June 11, 2009

Dear Educators:

First, we want to commend teachers, parents, and administrators for the tremendous job you have done to address the challenges so many of you have faced as a result of the H1N1 flu outbreak, particularly balancing health and safety requirements with the educational, business, and social needs of the community. As this school year comes to a close, we urge you to begin thinking about the next school year and how we can work together to keep our students and local communities safe. We also offer our support toward that end.

The H1N1 virus has been shown to affect school-aged children disproportionately, and children are known to be highly likely to transmit flu viruses, especially in school and other group settings. Furthermore, scientists and public health experts are concerned that the novel H1N1 virus may persist into the fall, potentially as a more severe strain, causing more serious and life-threatening illness. The Department of Health and Human Services is taking the steps necessary to secure H1N1 flu vaccine for possible use in the fall. If a vaccination program is initiated, however, the vaccine will not be available until several weeks after the school year begins.

Therefore, it will be critical for schools to begin planning non-pharmaceutical interventions to prevent disease transmission and protect students and staff, as well as local communities, from infection. Depending on the timing and severity of a potential fall H1N1 wave, those interventions could include: extra measures to ensure that commonly touched surfaces are disinfected, strict enforcement of exclusion policies for students and staff with flu-like symptoms, or extended school closures. In addition, because schools could be used as vaccine distribution locations, schools should consider how they might accommodate such requests. While all of us want to do all we can to keep students engaged in learning and maintain a sense of normalcy, we need to be ready for whatever the fall may bring.

Most public schools already are required to have emergency plans, which ideally consider a range of scenarios. The summer months ahead offer time to prepare and refine school "all-hazards" plans and ensure that parents make their own contingency plans. To that end, we recommend the following:

- Update your emergency plans and ensure all your contact lists are up to date. If you do not already have such a plan, we encourage you to develop one. To initiate or build upon an all-hazards plan, visit http://www.ed.gov/emergencyplan and http://rems.ed.gov.

- Collaborate with your state and/or local health departments. Useful information, including health department contacts, can be found at http://www.naccho.org or http://www.astho.org.
- Consider ways to promote good hand hygiene (including teaching proper hand washing technique, and providing opportunities and appropriate supplies for hand washing), regular cleaning and disinfection of surfaces in schools, and other infection control measures. More information about controlling infectious diseases at schools can be found at http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu.
- Develop response and communications plans to ensure that students or staff with fever or flu-like symptoms do not come to school or are sent home; advise parents of these plans.
- Advise parents to develop contingency plans should their children become sick and need to stay home or in the event their school is forced to close.
- Identify faith-based and community-based organizations that can assist with care and supervision of non-infected children whose schools may be closed.
- Consider alternative mechanisms for delivery of education content, leveraging community resources if appropriate and possible. See http://free.ed.gov.
- Consider alternative mechanisms for delivery of school meals to at-risk children.
- Work with local and/or state health departments to collect real-time data on school closures and rates of illness and absenteeism that will be shared with the Department of Education and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

We are also collaborating with mayors, governors, and state and local public health officials about contingency plans. Our hope is that the summer months can be used to develop and share a coordinated public health strategy that aims to protect our children and families and minimize disruptions.

We face an uncertain situation. Nevertheless, there are measures we can all take to meet the potential public health challenges that lie ahead, and your commitment to that end is critical to the overall effort. We want to work closely with you to ensure you have the support you need to provide a safe learning environment for our nation's students. You may call on us and our staffs at any time, and we will check in with you throughout the summer and the school year. In the meantime, you may find helpful information at these Web sites: www.ed.gov and www.cdc.gov. If you have questions for the Department of Education, feel free to send them to flu@ed.gov.

Again, thank you for all your efforts. We look forward to continuing to work with you.

Sincerely,

Arne Duncan
Secretary of Education

Kathleen Sebelius
Secretary of Health & Human Services