

SECTION III: PANDEMIC FLU PREPAREDNESS — STATE-LEVEL ACTIONS

PRE-PANDEMIC PLANNING

Leadership —

The Agency of Human Services (including the Vermont Department of Health and the Vermont Department for Children & Families), the Department of Education, and Vermont Emergency Management are working together on pandemic influenza community mitigation planning — including schools and child care settings.

Planning for social distancing among children in grades K-12 settings —

- ✓ **PUBLIC HEALTH MESSAGES** - The Department of Health will develop educational materials with messages on infection control for decreasing disease transmission, including decreasing close contact/social mixing with others in the community setting.
- ✓ **SCHOOL CLOSING POLICY** - The Department of Health will work with the Department of Education to ensure that there is a policy in place that describes the legal authority and process for closing schools, and a plan for communicating with schools about school closing.
- ✓ **CONTINUING EDUCATION** – Schools may consider creating a plan for continuing education while school is closed, or to cover missed educational content when classes recommence. The Department of Education will provide consultation and technical assistance as needed.
- ✓ **ALTERNATE STAFF ASSIGNMENTS** – Schools may consider creating plans for employing school staff to work in new ways to support students and their families who are at home during a prolonged period of school closing. For example, guidance counselors and other staff could call students to provide support and assurance as needed. School breakfasts and lunches could continue to be provided, but with new measures added to increase social distance. The Department of Health and the Department of Education will provide consultation and technical assistance as needed.

Notifying schools, facilities and the public about the status of pandemic flu —

- ✓ **STATE AGENCIES, STAKEHOLDERS, PARTNERS & PUBLIC** - The Department of Health will take the lead in triggering notification about pandemic flu to all state agencies, institutions, public health, health care and the public. State agencies will, in turn, notify their constituencies, partners and businesses.

- ✓ **SCHOOL DISTRICTS & SCHOOLS** - The Department of Education will notify school districts and schools. All school facilities are responsible for notifying staff of their status and impending activation. Notifications can be sent home via mail, e-mail or by students notifying parents of an impending activation.
- ✓ **CHILD CARE FACILITIES** - The Department for Families & Children will notify child care facilities and programs. All child care facilities are responsible for notifying staff of their status and impending activation. Notifications can be sent home via mail, e-mail or by students notifying parents of an impending activation.
- ✓ **STUDENTS, FAMILIES & COMMUNITIES** - All school facilities are responsible for notifying students, their families/guardians and the community. Notifications can be sent home via mail, e-mail or by students notifying parents/guardians of an impending action. All child care facilities are likewise responsible for notifying families/guardians and the community.

Criteria for determining if and when schools will close —

PANDEMIC SEVERITY INDEX -The Pandemic Severity Index introduced in the February 2007 federal guidance documents is an integral part of the state’s planning process, especially when considering implementation of school closure options.

The decision to close schools, and the length of time that schools will stay closed, will be based upon the severity of the pandemic. As noted in the federal guidance document: “Appropriate matching of the intensity of intervention to the severity of the pandemic is important to maximize the available public health benefits that may result from using an early, targeted, and layered strategy while minimizing untoward secondary effects.”

The Pandemic Severity Index recognizes that prolonged closure of schools and childcare programs will likely not be needed in less severe pandemics, but may save lives during severe pandemics.

VERMONT RECOMMENDATIONS - Generally, the State of Vermont will NOT recommend closing schools and school-based activities, closing childcare programs, or limiting school social contacts or community mixing for a Category 1 pandemic. However, these interventions may be recommended for Category 2 through 5 pandemic. (See Table 1 in Section II.)

The decision making process about interventions to be made during category 2 or 3 pandemic will include review of the most current information regarding attack rates by age, transmissibility of infection, any new guidance from the CDC, review of implementation issues that arise in any states or jurisdiction using this measure, and input from Vermont stakeholders.

For planning purposes, communities should be prepared to keep schools closed and maintain social distancing interventions for up to 12 weeks — the period of time considered for the most severe pandemic.

SCHOOL DISMISSAL ACTIVATION TRIGGERS - The Health Department will closely monitor information from the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) regarding status of novel influenza strain activity in the world.

The primary activation trigger for initiating school closing and social distancing interventions will be the arrival and transmission of pandemic virus within our state. This trigger can be defined as a *laboratory-confirmed cluster of infection with a novel influenza virus and evidence of community transmission*.

Specifically, the State of Vermont will be looking for epidemiologically-linked cases from more than one household. Vermont will also closely monitor any identification in surrounding states or regions, to make a determination as to whether this should trigger actions within our state.

All community mitigation strategies are used in combination with individual infection control measures, such as hand washing and respiratory etiquette (measures such as covering the mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, or sneezing into the inside of the elbow).

The current Vermont *Pandemic Influenza Preparedness and Response Plan* makes reference to the voluntary or mandatory closing of businesses and institutions, such as schools. The plan will be updated to incorporate the new guidelines described in this document.

Individuals with authorities, roles and responsibilities to officially declare schools closed and authorize their reopening —

Individual	Responsibility / Role
Governor	Broad authority to plan for and respond to emergencies and all hazard events. VSA Ch.1 (generally) and §§ 8-12.
Commissioner of Health	<p>Specific authority to issue a health order to prevent, remove or destroy a public health hazard or to mitigate a significant public health risk.</p> <p>The health order may:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impose mandatory isolation and quarantine. 18 VSA § 126(d)(5) • Close public and private places (including schools and places of public assembly). 18 VSA § 126(d)(6). • Cancel public events. 18 VSA § 126(d)(6). <p>Specific authority to issue emergency health order to prevent, remove or destroy an imminent and substantial public health hazard, or to mitigate an imminent and substantial significant public health risk. 18 VSA § 127.</p> <p>Specific authority to seek civil or criminal enforcement of health order. 18 VSA §§ 130, 131.</p> <p>Schools may be reopened upon termination of health order.</p>
Selectmen	Specific authority to issue and enforce a local health order or emergency health order. 18 VSA 126, 127, 130, 131.
School boards, Superintendents, School Principals, Headmasters	Local school officials may exercise the authority of their positions and, if so authorized, may decide to close and reopen individual schools within their jurisdiction to the extent such decisions are compliant with any health order issued by the commissioner of health or selectmen or otherwise subject to emergency actions taken by the governor.

As shown in the table above, Vermont law allows the governor, the commissioner of health, or local board of selectmen to issue a legally enforceable order that requires schools to be closed to address a public health hazard or significant public health risk — and to determine when the schools may reopen.

If issued by the governor or the commissioner of health, the health order may be applied statewide. The commissioner of health has specific authority to require explicit actions be taken, or activities to be ceased, and this may include mandatory isolation and quarantine, closing of schools and other public and private places, and cancellation of public events as necessary to address the public health hazard or risk.

Likewise, in the absence of a state health order, the local board of selectmen may issue a health order to address a local public health hazard or significant public health risk.

The law includes provisions for due process and appeals of health orders issued by the commissioner and local board of selectmen.

School authorities at individual schools may make the decision to close or to reopen their school, provided any such decision is fully compliant with any health order.

For additional information regarding authority, reference *Table 1: Statutory Authority* on page 11 of the *VDH Pandemic Influenza Preparedness and Response Plan*, version 3.6