

Question on Notice
No. 202
Asked on 16 March 2022

Mr S Andrew asked Premier and Minister for the Olympics (Hon. A Palaszczuk)—

QUESTION:

With reference to the Premier's Media Statement of 30 November 2021, announcing that Queensland school environments had been redesignated as 'high risk settings'—

Will the Premier (a) provide copies of the Risk Management Assessments reports or expert advice, that were used as the basis for the government's claim that schools and early childhood settings have (i) 'an increased infection risk' and (ii) 'a high risk of transmission' and (b) if no such documents exist, advise on what basis the government's decision to reclassify schools as a 'high risk setting' was made?

ANSWER:

COVID-19 vaccines are a proven, safe and effective means of reducing the risk of symptomatic infection, severe illness and transmission.

Vaccination against COVID-19 is required for a number of key workforces in Queensland, including the health and education workforce, to ensure the protection of vulnerable populations and continuation of essential services.

Encouraging vaccines in schools is recommended by the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee and was agreed to by National Cabinet as outlined in the *National Framework for Managing COVID-19 in Schools and Early Childhood Education and Care*. Vaccination for school staff is also required in the ACT, New South Wales, Victoria, and Western Australia. Workers in Early Childhood Education Centres (ECEC) are required to be vaccinated in the Northern Territory and Tasmania.

Vaccine requirements in schools and ECEC recognise the serious impact transmission within these settings has on children's access to education, the additional risks posed to a critical and vulnerable workforce, and the broader societal impacts of school closures.

Fortunately, healthy children and young people usually experience mild or asymptomatic COVID-19 infection and there are low rates of severe disease in this population. Recent data estimates that 1 per cent or less of children with the Omicron variant require admission to hospital. Although hospitalisation rates in children are lower for Omicron than previous variants, the greatly increased transmissibility of Omicron means that we are seeing more children in hospital than previously experienced.

Vaccine mandates for people working with children are protective while the vaccine rollout for younger cohorts is in its early stages. Vaccines remain unavailable for children under 5 years of age, and only 25.25 per cent of children aged 5-11 and 71.77 per cent of children aged 12-15 are fully vaccinated (as at 7 April 2022). Vaccination of all adults around children continues to be the most effective way to protect children from disease.

Beyond the immediate COVID-19 health risk, infection with COVID-19 impacts children's access to education and other foundational social and developmental activities.

This is particularly relevant in circumstances where school closures are ongoing or recurrent.

It is also important to protect adults in the school environment from the risks of COVID-19. The latest published registration report by the Queensland College of Teachers, the peak regulatory body for the teaching profession in Queensland, states there were more than 110,000 approved teachers in 2020, with over 68 per cent of these employed in permanent or long-term temporary teaching positions. According to the report, half of all teachers (51.3 per cent) were over 45 years of age and 16.5 per cent were 60 years or older.

It is well-established that the risk of severe COVID-19 symptoms increases with age. Vaccination ensures that teachers and education staff can continue to provide essential childcare and education services in the safest way possible.

It is expected that COVID-19 will be with us for some time. Mandatory vaccinations and other baseline public health measures continue to play an important role in managing COVID-19 in schools in the current epidemiological context.

The Queensland Government is continuing to closely monitor Queensland's COVID-19 restrictions against the broader COVID-19 environment, including the emergence of new variants. Any approach to introducing and easing restrictions continues to be guided by the advice of Queensland's Chief Health Officer and other medical experts from across Australia.