



Briefing report

Education Review Office (ERO): Turnaround Schools Evaluation | High Priority Schools Programme

Date	7 July 2021
Security Level	N/A
ERO Priority	Medium
ERO Reference	M21-26
Date requested	ERO initiated
Date due	ERO initiated
Proactive release	Not Recommended

Addressee	Action sought	Deadline
Associate Minister of Education	<p>It is recommended that you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a) Note the contents of the briefing on the Turnaround Schools Evaluation High Priority Schools pilot programme.b) Note outcomes and learnings have informed ERO's new School: Evaluation for Improvement approach.c) Note ERO estimate between 80 and 200 such schools across NZ at any one time.d) Note ERO proposes to continue to dedicate a limited level of resourcing to this work.e) Note current resource constraints mean that we are unable to take this approach to scale.f) Note the Ministry and ERO are trialling in Auckland a new approach to broker "fit-for-purpose" supports for HPS.g) Note ERO intends to publish the findings from the Evaluation of the Turnaround Schools Initiative on the 21st of July 2021.h) Agree that given the potential Budget considerations raised in this briefing note and that the overall evaluation findings from the pilot will be published shortly it is not recommended that this paper be proactively released.	



Briefing report



Attachments:

Education Review Office (ERO):
Turnaround Schools Evaluation | High
Priority Schools Programme



Comments:

Minister's Office to complete

Noted

Seen

Approved

Referred to:

Date signed by Minister:



Our Ref: M21-26

7 July 2021

Hon Jan Tinetti
Associate Minister of Education

Turnaround Schools Evaluation | High Priority Schools Programme
Purpose

1. This briefing provides:
 - An update on the Turnaround Schools pilot (TAS) | High Priority Schools (HPS) programme.
 - High level findings from an independent evaluation of the pilot.
 - Summarises key feedback from principals and board chairs involved in the pilot following an ERO and Ministry debrief session last week (2 July 2021).

Background

2. In recent years approximately nine percent (180-190) of all New Zealand schools have been identified as having sufficient concerns that they were placed on a 1 to 2-year review cycle. ERO's current approach is to work with the Ministry of Education (Ministry) to identify the support required for improvement and engage with the school over 1 to 2 years. Approximately 70% of the schools categorised in this way have in the past improved sufficiently with this additional support to shift to a 3-year review cycle.
3. However, there is a group of approximately 80 schools that have significant concerns and have been performing poorly over a long period of time. These schools often face a range of very complex issues both within the school and in their wider communities and require an intensive systemic improvement approach across a range of domains including: governance, leadership, professional capability, curriculum, and the quality of teaching. Presenting issues generally include:
 - Poor attendance and student engagement.
 - Low levels of academic achievement and low expectations for learner success and only a limited emphasis on differentiating teaching and learning to the needs of individual learners.
 - Chronic behaviour issues.
 - Low levels of teacher engagement and low staff morale.
 - High staff turn-over and a difficulty in recruiting staff.
 - Teachers working in isolation, and little effort to strengthen teaching capability or collective teacher efficacy.
 - Little evidence of whole school planning and consequentially poor learner pathways and a lack of scaffolding of learning.
 - Weak governance.
 - Minimal attention paid to evaluation or assessment data and such data is not used to effect improvements in teaching and learning.

- Very little internal capability to turn around performance.
 - Poor engagement with parents and whanau.
 - A poor reputation in their community, often resulting in rolls that are in “free fall” with the concomitant ongoing reductions in staffing and resourcing levels.
 - A breakdown in relationships with the school’s wider community, with the school often working in isolation.
4. An additional feature of note with many of these schools is that they have run down, badly maintained property and, in some cases, quite “disgraceful learning environments”.
 5. In the past, as a system we have tended to employ governance solutions (i.e. appointment of a commissioner or LSM) to address the needs of these schools. This approach has relied on identifying the right one or two individuals and leveraging change through governance oversight as opposed to directly shifting the conditions and practices of leadership and classroom teachers. Often those coming into these roles have not been educationalists or had the necessary training or exposure to the evidence base which is necessary to address the complex set of issues that these schools are often facing. Equally, the triggers for such intervention have often been to do with a failure in financial management as opposed to the poverty of education received by students. ERO’s analysis shows that on their own these interventions have not necessarily delivered long-term sustainable improvement for many schools.
 6. In 2017, in consultation with the Ministry and New Zealand School Trustees Association, ERO selected six schools identified as repeatedly poor performing. They had high proportions of Māori, Pacific and students with additional learning requirements. ERO then began trialling the new approach with a view to turning the situation at these schools around.
 7. In 2019, ERO extended its approach to a further eight schools. They are in a variety of locations, including rural and urban, and some with bilingual and immersion settings.

