

**DAKOTA COUNTY PANDEMIC INFLUENZA
TABLETOP EXERCISE:**

**K-12 SCHOOL CLOSURE AS A DISEASE CONTAINMENT
MEASURE**

APRIL 17, 2008

AFTER ACTION REPORT/IMPROVEMENT PLAN

August 2008

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This exercise was a re-creation of an exercise designed by the Minnesota Department of Health to discuss K-12 school closure as a disease containment measure during a pandemic flu incident. The goal of the Dakota County Pandemic Influenza tabletop exercise was to:

- Advance planning in Dakota County school districts through a discussion of issues that would arise during a pandemic disease
- Provide valuable feedback for policy formulation at all levels of government

The planning team was composed of numerous and diverse agencies, including Dakota County, the cities of Eagan and Sunfish Lake, and Independent School Districts 191, 194, and 196.

Based on the exercise planning team's deliberations, the following objectives were developed:

- Objective 1: Describe the potential impact of a pandemic on schools and the community
- Objective 2: Exchange ideas about the impact and policy implications of closing and re-opening schools in Dakota County.
- Objective 3: Discuss the roles and responsibilities of the school district and other agencies in preparing and responding to pandemic influenza.
- Objective 4: Use discussion points from the tabletop to improve local plans, and provide feedback for policy formulation at all levels of government

The purpose of this report is to analyze exercise results, identify strengths to be maintained and built upon, identify potential areas for further improvement, and support development of corrective actions.

Major Strengths

The major strengths identified during this exercise are as follows:

- Limited-time school closure plans are currently in place that can be adapted and used in case of a pandemic influenza event
- Schools already have many of the necessary relationships with stakeholders such as city, county and state officials, which will facilitate joint pandemic flu planning

Primary Areas for Improvement

The primary areas for improvement, including recommendations, are as follows:

- Ensure pandemic flu specific considerations are incorporated into schools' emergency plans (e.g. 3-deep role assignments)
- Ensure that plans also detail school re-opening processes, and address how behavioral health needs will be met
- Advocate for federal and state guidance on human resources issues (e.g. teacher's payment/schedule changes during school closures)

Overall, this exercise was successful in advancing pandemic flu planning in Dakota County by bringing together essential stakeholders, providing them with opportunities to discuss the status of their planning, and identify gaps and priority areas for improvement.

SECTION 1: EXERCISE OVERVIEW

Exercise Details

Exercise Name

Dakota County Pandemic Influenza Tabletop Exercise: K-12 School Closure as a Disease Containment Measure

Type of Exercise

Tabletop Exercise (TTX)

Exercise Start Date

April 17, 2008

Exercise End Date

April 17, 2008

Duration

6.5 hours

Location

Rosemount Community Center, Rosemount, Minnesota

Sponsor

Dakota County High Performance Partnership Project (HiPP)

Program

N/A

Mission

Response

Capabilities

Planning

Scenario Type

Severe Pandemic Influenza

Exercise Planning Team

Dakota County Public Health – Gina Adasiewicz, Shannon Bailey, Dori Makundi,
Tracie Lemke

City of Eagan – Jeremy Klein

Independent School District 191 - Dawn Willson

Independent School District 194 – Marne Berkvam, Chris McHale

Independent School District 196 – Sally Cole, Jane Schleisman

City of Sun Fish Lake – Major Molly Park

Participating Organizations

County:

Dakota County Public Health –Emergency Preparedness, Health Promotion, Disease Prevention & Control
Dakota County Community Services Administration -Contracts
Dakota County Emergency Management
Dakota County Medical Examiner’s Office – Medical Examiner

Schools:

Independent schools Districts: 191, 192, 194, 196, 197, 199, 200,
Special School District 6
Privates Schools: All Saints Catholic School, Faithful Shephard Catholic School,
St Elizabeth Ann Seton, St Joseph School, Visitation School/St Thomas Academy

Cities:

City of Apple Valley - Police
City of Burnsville -Police
City of Eagan – Support Services
City of Inver Grove Heights - Police
City of Sunfish Lake - Administration
City of West St Paul - Police

State:

Minnesota Department of Education –Health/Student Services Specialist
Minnesota Department of Health – Public Health Preparedness Consultant

Number of Participants

- Players: 58
- Controllers: 2
- Recorders/Evaluators: 9
- Facilitators: 9
- Observers: 10
- Presenters: 5

SECTION 2: EXERCISE DESIGN SUMMARY

Exercise Purpose and Design

This exercise was a re-creation of an exercise designed by the Minnesota Department of Health to discuss K-12 school closure as a disease containment measure during a pandemic flu incident.

