

Swine flu cases confirmed at Catholic schools in New York, California

WASHINGTON - Confirmed cases of swine flu caused two Catholic schools to close for one week in New York and California while fears of possible outbreaks closed two Catholic schools in California for a day until the reported student and faculty illnesses were determined not to be the virus.

Two New York Catholic schools also closed for precautionary measures for two days and another Catholic school in New York, where students have reported flulike symptoms, is being closely monitored.

At the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, one confirmed case of swine flu was reported. Classes were not canceled at the university and the student, who sought treatment April 22, has since recovered.

Eight Notre Dame students who were studying in Mexico this semester will return to the United States by May 1. Due to the swine flu epidemic, the Mexican government canceled classes in all schools and universities until May 6, which was to be the last day of classes.

At least 74 schools have closed across the U.S. because of confirmed or probable cases of swine flu and 30 more have closed as a precautionary measure, according to figures released April 29 by the U.S. Department of Education. Some schools that closed as a precautionary measure have already reopened.

President Barack Obama recommended April 29 that schools in the United States with confirmed or suspected cases of the disease “strongly consider temporarily closing.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there were 109 confirmed cases of swine flu in the United States April 30, primarily in New York, Texas and California, but also in Massachusetts, Michigan, Arizona, Nevada,

Indiana, Kansas, South Carolina and Ohio.

Catholic schools that closed April 27-May 1 included St. Francis Preparatory School in New York and St. Mel School in Fair Oaks, Calif., near Sacramento. At St. Francis, in the borough of Queens, 28 students tested positive for swine flu and 45 confirmed cases of the flu were linked to the school community April 28. At St. Mel's, three students were confirmed to have the virus.

At St. Francis, officials believed the flu spread quickly through the 2,700-member student body. Officials had not pinpointed the exact point of the outbreak, but some speculated that it originated from a group of seniors who recently returned from a spring-break trip to Cancun, Mexico.

During an April 27 press conference at New York's City Hall, Mayor Michael Bloomberg stressed that the St. Francis outbreak was the only cluster of swine flu in the city and the infected students, many of whom were taking antiviral medication, were improving. The strain appeared to be a milder version of the swine flu epidemic that broke out in Mexico.

The outbreak at the Franciscan-founded school began April 24 when dozens of students reported flulike symptoms at the nurse's office. When the school closed, the interior was scoured clean by a 70-person cleaning crew that worked the weekend of April 25-26 cleaning "every desk, every classroom, every lab and any place a germ could be," according to the school's chaplain, Father Bill Sweeney, a priest of the Diocese of Brooklyn.

An announcement on the school Web site said that SAT tests scheduled for April 25 had been postponed and students were expected to keep up with schoolwork posted online until the school reopened May 4.

To prevent further spread of the virus, schools in the Diocese of Brooklyn have been asked to promote and reinforce good health habits. The diocesan Catholic Schools Office circulated e-mails April 27 asking elementary and high school principals to encourage frequent hand-washing and to direct students with flulike symptoms to stay home.

Brooklyn Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio expressed his concern and offered prayers for the students of St. Francis and said in a statement that he was “proud of the swift action” of the school’s principal, Franciscan Brother Leonard Conway, who along with other school administrators acted quickly to enable city officials to “avert a potentially catastrophic outbreak of this deadly flu virus.”

Ascension School in Manhattan had reported several students with flulike symptoms but there have been no confirmed cases of swine flu. An April 28 press release from the New York Archdiocese said Catholic schools would be following New York City Health Department protocols for school closures and would close if a student was confirmed to have the swine flu or if there was a cluster of related cases in the school vicinity.

Three Catholic schools in Brooklyn – St. Brigid’s, Good Shepherd and Bishop Kearney High School – closed April 30 and May 1 as precautionary measures since some of their students may have had contact with victims of the virus. During the closures, school officials announced that the school buildings would be completely cleaned.

Sister Thomasine Stagnitta, a Sister of St. Joseph and principal of the girls school, Bishop Kearney, advised students on the school Web site to use the time off to “catch up on schoolwork and not be visiting friends.”

In California, one of the three students with swine flu at St. Mel School had been to Mexico during Easter vacation with his family. The first case at the school was reported April 27.

The health scare brought the St. Mel community closer, according to Father George Snyder, associate pastor of St. Mel Church.

He told the Sacramento Bee, daily newspaper, that the parish “received a tremendous amount of phone calls and support” for the students.

The priest spent several hours cleaning the church prior to an April 28 daily Mass because he didn’t want people to be afraid to come to church. Instead of fewer people in the congregation, he said there were more than usual.

The California Catholic schools that closed for a day as a precaution against swine flu were Christ the Cornerstone Academy in San Diego and Our Lady of the Assumption School in Claremont, just outside Los Angeles. Christ the Cornerstone closed early April 28 after six teachers became ill. But by late afternoon, the school was cleared to reopen after the teachers tested negative for the virus.

Assumption School also closed April 28 after a student who had recently returned from Mexico reported flulike symptoms. The Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles confirmed that the student tested negative for swine flu and the school was thoroughly cleaned before reopening April 29.