TE IHUWAKA | Education Evaluation Centre

Bridging the gap:
How well do we support students learning in alternative settings?

EDUCATION REVIEW OFFICE
Te Tari Arotake Mātauranga

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Contents

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Executive summary

Over the past decade, New Zealand has seen a marked shift in how many young people engage with school. An increasing number of students are leaving mainstream schooling – some through formal early-leaving pathways, others through prolonged non-enrolment, chronic disengagement, or referral into alternative forms of education. These young people too often receive a limited education, leading to poor outcomes that can last through their lives.

A step change is needed to reverse the trend of students disengaging from school. This requires both strengthening mainstream schooling, so more students are supported to stay and succeed, and developing a new model of quality alternative provision so that all students in New Zealand receive a high-quality education wherever they study.

How many young people are not in mainstream school?

Finding 1: The number of young people not in mainstream schooling is increasing, and this is deeply concerning.

The number of children outside mainstream schooling is rapidly increasing. The number of non-enrolled and homeschooled children (aged 12-18) has doubled in the last ten years – rising from less than 8,000 to almost 15,000 non-enrolled students, and from 2,300 to 5,000 homeschooled students.

The number of young people leaving school early has tripled. In 2015, around 400 15-year-olds were approved to exit school before the legal leaving age. By 2024, that number had risen to over 1,300.

Enrolments in New Zealand's distance school, Te Kura, have also tripled. Since 2016, the roll has increased from around 3,000 fulltime-enrolled students to nearly 9,000 in 2024. The Engagement and Wellbeing gateway has expanded rapidly, with enrolments rising fourfold – from fewer than 1,500 students in 2016 to over 6,000 in 2024.

Finding 2: There are signs that students are moving into these settings at a younger age.

Most students move into alternative settings during secondary school. Around three-quarters of students in Alternative Education (79 percent) and Activity Centres (74 percent) start in Year 11 and above.

Teachers and school leaders told us referrals are happening at younger ages – one in five students enter Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway before Year 9.

Where do they go?

There are five main education pathways for students who leave mainstream school. These are:

- **Activity Centres:** short-term, early-intervention placements for students at risk of disengagement. There are around 160 students in Activity Centres each year.
- **Alternative Education:** flexible programmes for students who have disengaged or are at high risk of disengaging from school. There are around 1,700 students in Alternative Education each year.
- **Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu (Te Kura):** online and blended learning with an Engagement and Wellbeing gateway designed to re-engage students in education. There are around 6,000 students in this Te Kura gateway each year.
- **Residential Care:** learning delivered within Oranga Tamariki residences or dedicated specialist schools. There are over 400 students learning in Residential Care each year.
- **Homeschool:** learning at home following an agreed programme of learning. There over 5,000 students aged 12-18 who are homeschooled each year.

ERO reviewed Activity Centres, Alternative Education, Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway, and Residential Care. We examined why students leave mainstream school, and the quality of the education they receive in these alternative settings. ERO did not review homeschooling.

Why do students enter alternative settings?

Finding 3: Students who are disadvantaged are most at risk of entering alternative settings.

Students who are referred to alternative settings are more likely to experience economic disadvantage. Those from low socioeconomic communities[a] are five times more likely to be referred than students from high socioeconomic communities. They are also more likely to have additional complex needs that require targeted support.

Finding 4: Students who have gaps in their education are at a much higher risk of entering alternative settings.

Students entering alternative settings often have a history of exclusion or prolonged gaps in schooling. Students who have previously been non-enrolled are five times more likely to enter alternative settings and students with a history of suspension are almost four times more likely to enter. Students who have been chronically absent from school are also more at risk of entering alternative settings.

Moving schools frequently increases the risk of students leaving mainstream schools. Every time a student has an unstructured school move (moving schools outside of the regular moves from one level of school to the next), they are 10 percent more likely to enter an alternative setting.

a Socioeconomic level is defined by the Ministry of Education's Equity Index (EQI) – Schools in high socioeconomic communities are the schools with fewer barriers. Schools in low socioeconomic communities are the schools with more barriers. For more information see the Technical Appendix.

Finding 5: Students' needs are increasing, and schools are not well set up to meet these challenges.

Schools report that increasing numbers of students need support and that schools are not set up to meet this challenge. Nine in ten (92 percent) leaders in high referring schools report that stronger support for learning needs and neurodiversity would help them retain more students in mainstream schooling. Seven in ten (73 percent) also say that having more effective processes for addressing behavioural issues earlier would support greater retention.

Finding 6: Māori students are more at risk of entering alternative settings.

Māori students comprise 58 percent of young people learning in these settings. This over-representation reflects underlying inequities – Māori are more likely to experience risk factors that increase the chance of referral, such as living in low socioeconomic communities and having periods of non-enrolment.

Finding 7: How likely students are to enter alternative settings also depends on the schools they go to. Some schools are much more likely to refer students to alternative settings. Three in five referrals come from just 12 percent of schools.

Referral rates vary enormously, with some schools far more likely to refer students to alternative settings than others. Some schools made only a single referral across a three-year period, while one school referred as many as 177 students – equivalent to about one in eight students on their roll.

Referral activity is highly concentrated, and socioeconomic disadvantage alone does not account for these differences. Sixty percent of all referrals between 2022 and 2024 come from just 12 percent of schools.

Finding 8: Many schools work hard to support students to stay in mainstream education. Schools that are most effective at retaining students build strong relationships, provide tailored support and create a sense of belonging to the school.

Schools with stronger retention deliberately identify and respond to students' barriers to engagement. These schools often involve family, use tailored practices, and offer extensive additional support to address students' barriers.

Schools that rarely refer students to alternative settings help students build a strong sense of belonging to their school community throughout everyday teaching and curriculum. As ERO has previously found, belonging is a key driver of attendance and engagement – students who feel they belong at school are around five times more likely to attend regularly than those who do not.

Some schools have created interschool networks that allow leaders to work proactively with neighbouring schools to support at-risk students through local transfers, reducing the need to refer them out of mainstream education and into alternative pathways.

How good is education provision in these settings?

Finding 9: Worryingly, students typically lose three months of learning while waiting to access an alternative setting.

Students can face long waits before they start at a new setting – on average, they wait 13 weeks between leaving mainstream school and beginning getting onboarded at the setting. These delays are partly caused by waitlists and lengthy referral processes.

Finding 10: The quality of teaching practice is too variable in these settings. Not all settings provide enough explicit teaching or qualified teachers.

Too few alternative settings have registered teachers. At Te Kura, all staff in educator roles have a teaching qualification, while in Alternative Education fewer than half (44 percent) do. Registered teachers bring training in curriculum design, assessment, and evidence-based teaching practice. When students do not have them, it affects the quality of teaching they receive and limits the learning progress they are able to make.

Students aren't always getting the explicit teaching they need. One in six (17 percent) teachers report that they do not regularly use explicit instruction. Fewer than one-third (31 percent) of students in Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway report regularly learning through direct teacher instruction due to its distance learning model.

Teachers lack the teaching resources they need. Across all alternative settings, up to 65 percent of teachers say that not having the right tools and resources gets in the way of supporting students.

Finding 11: These students need intensive support. Pastoral support is strong in alternative settings, but access to specialist services is inconsistent.

Pastoral support is a strength, particularly in face-to-face settings. Staff cultivate trust and safety so that students feel grounded and ready to learn, and some settings provide extensive support to remove underlying barriers to learning.

Access to specialist services – such as counselling, mental health support, youth work, and therapeutic interventions – is uneven across settings and not proportionate to the level of student need. In many places, support depends on local relationships, the arrangements of managing schools, or the goodwill of individual practitioners, rather than a consistent model of provision.

