



COMMUNICATION UPDATE

TO:	Mayor and Members Board of Health
DATE:	January 11, 2024
SUBJECT:	Enforcement of Immunization of School Pupils Act (City Wide)
WARD(S) AFFECTED:	City Wide
SUBMITTED BY:	Jordan Walker Director, Communicable Disease Control Division Public Health Services
SIGNATURE:	

This communication is to provide Council with an update on Hamilton Public Health Services Vaccine Programs as we are approaching the restart of one element of our immunization program post pandemic, the enforcement of the *Immunization of School Pupils Act*. This program element can lead to questions from the public.

Our immunization programs work to prevent vaccine-preventable diseases and prevent outbreaks of vaccine-preventable disease. Vaccines are one of the most important and effective interventions we have to keep people healthy and prevent diseases. Ensuring high vaccination rates in our schools helps to protect both the vaccinated and those that are at risk of severe disease but cannot be vaccinated (e.g., individuals who cannot be vaccinated due to medical or religious reasons).

Public Health Services' role in immunization programs is to:

- Promote and provide advice about immunization to the public and health care professionals and organizations;
- Distribute publicly funded vaccines to all providers in Hamilton except pharmacies;
- Monitor to ensure the proper storage of vaccines;
- Directly provide vaccines for select circumstances, including:
 - Grade 7 school-based vaccines, including Grade 8 catch-up;
 - COVID-19 and influenza, focusing on the most vulnerable, equity deserving populations; and,
 - Catch-up clinics for those behind in vaccinations, with a particular focus on easing access for equity deserving populations and those without a primary care provider.

OUR Vision: To be the best place to raise a child and age successfully.

OUR Mission: To provide high quality cost conscious public services that contribute to a healthy, safe and prosperous community, in a sustainable manner.

OUR Culture: Collective Ownership, Steadfast Integrity, Courageous Change, Sensational Service, Engaged Empowered Employees.

- Screening vaccination records for all children in school and childcare to ensure they are up to date with vaccinations, and providing reminders to get up to date; and,
- For school children, where the above efforts have failed to ensure that children are vaccinated in keeping with legislation, or a valid reason for an exemption provided, enforcement as required under the *Immunization of School Pupils Act*.

Information about our vaccine programs and services can be found here:
www.hamilton.ca/immunization.

During the COVID-19 pandemic there was a decrease in overall immunization rates among children for routine childhood and school-age vaccinations. Response to the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the ability of both Public Health Services and primary care to provide access to immunization services. Beginning in March 2022, Public Health Services began offering catch-up vaccinations at our then operational COVID-19 mass immunization clinic, and our monthly community catch-up clinics were reopened in January 2023. In the fall of 2022, Public Health Services resumed school-based clinics for Grade 7 vaccinations and offered catch-up for Grade 8 students. Additionally in the spring of 2023 broad catch-up clinics were offered in high schools for students in Grades 9 to 12 who may have missed vaccinations during the pandemic, with additional catch-up clinics offered for high school catchment areas over the summer of 2023.

While vaccination rates post-pandemic have improved, the percentage of students with an up-to-date vaccine record continues to be lower compared to pre-pandemic, both in Hamilton and province-wide. Historically, enforcement of the *Immunization of School Pupils Act* has been necessary to achieve compliance with the *Act* and ensure vaccination rates reach levels high enough to limit transmission and prevent outbreaks.

The *Immunization of School Pupils Act* is an Ontario law that requires children under the age of 18 years attending school to have an up-to-date immunization record, or valid exemption, on file with their local public health unit for designated publicly funded childhood immunizations. Annually, Public Health Services assesses the vaccination records of all children attending school and where there are vaccination records missing for those vaccines required under the *Immunization of School Pupils Act*, notices are sent to parents and guardians. If the required immunizations are not up to date, or a valid exemption submitted, notice is given to the child's school to suspend the child from school until this is addressed. Primary care is aware and collaborates in making vaccines as accessible as possible during these times, as does Public Health Services. The screening and notification process resumed in January of 2023.

Beginning in Q1 2024, Public Health Services will restart the enforcement of the *Immunization of School Pupils Act* focusing at this time on Grades 9 to 12. For students in those grades where vaccine records were outstanding, initial notices were distributed

in November of 2023. Follow-up notices will be distributed later this month and will inform them that if immunizations are still missing, suspension from school would take effect the week of March 5, 2024. As soon as Public Health Services is provided with the required information, the suspension will be rescinded, and the school is advised that the student may return.

Public Health Services makes every effort to get vaccines to kids and families during this time, both through primary care and our own clinics, so that suspensions can be prevented or kept as short as possible. To support students to ensure compliance with the *Act*, Hamilton Public Health Services will be engaging primary care providers locally on the suspension process and planning, advising of the potential for patients to reach out seeking additional vaccinations, and the importance of parents and guardians reporting these vaccinations to Public Health Services. Public Health Services will be attending high schools in Hamilton during the month of January and February to offer opportunity for catch-up records assessment and vaccination. Additionally, Public Health Services is increasing the frequency of our community catch-up clinics to weekly, to support those clients who may be unable to access or unattached to primary care. Throughout the week of March 4-8, 2024, Public Health Services will hold clinics for those students who may be suspended and still require additional vaccinations.

Public Health Services will provide further information on the Vaccine Program's roles and responsibilities under the *Immunization of School Pupils Act* in a report to the February 2024 Public Health Committee.

If you have any questions, or require additional information, please contact Jordan Walker, Director, Communicable Disease Control Division, Public Health Services at Ext. 7365 or jordan.walker@hamilton.ca.

APPENDICES AND SCHEDULES ATTACHED

Not Applicable.