



Report of the State Comptroller of Israel | May 2024

A Collection of Reports Concerning the
Coronavirus

Covid-19 Vaccines and Testing in the Education System



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Background

Following the worldwide outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic at the end of 2019, about 186 countries around the world, encompassing an overall 1.5 billion students, closed down the schools within their borders, either partially or entirely, depending on the state of morbidity and the local decisions adopted.

In Israel, educational institutions were closed down, and from March 13, 2020, over 1.8 million students in the State of Israel were required to study remotely for an extended time.

In June 2021, the Covid-19 pandemic¹ (the 'Delta' wave) began spreading again, so there was genuine concern that the 2021/22 school year would open subject to unique restrictions and conditions due to the inability to hold orderly and regular studies.

On August 22, 2021, in preparation for the opening of the 2021/22 school year, the 'Ministerial Committee on Coping with the Covid-19 Crisis and its Consequences' (the Ministerial Committee on Covid-19 Matters) decided on the manner of opening the school year. This decision was also based on the recommendation of the Minister of Education at that time and those of the representatives of the professional echelon of the ministry.

On September 2, 2021, this decision was given the effect of a government resolution after a discussion on the topic "The state of morbidity and the outline of education for the year 2021/22". In its resolution, the government adopted the Ministry of Education's operation of the education system concept, which was based on striving for the system's continuous functioning and ensuring a routine adapted to Covid-19. In March 2022, following a considerable decrease in morbidity, the restrictions on the activity of educational institutions in the State of Israel were lifted.

16-year-olds and older (grades 10–12) began to be vaccinated against the Coronavirus on January 23, 2021; 12–15-year-olds (grades 7–9) began to be vaccinated on June 6, 2021, and 5–11-year-olds (grades 1–6) began to be vaccinated on November 22, 2021.

At the beginning of the 2021/22 school year, in September 2021, 28% of all students (496,000 out of 1.8 million students) were vaccinated, recovered from the virus, or confirmed for Covid-19: about 316,000 of them were vaccinated for Covid-19 (from grades 7 to 12), and about

1 There have been five Covid-19 waves in Israel, when the first wave started at the end of February 2020 and the last wave ended in April 2022. In June 2021 the 'Delta' wave began, lasting until October 2021.



180,000 students recovered from Covid-19 or were confirmed for Covid-19 (from grades 1 to 12). As of the end of the last wave of Covid-19, April 2022, the rate of students who were vaccinated against Covid-19 and or who recovered from Covid-19 and or who were verified for Covid-19 was 66% (1.26 million out of 1.9 million students).

Educational institutions implemented two vaccination outlines and four testing outlines:

- **The 'Resilience for the Student' Outline (Hosen La'Talmid)** – vaccinating students in grades 1–12 through vaccination mobile units that mainly reached middle and high schools.
- **The Vaccination by Student Health Services Nurses Outline** – vaccination of elementary school students by the Student Health Services nurses who arrived at the schools.
- **The 'Education Shield' Outline** – consists of sampling testing at the schools for student morbidity and educational and administrative staff morbidity. The testing was proactively and cyclically performed once a week.
- **The 'Green Classroom' Outline** – distribution of antigen kits for testing students in kindergartens and elementary schools as well as in their homes, allowing children in whose class a student has been confirmed for Covid-19 to continue to come to school, provided that their Covid-19 test result was negative.
- **The Outline for Rapid Antigen Testing for Covid-19 for Students Before Returning from Vacations** – the beginning of the 2021/22 school year, the Tishrei (new year holiday, Hanukkah holiday, winter vacation for students in the non-Jewish schools). The outline was designed to detect early morbidity of students before they return from vacations to prevent students from contracting the virus and isolating them.
- **The 'Testing and Learning' Outline** – the outline was designed to enable a continuous study routine in schools by administering a home antigen test for students and educational staff members who have been exposed to a confirmed coronavirus patient.