Online learning does not meet these students' wider needs. It cannot provide the same immediate, relationship-based engagement available in face-to-face settings, leaving many students without the support they need.

Finding 12: Students' opportunities are limited by too few subject options and lack of access to formal qualifications.

Students can often access only some subjects, rather than the full range available in mainstream schools. Learning is primarily focused on foundational literacy and numeracy. Te Kura is the only setting that offers access to the full New Zealand Curriculum.

Students are rarely challenged. Settings usually deliver the content below students' educational level and often do not provide strong academic or vocational pathways. A reason for this is that learning does not always align with qualification requirements, reducing opportunities to build the skills they need.

Access to qualifications and pathways for young people are constrained. Almost half (48 percent) of students say there is no clear pathway for them when they leave.

How good is our system of alternative provision?

Finding 13: The alternative provision model is fragmented and has insufficient funding, unclear expectations, gaps in accountability and oversight, and ambiguity in roles and responsibilities.

New Zealand's alternative provision system is fragmented. Access depends heavily on local availability rather than student need, creating a 'postcode lottery' where similar students receive very different support. There is little intentional alignment between students' needs and the settings they are placed in.

Inconsistent expectations for alternative provision result in uneven quality. Without clear, shared standards for what alternative settings should deliver, including expectations for curriculum access, provision varies widely across and within settings.

Funding and resourcing do not match students' needs. Students in alternative settings have complex needs, yet funding does not match this intensity. Staff attempt to re-engage high-needs students without the support required. Short-term contracts further weaken delivery of adequate provision.

There are significant gaps in accountability. Oversight is split between schools and providers, and accountability mechanisms do not drive improvement of outcomes or provision. Existing accountability settings can make it easier for schools to exclude, refer, or discourage high needs students from enrolling than to provide the intensive support these students require. Around seven in ten (69 percent) leaders of alternative settings report schools at least sometimes refuse to re-enrol students.

Agencies do not work together effectively, and roles are unclear. Information sharing is patchy and slow, coordination is inconsistent, and there are gaps in responsibilities. As a result, students are left navigating a disjointed system at the very moment they most need coherent, joined up support.

What are the outcomes for students in these settings?

Finding 14: Fewer than one in six students return to mainstream school.

Successful return to mainstream school is rare. While one in three (31 percent) students say they plan to return to school, fewer than one in six (16 percent) actually return and remain in school. We heard that reintegration is often poorly planned, inconsistently supported, or not prioritised by schools.

Finding 15: Students in alternative settings make less progress in their learning than they did at their previous schools.

Nearly half of students say they are doing the same or worse in reading (51 percent), writing (45 percent), and maths (46 percent) since starting at their alternative setting.

Finding 16: Students' wellbeing and attendance improve in alternative settings, but this is often not resulting in better educational achievement. Four in five students leave without any NCEA qualifications.

Most students report positive wellbeing outcomes in alternative settings, particularly in face-to-face environments.

Attendance also improves. Across settings, roughly two-thirds of students and parents – 68 and 65 percent – say attendance is better now than at their old school.

Despite these improvements, students in alternative settings rarely achieve a qualification. Three in five (60 percent) students in alternative settings aspire to achieve NCEA qualifications. However, four in five (82 percent) students aged 17 and older leave without any.

Finding 17: Worse education outcomes lead to worse lifetime outcomes for these students. Compared to similarly disadvantaged students, they are less likely to be wage-earners, more likely to rely on benefits and more likely to enter the criminal justice system.

Students in alternative settings are 10 to 30 percent less likely to be wage earners and up to 1.5 times more likely to rely on a benefit. By early adulthood, around half of students (46-57 percent) from alternative settings aren't earning wages and around three-quarters (64-79 percent) receive a main benefit.

These students, except for those from Te Kura, also have up to three times the rate of offending. More than three in ten (31 percent) Alternative Education and Activity Centre students, and over half (54 percent) of Residential Care students, had a court charge by age 24.

Finding 18: Students in alternative settings cost the Government far more across their lifetimes.

By age 25, these students cost between $170,000 and $770,000 more, compared with the general population – 18 times higher for students in Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway, 27 times higher for Activity Centre students, 28 times higher for Alternative Education students, and 80 times higher for those in Residential Care. Not providing the support these students need early in life leads to escalating needs and costs later.

Recommendations

Based on these key findings, ERO has three areas of recommendations:

- **Area 1: Reverse the trend** – keep more students engaged in mainstream school
- **Area 2: Reform** – to build a nationally coherent, highquality alternative provision system
- **Area 3: Immediate improvements** – to lift outcomes for students currently in alternative provision

Area 1: Reverse the trend – keep more students engaged in mainstream school

There is strong evidence that early, targeted support in mainstream schools can prevent disengagement and reduce referral into alternative settings.

Recommendation 1: Continue to strengthen attendance, learning and behaviour supports. Build on current initiatives and recent investment to ensure schools can respond early, access specialist services, and prevent absence before disengagement becomes entrenched.

Recommendation 2: Avoid unplanned school moves. Agencies should work together to make sure housing and placement decisions take account of educational continuity and minimise unplanned school changes wherever possible.

Recommendation 3: Increase student engagement by addressing bullying and strengthening belonging. When students feel safe and connected to their school, they are more likely to attend regularly and remain engaged in learning.

Recommendation 4: Provide additional support to schools with the highest concentrations of at-risk students and invest in targeted support for these students. Targeted support such as teacher aides, counselling, and specialist programmes would help these schools respond earlier and more intensively to student need.

Recommendation 5: Ensure there are incentives and expectations for schools to retain students in mainstream education. Clear expectations, greater transparency of referral patterns, and appropriate oversight of decisions to move students out of mainstream education will increase retention.

Recommendation 6: Strengthen accountability for mainstream schools to retain students by requiring transparent reporting on retention and referral into alternative provision. System-level reporting to the Ministry of Education on retention and referral patterns would increase visibility of how schools are supporting students to remain in mainstream education. ERO can also monitor retention patterns to support improvement and national oversight.

Area 2: Reform – to build a nationally coherent, high-quality alternative provision system

This review finds that alternative provision plays a critical role for some students, but quality and outcomes vary widely. Reform is needed to ensure alternative provision deliver educational outcomes and works as a coherent system.

Recommendation 7: Design and implement a coherent national model of alternative provision. The model should clearly articulate what the different forms of alternative provision are, how they fit together and how they connect with mainstream schooling, so alternative provision operates as a purposeful part of the education system rather than a default pathway for disengaged students.

Recommendation 8: Fund alternative settings at a level that reflects need. Students with higher and more complex needs require more intensive support for their education. This requires funding. Investing in education support for these students has the potential to save greater costs later in their life.

Recommendation 9: Ensure students in alternative settings are taught by a qualified teacher. All students need high quality teaching. This requires an appropriately qualified teacher with access to professional learning and development.

Recommendation 10: Ensure students in alternative settings have access to the full curriculum, including meaningful academic and vocational pathways. Students in alternative provision should have access to the New Zealand Curriculum. Like mainstream education, their progress should be measured and reported on even where delivery approaches differ.

Recommendation 11: Deliver alternative provision onsite or in close connection with schools wherever possible. Locating alternative provision on-site or closely linked to schools supports continuity of learning, coordination of support, and increases the likelihood of students moving back into mainstream school.

Recommendation 12: Strengthen national oversight for quality of education at alternative settings. Clear oversight is needed to ensure alternative provision meets national expectations for quality and outcomes.

Area 3: Immediate improvements – to lift outcomes for students currently in alternative provision

While reform is necessary, action can be taken now to improve outcomes for students currently in alternative settings. These recommendations focus on strengthening the quality, consistency, and coherence of existing provision, so students experience high quality education while reform is underway.

