

Annual Conference 2025



ADDRESSING UNMET STUDENT NEED IN NEW ZEALANDS' SECONDARY EDUCATION SYSTEM

A PAPER FOR THE NZPPTA ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2025



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RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the report be received.
2. That PPTA Te Wehengarua calls on the Minister and Ministry of Education to co-develop a comprehensive roadmap to address unmet student needs, ensuring it is inclusive, evidence-based, and grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi.
3. That PPTA Te Wehengarua collaborates with sector bodies, whānau, students, and community organisations to advance this mahi, recognising the importance of cross-sector and culturally responsive partnerships.
4. That PPTA Te Wehengarua calls on the Ministry of Education to undertake a national needs assessment, informed by teacher, student, and whānau voice, to identify and quantify unmet needs across secondary schools.
5. That PPTA Te Wehengarua calls on the government to commit to sustained increases in base operational funding, enabling schools to meet core needs without reliance on short-term or contestable funding streams.
6. That PPTA Te Wehengarua calls for staffing entitlement reform to be prioritised, including reduced student-teacher ratios and expanded formulas to reflect pastoral, cultural, and specialist roles.

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Unmet needs in New Zealand's secondary education system are growing, especially in relation to student wellbeing, learning support, teacher workload, and equitable access to education. PPTA Te Wehengarua calls on the Ministry of Education and government to commit to resourcing a truly inclusive, adequately staffed, and future-ready education system.
- 1.2 PPTA Te Wehengarua activity is guided by a constitution which includes the objectives: To advance the cause of education generally...and to affirm and advance Te Tiriti O Waitangi. PPTA Te Wehengarua is committed to a partnership between tauiwi and tangata whenua, which affirms Te Tiriti o Waitangi.
- 1.3 This paper does not focus on the compounded and intersecting inequities experienced by whānau Māori, Pasifika, and migrant families through the lens of intersectionality, but it is grounded in our broader kaupapa which acknowledges that these layered injustices exist and must be addressed with urgency and cultural responsiveness. The 'Social Model of Disability' "recognises that the impairment[s] disabling a person [are] the barriers created by an inaccessible society" and this is amplified by structural racism and the effects of colonisation.¹
- 1.4 New Zealand's education system is founded on the principle that every young person has the right to equitable access to quality education. Yet growing disparities, staffing shortages, increasing student complexity, and inadequate support structures are undermining this principle.
- 1.5 Unmet need is no longer a marginal issue; it is a systemic crisis affecting teachers, students, and school communities. Providing support for vulnerable students, including those with mental health issues, is identified as the top-ranking issue facing schools.²
- 1.6 The 2025 Education Budget failed to address the scale of the problem. It provided minimal funding increases for learning support, neglected to boost base staffing, and did not commit to a long-term plan for system reform. The reliance on initiatives such as "Teaching the Basics Brilliantly" is a very narrow focus for schools and prioritises standardised outcomes over diverse learning needs and community-responsive education.
- 1.7 There has been an attempt to manufacture a crisis, justifying sweeping reforms including privatisation, centralised control and standardisation.³ Even though our education system is *not* in crisis – it may be flawed but it's not fundamentally broken – this government has insisted on imposing solutions that have not been sector-approved, and in most cases sector-unwelcomed.
- 1.8 Indeed his recent book, *Building on our Strengths – Improving Education in Aotearoa NZ*, Professor Stuart McNaughton makes the argument for not 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater'.⁴ His view is that we must raise the status of the teaching profession, recognise 'adaptive expertise' and imploring the Ministry to seek a range of evidence sources, not simply relying on advocacy groups. More money for research and stronger partnerships between schools and researchers was also advised.
- 1.9 In the recent report *Searching for Utopia: What our education system must confront and what it*

¹ Office for Disability Issues, 2002, cited in *He Whakaaraara Tōkeke*, (2024), p.87, <https://www.hewhakaaraara.nz/report>

² Alansari, M., MacDonald, J., & Li, M. (2023). Secondary principals' perspectives from NZCER 2022 National Survey of Schools. NZCER. <https://doi.org/10.18296/rep.0038>

³ Friedman laid out his theory in the 1982 preface to his signature treatise, *Capitalism and Freedom*, originally published in 1962: "Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. . . . Our basic function [is] to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible"—by which he meant enacting radical deregulation, privatization of national industries and public-sector programs, and deep cuts to the welfare state— "becomes the politically inevitable."

