

School's in

Lesson No. 1 is H1N1

PREPARATION KEY

Hand sanitizer will be everywhere

BRENDA BRANSWELL
GAZETTE EDUCATION REPORTER

Welcome back to school, everyone.

Oh, and feel free to use the new hand sanitizer dispensers on your way to class.

As Quebec students head back to CEGEP today, many can expect hygiene 101 to be on the agenda. Ditto for elementary and high school students who return to class this week and next.

Even though the H1N1 flu virus has mainly resulted in relatively mild illness to date, the possibility of a second wave of infections has kept swine flu on radar screens at CEGEPs, universities and school boards.

After all, schools and daycares are "known settings" for increased influenza transmission, as the Public Health Agency of Canada pointed out last week.

"Everybody has to be mindful that this is one of the issues we're dealing with this year," said Marcus Tabachnick, chairperson of the Lester B. Pearson School Board.

Dawson College bought 100 new hand sanitizer dispensers.

"Everywhere you walk in the college you will see a little grey dispenser," said spokesperson Donna Varrica.

Vanier College is reconfiguring its nurse's area so it can be more self-contained. The CEGEP in St. Laurent is also reminding people on its website about the importance of hand-washing, "respiratory etiquette" and what to do if they have flu symptoms.

"Our basic approach at this point is prevention," said John McMahon, Vanier's academic dean. "The key thing I think is not to panic but also to be prepared."

Quebec's public health department has recommended that schools maintain the same prevention measures, which focus on hygiene, that they've had in place since last spring.

The Public Health Agency of Canada weighed in last week with swine flu advice for schools, daycares, and post-secondary institutions to help them prepare for back to school.

The most important factors in controlling the spread of H1N1 in schools, it said, are quickly identifying students and staff who exhibit influenza-like-illness symptoms and excluding or isolating them from the setting. Hygiene measures such as frequent hand cleaning is the other key one.

The agency advised that

"high-touch surfaces" in schools be cleaned at least twice daily. Frequently touched surfaces include doorknobs, hand rails, faucet handles, and computer keyboards. The agency also recommended schools monitor hand cleaning supplies.

"There should be soap and water and towels in every bathroom in every school in abundance," said Ruth Rosenfield, head of the Montreal Teachers Association, whose members work at the English Montreal School Board.

"Will that be the case? I don't know," said Rosenfield, describing the presence of soap in school washrooms as a "hit and miss" situation.

At the Commission scolaire de Montréal, schools were sent a directive in May to have high-touch areas like doorknobs and banisters cleaned every day, said spokesperson Alain Perron. Caretakers were asked to be more vigilant about replacing paper towels and soap in bathrooms — an approach that will continue this fall, he said.

The Quebec government asked school boards, CEGEPs and universities to create an action plan to manage the fallout from an eventual pandemic. And it released a guide in 2007 for them to use for planning essential services in such a scenario.

The Pearson board's plan states that monitoring the number of students and staff who are absent with influenza-like-illness is essential in all stages of a pandemic flu outbreak.

Tracking absenteeism is a bit more difficult at the CEGEP level, said Vanier's McMahon. But if a student misses class linked to H1N1,

"we will have a mechanism by which they can inform the college of that fact," he said.

"One of our main objectives is the continuance of service so right now most of our (pandemic) planning is geared toward that," McMahon said.

Some institutions are well-prepared and others aren't, contends Daniel Dancause, senior consultant with Prudent Groupe Conseil, an emergency measures consulting company that provided training to most Quebec CEGEPs for preparing pandemic plans.

The Fédération des commissions scolaires du Québec says it is confident that school boards will do their pandemic planning work.

"I have difficulty thinking that they're prepared," said Réjean Parent, head of the Centrale des syndicats du Québec, which represents nearly 100,000 members in the education sector. "If they're prepared, it's well hidden."

Parent would like to see an inventory done of staff who are at greater risk, such as pregnant women, who could be quickly notified if there was a possible or actual presence of the H1N1 virus at a school. And those people would be told to stay away, he said.

Tabachnick calls it business as usual at schools but "tweaked slightly" to the current reality.

"Obviously we have to be very vigilant," he said. "That's the key word for the start up of school."

"And if we notice any change in pattern then to react appropriately with the health authority's assistance."

bbranswell@
thegazette.canwest.com