Recommendation 13: Ensure students in alternative settings leave with recognised qualifications or can access other future pathways. Students in alternative settings need the opportunity to achieve recognised school qualifications wherever possible and to move into training, further education, or employment. This requires stronger links between schools, alternative setting providers, and existing training and employment pathways.

Recommendation 14: Strengthen information sharing and clarify responsibility for transition planning. This is needed to ensure learning and progress information is transferred, used, and acted on consistently, supporting continuity of education and well-informed decisions about next steps.

Together, these recommendations are intended to reverse the trend of students leaving mainstream education, increase the quality of alternative provision and strengthen longterm outcomes for some of the most vulnerable young people in the system. Success will mean fewer students needing to leave mainstream schooling, and better outcomes for those who do.

Conclusion

The sharp rise in students leaving mainstream schooling signals a system under strain, with growing numbers of young people whose needs are not being met in regular classrooms. In alternative settings many students are experiencing poor achievement and worse life outcomes as a result. Without significant changes to strengthen support in mainstream schooling and ensure high quality alternative provision, these young people will continue to face long term disadvantage.

About this report

This report is about the education delivered in alternative settings designed for students who are at risk of disengaging from school, or who have already become disengaged. It describes who the students are, why they attend these settings, the quality of education they receive, the outcomes they achieve, and how well the system supports them.

A growing number of students are disengaging from mainstream schooling, and alternative settings are playing an increasingly critical role re-engaging these students in education. This review focuses on four such settings: Activity Centres, Alternative Education, Residential Care schooling, and Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway. Together, these settings form the core system of provision for students experiencing significant disengagement.

What we looked at

We wanted to understand who the students in alternative settings are, the pathways they follow, including whether and how they move between settings, and the education they receive, so that we can make well-informed recommendations to improve both the quality of their provision and their long-term outcomes.

To do this, we looked at six key questions:

1) How many young people are not in mainstream school?
2) Why do students enter alternative settings?
3) What are the outcomes for students in these settings?
4) How good is education provision in these settings?
5) How good are schools at retaining students in mainstream education?
6) How good is our system of alternative provision?

Where we looked

For this review, we gathered data during Term 3, 2025. Our approach included conducting interviews and surveys with students, their parents and whānau, school leaders, and leaders and teachers in alternative settings. We also drew on national administrative data from the Ministry of Education, ERO school review information, and the Integrated Data Infrastructure. In addition, we consulted a range of experts, incorporated insights from our previous reports, and used other relevant evidence and research to inform our findings.

The findings of our review are evidenced by a range of data and analysis, as outlined in the table below.

Table 1: *Data sources for this review*

Action	Who
Over 1,500 survey responses from:	→ 104 school leaders → 70 leaders in alternative settings → 320 teachers in alternative settings → 565 students learning in alternative settings → 531 parents and whānau
Interviews and focus groups with over 150 participants including:	→ 11 school leaders → 26 leaders in alternative settings → 47 teachers in alternative settings → 44 students learning in alternative settings → 15 parents and whānau → 13 experts
Data and evidence from:	→ National administrative data from the Ministry of Education → Stats NZ's Integrated Data Infrastructure → A review of international and New Zealand literature → ERO's School Improvement Framework → Insights from ERO's reviews of schools → ERO's previous reviews of Alternative Education (2023), Activity Centres (2018), Residential Care (2021), Attendance (2025), behaviour in classrooms (2024), chronic absence (2024), disabled students (2022) and the guidance report on school leadership (2016)

What alternative settings are we looking at?

This review looks at four key settings that provide a different pathway for learning in education: Activity Centres, Alternative Education, Residential Care, and a specific cohort of students enrolled in Te Kura via the Engagement and Wellbeing gateway.[b] The following table provides a brief description of each setting.

Table 2: *Overview of the four alternative settings in focus*

Setting	Purpose
Activity Centres	Provides short-term, early-intervention placements for students at risk of disengagement, with the primary aim of supporting a return to their enrolling school.
Alternative Education	Offers flexible provider-led programmes for students who have disengaged or are at high risk of disengaging from school, often with a focus on wellbeing and transitions to further education, training, or employment.
Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu (Te Kura) - Engagement and Wellbeing gateway	New Zealand's distance school, which delivers online and blended learning. The Engagement and Wellbeing gateway is specifically designed for disengaged students, or those at-risk of disengaging.
Residential Care	Delivered within Oranga Tamariki residences or dedicated specialist schools. These sites provide education alongside intensive therapeutic and wellbeing support for young people in Youth Justice or Care and Protection residences.

b This review exclusively looks at the cohort of students enrolled in Te Kura through the Engagement and Wellbeing gateway, their parents and whānau, as well as teachers, and leaders. Findings should not be extrapolated to represent the experiences or outcomes of all students in Te Kura.

Report structure

This report has eight parts.

- **Part 1** sets out **how many young people are not in mainstream school** and **where they are.**
- **Part 2** describes **why students enter** alternative settings.
- **Part 3** shares the **education outcomes** achieved by students in alternative settings.
- **Part 4** shares the **longer-term outcomes** of students who attended alternative settings.
- **Part 5** describes what evidence tell us about **the sort of provision that drives good outcomes.**
- **Part 6** shares our findings about **the quality of education provision** in alternative settings.
- **Part 7** describes **how good schools are at retaining students** in mainstream education.
- **Part 8** describes ultimately **how good New Zealand's system of alternative provision** is.
- **Part 9** provides **recommendations** to inform future change, as well as providing an overview of our key findings where all learners participate together and are taught by registered teachers.

Art from students learning in alternative settings

Part 1: How many young people are not in mainstream school?

In New Zealand, schooling is compulsory for children from age six to 16 and freely provided for students from age five to 19. For most students, this means learning in a traditional classroom environment at a mainstream school. However, an increasing number of students are either leaving school early, non-enrolled, or learning in alternative settings. In this chapter we look at how many students are leaving mainstream school and where they are going.

What we looked at

Most students in New Zealand learn in public, mainstream schooling from age six to at least 16. By mainstream, we mean an in-person school environment where all learners participate together and are taught by registered teachers. This includes state, state-integrated, charter, and private schools, but excludes other alternative settings such as Alternative Education, Activity Centres and Specialist Schools.[c]

To examine the number of 12- to 18-year-olds learning in mainstream and alternative settings, including those who were non-enrolled or who left school early through an exemption, we looked at:

- National administrative data from the Ministry of Education
- New Zealand Census data
- Previous ERO reports, including the review of Alternative Education (2023), Residential Care (2021), and Activity Centres (2018).

This chapter sets out:

1) How many young people learn in mainstream schools
2) How many young people are not enrolled or leave school early
3) Where students learn outside mainstream schools
4) How many young people learn in settings outside of mainstream school.

c Some of the settings are technically state schools (including Te Kura and some Residential Care schools), but they operate differently from traditional, inperson school environments and, for this cohort of students, function as alternatives to mainstream schooling.

What we found: an overview

Nearly 20,000 12- to-16-year-olds in New Zealand are not attending mainstream school – around 5 percent of young people.

- Around 355,000 young people aged 12 to 16 live in New Zealand. Of these, 19,500 are not enrolled in any mainstream school, representing around 5 percent of all 12 to 16-year-olds nationally.

The number of students not in mainstream schooling is increasing, and this is deeply concerning.

