



PPTA TE WEHENGARUA ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2022

COVID-19 – THE IMPACT ON EDUCATION IN NEW ZEALAND



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RECOMMENDATION

1. That the report be received.

1. TEACHER WELLBEING

- 1.1 2022 has been, anecdotally at least, the ‘worst year in working memory’ for many of our kaiako. Any sense of novelty has long worn off, and the daily grind of teaching in the face of such fraught uncertainty has taken its toll.
- 1.2 With successive Covid-19 waves hitting staff, as well as seasonal influenza and a range of other bugs doing the rounds (including norovirus), relievers were in extremely short supply, partly because many relievers have been pulled back into full-time work to plug teacher shortages. Teachers have been regularly giving up their non-contact time to take their colleagues’ classes which pushed all other tasks to after-hours and weekends. A sense of impending burnout has hovered over many of our schools.
- 1.3 While MOE advice was to roster home, move offsite or into hybrid learning when faced with extreme staff shortages, many schools seemed to see it as a ‘badge of honour’ to keep on keeping on, despite the impact this had on both kaiako and learners. This has placed undue stress on both teachers and the system and should not be celebrated.
- 1.4 Through the Accord Covid-19 subgroup, funding was made available to make EAP wellbeing support services available to all staff in state and state-integrated schools, extended until December 2022. A wellbeing support page made available through the Ministry of Health has also been touted through the MOE bulletins.
- 1.5 With ‘long Covid’ a very real pressure on the membership in future, sick leave is front of mind for many of our teachers. Long Covid is currently defined as ‘symptoms beyond 12 weeks’. For those teachers who are now out of their allotment of sick leave there is anxiety about how they will cope with any further illness. In the period between January 12 and July 12 of this year, secondary teachers took 119,903 sick days¹. An increase to sick leave entitlements to an average of 13 days per annum is in our current collective agreement claims (both STCA and ASTCA).
- 1.6 The use of disregarded sick leave and discretionary leave for teachers who have had Covid-19 (either personally or in the home) was welcomed and Field Officers provided a valuable service advising members and working with schools to ensure the correct payments were made and members were receiving their entitlements.

2. STUDENT WELLBEING

- 2.1 Our Year 13 students in 2022 have undertaken the majority of their NCEA experience in the grip of the pandemic. Our Year 11 students who are (for the most part) experiencing their first year of NCEA assessment have never had a ‘normal’ experience of secondary schooling. Disrupted learning and uncertainty has exacerbated student wellbeing concerns which will have an impact for years to come.

¹ Sean Teddy, MOE Operations and Integration Lead, on One News, 25/07/2022 retrieved from <https://www.1news.co.nz/2022/07/25/teacher-sick-days-up-60-compared-to-pre-pandemic-levels/>

- 2.2 The claims tabled in the collective agreement bargaining for this round have been heavily influenced by Covid-19 and there was an overwhelming emphasis placed by members on the wellbeing of students. The claimed staffing increases in pastoral care are a result of the feedback from members across the country and their concerns for ākongā.

3. EQUITABLE OUTCOMES

- 3.1 In particular, Covid-19 has hit our Māori and Pasifika ākongā the hardest. Māori students were disproportionately affected, which was discussed in the report *The Effects of Covid-19 on Māori Education Outcomes*, prepared for Te Pūtea Whakatere Trust². With pre-existing educational inequities only exacerbated (but illuminated) by the pandemic, the digital divide is one area where we need to do better if we are to stem this terrible tide. As they did through the first couple of years of this pandemic, many schools continued to provide equipment such as computers for their ākongā and we have heard many examples of teachers and Principals again delivering food parcels and learning packs for whānau in their communities.
- 3.2 An ERO report out this year, **Learning in a Covid-19 World: The Impact of Covid-19 on Pacific Learners**³, the facts are very clear – Pacific learners were also incredibly affected by the Covid-19 outbreaks and will continue to feel the brunt of the current inequities in our society unless a specific response is undertaken.
- 3.3 Disproportionately affecting our Māori and Pasifika students is also the loss of learning, both temporarily and permanently, for those students who have either left school or had repeated absences due to working in order to support family. With the current cost of living crisis, this is again becoming a major issue for many of our ākongā.

