



LESSONS LEARNED

From School Crises and Emergencies



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COORDINATING A RESPONSE TO H1N1: ONE DISTRICT'S EXPERIENCES

Schertz-Cibolo-Universal City Independent School District (SCUCISD) is a suburban San Antonio school district that has experienced a 10 percent average growth rate for the past 10 years. Twelve thousand students is the estimated enrollment for the 2009–10 school year. According to SCUCISD Superintendent Belinda Pustka, this rapid growth has helped the district to develop a culture that enables it to adjust quickly to changing dynamics. This flexibility served the district well during the end of April and the beginning of May 2009 when SCUCISD was the first school district in the nation to close due to H1N1. Response efforts by the district led to the following three primary lessons learned that can help LEAs elsewhere be better prepared and able to respond to H1N1 or similar pandemic crises:

- Provide ample, up-to-date, information to the school community and public through as many viable channels of communication as possible.
- Standardize school closure policies across regions and/or states.
- Prepare for and execute continuing educational activities to keep students engaged in learning and occupied in the event of a school closure.

SCUCISD comprises 15 separate campuses and includes two comprehensive high schools; it serves five cities and two counties, with the majority of students from Guadalupe County. On Wednesday, April 22, 2009, the principal at Steele High School in Guadalupe County received notification that two students might have the H1N1 virus; he relayed the information to the superintendent. The

following day, Superintendent Pustka received a phone call from Dr. Sandra Guerra, Region 8 medical director of the Texas Department of State Health Services, confirming that two cases of H1N1 had, in fact, been identified at Steele High School and that all parents in the district would need to be informed.

Lesson Learned: Communicate with the community—rapidly, thoroughly, and broadly.

Within hours of the confirmation of H1N1 cases, the district enacted its automated calling system to notify parents and direct them to the district's Web site for further information. However, within 24 hours, the situation had changed significantly. Friday night, Superintendent Pustka was invited to join a conference call concerning the Steele High School cases of H1N1. Other participants were Dr. Guerra, elected officials from Guadalupe County, and the Guadalupe County judge. During the course of the call, Superintendent Pustka was notified that Steele High School would need to be closed.

On Saturday, district staff worked all day to notify students, their parents and guardians, and employees through various channels that Steele High School would be closed. "It takes the best part of a day to close a school or a district," said Superintendent Pustka. SCUCISD used phone message systems, phone trees, Web site postings, and podcasts to convey to parents and guardians that the school would be closed on Monday, April 27. However, by 8:30 p.m. Saturday, more H1N1 cases had been identified, and the state health department recommended that the entire district be closed. "I went to bed on Saturday night knowing we would have to repeat

the closing process on Sunday but instead of it being a school, it would be the district,” said Superintendent Pustka.

By Monday, the district was inundated with media inquiries. SCUCISD staff quickly developed a procedure for responding to the media, while also working through its own channels to keep the public fully informed. Beginning Tuesday, Superintendent Pustka provided multiple morning interviews to the news media daily. Soon after, the district began streaming the interviews live on the SCUCISD Web site. The district opened a Twitter account as well, so audience members could Twitter questions as they watched the live streaming. Once Superintendent Pustka finished the media interviews, she would respond to the public’s questions via Twitter.

Encouraging communication among community members, including educators, elected officials, health providers, and emergency medical personnel, was another important part of the response effort and means of providing information to the public. This was facilitated through daily county-wide and state-wide conference calls. Superintendent Pustka concluded each day by posting a podcast on the district’s Web site, updating the public on the most recent events and information. “There wasn’t anything I did throughout the process that brought me more comments than the podcasts,” she explained. “On Friday evening, at the end of the first week we were closed, we had over 35,000 hits on the podcast that night alone ... Community members wanted to know what H1N1 meant for them personally and my podcasts seemed to fill that niche.”

Lesson Learned: Standardize school closure policies across regions and/or states.

Another issue that arose in the response to H1N1 in Texas related to the formal

implementation of school closures, especially across varying regions and entities. As a result, Superintendent Pustka suggested that states examine the procedures outlined in their various statutes prior to the need to close schools, as well as develop a protocol for both closing and reopening schools. “It sounds so simple, but it is more complex than it might first seem,” she explained. In Texas, the education code allows for the superintendent to close schools, but boards also have the authority to close schools. The education code also allows health officials, working in concert with elected county officials, to close schools. Superintendent Pustka explained, “We’ve learned to work with all governmental entities, even those [with which] we don’t have traditional dealings, so adjusting to the health department’s requirements was easy ... for the district.”

Coordinating a regional response could, however, be more complicated as demonstrated by the event that took place on Friday, May 1, four days after the SCUCISD school closings. On that day, the county adjoining Guadalupe County—Bexar County—released its guidelines for school closure. Even though a quarter of the students who attend SCUCISD reside in Bexar County and only a creek separates it from Guadalupe County, its standards for closing a school were very different. For instance, Bexar County’s guidelines stated that when 12 percent of the student population was absent for two days in a row due to flu-like symptoms, then a school would be closed, whereas Guadalupe County followed the Center for Disease Control’s guidelines at the time, which recommended closing schools once students there were identified as having H1N1. “Continuity between standards needs to be maintained,” Superintendent Pustka explained. “Patchwork closings of districts, schools or day-care centers are not effective.”

Lesson Learned: Prepare and implement continuing education plans to support student learning out of school.

How the education and care of the students of SCUCISD would be maintained during school closure periods was a third area of focus for the district. “I knew the first day students weren’t in school would seem like a holiday,” said Superintendent Pustka. “By the second day, they would get bored ... and it would deteriorate from there.” Because children are still in need of an educational routine during school closure, the district worked quickly to provide educational activities to parents and families to keep students engaged in learning during the school closure period

On Tuesday of the closure period, small groups of teachers came together to develop several weeks of work for each grade level in most subject areas and posted the work to the district’s Web site. Hard copies of the work were also reproduced for students who did not have access to online resources, and local businesses helped distribute them to students and families upon request.

Grappling with continuing education through a school closure period provided important insight to district staff. “For the first time, I understand that traditional classroom instruction and online instruction need to be so seamless that students can move from a traditional classroom environment to the online environment and back again without missing any instruction,” said Superintendent Pustka. “From each event that happens, there will be a positive lesson learned. On the positive side of a pandemic, it could be the event that dramatically changes the way instruction is delivered. It could be the event that pushes us to a seamless delivery method.”

This *Lessons Learned* publication was written with the assistance of Belinda Pustka, superintendent of Schertz-Cibolo-Universal City Independent School District in southern Texas, during the fall of 2009.

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