- **The number of children outside mainstream schooling is rapidly increasing.** The number of non-enrolled and homeschooled children (aged 12-18) has doubled in the last ten years – rising from less than 8,000 to almost 15,000 non-enrolled students, and from 2,300 to 5,000 homeschooled students.
- **The number of young people leaving school early has tripled.** In 2015, around 400 15-year-olds were approved to exit school before the legal leaving age. By 2024, that number had risen to over 1,300.
- **Enrolments in New Zealand's distance school, Te Kura, have also tripled.** Since 2016, the roll has increased from around 3,000 fulltime-enrolled students to nearly 9,000 in 2024. The Engagement and Wellbeing gateway has expanded rapidly, with enrolments rising fourfold – from fewer than 1,500 students in 2016 to over 6,000 in 2024.

These findings are set out in more detail below.

1) How many young people learn in mainstream schools?

The mainstream education system is expected to meet the needs of the vast majority of students in New Zealand.

Most children and young people in New Zealand are educated in mainstream schools from age six until at least age 16. In this report, mainstream education refers to in-person schooling in state, state-integrated, charter, and private schools, where all learners participate together and are taught by registered teachers.

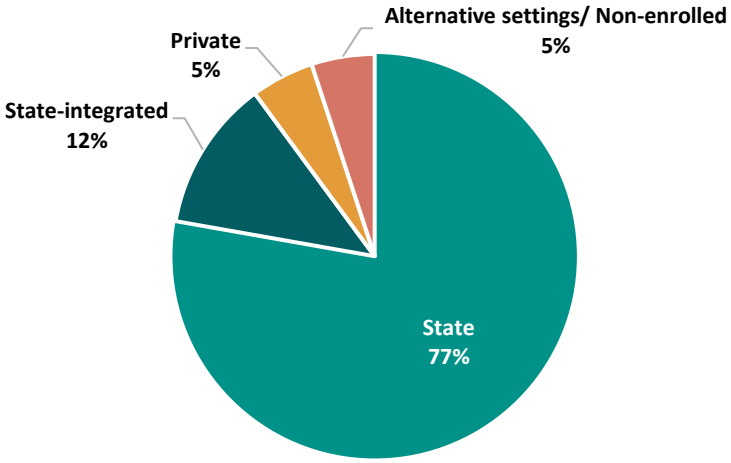
Under the Education and Training Act 2020, all students have the same right to enrol, attend, and receive education at state schools.[1] Mainstream schools are expected to provide reasonable and appropriate support so students can attend, participate and progress. While some students may require specialist provision, the expectation is that mainstream schools can meet most needs for most students.

When mainstream schooling work is working as it should, most students are supported to stay enrolled until at least age 16, achieve their NCEA qualifications, and leave secondary school prepared for further education, training, or employment.

Around 20,000 12- to-16-year-olds in New Zealand are not attending mainstream school – around 5 percent of young people.

In 2024, StatsNZ estimated around 355,000 young people aged 12 to 16 resided in New Zealand. Of this population, 274,500 (77 percent) were attending state schools, 42,500 (12 percent) were enrolled in state-integrated schools, and almost 18,500 (5 percent) were in private schools. This means that 19,500 young people were not enrolled in any mainstream school settings – roughly 5 percent of all 12- to 16-year-olds nationally.

Figure 1: *Percentage of young people (ages 12 to 16) enrolled in mainstream school, alternative settings or non-enrolled, 2024*



Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative and New Zealand census data*

2) How many young people are not enrolled or leave school early?

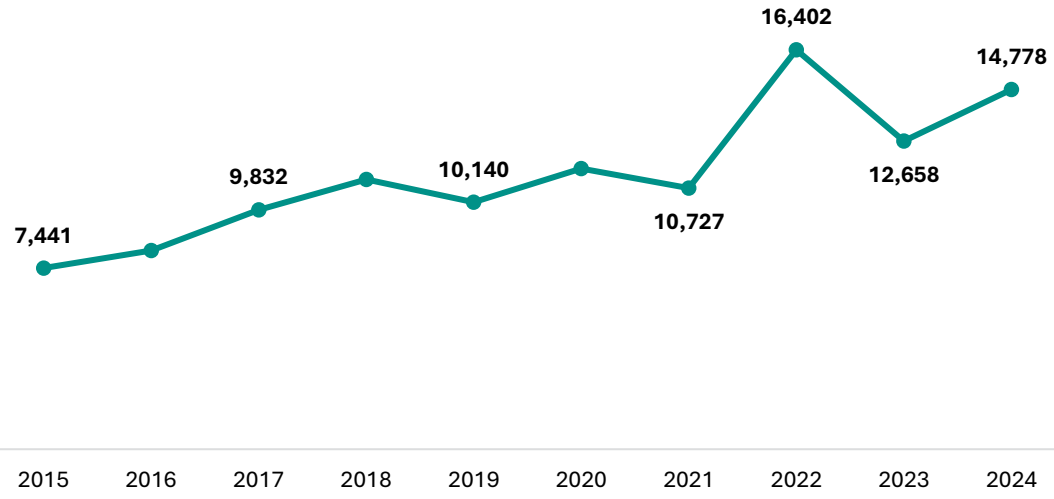
The law requires children and young people up to age 16 to be enrolled in school but, worryingly, the number of non-enrolled cases has doubled since 2015.

Although enrolment is compulsory in New Zealand for children aged six to 16 in New Zealand, a concerningly large and increasing number of students are being reported to the Ministry of Education as non-enrolled. A student is classified as non-enrolled if they have not attended school for 20 consecutive days, and the school cannot confirm that the absence is temporary. In these situations, schools are required to notify the Ministry of Education, which then opens a non-enrolment case from 2015 to 2024.

In 2024, the Ministry opened nearly 15,000 non-enrolment cases – twice as many as in 2015. The increase in non-enrolment is concerning. A growing number of young people are not engaged in education in any form, whether through mainstream or alternative pathways.

Once a student is reported as non-enrolled, the Ministry works to locate them and support their return to school or find an alternative learning pathway. During this period, students miss out on regular classroom learning, as well as the wider supports that schools provide.

Figure 2: *Number of non-enrolment cases opened, from 2015 to 2024*



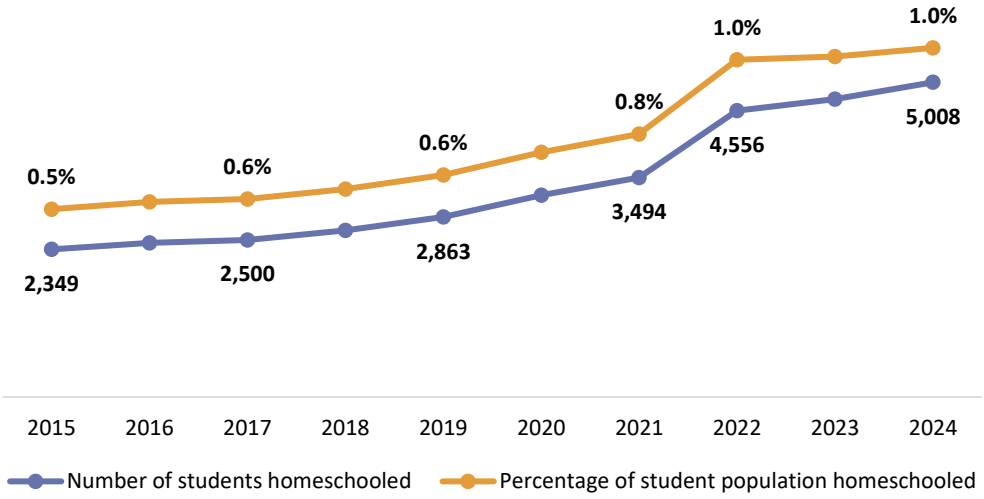
Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data*

The number of 15-year-olds granted exemptions from school tripled over the past decade.

