

# TAKE YOUR BEST SHOT

Flu vaccinations can prevent serious illnesses, but many employees still forgo them

*Marie A. de Perio, Douglas M. Wiegand, Scott E. Brueck, and Juliann C. Scholl*

You're most likely thinking about summer school or vacation plans right now and not about the upcoming flu season.

In fact, this is a good time to plan on how to best protect your employees, students, their families, and your community from the potentially serious respiratory illness.

Each year, more than 200,000 people in the U.S. are admitted to hospitals for flu-related ailments, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Seasonal flu cases usually peak during the fall or winter.

The flu causes about 70 million lost days from work and costs \$6.2 billion in lost productivity each year. Conditions in schools can worsen large flu outbreaks. Many employees and students are in close contact daily, and they go out into the community, with the chance to spread the illness to family members, friends, neighbors, and others.

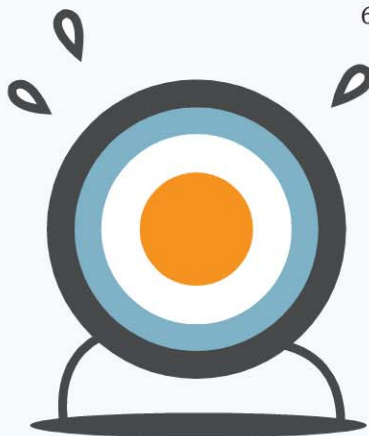
The flu is caused by viruses that get into your nose, throat, and lungs. They spread through tiny droplets that spray out when

you talk, sneeze, or cough. These droplets land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby. Sometimes, a person can get the flu by touching a surface or object that contains the flu virus and then touching their mouth, eyes, or nose.

Coughing, fever, body aches, stuffy or runny nose, chills, fatigue, and headaches are common flu symptoms. Though most flu cases are mild, others can be severe, even causing death. Most flu cases only last several days, but some can lead to more serious medical conditions such as dehydration, ear and sinus infections, or pneumonia.

Children younger than 5, adults older than 65, and pregnant women are at higher risk for flu-related complications. The flu also can be more severe for people who have weakened immune systems or chronic diseases like asthma, heart disease, or diabetes.

About 55 million students and 7 million teachers and staff attend more than 130,000 schools each day in the U.S. Flu vaccinations for this group could help to protect one in five U.S. residents.



# Vaccines are the best defense

Flu vaccines are the best way to prevent the flu and flu-related illnesses. The CDC recommends annual flu vaccination for nearly everyone age 6 months or older.

During the 2012–13 flu season, vaccines kept 79,000 people out of hospitals, according to CDC estimates. They prevented 6.6 million flu cases and 3.2 million cases that required serious medical attention. Vaccines are

typically delivered by injection or nasal spray. Injectable vaccines (the flu shot) contain dead, inactive viruses that don't cause the flu.

The most common side effect of a flu shot is soreness at the injection site. Rare side effects include fever, muscle pain, and discomfort. Unlike the flu shot, nasal spray vaccines have live viruses. However, those viruses are weakened and cannot cause illness. Nasal vaccine side effects can include runny nose, fever, nasal congestion, and sore throat. These symptoms are usually mild and don't last long.

Despite research showing that flu vaccines work, fewer than half of those age 6 months or older received the vaccine in the 2012-13 flu season.

## 6.6 million

flu cases were prevented during the 2012-13 flu season because of vaccines



## Employee attitudes

A school district in the suburbs of a large Ohio city asked scientists at CDC's National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) to study school employee attitudes and actions with flu vaccines. This district

offered onsite flu vaccine to its employees at the district administrative office. The evaluation included 412 school employees, or about 49 percent of district employees.

Researchers looked at how many employees received vaccines during the 2012–13 flu season. They studied why district employees decided to get or forgo the vaccine, and what

they knew or thought about the flu and the vaccine.

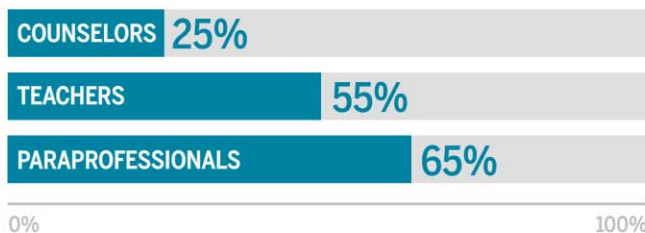
Only 58 percent of school district employees received vaccines. The most common places that employees got the vaccine were the school district's office (58 percent), a doctor's office (15 percent), and a pharmacy (15 percent).

Most employees (68 percent) received the vaccine by

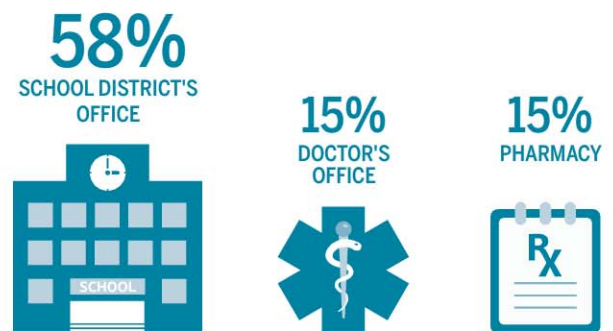
November. Vaccination rates of the different occupational groups ranged from 25 percent for counselors and therapists to 83 percent for food services workers. About 55 percent of teachers and 65 percent of aides and paraprofessionals got the vaccine. Employees age 50 and older (68 percent) were more likely than younger employees (51 percent) to get the vaccine.

