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COMPTROLLER

May 19, 2009

The Honorable Michael R. Bloomberg
Mayor
City Hall
New York, New York 10007

Dear Mayor Bloomberg:

I write to express my concern about the City's response to the H1N1 virus circulating through our schools.

Although we must not create undue concern as our City confronts an evolving public health issue, I am troubled by the City's failure to effectively balance that goal with the public's right to know about the spread of the virus in a timely manner and the means by which it is making decisions about whether schools should be closed.

It is clear from many published reports that the City had chosen to keep individual schools open despite dozens of children contracting the virus. By failing to share this information, the City denied parents the ability to make informed decisions about when it would be advisable to keep their children home as a precautionary measure. Instead, unsubstantiated rumors and incomplete information have created unnecessary worry and anxiety among the system's one million children, their parents, guardians, and school employees.

The recent death at IS 238, and the decision to keep the school open for three days after a confirmed case of H1N1--against the wishes of the school's leadership--has understandably stirred feelings of doubt about whether your Administration's desire to preserve a sense of normalcy was placed ahead of the safety of the immediate school community. The decision to close three schools on Friday, and multiple others since then--in the wake of mounting public pressure from various stakeholders--has further fueled questions as to whether the City waited too long to respond to evidence that the virus continued to circulate rapidly.

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Indeed, I am mindful of the City's Pandemic Influenza Preparedness and Response Plan that was created in 2006 in response to the avian flu and question whether consideration was given to activating this protocol as a result of the current health event. I note that at that time, New Yorkers were assured that they would be kept fully apprised with accurate, up-to-date information. Unfortunately, that has not been the reality thus far.

Because the Center for Disease Control does not have a clear protocol for school-based health issues such as the one now confronting our City, and has left decisions to local discretion, it is imperative that your Administration provide up-to-date information and clearly identify its response plans.

I urge the City to immediately take the following steps:

- Release and broadly distribute the detailed protocol being used to determine when a school should be closed, the scientific basis for the selected protocol, and the identity of the individual ultimately responsible for making the closure decision;
- Provide real-time public data reporting of all school absences;
- Issue a plan that details how decisions regarding school closures will be handled in the fall when the virus may resurface; and
- Identify what additional capacity is being made available at emergency rooms throughout the City, and particularly pediatric emergency rooms in Queens, to address the surge in demand, especially in light of the recent closures of Mary Immaculate Hospital and St. John's Hospital.

At this point, the H1N1 virus is mild when compared to the seasonal flu. The City must, however, reassure City residents that it is fully prepared should this newest virus return in a more dangerous form.

This reassurance can be achieved only through a transparent and well publicized process.

Very truly yours,



William C. Thompson, Jr.