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NEWS RELEASE

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Education Secretary and Health Officials Discuss Swine Flu with State Superintendents and Charter School Leaders

(SANTA FE) – Secretary of Education Veronica C. García this morning urged New Mexico school leaders to use standard precautions to protect students from swine flu, and communicate often with state officials.

Secretary García and medical doctors from the New Mexico Department of Health briefed public school superintendents and charter school leaders about swine flu, and the process to close schools in case of an outbreak. To date, no cases of swine flu have been confirmed in the state or in New Mexico schools, according to New Mexico Department of Health Secretary Alfredo Vigil, MD.

Secretary García stressed that public schools are open, and children should be in school. She asked school district administrators to continue following their existing attendance policies.

“New Mexico parents, teachers and school leaders can do a lot to help our children stay healthy, and stay focused on school,” Secretary García said. “These common-sense approaches to good hygiene and keeping sick kids at home can do a lot to lessen the impact of any potential outbreak, and help our students finish the school year healthy.”

Department of Health (DOH) State Epidemiologist Dr. Mike Landen and Dr. Maggi Gallaher joined Secretary García on a conference call to an estimated 90 public school superintendents and charter school leaders Thursday morning. The hour-long call provided the school administrators with DOH and Centers for Disease Control (CDC) information on the swine flu and the opportunity to ask specific questions of the Secretary and the doctors.

Throughout this week, Secretary García provided national and state swine flu information and updates, day and night, to public school superintendents, principals, and charter schools. Administrators were also sent a sample letter, in Spanish and English, to be used to communicate with parents.

Highlights of Secretary García’s recent communications to school superintendents include:

- New Mexico schools are open and students should continue to go to school, unless they are sick. Local school districts should follow their existing attendance policies.
- Practice and encourage good hygiene. This includes teaching children to wash their hands often, cover coughs and sneezes with the inside of the elbow, and avoid touching their face.

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- It is imperative that all school bathrooms be stocked with sufficient soap and paper towels, or hot air dryers.
- If you or a child is sick, it's simple – stay home from school and work, and call a doctor or other health care provider.
- New Mexico schools will follow guidelines from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and the New Mexico Department of Health.
- Some student groups have scheduled domestic travel. There are currently no restrictions on domestic travel. However, parents and guardians have the right to decide if their child participates or not. And there should be no penalties for students that choose not to travel. Local school leaders should consult with parents to make the best decision for children.
- Swine flu symptoms include fever over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, cough, sore throat, runny nose or stuffy nose.
- Closing schools is not necessary now. However, this may be necessary if swine flu continues to spread. Schools closures will be handled on a case by case basis. This decision will be made in collaboration by the Department of Health, the Public Education Department, and the local school district.
- The public will be notified immediately in case of a school closure.
- Parents should make plans now for child care before there is actual school closure.

“I encourage New Mexico families to talk about how to care for children should their school close for a period of time,” Secretary García said. “A little planning can go a long way to make things easier.”

“The Public Education Department has been proactive in communicating with school officials about the latest swine flu information, and I’m proud of the way school superintendents and charter school leaders have handled the situation so far,” Secretary García said. “I want to assure the public that I remain in close communication with Health Secretary Alfredo Vigil, MD and Department of Health staff. We will continue to do all we can to update schools and their families.”

For more information, go to the PED website at <http://www.ped.state.nm.us/press/current.html> , the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/swineflu> or the New Mexico Department of Health’s web site at http://nmhealth.org/FLU/seasonal/swine_flu.html.

For general questions, call the state’s Swine Influenza Hotline at 1-866-850-5893. People with symptoms can call Nurse Advice New Mexico at 1-877-725-2552.

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