



Briefing report

Education Review Office (ERO): Evaluation of provision in Alternative Education: Draft findings and potential areas for recommendation

Date	11 May 2023
Security Level	N/A
ERO Priority	Medium
ERO Reference	M23-18
Date requested	ERO initiated
Date due	ERO initiated
Proactive release	Recommended

Addressee

**Min Tinetti
Minister of
Education**

Action sought

- a) **Note** that ERO will provide you with a near final draft of the report “An Alternative Education? Support for our most disadvantaged young people” in June.
- b) **Agree** to forward this briefing to the Associate Education Minister and Minister for Youth.
- c) **Note** this briefing is recommended for proactive release after the final report is published.
- d) **Note** the Social Wellbeing Agency will send a copy to Minister Sepuloni.
- e) **Agree** to meet with the Ministry of Education, Social Wellbeing Agency and ERO officials to discuss recommendations and next steps.



Attachments:

**Appendix A: Draft findings
slidepack**



Comments:

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



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11 May 2023

Hon Jan Tinetti
Minister of Education

ERO Evaluation of Education Provision for Young People in Alternative Education: Key Findings and Draft Recommendations

Purpose

1. This briefing updates you on key findings from ERO's evaluation of the quality of education provision for young people in Alternative Education and sets out the potential areas of recommendations to strengthen education for these priority young people.

Background

2. Alternative Education provides education for approximately 3,500 young people (aged 13-16) who have disengaged from secondary schooling in any one year. There are an estimated 170 providers across the country, offering provision for approximately 1,400 young people at any one time. Seventy percent of young people enrolled in Alternative Education are Māori.
3. Alternative education provides a learning environment that is different from school. When school is not a good fit for a young person, it gives them a place where they can continue to learn.
4. ERO has partnered with the Social Wellbeing Agency (SWA) to review the quality of Alternative Education. This project started in October 2022, and will provide you with a draft report in early June, prior to publication at the end of June 2023.
5. We are working with an Expert Advisory Group who are supporting this work and with the Ministries of Education, Social Development, Justice, Oranga Tamariki, Whaikaha and Tertiary Education Commission.
6. The evaluation focusses on three key questions:
 - a. Who are the young people in Alternative Education and what are their outcomes and experiences?
 - b. How good is Alternative Education provision?
 - c. What changes are needed to strengthen provision?
7. Data collection and analysis for the Alternative Education evaluation is now complete.

What informed the findings?

8. The findings of the evaluation are based on wide-ranging evidence including:
 - Social Wellbeing Agency analysis of the long-term outcomes of young people who have participated in Alternative Education, and a matched comparison group, from the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI).
 - Site visits at 12 managing schools and their Alternative Education sites across the country.
 - Interviews and surveys of young people in Alternative Education.
 - Interviews and surveys of leaders and educators at Alternative Education providers.
 - Interviews and surveys of school leaders.
 - Interviews with key experts in Alternative Education.
9. The Social Wellbeing Agency looked in the IDI for young people who were similar to those who attend Alternative Education. They constructed a matched group of similarly disadvantaged young people. This group looks like the young people in Alternative Education across 86 variables, including learner characteristics, history of educational disengagement, parental characteristics and other experiences. We compared outcomes for young people who attended Alternative Education, and this matched comparison group.
10. The evaluation has a strong focus on understanding the experiences of disengaged young people, and a tailored approach to understanding Māori young people's experiences. We also focus on the experiences of Pacific young people, young people in Oranga Tamariki care and disabled young people.

Draft findings overview

11. The evaluation has identified ten key findings, which are summarised below.

Finding 1: Young people in Alternative Education are the most disadvantaged group of young people in our community. They are the most disengaged from education and with high, and often complex, needs. Many have experienced trauma. Many are in the youth justice system.

Finding 2: Young people in Alternative Education are most often Māori and male though the number of girls has increased recently.

Finding 3: These young people end up in Alternative Education due to behaviour issues, attendance issues, alienation from school and referrals made by Youth Justice and Oranga Tamariki.

Finding 4: While in Alternative Education they attend more, enjoy learning more, feel safer, have a stronger sense of belonging and improved behaviour.

Finding 5: Few young people in Alternative Education return to school. Some go on to further training or employment, but more than half do not.

