

**Region of Waterloo**

**Public Health and Paramedic Services**

**Infectious Disease**

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**To:** Community and Health Services Committee

**Meeting Date:** November 7, 2023

**Report Title:** Immunization of School Pupils Act and School Immunization Compliance Report

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**1. Recommendation**

For information

**2. Purpose / Issue:**

This report provides an update on compliance with the Immunization of School Pupils Act (ISPA) and the proportion of students immunized under the School Immunization Program at the school board and individual school level. The report also highlights activities of the Vaccine Preventable Diseases (VPD) program to increase immunization compliance among school-aged children, including hard-to-reach populations.

**3. Strategic Plan:**

This report relates to the Equitable Services & Opportunities strategic priority of the 2023-2027 Strategic Plan.

**4. Report Highlights:**

- The COVID-19 pandemic led to sharp decreases in the proportion of students compliant with the Immunization of School Pupils Act (ISPA) requirements due to the interruption of ISPA enforcement and reduced opportunities to receive immunizations.
- In response, the Vaccine Preventable Diseases (VPD) program has offered an increased number of immunization clinics for routine immunizations at Public Health offices and schools. Additional immunization clinics will continue to be offered at Public Health offices into 2024.
- Full enforcement of the ISPA will take place in the 2023-2024 school year. Suspension dates are set in collaboration with the school boards to ensure students are not suspended during important provincial school activities. The

Elementary suspension date will be March 27, 2024, and the secondary suspension date will be May 1, 2024.

- To increase coverage rates among hard-to-reach populations, a vaccine bus pilot program was delivered from March to October 2023. The goal of the program was to provide immunization services in areas, and to populations, where significant barriers to accessing health care exist. An evaluation of the pilot program is underway and expected to be completed by the end of the year.
- The school immunization program resumed in 2022-2023 to deliver Hepatitis B (Hep B), Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) and Meningococcal vaccines to grade seven students. Hep B and HPV immunizations are recommended but not required immunizations under the ISPA. The compliance rates for these diseases are shared in Table 1.

Table 1. Compliance rates for Hep B, HPV, and Meningococcal vaccines, 2017-2018, 2021-2022, 2022-2023\*

Disease Group	2017-2018 rate (Percent)	2021-2022 rate (Percent)	2022-2023 rate (Percent)
Hepatitis B	69.8	18.8	60.7
Human Papillomavirus (HPV)	62.5	6.4	52.9
Meningococcal Disease	99.6	91.3	88.3

Source: PEAR, extracted August 17, 2023.

\*Note: Information was not collected during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

- Vaccine coverage rates remain lower than pre-pandemic, particularly among the elementary school-aged population. The elementary population was more impacted by disrupted service than the secondary school population who likely received many of their immunizations in infancy or early childhood. Large declines in immunization coverage rates were also seen across the province. Provincial surveillance data reflects that for many vaccines, coverage rates in Waterloo Region are higher than, or near, the provincial rate.
- For a more detailed summary of compliance rates by disease group, see **Appendix A**.

5. Background:

As required by the Ontario Public Health Standards (OPHS), the Region of Waterloo Public Health (Public Health) promotes immunization, delivers the school immunization program and enforces the Immunization of School Pupils Act (ISPA). The ISPA requires that children enrolled in schools be compliant (i.e. have received, reported, and are not overdue for their next dose) with immunizations for the following diseases: diphtheria,

polio, tetanus, pertussis, measles, mumps, rubella, varicella (chicken pox), and meningococcal).

Students can receive routine immunizations through their health care provider (HCP) or a Public Health clinic if they do not have an HCP who provides vaccines or do not have an Ontario Health Card. Public Health also administers hepatitis B, human papillomavirus (HPV) and meningococcal vaccines to grade seven students in all Waterloo Region schools through the school immunization program.

### Immunization coverage rates

During the COVID-19 pandemic, several barriers contributed to a decline in vaccine coverage rates among school-aged children.

- Many healthcare providers moved to virtual appointments
- Public Health was unable to provide clinics for routine vaccinations
- The ISPA annual enforcement process was not completed

Vaccine coverage rates remain lower than pre-pandemic, particularly among the elementary school-aged population. The elementary population was more impacted by disrupted service than the secondary school population who likely received many of their immunizations in infancy or early childhood. Large declines in immunization coverage rates were also seen across the province. Provincial surveillance data reflects that for many vaccines, coverage rates in Waterloo Region are higher than, or near, the provincial rate. For additional details, see **Appendix B**.

In addition, Hep B and HPV immunizations are recommended, but not required, immunizations under the ISPA. These vaccines are provided primarily by Public Health to grade seven students in school and, in some cases, by health care providers (HCPs). Reporting of these immunizations is not required, so compliance data may underrepresent actual coverage rates for these vaccines.

For additional details on immunization coverage rates by school, see **Appendix C** (elementary) and **Appendix D** (secondary).

The proportion of students with a valid exemption on file in 2023 is generally consistent with rates reported pre-pandemic. For a full summary, see **Appendix E**.

### Improving Vaccine Coverage Rates in Waterloo Region

Increasing vaccine coverage rates is a priority for the VPD program. In response to lower rates, the program has offered the following:

- Immunization clinics: Between January and September 2023, 139 clinics were held, providing 8,991 doses of vaccine to 3,999 school-aged children and youth.
- A vaccine bus pilot program: Since March 2023, the vaccine bus made over 70 visits to community locations, providing 1,200 doses of the ISPA and routine vaccines to children across the Region.

The Vaccine Preventable Diseases (VPD) program will continue offering catch-up opportunities through routine vaccination clinics at Public Health offices.

## **6. Communication and Engagement with Area Municipalities and the Public**

**Area Municipalities:** Ongoing communication to coordinate vaccine bus and/or Neighbourhood Nursing Team (NNT) vaccine clinics is occurring with operators of city recreation complexes and libraries as well as with other similar organizations both under and outside of the municipal structures. Operators are supportive of the initiatives and some have requested additional visits.

**Public:** Residents with vaccine access issues (including language barriers, transportation, and safe/affordable childcare, among others) are engaged through surveys and promotional materials communicated via the vaccine bus and/or NNT host sites.

## **7. Financial Implications:**

The majority of the programs and services offered by the Vaccine Preventable Diseases (VPD) program are covered under the department's existing base budgets for Public Health Mandatory Programs. The budgets are established by the Regional Council (as the Board of Health) and are funded up to 70 percent by the province and the remainder funded by the local tax levy (30 percent). This includes the ISPA enforcement process.

Portions of the school immunization program are offered on a cost-recovery basis. The Ministry reimburses Public Health \$8.50 for each dose of meningococcal and human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine given. No reimbursement is provided for the administration of the Hepatitis B vaccine. The funds recovered help to offset the costs of delivering those vaccines.

## **8. Conclusion / Next Steps:**

In response to lower vaccine coverage rates, Public Health will continue offering immunization clinics, including the grade 7 school program, support health care provider (HCP) catch-up activities, fully enforce the Immunization of School Pupils Act (ISPA) for the 2023-2024 school year, and continue the Vaccine Bus project.

## **9. Attachments:**

Appendix A: Immunization of School Pupils Act Compliance Rates for Reportable Disease Groups

Appendix B: Waterloo Region and Provincial Immunization Coverage Rates

Appendix C: Immunization of School Pupils Act Compliance Rates for Elementary Students, 2022-2023

Appendix D: Immunization of School Pupils Act Compliance Rates for Secondary

Students, 2022-2023

Appendix E: Immunization of School Pupils Act Elementary and Secondary Exemption Rates by Vaccination Group, 2022-2023

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