Key Figures

81 days

the number of days from March 2020 to February 2021 when a complete lockdown was imposed and the education system operated through remote learning only

only 9%

the students' rate who were vaccinated in high schools of all vaccinated students (99,000 students); The remaining 91% were vaccinated in the community (988,000 students) as of the end of the implementation of the vaccination outlines in high schools

only 29% and 50%

29% – the schools' rate where vaccination mobile units were operated for 5–11-year-olds (429 schools out of a target of 1,500); 50% – the schools' rate where students were vaccinated by Student Health Service nurses (1,314 schools out of a target of 2,636)

only 11% and 5%

of the parents and administrators, respectively, who responded to the state comptroller's office survey stated that the Ministry of Health was the first source from which they learned about the outlines regarding vaccinations and testing

27%

of the parents who participated in the survey stated that there were parents in their vicinity who always or often reported negative test results, even though the test result was positive

26%–46%

of the parents whose children participated in the Covid-19 testing outlines stated that they did not receive kits or only received part of the kits required for their child's participation in the outline

79%


the parents' rate who did not submit statements about the results of the antigen tests in the 'Testing and Learning' outline (average rate on the day the outline was activated)

43%–67%

43% of the parents stated that the Ministry of Education and the schools' public information activities convinced them to a moderate or a lesser degree to allow their children to be vaccinated, and to the same extent, 67% of the parents stated that these activities convinced them to join the testing outlines