ERO’s High Priority Schools Approach

8. The approach involves a national team of specialist review officers with strong education and evaluation expertise working alongside the school. The team all have substantial school experience. A national manager has oversight of this work. We have attempted to keep the team together so that they can refine and develop their practice and build the deep knowledge around school improvement that is required to be effective with schools presenting with the sets of challenges that we see among these providers.
9. Given the limitations of the statutory levers in our system, this interventionist approach relies significantly on forming strong and effective working relationships in the schools concerned. Our intent is to ensure that we establish trusted relationships within these communities, and through this trust that we gain consensus, and commitment to re-build a quality learning offering.
10. The project has been overseen by a steering group of the Secretary for Education, Chief Review Officer, and the President of the NZSTA.
11. The evaluation approach has a diagnostic focus and is underpinned by *ERO’s Evaluation Indicators: Effective Practice for Improvement and Learner Success* and a synthesis of the substantial body of research related to school turn-around and improvement (here we refer to the works of Fullan, Hargreaves, and Hopkins).

12. The Turnaround or High Priority School approach is longitudinal and has a stepped or stair-cased process. A thorough review of existing information about the school's history and performance informs and underpins the scope and design of the approach. The initial focus of the evaluation is centred on leadership for equity and excellence, ensuring a responsive curriculum, and growing teacher capability. Four priority terms of reference are used.
 - Learner outcomes.
 - Settled learning environment including student wellbeing.
 - Effective teaching.
 - Effective leadership, including stewardship.
13. Building off an overarching analysis of where the school might be at, and an underlying "theory of change", the model of intervention takes an iterative approach which identifies a manageable sequence of initiatives aimed at anchoring the conditions that exist in the school to deliver rapid improvement. The focus on existing strengths, helps the school navigate the complexity of the issues that they face, and not become overwhelmed by the magnitude of the work required to successfully effect change.
14. A wide range of evaluation methods are used and customised for the specific environments and focused on increasing learners, staff, and community voice.
15. ERO, the NZSTA and Ministry collaborate to provide the most appropriate and timely support for the schools.
16. Written reports document and provide a succinct summary of the progress, priority areas for action, and the nature of the intervention and support required to rapidly improve what is happening for students. The audience and stakeholders for these reports include the school, Ministry and other agencies involved. While periodic public reports are also produced, our approach aims to not stigmatise or label these schools as this risks exacerbating many of the challenges that the school may face.
17. Each school is visited termly for the first two years. This engagement looks at progress made and sets the direction for the coming period. This intensity ensures accountability for action and that mid-course adjustments can be quickly made where initiatives might be floundering. This regularity aims to document successes and give the school a sense of momentum and hope.
18. Through the approach, ERO works to broker solutions with partner agencies that align with an assessment of the school's needs to move forward. As progress begins to happen, and the pace of improvement accelerates, this reduces to six-month monitoring in the third year and moving to self-autonomy and the regular ERO review programme in the third to fourth year based on readiness. There is high accountability for improvement with measures in place to monitor progress. Attachment 1 provides an example of one of our monitoring tools that maps the progress made over time of one of the schools involved in the pilot.

Independent Evaluation of the High Priority Schools Approach

19. The pilot has provided ERO, the Ministry and NZSTA with an opportunity to test and evolve a new approach to working with schools who are really struggling. We have from this approach developed a strong suite of tools and insights about what might be effective in terms of addressing the needs of these communities.

20. ERO commissioned an external evaluator* to independently evaluate the HPS approach. They evaluated stakeholders' perspectives on the implementation of the pilot approach, the effectiveness of the approach in supporting schools to make improvements and identified learnings to inform further work. The findings from this evaluation are provided in the attachment to this report (Attachment 2) and will be published on the 21st of this month (July 2021).
21. Findings from this evaluation show that the work has been highly regarded by school stakeholders and schools generally welcomed being part of the pilot. Leaders and trustees valued the relationships, collaboration, and continuity of the process.
22. The approach is showing positive successes, growing the capability and capacity of leaders, the overall conditions operating in a school and ultimately it is improving student learning and wellbeing. Considerable gains are evident where leaders use the evaluation findings, respond quickly, and make changes that increase student engagement in education.
23. Most of the schools have significantly shifted learning outcomes and are building more sustainable operational foundations and embedding a self-improvement approach.
24. The approach has shown that a different way of working together in partnership with schools that has engaged all key stakeholders, including the Ministry, to solve persistent problems systematically overtime has been effective. The relationship and communication between ERO and the Ministry strengthened as the trial progressed.
25. TAS reports provided the Ministry with a high-level indicator of progress within the schools, and robust evidence base to inform decisions about required resources and support for further improvements.
26. Improvements in performance are occurring at a much faster pace than with other previous interventions. The sustainability of these improvements was evident over COVID 19 disruptions where schools transition to a regular review approach was delayed but the improvements and progress were not lost.

