



# Learning in a Covid-19 World: The Impact of Covid-19 on Pacific Learners

## SUMMARY



Pacific learners and their families have been disproportionately affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Our research has found that Pacific communities have met these challenges with resilience, and schools have put in a range of responses to support Pacific learners through the disruption. However, there are concerns about the longer-term impact of Covid-19 on Pacific learners that will require a strong, targeted response across the education sector.

The disruptions caused by Covid-19 over the last two years have been challenging and long lasting. ERO's new report, *Learning in a Covid-19 World: The Impact of Covid-19 on Pacific Learners*, looks closely at the achievement, attendance, mental health and wellbeing, school contexts, and education pathways of Pacific learners over this time. The report shines a light on challenges and shares successful strategies.

Our research shows that positive practices are having a good impact for some Pacific learners. However, for many Pacific learners, stronger and more deliberate response strategies will be required to prevent long-term impacts from Covid-19 disruptions.

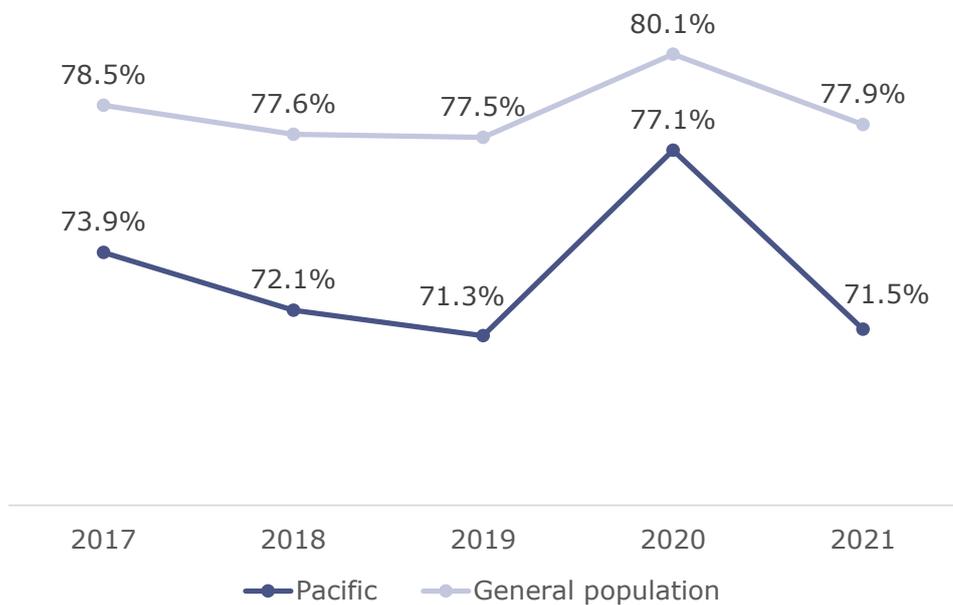
## What does the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 look like for Pacific learners?

### Pacific students' learning has been impacted

Pacific learners' achievement declined in 2021 after a rise in 2020. This fall was more pronounced for Pacific learners than the general population and Pacific learners continue to sit below the general population for achievement at NCEA Levels 1, 2, and 3, and University Entrance. For example, 72 percent of Pacific learners achieved NCEA Level 2 in 2021, compared to 78 percent of the general student population. While it is too early to know if the fall in 2021 is a trend or a one-off event, it is concerning.

Access to devices and online learning have been recurring challenges. In mid-2021, ERO found Pacific learners were six percentage points less likely than learners in the general population to report that they would be able to learn from home if there was another lockdown. They were also eight percentage points less likely to have access to devices if they needed them. One in five Pacific learners reported that they did not have or did not know if they had access to a device at home.

*Pacific and general population NCEA Level 2 achievement 2017 to 2021*



Some Pacific learners found the learning environments at home more challenging. Bubble sizes varied but large bubbles often meant there was limited space for Pacific learners to study. We also heard about challenges where their house wasn't quiet enough to focus on schoolwork.

Pacific learners were much more likely than learners in the general population to report they needed to catch up on their learning in mid-2021. Only half of Pacific learners reported coping with their schoolwork over time and with repeated disruptions.

## Pacific students' attendance and engagement has been impacted

The [Ministry of Education](#) found that attendance rates for Pacific learners towards the end of 2021 were below the attendance rates of learners in the general population.

Over the last two years, there have been patterns of Pacific learners disengaging from school with decreased attendance, especially after lockdowns. Two-thirds of Pacific learners live in Auckland where schools have been closed more than three times the number of days than the rest of the country.

Many Pacific learners have had to take on additional responsibilities to support their families and community due to the pandemic's challenges. This has impacted their ability, as well as availability, to engage in schoolwork and fit in with structured school timetables.