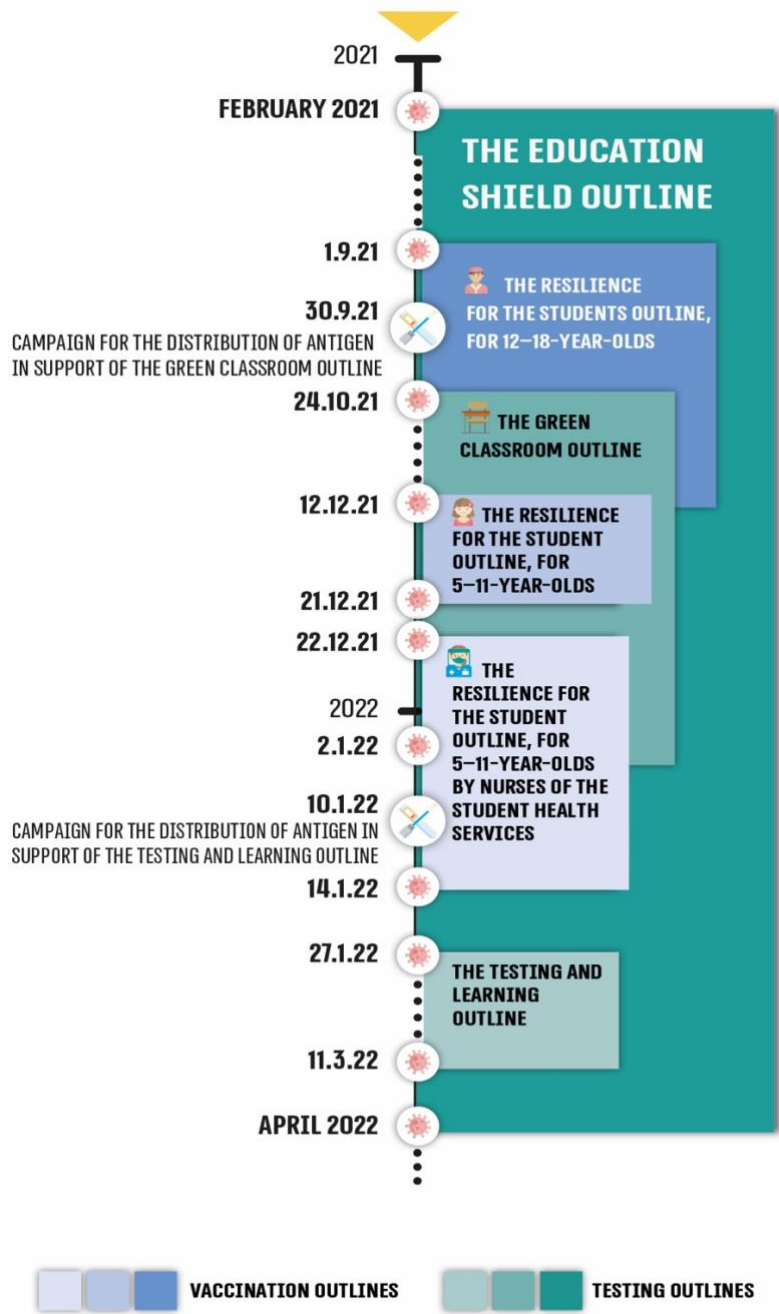
Audit Actions

 From March to October 2022, the State Comptroller's Office examined the implementation of the vaccination outlines among high school students. The implementation of the Covid-19 testing outlines among the students and teaching staff, as implemented at the return to studies in the high schools at the beginning of the 2021/22 school year, in September 2021 (the testing and vaccination outlines). The examination was conducted at the Ministry of Education's administration², at the Ministry of Education's Security Division – the body that coordinated the education system's coping with the issue – and at the Ministry of Education's Command and Control At the Control Center for the Management of the National Fight against the Virus in the Ministry of Health (the Ministry of Health's Coronavirus Command), including at the "Education Desk", which is responsible for coordinating the Ministry of Health's work with the Ministry of Education in everything related to the Coronavirus (the Education Desk). Completion examinations were carried out in the Ministry of Education and the Home Front Command (HFC) districts, which serve as a mission command for civil assistance for the operation of the drug and vaccination distribution program³. Furthermore, the State Comptroller's Office conducted a public participation procedure with parents and school administrators (parents and managers survey).

2 In December 2021, there was a change of personnel in the Ministry of Education, and this position was filled by a new female CEO instead of the CEO who held this office until then.

3 The National Preparedness Plan for a Pandemic Scenario (Healthy Surge) – a version from 2018 was distributed by the National Coordinator.

The Timeline of Operating the Testing and Vaccination Outlines in the Education System, 2021–2022



According to data from the Ministry of Education, processed by the Office of the State Comptroller.



Key Findings

📌 The Ministry of Education's Role During the Outbreak of a Pandemic in General and During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Particular – while contending with the Covid-19 pandemic, the National Preparedness Plan for a Pandemic Scenario (Healthy Surge) was not activated. Therefore, the tasks that were assigned to the Ministry of Education upon the outbreak of the pandemic included not only tasks outlined in the existing regulation (information, the guidance of the students and their parents on how to conduct themselves during the outbreak of the pandemic and preventing harm to the students studying to ensure the study routine) but also tasks that the Ministry was unfamiliar with, such as the execution of the vaccinations and testing and overall management of the event in the education system. The Ministry of Education was neither prepared nor ready for these tasks – it did not have an action plan detailing the actions to be carried out, and it was also not practiced in implementing them; it did not designate the officials in the Ministry who were to be responsible for carrying out the tasks and did not even regulate the Healthy Surge plan, before the outbreak of the pandemic, the work interfaces between it and the key partners in coping with the pandemic – the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Defense.

📌 The School Vaccination Outlines – as of the end of the vaccination outlines at the schools, about 99,000 students of all ages were vaccinated in the schools, but this is a relatively low rate of vaccination among the students in the schools in 2021/22 – about 4% of all students (2.3 million students) and only about 9% of the vaccinated students (1.1 million vaccinated students), this compared to about 91% of the vaccinated students in the community. Furthermore, only 429 schools out of a target of 1,500 schools participated in the vaccination outlines for 5–11-year-olds through vaccination mobile units in schools (about 29% of the target). Only 1,314 schools out of 2,636 that were set as a target (about 50% of the target) were vaccinated through the Student Health Services Nurses outline in the schools. The low rate of student vaccination within the framework of the vaccination outlines implemented in the schools reflects a failure of the outlines to achieve their goals.

