

Illness absences increasing in school districts

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The Courier-Herald

Absences due to illness have taken a jump the last three weeks, according to statistics provided by area school districts.

Sumner, Dieringer and the White River districts all have reported absence levels of 10 percent or more within that time frame.

It is unknown whether the illnesses are due to the highly publicized swine flu, other flu or simply other illness.

Ten percent is the level at which a school must report to the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department. The county then investigates the absences and reports from local health care providers to determine whether a central outbreak exists, or whether several unrelated illnesses are the cause.

"There are definitely a lot more kids out absent," said Patty Hu, attendance secretary at Elk Ridge Elementary, which had the lowest absence level in the White River district at 6 percent. "A few of the kids that are here, you can tell from looking at them that they are just making it through the day."

Hu and staffers at other schools describe absence levels as a "roller coaster." More parents call with sick kids as winter approaches, with fewer absences at the beginning and in the warmer months of the school year.

White River schools saw a spike in absences two weeks ago. It was concentrated at White River High School and Glacier Middle School, but has since trickled down to the elementary schools, Superintendent Tom Lockyer said.

"Right now we're seeing the same trends that are being seen across the state and the

nation, I'm sure," he said.

The Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department received reports Oct. 27 from 34 Pierce County schools detailing absences exceeding 10 percent, spokeswoman Eileen Finnigan said.

On that day, Wilkeson and Foothills elementary schools met the health department threshold of 10 percent and 15.6 percent, respectively. Typical absence rates for the schools fluctuate between 3 and 4 percent, based on estimates from attendance secretaries and annual reports from previous school years.

In the past three weeks, the Sumner School District reported absence levels to the health department seven times. Sumner fared better than surrounding districts and one of the reported days was on a Friday, which typically has a higher absentee rate,

Communications Director Ann Cook said. The average daily absence rate for Sumner district schools is lower than that of the White River elementary schools, at around 0.3 percent, she said.

Dieringer district reported a 10 percent absence rate at all its schools Oct. 26. The following day, that figure had dropped to 8.8 percent. Superintendent Judy Neumeier-Martinson sent an e-mail that day notifying parents of the health situation.

Persons aged 6 months to 24 years are a priority group for vaccines like the swine flu vaccine because they congregate in schools and foster an environment ripe for communication of germs and disease. Smaller schools seem to be harder hit, by percentage, because a disease occurs among fewer

See Illness page A2

Courier Herald 11/4/09

Illness

from page A1

students.

Many schools are emphasizing more diligent cleaning procedures for the current swine flu threat. At Sumner, Dieringer and White River districts, the custodial staffs are taking extra care to sanitize areas like cafeterias.

Those districts, and many others in the surrounding area and across the country, have distributed swine flu information and health procedures on their Web site and through newsletters.

Students and their families are encouraged to abide closely to school hygiene protocol, including thorough hand washing, avoiding hand contact with the face, covering coughs and

Schools and the health department are working together to avoid school closures. In May, several South Sound schools closed as a precautionary measure against swine flu, disrupting calendar schedules. Close communication between the department and schools this year is being maintained to mitigate disease risks.

A swine flu vaccine clinic will be available at Glacier Middle School on Nov. 19. The Sumner district was not able to host a clinic and a Dieringer district clinic scheduled for Oct. 28 was cancelled due to lack of available vaccine.

"They've been telling us for months about this horrible epidemic, and now that the vaccine is developed they didn't make enough for the population," Neumeier-

Health department distribution of vaccine depends on deliveries by the Centers for Disease Control's contractor, which can affect the outcome of scheduled school clinics.

The department anticipates shipments coming in, though decisions on distribution clinics are being made week by week, Finnigan said.

Large shipments of vaccine are delivered directly to hospitals and health care providers. Smaller shipments are made to the health department.

Two deliveries per week are scheduled but they have been inconsistent in meeting their schedules.

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