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## As school nears, flu looms

### Lee officials say it's OK to keep sick kids home

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TALLAHASSEE - From the governor's office to local school boards, Florida officials are looking nervously to the start of another school year in the days of swine flu.

While the strain of the H1N1 Virus is considered mild so far, there's no guarantee that won't change.

"This has been a relatively mild flu, but it has been difficult for us to determine how virulent it will be in the future," said Florida Surgeon General Dr. Ana Viamonte Ros.

One of the biggest concerns is a crucial window between the day when most public schools, including in Lee County, open Aug. 24 and mid-October, when a vaccine is expected to be widely available.

Until then, Ros, Gov. Charlie Crist, and Education Commissioner Eric Smith are crossing the state, including a stopover in Fort Myers on Friday, with a message for parents who will have to be the first line of defense against the spread of flu and risk of widespread school closures.

"We can't take anything for granted, we have to always be vigilant," Crist said.

State officials also are urging parents to look for more tips at a Department of Health Web site, [myflusafety.com](http://myflusafety.com).

Meanwhile, school districts across the state are coordinating with state and local health officials, disinfecting buildings and school buses and reviewing policies to assure parents that it's alright to keep a sick child at home.

"Protecting the health of children in school requires a three-way partnership. For the efforts of the school district and the health department will be successful we ask parents to join us in promoting good health habits. Most importantly we ask parents to keep their children home from school if they become ill," according to Dr. Judith Hartner, director of the Lee County Health Department.

The Lee County School District has had a pandemic plan in place the past few years, and it was put into practice last May when a Spring Creek Elementary student was one of the first confirmed cases of swine flu in Lee.

"All of our planning and preparation paid off in a big way," according to James Browder, superintendent of schools. "You hope you never have to implement such a plan, but if you do, it better be 100 percent - and ours was."

Part of the increased vigilance by school staff also includes identifying students exhibiting flu-like

symptoms; custodians/building supervisors are expected to increase focus and frequency of cleaning commonly touched areas, including doorknobs, light switches and handrails. Also, symptomatic students will be sent to the school's clinic for evaluation by a clinic assistant and/or school nurse, according to the district.

Jason Nice, 32, a parent and teacher at Gateway Elementary, said the practice of enforcing hand-washing and having kids sneeze into their sleeves are lessons he's been instilling in his third graders for years. But, with the new strain of the flu expected in full force, he agrees all teachers have to be aware.

"It's definitely something to watch out for," he said. "I don't like needles, but if I have to get the vaccine I will."

Any decision on whether or when to close a school if it gets hit by a swine-flu outbreak will be left to the local districts, state Department of Education officials say.

It's no small question during a recession, when unemployment is rising and parents are hesitant to risk losing a job through frequent absences. New York and Texas officials were criticized last year for being too quick to close schools. Child welfare investigators discovered many young children were being left at home to fend for themselves.

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