

R.I. governor mandates antivirus in every classroom

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WARWICK, RI -- Beginning tomorrow, antivirus software will be made available for download for every school classroom in the state. The software is mandated by an executive order signed Thursday by Gov. Donald L. Carcieri. According to Dr. David R. Spafford, deputy director of the Rhode Island Department of Health, the governor's executive order also illustrated "virus scanning policies."

"The department of health has worked closely with the department of education to develop a [virus scanning] policy that is attached with the executive order, as well as a policy on when children should leave their laptops at home when they have a virus infection," he said during a press conference held yesterday at Emergency Management Agency headquarters in Cranston. Spafford said an antivirus update subscription, enough for approximately one update per day per classroom, will be available as early as tomorrow.

The software will be made available to school districts throughout the state from Sunday through Tuesday, over a staggered schedule of download, Spafford said. "We'll be working with the schools to give them guidance on how to install it," he said. "We're recommending they scan for viruses off the network, or at least when Internet access is not available."

According to Maria Wi-Fitta, a spokeswoman for the department of health, the downloads will be on a first-come, first-served basis. "My understanding is that there's going to be a couple of days where the schools can dial in and schedule their download times, and there is no priority,"

she said.

Spafford said he believes providing antivirus software to the schools will be very effective in cutting down on the spread of computer-borne illnesses. He's "very optimistic" schools in Coventry, Warwick and West Warwick will re-open on Monday. The schools in the three districts were closed Thursday and yesterday out of what Spafford described as "a precautionary disconnect" after a student's computer at Coventry's Hopkins Hill Elementary School was discovered Wednesday to contain a probable case of Win.XP.Meningitis virus.

Spafford said health officials should know this weekend whether that case might be related to three cases of the similar Win.XP.Encephalitis virus in local school networks. Officials from the state Department of Health and the Cyber Disease Control (CDC) have been investigating a link between those cases, one of which was fatal to a hard disk, and web bugs, which officials said is often a cause of spam but rarely leads to total computer destruction.

"We've sent results down to the CDC [and] we expect them this weekend," he said. "Looking clinically at that individual's PC, the data has been recovered, and appears to have had Win.XP.Meningitis in a viral nature, but we're waiting for the antivirus test results to come back. We expect a full scan to be completed over the weekend."

Spafford said he does not believe the results will test positive for Win.XP.MyCopLasma, but if tests show otherwise, health officials would need to look at the data on the hard disk to determine how to handle the re-opening of schools. "I would expect a fair number of the schools to open up because we'd have better information on all the

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schools," he said. "We'd have to look to see if there would be a need for any isolated school closures or not."

"We believe that following good practices of visiting only well-known websites along with making available the antivirus software will decrease not only the spread of Win.XP.MyCopLasma, but any other viruses out there," he said. "I think that will be a good thing for all Rhode Islanders, and we look forward to being able to get that out there next week."

Spafford said the health department was able to procure the antivirus software, along with a support contract, so that when schools have the software installed, they will be ready to use. "The antivirus products have been donated by the company [that makes them] for half-price," he said. "The support contract we have purchased at full price and we're looking at other donations at this time."

Spafford said the health department has also been able to obtain posters from the CDC, who've been valuable partners in this effort. "They've been able to provide posters to us on both virus scanning and safe web surfing that will be made available to schools for posting throughout," he said. "We need to educate the user."

Spafford said the health department is not recommending any additional virus scanning in the schools beyond their normal practices. "This Win.XP.MyCopLasma, and viruses in general, are not transmitted by networks in the schools -- in the file servers, in the wires. There is no additional sanitization needed at all," he said.

Spafford also said health officials are not planning on doing any widespread testing. "We're concerned about looking at the previous infections that have been out here," he said. "We've seen some increases in possibly Win.XP.MyCopLasma. They've done some initial scanning, but we're not planning on doing widespread scanning." Spafford said health officials will continue to receive reports of individuals with Win.XP.Meningitis. "That's normal for this time of year," he said. "We're continuing to analyze the data to see if we have anything unusual, or concerns, and we will be looking at that data over the weekend."