⁴ McNaughton, S. (2024). *Building on Our Strengths*. NZCER Press.

could be,⁵ authors Hood and Macann begin with a call back to the 1995 report *Tinkering Towards Utopia; A century of public school reform* and posit the same conclusion.⁶ ‘Tinkering’ with curriculum and pedagogy (something the electoral swing encourages and enables) will never create enough change to be of any substance.

- 1.10 The “increasing challenges of neurodiversity and challenges to socio-emotional and mental health” are mostly being left to schools to deal with, “in a piecemeal, adhoc and isolated way”.⁷

“We live in a multicultural society, but our education system doesn’t recognise that. It’s based on Pākehā values that contradict and/or clash with many different cultures like Pacific and Māori.”

– Pacific Tertiary Student⁸

2. THE NATURE OF UNMET NEED

2.1 Learning Support

- 2.1.1 Secondary schools are facing inadequate specialist support for neurodivergent students, ESOL learners, and those with complex behavioural needs. There is an urgent need for more effective interventions to enable all of our ākonga to make the most of the educational opportunities available.
- 2.1.2 In 2022 the Highest Needs Review found that “significant change” was needed “across all layers of the education system”, allowing for “individualised needs of learners with the highest needs” to be met.⁹ Simply ‘rearranging the deckchairs’ is not going to cut the mustard, and changes to individualised support in isolation is not enough.
- 2.1.3 One in five children and young people need extra support for their learning which includes learning difficulties, disadvantage, physical or mental health, or behaviour. Learning supports are critical for learners who face persistent barriers to “attending, participating, and progressing in education”.¹⁰
- 2.1.4 Tailored supports need to be “integrated” into both school and class-wide practices to allow for, and support, the “presence, participation, progress and belonging of learners with high needs in local settings”.¹¹ Children and their whānau should be able to “access the support they need from the moment they enter early learning until when they leave school”.¹²
- 2.1.5 Neurodivergent students—those with cognitive, learning, sensory, and behavioural differences such as ADHD, autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia, and others—thrive best when schools provide inclusive, responsive, and well-supported environments.
- 2.1.6 What we have instead is an over-reliance on teachers without training or time to manage complex needs.
- 2.1.7 We want to see smaller class sizes combined with specialist teachers who have trauma-

⁵ Hood, N., & Macann, V. (2024). *Searching for Utopia: What our education system must confront and what it could be*.

<https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Koi-Tu-Searching-for-Utopia-Education-Report.pdf>

⁶ Tyack, D., & Cuban, L. (1995). *Tinkering toward Utopia*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjz83cb>

⁷ Hood and Macann, (2024) p.4

⁸ *He Whakaaraara Tōkeke*, (2024), p.56

⁹ Ministry of Education, (2022), *Highest Needs Review*, <https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/information-releases/issue-specific-information-releases/highest-needs-review>

¹⁰ Ministry of Education Website, <https://www.education.govt.nz/>

¹¹ *Highest Needs Review*, p. 8

¹² *Ibid*, p.6

informed practice, and who have up-to-date learning about combinations of neurodivergence. Our teachers need ongoing professional learning about autism, ADHD, sensory processing, anxiety, and trauma-informed practice. It is equally important that this includes culturally responsive approaches that also recognise intersectionality (e.g., neurodivergent Māori or Pasifika learners).

