

Raising Achievement in Secondary Schools



Ko te Tamaiti te Pūtake o te Kaupapa The Child – the Heart of the Matter



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The Education Review Office (ERO) is an independent government department that reviews the performance of New Zealand's schools and early childhood services, and reports publicly on what it finds.

Foreword

This report is the latest in a series produced by ERO over the past three years about secondary schools in New Zealand.

It looks at how 40 secondary schools inquire about and respond to achievement data, with a particular emphasis on the schools' analysis of their National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) Level 2 results. This report is useful for informing what practices are working and what are not in helping meet the Government's goal of having 85 percent of 18-year-olds achieving the NCEA Level 2 or equivalent by 2017.

One-quarter of schools in the sample were effectively using inquiry and improvement approaches to raise student achievement. The remaining three-quarters had further progress to make.

The most effective schools emphasised the importance of teachers knowing their students well and improving links with families and whānau, particularly for those students at risk of underachievement. The less effective schools lacked the evidence that their inquiry and improvement approaches had really raised student achievement. There was a clear need for more systematic monitoring of the impact of their strategies for students.

Many schools had improved their mentoring and pastoral care of students so they could provide additional support for students at risk of not achieving their NCEA qualifications. However, there was little recent evidence of innovative changes to curriculum to improve student achievement.

Many schools in the sample would benefit from gaining greater insights into what was working well in their curriculum and what should change if they were going to influence and potentially raise student achievement. By showing the approaches taken by effective schools, ERO hopes that other schools will find this information useful in their own settings.

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June 2014

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Overview

In the last three years ERO has published a series of reports about secondary schools. These reports have focused on student achievement, pathways, careers and the curriculum. Included in these reports has been a strong focus on student achievement. This focus has been consistent with the Government's Better Public Service goal of having 85 percent of 18-year-olds achieving the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) Level 2 (or equivalent) by 2017.

In 2013 ERO published the first of its reports evaluating the work of schools aiming to lift the achievement of targeted groups of Year 12 students.¹ These schools were part of a Ministry initiative. The aim of the project was to see what schools could do to assist students who were not expected to achieve the NCEA Level 2 without additional support. ERO will publish a second report about a larger group of these schools later in 2014.

While the two reports above have examined schools' strategies to identify and assist their target cohorts to achieve NCEA Level 2, this report – *Raising Achievement in Secondary Schools* – takes a broader approach to how schools inquire and respond to achievement data. Specifically, it examines how secondary schools have reviewed their 2011 and 2012 achievement information and developed activities, innovations or approaches to improve achievement. ERO's starting point for this work was schools' analysis of NCEA Level 2 results, although student achievement across each school was considered.

This evaluation found that while most New Zealand secondary schools have carried out some form of inquiry and improvement, the overall effectiveness of these processes was mixed.

Only one-quarter of schools in this evaluation had effectively inquired into achievement information and introduced changes that had made a noticeable difference to student success.

It is disappointing to find that while most of the remaining schools had invested a considerable amount of time analysing achievement information, the inquiries did not result in new approaches or innovations that improved achievement.

ERO identified three distinct groups of secondary schools in this evaluation. Each of these groups showed a different level of sophistication or effectiveness with regard to the analysis of achievement information and developing a response that improves results.

Ten of the 40 schools in this study had developed effective inquiry and improvement approaches. These schools had a culture of inquiry and responsiveness that had developed over several years. They had a range of effective approaches in place, a shared commitment to improving the status quo and a growing focus on involving families.

OVERVIEW

1 ERO (2013) Increasing Educational Achievement in Secondary Schools. Wellington: Education Review Office.

These schools had good (and/or rising) levels of achievement, with evidence of having made a difference for targeted groups of students.

The changes made by these schools were mostly based around improvements to their pastoral care and support initiatives. There was less emphasis placed on developing innovations in the curriculum. The pastoral care and support improvements included the monitoring of student achievement and providing individualised responses based on student need. There were also systems introduced to mentor students, provide career planning, improve literacy and support with students' homework.

While some of these schools had effective (and innovative) curriculum initiatives in place, the curriculum modifications made by most of these schools, as a result of their inquiry processes, were relatively minor and not likely to substantially raise achievement. One of these schools, with a predominantly Māori roll, did make a significant change to its curriculum with the aim of improving learning. This school also made the most significant achievement gains of all the schools. These findings suggest that while there are gains to be made in schools strengthening their pastoral care processes, school personnel also need to see curriculum change, and improved teaching and learning, as a key part of engaging students and raising achievement.

A second group of 14 schools demonstrated some effective inquiry and improvement processes. They exhibited a range of positive characteristics, but did not have the same strategic and coordinated approach to raising achievement as the most effective schools.

While they had some good initiatives in place, their inquiry and improvement processes had yet to show significant improvements in the outcomes of students, especially underachieving students. The teachers at these schools also tended to be in the beginning stages when it came to analysing data, developing teaching as inquiry approaches and making effective changes.

Many of these schools were using NCEA participation data to review their overall performance, and were subsequently failing to analyse all of the significant issues affecting student achievement,² such as examining the reasons why students drop out of school early.

A third group of 16 schools did not demonstrate effective school-wide approaches to inquiry and improvement. Any effective approaches found at these schools were usually limited to a minority of teachers. Many of the teachers at these schools believed that there was little they could do to alter the achievement levels of their students. As a result, they typically showed a lack of urgency in developing initiatives. At some of these schools, significant issues involving student attendance and engagement were not being addressed.

2 Participation data involves only those students who were actually entered by schools into NZQA qualifications. It typically does not include students who did not submit work for assessment as well as those who may have been absent for examinations. Students who leave during a school year may not be included in a school's participation data, although they would form part of the school's overall roll-based data (that is the gualifications achieved by a school measured against the actual number of students at the school).

Considerable work is needed before all New Zealand's secondary schools consistently and effectively **use inquiry and improvement processes** that lead to necessary curriculum changes for students not previously likely to achieve NCEA Level 2.

School leaders, middle-managers and teachers must improve their analysis and interpretation of assessment and other information they collect about students. Such skills are needed to gain greater insights into what is working well and what should change to most influence student achievement.