Recommendations from the external evaluation

27. The summary of the recommendations from the external evaluation report are included in italics below.

It is recommended that:

- *ERO maintain a dedicated group of experienced evaluators to focus on schools with persistent performance challenges. The extension of the pilot to a greater number of schools through the High Priority Schools (HPS) approach in 2020 is formal recognition by ERO of the importance of this work. However, the continuation of the pilot level of resourcing (time and scope of work with schools) is likely to be unsustainable as work is extended to a greater number of schools. ERO will need to identify strategies to balance internal resource constraints with their capacity to influence change.*
- *The TAS team's role be extended to provide additional support and/or PLD in monitoring, evaluation and using data for improvement purposes. The team has developed a sound knowledge base about what works with Turnaround schools within the NZ context, and this information will be useful for ERO, the Ministry and for schools.*

- *The learnings from the TAS pilot be used by ERO and the Ministry to inform the work undertaken to shift performance in other underperforming schools. Learnings could usefully be extended to inform improvement practices within early childhood services as well.*
- *Schools – principals and potentially Board Chairs - be provided with an opportunity to share lessons learned, and to highlight promising practices in support for school improvement. The success case profiles in this report highlight some topics that could be explored. Principals would welcome an opportunity to share experiences. A forum would provide a further opportunity for them to learn about potentially useful strategies that have worked in similar school contexts. Persistently low-performing schools may be better served learning from schools similar to themselves, rather than 'best practice' cases.*
- *The tools and resources developed over the past three years by the TAS team be shared more widely across ERO and the Ministry. Additional work may be required to provide guidance on the use of each tool, and the purpose and process of use with schools to ensure they are used appropriately and with fidelity. Some of these tools (e.g., the school radars) could be particularly useful for bringing together qualitative assessments and judgements of the review team with quantitative school outcome data.*
- *That evaluation mechanisms are built into school improvement approaches to allow for progressive formative feedback. The explicit inclusion of process evaluation within any school improvement approach also has the benefit of demonstrating that ERO and the Ministry 'walks the talk' of evaluation for improvement.*
- *That a simple map of the improvement phases be developed to increase school and board understanding of progress markers for withdrawal or dial-down of the intensive improvement initiative.*

ERO's response to the evaluation recommendations

28. The Turn Around | High Priority Schools work has contributed to the design of our new *Schools: Evaluation for Improvement* model where we adopt a more differentiated approach to using developmental evaluation that reflects individual context, culture, and needs. It aims to strengthen schools' capability through embedding a continuous improvement and strategic approach, building their own engagement with and accountability to whānau and their communities.
29. ERO estimates that there are approximately 80 to 200 schools where there are significant concerns that would benefit from the intensity of the model described above and the highly specialist team we have established to support this work.
30. A map of the improvement phases has been created. The framework, a toolkit and signature strategies have been integrated and are being used with a second group of schools brought into the approach. (See Attachment 3).
31. Methods for monitoring school improvements are being developed. Formative and summative feedback mechanisms and resources have been modified and clarified. As more schools move towards transition into the *Schools: Evaluation for Improvement* approach because of their improved performance, exit strategies and approaches are being designed and trialled during 2021.
32. The intensity required of this approach is expensive. Currently we have dedicated a manager and around four Review Officers to this work. This team could potentially work with up to 20 HPS in the course of a year. ERO is currently resourced at one Review Officer per 40 schools (with a total of 60 school focussed Review Officers/Evaluation

Partners nationally). While we have explored ways in which we might lessen the costs associated with the approach, we do not believe this is feasible. In fact, we believe more is required to support these schools to turn their situations around.

