



Westmoreland, Fayette schools on alert for staph

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Dennis Spinella's daughter teaches in a Virginia school district near Staunton River High School, where an antibiotic-resistant staph infection killed a 17-year-old student earlier this month.

"The word spread like wildfire down there," said Spinella, superintendent of Frazier School District in Perryopolis, Fayette County. So even though no cases of methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* bacteria have been diagnosed in Frazier, Spinella has taken preventive steps, from e-mailing information on MRSA to administrators and teachers to adding hand sanitizers to its two elementary schools.

"We expect the kids to use those," he said. In Westmoreland County, Penn-Trafford, Norwin, Hempfield Area, Monessen and Mt. Pleasant Area schools have reported MRSA cases.

In Fayette, the infection has been found in Albert Gallatin, Laurel Highlands and Connellsville Area schools. Districts are taking numerous steps to stop the spread of the infection, which state health officials said is typically seen in the fall when students are back in school.

"It's difficult for us to say there are more cases because it's not a reportable infection," said Pennsylvania Health Department spokeswoman Stacy Kriedeman. "It's been around, but I think there's a much greater awareness of it now." On Friday, that awareness grew with news reports that a middle school student from Brooklyn, N.Y., died of MRSA.

MRSA is spread by skin-to-skin contact, and is commonly seen among sports teams, in schools, prisons and military facilities, according to the health department. MRSA does not respond to normal antibiotics. Commonly found on the skin and in the noses of healthy people, it usually does no harm. When it invades the body, it can lead to skin infections, pneumonia, bone infections, severe fever and death.

Earlier this week, MRSA cases were confirmed at schools in Mt. Pleasant, Albert Gallatin and Connellsville. Mt. Pleasant Superintendent Frank Watson said confirmation came Tuesday that a student at Donegal Elementary School had contracted MRSA.

The school was "thoroughly cleaned" and hand sanitizers are being delivered. "We do have a few that are in, for example, our field house," Watson said. "But we will be installing those in more highly populated areas, cafeterias and libraries, in all the schools in the district."

On Thursday, Albert Gallatin officials confirmed one case of MRSA at the high school. But even before the diagnosis, they had sent a letter to parents.

"We took a proactive approach, telling parents what it is, how it's spread, recommendations to follow," said administrator Denise Martin.

A second letter was sent home informing parents of the diagnosis.

In addition to the hand sanitizers added at Frazier, district officials held a workshop for younger students without mentioning MRSA by name.

"We just called it getting rid of germs," Spinella said.

Maintenance staff is using a disinfectant that a manufacturer claims kills MRSA.

Sanitizers were installed in the middle and high school locker rooms, shower areas and weight rooms of the middle and high schools.

"We had the coaches speak to all players of all sports teams about MRSA," he said.

At Greater Latrobe, even a traditional staph infection was reported in an Oct. 17 letter to parents.

The letter emphasized that the student at the senior high school was not diagnosed with MRSA as a way to quell rumors and concerns.

Principal Georgia Teppert said locker rooms and the athletic training facility were disinfected to prevent the spread of any infection.

The emphasis on cleaning is high for area schools.

When two Laurel Highlands students tested positive for MRSA, the high school was scrubbed with a cleaner that kills bacteria that causes staph infections.

In Hempfield, two cases of MRSA have caused officials to reinforce regular hand washing, particularly among athletes, Superintendent Terry Foriska said.

Foriska said the district uses a fogging method of dispersing disinfectant in locker and training rooms to penetrate crevices. Additional antibacterial soap dispensers will be placed in locker rooms.

All three Norwin students who contracted MRSA are back in school. The students attend classes at two elementary schools and the high school, Superintendent John Boylan said.

Boylan said the custodial staff has for two years used a hospital-grade disinfectant to clean locker rooms, showers, restrooms and student desks. Antibacterial hand soaps are available in all schools. Wrestling mats and football turf are regularly disinfected.

"I think the most important thing is good hygiene," Boylan said.