As part of an inquiry and improvement approach, school leaders and teachers must also see **curriculum development as a potentially critical area for change**. In particular, they should consider wholesale changes to the way their resources, options and timetables are organised to ensure that those students who may not previously have achieved well are fully engaged and learning. A focus on mentoring students to achieve the subject qualifications they are participating in is not enough on its own.

Much more could be achieved if curriculum changes were introduced that ensure every student participates in courses that both engage them and lead to qualifications that enable them to reach their potential in the future.

NEXT STEPS

ERO recommends that the Ministry of Education:

- disseminates effective practice and provides support materials to encourage teachers and schools to, not only improve mentoring and support for students, but also improve curriculum opportunities so programmes are engaging and respond to each student's strengths, interests, needs and aspirations
- continues to support schools to develop expertise in analysing a range of student data, identify suitable responses, implement these strategies and monitor their effectiveness.

ERO recommends that schools:

- use this report's findings, conclusion and indicators to review the quality of their overall approach to improving student achievement
- review and develop their curriculum to provide opportunities that are engaging and more creatively respond to the individual strengths, interests, needs and aspirations of all students
- develop programmes that target underachieving students and ensure that effective pastoral, careers and curricula responses are in place to help these students reach their potential
- regularly review their strategies for target groups of students, and determine which approaches are working and which should be discontinued.

NTRODUCTION

3 The Ministry of Education's Education Counts website holds information on PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), PIRLs (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) and TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study). New Zealand publications can be accessed at www.educationcounts.govt.nz/ publications

- 4 Retrieved from www. minedu.govt.nz/theMinistry/ BetterPublicServices/ More18YearOldsWithNCEALevel2. aspx and also from www.educationcounts.govt.nz/ indicators/main/education-andlearning-outcomes/114325
- 5 Retrieved from www. minedu.govt.nz/theMinistry/ BetterPublicServices/ More18YearOldsWithNCEALevel2. aspx
- 6 A sixth pathway Creative Industries – is currently being developed.

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Introduction

Achievement in New Zealand schools

Many New Zealand students achieve well at school. International assessments such as PISA, TIMMS and PIRLS reflect the high levels of achievement by some New Zealand students.³ Conversely, these international comparisons also show high levels of disparity between our highest and lowest achievers. While many Māori, Pacific and students from low socio-economic backgrounds are among those who achieve well, there are high numbers who are not.

New Zealand's education system is focused on improving the achievement of its students. As part of the Government's Better Public Services goals the following target has been set for achievement across the education system:

• 85 percent of 18-year-olds will have achieved NCEA Level 2 or equivalent qualification in 2017.

In 2012, 77.2 percent of 18-year-olds achieved NCEA Level 2 in 2012, compared with 74.3 percent in 2011. The percentage of Māori 18-year-olds with NCEA Level 2, or equivalent, increased from 57.1 percent in 2011 to 60.9 percent in 2012. The percentage of Pacific 18-year-olds gaining NCEA Level 2 increased 2.6 percent to 68.1 percent.⁴

The Ministry of Education has reported that at 77.2 percent:

... the NCEA Level 2 achievement rate for 2012 means the Government and the education sector is on track to achieve the Better Public Services target for 85 percent of 18-year-olds to have achieved NCEA Level 2, or an equivalent qualification, in 2017.⁵

A key aspect of the Government's efforts to raise NCEA achievement is the emphasis on vocational programmes for secondary students, especially through the Youth Guarantee scheme. For example, the vocational pathways tool helps students identify the skills and qualifications they need across five broad employment sectors.⁶ These five areas are:

- Manufacturing and Technology
- Construction and Infrastructure
- Primary Industries
- Social and Community Services
- Service Industries.

The Youth Guarantee scheme also includes secondary-tertiary partnerships (Trades Academies), and the fees-free scheme, which provides one year of full-time study for 16 and 17-year-old students in vocationally focused training programmes.

In September 2013, the Government announced an extension of the Youth Guarantee scheme to all 18 and 19-year-olds. Foundation courses (Levels 1 and 2) will be fees-free for 20 to 24-year-olds.⁷

Previous ERO reports

Secondary Schools: Pathways to future education, training and employment (July 2013)

In this evaluation ERO investigated how well 74 secondary schools were preparing students for future opportunities in education, training and employment. The report's findings raised fundamental questions about the responsiveness of secondary schools. In particular, ERO found that most New Zealand schools are not showing the levels of innovation required to ensure that all learners have suitable pathways to future education, training and employment.

Ten schools showed high levels of responsiveness to individual students, through their academic, careers and pastoral systems, but these schools had relatively low proportions of priority learners.⁸ Schools with relatively high levels of priority learners were generally less responsive and did not have the careers, pastoral or curriculum approaches to support high numbers of students to gain qualifications and access suitable pathways.

The educational and social context of these schools was a factor in why many struggled to respond to individual student needs and aspirations. Staff at these schools were often overwhelmed with the range of needs presented by students. A focus for these schools, and the Ministry of Education, is on helping priority learners gain access to high quality education, health and social services.⁹

In this evaluation ERO also found across the schools only a limited number of innovative options in academically focused courses. Few schools, for example, had attempted to develop academic courses that spanned two or more curriculum areas. There were very few academic courses specifically aimed at improving outcomes for Māori or Pacific students. Similarly, ERO found some schools were specifically encouraging Māori and Pacific students to take vocationally-based courses.

- 7 Retrieved from www.beehive. govt.nz/release/foundationeducation-be-fees-free-20-24year-olds
- 8 Priority learners include those who have achieved lower levels of success in the education system. This includes many Māori and Pacific students as well as students with special needs and students from a low socio-economic background.
- 9 The report notes the efforts of the Social Sector Trials and the Prime Minister's Youth Mental Health initiative, which are in the early stages of providing an increased range of wraparound support to students and their families.

Increasing educational achievement in secondary schools (August 2013) In this project ERO reported on the work of 13 schools which had, to varying extents, put initiatives in place to raise NCEA achievement. This work was focused on target groups of students who were identified as being at risk of not completing their NCEA Level 2 qualifications. The primary focus for this work was on NCEA Level 2, in line with the Government's target of 85 percent of 18-year-olds achieving NCEA Level 2 in 2017.