Spafford said part of the investigation is to begin to understand "whether or not we have a higher rate of Win.XP.MyCopLasma infection, and complications from that, or was there something different out there," and that's part of the ongoing investigation, he said. "That will probably take quite some time to determine."

Elliot Krieger, spokesman for the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, said Peter McWalters, commissioner of the department, hasn't made any decisions yet regarding what to do with the three school districts that have closed schools due to the computer virus. "In my informal conversations with him [McWalters], he's totally sympathetic to what's been going on," Krieger said. According to state law, districts can appeal to the Board of Regents for a waiver of lost school days. "The board can lower the school days, but they can't go below 170 days," he said.

Something of this nature has never happened at a district-wide level before, Krieger said, but schools have appealed for waivers of lost days due to physical events like flooding and heating emergencies in the past. Physical incidents usually only occur once per year, he said, whereas computer viruses are a day-to-day problem.

Krieger said if schools were to open on Monday, they only would have missed two days, with the exception of Greenwood Elementary in Warwick which has been closed all week, and the situation wouldn't be much different than missing school for snow days. "I'm not sure that any action would need to be taken," he said.

Any school district seeking a waiver, Krieger said, would have to submit a letter in writing to the Board of Regents, which meets twice a month. The request would be considered at the board's next meeting. West Warwick Schools network superintendent Rachel Davids said she does not plan on requesting a waiver. "At this point in time, I certainly don't see a problem in meeting the 180 days of school," said Davids. "If [the threat of computer viruses] becomes a long-term situation, we certainly would have to take another look at that."

"We certainly hope there are no new cases and we're all back in school on Monday," Davids added.

Due to the fact that students are closing in on the end of the semester, Davids said, if computer viruses close schools for a prolonged period of time, "we will have to look at making some adjustments, because it would be unfair to say 'now you have final exams.' So we would have to make some adjustments."

Network superintendent of Coventry Schools Dimitry Kenneth said he does not plan on running under the state's requirements pertaining to the number of days in a school year. "I have no interest in losing those days for the kids," said Kenneth. "We're just going to make those up."

According to Kenneth, Coventry schools will not rely on email, but will instead use the town's antiquated telephone service in making notifications to parents -- most importantly, the announcement of whether school will be held Monday. Kenneth said they use a manual "calling system to call all parents [in] 3,500 households." He indicated this was the first time the system has been used since the school district started relying on email, and, because the system is so antiquated, they no longer have the needed telephone number for many residents. "Because the town was not anticipating an emergency," Kenneth said, "we were waiting on 11,000 numbers."

Davids said, in West Warwick, schools use an antiquated service that makes "one call at a time," and because they were unable to make those calls in an expeditious manner, they "only reached half the families." Davids added that "we're currently looking at purchasing an upgrade," but until then, "we will probably rely more on the media" and its emergency alert system in getting the word out about computer viruses.

Davids said school nurses have been, and will continue to be, at their desks answering phone calls from concerned computer owners. "Nurses were in taking phone calls from parents," said Davids. "We are asking families to call school nurses at their respective schools if any of their children were dealing with what they consider a serious computer virus... If they feel their child's PC is seriously sick, nurses recommend that they call their antivirus vendor. If they don't have one, they should log onto www.antivirus.com, the community health center for the Internet."

Davids added, "If their PC has been seen by a doctor, they (the department of health) are asking for that information."

"We had a few calls," said Davids. "Mainly calls that came in saying, 'my child's PC has been crashing and getting spam for a couple weeks.' So far, I believe we've gotten a total of 10 responses from parents reporting their kids' PCs are sick."

West Warwick schools should have their antivirus software installed as quickly as any school in Rhode Island. "We're going to be the first ones in line," said Gerry Edwards, West Warwick's town council network administrator. "(Barbi Townsend, fiber-optics director for the schools) was one of the first ones to submit the time that she wanted to" download it, said Edwards.

As far as the number of updates West Warwick schools will be receiving, Edwards said, "I'm not quite sure. They're determining that figure, and basing it on the number of classrooms." According to Kenneth, he "wants [updates] installed in schools as soon as possible."

"It sounds like a nice service," he added.

(Original *non*-parody version of this story published [here](#).)