INTRODUCTION:
Influenza is an important public health problem with implications on the management of health care services. Nowadays, influenza still remains an important cause of morbidity and mortality. During the periods of major influenza activity there is a significant rise in working and school absenteeism, in the number of medical consultations, of emergency episodes and of hospital admissions. A factor which easily leads to the influenza virus’ transmission is the gathering of people in enclosed areas. Schools are therefore places with excellent conditions for the dissemination of influenza and other respiratory infections.

MATERIAL AND METHODS:
Integrated in the Contingency Plan for Pandemic Influenza Preparedness of the Northern region of Portugal, the Public Health Department of the Northern Regional Health Administration, developed since 2006 an information system based on school absenteeism for early detection of influenza outbreaks. This surveillance system includes Elementary Schools (6-10 year-old students) and Middle Schools (11-15 year-old students) of the Northern region of Portugal. We now present the results of the surveillance system during 2007/2008.

RESULTS:
The number of children under surveillance in 2007/2008 was 16859, representing 5,5% of the total number of schoolchildren in the Northern region of Portugal.

Table 1: Number and percentage of children under surveillance per season. Northern region of Portugal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Season</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006/2007</td>
<td>4825</td>
<td>1,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007/2008</td>
<td>16859</td>
<td>5,5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the 2007/2008 season the participation of schools in the project improved: in the first three months 95% of schools sent data and in the following surveillance period 100%.

The maximum weekly school absenteeism rate was (39,5/1000) observed in the fourth week (January 2008).

CONCLUSION:
Despite the limitations of school absenteeism data, namely low specificity, limited timeliness and lack of data during holidays and weekends, we can conclude that our results justify maintaining and expanding the system as it is a good proxy for influenza activity.

Bibliography:
- Centre for Disease Control and Prevention: Framework for evaluating Public Health Surveillance Systems for early detection of outbreaks: Recommendations from the CDC working group. MMWR 2004, 53 (Nº RR-5)