

Schools prep for swine flu threat

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CHARLOTTE COUNTY: It's back to the books and a brand new year for students in Southwest Florida.

But one concern that's carrying over into the new school year is the threat of swine flu.

Just days away now, students will head back to schools in Charlotte County, and in Collier and Lee counties it's just weeks away.

All summer the school administrations along with their health departments have been mapping out plans to combat swine flu if it creeps up in the classroom.

Seats in Charlotte County Elementary School will soon be filled with young children sharing ideas, books and inevitably, germs. And the county says some cases of seasonal flu are already cropping up.

"It's unusual for us to have flu-like symptoms this early in the year," said Gail Buck, supervisor of health district services for Charlotte County Schools. "So we've had some cases we've been monitoring carefully."

The school district and the Charlotte County Health Department are working together, and for the first time this year the health department will offer a vaccination clinic in the fall.

The department received stimulus funds to offer 5,000 seasonal flu vaccines to kids in kindergarten through sixth grade.

"The difference between now and what's been doing in the past is that it was always looked at vaccinating the older population and adults, and now the school of thought is to vaccinate kids," said Steven Mitnick, an administrator with the Charlotte County Health Department.

While there still is no vaccine available for the H1N1 virus, Charlotte County Schools has plans in place if someone contracts swine flu.

The school health district advisor says the superintendent and health department will work together if schools need to be closed.

"The recommendation is really if it affects ability of the school to function--a high number of the staff, a high number of the students--then that collaboration takes place and then a decision will be made," Buck said.

In the meantime, parents and teachers are advised to follow some common sense rules.

"So again we're going with back to the good old basics with hand washing, staying home when you're sick, because you want to mitigate as much as possible, and cough and sneeze etiquette," Buck said.

In Charlotte County, parents will receive flyers on what they can do to protect their kids from the flu.

Teachers were told if they notice a child showing flu-like symptoms, they are to immediately send the child to the nurse's office and isolate themselves until the child's parent picks them up.

By [Kelly Creswell](#)