As of April 2023, no method has been determined embodying solutions to the needs and insights that emerged from the operation of the outlines, and no rules were established for the operation of an outline in which the Ministry of Health has a relative advantage compared to the HMOs; Preparation times have not been set; And no guidelines were examined for the cooperation of the Ministry of Health and HFC with the Ministry of Education, that would enable better preparation of the schools in the future.

📌 The Outlines for Testing Students and Teaching Staff – four chief testing outlines were implemented in the educational institutions for targeted detection and isolation of sick students and teaching staff, maintaining continuous studies throughout the education system while protecting the health of students and educational staff. This is, among other things, by creating a situation report of the morbidity in the schools, quickly locating students with Covid-19 symptoms, preventing them from coming to the schools, and ensuring that a sick child is treated at home. The audit demonstrated that the scope of application of the testing outlines was low:

- Only 12% of elementary schools (374 out of 3,030) participated in the Education Shield outline.
- Only 13% of the classes (5,800 out of 45,000) participated in the Green Classroom outline.
- In the testing outlines that followed the Tishrei and Hanukkah holidays, parents were required to submit statements about performing tests as a condition for entering school; After the Tishrei holidays, only 37% of parents submitted a statement (the parents submitted statements for about 586,000 children aged 3–16 out of about 1.6 million children of these ages); After the Hanukkah holiday, 73% of the parents submitted a statement (about 725,000 parents of children aged 3–12 out of about 1 million children of these ages).
- As part of the Testing and Learning outline, the parents' rate reports were low and averaged 21% daily (404,000 out of about 1.9 million students). Over time, there was a decrease in the number of statements submitted – from about 697,000 statements at the beginning of the outline on January 30, 2022, to about 142,000 statements at the end of the outline on March 9, 2022, an overall decrease of about 80%.
- As part of the Testing and Learning outline, the parents were asked to declare that their children had been tested and provide the test results, but this was not a condition for entering the school.

📌 The Ministry of Education's Guidelines for Schools About the Performance of Vaccination Outlines and Covid-19 Testing – from the responses given by the principals and parents in the State Comptroller's surveys, although the Ministry of Education has established guidelines for the formulation and distribution of instructions and procedures, according to 70% of the principals, it has distributed its instructions and procedures at the wrong time, preventing early preparation for the performance of the tasks required in the vaccination and testing outlines. Moreover, according to 56% of the administrators and 53% of the parents, the instructions were unclear, making it difficult to follow them.



The Official Handling of Vaccinations and Covid-19 Testing in the Secondary

Schools – according to the national plan for the opening of the 2021/22 school year, the secondary schools were not eligible for the financing of a Covid-19 Trustee therefore, the school principals or their staff carried out the task. 24% of principals of secondary schools indicated in the survey (68 out of 287 principals in the secondary schools who answered the question) that their school did not have an official coordinating the Covid-19 testing and vaccinations. Furthermore, 64% of the secondary school principals in whose school there was a coordinating official (140 principals out of 219 who answered the question) believed that the coordination of Covid-19 testing and vaccinating had a significant or substantial effect on the management of the day-to-day tasks of the coordinating official in the school.

The Distribution of the Antigen Kits Within the Outlines Framework Implemented in the Education System

– the process of packing personal kits and distributing them to the students required a great deal of time from the education staff (about four working days for the packaging operation) affecting their ability to dedicate themselves to their leading role – pedagogy and education. In some cases, there was a shortage of kits for distribution to students; in other cases, kits were missing some of the components required to administer the tests (about 20%, as revealed by the parents' survey). Consequently, the education system's orderly process of the testing outlines was affected. Furthermore, due to a lack of testing kits, many students were left without tests (to the extent of a 76% shortage in the Testing and Learning outline, as indicated by a study conducted by the Government Advertising Agency), not allowing them to participate in the outlines unless they purchased test kits at their own expense. Failure to implement the testing outlines fully, adversely affected the effectiveness of the outlines and the achievement of the goal for which they were formulated – locating verified students, breaking the chains of infection, and maintaining continuous studies at school. This posed a danger of the spread of disease and harm to public health. Furthermore, as the tests were not distributed to the teaching staff, and tens to hundreds of teaching staff members (36–380) were found to be verified in the days following the administering of testing, there was a rise in the possibility that the failure to distribute test kits to the teaching staff will result in widespread infection of teaching staff and students in the schools.