The goal of the exercise was to:

- Advance planning in Dakota County school districts through a discussion of issues that would arise during a pandemic disease
- Provide valuable feedback for policy formulation at all levels of government

In Dakota County, nine simultaneous independently facilitated tabletop exercises utilizing the same scripts, discussion issues and video enhancements were carried out with players being representatives from K-12 schools in Dakota County.

The exercise lasted approximately five hours and consisted of nine player tables. Each table had a dedicated facilitator and recorder, and five to nine representatives from school districts.

A tenth table was composed of city, county and state representatives who acted as resources to the players.

At the end of the discussions, a large group summary and hotwash was conducted.

Exercise Objectives, Capabilities, and Activities

The following objectives were identified by the exercise planning team:

1. Describe the potential impact of a pandemic on schools and the community.
2. Exchange ideas about the impact and policy implications of closing and re-opening schools in Dakota County.
3. Discuss the roles and responsibilities of the school district and other agencies in preparing and responding to pandemic influenza.
4. Use discussion points from the tabletop to improve local plans, and provide feedback for policy formulation at all levels of government

Based upon the exercise objectives above, the exercise planning team identified planning as the target capability to be demonstrated during this exercise.

Scenario Summary

The scenario consisted of three separate scripts, each script focused on a particular time period during a pandemic flu outbreak. The scripts were as follows:

- Script 1: Pending school closure
- Script 2: Schools are closing
- Script 3: Schools are re-opening

At the beginning of each script, a fictional video clip developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) was shown to introduce the time period in a developing influenza pandemic. At the end of the video clip, participants read a narrative (developed by the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) that linked the content of the video clips to events that would be occurring in Minnesota, including MN specific policies and procedures to provide context for the following discussion.

SECTION 3: ANALYSIS OF TABLETOP DISCUSSIONS

(Emergency) Planning is the process through which emergency responding entities (government and non-governmental organizations, and the private sectors) develop, validate and maintain plans, policies, and procedures describing how they will prioritize, coordinate, manage, and support personnel information, equipment, and resources to prevent, protect, and mitigate against, respond to, and recover from catastrophic events. The planning capability sets the activities and tasks undertaken by these entities when drafting (or updating) emergency management (preparedness) plans.

Evaluation of whether the planning capability was demonstrated by this exercise was completed by doing a review and analysis of tabletop discussions as recorded by table recorders. Additionally, notes from the exercise hotwash that included highlights and remaining questions from each table were reviewed.

During the exercise, some discussion issues were cross cutting and did not apply to any one particular script. Furthermore, players consistently commented that these issues have broad implications, and should be addressed at the state and/or federal levels:

- Payment of teachers during student dismissal
- Working with unions to create flexibility to be able to re-assign work responsibilities during school closures, if such is needed (i.e. – can teachers be required to perform other non-teaching or supportive tasks)
- Meeting federal requirements for in-class instruction time for reimbursement purposes
- Assisting and supporting students to ‘catch-up’ and graduate on schedule
- Possibly relaxing some qualification standards for hiring of new staff post pandemic – in the event large numbers of school staff are unable to return to work

PREPARATION FOR SCHOOL CLOSURE

Observation/Discussion Summary:

Initial discussion on school officials’ activities pending school closure was centered around the schools’ existing emergency plans. Specifically, discussions revealed that majority of schools did not have pandemic specific plans. The few school officials that had pandemic plans reported that their plans did not outline specific response activities for pre-pandemic period. Activities that were identified as essential during preparation for school closure included:

- ✓ Notification of parents, students and the community to ensure that they were aware of the possibility of school closures, and things they can do to prepare for it
- ✓ Maintaining communication with city, county and state officials to stay up to date on the situation, and ensure consistency in messages to the public

- ✓ Clarification of policies, and time periods for implementing policies (e.g. staff absentees and pay, and parents who remove children from schools prior to school closure)

Recommendations:

- ✓ Initiate pandemic flu discussions and educations with stakeholders including teachers and other school staff, students, and parents
- ✓ Schools should identify partners and stakeholders in pandemic preparedness and response, and establish mechanisms to communicate with these entities throughout pandemic preparedness, response and recovery
- ✓ Schools should create or update pandemic specific plans that outlines activities school officials would take during each of the different phases of a pandemic

IMPLEMENTATION OF ORDER TO CLOSE SCHOOLS

Observation/Discussion Summary:

Discussion notes reveal that although school officials were not all aware of governor's power to issue order for school closure, they were clear on who could authorize school closure at the local level. Schools frequently are called upon to dismiss students or suspend activities during incidents such as inclement weather. School officials were clear on activities that would need to occur in order to close schools, but were less clear on activities and staff requirements once schools were closed. The following issues were highlighted as critical to ensure a successful implementation of the order to close schools:

- ✓ Rapid communications to school staff, teachers, and parents
- ✓ Ensuring staff are clear on responsibilities during this period, and once schools are closed (whether to report to work or not, alternative work assignments, pay)
- ✓ Establishing a phone bank to respond to request for information about community resources or to provide behavioral health support to families raising kids with special needs who might be adversely affected by the change in daily routines.