The report identified a range of good practices that supported student achievement, including:

- individualised learning and support for students
- careful tracking and monitoring of student achievement
- positive relationships with students and their families
- robust review and improvement of teaching and support initiatives.

The report also identified a series of challenges that all secondary schools need to consider when attempting to improve their NCEA achievement. These include the need for schools to provide credible pathways for students, and not just focus on acquiring credits. It also discussed the need for schools to build a sustainable, whole-school focus on supporting students – through their pastoral, curriculum and careers systems – rather than leaving student support roles in the hands of a few staff.

The report emphasised the need for secondary schools to go beyond a focus on students achieving NCEA Level 2 and to understand the broad context of student achievement, particularly in Years 9 and 10 when students are developing the core skills they need to succeed.¹⁰

10 See also ERO (2012) Literacy and Mathematics in Years 9 and 10: Using Achievement Information to Promote Success. Wellington: Education Review Office.

Methodology

The information for this evaluation was collected from 40 secondary and composite schools as part of each school's education review during Terms 2 and 3, 2013. These schools represented a variety of deciles and sizes, and were from a range of locations – from main urban centres to small rural settlements (see Appendix 2).

Three broad questions were the focus of this evaluation:

- How effectively are schools using inquiry and improvement approaches to increase the number of students leaving school with NCEA Level 2 or above?
- What activities, innovations or approaches have schools used to successfully increase the number of students leaving with NCEA Level 2 or above?
- What factors/issues or challenges have prevented schools effectively inquiring and improving their number of school leavers with NCEA Level 2 or above?

In the context of this evaluation, 'inquiry and improvement' processes include the range of activities schools undertake to analyse and respond to student achievement information. These inquiry processes which schools could use include regular self-review activities, departmental reviews and annual reports, as well as the various teaching as inquiry projects underway at a school. They can also include informal activities based on staff judgements in response to an issue affecting student achievement, engagement or attendance. The responses schools could make can include changes to their curriculum, pastoral care or careers systems.

The main area for investigation was how schools have responded to their annual NCEA results. ERO evaluated how schools analysed their 2011 and 2012 results and what they did to improve student achievement. To be judged as effective, ERO found initiatives had led to increases in student achievement. The data examined by review teams included the Ministry of Education's roll-based achievement profiles for each school.¹¹

While the emphasis was placed on achievement at NCEA Level 2, review teams examined a variety of achievement information to make judgements about how well schools were developing effective inquiry and improvement processes. This included other NCEA achievement information and assessment information from students in Years 7 to 10 (or 9 to 10, where appropriate).

METHODOLOGY

11 Ministry achievement profiles are not public documents. These are prepared by the Ministry on the basis of a school's roll numbers and their overall NCEA achievement. Potential difficulties with these profiles are explored in the discussion section of this report.

FINDINGS

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Findings

In identifying secondary schools that were effective in raising achievement, the key features considered were:

- the use of evidence to inform the school's analysis of its patterns of success or failure
- the extent to which school personnel had a well-informed understanding of why both individuals and groups of students have previously succeeded or failed
- the effective implementation of curriculum, pastoral care and/or careers initiatives targeted at improving achievement
- changes in student achievement, especially in NCEA Level 2, but also changes across other NCEA levels and improvements made in Years 7 to 10 (or 9 to 10, where appropriate). In particular, emphasis was put on changes in the achievement of Māori and Pacific students.

The overall results show that 10 of the 40 schools had inquiry and improvement processes that made a significant difference to student achievement. A culture of inquiry and responsiveness successfully operated across each of these schools. The efforts of staff at these schools led to improvements in student achievement, including that of targeted Māori and Pacific students.

ERO identified that 14 of the 40 schools had inquiry and improvement approaches that were 'somewhat effective'. These schools showed some evidence of improvement, although these changes did not consistently or significantly affect most students, especially priority learners. While some staff at these schools had developed useful approaches, these schools had yet to develop a consistently effective school-wide approach to investigating and responding to student achievement information.

Sixteen of the 40 schools were identified as having inquiry and improvement processes of **limited effectiveness**. ERO found little evidence that their efforts were changing the school's achievement patterns. Staff often lacked urgency and focus in responding to student achievement issues. School-wide guidelines or processes to support staff to understand and respond to student achievement issues tended to be weak.

SCHOOLS WITH EFFECTIVE INQUIRY AND IMPROVEMENT PROCESSES

Ten of the 40 secondary schools in this evaluation demonstrated effective inquiry and improvement processes. These schools were a variety of sizes and from both rural and urban settings. Four were high decile schools, five middle decile schools and one was low decile.

These schools each had a culture of inquiry and a focus on improving achievement. Staff demonstrated an urgency to both identify achievement issues and develop responses that would improve student learning and engagement. They were focused on identifying 'who' were the students underachieving, 'what' needed to change, and 'how well' new school initiatives had contributed to any gains in achievement. The leaders and teachers were confident that they could work with students and their families to change things for the better. This belief was supported by good levels of teamwork and coordination across the school.

In addition to the above qualities, these schools had:

- levels of academic achievement that were rising and/or above schools of a similar decile, and Māori student achievement in NCEA Levels 1 and 2 (but typically not University Entrance) was comparable to that of all leavers¹²
- leadership that underlined the importance of investigating and responding to achievement information, including evidence of student underachievement
- a shared commitment from staff to improve the status quo and a relentless focus on improving student achievement
- a focus on engaging individual students at risk of not achieving and helping them succeed
- made a difference for targeted groups of students, including Māori and Pacific students
- trustees who received information about student achievement and used this to inform school strategies and operations
- made some modifications to the curriculum to respond to the identified needs of students
- well-developed school-wide frameworks, guidelines and expectations for inquiring and responding to student achievement information
- professional development and support for teachers to develop skills in analysing data and to manage teaching as inquiry projects
- an integrated approach to achievement information that was not limited to academic achievement but also included a range of student aspirations (e.g. vocational, sporting and cultural)