**58%** of district employees received vaccines

### Vaccination rate by occupation



### Where employees received the vaccine



## Knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs

Besides measuring vaccination rates, the Ohio study also uncovered the attitudes and beliefs employees had about the flu vaccine. **Nearly all employees in the study (99 percent) believed that teachers, staff, and children can spread the flu.**

Most employees also believed the flu is a serious infection (96 percent) and vaccines can help prevent the flu (72 percent). Interestingly, most employees (59 percent) also believed the flu vaccine would make them sick.

Employees with positive attitudes and perceptions about flu vaccines were more likely to get vaccinated. **The most common reason for getting the vaccine was to protect oneself or one's family (87 percent).** Other reasons included social pressure from others (5 percent) and a doctor's recommendation (4 percent).

Employees who reported not getting the vaccine were asked to identify the main reason for not receiving it. The most common reason was not seeing a need for it (32 percent). Some employees didn't believe that vaccines work (21 percent), and some said they didn't have time to get vaccinated (17 percent). **Still others believed the flu vaccine was unsafe (11 percent).**

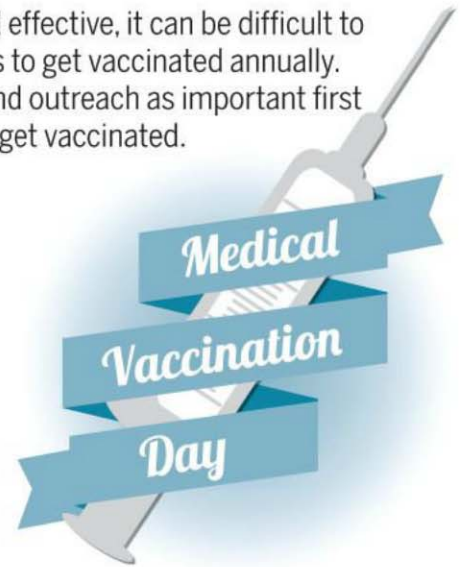
## Encouraging vaccinations

Though the flu vaccine is safe and effective, it can be difficult to convince some district employees to get vaccinated annually. School leaders can use training and outreach as important first steps to encourage employees to get vaccinated.

**Train:** You can provide district employees with training about the flu and the benefits, safety, and effectiveness of the flu vaccine. Messages should emphasize that vaccines reduce the chance of getting the flu, spreading the flu to others, and missing time from work. Getting more employees vaccinated requires strong and persuasive educational efforts. Tap into what matters most to employees, such as self-protection. A good message might be, "Protect yourself, your family, and your students from the flu by getting vaccinated."

**Educate:** Flu vaccine education doesn't always have to be formal. You can raise awareness by having schools give information about the flu and the vaccine annually in the fall. Schools can send email messages and display posters as part of a long-term effort to inform staff, parents, and students. This information should come from credible and well-known sources like the CDC and the state or local health department.

**Promote:** School districts can take other actions to promote flu vaccines, such as creating incentives and awarding prizes for team or school vaccination challenges. District leaders can work with local medical providers or health department personnel to offer the vaccine to employees at each school. This makes getting the vaccine every year more convenient, and it may even reduce costs.



**Organize:** It's also a good idea to start a committee that includes members of the administration, teachers association, union, and parent groups. This committee could find creative and cost-effective ways to bring a vaccination program to the school district.

**Personalize:** Finally, school administrators should encourage employees to take care of themselves if they get the flu. Advise employees to stay home when they are sick, and to watch for symptoms such as sore throat, fever, and cough. If employees worry about missing work, administrators should review policies on sick leave to ensure that sick employees are able to stay away from work when they are ill.

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## Where the Health Are We?

Seeking solutions to childhood obesity



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spotlight:**

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and exercise

# august 2014



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## President's Corner

Anne M. Byrne

# School nutrition: A prescription for success



**IT'S COMMON SENSE** that students need healthy meals and good nutrition to learn and thrive in school. School boards across the country know the importance

of a healthy school meal, particularly for the many students who may not get good nutrition at home.

As a registered nurse, I have studied the impact of nutrition on brain development and learning in the early years. Without a balance of specific nutrients during this critical period, a child's cognitive and motor development may be impaired. These are irreversible effects. Good nutrition has only become more paramount as this research continues to evolve.

The increasing number of children who

come from food-insecure homes—those that do not have a steady and dependable supply of healthy foods—are much more likely to have health issues and problems in cognitive, language, and behavioral development that directly impact their learning. Ironically, because these families rely on cheaper, less-nutritious foods, these children are more likely to be obese.

Schools must play a role in ensuring students are ready to learn and succeed. For decades, we have relied on the school breakfast and lunch programs to provide substantial meals for our disadvantaged students. More recently, school leaders across the nation have led local initiatives to provide healthy meals to students and their families, such as school gardens, nutrition education, and initiatives to increase physical education and exercise throughout the day.

Making federal policies around nutri-

tion, though, has proven to be more difficult. At NSBA, we have supported first lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move/Active Schools campaign, but more recently have found ourselves at odds with the Obama administration's rulemaking for the Healthy, Hunger-Free Schools Act. Unfortunately, these overly rigid mandates have led to higher costs for school districts and unintended consequences such as wasted food or reduced participation in the school meal program. This undermines the good efforts of school district leaders who want to ensure that their students are healthy and ready to learn.

NSBA is asking Congress for leeway with some of the most prescriptive mandates so that school boards and their districts' school food service professionals can focus on serving healthy foods that students will enjoy.

To meet our shared goals, let's focus on commonsense regulations that will serve children well.

**Anne M. Byrne is NSBA's 2014-15 president and a member of New York's Nanuet School Board.**

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