



Learning in a Covid-19 World: The Impact of Covid-19 on Teachers and Principals



Covid-19 continues to disrupt many different aspects of education. Teachers and principals have taken on new responsibilities and quickly adapted how they deliver education to meet their students' needs. This has had an impact on their wellbeing and workload. This report examines what the impact has been on teachers and principals, the challenges ahead, and how they can be supported to respond to ongoing disruption.

What did ERO do?

This report is a continuation of ERO's *Learning in a Covid-19 World* series. ERO has collected wide-ranging data from May 2020 up to October 2021, including:

- surveys, during the 2020 lockdown, of 10,106 students and 694 teachers
- surveys, after the 2020 lockdown, of 1,777 principals, 4,666 students, and 686 teachers
- interviews, during and after the 2020 lockdown, of principals, board chairs, and teachers in 740 schools
- follow up surveys before the 2021 lockdown of 1,222 principals and 427 teachers, as well as 27 interviews with school leaders during the 2021 lockdown.

ERO has used this data to understand the impact of Covid-19:

- on teachers' and leaders' wellbeing
- on teachers' and leaders' workloads
- on teaching practices.

ERO has identified actions schools can take to be well placed to continue to respond to Covid-19 in 2022, along with the support that teachers and principals will need to enable them to continue to meet the challenges of Covid-19.

What did we find?

Teacher and principal wellbeing has declined

Principal and teacher wellbeing has been significantly impacted by Covid-19. Enjoyment of work has declined, and principals and teachers are feeling less supported. Principals of smaller schools, and younger teachers are struggling the most.

Covid-19 has had a big impact on teachers and principals. They have had to react quickly and adapt the way they work, innovating to meet the needs of their students and communities. But this has come at a cost to their wellbeing.

Key findings include that, in June and July 2021:

- **teachers' and principals' enjoyment of work had declined.** Only half (56 percent) of teachers reported being happy at work, down from nearly two thirds (62 percent) in September 2020. Two thirds of principals (64 percent) reported being happy at work, down from 68 percent
- **teachers and principals were feeling less supported and connected.** Only half (56 percent) of teachers felt their school had supported their wellbeing in the last week, down from nearly two thirds (63 percent) last September. Just over a quarter of principals said they needed further support
- **principals of smaller schools were less happy at work.** Only 57 percent of principals in small schools were happy at work compared to 72 percent of principals in very large schools
- **younger teachers were struggling more.** Teachers under 35 years old were three times as likely to say they were not happy at work, compared to those over 46 years old
- **overall life satisfaction was low.** Only 57 percent of teachers and 62 percent of principals reported that they were satisfied with their life, compared to 86 percent of New Zealanders rating their life satisfaction highly, [according to Statistics New Zealand](#).¹

“I also have a very young staff, 3 out of my 4 teachers are beginning teachers. They are not equipped to deal with the emotional and social problems that some of our students exhibit.”

Teachers and principals are increasingly struggling with their workload

Teachers and principals are increasingly struggling with their workload due to Covid-19 disruptions. Teachers and principals have had to deal with new challenging situations, and provide support to students, whānau, and the community. Principals of smaller schools are struggling more with their workload, as are younger and female teachers and principals. A third of principals reported student behaviour had worsened, which also impacts on their workload.

Covid-19 disruptions have seen teachers and principals go above and beyond to support their students, but this has led to increased workload for teachers and principals. Key findings include that, in June and July 2021:

- **workloads were becoming less manageable.** Only a third of teachers (32 percent) and a fifth of principals (19 percent) felt their workload was manageable. This had worsened from last September, when 42 percent of teachers and 26 percent of principals felt their workload was manageable
- **younger teachers and principals were struggling more with their workload.** Twenty-seven percent of teachers under 35 years of age reported their workload was unmanageable, compared to 16 percent of teachers over 46 years old

¹ www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/wellbeing-statistics-march-2021-quarter

- **principals of very small schools were also struggling;** they were nearly twice as likely to report that their workload was unmanageable compared to principals of very large schools
- **female principals and teachers were finding their workload less manageable than their male colleagues.** Only 17 percent of female principals reported their workload was manageable compared to 23 percent of male principals
- **teachers' wellbeing and workload had also been impacted by student behaviour.** Around a third of both teachers and principals reported that student behaviour was worse than they would have expected for that time of the year
- **filling vacancies had been challenging for some schools,** increasing workload pressures, with 17 percent of principals reporting that they had been unable to fill vacant positions.

“I need to take more control of my work life balance, currently working 60+ hours per week is unsustainable.”

“It almost seems that we all went 'hard' during lockdown and afterwards to ensure that students didn't fall behind that we ended up exhausted by the end of the year – teachers, students alike.”

The impact has been greater on Auckland schools

Things have been more difficult in Auckland.

In June and July, principals in Auckland were more likely to report that staff wellbeing had not returned to the levels they had prior to the Covid-19 disruptions. During the current outbreak, principals reported stress and exhaustion were very high, especially for teachers with their own young families or those living alone.

Key findings include that, in June and July 2021:

- a third of principals in Auckland reported that their communities had not recovered from the financial impact of Covid-19, compared with a quarter of principals outside Auckland
- schools in Auckland had been slower to recover from disruptions
- principals in Auckland were more likely (34 percent to 24 percent) to report that staff wellbeing had not returned to pre Covid-19 levels.