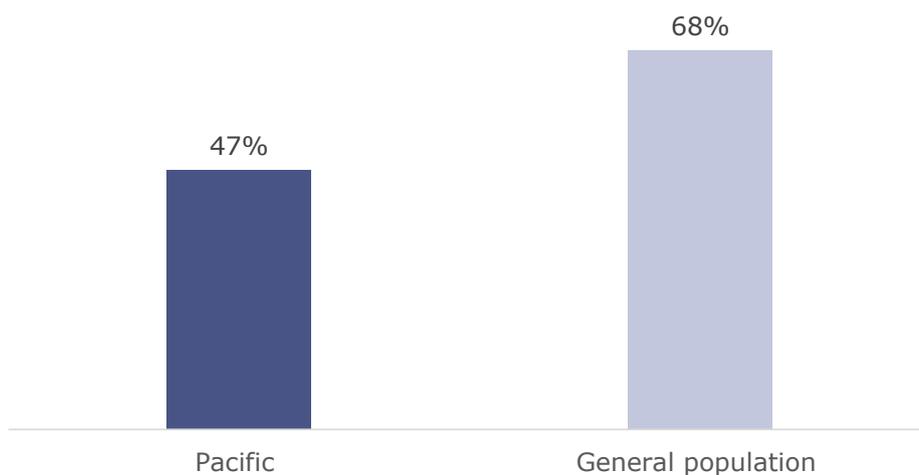
“I feel that I am behind on my work and I find it a little bit hard with time management here at home. I hope to return to school real soon to catch up.”

PACIFIC LEARNER

“Due to Covid-19 I have not been motivated to come to school and due to that I have been missing out a lot on school.”

PACIFIC LEARNER

### Average school attendance for week beginning 22 November 2021



## Pacific students' mental health and wellbeing has been impacted

The emotional wellbeing of many Pacific learners has been negatively affected by the pandemic.

Feeling safe from Covid-19 fluctuated over time with varying Alert Level settings. Returning to onsite schooling created more anxiety for some Pacific students. They told us how the pandemic had continued to impact them in terms of anxiety and being overwhelmed transitioning in and out of lockdowns.

Pacific learners were more likely to be in families where members had contracted Covid-19, been hospitalised, or died. Their grief was compounded by an inability to have normal community gatherings and grieving rituals because of Covid-19 restrictions. Learners and their families missed out on their usual extended support systems and learners told us about the significant impact that this had.

“Our mental wellbeing – it can be suffocating at home, mental illness is real.”

PACIFIC LEARNER

“Funerals - attending Zoom, we had friends who lost family members and they could only attend via Zoom, imagine that, I would smash the Zoom if that was me.”

PACIFIC LEARNER

## Pacific learners are at more risk of moving out of education

Some Pacific learners had family members who lost jobs or had substantially reduced income. Consequently, they needed to prioritise providing financial assistance to their family over their schooling. It is unclear how widespread the issue is, but it is extremely significant for those learners who are facing this decision.

“We do a lot for our families. We are the breadwinners for our families and need to succeed at school and work.”

PACIFIC LEARNER

## Pacific learners are more likely to be in schools where leaders and teachers are struggling

Pacific learners are more likely to be in schools in Auckland, where teachers' wellbeing has been slower to recover from the Covid-19 disruptions than for teachers elsewhere. ERO found that principals in Auckland were less likely to indicate their staff's wellbeing had returned to pre-Covid-19 levels compared with principals in the rest of New Zealand.

Lower decile schools, where Pacific learners are more likely to be, also reported more difficulties filling vacancies. This adds to the existing stress for principals and staff.

## What has been going well for Pacific learners?

Families, learners, and schools have innovated in response to the educational challenges that the pandemic has posed for teaching and learning. Schools and teachers have worked to minimise the impact of the disruptions to learning continuity for their Pacific students.

### Family and community connections made a positive difference to Pacific students' experience of the pandemic

ERO found that there has been a significant lift in Pacific families' engagement in their children's learning. Families have been active in supporting learners in their at-home learning. Most Pacific learners reported feeling supported by the adults in their lives and had people they could talk to at school or at home if they had wellbeing or learning concerns. Pacific students reported that their parents became more interested in their learning more often than other students.

Friendships were an important source of support for Pacific learners staying connected when at home. They were also a motivating factor to returning to onsite schooling following lockdowns. ERO also found examples of Pacific learners taking initiative with their learning and supporting one another with learning and wellbeing. These connections may be contributing to Pacific students enjoying their learning. In mid-2021 almost two-thirds of Pacific students reported enjoying their learning – more than other students.

“My grandma motivated me to get off the phone and do my schoolwork.”

PACIFIC LEARNER

“Prefects did some motivational work themselves which was very good and directed at the students. The service group were able to provide practical support for families.”

SCHOOL LEADER

## Schools have innovated to support Pacific learners

Many teachers went above and beyond to support their students, providing extra help with catching up on schoolwork. One in two Pacific learners reported they got extra help from their teachers after the 2020 lockdowns, compared to one in three learners in the general population.

