



Education Report: extension of rapid antigen tests for schools and early learning services

To	Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister of Education		
Date:	7 April 2022	Priority:	High
Security Level:	In Confidence	METIS No:	1285382
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Messaging seen by Communications team:	No	Round Robin:	Yes / No

Purpose of Report

1. This report responds to your Office's request for advice confirming your preferred approach to an extension of Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs) in schools and early learning services.

Recommendations

We recommend that you:

- a. **note** on 16 March 2022, you announced the provision of Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs) in state and state integrated schools, kura and early learning services to provide for:
 - i. symptomatic testing of children, young people, and staff in early learning, schools and kura
 - ii. asymptomatic twice weekly testing for a period of four weeks only for staff in early learning services, specialist schools; special needs units and school hostels.
- b. **note** that, as of 5 April, over 2.016 million RATS had been dispatched to schools and early learning services:
 - 1,064,721 to schools, kura, specialist schools, special needs units and boarding hostels
 - 951,303 to early learning services.

Noted

Noted

- c. **note** that the Ministry of Health can make a further one to one and a half million RATs available to the Ministry.

Noted

- d. **agree** that:

- i. we use this supply to proactively provide additional RATs to schools, specialist schools, special needs units, boarding hostels and those early learning services that have opted in;

Yes/No

- ii. we supply additional RATs sufficient for at least an additional two weeks of testing in schools, kura, and early learning services;

Yes/No

- iii. reflecting the greater vulnerability of students, we supply additional RATs to specialist schools, special needs units, boarding hostels sufficient for them to undertake asymptomatic testing of staff until the end of Term 3

Yes/No

- iv. private schools are offered RATs for symptomatic testing of staff and students and asymptomatic testing of staff in any boarding hostel if they agree to meet distributions costs (ie the same approach as used for masks);

Yes/No

- e. **note** that, if you agree to the recommendations in d above, the Ministry will:

- i. inform schools and services of the extension and opt-out approach in the week beginning 11 April;
- ii. ask schools and services that do not wish to receive further RATs to indicate this to us by 20 April 2022;
- iii. start distribution from 21 April 2022 with the aim of all schools and services receiving RATs by the beginning of Term 2.

Noted

Proactive Release

- f. **agree** that the Ministry of Education release this report, once any announcements have been made on an extension of the provision of RATs to schools and early learning services and subject to any redactions in line with the provisions of the Official Information Act 1982.

☒ Agree / ☐ Disagree



Helen Hurst
Head of Covid Response
**Te Pae Aronui | Operations and
Integration**
6/04/2022



Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister of Education

9 / 4 / 2022

Background

1. On 16 March 2022, you announced the provision of Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs) in state and state integrated schools, kura and early learning services to provide for:
 - symptomatic testing of children, young people, and staff in early learning, state and state integrated schools and kura;
 - asymptomatic twice weekly testing for a period of four weeks only for staff in early learning services, specialist schools; special needs units and school hostels.

Private schools were not included.

2. The offer was for a period of four weeks to align with the Omicron peak. There was no commitment by the Ministry of Education to additional testing beyond this initial four weeks and any extension was to be based on how the outbreak is tracking in regions.
3. We proactively distributed RATs to schools, specialist schools, special needs units and hostels and invited early learning services to opt in to symptomatic and asymptomatic testing. Over 2,600 services have opted in to date.
4. Some schools and early learning services received a supply of RATs earlier than others. This was due to the prioritisation of distribution to specialist schools, special needs units and boarding hostels, pressures on distribution networks, and the requirement for early learning services to opt in so we had a sense of the numbers of staff and children and the number of RATs required. This means that some schools and services are further into the four week supply than others.
5. As of 5 April, over 2.016 million RATs had been dispatched to schools and early learning services:
 - 1,064,721 to schools, kura, specialist schools, special needs units and boarding hostels
 - 951,303 to the early learning services that opted in.

Continuing the provision of rapid antigen tests

6. The Ministry of Health has indicated that it can make a further one to one and half million RATs available. This followed discussion at the regular meeting of Health Ministers' with officials on 14 March. That meeting considered a paper, *Options for Increasing Public Access to Rapid Antigen Testing* [HR 20220445, refers] and Ministers requested advice on an option to distribute RATs through schools to provide some asymptomatic testing of some staff. This advice was provided by Health officials on 18 March, with input from the Ministry of Education.
7. This additional supply could be used to extend the current approach.
8. Regions are at different points in the outbreak. For those specialist schools, special needs units and boarding hostels that are past the peak additional RATs can help provide reassurance and build confidence in attendance and participation as the peak of the Omicron outbreak recedes.

9. We recommend that state and state integrated schools, kura, specialist schools, special needs units, boarding hostels, and early learning services are proactively provided with further RAT supplies.
10. Schools, kura and will be provided with sufficient supplies to continue symptomatic testing of students and staff for at least another two weeks. Early learning services will be provided with enough tests to allow symptomatic testing of children and staff and asymptomatic testing of staff for at least a further two weeks.
11. Recognising that students in specialist schools and special needs units are at greater vulnerability and that students in boarding hostels are living in a residential setting, we recommend that the RATs are provided in these settings to support continued surveillance testing of staff (on a voluntary basis) over the winter (ie until the end of Term 3). This would also support confidence in participation in these settings after the end of vaccine mandates. Approximately 300,000 RATs would be required across specialist schools, special needs units and boarding hostels. The Ministry of Health has confirmed that they will be able to supply us with enough RATs for this surveillance testing.
12. We also propose that private schools are able to opt in this time if they agree to pay the costs of distribution. This was the approach used for the distribution of masks.

An opt-out approach for schools, kura and early learning

13. Some schools and services will not require further RATS as they may not have used all those supplied to them by the Ministry and/or have accessed a supply from other sources including District Health Boards or Māori health providers. Recognising this, and to address some of the delays in distribution that occurred in the first round, we propose that schools and services are proactively supplied unless they opt out. We will not proactively provide RATs to those early learning services that have not opted in to the first round of testing.
14. To address the delays in distribution to rural and isolated early learning services and schools that some encountered in the first round, we will allocate a supply of RATs to Ministry regional offices so they are able to supply rural schools and services directly if there are delays in distribution.
15. With your agreement, in the week beginning 11 April 2022 the Ministry will inform schools and services of the extension and that it will be opt-out. Schools and services that do not wish to be supplied will be asked to indicate this to us by 20 April and we will start distribution from 21 April 2022. We will aim to complete distribution by the beginning of the first week of term two.
16. We will be clear that there is no commitment to any further supplies of RATs at this time.