Parents can apply to the Ministry of Education for an exemption from the compulsory enrolment requirement when their child turns 15. These applications are often made when a student is experiencing significant educational or behavioural challenges, or where attending an available school is no longer considered beneficial. As part of the application, parents must outline the student's planned next steps, such as training programmes or employment.

As demonstrated in Figure 3, aside from a brief dip in 2020 (during the Covid-19 pandemic), the number of applications has risen steadily over the past decade. In 2024, the Ministry approved over 1,300 early leaving exemptions, compared with nearly 400 in 2015.

Figure 3: *Number and rate of approved early leaving cases, from 2015 to 2024*



Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data*

This matters because students who leave school early miss out on the benefits that education provides. International research shows that young people who exit education prematurely are more likely to become disengaged from both learning and employment later on, as re-engagement becomes increasingly difficult.[2 3]

3) Where do students learn outside of the mainstream?

When mainstream schooling does not work for students, there are alternative settings they can learn in.

For some students, mainstream schooling is not the most appropriate option, either temporarily or longer term. In these circumstances, students may learn in other learning settings that provide more intensive, flexible, or specialised support than is typically available in mainstream schools.

New Zealand has a diverse set of alternative pathways. The following table represents some of these alternative places of learning.

Table 3: *Alternative places of learning in New Zealand*

Setting	Purpose
Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu (Te Kura)	New Zealand's distance school, which delivers online and blended learning. Its Engagement and Wellbeing gateway receives referrals for students who have disengaged, or are at-risk of disengaging, from mainstream school.
Homeschooling	Home-based learning delivered by parents or caregivers with Ministry approval, as an alternative to enrolment in a mainstream registered school.
Specialist schools	Serves students with high and complex learning support needs or disabilities.
Alternative Education	Offers flexible, community-based programmes for students who have disengaged or are at high risk of disengaging from school, often with a focus on wellbeing and transitions to further education, training, or employment.
Residential Care	Delivered within Oranga Tamariki residences or dedicated specialist schools. These sites provide highly structured learning alongside intensive support for young people in Youth Justice or Care and Protection residences.
Teen Parent Units	Enables students who are pregnant or parenting to continue their education alongside parenting and wellbeing support.
Activity Centres	Provides short-term, early-intervention placements for students at risk of disengagement, with the primary aim of supporting a return to their enrolling school.
Regional health schools	Supports students unable to attend school because of significant physical or mental health needs.
Military-style academies	Provides highly structured programmes for a small number of young people involved in the youth justice system.

This review focuses on four of these alternative settings: Activity Centres, Alternative Education, Residential Care education, and Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway.[d] These settings form the core learning pathways available to students who are disengaging from, or at risk of disengaging from, mainstream schooling. Together, they serve around two percent of all 12- to 18-year-olds in New Zealand – around 8,500 young people – making them a crucial part of the education landscape for these students.

Alternative settings look very different from each other, and different from mainstream school learning.

These four alternative settings collectively support most students who move out of mainstream schooling. These settings share a common purpose – to re-engage students with more individualised and intensive support than is typically available in a mainstream classroom.

Across these settings, the intensity of support, the structure of provision, the teaching expertise available, and access to the curriculum all vary considerably between settings.

Activity Centres:

Activity Centres provide short-term, early intervention for students in Years 9 to 13 who are at risk of disengaging from school. Their primary purpose is to stabilise learning and behaviour, re-establish learning routines, and support a return to the student's enrolling school. Students remain on their school roll and typically attend for up to two terms, although placements can be extended when needed.

Referrals usually arise from concerns about behaviour that disrupts the student's learning or that of others' and are most often initiated by schools. Enrolment decisions are made jointly by the managing school and the Activity Centre, and capped rolls mean that some students wait for placements.

Learning takes place in small, structured environments, commonly with around one teacher to ten students. Programmes are delivered by registered teachers supported by teacher aides or tutors and often include shorter learning days, practical activities, and focused support for social and self-management skills.

Activity Centres operate under agreements with the Ministry of Education. The Ministry provides funding and policy direction, while managing schools hold governance responsibility and oversee delivery, reporting, and staff capability.

Alternative Education:

Alternative Education supports young people who have already disengaged, or are at high risk of disengaging, from school. Most students are in Years 9 to 11, with some starting from age 13 and a smaller group remaining through to Year 13.

Students may be referred by schools, parents and whānau, or themselves, with referrals occasionally requested by Oranga Tamariki social workers or Youth Court judges. Contract holders decide on enrolment, and demand can exceed available places.

d This review exclusively looks at the cohort of students enrolled in Te Kura through the Engagement and Wellbeing gateway, their parents and whānau, as well as teachers, and leaders. Findings should not be extrapolated to represent the experiences or outcomes of all students in Te Kura.

Programmes are small and highly individualised. Each student has a Collaborative Action Plan developed with the school, provider, student, parents and whānau, and relevant agencies. Staffing typically includes tutors, youth workers, or mentors rather than registered teachers, and many programmes incorporate vocational learning to support future pathways.

Alternative Education is delivered through regional contracts funded by the Ministry of Education. The Ministry sets national direction, Te Mahau Takiwā[e] manages contracts, and delivery is often subcontracted to community organisations. Enrolling schools retain responsibility for students' roll status and pastoral oversight.

Residential Care:

Residential Care serves some of New Zealand's most vulnerable young people, including those in Care and Protection and Youth Justice residences. Education is delivered within secure settings or dedicated specialist schools and is compulsory for students under 16. Programmes emphasise safety, emotional regulation, and therapeutic support, alongside learning.

Students enter Residential Care through Oranga Tamariki or court-related placements, with lengths of stay typically ranging from several weeks to several months depending on the type of residence and the young person's needs. Stays are typically shortest for Youth Justice facilities – averaging around only 40 days for some sites.

Education is delivered either by dedicated specialist schools or by Ministry-contracted providers, often in school sites within residences, or sometimes off-site within the community. Teaching is typically delivered with high levels of staffing, such as a one-to-five teacher-to-student ratio. Learning plans are typically wellbeing-focused and aligned with court or family group conference decisions.

Responsibility for education in Residential Care varies by site. In some facilities, the Ministry of Education funds and oversees the delivery of education by external providers, while Oranga Tamariki is responsible for care, placement, and the day-to-day conditions that influence students' learning. This is also the case for community-based learning spaces, which extend provision to some young people in non-residential care who are not engaged in education.[f]

In contrast, dedicated specialist schools operate as Crown entities, like all state schools, and hold full responsibility for students' education provision. At these sites, Oranga Tamariki's role is limited to governance support.

Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu (Te Kura):

Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu (Te Kura) is New Zealand's largest state school, delivering distance and blended learning to a wide and diverse range of students across the country.[g] Te Kura supports school-aged students, young adults, and

e Te Mahau Takiwā is the regional operational arms of the Ministry of Education. These offices provide accessible, tailored support to local learning services, schools and kura. The support includes interventions for target student groups, such as young people with special learning and developmental needs.

f For the purposes of this report, community-based learning spaces do not include bail or remand homes, due to the very short duration of placement in these settings (typically 5-14 days).

g Te Kura is a state school which means it may meet certain criteria associated with mainstream schooling. However, for the purposes of this report, we treat it as an alternative setting because it functions as an alternative to mainstream schooling for students who enters through the Engagement and Wellbeing gateway.

adults, including those who cannot attend a physical school because of health needs, geographic isolation, elite sporting or performance commitments, transience, or personal circumstances. It also provides learning for students in custody, those returning to education after time away, and students seeking flexible pathways alongside work or caregiving responsibilities.

