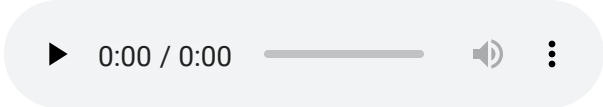


'Perfect storm' of illnesses results in cancelation of classes, sports and concerts for students

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By Cory Smith | on December 17, 2022

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From canceled high school concerts and sporting events to having to close school buildings for a pair of days, local school districts are feeling the consequences of an influx in illnesses as flu season hits high gear.

According to Dr. Jennifer Morse of the Mid-Michigan District Health Department, while cases of the flu typically experience an uptick at this time of year on an annual basis, area schools are currently feeling the brunt of a large wave of increased cases of influenza.

“We are starting to see influenza spreading quickly in our area,” she said. “The number of school-aged children going to urgent cares and emergency departments from the flu has more than doubled since the end of November. The number of influenza-like illnesses, which is having a fever with a cough and/or a sore throat, also continues to increase in our schools and childcare centers. We had previously been seeing very high levels of respiratory syncytial virus, or RSV, but that seems to be decreasing.”



Jennifer Morse

Morse said in addition to RSV and influenza, COVID-19 continues to spread as well, creating a triple threat of illnesses currently spreading throughout communities, though the illnesses vary from school district to school district.

“It seems to be ILI (influenza-like illness) — fever, cough and/or sore throat,” she said. “Many are testing positive for influenza, but also some (are reporting) strep throat, RSV, and COVID-19.”

Earlier this week, Carson City-Crystal Area Schools Superintendent John Sattler made the difficult decision of canceling school on Tuesday and Wednesday due to the excessive amount of illness throughout the school district.

“We have had our attendance numbers dropping slowly and consistently for a couple of weeks,” he said.

Sattler said that trend came to a crux on Monday when attendance numbers reached a critical low.

“On Monday we had 33% of the students (full day absences) out from the elementary with many other students going home throughout the day with flu-like symptoms,” he said. “We also had 25% of the middle school students out on Monday with full-day absences with many others going home during the day with illness.”

Per Michigan state law, when a school district falls below the 75% attendance requirement, the district must either make up the day or report the attendance shortfall in the year-end days and hours collection.

By the time Monday afternoon came around, Sattler said the school district was sitting at 75.3% attendance.

“With so many students going home on that Monday with flu-like symptoms I decided to cancel for two days so that we would have time to do a deep and thorough cleaning of the buildings and hope that the flu would work its way out,” he said. “The majority of cases of illness have been reported as influenza-A. Although our student attendance numbers have gone up a little bit district-wide since returning on Thursday, we still have a high number of students out in our K-3 building as of today (Friday).”

Other school districts that have canceled events include Ionia Public Schools and Belding Public Schools in Ionia County.

According to Ionia Superintendent Ben Gurk, the school district has averaged between 86% and 87% attendance throughout the week.

However, due to a number of illnesses affecting student-athletes, several sporting events were canceled.

“Lansing Catholic canceled boys varsity basketball last Friday due to illnesses on their team and not having enough players to play,” he said. “Lansing Eastern (United) canceled boys and girls bowling due to illness (and) we canceled boys swimming because we only had 13 swimmers between Ionia and Eaton Rapids due to illness and injury.”

At Belding, Superintendent Brent Noskey said the school district has managed to stay a few percentage points above that 75% attendance threshold to avoid having to close its doors.

“We have been dealing with a great deal of illness,” he said. “Oddly, it has been mostly at our high school where we have been hit the hardest. In normal years, it is our elementary students who are hit the hardest.”

Noskey said a combination of illnesses has been affecting the school district.

“It has been a perfect storm of the flu, COVID, RSV, (and) a two-day stomach flu all happening at once,” he said. “Our high school has been running around 20% absent all week. Our elementary schools have been between 10-15% (which is normal for this time of year) and our middle school has been between 15-20%.”

Noskey added that additional communication has been made in the past weeks to encourage students and staff to work toward preventing the spread of illnesses.

“To try and mitigate the situation, we always preach to parents that if their children are sick, please keep them home,” he said. “We continue to promote hand washing and the use of hand sanitizer throughout the district. Since COVID, we have increased the number of hand sanitizer ‘stations’ throughout the district. We have also been sending students home when they are showing signs of illness within the classroom.”

Noskey added that the upcoming two-week holiday break will hopefully serve as a chance for students and staff to recuperate and return in January.

“We are hopeful that the break will allow both students and staff to get healthy,” he said.

Morse said the MMDHD also communicated information and recommendations to area school districts this week to slow the spread of viruses.

“Two days ago we did send information to schools to provide guidance to them with this increase in influenza as well as information they could send home to parents,” she said. “We are available to the schools to discuss any questions or concerns they have regarding illness control and making decisions about closure.”