



Flu-like illnesses close St. Charles East High

By James Fuller | Daily Herald Staff

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St. Charles East High School was closed Tuesday for the rest of the week after more than 40 percent of the student population called in sick reporting flu-like symptoms.

The school will be closed through at least Friday as the loss of 911 students from classrooms began to make some of the normal school operations impossible. The absences follow homecoming activities last weekend.

Superintendent Don Schlomann said the district first began seeing a high rate of absences on Monday when about 30 percent of the 2,200 students at the school called in sick. About 27 staff members joined them on the sick roster.

Only 11 staff members called in sick on Tuesday, but the student absences ballooned to 911 as of about 2 p.m. Even as Schlomann spoke of the outbreak, more parents drove through the parking lot picking up students leaving school early.

Schlomann said there's no evidence of how much of a role the H1N1 virus is playing in the absences. The district is unaware of any students testing positive for the H1N1 virus, nor any students who have actually been tested for the virus. Schlomann said he suspects the outbreak is attributable to a combination of H1N1, the regular seasonal flu and other cold-weather illnesses.

Freshman Amanda Mueller was one of the students headed home about that time. She said classes and teachers were having difficulty functioning with some classes, such as her math class, missing half the students that would normally occupy desks.

Asked what she planned to do in light of all the illness around her, Mueller said her game plan involved just one thing.

"Sleep," she said.

At that point in the day, the district was still struggling with the idea of when to close the school. Schlomann said neither the Kane County Health Department nor the Kane County Regional Office of Education had any guidelines about how many absences should trigger a school to close.

"Some parents are calling us and saying, 'Why don't you close schools?' " Schlomann said. "Well, even if we closed schools, when would we open them again? There's no clear indication as to, OK, it's all clear now. This virus is present in the community. It will probably be present all winter."

Later, district staff members met with staff members at the high school and decided to shutter the building for the rest of the week. All extracurricular activities scheduled for Tuesday continued as scheduled. All extracurricular activities for the rest of the week have been postponed.

That includes the fall play, the St. Charles East vs. St. Charles North football game and the Kick-a-Thon. The district will announce makeup dates as the impact of the illness outbreak becomes more clear.

All other District 303 schools will remain open as no other schools are experiencing higher than normal absentee rates.

Schlomann said it's possible the outbreak has struck only St. Charles East because it is the only school in the district that had homecoming activities in the past few days.

"You would think there might be some connection in regard to that," Schlomann said. "We had a lot of students very close together for a long period of time for football games and dances and other things like that."