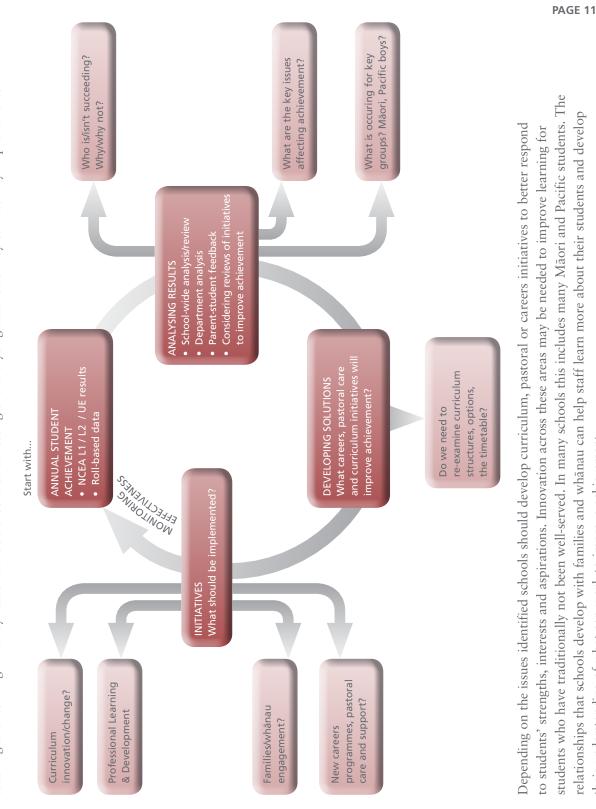
12 Across these schools for NCEA Levels 1 and 2 Māori school leavers were typically just above, equal or just below the rates for all leavers. The Māori leaver's rate for University Entrance was lower than that for all leavers at each of these schools. This reflects a national picture whereby between 2009 and 2012 the gap between Māori and 'All Leavers' has closed – most at NCEA Level 1, followed by NCEA Level 2 and the least for University Entrance.

- coordinated pastoral care and careers systems that were effective at identifying and responding to the needs of students, including developing support structures for student learning and vocational pathways
- an increasing focus on involving families/whānau in strategies to improve student achievement
- an emphasis on students as 'self-managing' students who can take responsibility for their achievement.

These features, along with examples from the effective schools, are discussed in more detail under the three sub-headings (from page 13).

Inquiry and improvement process for schools

teaching and learning. The key reason schools should be collecting and analysing data is so they can identify improvements. This diagram includes key self-review questions for schools as part of an overall strategy which schools can use to improve achievement. The process below and the associated questions are based on the findings of this report. The key message for schools from this diagram is the importance of schools using data to build their understanding of where they can improve



relationships that schools develop with families and whanau can help staff learn more about their students and develop

their understanding of what can work to improve achievement.

High levels of coordination and responsiveness

As noted in other recent ERO evaluations of secondary schooling, student achievement at the effective schools was reinforced when curriculum, pastoral and careers systems worked together.¹³ This coordination was an important aspect of the culture of the school. Staff shared a belief in the benefits offered by restorative and/ or supportive approaches for students who were struggling. The schools with more effective approaches had less emphasis on punishing students, and more emphasis on understanding and responding to the factors that prevented students from reaching their potential.

Staff at the schools with effective approaches often differentiated their responses for individual students at risk of not achieving. School personnel used different strategies depending on the situation of each student. They also differentiated their approach with families so that specific support strategies could be developed for each student and their situation. In the example below the school's involvement of families and flexible curriculum approach had a significant effect on the NCEA achievement patterns.

Making the curriculum work for all students – especially Māori One small, low decile area school, with a predominantly Māori roll, had identified that their NCEA achievement needed to improve. In 2011, the school introduced a new programme into their senior school which provided a high level of flexibility to their curriculum based around student strengths, needs, interests and aspirations.

The programme sees Years 11 to 13 students take part in a core programme involving mathematics, English, te reo Māori and science. The students also have two timetable lines (approximately 10 hours) dedicated to a particular curriculum theme. The themes are broad areas of student interest and include contexts such as multi-media studies, performing arts, academic studies and trades-based learning.

Students take part in an interview with staff where they discuss and decide their area of interest. Families and whānau are fully involved in this process. Teachers, students and family members then set specific learning goals which become the focus when they meet together twice each term. The goals inform the specific activities undertaken in class and teachers link achievement and unit standards to these projects. In this way the student interests shape the curriculum, which is then assessed. Significantly, this is in contrast to most senior school settings where NCEA assessment still operates as the default curriculum.

13 This was evident in the findings reported in ERO's report Secondary Schools: Pathways for Future Education, Training and Employment (2013).

In 2013 a student from the multi-media programme won an award for her digital project. Students from the performing arts area received credits on the basis of a production they developed for the school.

The use of students' goals to shape the curriculum and assessment focus of these schools has considerably improved student engagement. Other initiatives the school has introduced have also supported engagement. For example, students also have access to STAR courses, which they do as block courses during the year (this helps to minimise clashes with the normal timetable). Students can also take part in Trades courses at a nearby provincial centre one day a week and some of the Year 13 students also take part in Gateway.

The benefit of the school's approach is most evident in the increase in NCEA achievement. From 2011 to 2012 there was a 25 percent increase in the number of leavers with NCEA Level 1, NCEA Level 2 and University Entrance.¹⁴

In contrast to the efforts of the school above, most of the other schools with effective approaches had not made the same level of change to their curriculum in an attempt to improve student achievement.

Most schools were focused on using pastoral care approaches to keep students engaged, rather than make significant changes to their teaching and learning. Pastoral care approaches included effective student mentoring and support as well as the tracking of individual students and responding to specific issues affecting their performance.¹⁵

Some of these schools already had some effective curriculum innovations in place, but most had maintained somewhat traditional learning opportunities, including the use of conventional subjects and typical timetable structures. For most of the effective schools the high levels of NCEA success they had already achieved may have outweighed the need to make significant changes to school-wide curricula.

Other significant curriculum changes made by schools with effective approaches, in response to student achievement information, included one school introducing three additional vocational options to its senior programme following a survey of students. This school had identified that 20 percent of its leavers were not well catered for. Leaders supplemented what they had learnt through an analysis of achievement information with a survey of the students who were not well served, and asked them what other options they would like added to the timetable. The additional vocational options were added and these were linked to small increases the school saw in its (already high) achievement rates for NCEA Level 2.

