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Flu hits Valley schools

Closings eyed as cases mount

By **THE DAILY HAMPSHIRE GAZETTE**
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A bug suspected to be the H1N1 virus is whipping through schools in the Valley, bringing the closure of one middle school and seriously diminishing attendance at others.

Because the state Department of Public Health is not recommending people who have flu-like symptoms be tested for swine flu, and no schools are testing independently, the exact number of cases is unknown. However, anyone who comes down with flu-like symptoms at this point in the year is almost guaranteed to have swine flu, said Dr. Sarah Haessler, infectious disease specialist at Baystate Medical Center in Springfield.

"The reason why it would definitely be swine flu is because we are in the middle of a pandemic, and this is what pandemics do, they hit us in the off-season," Haessler said. "And the reason why it's so widespread is because no one has any immunity to this virus, so the whole population is at risk."

The health department said Thursday that since the outbreak, 320,000 doses of H1N1 vaccine have landed in the Bay State, but they are targeted for high-risk groups. Department spokeswoman Jennifer Manley said she could not specify a time line for distribution of the vaccine to the general population.

Although one school has closed, and others are discussing the option, the national Centers for Disease Control maintains that school closings don't help to mitigate the impact of the virus.

Amherst

At the middle school here, 108 students were absent Thursday, but attendance was close to normal at all the town's other schools, said Principal Mark Jackson.

The 108 absences represent 22 percent of the middle school student body, while the typical absentee rate is 5 percent, he said. On Wednesday, 90 students were absent at the middle school, he said.

"This is where the red flag is," Jackson said. "Why is the middle school in front of the curve? I have no idea about that."

Based on symptoms described by students leaving school and calls from parents, "the reasonable assumption is that the preponderance of the absences are flu-related," he said. The predictions of H1N1 hitting in early fall "are enough to raise everyone's concerns," he said.

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The injectable version of the swine flu vaccine is shown Monday, Oct. 19, 2009 at Broadmoor Elementary School in Miami. The Miami-Dade County Health Department launched their H1N1 vaccination campaign Monday after having received their initial shipments. (AP Photo/Wilfredo Lee)



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Administrators have discussed how to respond to the apparent flu outbreak, and the consensus Thursday was that there is no basis for a decision to close the school, Jackson said.

"This is a potential option, but one we would exercise only in conjunction with the Amherst Health Department and only when it is clear that the work of the school has been significantly compromised," he wrote in a letter to parents Thursday.

There has been no comparable increase in absences among faculty and staff at the middle school, Jackson said. Absenteeism is up only slightly at Amherst Regional High School, he said.

Williston Northampton

In Easthampton, the number of Williston Northampton School students absent with flu-like symptoms has doubled in three days, moving the private school to cancel three sporting events Wednesday and close its middle school today.

At the middle school, about 30 of the school's 88 students are sick. Sarah Kotwicki, director of the middle school, decided to close school today "to give people a chance to rest and get over any illness they might have."

Spokesman Andrew Shelffo noted today is the day before the school's long fall weekend, which is included in the academic calendar every year. Classes resume Wednesday as planned.

"We had about 30 kids in the middle school who have been sick, and because Friday is also not a normal class day the director made the decision to extend the weekend by a day," Shelffo said.

Meanwhile, the school canceled two soccer games and one field hockey match Wednesday against Taft because of athlete illnesses, Shelffo said. The reason was "a combination of kids being sick and the coach making the decision that it just doesn't make sense to play with not enough kids," Shelffo said. He added he did not know how many athletes had flu-like symptoms.

Williston Northampton high school reported 27 students absent Thursday with flu-like symptoms; an additional 55 students were absent with bad colds. The school has an enrollment of about 530.

"We have more kids this early in the year who are sick, but I don't think it's more than we might have in a typical February when it's the height of cold" season, said Shelffo.

The school's response is to treat sick students and then separate them from the rest of the campus community by requesting day students stay home until they are proven healthy for 24 hours and requesting that boarding students travel home. Beds are set up in the school's health services building for boarding students who are sick but can't travel home.

