



Starting School Together: What Do We Know?

SUMMARY



Starting school is a major childhood event. It can be an exciting time for children and their families. But it is a big change and can be an uncertain time. Since 2018, schools have been able to have children start in groups at certain dates during the year. This is called cohort entry. ERO found that cohort entry has a range of benefits for children's wellbeing and learning, schools' ability to structure transitions more easily, and for teachers due to fewer disruptions and more time to teach.

A good start at school sets children up to succeed at school. We looked at how changing to 'cohort entry' impacts on children, their peers, and their whānau, as well as their schools and early childhood education services.

In most OECD countries, new entrants start with groups of peers (cohort entry). Up until recently, in New Zealand, students started school on their fifth birthday, or any school day after that (continuous entry).

Following changes to the law in 2017, 7 percent of New Zealand schools now enrol children in groups on fixed dates, twice per term (eight times a year).

ERO's new report, *Starting School Together: What Do We Know?*, looks closely at how cohort entry is working in New Zealand.

Which schools adopted cohort entry and why?

Seven percent of schools around the country have adopted cohort entry. Over two thirds (70 percent) of these are in urban areas, and more than half (58 percent) have rolls of more than 300 children. Cohort schools are also two and a half times more likely to be higher decile. As more Māori and Pacific learners attend primary schools in urban areas like Auckland, they are more likely to be at schools running a cohort entry policy.

Schools told us they implemented cohort entry because they thought it would benefit new entrant children. Almost three quarters of principals and new entrant teachers indicated they thought cohort entry had social and emotional wellbeing benefits for new entrants.

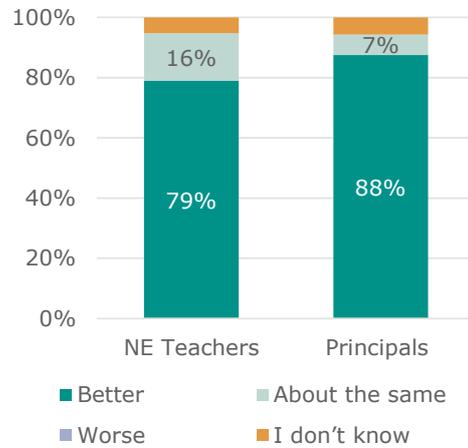
Impacts of cohort entry on children, whānau, schools, and early childhood education services

1. Benefits for new entrants

Children’s wellbeing is supported

Nine out of 10 principals indicated cohort entry has a positive effect on child social and emotional wellbeing. Schools told us that starting with friends and other children helped new entrants establish social connections, experience a greater sense of belonging, and feel less anxious.

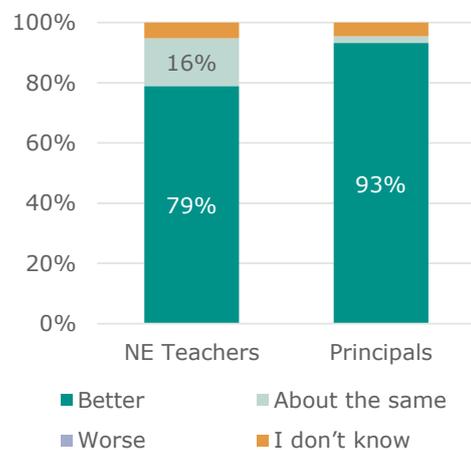
Cohort entry’s impact on child social and emotional wellbeing



Settling into school was better

Most principals (93 percent) and new entrant teachers (79 percent) said children settled better in class with cohort entry. Teachers said they are better able to teach the routines and behaviours children need to get started at school because they had blocks of uninterrupted time. Routines can be reinforced when new cohorts start. Just over three quarters of schools that have cohort entry agreed transitions to school from ECE services were better than with continuous entry.

Cohort entry’s impact on how well children settle into class



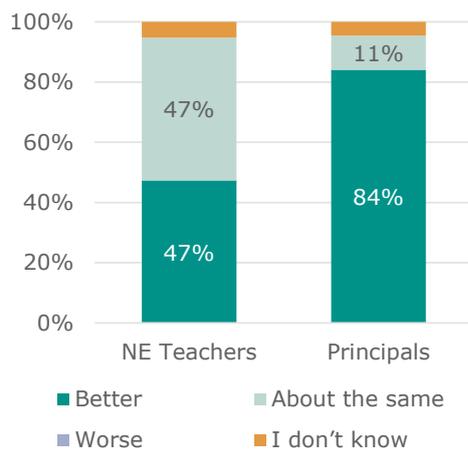
Friendships were supported

Two-thirds of whānau (68 percent) thought their child's friendships with other children were better with cohort entry. They agreed with schools that it helped children maintain or establish friendships and gain confidence as they adapted to new environments with others in the same circumstances.

Children's learning was supported

Eight out of 10 principals (84 percent) and just under half of new entrant teachers (47 percent) considered cohort entry improved new entrants' engagement with learning.

Cohort entry's impact on children's engagement with learning



Peers of new entrants also benefited

Schools reported cohort entry positively impacted other children in class. Learning, engagement, and wellbeing benefited from fewer disruptions and opportunities to reset and relearn when new cohort groups start. Whānau and schools thought there were fewer disruptions as new children joined their classroom. Twice termly intakes meant teachers had uninterrupted blocks of time to develop school readiness and progress learning for each cohort.

2. Impacts for whānau

Cohort entry can help whānau wellbeing

For whānau, just under half (44 percent) indicated their wellbeing was positively affected by cohort entry. This is in part due to their children having a more settled experience — when children were less anxious, so too were their parents. Only 3 percent of whānau reported a negative impact on wellbeing.