Parents' Declarations on Administering Home Tests to Their Children

- A significant rate of parents (about 79% within the framework of the 'Testing and Learning' outline, as shown by the parents' survey) did not submit statements about the antigen tests they administered to their children (either they did not perform the tests or they performed the tests but did not report them) – the reasons for this included, among other things, technical reasons, misunderstanding, lack of motivation and even the assumption that this would not prevent their children from entering the school.

- Among the ultra-orthodox or Arab parents, this rate was even higher (and reached as high as 98% in the ultra-orthodox society on one of the 'Testing and Learning' outline test days, as revealed in the examination conducted by the Ministry of Education).
- About 27% of the parents who participated in the survey (173 parents out of 633) stated that there were parents in their vicinity who always or often reported negative test results, even though they were positive (among the parents from the Arab society, the percentage of parents who made such a statement was 42%).
- About 27% of the principals (180) who participated in the survey indicated that there were no tools available if a student arrived without a declaration. Similarly, 36% of the parents who participated in the survey stated that if their children came to school without a statement, the school did not take any action and behaved as usual. In the absence of a statement in general, and in the absence of a reliable statement in particular, and in the absence of tools allowing the principal to deal with the arrival of a student without a statement, there is real doubt as to the outline's effectiveness in achieving the goal of breaking the chains of infection in schools.

👉 Parental Approvals as a Condition for Vaccinating and Testing the Children – in the vaccinations through mobile units, a minimum threshold of 50 parental approvals was determined for its implementation (in the absence of these, the schools could not summon a vaccination mobile unit and participate in the outline). The survey raised that about 32% of the principals stated that the main reason for not implementing the outline was the absence of parental consent for their child to be vaccinated as part of the outline; About 46% of the principals stated that the Education Shield outline, which also required a minimum threshold of approvals – 75% of the parents. The requirement for a minimum threshold of parental approval as a condition for implementing the outlines has been, more than once, a barrier to implement the outlines in schools.

👉 Public Information, Publicity, and Encouragement to be Vaccinated – about 40% of the 233 parents who responded to the survey and did not vaccinate their children refrained from vaccinating their children for reasons arising directly or indirectly from ineffective information (fear of a new vaccine and lack of information, lack of understanding of the dangers of the Coronavirus and lack of knowledge of the benefits justifying vaccination); Another 39% of parents did not vaccinate their children for objective and other reasons (such as a previous illness of the child or a lack of vaccines); And 21% of parents did not vaccinate their children due to their objection to vaccination (for ideological or religious reasons). The principals who responded to the survey also believed that about 51% of parents did not vaccinate their children due to ineffective information, 35% – due to principled objection, and 14% – for objective and other reasons. From the analysis of the principals' and parents' answers to the survey, the main reason parents did not vaccinate their children was (directly or indirectly)



unconvincing public information activity. This fact is in line with the statements of the parents in the survey that the main problem regarding Covid-19 testing and vaccinations in the education system was "a lack of an appropriate public information campaign – [and the need] to increase and improve the system of public information and trust."



Ministry of Education Headquarters Actions for the Opening of the 2021/22 School Year




– the Ministry of Education formulated an outline for the opening of the 2021/22 school year to enable continuous learning in schools despite the morbidity from Covid-19. In this regard, at the end of August 2021, the Ministry published to district administrators and school principals the outline of return to school, the 'National Plan for the Opening of the 2021/22 Year – During the Covid-19 Period – 'Connecting to Education''; The Ministry opened the national situation room and the district situation rooms to manage the operations; It established several systems for coordinating and managing data to assist in formulating a situation report in the education system on morbidity, on those who have been vaccinated and on those who have recovered; It placed representatives in the 'Inter-Organizational National Vaccination Operations Room' led by the HFC and the Education Desk at the Ministry of Health's Coronavirus Command.