33. In addition to the evaluative effort these schools require, substantial additional “fit-for-purpose” resources are required to support the interventions needed to lift performance. Examples include extra senior leaders with capability, embedded curriculum advisors, special educational needs coordinators (SENCO) or learning support coordinators, professional teaching coaches and mentors (on the ground) and community liaison specialists. For some schools Ministry support in holding staffing and operations funding, rather than seeing the school forced into a CAPNA process as rolls drop, have also been helpful to anchoring a school whose roll might be in “free-fall”. [REDACTED] is a good example of this where their roll trend has been completely reversed. We would also note that current system wide resources such as teacher PLD or Kahui Ako support are less appropriate to the circumstances that these schools often find themselves in.
34. To this end the Ministry and ERO are trialling, in Auckland, a new approach to the allocation of PLD resourcing. Where findings/ insights from the *Schools: Evaluation for Improvement* approach signal the need for an urgent capability uplift or other forms of support for the school, ERO can broker this support in partnership with the Ministry. This is aimed at helping address identified priorities for improvement and to share examples of effective practice. The initiative is flexible and looks to ensure that the way the resourcing is used meets the needs of the HPS provider, as opposed to having the providers fit within the centrally funded offerings. ERO can broker support through:
 - Referring the school to another principal or key leader that has effectively dealt with similar challenges or issues.
 - Another education agency in consultation with the Ministry.
 - Productive cross sector relationships with other educational institutions (for example a local ECE).
 - Connections between groups of schools with similar focus areas, challenges, and opportunities.
35. Given its impact, we believe the approach represents value for money and has the capacity to significantly improve the quality of learning for thousands of learners.
36. Going forward ERO is exploring ways in which we can sustain this approach given existing resourcing constraints. A key here will be prioritising those providers who are large and have the poorest student outcomes.
37. To work with an increased number of schools in order to address a larger proportion of the 80-200 identified schools poorly performing schools will require additional funding.

Recent Principal and Board Forum for Turnaround Schools

38. Principals and Board Chairs from the group of six pilot schools have had an opportunity to share lessons learned, to highlight promising practices in support for school improvement, and to consider next steps at a Turnaround Schools Workshop that took place at the beginning of July 2021 jointly hosted by ERO and the Ministry.

39. In addition to reinforcing the overall findings from the evaluation, the principals and trustees highlighted other positive aspects:

- They valued review officers working in partnership alongside the school and realised the team genuinely wanted change and improvement for the students.
- Reviews were focussed, specific and understood the nuances of the school's unique context.
- "ERO listened to our story – we were open and honest with each other".
- Pressure from the frequency of visits, regular contact created a sense of urgency. Change was promoted by identifying priorities and setting deadlines.
- The review provided 'leverage' for principals with the school and community to make desired changes.
- Developing knowledge of what good practice looked like facilitated improvement.
- ERO reports validated the progress and developments the school had made. Principals said they could see their own voices in the reports.
- The process gave schools the motivation to improve – "we felt we could trust the team".
- Reviewers were prepared to be innovative and creative; they recognised that changing thinking was needed to solve problems.
- Some said that the TAS approach is the best model of ERO reviewing practice they have experienced.

** Delwyn Goodrick, PhD, is a psychologist who has been working as an academic and as an evaluation practitioner for the past fifteen years. She has extensive experience in teaching evaluation and social research to academics and to public sector practitioners. She conducts evaluations of small and medium size programs and policy initiatives and offers workshops to enhance the capacity of public sector workers in evaluation.*

Recommendations

40. It is recommended that you:

- a) **Note** the contents of the briefing on the Turnaround Schools Evaluation | High Priority Schools pilot programme. **Noted**
- b) **Note** outcomes and learnings have informed ERO's new School: Evaluation for Improvement approach. **Noted**
- c) **Note** ERO estimate between 80 and 200 such schools across NZ at any one time. **Noted**
- d) **Note** ERO proposes to continue to dedicate a limited level of resourcing to this work. **Noted**
- e) **Note** current resource constraints mean that we are unable to take this approach to scale. **Noted**
- f) **Note** the Ministry and ERO are trialling in Auckland a new approach to broker "fit-for-purpose" supports for HPS. **Noted**
- g) **Note** ERO intends to publish the findings from the Evaluation of the Turnaround Schools Initiative on the 21st of July 2021. **Noted**

- h) **Agree** that given the potential Budget considerations raised in this briefing note and that the overall evaluation findings from the pilot will be published shortly it is not recommended that this paper be proactively released. **Agree** **Disagree**



Nicholas Pole
Chief Executive

NOTED/APPROVED

Hon Jan Tinetti
Associate Minister of Education



10 / 07 / 2021

Attachments:

- The full evaluation report.
- The summary showing a school's progress in through the initiative.
- TAS Pilot Methodology timeline and ERO High Priority Development Evaluation Framework.