More flexibility around timetables has allowed many learners to manage their own schedules and complete schoolwork at a time that suited their family and work commitments. This meant many learners weren't forced to choose between continuing their study or taking on a job that conflicted with traditional school hours.

Learning experiences that were responsive to the needs of Pacific learners and the Covid-19 context worked well for many students. Schools and teachers took opportunities to centre learning around culture, enabling students to use their cultural knowledge to demonstrate learning.

Schools have worked to gain a greater understanding of each learner and their individual circumstances. Making these strong connections and building trust with both the learner and their family allowed teachers to better understand the context of the student and to respond to their needs more effectively.

“Where possible, teachers discussed and negotiated amongst themselves the changes in session times in response to students’ preferences.”

TEACHER

“They could pick and choose when in the day they’d do the work – but they had to do the work.”

SCHOOL LEADER

## What next - how we can respond to concerns?

Our research shows that, although positive practices are working well in some areas and for some learners, the pandemic is having a significant and disproportionate impact on Pacific learners. Concerns about the learning and wellbeing of Pacific students could have serious long-term impacts. A stronger and more deliberate response is required, and schools can’t do it alone.

ERO recommends three areas of action.

### 1. Building on the Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020 - 2030, education agencies need to develop a specific response to reverse the decline in achievement for Pacific learners.

This response needs to:

- focus on ensuring Pacific learners are not disadvantaged in the long term

- prioritise reengaging learners in schooling and address lost time in learning across the curriculum, focusing on the essential areas of literacy and numeracy, particularly for younger learners
- make every effort to identify those Pacific learners who are significantly behind and support them to catch up.

### 2. ERO to work specifically with those schools who are seeing declining achievement of their Pacific learners.

ERO will work with the schools where Pacific student learning, progress, and achievement has declined. ERO will support the schools’ continuous improvement journey with our evaluation expertise.

### 3. All schools to recognise the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on Pacific learners and take proactive action to offset this impact, drawing on best practice.

Many schools are already doing this. To support schools to raise and maintain Pacific achievement, we held a talanoa with principals and leaders of schools who have seen an improvement in Pacific achievement during the Covid-19 disruptions to get their ideas on what works. These schools:

- had a school culture that celebrated Pacific culture and prioritised Pacific learners’ achievement
- knew their Pacific learners, and supported their learning needs
- combined supports for wellbeing with supports for achievement or supports for attendance
- supported students to balance their learning with their family commitments.

## Useful resources

The full report, *Learning in a Covid-19 World: The Impact of Covid-19 on Pacific Learners*, sets out strategies to support Pacific learners. Schools can also draw on the Tapasā framework to help guide their work with Pacific learners and to review and improve their practice to support Pacific learners and their families more effectively.

ERO's reports on strategies for reengaging learners in the classroom are also useful resources:

- [Learning in a Covid-19 world: Supporting primary school students as they return to the classroom](#)
- [Learning in a Covid-19 world: Supporting secondary school students as they return to the classroom](#)
- [Learning in a Covid-19 world: Supporting secondary school engagement](#)

Other useful resources are:

- [Best practice for teaching Pacific learners: Pacific Evidence Brief 2019](#)
- [Action plan for Pacific Education 2020-2030: Supporting research and community voice](#)
- [Research to understand the features of quality Pacific bilingual education: Review of best practices](#)
- [Language Enhancing the Achievement of Pasifika \(LEAP\)](#)
- [Tapasā Framework](#)

## What ERO did

Data collected for these reports included:

- surveys of 612 Pacific learners in April and May 2020
- surveys of 457 Pacific learners in August and September 2020
- surveys of 316 Pacific learners in June and July 2021.

ERO has also drawn on data collected by the Ministry of Education.

Following the Delta outbreak, ERO took a deeper look at the impacts on Pacific communities. In November 2021, ERO's Pacific staff conducted:

- talanoa sessions with 32 leaders and teachers across 14 schools with significant Pacific rolls
- talanoa sessions with 41 Pacific learners across seven schools.

To further inform the report's recommendations and guidance strategies, in April 2022, ERO conducted an online talanoa session with seven school leaders where achievement for Pacific learners had improved over the pandemic, focusing on strategies they had found to be successful.



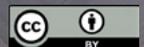
EDUCATION REVIEW OFFICE  
Te Tari Arotake Mātauranga

[www.ero.govt.nz](http://www.ero.govt.nz)



**Te Kāwanatanga  
o Aotearoa**  
New Zealand Government

Learning in a Covid-19 World: The Impact of Covid-19 on Pacific Learners  
Published 2022 © Crown Copyright  
Digital: 978-1-99-000299-1 Print: 978-1-99-000297-7



Except for the Education Review Office's logo used throughout this report, this copyright work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 New Zealand licence. In essence, you are free to copy, distribute and adapt the work, as long as you attribute the work to the Education Review Office and abide by the other licence terms. In your attribution, use the wording 'Education Review Office', not the Education Review Office logo or the New Zealand Government logo.