- 2.1.8 Research shows us that “Autistic children in New Zealand are almost three times more likely to be stood down or suspended from school than children who aren't autistic” and one in 20 (more than 500) were formally stood down or suspended (and this is not counting the (illegal) ‘kiwi suspensions’).
- 2.1.9 This same research, conducted by Dr Nick Bowden from the University of Otago, found that ORS funding provided a stark level of difference for students with autism and that “putting high-need funding or targeted funding around kids that need it - autistic students that need it - results in better outcomes”¹³.
- 2.1.10 The results were “pretty powerful ... and hard to ignore, hopefully, for policy-makers”.¹⁴
- 2.1.11 We know that learning losses have been the most severe among our most marginalised students since ‘the health crises’.¹⁵

2.2 Attendance

- 2.2.1 We also know that neurodivergence is not the only unmet need affecting ākonga attendance.
- 2.2.2 It’s a no-brainer that when our students feel connected to the learning and to their school environment, they are more likely to attend school. We also know that sometimes ‘life be lifing’ and for a myriad of reasons, children either cannot or do not want to attend.
- 2.2.3 The Associate Minister of Education caused ripples earlier this year when he announced punitive measures for the parents and whānau of truant ākonga, saying that “[p]rosecution is a reality for parents who refuse to send their children to school and ignore supports to ensure their children are in class and learning.”¹⁶
- 2.2.4 The Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study (The Dunedin Study) showed that the issues are systemic – we need multisystemic therapy to stop ākonga and their families falling through the gaps.¹⁷
- 2.2.5 The Dunedin study found that young people who feel connected to school and who had strong relationships with teachers and peers were more likely to remain engaged, even if they faced difficulties at home.
- 2.2.6 The research repeatedly shows “what most of us know; there’s a strong relationship between school attendance and life outcomes”.¹⁸ Regular school attendance creates opportunities for success, and it goes without saying that “lots of absence from school goes

¹³ Bowden, N., Anns, F., Vu, H., Dacombe, J., Muir, C., Russell, J., van der Meer, L., Williams, J., & Clendon, S. (2025). School Attendance Among Autistic Students in Aotearoa/New Zealand: A Population Cross-Sectional Study Using the Integrated Data Infrastructure. *Journal of paediatrics and child health*, 61(4), 609–616. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpc.16795>

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ OECD, 2021

¹⁶ <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/measures-encourage-student-attendance-school-strengthened>

¹⁷ Moffitt, T. E., Arseneault, L., Belsky, D., Dickson, N., Hancox, R. J., Harrington, H., Houts, R., Poulton, R., Roberts, B. W., Ross, S., Sears, M. R., Thomson, W. M., & Caspi, A. (2011). A gradient of childhood self-control predicts health, wealth, and public safety. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 108(7), 2693–2698. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1010076108>

¹⁸ <https://www.lifeeducation.org.nz/truancy>

with lower attainment”.¹⁹

- 2.2.7 Creating inclusive schools that meet the needs of all learners is crucial. High quality education systems, providing fair access for children from all “social and economic backgrounds” is acknowledged as a way to “lift people out of poverty and empower students to reach their full potential”.²⁰
- 2.2.8 Understanding the socioeconomic deprivation that many of our most vulnerable ākonga and their whānau experience is crucial to making real change that can contribute to equitable societies where all can thrive. The Ka Ora, Ka Ako programme that fed some of these ākonga was instrumental in improving the wellbeing of all of those who were involved. A report commissioned by the Ministry of Education found that “[b]y alleviating food insecurity and reducing the stigma associated with not having kai, the programme has encouraged more consistent attendance among underserved ākonga”.²¹ It is also worth noting that lower levels of aggression and increased wellbeing were also reported.
- 2.2.9 Searching for Utopia discusses the schools as hubs model (something that is PPTA Te Wehengarua policy) – recognising “the multifactorial nature of learning, engagement and achievement in schools” and the potential for “connecting schools...with a broader range of social services, multi-generational support and population health services”.²² This could go some way to ensure that many of the socioeconomic factors that can affect attendance could be addressed.