- 14 For example, from 2009 to 2011 the number of leavers at this school with NCEA Level 2 was steady at just over 50 percent. In 2012, 17 out of 22 leavers (77 percent) had achieved NCEA Level 2.
- 15 This is in line with ERO's 2013 report Increasing Educational Achievement in Secondary Schools.

At another school, its review of student achievement information resulted in them moving away from Cambridge examinations. When the school decided to develop Cambridge classes for its top students, the rationale was that it would be more motivating and help more able students to gain endorsements in NCEA. It was hoped that this would flow on to NCEA Level 3 and scholarship results. The school also identified a risk in that other schools in their community were offering Cambridge examinations and they did not want to lose students to these schools.

After several years of Cambridge examinations the school identified that its top students had not noticeably benefitted in terms of their NCEA endorsements. There were also logistical difficulties in having students enrolled in two assessment programmes. In some cases the school's involvement in Cambridge examinations limited the NCEA opportunities for students. For these reasons the school opted to drop the Cambridge examinations in favour of an all NCEA assessment programme.

Making a difference through effective inquiry and improvement

Effective schools had levels of achievement that were either rising and/or above that of schools of a similar decile. Across most of these schools, Māori and Pacific student achievement was comparable to that of all students at NCEA Levels 1 and 2. However, the numbers of Māori and Pacific students gaining University Entrance tended to be below that of other students.¹⁶

ERO found evidence that the inquiry and improvement processes at these schools had made a difference for Māori and Pacific students. In particular, ERO found considerable evidence that these schools had effectively identified issues affecting student achievement, explored some of the possible solutions, implemented a strategy and seen an improvement in the performance of most or all of these students. This is seen, for instance, in the example on the opposite page.

16 While the effective schools in this evaluation tended to have a smaller gap than the overall national picture, the lower proportion of Māori and Pacific students achieving University Entrance, both in these schools and across the country, may be linked to higher proportions of Māori and Pacific students participating in vocational courses and/or other programmes that are not part of a higher education pathway (i.e. courses offering credits at NCEA Level 2 rather than NCEA Level 3). This concern has been raised by ERO in its 2013 report -Secondary Schools: Pathways to Future Education, Training and Employment.

Improved results for a targeted group of students at a small secondary school One small secondary school uses a targeted approach with students it identifies through its assessment processes. For example, in 2010 the school identified a group of low achieving Year 9 students, four of whom were Māori.

In 2010 these students took part in an English class where their specific literacy needs were the focus of the school's special education needs coordinator (SENCO). Two teacher aides were also trained to support these students in class. This included training about behaviour, dyslexia and autism.

In 2011, when these students had entered the senior school, a learning plan was developed for each student. Each student's strengths and needs were considered, along with their intended pathway through school and beyond. These students were then provided with courses relevant to their individual pathways. Two students were given access to work experience, life skills programmes as well as community and STAR courses. Another student was placed in a Trades Academy.

As of 2013, eight of these nine students had progressed to NCEA Level 2 courses with just one having left school (without NCEA Level 2). Four were on track to achieve NCEA Level 2 in 2013, while another three were likely to achieve this milestone in 2014. Another student was unlikely to achieve NCEA Level 2 due to unresolved truancy issues. Two of the students had become mentors for younger students at the school.

Leadership at schools with effective inquiry and improvement approaches Schools with effective inquiry and improvement approaches showed a focused and coordinated commitment to improving student achievement. This had typically been developed over several years in most cases and reflected the efforts of well organised and strategic leadership working with capable staff. The success of these schools reinforced the widespread belief of staff that they could make a difference for all students.

Overall, there was a sense of urgency and agency from staff to ensure that they made a difference, and that their efforts, along with those of their colleagues, would contribute to improved student outcomes.

Leaders were an important aspect of the urgency and agency displayed by staff. They modelled the importance of 'finding a way' when it came to dealing with the challenges that limited student achievement. Leaders had a role in developing effective school-

wide processes for the collection, analysis and use of student information. This was not limited to achievement data, but also included information gathered from the pastoral team as well as day-to-day observations made by form teachers, mentors and other staff.

School leaders also helped develop useful school-wide processes for monitoring and responding to student achievement issues. They established the expectations and guidelines for how departments analysed, reported and responded to achievement information. Leaders ensured that detailed analyses of student achievement information led to well-considered plans for improving student learning.

Similarly, the boards at the effective schools supported the values and approach of school leaders and teaching staff. Trustees in these schools were, in most cases, effective governors who received good information about student achievement and resourced suitable strategies to improve learning.

School-wide professional learning and development (PLD) helped give staff the skills to carry out inquiry and improvement processes. This PLD included training in analysing achievement data as well as undertaking 'teaching as inquiry' projects.

In many cases, staff were trained as mentors (academic counsellors) so they could give one-on-one advice and guidance to students, and their families and whānau, about their progress at school, including each student's academic goals and career pathways.

Effective mentoring by staff helped students achieve success across a range of academic, sporting, artistic and social domains. Staff developed their knowledge and understanding of students, and often emphasised the importance of 'knowing the student' as a significant aspect of developing processes that support each student to succeed. ERO observed that the mentoring and support given to students at the effective schools helped to motivate them to achieve and acquire the skills to manage their own learning.

Striving to make a difference for Māori students

One large, mid-decile school was judged to have effective inquiry and improvement processes because of the efforts it had gone to in analysing and responding to the educational achievement of its Māori students. A third of the students at this school identified as Māori. The school had an ongoing involvement in Te Kotahitanga.¹⁷ In 2011 this involvement contributed to a significant shift in Māori student achievement at NCEA Level 2.

In 2012 the school saw a much smaller gain in Māori student achievement at NCEA Level 2. The school's leaders identified that they needed greater levels of coordination between their existing initiatives to improve student achievement, especially Māori student achievement. They reviewed and modified their systems designed to support student achievement. They also considerably improved their connections to whānau and families. Tighter connections were developed between the school's strategic goals, teacher appraisals and PLD. More emphasis was put on 'teaching as inquiry' and implementing strategies which Māori students, in particular, needed to succeed.