Finding 6: These young people have significantly worse outcomes than most young people, worse even than other similarly disadvantaged young people. They are very unlikely to achieve a qualification. They are more likely to commit crime, be victims of crime, and more likely to access benefits.

Finding 7: These poor outcomes are partly due to the significant gaps in learning prior to Alternative Education, the level and complexity of the young persons' needs and the

level of their disengagement from education. This means Alternative Education is often focused on re-engagement and pastoral care rather than education.

Finding 8: The poor outcomes are mostly due to the model of Alternative Education being inadequate to meet the needs of these highly disadvantaged young people. There are too few places (fewer places per capita now than in 2010), leading to wait times that deepen students' disengagement. Funding is inadequate (lower than funding for other, less disadvantaged, young people) and has decreased in real terms since 2010. This is leading to high turnover of staff, and loss of providers. Teaching is often weak and resources are inadequate. Facilities are often so run down they act as a barrier to learning. Providers are often isolated from other providers and schools in their community. There is weak accountability.

Finding 9: When young people (exceptionally) do succeed at Alternative Education it is due to the model of small class sizes, having the same educators throughout the day, the flexibility to provide a different education separate from school, and having staff with experience of working with these young people.

Finding 10: The evidence shows that education can change the life trajectories of these young people. Alternative Education is not currently set up to do that. And the long-term costs for both the young person, their family and broader society are very significant.

These findings are set out in more detail below.

Draft findings in detail

Finding 1: Young people in Alternative Education are the most disadvantaged group of young people. They are the most disengaged from education and with high, and often complex, needs. Many have experienced trauma. Many are in the youth justice system.

12. Young people in Alternative Education have significant mental health, disability and related needs and have been involved in offending.
 - Eight percent of young people in Alternative Education have had a Youth Justice Family Conference.
 - These young people are four times more likely than other young people to have high mental health needs.
 - These young people are three times more likely to have ADHD, and two times more likely to have an intellectual disability.
 - One in six of these young people have been in the care of Oranga Tamariki.

Finding 2: Young people in Alternative Education are most often Māori and male, though the number of girls has increased recently.

13. The population of Māori and male young people is overrepresented in Alternative Education.
 - Seventy percent of young people in Alternative Education are Māori compared to 25 percent in schools.
 - Sixty two percent of young people in Alternative Education are male compared to 51 percent in schools.

14. In interviews, providers told us the number of girls being referred to Alternative Education is increasing and suspect it is due to an increase in anxiety, and externalisation of behaviour among girls.

Finding 3: These young people end up in Alternative Education due to behaviour issues, attendance issues, alienation from school and requests for support made by Youth Justice and Oranga Tamariki.

15. Many young people in Alternative Education have a history of absenteeism, suspension and exclusion due to behaviour issues.
 - Young people in Alternative Education are 22 times more likely than other young people to have been suspended.
 - They are six times more likely than other young people to have at least one Attendance Service referral.
16. In addition, young people in Alternative Education are four times more likely to have had a report of concern lodged with Oranga Tamariki, and 25 times more likely than other young people to have had a Youth Justice Family Conference.

Finding 4: While in Alternative Education they attend more, enjoy learning more, feel safer, have a stronger sense of belonging and improved behaviour.

17. Sixty-four percent of whānau report young people from Alternative Education have better attendance than they had previously, and every young person we talked with told us they attend Alternative Education far more than they attended their previous school.
18. There is no national attendance data for young people in Alternative Education.
19. Young people enjoy Alternative Education more than school, and feel safer, they also report that they have someone who cares about them.
 - Sixty-seven percent of young people enjoy learning at Alternative Education, while 29 percent enjoyed learning at their previous school.
 - Ninety-three percent of young people feel safe at Alternative Education, while 59 percent felt safe at their previous school.
 - Eighty-one percent of young people feel they have someone who cares about them at Alternative Education.
 - In interviews, we heard that young people felt comfortable in the whānau-like structure of their program.
20. Fifty-nine percent of whānau report their young person has better behaviour in Alternative Education, and 71 percent of enrolling schools report that young people have better behaviour when they return from Alternative Education. Sixty-six percent of young people report their behaviour has improved. Alternative Education providers reported young people's behaviour is greatly improved at their service.

Finding 5: Few young people in Alternative Education return to school. Some go on to further training or employment, but about half do not.