The most recent lockdown is likely to have increased the differences between Auckland schools and schools in regions who have not experienced prolonged lockdowns. Principals reported being aware of anxiety from both staff and students about safety when returning to onsite learning, with ongoing active community transmission.

Principals and teachers have changed their practices to respond to Covid-19

Principals and teachers have responded to Covid-19 challenges by changing what they teach and how they teach it. There has been an increased use of digital technology, increased whānau engagement, and other innovative approaches to teaching and learning.

Key findings include that, in June and July 2021:

- **there were stronger relationships with whānau.** A third (30 percent) of teachers and just under a quarter (22 percent) of principals felt that Covid-19 had strengthened the role of parents, whānau,

and caregivers as key partners in student learning. However, this was lower than at the end of 2020

- **schools have become more digital.** A third (32 percent) of teachers reported they made more use of online teaching than before Covid-19. The biggest relative increase in use of online teaching was seen in low decile schools
- **innovation continues.** Principals reported they were continuing to innovate with new approaches, including re-thinking how lessons are organised to increase engagement and learning, and finding new ways to use technology to support learning and engagement.

Looking forward – new challenges

Looking forward, Covid-19 will continue to challenge principals and teachers and disrupt education. The nature of this impact is uncertain, but it is likely that hybrid learning (teaching online and in the classroom) will be common, staff absences will increase, and there will be challenges with student engagement, attendance, and learning.

Whilst the impact of Covid-19 remains uncertain, emerging evidence suggests that it is likely schools will have to adjust to the following changes.

- **Hybrid/blended learning** – needing to teach both students who are learning from home for short or extended periods while others are learning in the classroom, and possibly having to respond to short but sudden school closures.
- **Staff absences** – needing to be able to respond to high levels of staff absences due to both illness with Covid-19 and isolation due to contact with Covid-19. Due to difficulties filling vacancies, secondary and low-decile schools are likely to find this particularly challenging.
- **Student engagement and attendance challenges** – having to re-engage and reintegrate into the classroom students who have had spells learning from home, as well as teaching students with higher levels of anxiety, which can impact on their behaviour and learning.
- **Learning gaps** – disrupted learning leading to both individual students having learning gaps and wider gaps in the levels of learning within classes.

How schools can prepare for the new challenges

Schools are already innovating to develop practices that can help meet the challenges of this new reality. Schools can be well placed to meet the challenges of 2022 through having plans in place now to prepare for hybrid learning, support learners to catch up, and promote re-engagement with learning.

Practical steps that schools can take to prepare for 2022 include the following:

- **Preparing for hybrid/blended learning.** For example, through having a clear plan of how remote learning will be supported for some students when most students have returned to the classroom.
- **Supporting learning catch up.** For example, regularly using assessment tools to find out where students are at with their learning and developing differentiated and individualised teaching strategies for accelerated learning.
- **Having a plan to support re-engagement** both in the classroom and remotely. For example, through increasing meetings with whānau and using positive and consistent messaging about the value of good attendance.
- **Supporting students' wellbeing.** For example, focusing on students' connections and togetherness, and teaching students ways to strengthen their tolerance, resilience, and self-regulation, as well as ways to cope with anxiety.

More detailed examples of practices that can help are available in ERO's recent reports: [Supporting Primary Students as they Return to the Classroom](#), and [Supporting Secondary Students as They Return to the Classroom](#). The report [Learning in a Covid-19 World: Supporting Secondary School Engagement](#) also suggests a range of additional strategies for re-engaging secondary students with onsite learning.

Teachers and principals will need support

This report has found that teachers and principals have adapted and responded to Covid-19 to meet their students' needs, but they are struggling. Their enjoyment in their work is low and declining, while concerns about workload are rising. They will need support to meet the ongoing challenges of Covid-19 and adjust to new ways of working.

ERO's research has identified four actions that could be taken to support teachers and principals.

1. Supporting availability of teachers

Teaching and learning in a Covid-19 world is staffing-intensive. Providing both online and onsite learning is a new challenge for most New Zealand schools. In addition, students may need extra support from their teachers. Staff absences and vacancies are likely to continue to be significant issues for some schools. Schools should consider contingency plans to deal with staff absences. There may also be opportunities to pool staffing resources across multiple schools, both regionally and nationally.

2. Opportunities to share effective approaches

Hybrid learning and re-engaging students remotely is new. As schools develop their approaches, being able to share what they have learnt and draw on emerging good practice from New Zealand and abroad will help.

3. Using existing expertise in distance and blended learning

The Ministry of Education provides resources to support online learning through the Virtual Learning Network (VLN). Additionally, Te Kura | Te Aho o te Kura Pounamu (formerly the Correspondence School) has considerable expertise and experience in providing distance learning and hybrid approaches in the New Zealand context. Te Kura's expertise could be used to support all schools.

4. Supporting principals' and teachers' wellbeing

The low level of life satisfaction and high level of stress reported by principals and teachers is very concerning. Many principals reported feeling pressured and isolated and may need greater opportunities to have peer support as they meet the ongoing challenges of Covid-19. Some principals and teachers could benefit from access to professional support that helps them navigate the challenges of Covid 19 in 2022.

Where can teachers and principals go to for help?

- [Ministry of Education COVID-19 Information and Advice](#)
- [Workforce Wellbeing Package](#)
- [SPARKLERS resource hub](#)
- [Springboard Trust](#)
- [NZEI Covid-19 Information](#)



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