Central to the school's efforts in 2013 was a target group of 15 Year 11 students (most of whom were Māori). These students were provided with additional support through academic mentoring, extra tuition, home visits, career advice and closer tracking. At the time of the ERO review these students were on track to achieve NCEA Level 1. Because of the initial success of this initiative, it was being widened in 2014 to include a target group of Year 10 students.

17 For more information on the Te Kotahitanga initiative see http://tekotahitanga.tki.org.nz/

SCHOOLS WITH SOME EFFECTIVE INQUIRY AND IMPROVEMENT PROCESSES

Approximately one-third of the schools in this evaluation (14 out of 40 schools) had inquiry and improvement processes that were somewhat effective. While they had typically developed some promising initiatives to raise student achievement, these schools did not have the same level of coordination, focus and effectiveness as those in the previous category.

These schools were a variety of sizes, deciles and types. Five were high decile schools, seven middle decile schools and two low decile schools. Their achievement profiles reflected achievement patterns that were, in many cases, broadly comparable with schools of a similar decile, with some schools being above and some below schools of a similar type.¹⁸ From 2010 to 2012 some of these schools increased the number of students gaining some qualifications, for example in the percentage of students achieving NCEA Level 2, but their achievement also went down in other areas. This inconsistent pattern was also seen in the achievement of Māori and Pacific students at most of these schools.¹⁹

The curriculum, pastoral care and careers systems of the somewhat effective schools showed a mix of effectiveness. While there were pockets of innovative and effective practice, many new initiatives were in the early stages and without evidence that they were consistently or significantly raising achievement.

Inquiry and improvement that was starting to inform practice

Although these schools carried out some analyses of student achievement, engagement and attendance, these analyses were not undertaken well enough to consistently inform practice. This inconsistency occurred across a range of inquiry and review contexts including the analysis of school-wide data, teaching as inquiry projects, the examination of individual student achievement, and reviewing the effectiveness of specific initiatives.

For these schools to have effective inquiry and improvement processes, they needed to extend from analysing 'who' might need additional support, to effectively identifying and implementing 'what' their targeted students needed in terms of a curriculum, pastoral and/or careers response. Many of these schools had identified possible ways to improve student achievement and some had implemented school-wide strategies. Generally these schools did not have robust evaluation processes in place to subsequently monitor these initiatives. The evidence, at the time of ERO's review, tended to show that these initiatives had not resulted in any clear improvements in student achievement.

- 18 For example, with an achievement level that was five or more percentage points higher than the national average for schools of that decile.
- 19 It was not possible to discern trend information for Pacific students because of the small numbers of Pacific students at some schools.

A significant factor affecting the quality of some school analyses was the use of participation data.²⁰ In approximately half the schools with somewhat effective inquiry and improvement processes, school-wide analyses were focused on participation data rather than roll-based data. The use of participation data (without reference to roll-based data) can obscure what has occurred for students who have not, for example, completed an academic year (or entered NCEA qualifications). This may include those who have left school or been placed in an Activity Centre, Alternative Education or Teen Parent Unit.

For all schools there is potentially a rich source of information available in understanding why some students leave, and what could be done to improve the overall engagement of students.

Developing initiatives for students

Schools with some effective inquiry and improvement processes typically had some positive initiatives that aimed to improve student achievement. In many cases these schools had developed initiatives as a relatively broad response to achievement patterns or issues. For example, academic counselling approaches were introduced to improve engagement, and vocational learning programmes were added to the curriculum to provide more options for students who were not succeeding. It was not always clear that the introduction of these initiatives was sufficiently well-targeted by these schools. In some cases these initiatives had yet to gain momentum. In terms of specific examples, one school had focused its teacher PLD on developing differentiated teaching approaches. Another school established a mentoring programme for Māori students. A third school put considerable emphasis on staff members developing teaching as inquiry projects.

These examples, and several others from across this group, show some potential to make a difference for students. Some of these initiatives only started in 2013 without firm evidence of increases in student achievement in NCEA available at the time of ERO's review. Others, which started earlier, had been modified to better achieve success. In 2013, the above example of a mentoring programme for Māori students, was altered to become more focused on students setting academic goals and including whānau in the goal-setting process.

Overall, despite the promising start made by many of the initiatives, the inquiry and improvement approaches of these schools had not contributed to consistently or substantially improved outcomes for priority learners. In some cases the initiatives themselves were too broad and were not sufficiently focused on the specific issues 20 Participation data involves only those students who were actually entered by schools into NZQA qualifications. It typically does not include students who did not submit work for assessment as well as those who may have been absent for examinations. Students who leave during a school year may not be included in a school's participation data, although they would form part of the school's overall roll-based data (that is the qualifications achieved by a school measured against the actual number of students at the school).

affecting individual students. A key feature of the initiatives at schools judged to be somewhat effective was the limited way they responded to individual students and targeted groups of students. The staff at somewhat effective schools needed to know more about their students – the specific academic, pastoral, careers and whānau contexts of students – and translate this into a coordinated response.

Clear differences between effective and somewhat effective schools were evident in terms of the agency and urgency of leaders and teachers. Staff at the more effective schools were more focused on making a difference, they were more confident that they would find a way to improve student achievement, and they worked (one student at a time in many cases) to ensure that the initiatives they introduced specifically addressed identified issues and led to clear improvements in student achievement.

A school with somewhat effective processes for inquiry and improvement At one small middle-decile school NCEA achievement has fluctuated from 2010 to 2012. While its NCEA Level 1 and 2 rates have been comparable to schools of a similar decile, their University Entrance rate has been well below that of similar schools. The school had identified student retention as an area for development.

In 2011, the school implemented some approaches to improve student engagement and retention. These included a Year 10 diploma, with a focus on work skills and preparation for NCEA qualifications, as well as an across the school focus on literacy. A change to the timetable structure, which saw the school shift from six subject lines to five was undertaken along with a tightening up of the students who could take part in Gateway.²¹ These changes did not noticeably improve the NCEA results for 2011.

At the end of 2011 the school was accepted into the Starpath programme.²² In 2012 the school introduced academic counselling to help students set goals and work with staff to improve their achievement. The school's NCEA results rose slightly from 2011 to 2012 – although these results were still not as high as those achieved in 2010.