Recommendations:

- ✓ Assign staff specific roles, and clearly establish lines of successions in the event specific individuals are unavailable or unable to perform designated task
- ✓ Schools should create or update pandemic specific plan that outlines activities school officials would take on each of the different phases of a pandemic

- ✓ Plans should include how to continue providing supportive services for students with special needs that depend on these services for family to function

RE-OPENING SCHOOLS

Observation/Discussion Summary:

Discussions highlighted a variety of issues surrounding re-opening of schools after a traumatic event. Majority of table discussions reflected that school re-opening would be a far more complex process than school closure. Discussion also highlighted that most school plans did not currently feature a plan for re-opening schools.

Issues that were identified as requiring special consideration during school re-opening process include:

- ✓ Conducting of an assessment to determine who is available to return to, and staff positions that might need to be refilled. This process might involve re-structuring and re-assignment of school staff to positions different from what they occupied pre-pandemic.
- ✓ Need to address behavioral health needs of students and staff adversely affected by pandemic event.
- ✓ Need for federal and state guidance on best way to assure students are able to get “caught up”, and can successfully continue or finish their academic life on schedule

Recommendations:

- ✓ Identification of community resources that could be used to address behavioral health issues stemming from pandemic, and inclusion of behavioral health component to pandemic recovery plans
- ✓ Seek guidelines from federal and state on academic recovery process, to ensure students are able to make up for lost in-class time, and progress toward graduation is not severely impacted

SECTION 4: CONCLUSION

(Emergency) Planning is the process through which emergency responding entities (government and non-governmental organizations, and the private sectors) develop, validate and maintain plans, policies, and procedures describing how they will prioritize, coordinate, manage, and support personnel information, equipment, and resources to prevent, protect, and mitigate against, respond to, and recover from catastrophic events. The planning capability sets for the activities and tasks undertaken by these entities when drafting (or updating) emergency management (preparedness) plans.

Evaluation of this whether this target capability was demonstrated during this exercise was completed by reviewing and analyzing records of tabletop discussions recorded by table recorders. Additionally, notes from the exercise hotwash that included highlights and remaining questions from each table were reviewed.

During this exercise, discussions confirmed that schools already have existing systems and structure that can be built upon to respond to pandemic influenza event. Schools periodically utilize these processes when they close schools for short periods of time, for example, due to inclement weather. Supplemental planning is needed to incorporate pandemic influenza specific considerations into the planning, such as the continuation of school operations during long absences of the student body - weeks to months, process for re-opening schools which is flexible to respond to in-time situation analysis of the pandemic effect on the community, and finally, ensuring that the joint planning involving the various stakeholders continue to occur to ensure consistency in approaches to planning, and provide input into issues with broad implication not just for the county, but the state and the country.

APPENDIX A: IMPROVEMENT PLAN

This IP has been developed specifically for Dakota County as a result of the Dakota County Pandemic Influenza Tabletop Exercise: K-12 School Closure as a Disease Containment Measure conducted on April 17, 2008.

Capability	Discussion Point	Recommendation	Corrective Action Description	Capability Element	Primary Responsible Agency	Agency POC	Completion Date
Planning	1. Pandemic flu preparedness and response plans	1.1 Create and/or adopt pan flu plans that outline response activities and timelines for implementation	1. Educate school staff on content of pan flu plan	Planning	Schools	School Principal	April 2009
			2. Distribute copies of plan to all school departments	Planning	Schools	School Principal	April 2009
		1.2. Ensure pandemic flu plans detail how behavioral health needs will be met	1. Identify and incorporate resources and strategies to respond to behavioral health needs among students	Planning	Public Health	School Principal	April 2009
	2. Dissemination of order to close schools	2.1 Establish mechanism for schools, cities and county to communicate	1. Creation of school-city-county communication contact list that is stored in a centrally accessible location	Planning	HiPP Communication Workgroup	School Principal DCPHD	April 2009
			2. Identify and promote a system to allow communications between school, city and county officials	Systems/ Equipment	Dakota County Public Health Department (DCPHD)	School Principal DCPHD	April 2009
		2.2 Create systems to rapidly communicate order to school personnel, parents and students	1. Identify a system to allow rapid alerts and notifications to school personnel, parents, and students	Systems/ Equipment	School Personnel	School Principal	April 2009

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK SUMMARY

At the end of the exercise, all participants were asked to complete a feedback form with questions that would be used to improve this exercise process. The following information was summarized from the feedback forms.

