



# Learning in a Covid-19 World: Supporting Primary School Students as They Return to the Classroom



We know that Covid-19 is having a huge impact on schools across NZ with the recent national lockdown in 2021. We would like to share the evidence on how schools can support students as they return to the classroom.

Last year was tough and schools had to go above and beyond to meet the needs of students and whānau. The recent national lockdown in Term 3 2021 means the impacts of Covid-19 will continue this year.

ERO has been monitoring the impact of Covid-19 on schools and students. We carried out 740 interviews with principals, board chairs, and teachers and surveyed 67 schools in 2020. We talked to these schools to find out about the challenges they had to overcome in responding to Covid-19 and the lessons learnt in supporting primary students (Years 4-8) on returning to the classroom. We also followed up with the same students, teachers, and principals in June this year, in 27 schools, about the ongoing impacts of Covid-19 and how prepared they were for

another lockdown. Most recently, we have talked to a selection of schools about their experiences of the 2021 national lockdown.

We have also looked at best practice for supporting students based on the evidence and experiences from here and abroad in responding to the disruption caused by Covid-19.

This short guide covers:

- what we have learnt so far about the impact of Covid-19 on students
- who schools should look out for – which students may need additional support following the recent Covid-19 disruptions
- practical actions for schools to consider for supporting students as they return to the classroom.

## What we have learnt about the impact of Covid-19 on primary students

### Some of your students may still be feeling anxious about Covid-19, but most will be feeling positive about the year ahead

- Following the lockdowns last year, 62 percent of primary-aged students said they were feeling safe from Covid-19.
- When we surveyed primary students in June this year, around two thirds (67 percent) of Year 4–8 students were feeling positive about their learning progress.

### While most students returned to school following the lockdowns last year, some had reduced attendance

- Ministry of Education data found that most primary and secondary students returned to school following the disruption caused by Covid-19 in 2020, but around half of schools were concerned about student attendance when we spoke to them in 2020.
- Students were most likely to have reduced their attendance in response to Covid-19 if they attended a low decile school or were in Years 1–2.
- Forty percent of those students with reduced attendance following the lockdown did not have concerning attendance patterns prior to Covid-19.
- Most of the schools ERO talked to told us that student and whānau anxiety about Covid-19 was the main reason why students were not coming back to school.

### Disruption to learning was minimised for most primary students last year

- Last year following the lockdowns, 66 percent of Year 4–8 students told us they had been able to keep up with their learning post-lockdown, whereas 4 percent told us they were struggling to keep up.

- For primary students, progress in reading and mathematics was not disrupted last year by Covid-19, according to Ministry of Education data. However, progress in writing was lower than expected (equivalent to losing five weeks of instruction).

## Who should you look out for following this current lockdown?

Most schools reported they felt prepared for the current national lockdown, but overall experience to date suggests we can expect Covid-19 to continue to impact on students in low decile schools. Once again, Auckland students are likely to have experienced more disruption to their learning because they have spent more time learning from home due to the recent lockdown and the lockdown earlier this year in February.

### Most primary students will be up to date with their learning, but some would have found it harder to learn from home

Last year following lockdown:

- just under two-thirds (62 percent) of Year 4–8 students felt they were up to date with their learning.

In June this year:

- around three-quarters (77 percent) of Year 4–8 students agreed they would be able to learn from home, but 6 percent of primary students surveyed disagreed they would be able to learn from home during another lockdown
- one in five (18 percent) of Year 4–8 students said they did not have a digital device at home or were unsure if they would have access to a device.

### Students in low decile schools may need additional support

Last year following lockdown:

- fifty-six percent of low decile schools (decile 1–3) were concerned about student attendance, compared to under a third of high decile schools (decile 8–10)

- more than three-quarters of low decile schools were concerned about student achievement in their school, compared to 48 percent of high decile schools. Additionally, just over a quarter of teachers in low decile schools were confident their students would be able to catch up with their learning.

In June this year:

- seventy-two percent of principals in low decile schools agreed that their schools were prepared for another lockdown, compared to 80 percent of principals in decile 8-10 schools.

### **Auckland students may be feeling more anxious about Covid-19 and could find it more difficult to re-engage when they are back at school**

Last year following lockdown:

- teachers based in Auckland schools were less likely to feel their students were engaged. Only 28 percent of teachers in Auckland felt their students were engaged, compared to 72 percent of teachers outside of Auckland
- seventy-one percent of principals in low decile schools in Auckland were concerned about their students' learning, compared to 56 percent of principals in low decile schools outside Auckland. The Auckland difference in concern for student progress was much greater for low decile principals than for principals of mid and high decile schools.

### **Male students were less likely to say they would enjoy learning from home**

In June this year:

- less than half (47 percent) of male students surveyed agreed they would enjoy learning from home, compared to over half of female students (52 percent).

### **Māori and Pacific students were less likely to say they would be able to learn from home**

In June this year:

- just over 10 percent of Māori and Pacific students disagreed they would be able to learn from home during another lockdown, compared to 1 percent of New Zealand European students
- this may be partly explained by a lack of access to digital devices in their households. Twenty-six percent of Māori students and 24 percent of Pacific students said they would not have access to a digital device or were unsure, compared to 16 percent of New Zealand European students.

See Part 2 in ERO's report [Learning in a Covid-19 World: The Impact of Covid-19 on Schools](#) for more information about the impact on specific groups of students. The Ministry of Education's analysis of the impact of Covid-19 on attendance and learning is available in their *He Whakaaro* reports [How Covid-19 is affecting school attendance](#) and [Student learning during COVID-19: Literacy and maths in Years 4-10](#).