Appointment of Covid-19 Trustees in Elementary Schools

– as of December 2021 (when the rate of children confirmed for Covid-19 was high, and when among children aged 5–11 each day there were 562 new verified children with about 5,600 isolated children), the staffing gap was only 52 Covid-19 trustees – 3,139 trustees were appointed out of 3,191 who were supposed to be appointed – i.e., a staffing rate of 98%.



Key Recommendations

-  **Regulation at the National Level of the Role of the Ministry of Education During a Pandemic Outbreak and the Formulation of Ministerial Procedure** – it is recommended that the Ministry of Defense, responsible for leading the Healthy Surge national preparedness plan, determine in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education and the HFC the tasks that the Ministry of Education is responsible for carrying out during a pandemic outbreak. The Ministry of Education's working interfaces vis-à-vis the other bodies in the system are to be defined, the officials necessary to carry out their tasks designated, and the resources and skills required for the employees examined. It is further recommended that the Ministry of Education prepare a detailed procedure that translates the tasks that will be determined as being under its purview into contingency plans and practice them so that they can be implemented immediately when needed. It is further recommended that until the Healthy Surge plan is updated, the Ministry prepares a temporary plan for coping with a pandemic if one does break out, a plan based on the experience gained not long ago in the outbreak of the Coronavirus.
-  **Supplementary Vaccination in Schools** – it is recommended that the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education, in cooperation with the HFC, examine the vaccination data of the students according to the age groups and according to the place of vaccination – community versus schools. In this framework the relative advantages of each of the partners in the process will be considered – the Ministry of Health, the education system and the HFC – in comparison with their designated roles in routine and emergencies. For instance, it is recommended that vaccinating students only in schools be considered where this treatment has a relative advantage – for example, in schools whose students have difficulty with accessibility or whose residence has a limited deployment of HMOs.
-  **The Operation of the Testing and Vaccination Outlines in Schools and the Logistical Process for Distributing Testing Kits to Students** – it is recommended that the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education cooperate to determine a flexible and efficient method for the operation of the testing and vaccination outlines in schools, for any future case of a pandemic outbreak or a renewal of the Covid-19 outbreak. Within this framework, it is recommended that the need to set a minimum, flexible threshold of parental approval for activating the outlines be examined according to the characteristics of the school – the rate of those vaccinated, the rate of parental response to cooperation with the school's administration, its geographic location and the number of students. It is further recommended that the Ministry of Education, in cooperation with the HFC, the Ministry of Health, and the local authorities, formulate the logistical process for distributing the kits to students and consider proposals made in this regard and that the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health consider providing testing kits to teaching staff as well. It is further recommended that emphasis be placed on vaccinating and testing accessible in schools, especially among populations where the vaccination rate of children is low, and the availability of vaccines in the community is insufficient.

