



# Briefing report

## Education Review Office (ERO): Findings from Phase One of the Counselling in Schools initiative

Date	13 May 2022
Security Level	N/A
ERO Priority	Medium
ERO Reference	M22-19
Date requested	ERO initiated
Date due	ERO initiated
Proactive release	Recommended

Addressee	Action sought	Deadline
<b>Minister of Education</b>	<p>It is recommended that you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) <b>Note</b> the early implementation findings of the Counselling in Schools initiative in primary schools</li> <li>b) <b>Note</b> that we intend to proactively release this briefing and summary of findings shortly</li> <li>c) <b>Indicate</b> if you want to discuss this briefing with officials from ERO and the Ministry</li> <li>d) <b>Agree</b> to forward this briefing and summary of findings to the Minister of Health</li> </ul>	



### Attachments:

***Education Review Office (ERO):  
Findings from Phase One of the  
Counselling in Schools initiative,  
Appendix A: Summary of Findings***



### Comments:

### Minister's Office to complete

Noted	<input type="checkbox"/>
Seen	<input type="checkbox"/>
Approved	<input type="checkbox"/>
Referred to:	
Date signed by Minister:	

ERO Ref: M22-19  
MOE Ref:

16 May 2022

**Hon. Jan Tinetti**  
**Associate Minister of Education**

### **‘Findings from Phase One of the Counselling in Schools initiative’**

#### **Purpose**

1. The briefing describes the findings from Phase One of an evaluation of the Counselling in Schools initiative (‘the initiative’) in primary schools, carried out by the Education Review Office (ERO). A summary of the findings is attached, as Appendix A.
2. Phase One looks at the implementation of the Counselling in Schools initiative and makes recommendations for the initiative going forward. Phase Two will look at learner outcomes.

#### **Background**

3. The initiative was funded through Budget 2020 as part of a package of supports for learner and educator wellbeing in response to COVID-19. \$43.9 million over four years was allocated to contract local community organisations to provide counselling services to primary and secondary students. This included funding for an evaluation and 6 FTEs at the Ministry of Education (‘the Ministry’) to support the initiative.
4. The initiative is a new approach to the provision of counselling in schools. The Government has not previously funded counsellors in primary schools. In secondary schools, counselling is typically delivered by registered teachers employed by the school using their guidance staffing entitlement. The initiative was funded to provide greater access to counselling for primary, intermediate and secondary students, particularly those most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. It enables us to test an alternative model of counselling provision in schools where there is greater central control over how funding is used and greater utilisation of expertise from outside the education sector.
5. Government funded an evaluation of the initiative in primary schools to help inform operational improvements and future policy development on wellbeing supports for school students. There are currently 164 schools taking part in the initiative, with the majority being primary schools. ERO is carrying out this evaluation. ERO and MOE are jointly steering the evaluation.

## Evaluation of Counselling in Schools

6. The four-year evaluation of the initiative looks at:
  - a. The implementation of the initiative and how well it increases access to counselling support for children and their families
  - b. the wellbeing and learning engagement outcomes for children receiving counselling.
7. The first phase of the evaluation looked at lessons from early implementation. Findings were informed by fieldwork undertaken in Nov 2021, including:
  - a. survey of all primary schools and counselling providers [40/113 school responses and 8/9 providers]
  - b. a case study of 6 schools (interviews/focus groups with principals and school leaders, provider managers and counsellors)
  - c. data from regional Ministry wellbeing advisers
  - d. document analysis.
8. Future phases of the evaluation, due for completion in March 2023 and May 2024, will look at how counselling has impacted on children's wellbeing and learning outcomes. We also intend to look at how different models of implementation impacts on these outcomes. The Ministry and ERO are working together to gather from providers the data needed to report on outcomes.
9. ERO is grateful for the support of the Ministry for this evaluation, including the provision of information to support it.

## Key Findings

10. The evaluation looked at how well the initiative has been implemented in primary schools. Even in the context of Covid-19 provision was stood up quickly by the Ministry. The partnership between the Ministry, the schools, and the providers helped to get the initiative going.
11. ERO looked at eight components of the implementation and found that, even in the early stages, there were two areas where the implementation is going well. There were three components where it is too early to say, and three components where improvements could be made.

### *Areas going well*

12. Schools are **identifying students' needs** and the counsellors are finding accessible, **suitable sites** for counselling, which is consistent with good practice in school counselling.

### *Too early to say*

13. While there are green shoots of **culturally responsive practice for Māori**, further work is needed. ERO found that the providers had a range of frameworks,

strategies, training, and support for counsellors to deliver a culturally responsive approach for Māori. However, providers and schools spoke about a lack of Māori counsellors. There is minimal evidence of **culturally responsive practice for Pacific**, though Pacific students are more likely to be in schools participating in Mana Ake.

14. Counsellors are often part of school wellbeing/hauora teams, but there is some confusion about role clarity between counsellors and other roles (e.g., SWiS), so it is too soon to assess how well **counselling services are being integrated** into school practice. Similarly, there is not yet enough evidence to assess the level of **linking up with community networks**/other wellbeing/hauora services.