### **Practical actions for re-engaging students back in the classroom and addressing any learning loss**

ERO has consistently found that schools have gone above and beyond to keep their students learning and to support the wellbeing of their students. During lockdowns, schools have kept in regular contact with whānau and their students, and supported their local community. Following lockdowns, schools have actively supported student engagement and learning through many new approaches.

ERO has four actions for schools to consider to help support their students as they return to the classroom. These actions are based on what ERO found talking to schools and students last year, best practice based on

the evidence, and emerging practice based on experiences here and from other countries' responses to the disruption caused by Covid-19.

### Supporting student engagement

There are a range of strategies schools can use. Many are well known and may already be in place in schools.

- Prioritising connection through a positive school climate for students – for example: creating opportunities for students to socialise, having opportunities for students to talk through recent experiences, and providing quiet spaces for students to 'chill out'.
- Monitoring and tracking engagement to identify students at risk of disengaging – for example: intensifying attendance monitoring and using 'check in' surveys or 'pulse checks'.
- Strengthening relationships with students and their whānau – for example: increasing meetings with whānau. A quarter of leaders told ERO they found greater whānau involvement and integration of home and school learning a key success during lockdown.
- Using positive and consistent messaging about the value of good attendance – for example: through communicating about successes of lockdown; expressing belief in students' capabilities.
- Giving students opportunities to make decisions about their learning – for example: through revising school schedules. Two thirds of schools told ERO they intend to retain some elements of distance learning and increase the use of digital technology in their curriculum and delivery.

### Promoting student wellbeing

Promoting student wellbeing is key to supporting their success at school. Key steps schools can take include:

- ensuring an effective pastoral system where every student is known by at least one teacher

- using a 'wellbeing team' within the school to coordinate the school's wellbeing response across teachers and others, for example, school counsellors, SWIS workers, Learning Support Coordinators, and school nurses
- actively monitoring changes in students who may be particularly anxious, have behavioural, social, or emotional issues, or challenging family contexts. Acting early where there are concerns
- establishing in-school 'friendship groups' or tuakana-teina arrangements for students of concern
- reviewing your health and safety plan to keep staff and students safe from Covid-19.

### Assessing student progress in their learning

Finding out where students are at with their learning is an important first step to supporting their learning back in the classroom. It will ensure the right support is provided to the right students.

Teachers can then develop differentiated and individualised teaching strategies to help ensure learning is scaffolded from where students are at and where they need to be.

Based on their understanding of where students are at, teachers can then set clear learning targets, working closely with whānau. The impacts of Covid-19 can be ongoing on both students' wellbeing and their learning, so it is important to keep monitoring student engagement and learning progress regularly.

### Accelerating student learning

The Covid-19 pandemic risks widening the learning gap for many students. Many students have found it hard to learn during the pandemic due to the challenges of learning from home, not being able to access digital devices, or because they struggled to transition back to learning in the classroom.

For some students it will be necessary to revisit learning, which means they will need additional learning opportunities to help them succeed.

The evidence shows that using remediation classes, where students are moved out of their regular classes, increases the risk that they may never catch up to their peers (they will always be behind).

Accelerated learning seeks to make the student's year level learning accessible to them and supports them to be successful in their current year level. Acceleration is also focused on preparing students with their upcoming learning to keep them on track with their learning goals. The key concepts that could be used to accelerate a student's learning following the disruption caused by Covid-19 are:

- high expectations for all students:
  - provide all students with access to effective instruction focused on the essential skills and concepts for their year level
- just-in-time support:
  - support is based on what a student knows, what they need for upcoming lessons, and based on their year-level learning goals
  - provide more exposure to year-level essential skills and concepts by providing additional support as part of their current classroom instruction.

Accelerated learning programmes could include tailored group and individual acceleration programmes for those learners who are at risk of not catching-up. In particular, small-group approaches in the early years of schooling in areas such as reading and mathematics.

## Reviewing plans for future disruptions

Unfortunately, it is likely that the Covid-19 pandemic will continue to disrupt schooling. Taking time to reflect on the recent lockdown – identifying what worked well, the challenges faced and how they were addressed – can help schools be prepared for future disruptions. Planning for different scenarios can also help schools be prepared.

These could include temporary closures, lower attendance of staff and students due to Covid-19, and, for some students, the need to learn remotely from time to time. Schools could consider ensuring remote learning remains available if a student is unable to be at school in the future.

## Where can schools go to for help?

[Guidance for schools for Alert Levels 1-4](#) – Ministry of Education public health advice for schools and kura.

[Covid-19 wellbeing guide](#) – Ministry of Education resource with activities, tip sheets, and resources to support children and young people.

[Ministry of Education Covid-19 wellbeing guidance for teachers](#).

[EAP workforce wellbeing support](#) – support services available for teachers, regular relievers, and support staff in kura and state and state-integrated schools.

[Supporting learning progress – strategies and tools](#) – Ministry of Education advice for schools and kura.

[Kia Manawaroa](#) – Ministry of Education information about Covid-19 changes for whānau Māori.

[Pacific Education Fund](#) – Ministry of Education has set up two funds to support Pacific learners' education success and wellbeing during Covid-19.

[SPARKLERS resource hub](#) – wellbeing tips and supporting home-learning.

## Next Steps

ERO will continue to monitor the impacts of Covid-19 and share with schools the best practice from schools in New Zealand and other countries in responding to these impacts. Our next report will be released in Term 4.



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Published 2021

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Digital: 978-1-99-000272-4 Print: 978-1-99-000271-7



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