



*Health, Well-being & Safety*

Larry Meredith, Ph.D., Director

Matthew D. Willis, MD, MPH, Public Health Officer

---

April 1, 2013

To: Marin County Office of Education  
School Superintendents and Principals

Subject: Communicable Disease Outbreaks at Schools: Reporting and Response

In a school setting, a communicable disease outbreak is a challenging situation requiring early recognition, timely reporting, investigation, and implementation of control measures to limit disease spread. The Communicable Disease Program of the Marin County Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) values collaboration with schools to assist in keeping students, faculty, staff and the community healthy.

We are sending this letter to clarify, in the setting of a potential school outbreak:

- Role and responsibilities of the Marin HHS Communicable Disease Program
- Responsibilities of the schools
- How we can work together effectively to minimize the impact of an outbreak
- Procedures for reporting, investigation, communication, and outbreak management.

If there are questions about the procedures, indications for reporting, or about any of the diseases, please call Communicable Disease Prevention and Control.

Sincerely,

Linda Ferguson, RN, BSN, PHN  
Supervising Public Health Nurse/CD Controller

Matthew Willis, MD, MPH  
Public Health Officer

---

**Dept of Health & Human Services – Communicable Disease Prevention & Control**

899 Northgate Drive • Suite 400 • San Rafael, CA 94903 • Tel: 415.473.4163 • Fax: 415.473.6002

---

# Communicable Disease Outbreaks at Schools Reporting and Response

## Schools' Role and Responsibilities

### **1. Report cases or outbreaks of reportable communicable diseases.**

- There are specific communicable diseases which by law **must** be reported to the county health department. A complete list of diseases reportable by health care providers is attached for your information. Usually, these are reported to the Marin Health and Human Services Communicable Disease Public Health Nursing Unit by a student's physician, or through a laboratory report. However, some outbreaks will occur in which the school nurse is the initial reporter. Due to the limited amount of time school nurses are assigned to individual schools, this task may fall to administrative personnel.

### **2. Maintain an "Exempt Roster" of students with medical or personal belief exemptions from vaccination.**

- One key to our collaboration in dealing with illnesses which are vaccine preventable, is the accurate information which the school is required to obtain on the California School Immunization Record (the blue card). It is on this card that parents may sign a medical or personal belief exemption to any or all of the required vaccines. The medical exemption must include certification by a physician.
- This affidavit also states that the parent "understands that in case of an outbreak of any one of these diseases, the child may be temporarily excluded from attending for his/her protection." Further, the blue card states "names of all children who are exempt should be maintained on an exempt roster for immediate identification in case of disease outbreak in the community."
- The exempt roster should be reviewed annually by the school nurse/secretary and contact made with parents by letter to update any change in students' immunization status.
- Maintenance of this roster and up to date information enables Public Health and the involved school to minimize the number of phone calls requesting critical information at the time of an outbreak situation.

### **3. Communication to parents.**

- School drafts an exposure notice letter to parents. Template letters are included in the Marin School Nurse Manual, which is online at the MCOE website.
- School sends draft to Communicable Disease Public Health Nurse for review.

### **4. Implement control measures recommended by Public Health.**

### **5. Designate school Public Health and media contact(s) and share with Communicable Disease Public Health Nurse.**

(For use by District/Site Administrator/Nurse)

## **Public Health's Role and Responsibilities**

1. **Outbreak investigation.** Upon receiving a case or outbreak report, the Health and Human Services Communicable Disease Public Health Nurse Unit begins an investigation, which includes acquiring essential information about the case(s) and possible transmission to others. For any given outbreak investigation, one of the Public Health Nurses assigned to Communicable Disease will be designated as the lead investigator and will be the main point of contact for the school. Investigation may include:
  - Calling the school nurse or administrative staff for contact and other information, e.g., student name(s), parents' names and phone numbers, last day in school, etc.
  - Visiting the school site to obtain information.
  - Interviewing parents when necessary. We may also request the name of the ill student's health care provider so that we can obtain needed clinical data. **Release of this information is exempt from HIPAA regulations, pursuant to Title 17 of the Health and Welfare Code, as it involves maintaining and protecting the health and safety of the community.** School districts may want to notify parents of this provision of the code.
2. **Communication to Parents.** Public Health Nursing will review draft of school exposure notice letter to assure accuracy of any outbreak specific information, such as exposure and incubation periods.
3. **Contact Tracing.** Public Health Nurse will assure that anyone who has come in contact with the ill children is notified, interviewed and given information regarding the disease, potential exposure, risk, and preventive measures.
4. **Communication to healthcare providers.** Marin Health and Human Services Public Health disseminates Public Health alerts, advisories and updates as needed.
5. **Outbreak Management.** Marin Health and Human Services Public Health will provide guidance about outbreak management and control measures, and will work closely with the school in implementation of these measures.

## **How Schools and Public Health Can Work Together Effectively to Minimize the Impact of an Outbreak**

1. Designate one primary contact at school (school nurse or other) and at Public Health to facilitate effective communication. This will minimize the number of calls and allow for the greatest consistency and collaborative effort.
2. When appropriate, Public Health staff may be sent to a school site to assist school personnel in obtaining appropriate information.
3. Provide consistent information to parents, staff and the media.
  - School should designate its media contact(s).
  - Media requests for Public Health should be referred to the office of the Public Health Officer at (415) 507-4163.

**(For use by District/Site Administrator/Nurse)**

# Procedures for School Reporting to Public Health

## Types of Illnesses and Timelines

Varicella (chickenpox): This is the most common disease that would be reported by a school and there is often confusion regarding when to report. Varicella is reportable in the event of an outbreak, which is defined as five (5) or more cases at a school within a sixty (60) day period for children up to the age of 13, or three (3) cases within a sixty (60) day period for children over the age of 13. Note that varicella immunization became a school entry requirement in July 2001. Therefore, some children in older grades may be unvaccinated.

• Pertussis (whooping cough): A single case of pertussis should be reported immediately by phone.

Strep throat: We would be interested in receiving reports when there is a cluster of five (5) laboratory confirmed cases in a week. Thus, if a parent calls in stating their child has "strep throat", it is necessary to find out if this diagnosis has in fact been confirmed by lab test and the health care provider.

Meningococcal Infections (meningitis or other): Report immediately by phone. This is a serious, life threatening illness which can be fatal in as little as 24 hours from onset of symptoms. Therefore, if the school becomes aware of a case or if it is reported to us, time is of the essence in our obtaining contact information so that potentially exposed persons (children and adults) can receive prophylactic treatment immediately.

• Meningitis (specify viral, bacterial, fungal, parasitic): Report individual cases by phone.

## Public Health Contact Information

After notification is made to Public Health, please contact your district office and/or school nurse.

Public Health Nursing communicable disease staff and phone numbers:

Shanna Cronan, Senior Public Health Nurse	473-7805
Mirta Cuevas, Public Health Nurse, Bilingual	473-2623
Linda Ferguson, Supervising Public Health Nurse	473-3038
Public Health General number:	473-6007

(For use by School Secretary/Administrative Support Staff)