THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair



Fiona Goodall/Getty Images

After three years of relentless reform, what lies beyond the election for education?

Published: October 30, 2026 6.26am NZDT

https://theconversation.com/after-three-years-of-relentless-reform-what-lies-beyond-the-election-for-education-293794

A sweeping overhaul of New Zealand's education system over the past three years has affected almost every aspect of how schools operate.

It's been guided by a stated rationale of "teaching the basics brilliantly" and giving each child the foundations to succeed, regardless of their background.

But the reforms have driven heated debate among academics, teachers, school leaders and parents over how – and what – our children should be taught.

With many of these changes now bedding in, the next government faces the hefty challenge of bridging these divides and trying to bring the education sector back together.

New rules, changing schools

Soon after the coalition government took charge three years ago, it began enacting its election pledge of requiring primary and intermediate schools to teach an hour each of reading, writing and maths daily.

It spelt the start of a much wider policy reset.

Mobile phones were banned in schools, structured literacy was expanded in primary classrooms and work began on rewriting the New Zealand Curriculum to place greater emphasis on knowledge.

Primary schools also faced new requirements for twice-yearly standardised testing, while plans were announced to replace NCEA with two new secondary qualifications.

Changes to school governance and oversight followed. The government removed the requirement for school boards to give effect to te Tiriti o Waitangi, reintroduced charter schools and changed how the Education Review Office reports on school performance.

It has also introduced a school-based teacher training pathway and shifted responsibility for setting professional teaching standards from the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand towards the government, giving ministers greater control over the profession.

The shift towards a "knowledge-rich" curriculum and structured teaching represents a significant departure from decades of more child-centred approaches to education in New Zealand.

Critics have argued that the shift to a narrower, more prescriptive curriculum risks marginalising Māori and other cultural knowledge, while increasingly scripted teaching methods leave teachers less room to respond to individual students' needs.

There are also concerns that a more standardised system could struggle to meet the needs of students with different learning needs and backgrounds, leaving some of the most vulnerable learners further behind.

It's still too early to assess the reforms' impact. Earlier international PISA results paint a mixed picture, with science scores improving and maths performance stabilising after years of decline. Reading scores, however, remain troubling, particularly among boys.

There are also questions about whether more structured literacy teaching could affect children's enjoyment of reading, which researchers have found to be declining in the UK, where similar approaches have been used for years.

A sector divided

Whoever assumes power after the election, it's clear that rebuilding trust and consensus across a fractured education sector won't be straightforward.

Several faultlines are particularly apparent.

One concerns te Tiriti o Waitangi. More than 1,000 schools have publicly committed to upholding its principles, despite the government's removal of the requirement for school boards to do so.

Another is the proposed replacement of NCEA. Some secondary principals called for consultation to be paused, while most students and whānau who provided feedback on the proposed changes questioned the need for an overhaul. Others, however, have supported the reforms.

The wider curriculum overhaul has proven similarly contentious, with 39 local and regional principals' associations and six subject associations signing a joint letter to the government opposing the changes.

Questions have also been raised about how the current reforms have been developed.

An Australian firm founded by a knowledge-rich curriculum advocate has been involved in the curriculum overhaul, while reports of internal concerns at the Ministry of Education have added to the controversy.

Whistleblowers have alleged ministry staff were advised to avoid recording comments that could be released under the Official Information Act.

Read more: ***Election Policy Tracker: your guide to what the parties are promising during the 2026 election campaign***

If elected, Labour says it would freeze the curriculum overhaul and proposed NCEA changes. National, in turn, has promised to expand its maths acceleration programme, among other education commitments.

Away from these live issues, there remain wider challenges that must be addressed.

One is the growing role of artificial intelligence in teaching and learning, and how schools can make use of the technology without undermining students' development of essential skills.

Another is the persistent disengagement of young people from education, training and employment. In March 2026, 14.4% of 15-24-year-olds were not in employment, education or training, up from 11.2% in 2023.

Schools are also grappling with concerns about physical violence, while facing growing demands to meet the needs of neurodivergent learners.

Then there are the longstanding disparities in educational achievement, particularly for Māori students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Closing these gaps will require sustained attention and investment. At the same time, New Zealand needs greater certainty about the direction of its education system.

Keeping politics out of education altogether may be unrealistic. But finding common ground on the fundamentals, at least, could be a valuable first step towards preventing another major shift every three years.

From the cost of living to how best to tackle climate change, the coming election involves some big choices.

This article is part of The Conversation's Election 2026 series: expert analysis of the major policy debates and the big challenges New Zealand's next government will face.

Adrian Schoone
Associate Professor, School of Education, Auckland University of Technology

DOI

https://doi.org/10.64628/AA.js746w6tn