be predicted with certainty in advance. For this reason, preparation and contingency plans are essential. TASB recommends that districts maintain an ongoing relationship with local health authorities to keep abreast of the most accurate information.

The information contained in this alert is only an overview of the issues involved in pandemic planning. A comprehensive pandemic plan is complex, detailed, and suited to an individual district's needs. Complete planning demands careful consideration of a number of issues; fortunately, there is a wealth of information from a variety of sources. From a planning perspective, the most comprehensive resource is a site maintained by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at [PandemicFlu.gov](http://PandemicFlu.gov). By navigating the site, the reader will gain access to the newest information concerning federal planning, state and local planning (including state-by-state information), school planning, and other topics. Of particular note, under the [school planning tab](#) there is a School District (K–12) Pandemic Influenza Planning Checklist and examples of local pandemic plans developed by school districts.

In addition to the TDSHS [Pandemic Influenza Plan Operational Guidelines](#), TDSHS has posted [Pandemic Flu: Information for Professionals](#). The U.S. Department of Education has posted its publication [Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities](#) and other helpful resources at [Lead & Manage my School: H1N1 Flu Information](#).

Finally, the Homeland Security Council's [Implementation Plan for the National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza](#) is the federal government's comprehensive planning document. Although the size of this report may be daunting, it nonetheless contains the most far-reaching information, as well as specific guidance for schools.

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