1. What is your assessment of the exercise design and conduct?

RATING OF SATISFACTION WITH THE EXERCISE

Assessment Factor	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
a. The tabletop was well structured and organized.	1 3%	2	3 3%	4 36%	5 58%
b. The tabletop scenario was plausible and realistic.	1	2	3 11%	4 39%	5 50%
c. Communication prior to the tabletop was clear and sufficient regarding expectations of me	1	2 3%	3 25%	4 22%	5 50%
d. The participants understood their roles.	1	2	3 7%	4 39%	5 54%
e. The participants were engaged in the scenario.	1	2	3 3%	4 25%	5 72%
f. The large group presenters were knowledgeable about the subject	1	2	3	4 25%	5 75%
g. The large group presentations provided clear and useful information.	1	2	3 3%	4 36%	5 11%
h. The table facilitator kept the exercise discussion on target.	1	2	3 7%	4 29%	5 64%
i. The player's handbook was useful.	1	2	3 3%	4 25%	5 72%
j. Participation in the exercise was appropriate for someone in my position.	1	2	3	4 32%	5 68%
k. The participants included the right people in terms of level and mix of disciplines and agencies.		2	3 3%	4 25%	5 72%
l. Overall, participating in the tabletop was a valuable use of my time	1	2	3	4 32%	5 68%

Functions of the exercise that worked well:

Having facilitators/recorders for each tables:

- Good Facilitator – Barb – motivated conversation
- Having a facilitator and recorder already assigned
- Facilitator participation
- Having facilitator and recorder was great!
- Facilitator/ Recorder
- Thought the role of the facilitator was essential
- Use of note taker was effective
- Great to have recorder provided – know what he was looking for
- Facilitator and recorder were fabulous!
- Good discussion leaders
- Leadership form moderator worked well
- Great lunch – leaders at each table to help conversation
- A Good facilitator at each table was key

Format of the exercise:

- Small group discussions
- Tabletop discussions – awesome and eye-opening
- Group Setting
- Good idea to let districts work at their own tables
- Viewing a scenario and discussion format was helpful
- Length of discussion periods
- Wrap – up; Hotwash
- Tabletops – well organized process

Having diverse participants at the tables:

- Diverse participant pool
- Range of professions with in the group
- Different positions and work experiences
- Putting different stake holders together
- Kept my interest, public and non public views at same table
- Input from others we did not consider
- Different views on situation

Engaging scenario

- Three scenarios
- The DVD Scenarios
- 3 separate areas to look at then into big picture
- Scenarios
- Unique scenarios
- Scenarios
- Good scenarios
- Scenarios were very good.

Bringing districts together:

- Great bringing all parties together
- This gathered folks from our district to talk about this issue
- Different opinions from *different* school District vs. private schools
- Bringing Districts together
- Sitting with district group

Information and resources (presentations and handouts)

- Additional handouts, tote bag
- Community resources
- Basic information regarding state plans
- MDH resources for tabletop
- Presenters – well versed
- Materials in binder were great!
- Continuing education, communication of ideas.
- Time to visit about channels of communication

Misc

- Scripts that were consistently used with each table
- Good explanation of our roles at the meeting
- Excellent group discussion
- Good group discussions
- Group came to similar conclusions
- Open atmosphere
- Group discussion
- Everybody participated!
- Time was good – Not too long!
- Recognizing collaborative partners
- Importance of district plan

Functions that could have worked better:

Room/Table Set up

- Better Acoustics
- Table Configurations
- All groups should have had round tables
- Room Acoustics was terrible!
- Round table instead of long 8' table
- Need a Round table – Hard to hear

Hotwash

- Hotwash – got a bit repetitive
- Hotwash – good idea – but not well planned out
- Would have been nice to have conversation after hotwash

Time for discussion

- Timing – too long on last scenario – not enough on 1st one
- Each script probably could have been completed in less time

Format

- More structured discussion
- Probably an explanation of what a tabletop actually consists of before the event

Misc

- Scenarios should be watched 1-2-3 too much overlap
- More State officials
- No indication that resources would be printed by state to schools
- School, districts need to work together to develop a plan and identify resources
- It would be helpful to know what is already in place with in the county / district

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