4. VENTILATION

- 4.1 Most schools are due to receive an additional distribution of portable CO₂ monitors and air cleaners, as well as a one-off supplementary energy payment to counter the higher costs of heating classrooms that require open windows as a Covid-19 measure. All schools will receive at least \$200 with funding capped at \$4,000.

² The Effects of Covid-19 on Māori Education Outcomes, report prepared for Te Pūtea Whakatere Trust, August 2020.

³ Learning in a Covid-19 World: The Impact of Covid-19 on Pacific Learners, ERO, 9 May 22, retrieved at <https://ero.govt.nz/our-research/learning-in-a-covid-19-world-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-pacific-learners#:~:text=Impact%20on%20wellbeing&text=Pacific%20learners%20were%20more%20likely,bea use%20of%20Covid%2D19%20restrictions>.

5. MASKS

- 5.1 In Term Two of 2022, the effect of the Ministry of Education changing mask requirements in schools from 'required' to 'strongly recommended' was felt, with a rapid decline in mask wearing from students and some teaching staff.
- 5.2 While we saw that many schools had already begun taking steps to introduce mask requirements themselves, for the beginning of Term Three, the MOE recommended that students from Year 4 and above wear masks indoors for the next four weeks of term. The Government is also providing both adult-sized and child-sized masks for Term Three.
- 5.3 Minister Tinetti sent a letter informing school boards that there was a strong recommendation to review and enforce a mask wearing policy as much as practicable, with the analogy of enforcing 'sun hat and sunblock rules and uniform rules' as a guide for enforcing of mask wearing. While this is no great leap from where we were in Term Two, the messaging has been much stronger, and has been amplified in the media.
- 5.4 There has been a lack of clear guidance, with decisions being devolved down to local level. This has placed additional stress on principals who are required to consult with communities as to policies such as mask wearing rather than simply being able to say, "these are the rules". More guidance from Ministry of Education's regional offices around this would be helpful. We don't consult around seatbelt rules, so it seems odd that we would around masks when the public health advice is so clear. At the Leadership Summit held in Christchurch in July, Minister Hipkins was challenged on the lack of teeth for schools wanting to bring back 'required' mask wearing in schools; he put it back on the individual schools who are empowered to make those decisions for their own communities.

6. MEMBER VIEWS

- 6.1 A Covid-19 Professional Issues Taskforce was established early in the pandemic and met this year, though not as frequently. The taskforce consisted of members and staff. At the May meeting, the usual suspects were discussed: masks, attendance and engagement of students, ventilation, assessment concerns and a general feeling that the communications from the MOE were lacklustre.
- 6.2 Masks are just one of the areas where we have seen a divide in the community and in the membership itself. Very early in the pandemic, the decision was made to follow Ministry of Health guidelines. This placed the Association in opposition to some of our members' views – on both sides of the debate but ensured that we maintained a science-based position.
- 6.3 While some members felt that we were not strong enough with our demands around health and safety, others felt we went too far. Ultimately, the Association felt that following official Ministry of Health advice and guidance was the best measure in terms of a response.

7. THE END OF VACCINATION MANDATES

- 7.1 On April 5 of this year, we saw the end of the vaccine mandate in the education sector. This meant that those teachers who had been placed on leave were able to return to their normal duties at the end of their leave period, or earlier by arrangement. Those staff who had lost their positions due to the mandate were not entitled to return to their previous roles, but they were now able to apply for new positions in schools.
- 7.2 As they have done since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, Field Staff have provided a valuable service to our members at the individual level. Towards the end of 2021, when the vaccine mandates were introduced, there was significant work undertaken by the Field Service to support members who had been affected by these measures.

8. SUPPLY

- 8.1 While we saw a spike in teacher training in 2021, this has not been sustained in 2022. We need to be training more teachers, but with a significant worker shortage in general, teaching needs to be seen to be an attractive career by graduates and career changers. At the time of writing this report there are no concrete numbers available but the anecdotal evidence suggests we will have an exodus of teachers – retirement, leaving for other careers, and those heading overseas. We will see some of these roles picked up by teachers coming into the country but we are yet to see if this will be enough to fill vacancies. The campaign ‘Invest in Teachers, Invest in Aotearoa’ will raise our visibility but a strong result in the collective agreement negotiations would be the best advertisement for a career in teaching.

