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SECRETARY OF EDUCATION

BILL RICHARDSON
Governor

October 9, 2009

MEMORANDUM

TO: District Superintendents, Charter School Administrators
BIE-Tribal School Leaders, NMAA

FROM: Dr. Veronica C. García (signature on file)
Secretary of Education
Dr. Alfredo Vigil (signature on file)
Secretary of Health

RE: Update on H1N1

H1N1 flu activity in New Mexico is widespread, and we know that several schools around the state are experiencing higher than normal absences. We have, also unfortunately, experienced two deaths in school-aged children already this flu season.

In an effort to keep the public informed about H1N1 flu activity in your communities, the New Mexico Department of Health and the Public Education Department are asking that we all coordinate the release of information. We understand that it is critical that parents know the most up-to-date information so they can make the best decision about the health and safety of their children.

To keep the public informed, the Department of Health will report to the media all H1N1-related deaths in school children as soon as DOH has confirmation. **We are asking that schools not send letters to parents about H1N1 related deaths until the Department of Health has had a chance to release the information to the media.** The Department of Health will continue to report hospitalizations from around the state in a weekly report that is released to the media every Wednesday afternoon. We feel this is the best approach to keep the public informed.

PED and DOH's Public Information Officers will coordinate with individual schools to alert them that this information will be released to the media. Please be aware the Department of Health will only release the age, county and gender of the person to the media. **Other information that could identify the person is protected health information and will not be released.**

We know that several schools around the state are experiencing higher than normal absences due to influenza like illness. The Department of Health will not know about or report every flu case in the state because not all cases are reported to the Department, and often sick individuals do not go to their doctors or get tested for influenza. The Department tracks influenza-like illness, which is defined as fever and either cough and/or sore throat, at 22 clinics throughout the state. Influenza-like illness is the best indicator of flu activity in the state.

In order to reduce over-utilization of clinics and emergency rooms during this busy flu season, please do not require a doctor's note for children or school staff to return to school. Children and staff may return to school once their fever has resolved for 24 hours (without the use of fever-reducing medications during that 24 hours.)

As we mentioned in a previous email, school closures should be considered only if attendance reaches a level that makes operations of a school impractical. Please contact me directly if you believe school closure is imminent before making any public announcement.

We have sent two important documents pertaining to continuity of education and food services in the event of a school closure. I encourage you to work with your food service directors and the PED Nutrition office to have the food service MOUs in place. Please review previous guidelines regarding continuity of education service plans in place as soon as possible. My office is reviewing guidance from the US Department of Education as to participation rates for NCLB, and we will get back to you with more specifics about that information.

School officials should continually provide basic prevention information for staff, students and parents. I know that we all share the same concern regarding the H1N1 for the well being of our students, families, and community. As information becomes available we will provide it to you.

The best defense is prevention. Please follow the guidelines on the DOH and PED website. Thank you for your continued support and diligence on this important issue affecting the health and well-being of students and staff.