21. Only one in four young people who enrol at Alternative Education return to school.

22. At age 19, only one in five Alternative Education young people were enrolled in tertiary education and only half were in employment.

Finding 6: These young people have significantly worse outcomes than most young people, worse even than other similarly disadvantaged young people. They are very unlikely to achieve a qualification.

23. Less than one in five Alternative Education young people go on to achieve NCEA, compared to nearly half of similarly disadvantaged young people, and nine out of ten young people overall.
24. Sixty-eight percent of whānau of young people from Alternative Education reported their literacy and numeracy has not changed.
25. On average, fifty-seven percent of young people aged between 18 and 24 who had been to Alternative Education were receiving a benefit, compared to 12 percent of all 18 to 24 year olds and 46 percent of similarly disadvantaged young people.
26. They are twice as likely to be incarcerated as similarly disadvantaged young people, and eight times as likely as all 20 year olds.
27. At age 18, thirty-nine percent of Alternative Education young people have offended. This is significantly more to similarly disadvantaged young people.

Finding 7: These poor outcomes are partly due to the significant gaps in learning prior to Alternative Education, the level and complexity of the young persons' needs and the level of their disengagement from education. This means Alternative Education is often focused on re-engagement and pastoral care rather than education.

28. Alternative Education service leaders and educators told us their priority is to address young people's complex needs, and re-engage them in learning before being able to target educational needs. They reported needing to seek diagnosis for young people's learning and other disabilities, mental health support, and providing practical support for attendance (such as bus passes) to enable young people to participate in education.
29. Thirty-seven percent of educators identified helping young people with academic learning as their main role at Alternative Education.

Finding 8: The poor outcomes are mostly due to the model of Alternative Education being inadequate to meet the needs of these highly disadvantaged young people.

30. There is insufficient availability of places for young people in Alternative Education leading to wait times that deepen disengagement.
- Sixty-four percent of enrolling schools, and 64 percent of managing schools reported insufficient availability of places within their region.
 - While the New Zealand population of young people has grown by six percent between 2010 and 2021, the number of places in Alternative Education has increased by less than four percent. Providers and schools reported the need has increased faster than population growth.
 - The distribution of places across the country does not match the need. While in some areas providers have empty spaces available, one in three Alternative Education providers have had to turn young people away.

31. Funding for Alternative Education is inadequate. Funding data indicates that:
- In 2023, each place in Alternative Education was funded at \$12,720. This funding is an all-inclusive figure, covering staffing and other operating costs. This is in real terms less than in 2010, due to inflation. Students who attend Alternative Education remain on the roll of their enrolling school, but the school no longer receives funding.
 - In comparison, Activity Centres receive multiple separate funding streams to cover staffing, operational costs and property costs. Places at Activity Centres are funded at \$15,661 per young person per year, in addition to the regular funding for the learner.
 - The funding in small schools, similar in size to Alternative Education, is also greater. For example, in 2021, a secondary school with 29 students received the equivalent of \$36,760 per student.
32. Funding limitations make it financially unviable for many providers, and provider turnover is high.
- Forty-two percent of educators in Alternative Education have worked in Alternative Education for less than two years, and in one region, the managing school had worked with six providers over eight years.
 - Sixty-eight percent of Alternative Education providers have experienced difficulty recruiting qualified or experienced staff. Low levels of funding was reported as the key reason reported for this.
33. Teaching is often weak, and resources are inadequate.
- Only one in five educators in Alternative Education are registered teachers.
 - Twenty-one percent of educators reported they wanted more support in teaching literacy, and 23 percent needed support in teaching numeracy.
 - Educators are more confident supporting stable routines, providing feedback, and managing behaviour.
 - Only half of educators reported that they had the resources they need to do their jobs, and a quarter of Alternative Education providers do not have access to curriculum resources.
 - We observed teaching of outdated and disproven ideas, resources that were not age appropriate, and saw a reliance on learning programmes that are not working for young people.
34. Facilities are often so run down they impact safety and learning.
- We visited 20 Alternative Education provision sites and found four operating out of poor quality facilities and two out of inadequate facilities. These facilities were deemed to be too small for the number of people, and many were rundown and inaccessible.
 - Providers reported this has led to feelings of unsafety in the space, and not all young people could engage in learning activities at the same time.