Whānau connection with the school and community was supported

Schools and whānau agreed cohort entry provided an opportunity to build relationships with each other and between whānau. Having set dates for school visits were opportunities for leaders to bring whānau together to learn about the school and meet other families. Formal welcoming events like pōwhiri made starting school a “special time”.

“I really enjoyed the cohort entry and how a small group of other carers were experiencing the exact same thing as me at the exact same time as me. It allowed for quality peer support.”

PARENT

3. Impacts for schools

Cohort entry helped schools plan transitions

Cohort entry helped some principals and teachers to plan visits and events for groups of whānau. They could communicate consistently with whānau. They could also work with ECEs to ensure new entrants' transitions support learning continuity as learning was not constantly interrupted by new arrivals.

Cohort entry reduced administrative time and supported planning

Most principals (82 percent) and teachers (84 percent) agreed cohort entry lessened their administration time. Principals described being able to anticipate staffing requirements and identify when to hire teachers because they knew when new entrants were due to start. They could also manage class sizes and school rolls, and be prepared for children with learning support needs.

“It has enabled us to strategically plan to have set teachers released to support our new learners to school at one time. This has meant that for their first week at school, someone is tagged to the group to ensure they are all settling ok.”

PRINCIPAL

Principals could be strategic with new entrant teacher release time so they could visit early learning centres once or twice a term. This helped them get to know potential new students.

“...with the cohort entry... we're not having to send a teacher to the early childhood every couple of days.... There's a number of early childhoods in town, so they'd take a day and they go tiki-touring around where our kids are coming from this time to meet them, to get to know them a lot and that sort of thing, you know. So that has also made things a lot easier.”

PRINCIPAL

State Integrated schools commented they could manage their enrolment processes and communicate more easily with whānau on waiting lists with cohort entry.

Teachers had more time to teach

Eight out of 10 principals (85 percent) and teachers (84 percent) thought cohort entry positively impacted teachers' work. Teachers told us they could plan for new entrant numbers due at specific times during the year and they could engage in activities like preparing stationery packs, transition visits, or lesson planning.

Why cohort entry may not work for all schools

Although cohort entry has a range of benefits for schools, it may not be a good fit for every school.

Schools that are trying to encourage enrolment

Where families may be disengaged with education, continuous entry can help ensure children start school as soon as possible. Short delays to starting school, from two to eight weeks, can also have financial impacts for some whānau.

State integrated schools in competitive enrolment environments may also choose continuous entry, so students can start quickly, if they are trying to maintain or grow their roll.

Schools with specific community needs

Schools told us that when they have higher numbers of children with learning or behavioural support needs, continuous entry helps them manage their induction.

“Transitioning students with learning and support challenges into school may better lend itself to a continuous entry policy in communities with a higher proportion of these learners. Continuous entry can provide teachers with more time to devote to individual learners as enrolments are staggered rather than clustered.”

PRINCIPAL

Schools may have relationships with other schools in their community (for example, a Kōhui Ako), and may agree to keep continuous entry to ensure whānau are not confused by different enrolment policies. Communities can also favour a birthday start and prefer their school retain continuous entry. For schools with small rolls, cohort entry may offer no benefits.

4. Impact on the early childhood education sector

Early childhood services have traditionally managed the flow of children through their centres based on children moving on to school on their fifth birthday. Cohort entry could change the pattern of how children flow in and out of a service, and how services manage their rolls.

ECEs with waiting lists might experience delays with new child intakes

ECE services told us that, for services with waiting lists, cohort entry's twice a term intake can mean children stay slightly longer in ECE. Having more older children may require a centre to adjust its service to keep these children engaged with learning. It can also delay some younger children taking up places until they become free.

“...there was a need for them to look at their programs and how they were going to extend or challenge or keep engaged, you know, the children that were staying a wee bit longer...”

PRINCIPAL

ECEs with small or no waiting lists might experience gaps in their rolls

For ECEs with small or no waiting lists, a group of children leaving together can mean a temporary drop in numbers they cannot quickly replace.

Some ECEs may benefit

For other services, children staying longer can benefit both the service and the children. For centres, retaining children for a few weeks, or over the Christmas period, can be a financial benefit as they are still eligible for funding. Children also have more time to get ready for school.

What we learned

Schools that have tried cohort entry recommended it and intend to stay with it. Only 2 percent of schools thought they would return to continuous entry. We found that cohort entry can:

- help with new entrants' successful transition to school
- have a positive impact on peers
- help whānau connect with the school
- help schools plan for transition and give teachers more time to teach.

Whilst cohort entry may not work for all schools, there are clear benefits so far for the schools that have adopted it. Other schools may wish to consider adopting cohort entry.

Useful resources

The full report, *Starting School Together: What Do We Know About Cohort Entry?*, delves more deeply into the data we collected and provides insights for schools considering cohort entry. ERO has also produced four helpful guides:

1. *A guide for school leaders considering cohort entry*
2. *A guide for school boards considering cohort entry*
3. *A guide for ECE services on children starting school in groups*
4. *A guide for parents sending a child to a cohort entry school*

Other useful sources of information on cohort entry include:

- [Starting school – Education in New Zealand](#)

What ERO did

Data collected for this evaluation include:

- surveys of 94 principals, 21 teachers, and 66 whānau
- interviews with 22 school leaders and teachers, two whānau, and 12 ECE providers/staff.

ERO also drew on administrative data collected by the Ministry of Education.





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