

For discussion on
2 July 2021

Legislative Council Panel on Education

School Arrangements for COVID-19 Vaccination

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) vaccination arrangements for schools and other anti-epidemic measures.

Background

2. Schools are places where a large number of young students study and engage in activities. On campuses activities are frequent. In order to safeguard the safety of students, school staff and the public, and prevent the spread of the virus in schools and communities, the Education Bureau (EDB) has all along been in close liaison with health experts and the school sector to timely announce the arrangements on face-to-face classes and related measures in response to the development of the epidemic, so as to strike a balance between student learning and epidemic prevention as far as practicable. From 24 May 2021, all kindergartens, primary and secondary schools (including special schools and schools offering non-local curriculum) as well as private schools offering non-formal curriculum (commonly known as tutorial schools) could fully resume face-to-face classes but on a half-day basis in order to avoid the infection risk caused by students' eating out.

3. In addition, schools have been putting much effort in preventing and combating the epidemic. In tandem, we have been encouraging school staff to proactively receive COVID-19 vaccines. It is the expectation of the general public and parents that schools can provide a safe and healthy environment for students to study and learn.

COVID-19 Vaccination Programme

4. Having regard to the advice of the Advisory Panel on COVID-19 Vaccines, the Secretary for Food and Health approved the lowering of the age limit for receiving the Comirnaty vaccine to age 12 on 3 June 2021. From 14 June 2021, the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme started to cover adolescents aged 12 to 15. The vaccine under the Programme for them is the Fosun Pharma/BioNTech “Comirnaty COVID-19 mRNA Vaccine” (BioNTech)¹.

5. According to the data provided by the pharmaceutical company, completing two doses of BioNTech can generate significant protective effect for adolescents aged 12 to 15. Compared with adults, adolescents who receive the vaccine will develop a higher antibody response and can achieve 100% efficacy in preventing illness from COVID-19 disease. Moreover, the advice of the Scientific Committees under the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) stated that getting vaccinated by BioNTech is important for protecting adolescents against symptomatic COVID-19 disease, reducing community transmission, and increasing overall community immunity. Meanwhile, many drug regulatory bodies overseas such as those in Canada, the United States, European Commission, Singapore and the United Kingdom have already approved the lowering of the age limit for BioNTech vaccination and many countries have already started to arrange BioNTech vaccination for adolescents.

Vaccination Arrangements for Primary and Secondary Students

6. To dovetail with the new initiative mentioned above, the Government provided three channels for schools, teachers and parents to arrange vaccination for their students or children.

(i) Self-directed booking for vaccination online

7. Starting from 11 June 2021, adolescents between aged 12 and 15 years may make appointments direct at the dedicated website of the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme to receive vaccination at 24 Community Vaccination Centres (CVCs) in Hong Kong.

¹ The minimum age for receiving Sinovac vaccine is 18 years old.

(ii) Vaccination at CVCs through group booking made by schools

8. Schools may pre-arrange time slots with the CVCs for student vaccination through group booking. Each slot has a quota of 20 to 30 persons and multiple time slots may be reserved. Schools can make booking for transportation between the CVCs and schools on the vaccination day with the Government's school bus contractor direct. School staff as well as parents and guardians of students are welcome to come along to the CVCs to receive vaccination on the same day.

(iii) School outreach service

9. An outreach vaccination service is provided for administering vaccination at schools and the minimum number of participants is 300 persons per visit. School staff as well as parents and guardians of students are welcome to receive vaccination together with the students on the vaccination day. The outreach service providers will arrange staff to administer vaccination on-site at schools. The schools will be required to carry out certain venue set-up work and be responsible for the cleansing services. The venues should meet the requirements for outreach venues for vaccination service.

Vaccination of Teachers and School Staff

10. Teachers and school staff have been included as priority groups to receive COVID-19 vaccines since 8 March 2021. All teachers and staff (i.e. teaching and non-teaching staff providing services for schools and students) of kindergartens (including kindergarten-cum-child care centres) as well as primary and secondary schools (including special schools and schools offering non-local curriculum), and staff of the boarding section, are included.