Learning is primarily delivered online, supplemented by some face-to-face opportunities. Te Kura operates nationally across seven regions, with regional offices and hubs that host group sessions (Huinga Ako),[h] tutorials, and events. Students are supported by learning advisors (kaimanaaki) and teachers (kaiako), and can access the full New Zealand Curriculum and NCEA, alongside personalised programmes and selected vocational pathways such as Secondary Tertiary Alignment Resource (STAR) courses and Trades Academies.

The Ministry of Education enrols students through the Engagement and Wellbeing gateway who have been, or are at risk of, disengaging from school. This includes students who are non-enrolled, excluded or expelled and students who have needs that are not being met within their current learning environment. Students typically remain enrolled for at least one term.

In addition to teachers and learning advisors, students in this gateway work with support staff (kaiāwhina), who provide tailored wellbeing and mental health support alongside learning.

Key differences between the four alternative settings are summarised in the table below.

Table 4: *Overview of key operational aspects of alternative settings*

	Activity Centres	Alternative Education	Residential Care	Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway
Purpose	Provide short-term, early intervention support to stabilise progress and transition young people back to school.	Support young people to re-engage in learning and transition to mainstream schooling, further education, training, or employment.	Deliver compulsory education for young people in care or youth justice settings and maintain continuity of learning during their placement.	Offer a full-time learning option and supports young people to re-engage in learning and reintegrate into school or other pathways. There is a set of criteria for entry via this gateway.

h Regular face-to-face or online meetings, where students can connect and collaborate with peers, and receive support from mentors.

	Activity Centres	Alternative Education	Residential Care	Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway
Number[i]	Fourteen sites.[j] In 2024, there were around 160 students in Activity Centres.	Eighty-three secondary schools, four NGOs and three iwi hold contracts for 100-120 sites. In 2024, there were around 1,700 students in Alternative Education.	Three Care and Protection sites, five Youth Justice, and two community-based sites. In 2024, there were 400 students in Residential Care.	One national school. In 2024 there were around 6,000 students in this gateway.
Length of enrolment	Up to two terms, with case-by-case extension.	Range from a few weeks to several years, depending on needs.	From several weeks to several months, depending on facilities.	Minimum one term, but duration varies based on readiness.
Referring agent	Schools.	Usually schools; can be prompted by parents and whānau.	Oranga Tamariki.	Ministry of Education (MoE); can be prompted by schools.
Staffing	Two registered teachers per site, with supporting tutors or assistants.	Not all sites are staffed by registered teachers; staff often have experience in youth work and related support roles.	Each site must have a registered teacher; supported by a multi-disciplinary team including teacher aides and social workers.	Education is delivered by registered teachers; supported by learning advisors, mentors; supervisors identified by the MoE at enrolment.
Connection to mainstream	Students remain on roll of mainstream school.	Students remain on roll of mainstream school.	Students are not enrolled in mainstream school.	Students are not enrolled in mainstream school.

i Enrolment numbers are based on Ministry of Education administrative data and represent cumulative enrolment counts across 2024, not point-in-time enrolment estimates.

j As of 2026, there are fourteen Activity Centre sites across the country. At time of review, there were thirteen sites.

	Activity Centres	Alternative Education	Residential Care	Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway
Governance	The managing schools and their board hold and oversee contracts, delivery and reporting, and supporting staff capacity.	The contract-holder (school, NGO, or iwi) manages and oversees contracts and provision. Regional MoE staff manage and support.	Governance arrangements vary by site/provider (e.g., MoE sets education policy and assigns providers; Oranga Tamariki responsible for care, placements, daily supervision; or the provider oversees delivery, while Oranga Tamariki provides governance).	Nationally managed state school; governed by a Ministerially appointed board; supported by regional offices.
Funding	MoE funds all operational and educational costs, including facilities, property and two full time registered teachers per site. Sometimes topped up by supple-mentary or charitable funding.	Per place MoE funding to managing schools covering operational costs. Sometimes topped up by supplementary or charitable funding.	MoE funding for education facilities, and teacher salaries. Oranga Tamariki funds materials, other education costs, transport.	MoE funding, for approximately 4,000 full time students at any one time; based on engagement and including a funding top up for students at-risk of disengaging.

4) How many students learn outside of mainstream school?

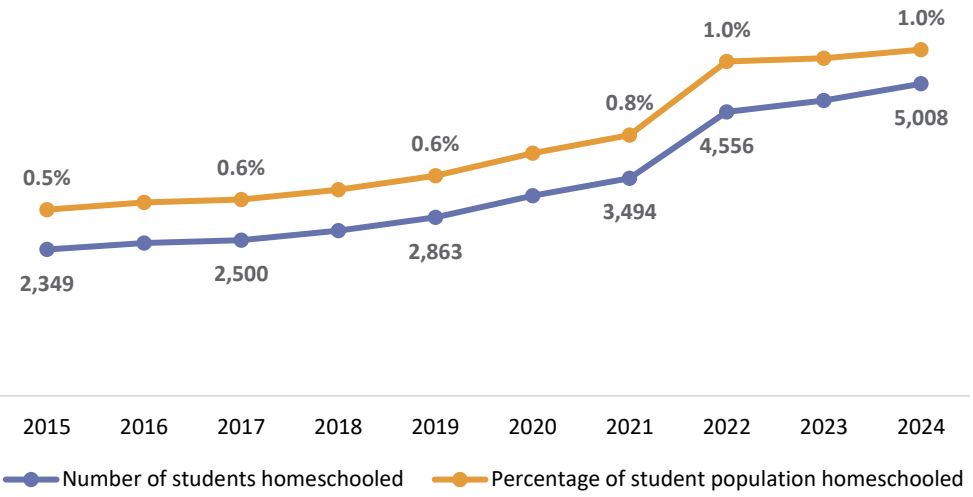
Homeschooling has doubled over the past decade.

In 2024, more than 5,000 students aged 12 to 18 were homeschooled – up from 2,350 in 2015.

The largest increase occurred between 2021 and 2022, when enrolment jumped by 1,000 students – a 30 percent rise.[4] This increase coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic, which widened existing educational gaps. Many students missed significant periods of classroom learnings, struggled with remote learning, and lost access to consistent support. Attendance and engagement declined, and behaviour concerns intensified as students coped with stress, uncertainty, and disrupted routines. For some, these challenges were compounded by fears of illness and a lingering sense of not feeling safe at school, making re-engagement harder.[5]

However, the increase in numbers of students homeschooled is not due to Covid-19 alone. Numbers were rising before Covid-19, and the number of students pursuing education outside mainstream schooling continues to rise even after the pandemic.

Figure 4: *Number and percentage of homeschooled students (ages 12 – 18), from 2015 to 2024*



Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data*

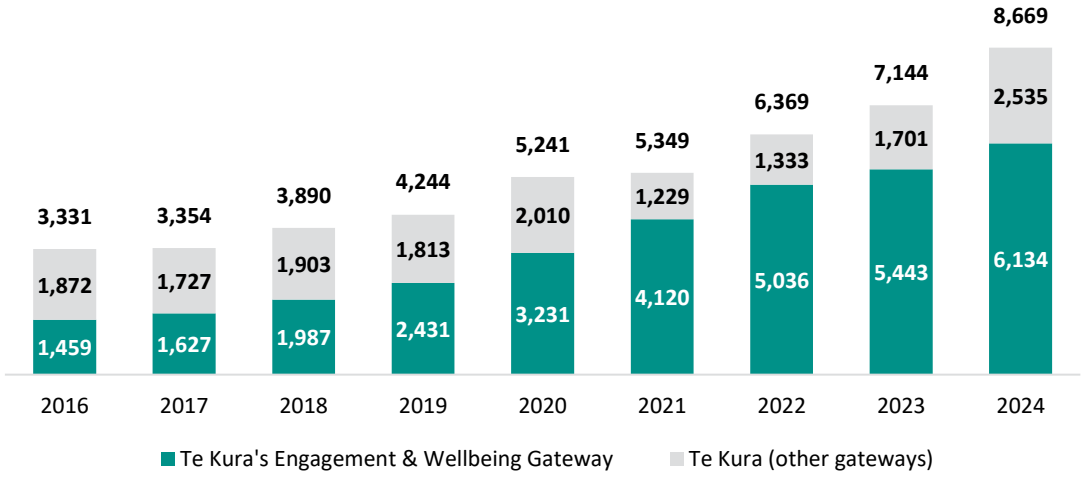
Enrolments in Te Kura have tripled in the past decade, largely driven by increasing number of students disengaging from mainstream education.

