

H1N1 and AYP

Flu-related absences could affect attendance element

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While it seems the worst of the H1N1 activity has passed, the illness may have a long-term effect on schools that wasn't anticipated.

H1N1, commonly referred to as swine flu, has been affecting people throughout the country and state since June when it caused the first pandemic, or global outbreak of disease in more than 40 years. The disease is more common among children and young adults, with the first confirmed cases in Orange County Public Schools occurring in October. Since then, the illness has spread throughout the county, affecting students at each of the county's eight schools.

"It seems that the virus started at Gordon-Barbour Elementary School and moved around [to each of the schools]," said Jan Carpenter, Orange County Public School Director of Special Education.

According to Carpenter, when the school district first started monitoring the number of students with H1N1 per week, there were 136 cases, she said. Last week, she said, there were just 15.

"The numbers are drastically declining which seems to be following a similar trend throughout the state," she said. However, despite declining numbers in the occurrence of the illness, the collateral damage may have already been done. Six of the county's eight schools use attendance rate as one of their other academic indicators for achieving adequate yearly progress (AYP). The AYP measure is established by the No Child Left Behind Act. The purpose of the act is to ensure all students are served well and are on grade level in reading and math by 2014. The act requires students to be tested in various subjects each year, with the percentage of students passing the tests increasing each year up to 100 percent in 2014. Students are broken into seven different subgroups for measuring AYP which are: all students, black students, Hispanic students, limited English-proficient students, students identified as disadvantaged, students with disabilities and white students. Schools and school divisions are then held accountable for each subgroup's participation and performance in reading and math, plus in one other academic factor. In some instances, this other academic indicator is attendance, in others it is science performance or graduation rate. For a school or school division to be deemed as having met or exceeded AYP benchmarks, it must meet or exceed the separate requirements and all 29 objectives as determined by the No Child Left Behind Act. The requirements and objectives include participation in Virginia Standards of Learning reading and mathematics tests, achievement on these tests and attendance, for elementary and middle schools, or graduation for high schools. Last year, five out of the eight county schools met AYP.

Locust Grove Elementary School uses science tests as their other academic indicator and Orange County High School is required to use graduation rate as theirs because they have a graduating class.

In order to pass the attendance requirement, each of the six schools must have an attendance rate of at least 94 percent, something that may not happen because of the occurrence of H1N1 in the schools.

Orange County Public School Director of Testing Jim Yurasits has been compiling monthly attendance rates for this year compared with attendance rates for last year at each of the schools. He said while the attendance rates are relatively the same, there is a noticeable dip in attendance in October due to H1N1. Division wide, attendance last September was at 94.21 percent while this September it was 94 percent. Last October, attendance was at 94.60 percent and this October it was 91.84 percent. November's attendance last year was 94.81 percent while this year's November attendance was 93.17 percent.

“Because of the noticeable decrease in attendance in October, it is possible we will be below the necessary 94 attendance rate to make [adequate yearly progress],” Yurasits said. “However, the state has said the school divisions can appeal to the state to waive the attendance requirement.”

According to Yurasits, by collecting the attendance data and the data on the occurrence of H1N1 cases throughout the division, Orange County Public Schools will have a strong case showing that the attendance rate was affected by the H1N1 virus. There is also the possibility that throughout the rest of the year, the attendance rate may level out enough for the school division to meet the attendance requirement.

“The department of education has said there will be an appeal process in the event that H1N1 [keeps us from meeting adequate yearly progress requirements],” Orange County Public School Superintendent Dr. Bob Grimesey said. “Currently, we feel that we have a pretty solid case if that happens. However, while H1N1 has obviously affected us, we were not hit as severely as other school divisions and we are hopeful that the attendance rate may meet the standard at the end of the [school] year.”

One of the most drastic drops in attendance rate occurred in Gordon-Barbour Elementary School in October with a 97.01 percent rate last year compared to a 93.97 rate this year. Unionville Elementary School also experience a drop in October with a 94.31 percent rate last year compared with a 92 percent rate this year. Orange Elementary School experienced a two percent rate drop, 95.82 last year compared to 93.82 this year as did Lightfoot Elementary School, 95.53 last year compared with 93.42 this year. Prospect Heights Middle School also experienced a decline in attendance during October, 95.49 percent last year compared to 93.58 percent this year. Locust Grove Middle School stayed the same at 95.5 percent.

According to Carpenter, all of the schools have had their first dose of H1N1 vaccinations and a second dose for children under 10 could be administered as early as next week. For more information on H1N1 in Orange County Public Schools, visit www.ocss-va.org.