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March 6, 2020

Dear Orange County families:

The Orange County Department of Education and your local school district continue to monitor developments related to the novel coronavirus while working closely with our partner agencies, including the Orange County Health Care Agency, the California Department of Education and all 27 school districts in our county. This letter is intended to share what we know, how we're responding, and the process we are pursuing to promote the safety of all Orange County students and school employees.

WHAT WE KNOW

The novel coronavirus, or COVID-19, is a respiratory virus that was first identified in Wuhan City, China. It has since spread to other countries, including the United States. Cases have ranged from mild to severe, including illnesses that have resulted in death.

This week, the Orange County Health Care Agency held a conference call with local school officials to provide an update on the novel coronavirus and general guidance for Orange County campuses. So far, Orange County has one confirmed case of COVID-19 — a man in his 50s who has since recovered — and two "presumptive positive" cases are pending confirmation from the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The HCA said it is following up directly with all individuals who have had close contact.

County Health Officer Dr. Nichole Quick said that if any additional cases are found with a connection to an Orange County school, the Health Care Agency will immediately reach out to that school and district to provide guidance. The agency is not asking residents at this time to take social distancing measures, such as avoiding public gatherings, and schools should not exclude any students out of fear. According to the CDC, limited reporting data suggests that children in other countries with confirmed cases of COVID-19 generally get mild symptoms. Though severe complications have been reported, "they appear to be uncommon."

The latest school guidance from the CDC encourages school administrators to review and update their emergency plans in collaboration with local health departments and other partners. Plans should include strategies to reduce the spread of a wide variety of infectious diseases, such as seasonal influenza. Local health officials continue to emphasize common-sense steps to prevent the spread of respiratory illnesses. You have likely heard these many times before, but they're worth sharing again:

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Stay home when you are sick.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces using a regular household cleaning spray or wipe.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after going to the bathroom, before eating and after blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing. (If soap and water are not readily available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60 percent alcohol.)

WHAT WE'RE DOING

The Orange County Health Care Agency is not recommending the cancelation of school events or the temporary closing of schools. However, we remain on heightened alert and are working collaboratively with local health officials, your district and the California Department of Education, and we have a plan in place to guide our response to a potential outbreak or pandemic.

Developed jointly by OCDE and the Health Care Agency, the Pandemic Influenza School Planning Workbook was established to provide general guidance related to an influenza pandemic, but it is adaptable to the current COVID-19 threat. This 62-page document outlines roles, responsibilities and considerations to keep students and employees safe and to ensure the continuity of educational and operational services.

Communication will be absolutely critical in the weeks and months ahead. Since January, we have been providing regular updates to our schools, families and communities through our OCDE Newsroom blog at newsroom.ocde.us, and we will continue to do so. This site will share the latest guidance from local, state and federal health officials and other relevant information that may impact schools and families. We are also regularly distributing information and resources from expert agencies through our networks, which include district-level administrators and school communicators.

Finally, our OCDE staff is working diligently to provide guidance on how best to support teaching and learning if students are under self-quarantine or a school is closed. Though each school and district will have different needs, a number of distance-learning options are available, including online content and hard copy packets.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

The national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has urged communities, businesses, local governments and schools to prepare for the potential of additional COVID-19 cases in the United States. Similarly, California Governor Gavin Newsom declared a State of Emergency this week to make additional resources available, formalize emergency actions and help state agencies prepare for the broader spread of COVID-19.

Again, any decision to temporarily suspend school operations will be made by your local district in concert with the Orange County Health Care Agency. Should this occur, your district will notify its families immediately, but we will also share information through our regular communications channels, including the OCDE Newsroom and social media.

Finally, with spring break approaching, some families may have long-standing plans to travel outside the United States. We urge you to be extra vigilant and aware of the most recent guidance provided by the CDC, which has issued travel warnings for China, Iran, South Korea, Italy and Japan. You can find updated travel information at www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/index.html.

The safety and well-being of students and staff has always been the top priority of the Orange County Department of Education, which works year-round to bolster emergency preparedness plans in collaboration with your district and its leadership. This remains a rapidly evolving situation, and there is still a lot we still don't know, including how and when Orange County may be impacted. But our strong regional partnerships and proactive planning ensures we are in a state of readiness moving forward.

Thank you for all you do to keep our schools and students safe.

Sincerely,



Al Mijares, Ph.D.
Orange County Superintendent of Schools