

School Absentee Surveillance

Schools are often prime sources of information regarding disease activity in their local communities. However, many schools do not collect detailed information regarding the number of students absent over time and the symptoms that are keeping students home in a school building or district. Levels of absenteeism can provide valuable information to school districts and public health officials regarding normal disease activity at a particular time during the school year and early signs of disease outbreaks.

It is recommended that all school districts look at absentee procedures and surveillance measures. School officials will want to partner with their school nurse and/or public health department to look at a disease surveillance model for their school districts. A surveillance model should define:

- Set criteria for illness,
- Data collection system for total number of students absent and symptoms of illness keeping a student home ill.
- Plan for collection of data.
- Determine level of absenteeism triggering consultation with school nurse and local public health officials.

Consideration for Surveillance Model

- Designate primary and back-up school personnel who are responsible for tracking illness.
- After the third Friday in September, track total number of students that are ill daily. Designate a uniform day of the week to identify the number of students absent due to illness symptoms. Tuesday is often recommended since it does not involve extended weekend or holiday absences. If a parent does not identify a reason for absence, school personnel should attempt to make contact with parents to determine reason for the absence and symptoms if child is ill. During increased disease activity, schools may be asked to track illness symptoms daily.
- Modify your safe arrival or attendance line answering machine message requesting parents to provide specific symptoms keeping a student home.
- Notify parents in a letter or student handbook procedure for reporting absence and request for symptoms of the student's illness.
- A student that is absent for more than half of the school day due to illness, should be counted as one absence (not a half).
- Students who are absent due to previously scheduled doctor/dentist and therapy appointments are not considered absent due to illness.
- If the total number of students absent due to illness exceeds the threshold limit on any given day, and school officials do not have a ready explanation, the school should contact the school nurse and the local public health department.