9. THE ACCORD

- 9.1 The first lockdown showed how the group could come together for the good of both teachers and students, with the accord providing a structure for collaboration to happen. An accord subgroup was set up which included PPTA Te Wehengarua, NZEI, MOE, Te Akatea, NZSTA and other key education sector groups.
- 9.2 The Wellbeing subgroup spent much of its time working out how to spend allocated funds which had been earmarked for Covid-19 relief, with repeated calls from the sector groups to give the funding to schools. It resulted in money being made available to schools through the Covid-19 Relief Fund which schools could apply to, and through extended EAP access. Ultimately the best way to provide support to teachers is through increased staffing, an ask that was unable to be met through the Accord and will have to be gained through collective bargaining.

10. PEAK BODIES MEETINGS

- 10.1 Weekly forums between the Ministry and the 'Peak Bodies' in education (including PPTA, NZPF, NZEI, SPANZ, SPC, NZSTA) have been an opportunity for PPTA Te Wehengarua to raise concerns directly, and in a timely fashion.
- 10.2 While there was a lot of discussion, there were not always concrete solutions to come out of the meetings. At times, the outcomes were improved communications although the message being communicated was not always what our schools wanted to hear. Staffing concerns were high on the list of priorities at many of the meetings, but – as with the Accord subgroups – outside of the group's ability to effect change.
- 10.3 One of the most helpful groups in the covid space has been the Sector Working Group: Schooling Under the Covid Protection Framework with representation also from NZSTA and NZEI, allowing clear and robust discussion with the ministry. It has increasingly become a 'catch-all' around various issues including NCEA & Curriculum timelines as well as the backlog in salary assessments.
- 10.4 Another group that has been helpful through Covid is the NCEA Professional Advisory Group which includes PPTA Te Wehengarua members including a Secondary Principals' Council member. Back in 2020 it was this group that worked to put mitigations in place around the NCEA qualifications. We have continued and are continuing to work in this space.
- 10.5 The downsides of being involved in this work are of course the ongoing stress and rapid response times required. The government had embarked on an epic (curriculum and assessment) change programme that was always going to be a huge ask of the sector without Covid, and with it seems increasingly unmanageable.

11. COMMUNICATION

- 11.1 The use of the PPTA Collective News was vital in keeping members informed of updates and changes regarding Covid-19 protocols, levels and responses.
- 11.2 Extensive web resources were available to staff and were updated as the situation changed, turning the bureaucratic speak into clear and concise advice for members.
- 11.3 There was a huge amount of work with members, branches, health and safety reps and principals to understand and problem solve the practicalities of Covid-19 government responses and what it meant for students, staff and anyone else in the school community that may participate in a school event, or need to come onsite. This included webinars, small group online sessions, written resources, extensive information on the web, newsletters and the ongoing work of the field team managing cases. Our information was widely recognised for being timely, accurate and useful for members and schools.
- 11.4 PPTA Te Wehengarua President Melanie Webber was often called on to make comment on issues in the media that were tricky. She should be commended for stepping up in this space and for her commitment to providing member voice on these issues.

12. CONCLUSION

- 12.1 The 2021 (truncated) Annual Conference Paper *Covid-19: What Have We Learned?* concluded with the statement:

COVID-19 has taught us some vital lessons that we ignore at our peril. Some of these, like equity, are so important they must be addressed immediately. It is not enough to say that they will be addressed in the ten-year plan. Every student who loses out on the opportunity of a fulfilling education is a tragedy. The solutions come at a cost; failure to act comes at a greater cost.

- 12.2 While there have been some changes made, it is clear that equitable outcomes are a long way off for many of our rangatahi, with Māori and Pasifika experiencing the worst.
- 12.3 Teacher wellbeing is at an all-time low, and there must be an undertaking from the Government to address impending staff shortages and workload issues. Teachers have always shown a willingness to go ‘above and beyond’ in their roles, and never more so has this been proven than since the start of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic in Aotearoa New Zealand. Since then, teachers have continued to turn up and be there for their ākongā and their schools. It’s time for the Government to turn up and be there for teachers.