11. The EDB has been encouraging teachers and school staff to set examples by receiving vaccination, so as to protect themselves, their families and the Hong Kong community as a whole. In response to the enquiry of a Legislative Council Member on the general situation of vaccination of teachers and school staff in Hong Kong, the EDB collected the related data from all schools in the territory in early May 2021. According to the information provided by some 2 000 schools (including kindergartens, primary schools and secondary schools), the overall vaccination rate (i.e. having received two doses of COVID-19 vaccine or having planned to receive/received the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine) of

teachers and school staff was around 18% at that time.

12. Thereafter, the Civil Service Bureau announced at the end of May 2021 that government employees would be entitled to a day of “vaccination leave” after receiving COVID-19 vaccines. The EDB has also issued letters earlier to encourage schools in Hong Kong to arrange “vaccination leave” for teachers and staff receiving vaccination. If a teacher or school staff has received a dose of COVID-19 vaccine from 1 June to 31 August 2021, he or she may be granted one day of “vaccination leave” on the day after the vaccination. If a teacher or school staff has already been vaccinated on or before 31 May 2021, he or she may also be granted one day of “vaccination leave” for each dose received. The total period of leave is capped at two days in total, all to be taken on or before 31 March 2022. In addition, it is expected that the facilitation measures in paragraphs 8 to 9 above will encourage more teachers and school staff to get vaccinated as early as possible

Promotion of Vaccination at Schools

13. To enable principals, teachers and staff of primary and secondary schools to better understand the matters relating to children and adolescents receiving COVID-19 vaccines, the EDB has invited schools to participate in an online webinar on “COVID-19 Vaccination of Children and Adolescents” organised jointly by the Department of Health and the Hong Kong Paediatric Society on 29 June 2021. During the webinar, medical experts will share the latest information on vaccination and explain the issues about vaccination of children and adolescents which the public are most concerned with.

14. In addition, the Federations of Parent-Teacher Associations (FPTAs) of 18 districts arranged a meeting for the representatives of parent members in June 2021, during which the Chairman of the Scientific Committee on Vaccine Preventable Diseases shared with parents information of COVID-19 vaccines. The Committee on Home-School Co-operation also invited a paediatric expert to brief members of the FPTAs on information of COVID-19 vaccines with a view to promoting the vaccination programme through parent groups and encouraging more parents and their eligible children to receive vaccination.

Anti-epidemic Measures taken by Schools

15. We have all along been requiring schools to strictly put in place the health precautionary measures stipulated in the “Health Protection Measures for Schools” issued and from time to time updated by the EDB and the “Health Advice to Schools for the Prevention of COVID-19” issued by the CHP to safeguard the health of teachers and students. Such measures include wearing masks all the time within school campuses, maintaining appropriate social distances, measuring temperatures of teachers and students at school entrances, etc. Schools should also always keep the school environment clean and hygienic.

16. Furthermore, the EDB and the CHP have established a co-ordination mechanism to handle COVID-19 cases, including “confirmed cases” or “preliminarily tested positive cases” and “close contacts”, and maintained close communication with schools on related matters. If such cases are found in schools, the CHP will recommend necessary follow-up actions, including suspension of face-to-face classes and activities, disinfection and cleansing of school premises, compulsory testing for the related school staff and students, etc., subject to the schools’ circumstances and the needs of individual students.

Way Forward

17. The EDB appreciates the efforts made by school staff, parents and students in preventing and fighting the epidemic in the past months. All of them have been actively supporting the Government’s efforts in taking forward the anti-epidemic arrangements, adjusted to the situation flexibly and joined hands with the society in fighting COVID-19. The EDB will continue to closely monitor the development of the epidemic situation, seek professional advice of health experts and maintain communication with the school sector, with a view to reviewing the anti-epidemic measures in a timely manner.

18. It is important to increase the overall vaccination rate in schools so that our students can resume normal school life as soon as possible. The EDB will continue to encourage teachers, school staff, parents and students to get vaccinated. We are of the view that schools with a higher overall vaccination rate (i.e. with the number of teachers, school staff and students receiving vaccines reaching a certain percentage) will be more capable of protecting themselves against the virus and can provide a safer school environment. These schools are suitable to have more time for

face-to-face classes and organise extra-curricular and sports activities. We will liaise with health experts to further seek their views and discuss the related arrangements.

Advice Sought

19. Members are invited to note the content of this paper.

**Education Bureau
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