#### *Improvements could be made*

15. The initiative was intended to allow for **self-referral**, but in practice referrals are largely happening through schools. This means that students and whānau must talk to the school first if they need support, which may limit student access
16. The initiative originally intended to have registered counsellors. However, **counsellors are not always registered**, which is a concerning barrier to ensuring quality provision. A mechanism to monitor the progress made by non-registered counsellors towards registration is important to ensure that learners are seen by skilled counsellors.
17. **Communication and involvement with whānau and community** has been minimal, but COVID-19 may have been a barrier to this. This may mean that design of the service within the school may not meet the needs of the students in their community.

#### **ERO recommendations**

18. ERO has found that while the early implementation has largely gone well, there are some areas for improvement if the initiative is to deliver on the intent of the funding and good practice for counselling in schools. We recommend that:
  1. **Counsellor qualifications, registration and progress towards registration are actively recorded and monitored to ensure counsellors are qualified, or well on their way to being qualified.** To ensure quality provision of counselling, it is important that counsellors be qualified and registered.
  2. **Expectations for involvement of students and whānau in designing counselling approaches should be made clear, with the aim of increasing involvement.** Student and whānau involvement and consultation did not match the intent of co-design. It is important that students and whānau are involved in the initiative.
  3. **Referral through avenues other than school/principal be encouraged, through strengthening opportunities for self-referral and whānau referral.** The initiative was designed to allow for other ways of referral such

as self-referral. Currently referral processes within the initiative are very similar to the existing secondary school guidance counselling model, but this initiative intends to offer a new, different approach to counselling in primary schools.

### **Ministry commentary on recommendations**

19. The evaluation findings are consistent with the operational issues the Ministry has been seeing. We are continuing to make operational improvements to the initiative in light of these issues, including encouraging greater student and whānau engagement in the referrals processes.

#### *Counsellor qualifications*

20. There is a critical national shortage of qualified counsellors to meet current levels of demand for mental health and wellbeing support. The consequence of this has been a slower than expected start to delivery of the Counselling in Schools initiative whilst providers recruit staff.
21. To mitigate the impact of this, we have broadened the definition of counselling to include different therapeutic approaches (e.g., sand play, art therapy). These approaches may be more appropriate for younger children than traditional counselling. We have also started conversations with smaller, locally based, and qualified providers that can be contracted to deliver Counselling in Schools in those regions where the current providers do not have capacity.
22. We have also been considering how we can support a national workforce development plan to address the ongoing shortage of qualified counsellors, including looking at international examples to better understand how this is being managed.
23. Information on counsellor qualifications, registration and progress towards registration is held by the Lead Advisors in each region where Counselling in Schools is being delivered. A centralised system is being considered.

#### *Student and whānau engagement*

24. As the initiative has progressed and the programme is embedded in schools, ways to engage whānau in the referral process are being developed. For example, some schools are now promoting counselling services with their school community and students via social media, newsletters, assemblies, school events, and face to face with students. Face to face whānau engagement has been hindered due to national ongoing COVID-19 precautions in schools.

#### *Self-referral*

25. A number of providers have actively worked with schools to enable and encourage students to self-refer. An example of this is where the counsellors visit

each classroom to lead an activity around a wellbeing area (e.g., emotional regulation, friendships), and the counsellor then identifies themselves as someone students can approach if they want to talk more. This approach is likely to work better for older students.

26. It should be noted that parents have to give consent for one-to-one sessions for children under 12, which is the case for most of the schools involved in this initiative, so while a child might identify a need for themselves, that is only the starting point for engagement.
27. There are also examples of providers working with schools to obtain signed consent from parents/caregivers at the beginning of the school year to enable students to self-refer and go directly to the counsellor, reducing the barriers to engagement. There is also an agreed process for engaging with whānau.
28. The Ministry will continue to keep you updated on progress with addressing these issues through our weekly reporting on this project.

## **Publication**

29. ERO and the Ministry have recommended that this briefing and the summary of findings is proactively released shortly. We also intend to share the findings with the schools and providers, so that they can learn from the findings as they continue with the initiative.
30. ERO and the Ministry will work together to share the findings with the participants involved in Phase One of this evaluation. We plan to share the findings with key groups through:
  - a. Sending a copy of the summary to all participants in the research, including schools/providers and the Expert Advisory Group, prior to the proactive release
  - b. Holding a webinar for providers and schools to hear about the findings and ask questions, after the proactive release
31. We will work with your office on any media queries and any preparation required for the proactive release, but we do not intend to do a media release.

## Recommendations

It is recommended that you:

- a) **Note** the early implementation findings of the Counselling in Schools initiative in primary schools  **Noted**
- b) **Note** that we intend to proactively release this briefing and summary of findings shortly  **Noted**
- c) **Indicate** if you want to discuss this briefing with officials from ERO and the Ministry  **Yes**  **No**
- d) **Agree** to forward this briefing and summary of findings to the Minister of Health  **Agree** /  **Disagree**



Susan Howan  
**Associate Deputy Secretary**  
**Ministry of Education**



Ruth Shinoda  
**Deputy Chief Executive, Evaluation and**  
**Policy - Te Ihuwaka**  
**Education Review Office**

NOTED/APPROVED

Hon. Jan Tinetti  
**Associate Minister of Education**

21 / 05 / 2022