2.3 Mental Health and Wellbeing

- 2.3.1 Aotearoa New Zealand, and indeed the entire globe, is seeing rising levels of anxiety, depression, school avoidance and trauma, and exacerbating the level of need is the shortage of guidance counsellors available to schools. The New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC) has a recommendation of staffing ratios in schools as “one counsellor to 400 students...some schools in NZ have 1 to 1000”.²³ Increasingly, our schools are not seen as a safe place for ākonga.
- 2.3.2 Long waiting lists for both school and private counsellor services are of extreme concern for anyone working with young people says NZAC President Sarah Maindonald, and is a “matter of student safety, particularly given our high youth suicide rates and pervasive mental health concerns”.²⁴
- 2.3.3 While not the only factor in these rising levels, the digital realm is having considerable creep into the lives of rangatahi, and we know that cyberbullying, “grooming and...misinformation” is having a negative impact on the mental health of our students.²⁵ Unlike ‘in our day’²⁶, there is no escape for our young people and the pressure they are facing is relentless.
- 2.3.4 Systemically, our schools have a lack of sustainable funding for wellbeing coordinators, pastoral deans, and health teams. In 2021, 82% of teachers reported an increase in mental health issues with their students.²⁷ This is not something that will go away without

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ OECD (2024), *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en>.

²¹ Mana Pounamu Consulting & Ministry of Education, *Nau Mai E Ngā Hua: Kaupapa Māori Evaluation of Ka Ora Ka Ako | Healthy School Lunches Programme*, (2024), p.36.

²² Hood, N., & Macann, V. (2024), p.13

²³ Quinn, Jamie. The Role of School Counsellors For Student Wellbeing, *Principals Today*, (2025). <https://principalstoday.co.nz/the-role-of-school-counsellors-for-student-wellbeing/>

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ We acknowledge that ‘in our day’ has a wide meaning in a workforce ranging from 24 to 99 years of age.

²⁷ Quinn, (2025)

considerable and sustainable management (and resourcing) in our schools.

2.4 Teacher Workload and Burnout

- 2.4.1 Teachers are on the 'front lines' and there is not only an expectation but a need to fill gaps left by social services, health, and learning support systems.
- 2.4.2 It is a common saying that teachers' working conditions are children's learning conditions. Increased administrative and compliance demands have left our members feeling under significant pressure.
- 2.4.3 Unmanageable class sizes in some areas and kaiako teaching outside of their specialist subject areas is exacerbating the burnout that our members are feeling. The rising number of principals being forced to employ untrained/unqualified teachers because they "could not find trained and qualified teachers"²⁸ to employ just tumbles on top, with Middle Leaders and teachers needing to further support and mentor these staff alongside their other duties.
- 2.4.4 In some regions, our members anecdotally report a lack of relief teachers available. Not some, not few, none. This means colleagues having to cover classes when a teacher is unwell, and it has significant impacts on the ability to take up PLD opportunities that fall outside of the mandated school-wide learning.

²⁸ PPTA, *PPTA Te Wehengarua Staffing Report 2024*, (2024). <https://www.ppta.org.nz/about-ppta/publication-library/document/2409>

2.5 Alternative Education

- 2.5.1 We need a suite of approaches and to see creativity of provision in the Alternative Education space.
- 2.5.2 Despite some increase in funding for alternative education in this year's budget, it remains one of the most drastically underfunded areas of our secondary education system.
- 2.5.3 There is a rapidly increasing need for a properly funded and resourced end-to-end system of support for young people at risk of disengaging from education. Funding for alternative education places has not increased for many years, while need has skyrocketed.
- 2.5.4 One possibility is to situate Alt-Eds on site in all schools – allowing ākonga to be integrated back into school life without too much of a disruption on the ākonga and their whānau. We need to decide what the purpose of Alt-Ed is. Is it to allow the student to return to regular schooling or to provide an alternative path? Or is it both?
- 2.5.5 At the moment Alt-Ed is seen as respite, but some schools are using it as a way to shift certain problems 'out of sight'. There are many examples of local initiatives – models of 'connection first' – with a combination of teachers and teacher aides. Emotions are regulated, and the learning follows.