Like homeschooling, fulltime enrolments in Te Kura have grown steadily over the past decade – from around 3,300 students in 2016 to more than 8,600 in 2024 – with particularly sharp growth during the pandemic years. Since the pandemic, numbers have continued to climb.

Most of this growth is due to the increase in students who enter Te Kura through the Engagement and Wellbeing gateway. These students are referred to Te Kura by the Ministry of Education because they have disengaged from school or are at risk of disengaging. This includes students who are not enrolled in school, have been excluded or expelled, and those with psychological or psychosocial challenges that are not being met in their current learning environment. Fulltime enrolments for these reasons have increased rapidly, from fewer than 1,500 students in 2016 to more than 6,000 in 2024.

Unlike other alternative settings with limited enrolment capacity, Te Kura can accommodate all students referred through this gateway. This has meant Te Kura has absorbed much of the system-wide pressure created by increasing numbers of students who are disengaging from mainstream school. Budget 2022 included additional funding for Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway in recognition of both the rising demand and the higher costs of meeting the needs of this group of students.[6]

Figure 5: *Number of students enrolled in Te Kura through the Engagement and Wellbeing gateway and other gateways (ages 12 – 18), from 2016 to 2024*

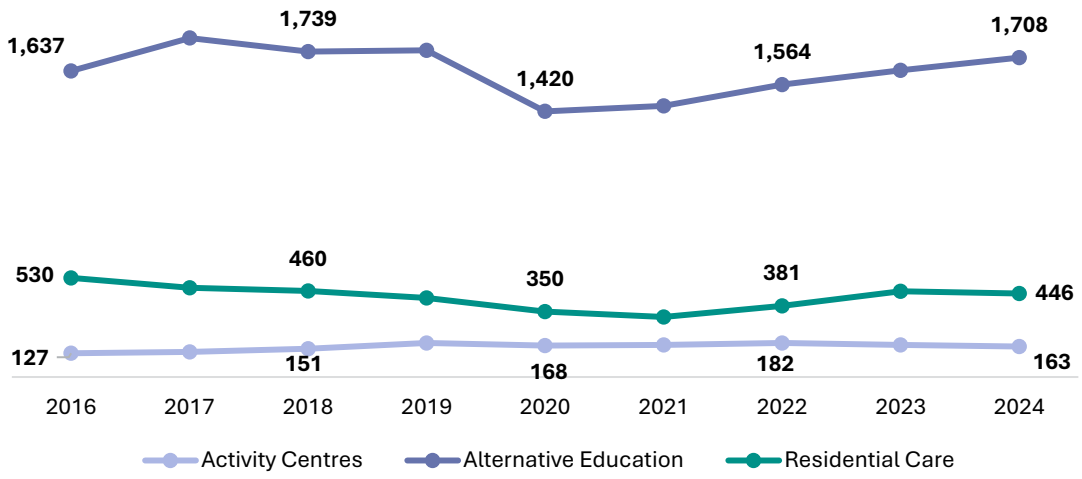


Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data*

Enrolments in Alternative Education, Activity Centres, and Residential Care have remained relatively stable over time due to capacity limits, despite increased demand for alternative learning options.

The number of students in Alternative Education, Activity Centres, and Residential Care has remained relatively stable over time. This is largely because these settings operate with a fixed number of placements, which places an upper limit on growth regardless of rising demand.

Figure 6: *Number of students in different settings, from 2016 to 2024*



Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data*

Conclusion

Growing numbers of students are not in mainstream schools. The increasing movement away from mainstream education reflects mounting pressure on schools and their uneven ability to meet the full range of student needs. Referrals into alternative pathways – particularly through Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway – have risen steadily, signalling that more young people are exiting or being redirected from mainstream schooling.

The next chapter examines pathways into alternative settings and the characteristics associated with students who are more likely to enter them.

Part 2: Why do students enter alternative settings?

Students from low socioeconomic communities, those with complex learning and behaviour needs, and those who experience significant disruptions in their learning are all at greater risk of becoming disengaged from mainstream schooling and entering alternative settings. This chapter examines why students transition into alternative settings.

What we looked at

To understand who the students in alternative settings are, and their pathways into these settings, we looked at:

- Our surveys and interviews of students, parents and whānau, school leaders, and setting teachers and leaders
- National administrative data from the Ministry of Education
- Stats NZ's Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI)
- Previous ERO review of chronic absence (2024).

This chapter explores:

1) What age students move into the settings
2) How long they stay in the settings
3) What makes students at risk of entering the settings
4) Why students are referred into the settings
5) How long students wait to enter the settings.

What we found: an overview

There are signs that students are moving into these settings at a younger age.

- **Most students move into alternative settings during secondary school**. Around three-quarters of students Alternative Education (79 percent) and Activity Centres (74 percent) start in Years 11 and above.
- **Teachers and school leaders told us referrals are happening at younger ages** – one in five students enter Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway before Year 9.

Students who are disadvantaged are most at risk of entering alternative settings.

- **Students who are referred to alternative settings are more likely to experience economic disadvantage.** Those from low socioeconomic communities are five times more likely to be referred than students from high socioeconomic communities. They are also more likely to have additional complex needs that require targeted support.

Students who have gaps in their education are at a much higher risk of entering alternative settings.

- **Students entering alternative settings often have a history of exclusion or prolonged gaps in schooling.** Students who have previously been non-enrolled are five times more likely to enter alternative settings and students with a history of suspension are almost four times more likely to enter. Students who have been chronically absent from school are also more at risk of entering alternative settings.
- **Moving schools frequently increases the risk of students leaving mainstream schools.** Every time a student has an unstructured school move (moving schools outside of the regular moves from one level of school to the next), they are 10 percent more likely to enter an alternative setting.

Attendance, behaviour and complex needs are key reasons for referrals into alternative settings, not poor academic performance.

- **Attendance issues and disruptive behaviour are reported as referral reasons** by almost all teachers in Activity Centres and Alternative Education.

Māori students are more at risk of entering alternative settings.

- **Māori students comprise 58 percent of young people learning in these settings.** This over-representation reflects underlying inequities – Māori are more likely to experience risk factors that increase the chance of referral, such as living in low socioeconomic communities and having periods of non-enrolment.

Worryingly, students typically lose three months of learning while waiting to access an alternative setting.

- **Students can face long waits before they start at a new setting** – on average, they wait 13 weeks between leaving mainstream school and beginning getting onboarded at the setting. These delays are partly caused by waitlists and lengthy referral processes.

These findings are set out in more detail below.

1) What age do students move into these settings?

