



# Executive Summary of Vax4Health Phase 1

## Understanding Community Needs

### Introduction

Schools play an important role in promoting students' health and wellbeing. For many years, NSW Health has worked in partnership with schools to offer free vaccinations to adolescents. It has been estimated that 53–66% of students in special schools get the recommended vaccines. For students in mainstream schools, the percentage is 76–87%. Reasons for this gap are not well known.

#### Vaccines for adolescents

The vaccines recommended for adolescents aged 12–16 years old include:

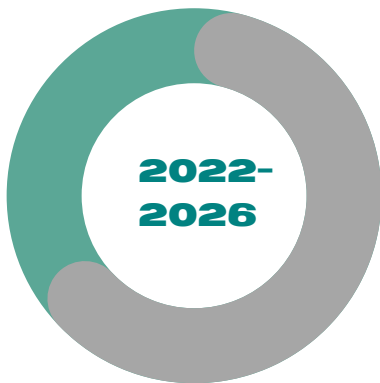
- diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis (dTpa),
- human papillomavirus (HPV), and
- meningococcal ACWY (MenACWY).

These vaccines protect against serious diseases now and later in life.





## Our aim



Vax4Health is a four-year research project that aims to improve vaccination uptake and experiences in NSW special schools. The project involves three phases: 1) Understand needs, 2) Co-design services, and 3) Pilot services. The first phase is now completed. It included understanding the community's needs and main factors influencing vaccine uptake and experiences.

## Our approach

The project involves co-design, a participatory, design-led approach for improving services that involves collaboration between individuals with lived experience, their families and professionals. In the first phase, we talked to 50 people in different roles within the school vaccination program, including students with intellectual disability and/or autism and their parents, along with nurses, teachers, principals, policymakers, program coordinators, and support staff.





## What we did



### How?

Interviews and focus groups



### Who?

50 stakeholders including:  
•10 students  
•6 parents  
•24 school staff  
•10 health staff



### Where?

4 special schools including:  
•2 in Sydney  
•2 regional



### When?

November 2022 - July 2023



## Key insights

We identified 13 stages of the vaccination journey in special schools. All stages are essential and feature strengths in the community that make for a positive vaccination experience (“enablers”), in addition to challenges and gaps (“barriers”).

## The vaccine journey

### BEFORE

1. Stakeholder support for the program
2. Health-school liaison
3. Parental consent
4. Student preparation
5. Health team preparation

### DURING

6. Ensuring a supportive care environment
7. Gaining students' cooperation
8. Reducing students' anxiety
9. Holding students for vaccination
10. Deciding to end vaccination attempts

### AFTER

11. Immediate aftercare
12. Follow-up with parents
13. Catch-up vaccinations



### Key enablers include:

- the knowledge of students about vaccines
- the supportive attitudes of parents regarding school-based vaccination
- the commitment of schools to ensure all families can access the program
- consistent, well-qualified nursing teams that collaborate well with teachers to support individual students for vaccination



### Key barriers include:

- unaddressed needle fear in students
- unmet information needs and health literacy barriers among parents
- inadequate resources for schools to help facilitate the program
- no formal training for nurses to provide care to adolescents with disability
- no policy on reasonable adjustments to ensure students with disability have equal access to vaccines as their peers

While both school staff and health teams work closely to tailor approaches to vaccination for each student, the community identified several opportunities to strengthen person-centred practice within the vaccination program.

Person-centred means to think about each person and what they need in the journey to vaccination. This includes treating students as individuals and respecting their rights as a person, as well as building effective relationships and supportive systems for parents, teachers, and nurses to deliver and facilitate the program.





[Q So, what is good about vaccines?]  
“They make you invincible to certain diseases”  
- Student

## Conclusion

Factors affecting vaccine uptake and experiences in special schools are multifaceted and multileveled. The community suggested a range of improvement ideas to address barriers and build upon enablers across the vaccination journey.

By enhancing person-centred practice, we can foster positive health-promoting experiences for students, their families, school communities, and health professionals.



### Acknowledgements

We acknowledge people of the many traditional countries of New South Wales. We pay our respects to Elders past and present. We recognise and value young people with disability, their families, supporters, and communities. We thank the participants who shared their stories with us and our Community Advisory Board for their support.

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## Future actions

The next phase of the project aims to co-design improvements to the school vaccination program in special schools in NSW.

The goal is to better meet the needs of all persons using, delivering, and facilitating this essential health program through schools.

Interventions will then be evaluated in an implementation phase.