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CONTACT: Hilary McLean
PHONE: 916-319-0818
E-MAIL: hmclean@cde.ca.gov

State Schools Chief Jack O'Connell Holds Teleconference With Educators On H1N1 Virus

SACRAMENTO – State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell held a conference call briefing today with local educational agencies (LEAs) from across California regarding the H1N1 virus. O'Connell discussed school closures, the extension of state testing deadlines, and precautionary measures schools and districts should take to guard against the spread of the H1N1 virus.

The following is the text of O'Connell's prepared remarks:

"I would like to thank everyone for joining us this morning during what I know is an exceptionally unsettling time for our local educational agencies.

"As most of you are aware this week we have begun to see a number of schools in California that have been ordered to send students home because of the H1N1 flu outbreaks. We are following the recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and the California Department of Public Health, which were just updated today to recommend that if there is a confirmed case or strongly suspected case of the H1N1 flu, a public health officer should order that the school dismiss students for 14 days from the last known case. The CDC had previously recommended student dismissal for a period of one week. Please note that I said students are to be dismissed. Teaching staff and school administrators can still come to work, and we encourage our schools to provide for the continuity of education services for students at home, either through distance learning, Web-based instruction or learning packets that parents can pick up.

"My department is working to develop an easy reporting process that affected schools and districts can use to alert us about new orders of student dismissal. I expect this system to be up and running shortly, and I will keep you updated on the progress.

"Another matter that I would like to touch on is testing. We have received a lot of questions about how the flu outbreaks and school closures would affect STAR and

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CAHSEE testing deadlines. I will be requesting that through his emergency power authority the Governor grant my office the authority to extend or modify the testing administration and release dates as needed. My staff has also been communicating with our testing contractors and vendors to talk about any necessary accommodations needed for affected schools. We are also in touch with the U.S. Department of Education regarding the potential need for flexibility on accountability requirements – like participation rates and reporting schedules.

“We have updated the CDE flu Web pages with this information and will continue to do so as this situation continues to evolve.

CDE Web site: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/el/le/yr09ltr0429h1n1.asp>

CDE Web site: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/fluinfo.asp>

“I would also like to stress that our school communities play an important role in mitigating the spread of this virus, and there are some very simple precautionary steps they can take prevent the spread of H1N1: students and staff should stay home if they are sick; everyone should always cover their coughs and sneezes with a tissue or by covering with your arm; and students and school staff should frequently wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water; or use alcohol- based hand sanitizer.

“I have also heard that some of our schools do not currently have soap for student use. During this public health emergency I strongly urge school leaders to make sure that soap or alcohol-based hand sanitizers are consistently and easily available to your students.

“I can’t stress the importance of these measures enough to protect the health of our students and our school staff. The education community certainly has an obligation to ensure that these precautions are being taken seriously on our campuses.”

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As of 2:00 p.m. Friday, May 1, the following schools have issued student dismissal orders: Highlands Elementary in Pittsburg (Pittsburg Unified School District, Contra Costa County); Branham High in San Jose (Campbell Union High School District, Santa Clara County); *Rucker Elementary in Gilroy (Gilroy Unified School District, Santa Clara County);

Charles Blackstock Junior High in Oxnard (Hueneme School District, Ventura County); Haycox Elementary in Oxnard (Hueneme School District, Ventura County); Indio High School in Indio (Desert Sands Unified School District, Riverside County); Lee V. Pollard High in Corona (Corona-Norco Unified School District, Riverside County); Mission Bell Elementary in Riverside (Jurupa Unified School District, Riverside County); Della Lindley Elementary Thousand Palms (Palm Springs Unified School District, Riverside County); Cole Elementary in Highland (San Bernardino City Unified School District, San Bernardino County); Mountain View Elementary in Visalia (Visalia Unified School District, Tulare County); and Bahia Vista Elementary (San Rafael City Schools, Marin County).

*Rucker Elementary is expected to reopen Monday after school officials said they'd been notified that none of the students tested positive for swine flu.