

Amid Ebola cases, Texas schools clean classrooms, fight rumors

By Fort Worth Star-Telegram, adapted by Newsela staff

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A Dallas Independent School District bus departs L.L. Hotchkiss Elementary after dropping off students, Thursday, Oct. 2, 2014, in Dallas.

FORTH WORTH, Texas—North Texas school districts continued their assault on the Ebola virus Friday. Workers disinfected campuses, and administrators kept tabs on absences and took on the rumor mill.

In the two weeks since Thomas Eric Duncan became the first person in the United States to be diagnosed with Ebola—infecting two nurses caring for him before he died in Dallas on Oct. 8—fears about the deadly virus have found their way into schools in the Dallas area.

Some of the concerns are warranted; others are largely unfounded.

Attendance at Lake Pointe Elementary in the Eagle-Mountain Saginaw school district dropped significantly after parents were notified Wednesday night that a student had been placed in voluntary isolation. The student's father is a Marine stationed at Naval Air Station Fort Worth. He was on a Frontier Airlines flight with infected health care worker Amber Joy Vinson.

“Not Sure What To Believe”

“It is the first time it really got real for our community, because it brought Ebola from Dallas right into our school community,” said Kristin Courtney, director of communications for the school district in northwest Tarrant County. “And our community needed some time to process the information.”

Absenteeism at Lake Pointe Elementary soared to 40 percent on Thursday, Courtney said, and 28 percent of students were absent again on Friday. Normally, Courtney said the district average is about 4 percent of students absent on any given day.

The school district did not close any campuses, but did extra cleanings Wednesday night and again Thursday morning. The school district already does regular cleanings that use hospital-grade disinfectants, Courtney said.

“What I have heard is not so much people mistrusting us, but they are just not sure what to believe, so they needed time to work through the information and see how it would affect them,” Courtney said.

Roland Kennedy, the father of a 7-year-old at the elementary school, said it was difficult to send his son to school. Lake Pointe’s communication with parents and cleaning efforts played a role in his decision.

“It reassured me that that it is OK, that he can go back to school,” Kennedy said. “And if he did come into contact with that student, the damage is done. I hope they do keep us informed, keep up with the phone calls and notices, because communication is key in this.”

Don’t Overreact, Judge Says

Chelsea Salas, the mother of a first-grader, said she and her husband made the decision to send their daughter to school.

“I just got real nervous. I couldn’t sleep. I kept worrying about if we should keep her home,” Salas said.

The district is developing a specialized education plan for the isolated student, Courtney said. The plan will use technology and interactive programs to help the student complete schoolwork and not fall behind.

Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins on Friday urged North Texans not to overreact to the threat of Ebola, especially in the case of schoolchildren.

He said he was disappointed to learn of schools closing in various parts of Texas, where children and parents of children had possible contact with someone infected with Ebola.

He said some workers at Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital Dallas told him that their children were being advised to stay away from day care facilities.

“These hometown heroes are in a difficult situation, dealing with their children being discriminated against in day care and school,” Jenkins said. “It’s not representative of North Texas and American values.”

The Fight Against Ebola

“Anyone doing it should apologize to those families and show their children love and laughter,” Jenkins said.

Jenkins defended those who have been on the front line in the fight against Ebola, and since Day One has been working to educate the public about the virus.

Workers who do not have symptoms have “zero” chance of spreading Ebola, Jenkins said.

In the Highland Park school district in Dallas, Superintendent Dawson Orr posted a message Friday on its website. He explained that all campuses would be cleaned over the weekend and that the custodial staff will step up cleaning during the school day.

The district also explains how its nursing staff has been trained to spot symptoms of Ebola, and what steps would be taken in the event of a case being suspected.

And in a proactive approach, the district has a section on its website called “Help with rumor control,” in which it addresses such situations. It gives the example of questions they received about an elementary school student and his mother being on the same Frontier Airlines flight with Vinson.

Keeping Parents Informed

The Fort Worth school district is also trying to dispel rumors, said Clint Bond, director of communication for the district. The district had not even had any reported exposure to Ebola.

As precautions, Bond said, they have re-emphasized infectious disease protocols with school nurses. They also have talked with the Dallas school district on their experiences and “lessons learned.”

The district has also put up information on the website. In a release called “Know the Plan,” the district outlines its questioning method for possible exposures.

Other area districts stepped up their cleaning efforts.

In Burleson, a parent of a student at Centennial High School was confirmed to have been on the flight with Vinson from Cleveland to Dallas, prompting school district officials to begin a “high-level” disinfecting of the school, beginning Friday night. The school was not closed.

The Grapevine-Colleyville school district deep-cleaned two campuses overnight and were open as usual Friday morning after notifying parents late Thursday that three of its students were on round-trip flights between Cleveland and Dallas with Vinson. The district also confirmed that one of its employees was on the same flight with Vinson last Friday, from Dallas/Fort Worth to Cleveland.