

CONCEPT NOTE

VACCINATE SCHOOL EMPLOYEES: STRENGTHENING OUR RESOLVE TO RETURN TO FACE-TO-FACE SCHOOLING

Introduction

After several months of uncertainty, the roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines is indeed welcoming news. It is likely that a vaccine will reach the shores of Jamaica within the next three to six months; however, only 16 percent of the population will be vaccinated in the first instance (Loop, 2020). Consequently, the country is now faced with the challenge of deciding who will be prioritized to be among the first to be vaccinated. Whilst this decision may be the primary responsibility of the Ministry of Health and Wellness, the Education Ministry should consider the position that: ***The reopening of schools for face-to-face teaching and learning will be achieved with greater confidence if the employees in the education sector are among the first to be vaccinated.*** The immediate benefit of this approach is that the education system will be better able to sustain a targeted return to the classroom, with safety being a primary goal. This, will in turn, assist in reducing the negative effects on the country's economy, both in the short, and long-term.

It is an accepted position that students' academic achievement has long-term economic implications for a country's performance in terms of its national income and gross domestic product (GDP). According to the World Bank (2013) "the quality and relevance of education is paramount to achieving economic growth. It is believed that a single standard deviation in test scores between countries equates to two percentage points in long term GDP." Therefore, the Jamaican education system must ensure that the fallout from this pandemic is minimal, or otherwise, and that appropriate corrective measures are taken to ensure that any loss is restored in the shortest possible time. It has been reported that there is a general reluctance by teachers and other employees of the school system to return to face-to-face learning and teaching because of the fear of contracting the virus. Fortunately, being vaccinated may be the best protection against the virus for most persons at this time. But, this is not being made easier because of the fear regarding the safety of the vaccine, especially at the early stage of its application.

In so doing, the National Council on Education (NCE), the major policy advisory body on educational matters, is recommending that a national framework be developed to govern the distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine in which the education sector is assigned a high level of priority, based on clearly defined principles. The foregoing is being suggested against the background of the impact the pandemic continues to have on the education system and the risks facing our nation's children in terms of learning loss and academic performance. Challenges with bandwidth, connectivity, lack of instrument and devices, underscore the need for the resumption of face-to-face inclusive learning and teaching that caters to the needs of all children including the vulnerable.

Composition of the Education Sector

A comprehensive analysis of the various sub-groups within the education system should be conducted. These sub-groups include teachers, students, administrators, ancillary workers, providers of goods and services inclusive of security personnel. Each sub-group must be carefully analysed and an accurate estimate be done to determine who should be vaccinated. This is necessary to minimize risks.

Based on data obtained mainly from the MoEYI and the Early Childhood Commission, there are approximately 61,000 persons employed to the sector comprising the categories identified earlier. These include 46,500 educators, teachers and practitioners from early childhood to tertiary, from both the public and private sectors. We are recommending that schools, along with representatives of teachers and principals be given the opportunity to play a critical role in the process of determining the criteria and priorities for inoculation.

It should be noted that young children are more resilient and are less affected by the virus. The rate of contraction among younger children is reported as lower and that they are less likely to transmit the virus to their peers and their rate and chance of recovery are quicker and higher than adults. Based on these factors, the school employees must be the first to be vaccinated and considered among the essential service cadre of the country.

Principles of the Framework

Underpinning any viable framework is the role of education, which is a vital element for social cohesion and economic development of a country. The fact is that the closure of schools will have far-reaching implications for a country's economic development. Therefore, under any plan for the distribution

of a vaccine, education should be treated as **an essential service** and assigned a high priority to facilitate students' continued formal education. Moreover, it is widely accepted that any vaccine received will be limited in amount due to costs and the number of persons to be vaccinated. In light of the foregoing, it is recommended that a distribution framework be developed based on the guiding principles of effective risk management, equity and fairness.

Context for Effective Risk Management

There are varying types of risks to the education system and the education process relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. These must be carefully assessed in terms of their implications for the sector and sub-population groups considered. The major risks as a result of COVID-19 are the loss of life, which is an irreversible event; contracting the virus with its debilitating effect, especially by those with comorbidities; disruption of the education process, and most importantly, learning loss resulting from the challenges with remote learning.

Learning loss, for example, has short, medium and long-term implications and the risks in terms of its impact, can be classified as high, medium and low, in terms of severity. Based on the findings of the NCE study, students' start showing evidence of learning loss immediately upon the switch to remote learning. This, in turn, affects their capacity to grasp learning concepts, which stymies their cognitive development. This is more evident at the early childhood level, as this period constitutes a window of opportunity for laying a solid foundation for learning. Failure to seize this opportunity could result in challenges in the later years of an individual's life.

Further, children who are unable to "catch up" at the primary level face considerable challenges at the secondary level. The delay in remediating students at the secondary level is also more costly for the government in terms of investment in the human resource capacity to facilitate remedial programmes. It is also generally felt that remedial programmes at the secondary level are fairly unsuccessful due to the stigma attached to these programmes and how students who participate in them are perceived by their peers. **In light of the foregoing, the reopening of schools, particularly at the early childhood and primary education levels, should be treated as a priority.**

Equity and Fairness

The NCE has no desire for the education system to be prioritized for the vaccine if we were not convinced of the reasonableness of the proposal of its social, economic, psychological and even political impact. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected people worldwide, despite nationality, race, or gender. However, it is an established fact that the consequences tend to be more severe for vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. It is now an incontrovertible fact, that the most disadvantaged and those with the least economic wherewithal who contract the virus are the ones who are likely to lose their lives. In addition, for the education system, it is the children of the poor and especially those at the early childhood level; attending basic schools that are the ones benefiting the least from remote learning. In fact, the findings of the NCE COVID-19 study show that:

For some schools, participation was reduced by up to 30 percent, especially at the early childhood level. Since the start of the new school year, the level of participation in remote learning has fallen even further, with some schools, especially at the primary and early childhood levels, reporting that between 20 percent and 50 percent of the students were not participating in any form of remote learning. (p 5).

The distribution framework should incorporate the principles of fairness and equity in terms of which segment of the school system will be first to receive the vaccine. Of course, for those with comorbidities and the elderly, especially those who are 60 years and older, including selected service providers and other similar groups, must be 'first in line'. Steps must be taken to address the disadvantaged vulnerable sub-groups. It is being suggested that the Ministry of Education, Youth and Information identifies sub-groups and vulnerable members of the population in the education sector who should be targeted for priority action. These sub-groups should be consulted for feedback and recommendations. The aim is to create an actual bubble for schools to function safely.

Conclusion

Jamaican students can derive far-reaching benefits from the reopening of schools. Preliminary data from the research conducted by the NCE revealed that up to 50 percent of students from some early childhood schools have not participated in planned learning since March 2020. The foregoing has implication for their future academic performance. The learning loss, which commenced with remote teaching and learning since March, if not averted, could result in far-reaching social and economic consequences for the country. Thus, every effort must be made to address the concerns and fears of stakeholders in the education sector that the necessary preventative measures will be put in place to reduce the risks of the deadly virus. Hence, the recommendation that the employees in the education sector, and, in particular, those employed in the school system (public and private), be placed in the category named **essential service** so that they will be considered among the priority groups to receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

The National Council on Education, a statutory organization, is the major policy advisory body on educational matters to the Minister of Education. It is also responsible for nominating for appointment and training school board members and conducting research to support its policy initiatives and the goals of the education system.

NCE: Networking for Change through Education