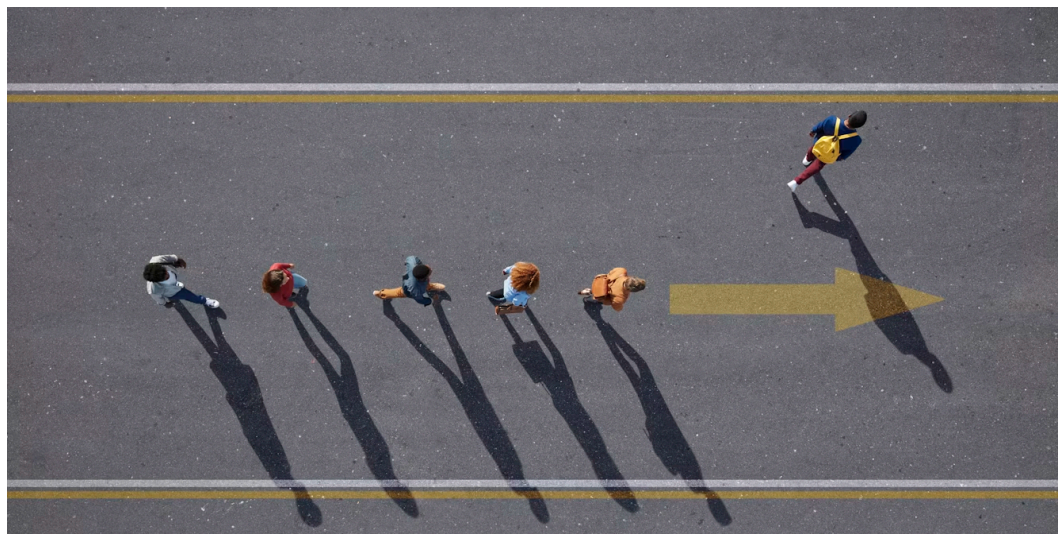


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Will NZ's education system overhaul leave vulnerable learners even further behind?

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New Zealand's education system is undergoing its largest overhaul in decades, with new curricula, rewritten qualifications and greater accountability for schools.

But as policymakers focus on lifting standards, another challenge is building: how to support the rising number of students struggling in mainstream classrooms.

Over the past decade, the number of students outside mainstream school has doubled to almost 15,000.

More than 9,000 students are now learning remotely through Te Kura because of wellbeing and engagement issues, while another 2,000 attend alternative education providers. New Zealand's small charter school network has also experienced a 200% increase in enrolments.

Last month, the Education Review Office (ERO) warned New Zealand was failing many young people in the alternative education system. Its call for an urgent overhaul came at a pivotal moment.

Countries that have embarked on similar waves of education reform have often seen growing demand for alternative education, particularly where vulnerable students have not been adequately supported.

In England, enrolments in alternative provision increased by 156% between 2017/18 and 2024/25. The growth has been concentrated among some of the education system's most vulnerable students, particularly those in their mid-teens and who have special educational needs.

In the United States, charter school enrolments grew from 2.7 million students in 2014/15 to about 3.9 million in 2023/24.

Closer to home, Australia now has around 70,000 students enrolled in alternative education. Between 2014 and 2022, enrolments in independent special assistance schools almost tripled.

Whether New Zealand's reforms can lift student achievement without leaving vulnerable students further behind remains to be seen.

Lessons from the past

There are already concerns that New Zealand's new knowledge-rich curriculum may narrow subject choice and be less responsive to individual needs.

Early reporting has also pointed to lower achievement under the new mathematics curriculum. At the same time, achievement is expected to fall during the shift from the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) system to the new secondary qualification.

There are also wider risks. New school report cards published by the ERO are designed to help parents judge how schools are performing. But if schools are publicly rated, they may have less incentive to work with students who are struggling or at risk of disengaging.

This has played out before in New Zealand.

Alternative education in the country emerged in the early 1990s after the Tomorrow's Schools reforms gave boards of trustees more power to exclude students. Later, qualification completion league tables also penalised schools that worked with the most challenging students.

Yet these debates did not begin with Tomorrow's Schools. Concerns about creating a one-size-fits-all education system are almost as old as New Zealand's public school system itself.

This tension was well illustrated in an 1899 cartoon, published just a few decades after New Zealand's 1877 Education Act established national schooling. In it, an inspector is shown overseeing rows of students, all wearing the same "standard" jacket and judged by the same ruler.



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After the Second World War, New Zealand took a different path.

Under Director of Education Clarence Beeby (1940–1960), schools embraced a more progressive, student-centred approach that earned international recognition.

Many regard it as the high point of New Zealand's commitment to inclusive education. Beeby argued that every child should receive an education “for which he is best fitted”, regardless of social background or ability.

However, from the outset, many Māori have been poorly served by the formal system. As ERO reported, 58% of students in alternative education are rangatahi Māori.

The emergence of charter schools in New Zealand also points to unmet demand. Around half appear to be informed by kaupapa Māori approaches, underscoring ongoing dissatisfaction with how well the conventional system meets Māori educational needs and aspirations.

As well, the system needs to accommodate the rising number of neurodiverse learners and students facing mental health, care and socio-economic challenges.

Making the reforms work for everyone

New Zealand's education reform agenda is now well underway. Reversing course would likely bewilder and overwhelm a sector that has already endured constant and significant change over the past three years.

But that does not mean the programme could not be phased more carefully, with a complementary investment in learning support and alternative education to ensure the most vulnerable learners are not left behind.

A [white paper](#) recently released by the [Youth Development and Education Network Aotearoa](#) offers some starting points.

It argues that education reform should be matched by greater investment in the students most at risk of disengaging. Its recommendations include adopting trauma-informed and developmental approaches across mainstream schools to reduce the need for alternative education.

It also calls for funding alternative education providers at levels comparable with charter schools, allowing them to employ qualified teachers alongside specialist youth educators.

As well, it recommends developing a [professional social pedagogy workforce](#) to support students' social and developmental needs alongside classroom teachers.

If New Zealand's education reforms are to succeed, policymakers should heed the words of one 15-year-old alternative education student whose plea inspired the white paper's title: "Just don't give up on us."

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