Seasonal flu vaccinations have been given to faculty, but not to students, Shelffo said. The school is waiting on seasonal flu vaccinations for students and H1N1 vaccinations for both faculty and students, he added. No teachers have reported flu-like symptoms.

Belchertown

School nurse leader Phyllis DuComb said there are a number of suspected or presumed cases of the H1N1 flu virus among Belchertown students and staff, but she declined to give specific numbers.

"We are not seeing clusters at this time," DuComb said, but rather scattered cases that appear to be the swine flu. "Unfortunately, people are contagious before they even know they have it," she said.

The school department plans to hold a clinic and administer the H1N1 flu vaccine to students, but those plans are on hold because the vaccine is not available yet. "The vaccine distribution is not what was expected," DuComb said.

South Hadley

Superintendent of Schools Gus Sayer said his office has been monitoring school attendance since September.

"Up to this week it's been remarkably consistent at about 5 percent a day -- but this week it jumped to 8 percent," Sayer said. Eight percent amounts to about 160 students, but it wasn't an indication of which students have flu-like symptoms or other maladies, Sayer said.

Easthampton

Superintendent Deborah Carter reported at least two students at Maple Elementary School are

believed to have the flu, which she addressed in a letter to parents Wednesday.

"We're watching it carefully," she said. "We're seeing some evidence of flu-like symptoms. We just have to keep our eyes open and keep on top of it."

Carter said she was unable release an accurate number of students diagnosed with the flu.

The School Department and the city are working to set up vaccine clinics for high school and middle school students, Carter noted. She encourages parents of elementary students to take their children to a doctor to get the flu shot.

"I figure this is going to happen all fall or winter," she said. "I just expect it."

Colleges

Mount Holyoke and Smith colleges have experienced a recent spike in the number of students displaying flu-like symptoms. In the last 10 days, there were 12 reported cases of students with influenza-like illnesses on the Mount Holyoke College campus and 12 over the past few days at Smith, officials said.

"Until this week, the number of flu cases reported in the Smith community seemed to be about the same as those that occur during a regular flu season," said Smith College spokeswoman Kristen A. Cole.

The Five Colleges have prepared on-campus, isolated quarters for students who catch a virus and need to recover. All campuses have had students use those rooms.

Mount Holyoke College is also seeing a stronger virus.

"We're starting to see students who are a little bit sicker," said Mary Jo Curtis, spokeswoman at Mount Holyoke College. "The cases have been relatively mild with the average time of isolation about three days, but now we're starting to see kids stretch to four or five days."

Mount Holyoke College has had to isolate 23 students since the start of the school year.

On other campuses, the number of flu cases have been more moderate.

Amherst College has identified eight students with flu-like symptoms. Hampshire College has isolated five students with the flu. A student can be isolated for demonstrating flu-like symptoms and may not have the H1N1 virus.

This past week at the University of Massachusetts, 50 visitors to health services - which provides care to some students, faculty and staff - had flu-like symptoms.

"Not everyone seeks treatment," said Patrick J. Callahan, a UMass spokesman. "Our cases are moderate."

At Cooley Dickinson Hospital, spokeswoman Christina Trincherro said she could not give out any information on the number of flu cases so far this season.

Unscathed schools

School districts in Northampton, Hatfield, Leverett, Shutesbury, Hadley, Worthington and Cummington reported nothing unusual for this time of year.

For instance, at the Berkshire Trail Regional Elementary School, "We've had little illness so far this season," said Phoebe Bushway, school nurse. "Nothing has really hit yet."

Meanwhile, as a preventive measure, Bushway said, "We've been doing lots of handwashing, to prevent the transmission of flu or any illness." Students here were already washing their hands before they ate meals or snacks. "The extra handwashing is new this year," she said.

Gazette writers Nick Grabbe, Stephen C. Hill, Ben Storrow, Bob Flaherty, Catherine Baum, Laura Rodley, Kristin Palpini and Owen Boss contributed to this story.

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