The school's review of its 2012 Starpath identified that some of the school's targets were too broad. In 2013 the school had a much tighter focus on the achievement of individual students – both in terms of its charter goals and in how it carries out academic counselling. A new student management system has also helped the school better analyse student achievement through the year. The school is anticipating improved results on the basis of these new initiatives.

- 21 Gateway is a national initiative to support students to take part in workplace learning. More information is available from www.tec.govt.nz/Funding/Fundfinder/Gateway/
- 22 The Starpath programme is a joint initiative between the Ministry of Education and The University of Auckland to help students in lower socioeconomic settings develop positive pathways from school. More information on Starpath is available from www.education. auckland.ac.nz/uoa/home/about/ research/starpath-home/

SCHOOLS WITH LIMITED INQUIRY AND IMPROVEMENT PROCESSES

Just over one-third of the secondary schools in this evaluation (16 out of 40) had inquiry and improvement processes that were of limited effectiveness.

Five of the 16 schools in this group were low decile, seven were middle decile and four were high decile. These schools were in a range of rural and urban settings, much like the schools in the more effective categories. They also ranged in size from small to very large.

Most of the NCEA data for these schools did not show improvement.

The NCEA results for some of these schools fluctuated and/or were unchanged (from year to year). Some schools had NCEA results that were dropping and/or low compared to similar schools. A few of these schools had NCEA results that were rising and/or in line with similar schools. Where schools had relatively positive NCEA results there was little or no evidence that this was linked to school inquiry and improvement processes.

Overall, these schools did not have a strong culture of inquiry and improvement. Similarly, there was a lack of urgency to improve achievement from at least some staff at each of these schools.

While many of these schools had introduced some initiatives to improve student engagement – including vocational courses and academic counselling, these initiatives were not a focus for ongoing self review. In some cases these initiatives were introduced while significant issues affecting achievement, such as student attendance or engagement, were not addressed.

The other significant features of these schools were their lack of:

- monitoring of initiatives to improve achievement
- school-wide frameworks for inquiring into achievement and developing effective responses to improve results
- teacher skill or knowledge in identifying the issues affecting achievement and developing suitable responses
- links that existed between teacher appraisals and efforts to improve student achievement
- analysis and response to student achievement for students, especially for priority learners
- challenging targets that could help provide a strong focus for improvement
- focus on Year 9 and 10 student data as a way of improving student achievement.

Even the schools in this group with more positive NCEA achievement had a limited understanding of their inquiry and improvement context. Despite the achievement profiles of these schools, ERO found that staff lacked the capability to carry out inquiries into achievement. ERO also identified issues with school-wide inquiry and improvement processes, including issues with target-setting and the lack of specific actions to reach these targets.

All schools in this category had little capacity to be able to identify and extend the programmes or teaching approaches that were most beneficial for students in their school. Without this understanding it is unlikely that more students will achieve the qualification necessary for them to succeed in future education, training or employment.

Conclusion

This report found that approximately one-quarter of secondary schools in this sample (10 out of 40) were effectively using inquiry and improvement approaches. Staff at these schools displayed an urgency and focus to improve student achievement. They showed high quality analysis skills and, importantly, responded in ways that improved the outcomes for students – including the achievement of targeted groups of learners.

These schools emphasised the importance of teachers knowing their students well. Based on this knowledge, these schools had put in place more focused support structures, including better tracking and monitoring, academic counselling, mentoring and homework/learning support. Most schools had also improved their links with families/whānau – especially for those students at risk of underachievement.

In general, these schools had put more effort into pastoral and support processes than they had in identifying what curriculum innovations could be introduced to improve achievement. While some of these schools already had effective curriculum innovations in place, most only made moderate or minor curriculum changes in light of their achievement information. Most of these schools also had good levels of achievement, which may have discouraged wholesale changes to curriculum structures.

The remaining three-quarters of schools (30 out of 40) in this evaluation did not have clear evidence that their inquiry and improvement had consistently or substantially improved student achievement. A group of 14 schools demonstrated inquiries that, while showing some promise, had yet to noticeably lead to improved achievement. In general, these schools invested a considerable amount of time into identifying 'who' needed support. They had yet to consistently and successfully implement 'what' strategies were needed to raise achievement. These schools also needed to more systematically monitor 'how well' their strategies were working for their students.

In the final group of 16 schools, staff lacked the urgency required to change achievement patterns, as well as the agency or belief that they could make a difference. Only a minority of teachers were actively identifying and responding to individual student interests and needs. At some of these schools, significant school-wide issues involving student attendance and engagement were not addressed.

CONCLUSION

Even schools rated as being effective in raising student achievement had potential for further improvement.

Many had strengthened their pastoral care and support systems, and had effectively focused on individual students. However, they had not significantly inquired into how they could improve their delivery of the curriculum.

Just one of the 10 schools with effective inquiry and improvement processes redesigned its curriculum. Their new approach to learning also led to the most significant lift in student achievement.

ERO's report *Secondary Schools: Pathways to Future Education, Training and Employment (July 2013)* found in the sample of 74 secondary schools that most were not showing the levels of innovation required to ensure that all learners have suitable pathways to future education, training and employment.

This latest sample of a further 40 schools identifies improvements in mentoring and pastoral care. However, the paucity of curriculum innovation found indicates little has changed that would ensure all learners are engaged and achieving the qualifications needed for future success.

Next steps

ERO recommends that the Ministry of Education:

- disseminates effective practice and provides support materials to encourage teachers and schools to, not only improve mentoring and support for students, but also improve curriculum opportunities so programmes are engaging and respond to each student's strengths, interests, needs and aspirations
- continues to support schools to develop expertise in analysing a range of student data, identify suitable responses, implement these strategies and monitor their effectiveness

ERO recommends that schools:

- use this report's findings, conclusion and indicators to review the quality of their overall approach to improving student achievement
- review and develop their curriculum to provide opportunities that are engaging and more creatively respond to the individual strengths, interests, needs and aspirations of all students
- develop programmes that target underachieving students and ensure that effective pastoral, careers and curricula responses are in place to help these students reach their potential
- regularly review their strategies for target groups of students, and determine which approaches are working and which should be discontinued.