Finding 9: When young people (exceptionally) do succeed at Alternative Education it is due to the model of small class sizes, having the same educators throughout the day, the flexibility to provide a different education separate from school, and having staff with experience of working with these young people.

35. Young people have strong relationships with their educators at Alternative Education, compared to their previous schools.
- Eighty-four percent of young people have an educator they like at Alternative Education (compared to 50 percent at their previous school).
 - Nearly all young people (97 percent) say educators help them when they need it, while only 44 percent felt the same about their previous school.
 - In interviews, all the students valued the 1:1 relationship with their educators, helping them focus on their learning at Alternative Education.
36. Young people, their whānau and educators all reported it was important that Alternative Education was not like school. They felt safer being in a different location from environments where they had negative experiences.

Finding 10: The evidence shows that education can change the life trajectories of the most disadvantaged young people. Alternative Education is not currently set up to do that. And the long-term costs for both the young person, their family and broader society are very significant.

37. Alternative education provides an opportunity to change life trajectories. The failure to do so is very expensive, with the proportion of young people moving on to offending, benefits and experiencing poor health being very high.

Draft recommendations

38. In 2011, ERO reported that Alternative Education was not adequately supporting young people to succeed. While there have been changes to the Alternative Education Guidelines, we continue to see the model failing to meet the needs of our most disadvantaged young people. The cost of this is high, both for the young people and wider society. Education provides the greatest protective factor and can turn these young people's lives around.
39. ERO and SWA are working with agencies, in particular the Ministry of Education to develop a draft package of recommendations to reform Alternative Education. These recommendations build on the proposed changes to Alternative Education agreed by Cabinet in 2019.
40. There are five draft areas of recommendation:
- a) Support young people earlier and more effectively. Do more to prevent and tackle early signs of disengagement, and provide tailored education and support in schools where possible, to ensure more can continue in mainstream schooling.
 - b) Make sure Alternative Education is the right choice for young people needing support. Be clearer and more consistent about when students should be referred to Alternative Education, how and who it will work for. Make sure agencies work together to prepare for the transition and ensure information goes with the young person.

- c) Reform Alternative Education and have a national model so it meets the needs of the most disadvantaged and disengaged young people:
 - i. Ensure adequate places. Prevention will not always work, so there will always be a need for places in Alternative Education.
 - ii. Adequate funding, to enable stability in providers, qualified staff, adequate premises and provision that meets complex needs.
 - iii. Require qualified teachers alongside skilled youth workers, to ensure quality education provision.
 - iv. Better premises. Review the current quality and ensure premises meet standards for other education facilities.
 - v. Better curriculum resources. Make sure alternative education providers have the resources needed to teach.
 - vi. Networked provision. Local and national partnerships between Alternative Education providers, managing schools and other related education services.
- d) Ensure successful pathways and transitions from Alternative Education. Manage pathways and transitions out, so support tapers and there are no 'cliff-edges'.
- e) Strengthen accountability and monitor outcomes including ensuring who is receiving and providing alternative education and the quality of provision is more closely monitored.

Across all these areas of recommendation, we need to make sure:

- a) Alternative Education is part of a more coherent, national approach to tailored and vocational education.
- b) We collectively uphold our responsibilities as Treaty partners. Alternative Education is primarily serving Māori young people. Our Te Tiriti obligations require us to do better.

Next Steps

- 41. ERO is working with key agencies to develop the recommendations and complete the report. We will provide you with a near final draft of the report, including final recommendations, in mid-June and publish the report at the end of June.

Recommendations

42. It is recommended that you:

- a) **Note** that ERO will provide you with a near final draft of the report in June. **Noted**
- b) **Agree** to forward this briefing to the Associate Education Minister and Minister for Youth. **Agreed/Disagreed**
- c) **Note** this briefing is recommended for proactive release after the final report is published. **Noted**
- d) **Note** the Social Wellbeing Agency will send a copy to Minister Sepuloni. **Noted**
- e) **Agree** to meet with Ministry of Education, Social Wellbeing Agency and ERO officials to discuss recommendations and next steps. **Agreed/Disagreed**



Nicholas Pole
Chief Executive

NOTED/APPROVED



Jan Tinetti
Minister of Education
13 / 05 / 2023

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