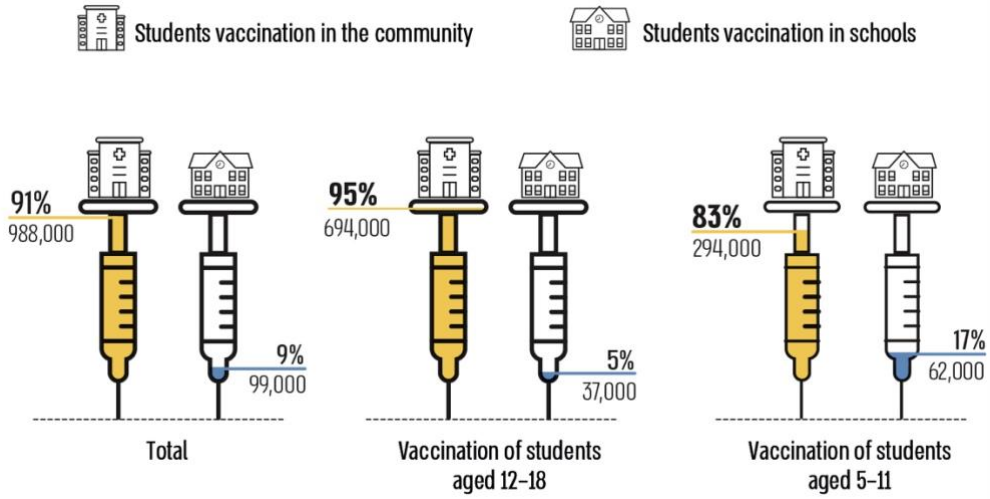


Placement of Covid-19 Trustees in Schools – given the claims of exceptional burden placed on the principals and officials in the secondary schools regarding the handling of Covid-19 testing and vaccinations and the substantial deviation from their main tasks and their current pedagogical and administrative activities – it is recommended that the Ministry of Education, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health and the local government, consider to place Covid-19 trustees in these schools in the event the Coronavirus or any other pandemic breaks out again.



Public Information Activities and Harnessing the Students' Parents – it is recommended that the Ministry of Education and the schools examine the reasons why their public information campaigns to encourage vaccination and join the testing outlines did not reach all parents. It is recommended that the Ministry of Education improve the public information campaigns, increase their accessibility, and ensure that they reach the parents. Moreover, it should examine the barriers that prevented parents from approving their children's participation in the outlines, remove them, and with a forward-looking vision, improve cooperation with parents. It is recommended that the Ministry's spokespersons consider the publication date of the campaigns that it releases advocating vaccination and, in the future, adjust the publication date to the start of the vaccination campaign date.

The Rate and Number of Students Vaccinated in the Community and in Schools as of the End of the Implementation of Each Vaccination Outline, 2021– 2022⁴



According to data from the Ministry of Education, processed by the Office of the State Comptroller.

⁴ The data for vaccination of students aged 12–18 is correct as of December 12, 2021; The data for the vaccination of students aged 5–11 is correct for the time period between December 12, 2021, and January 18, 2022.



Summary

In preparation for the 2021/22 school year, at the beginning of September 2021, the government decided to open all schools after about a year during which the education system operated through remote learning due to the closures or in a format combining remote learning alongside frontal learning. The main challenge facing the education system at that time was to enable the return of students to learn in schools and maintain a study routine in them. According to the government's resolutions and the Ministry of Health directives, the key measures intended to enable the complete return to studies in schools were outlines for the vaccination of students in schools and for rapid antigen testing to assist in the detection and isolation of illness among students and educational staff.

The audit found that only a low rate of students of all ages (4%) were vaccinated as part of the school vaccination outlines, reflecting a failure of the outlines to achieve their goals. Similarly, the contribution of the testing outlines was also low, as reflected in the low rate of participation in these outlines (12% of the schools participated in the Education Shield outline, and 13% of the classes participated in the Green Classroom outline) and in the low rate of parents' statements submitted as part of the testing outlines – for example, in the Testing and Learning outline, the rate of parents' statements was 21% on average as of the outlines' implementation day.

In addition to the limited contribution of the testing and vaccination outlines, the audit raised a series of deficiencies concerning the system for their operation, among others, on the following topics: the Ministry of Education's instructions for schools to implement outlines for vaccinations and Covid-19 testing, distribution of antigen kits, parents' statements for administering Covid-19 testing for students, public information and encouragement of vaccination, and more.

The Ministry of Education, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, should draw lessons from the implementation of the students' testing and vaccination outlines in the 2021/22 school year, rectify the deficiencies noted in this report, and examine the way the recommendations are implemented, with a forward-looking view, to increase the effectiveness of the testing and vaccination outlines in the event of another Covid-19 outbreak or that of another pandemic.