NEXT STEPS

APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Indicator Framework: Raising Achievement in Secondary Schools

These indicators should be used in collaboration with ERO's *Evaluation Indicators for Schools* (2011).

| Overall philosophy | and approach | |
|--|---|--|
| Context | Indicator | Evidence |
| The school's philosophy or expectations related to improving achievement at NCEA Level 2 | The school is focused on improving its outcomes for students, especially priority groups, for example: Māori, Pacific, students with special needs, and those from low income backgrounds. The school's approach has integrity and is focused on supporting student pathways and not just the acquisition of any Level 2 credits The emphasis on improving achievement operates across the school (including senior leadership, middle managers, pastoral and teaching staff.) The school's approach does not contradict other approaches for priority learners, for example Ka Hikitia and the Pacific Education Plan | As articulated by its leaders In planning and reporting documentation Major curriculum documents |
| Leadership | School leaders provide the ethical example to their staff in focusing on improved student outcomes and the importance of developing innovative approaches for priority learners Leaders ensure that inquiry processes are meaningful, focused on improving student achievement | |

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| Inquiry processes | | |
|------------------------|--|---|
| Context | Indicator | Evidence |
| NCEA data analysis | The school has analysed its NCEA data for 2011 and 2012 and identified the innovations/improvements required to lift the school's future achievement at NCEA Level 2 and above The school has a justified, evidenced-based theory explaining individual school leavers, from 2011 and 2012, who did not achieve NCEA Level 2 and what could have been done to better support these students There is a high-level of involvement from staff in terms of understanding the implications of NCEA analysis and knowing what is needed to improve the school's overall performance in the future School departments are involved in analysing NCEA results and identifying factors that supported and hindered students achieving NCEA Level 2 in their subjects Individual teachers understand what they need to do to contribute to the school's approach to lifting achievement | NCEA data Ministry achievement profiles Self review reports Attendance data Literacy and numeracy |
| Other data | The school inquiry processes have involved other forms of data where applicable for example attendance data, retention data, NCEA Level 1, Years 9 and 10 achievement information (ie literacy and numeracy) Whānau and iwi consultation is used to understand more about student strengths, needs and aspirations – especially those who have under-achieved Whānau and iwi consultation is used to build partnerships that promote the achievement of Māori children – especially those who have under-achieved | |
| Priority learners | The school has reflected on the performance of all its students – especially priority learners – and identified aspects that could improve its responsiveness for individuals and groups The analysis acknowledges the areas where the school has been successful with priority learners | |
| Individual students | • The inquiry process extends to the level of individual students with the school reflecting on ways it could improve its responsiveness in light of what they learn about the success or otherwise of each student | |

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| Implementing innovation and change | | | |
|------------------------------------|---|-------------------|--|
| Context | Indicator | Evidence | |
| Innovation and responsiveness | In response to its analysis of NCEA data, the school has implemented curriculum, pastoral and/or support initiatives to improve student achievement, including those focused on increasing the number of students achieving NCEA Level 2 (or above) The initiatives support the development of student pathways, self-management skills and competencies (core competencies and career management competencies) and not just the acquisition of credits The initiatives that the school has developed align with approaches for priority learners, for example Ka Hikitia, and the Pacific Education Plan | School planning | |
| Family involvement | • Whānau/families provide input in the development and/or support of initiatives that aim to improve student achievement | Consultation data | |

| Increased levels of achievement | | | |
|---------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Context | Indicator | Evidence | |
| Achievement gains | The innovations and change designed to improve student achievement show evidence of actually working (there is evidence of a likely connection between an initiative and improvements in achievement data) The achievement gains are significant in terms of the context of the school. For example, a school has an increase in the overall number of students achieving NCEA Level 2 Groups of students, who received targeted support, improve their performance relative to the rest of the school Individual students, who are targeted for support, improve their performance in measureable ways | Achievement information eg 2012 data | |

Appendix 2: Schools in this evaluation

Table 1: School type

| School type | Number of schools in sample | Percentage of schools in sample | National percentage of schools with Years 11–15 students |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Secondary (Years 7-15) | 15 | 37.5 | 21 |
| Composite (Years 1-15) | 5 | 12.5 | 30 |
| Secondary (Years 9–15) | 20 | 50 | 48 |
| Secondary (Years 11–15) | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Total | 40 | 100 | 100 |

The sample contained fewer composite (Years 1–15) schools and more secondary (Years 7–15) schools, compared with national percentages. The secondary (Years 9–15) school sample percentage was similar to the national percentage. These differences were statistically significant. (NB: no Māori-medium schools have been included in this sample.)

| Table | 2: | Roll | size | group |
|-------|----|------|------|-------|
|-------|----|------|------|-------|

| Roll size group (number of students) | Number of schools in sample | Percentage of schools in sample | National percentage of schools with Years 11–15 students |
|---|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Very small (1–100) | 0 | 0 | 11 |
| Small (101-400) | 12 | 32.5 | 26 |
| Medium (401–800) | 9 | 20 | 36 |
| Large (801–1500) | 14 | 35 | 19 |
| Very large (1501+) | 5 | 12.5 | 8 |
| Total | 40 | 100 | 100 |

The sample contained fewer very small and medium-sized schools, and more small, large and very large schools, compared with national percentages. These differences were statistically significant. **APPENDIX 2**

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Table 3: Locality

| Locality and population size | Number of schools in sample | Percentage of schools in sample | National percentage of schools with Years 11–15 students |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Main urban (30,000+) | 23 | 57.5 | 53 |
| Secondary urban (10,000–29,999) | 5 | 12.5 | 6 |
| Minor urban (1000–9999) | 6 | 15 | 12 |
| Rural (1–999) | 6 | 15 | 29 |
| Total | 40 | 100 | 100 |

The sample contained fewer rural schools, more secondary urban schools and slightly more main urban and minor urban schools, compared with national percentages. These differences were not statistically significant.

Table 4: School decile group

| Decile group | Number of schools in sample | Percentage of schools in sample | National percentage of schools with Years 11–15 students |
|--------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Low (1–3) | 8 | 20 | 32 |
| Medium (4–7) | 19 | 47.5 | 39 |
| High (8–10) | 13 | 32.5 | 29 |
| Total | 40 | 100 | 100 |

The sample contained fewer low decile schools, more medium decile schools and slightly more high decile schools, compared with national percentages. These differences were statistically significant.

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