

DATE: March 12, 2020  
TO: Diocese of Lincoln Catholic Schools  
FROM: Dr. Matt Hecker  
Chief Administrative Officer of Schools  
RE: COVID-19 Response

The potential outbreak of a Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has us all on edge. Certainly in our schools, our highest priority is for the safety and well-being of our students and the faculty and staff members who serve them. Every decision will be made with that priority in mind.

Complicating the issue is the reality that we are educators, not public health officials or health care providers. Our competence is in teaching and learning not pandemic response. Thus, we are entirely dependent upon the expertise of those in the medical and public health professions to guide our decision-making relative to COVID-19. It means however, we are unlikely to have at our fingertips answers for pressing questions asked by nervous parents, school employees or our many volunteers. That can and does lead to anxiety, frustration and anger.

At this time, the Diocesan Education Office (DEO) is actively monitoring the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) websites. Here in Lincoln, we are in communication with Lincoln/Lancaster County Health Department Officials and the Lincoln Public Schools. All schools should be working in close cooperation with and continue to follow the recommendations of their local county Health Department. In addition, you should also be in close communication with your local public school district.

How can we best respond to this situation?

## 1. Watch for symptoms

Reported illnesses have ranged from mild symptoms to severe illness and (for a few) death for confirmed COVID-19 cases. The following symptoms may appear **2-14 days after exposure**.

- Fever
- Cough
- Shortness of breath
- **Anyone** who begins to develop symptoms consistent with this list (developed by the CDC) should self-isolate and call your physician **IF** you have been in close contact with a person known to have COVID-19 **OR** have recently traveled from an area with widespread or ongoing community spread of COVID-19.

## 2. Faculty, Staff, Students and Families

At this time, we are asking you to do the following:

- **If you or your child are sick, stay home.** Especially if you or they have a fever of over 100 degrees.
- Continue to follow the CDC recommendations for keeping you and your family healthy from any respiratory illness.

- If you or your child are traveling, please check the CDC website for the latest recommendations on travel. Continue to self-monitor for symptoms and fever for 14 days after you return. If you have a fever or any other symptoms, immediately self-isolate by staying home and contact your physician.
- If you have questions about COVID-19 and possible exposure, please contact your physician or local county Health Department.

### 3. CAO's and Principals

#### A. Understanding primary vs secondary contact

- Primary contact is defined as someone who has or may have come in close personal contact with a person known to have COVID-19.
- Schools continue to face questions about secondary contact (defined as an individual having contact with another who previously had contact with a diagnosed individual). The advice from health officials is that secondary contacts need to review the symptoms of COVID-19 and self-monitor.
- Health officials have not advised people to self-quarantine if they are a secondary contact. Primary contacts are the people who are asked to self-quarantine. These primary contacts – those who believe they have had direct contact with a positively diagnosed person - even if they are not experiencing symptoms - should contact the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services through their website at <http://dhhs.ne.gov/Pages/Coronavirus.aspx>
- Regarding individuals making decisions to self-quarantine, the matter is left to the determination of local school leadership in consultation with your county Health Department and the DEO, if needed.

#### B. Cancellations, postponements, school closure

- Cancellations or postponements for individual events are decisions left to administrators at your school/parish. For example, Omaha Public Schools indefinitely cancelled all school trips. This was done in consultation with others but it is not a mandate from any Health Department or the Nebraska Department of Education. Other school systems have opted not to cancel field trips. These are examples of local decisions done in consultation.
- Any decision to close a school necessitates consultation with your local county Health Department, the local public school district and the DEO. **This cannot be a unilateral decision.** St. Patrick-Fremont gives us a good example of a local response to a verified case of coronavirus: Parish and school leadership collaborated with their chancery, local health experts and Fremont public schools before deciding that closing the school served the best interest of the students, staff, and community. Again, this decision was supported by a verifiable risk and at the suggestion of local public health experts.

#### C. Maintain vigilant awareness

School administrators have a heightened responsibility for the health and safety of our students and staff. During the course of this crisis, it is important to stay informed with up-to-date and accurate information. This is a fluid situation with new information coming out daily. Daily, schools should be checking:

- <http://dhhs.ne.gov/Pages/Coronavirus.aspx>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

- <https://www.education.ne.gov/publichealth/resources/>

In addition, school administrative responsibilities during this crisis include:

- Providing clear and transparent communication to your school community especially around any suspected or confirmed cases.
- Ensure that your school nurses or health aides are vigilant in monitoring the student body, especially in cases where students exhibit symptoms associated with the virus.
- Establish a process for determining if students are suspected of primary contact with and/or having possibly contracted the virus and a system for reporting updates to your county health officials.
- Share overall school strategies for dealing with the spread of the virus should your school be impacted.
- Currently, public health officials are not recommending the use of masks or gloves in public settings.
- If you have planned out-of-district trips overseas or within the United States (if there are reported outbreaks at the U.S. destination), consider cancellation.

The following video, produced by Education Week, is a valuable resource in a short and shareable format.

### Responding to Coronavirus: A 3-Minute Guide for Schools

Six steps for school leaders on how to respond if the virus emerges in your community. <https://video.edweek.org/detail/video/6139124595001/responding-to-coronavirus-a-3-minute-guide-for-schools?autoStart=true&cmp=eml-enl-vid-p1>

#### 4. Thinking Beyond School Doors

We must and will act in the best interests of our students, faculty and staff. However, it is good to be reminded that a decision to close school, especially for an extended period, will have an impact on our families. This article provides a thoughtful reminder. <https://www.msn.com/en-us/lifestyle/lifestyle-buzz/the-coronavirus-will-cause-a-child-care-crisis-in-america/ar-BB110tRc?ocid=spartandhp>

In conclusion, let us remember who we are. We are God's people. Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made Heaven and Earth. We are led by faith in God rather than the CDC. Panic and irrational fear have no place in our schools. Rather, with our public health officials and fellow educators, together we are forming a thoughtful and comprehensive response. In prayer, we continue to place our schools in the hands of our loving Almighty God. There is no better course of action.