News



A worker pulls a garbage bin while wearing a mask at the Life Care Center of Kirkland, Wash., where two of three confirmed coronavirus cases in the state had links to the long-term care facility in Kirkland March 1, 2020. (CNS/Reuters/David Ryder)



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While school systems around the country are discussing what to do in response to the coronavirus, St. Raphael Academy in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, had to put its plans into immediate action when a member of the school community tested "presumptive positive" for a strain of coronavirus after participating in a recent school trip to Italy.

The Catholic high school building was initially closed March 2-3 for sanitizing, but the school later extended this closure for the entire week, announcing on its website that "students will be instructed at home through virtual learning." All after-school activities and sports practices also have been canceled.

On March 1, a man in his 40s who was on the February school trip and has not been identified as a member of the school's faculty or a chaperone, was the first Rhode Islander said to have a strain of the virus.

The man, who has not been at the school since returning from the trip, is currently hospitalized. By the end of the day March 1, a student from the school, who also was on the trip, was similarly diagnosed, and by March 2, health officials said a third person, a woman in her 30s who likewise was on the trip, is undergoing tests for the coronavirus.

The state health department announced March 2 the teenager and woman are both at home with mild symptoms.

The school's website announcement said it has been in "close contact with the R.I. Department of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention," and following their directive, students and chaperones who were on the recent trip to Europe will be out of school until March 9 on self-quarantine and self-monitoring with

supervision from the state health department.

Closure of the school building was not directed by the state or CDC, the school said, but is occurring "out of an abundance of caution."

Bishop Thomas J. Tobin of Providence tweeted March 1 that he was "very sorry to learn that a member of the St. Raphael Academy community has tested positive for the coronavirus. I extend my prayers and blessings to the individual involved and to all the members of the St. Ray's family. May God grant us healing, comfort and peace."

He also commended and thanked the Rhode Island Department of Health and the leadership of St. Raphael Academy and the diocesan Catholic Schools Office "for their prompt and prudent response to this situation. In these challenging times it's important that we all stand and work together," he tweeted.

A statement by the state's Department of Health said that all 38 people who were on the school trip will be monitored for the next 14 days.

"All three people went on the same trip to Italy," said Dr. Nichole Alexander-Scott, the state's director of health. "This is precisely why we are being so aggressive in identifying contacts, ensuring monitoring and testing people who are symptomatic."

Letters from school district officials and individual school leaders have been sent home in recent days assuring parents that current exposure to the coronavirus is low and that students should use similar precautions as they do in the flu season with frequent hand washings and staying home when they don't feel well.

Lincoln Snyder, superintendent of Catholic schools in the Diocese of Sacramento, California, wrote to parents Feb. 27 "out of an abundance of caution," saying he didn't have reason to believe the coronavirus is "an immediate threat to our schools." But he pointed out that Sacramento County Public Health officials have confirmed the first travel-related case of coronavirus involving a Sacramento resident.

"Like all area schools, we are in regular contact with Sacramento County Public Health officials, who assure the community that there is no need to change daily routines in any way. We, of course, understand that with the strong media coverage, anxieties are heightened, and our families and staff may have questions. According

to public health officials, students and staff should continue their normal routines and take the same precautions they would during cold and flu season," he wrote.

Theresa Kirk, principal of St Mary of the Assumption School in Brookline, Massachusetts, wrote to families of the elementary school's students reminding them if they take part in international travel, they should follow the CDC guidelines of a 14-day self-quarantine when they return.

"We have had very few cases of flu and our children and staff seem healthy. Let's keep up the great work!" she wrote.

When asked about the possibility of closing U.S. schools because of the virus, U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar told reporters in a Feb. 28 news conference that "every option needs to be on the table."

"There is a whole continuum of mitigation steps that one can do in the event of an epidemic, an outbreak or eventually if there were ever a pandemic situation," he added.

In the meantime, schools are employing hand sanitizers in classrooms and school buses, and urging students to follow basic steps: primarily staying home when they don't feel well.

Some school officials are making plans to provide online teaching but not all schools have that capability.

Francisco Negron, chief legal officer for the National School Boards Association, told The Associated Press that if schools are forced to close for long periods, it could impact students who rely on school meals and parents who use their schools' child care programs.

He also said his group is asking school districts to reconsider attendance awards sometimes given to students who don't miss a day of class for an entire year or semester.

"School districts may want to revisit what it means to have perfect attendance," Negron said. "We certainly wouldn't want sick kids to come to school just because their parents are shooting for that perfect attendance award."

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