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Governor Bullock Announces COVID-19 Outbreak Response Protocols for Schools

MONTANA – Governor Steve Bullock today announced outbreak response protocols to support K-12 schools as they respond to suspected or positive COVID-19 cases and take public health-based measures to minimize the spread and keep students safe and healthy.

“The Outbreak Response Protocols provides guidance requested by school nurses and other education advocates to ensure K-12 schools are responding to COVID-19 consistently and taking measures backed by science,” Governor Bullock said. **“By following these protocols in consultation with local public health, our schools can properly quarantine, recommend testing, and take other measures to minimize the spread and keeps kids healthy while preserving in person learning for the students and families who depend on it.”**

Governor Bullock brought together a group of public health experts to develop the Outbreak Response Protocols after school nurses and education advocates requested guidance. The document is based on an outbreak response plan put together by Rhode Island and includes best practices from the CDC and other expert groups to provide high level guidance for schools as they work with their local public health agency to respond to suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19.

The response protocols include information on COVID-19 symptoms, when to call for emergency care, determining close contacts, when to quarantine, isolate, and recommend testing, and when to allow students and staff to return to school. The document also includes information on when to involve local public health, how to screen symptomatic students and staff to determine if testing or isolation is appropriate, and guidance on athletics and extracurricular activities.

Many schools, especially those without school nurses, have requested information from public health on when individuals should be quarantined or isolated, testing protocols, and when they can return to school. The document includes different protocols for a case with symptoms that are not suspected to be COVID-19, suspected COVID-19 cases, confirmed COVID-19 cases, and close contacts. For example, if a student or staff member has COVID-19 related symptoms, the protocol includes sending the individual home to isolate, recommending testing, and a requirement to get a test or recover before returning to school.

For students in athletics and extracurriculars, the guidance recommends hand sanitizing, wearing face coverings when appropriate, and prioritizing activities where physical distancing can be maintained. Other recommendations include minimizing travel, keeping practices or events small, and sanitizing equipment and frequently touched surfaces. Based on national guidelines, an athlete who tests positive should be cleared by a healthcare provider before resuming participation. Schools should have plans in place for isolation, treatment, and appropriate transportation for a visiting traveling athlete, extracurricular activity participant, or staff who develops COVID-19 symptoms.

The guidance has been distributed to public health officials, schools, and education advocates. The full plan can be read here:

<https://covid19.mt.gov/Portals/223/Outbreak%20Response%20Protocols%20K-12.pdf>