3. STRUCTURAL CAUSES

3.1 Fragmented Funding

- 3.1.1 Schools are too reliant on contestable, one-off, or short-term funding to meet basic needs. Pilots that are not picked up permanently create gaps when they end and contribute to the change fatigue that our kaiako report.
- 3.1.2 The end of Kāhui Ako will have a significant impact on some of the local initiatives that schools were invested in, and we are yet to see if and how schools might be able to continue any of these.
- 3.1.3 Ultimately, the chronic underfunding of frontline education support staff and learning support services has 'come home to roost'. It is not only the fault of this government, or the last political cycle. It is ongoing, and successive governments have failed to resolve this.
- 3.1.4 We do have significant concern that the privatisation of the education system that this government seems desperate to embed will only make this worse. \$153 million for charter schools, and indeed \$10 million for 215 students as reported earlier this year, could have made significant impact in the public system.²⁹

²⁹ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/politics/360654799/charter-schools-david-seymour-defends-10-million-215-students>

3.2 Inadequate Cross-Sector Integration

- 3.2.1 Education, health, and social services often operate in silos, leaving schools to bridge gaps. We want to see a co-ordinated approach to supports. The current system is failing our young people, their whānau, and wider society. We need to see long-term, cross-sector investment and collaboration.

4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 Successive governments have made incremental changes without cohesive system design or long-term vision. This paper calls on the Ministry of Education to work alongside PPTA Te Wehengarua to co-design a future-focused, equitable education system that is fit for purpose - an Aotearoa New Zealand purpose.

4.1 A National Needs Assessment

- 4.1.1 PPTA Te Wehengarua calls for a government-led but sector-informed audit of unmet need across secondary schools. This collection of data must include teacher, student, and whānau voice.

4.2 Base Funding Increases

- 4.2.1 Our schools need to see an increase in core operational funding to meet real costs. Principals should not be required to make impossible compromises as they struggle to meet the fundamental needs of their school communities.
- 4.2.2 We need to see permanent roles for learning support and wellbeing staff in all schools, and these need to be allocated according to need.

4.3 Staffing Entitlement Reform

- 4.3.1 For any significant and sustainable change for the better, there needs to be a planned reduction in student-teacher ratios and these need to be incorporated into the collective agreements.
- 4.3.2 We want to see an expanded staffing formula to reflect pastoral, cultural, and specialist roles.

4.4 Integrated Services in Schools

- 4.4.1 PPTA Te Wehengarua once again calls for a co-location of health, social services, and specialist teams within school hubs.
- 4.4.2 There must be ongoing funding for community engagement and culturally sustaining practices.

4.5 Strategic Workforce Development

- 4.5.1 Incentives and professional pathways are required to retain and upskill teachers.
- 4.5.2 For our most vulnerable ākonga, ongoing inservice teacher education and PLD in trauma-informed practice, inclusive education, and equity is required.

5 CONCLUSION

- 5.1 In 2015, world leaders gathered to set Sustainable Development Goals. Goal 4 looks to ensure “inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”.³⁰ For all. Not for some. Not only for those who can afford to. Not only for those for whom learning is ‘easy’ or straightforward. For all.
- 5.2 PPTA Te Wehengarua fundamentally believes that education is a public good, that it should be equitably resourced and grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Addressing unmet need is not an optional extra, it is core to our professional responsibility and moral mandate. The current system places unreasonable burdens on teachers while failing our most vulnerable students.
- 5.3 The scale of unmet need in New Zealand’s secondary schools is undeniable. The PPTA calls on the government to act with urgency, ambition, and fairness. Education must be designed for the needs of all learners, not just the ones who fit within the margins.

³⁰ United Nations Sustainable Development Goals <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>