Dear Superintendent/Principal,

Cases of 2009 H1N1 (swine) influenza continue to occur in children attending schools across Mississippi. So far, the 2009 H1N1 influenza is similar in severity to the seasonal influenza that occurs in the winter and early spring each year, however the age groups affected are very different. With this new virus younger persons are at increased risk of infection. While most ill persons will recover, every year thousands of people die from the seasonal flu and already in the US, 60 children have died from this 2009 H1N1 influenza virus. Vaccination is the best prevention. Because of this, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has recommended that children and young adults aged 6 months through 24 years be vaccinated against 2009 H1N1 as soon as vaccine is available. In addition to people 6 months through 24 years of age, groups that are at higher risk of complications from infection, and are recommended to receive initial doses of 2009 H1N1 influenza vaccine:

- Pregnant women
- People who live with or care for children younger than 6 months of age
- Healthcare and emergency medical services personnel, and
- People 25 through 64 years of age who are at higher risk for complications of 2009 H1N1 infections because of certain health conditions, including: chronic pulmonary (including asthma), cardiovascular (except hypertension), renal, hepatic, hematological (including sickle cell disease), neurologic, neuromuscular, or metabolic disorders (including diabetes mellitus); and immunosuppression, including that caused by medications or by HIV.

Because of the increased risk of infection in younger persons, The Mississippi State Department of Health (MSDH) and The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) are developing plans for school-based vaccinations of all school aged children enrolled in public and private schools. Vaccinating children (and other indicated groups) at school can help meet the demand for convenient, timely vaccination while decreasing the burden on local health care providers who may be busy treating those infected with 2009 H1N1 and/or seasonal influenza.

MSDH staff from your local Public Health District will contact each of your schools to determine the best way to vaccinate the children in your school, and any staff at higher risk of complications. School-based vaccinations will be accomplished through one of two programs. In the first model, MSDH staff will work directly with school staff to set a date(s) for vaccination, determine the most appropriate location on the school campus, and administer the vaccine. As an alternative, MSDH is encouraging private providers throughout the state to “Adopt-a-School”. With this program, private providers agree to adopt your school, and will work directly with your school staff to arrange the school-based vaccinations, utilizing their clinic staff to administer the vaccine. With either program, there will be no fee to receive the vaccine.
Schools will be provided with information for the parents, including consent forms and vaccine information sheets prior to the vaccination dates. Only those students who have parental consent will be vaccinated.

The 2009 H1N1 influenza vaccine is being manufactured with the same process used for making seasonal influenza vaccine, which has a long record of safety. The school-based vaccinations are voluntary, but each school and school district is encouraged to participate to ensure that all school age children throughout the state have the opportunity to receive the 2009 H1N1 vaccine. Please contact your local Public health District Office if you have not yet discussed a vaccination plan for your school.

Sincerely,

Ed Thompson, MD, MPH
State Health Officer, MS

John W. Jordan, EdD
Interim State Superintendent of Schools, MS