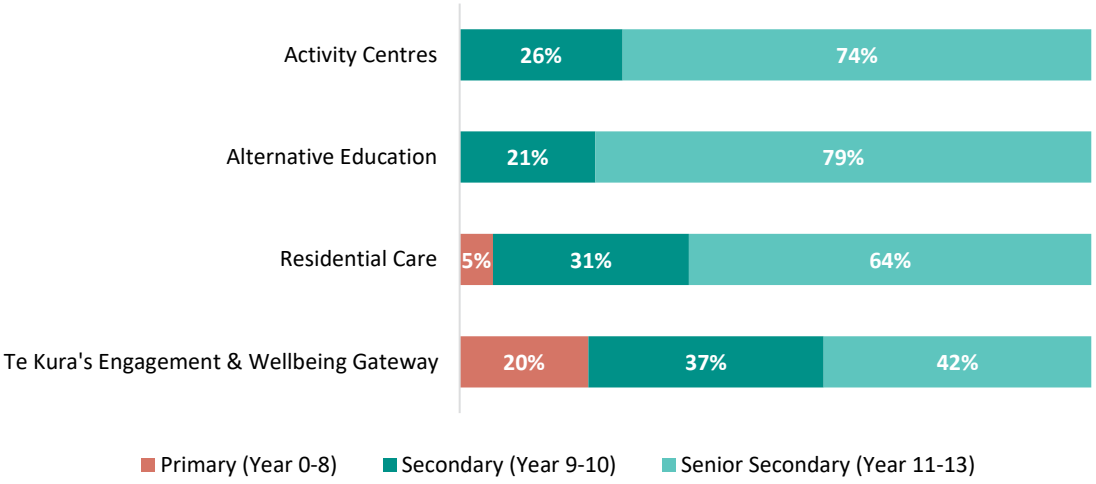
Students can move into these settings before starting secondary school, and referrals are starting to shift to earlier year levels.

The age at which students enter alternative settings varies by setting. This is in part because different settings are targeted at different age groups.

Around one in five (21 percent) students enrolled in Te Kura through the Engagement and Wellbeing gateway start before Year 9. One in twenty (5 percent) entering Residential Care do so before Year 9.

In contrast, Activity Centres and Alternative Education are intended to start at Year 9. Only two percent start earlier than Year 9 and nearly half of students start in Year 11. Although Alternative Education is intended to support students only up until Year 11, more than one-third (35 percent) of students are enrolled in Year 12 or 13.

Figure 7: *Percentage of students entering alternative settings, by Year level and setting*



Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data, 2022-2024*

Year 11 is a pivotal stage in schooling because it marks the start of formal assessments and NCEA Level 1, introducing higher academic expectations and increases pressure on students. We heard that for those already experiencing challenges with educational disengagement, this transition can be overwhelming. Some students require short-term support in alternative settings to re-establish routines, rebuild confidence, and reconnect with learning before returning to mainstream education.

Teachers and leaders of alternative settings and schools told us that referrals are happening earlier, particularly in Years 9 and 10. They consistently described the transition into secondary school as a critical pressure point and a major shift for

many students. We heard that in primary settings, students usually have one main teacher who knows their learning needs, behaviour patterns, communication style, and parental and whānau context well.

According to the staff we spoke with, this changes drastically when students enter secondary school. Students have multiple teachers, and each teacher can have different expectations for behaviour and performance, differing understanding of a student's background or challenges, varying communication styles, and different approaches to support. We were told that for students with underlying challenges or complex needs, navigating these differences can be overwhelming. Small disruptions – such as timetable changes, new social environments, or varied teaching styles – can quickly escalate into disengagement if support isn't well coordinated.

> "The transition between primary, intermediate and college is massive. The transition from having one trusted teacher to six teachers who don't know you well, in six different classroom location, larger class size, and lack of communication."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION LEADER**

> "There are too many people [at secondary school]. Too many people. I'm not sure about everyone. I feel anxious."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION STUDENT**

2) How long do they stay in these settings?

The length of time students spend in a setting varies. Students in Activity Centres and Residential Care have shorter stays, while students in Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway and Alternative Education tend to stay longer.

Students experience variable lengths of placement in alternative settings, reflecting the different intended lengths of stay for each setting, as outlined in the following table.

Table 5: *Intended purpose and placement lengths for alternative settings*

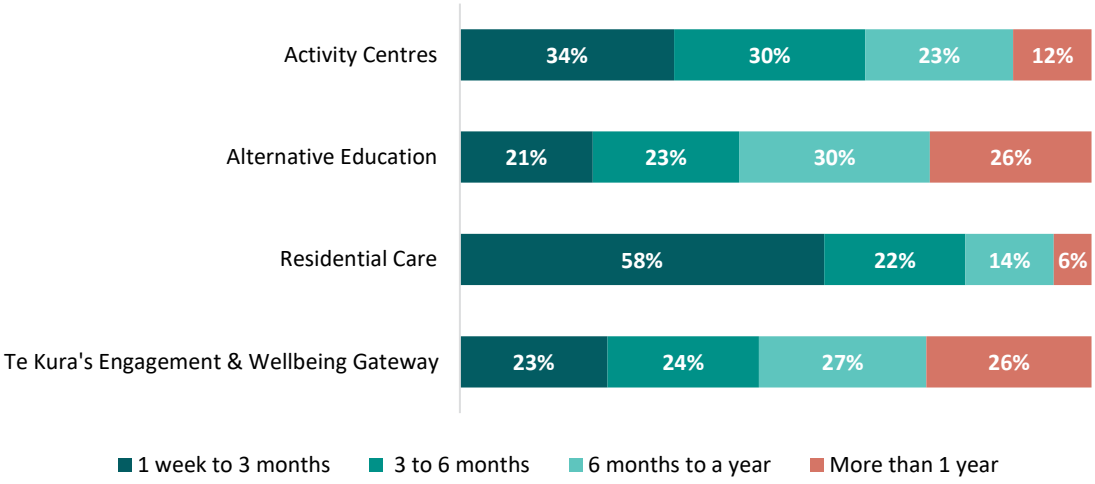
Setting	Purpose and placement lengths
Activity Centres	Designed as short-term interventions, usually up to two terms, providing a stabilising environment before students ideally return to mainstream schooling.
Alternative Education	Intended to support reintegration into mainstream schooling and function similarly to Activity Centres. In practice, however, it often serves as a long-term placement for students who have disengaged and do not expect to return.
Residential Care	Placements vary widely, and their length is usually determined by the duration of court orders or other Oranga Tamariki care arrangements rather than education considerations. Enrolment typically aligns with these mandates, and students transition out once orders or other care arrangements lapse. Consequently, stays in secure residences (Youth Justice or Care and Protection facilities) are not intended to cover a student's entire secondary education.
Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway	Enrolments are generally longer because, as a state school, it operates as a full alternative to face-to-face schooling. This means that Te Kura often becomes a long-term destination rather than a temporary solution. We heard that Te Kura does not actively promote reintegration for students in its Engagement and Wellbeing gateway, but staff will facilitate students' return to mainstream if this is decided by Ministry of Education staff.

In Activity Centres, around two-thirds (64 percent) of students stay for relatively short periods, typically less than six months, as placements are generally limited to two terms. However, site leaders can extend stays at their discretion. With over one-third (36 percent) of students exceeding the two-term limit, extended placements appear relatively common.

Residential Care placements are also generally brief, with nearly three in five (58 percent) lasting from three weeks to six months. The length of stay can vary depending on whether the site is a Care and Protection or Youth Justice residence, or a community-based learning space. We heard that stays can be particularly brief in some Youth Justice facilities — averaging just 40 days at one site.

By contrast, students referred to Te Kura through the Engagement and Wellbeing gateway tend to remain longer, with over half (53 percent) enrolled for six to 12 months or more than one year. Alternative Education has similarly long stays with over half (56 percent) of students staying six to 12 months or more.

Figure 8: *Percentage of students by duration of stay and setting*

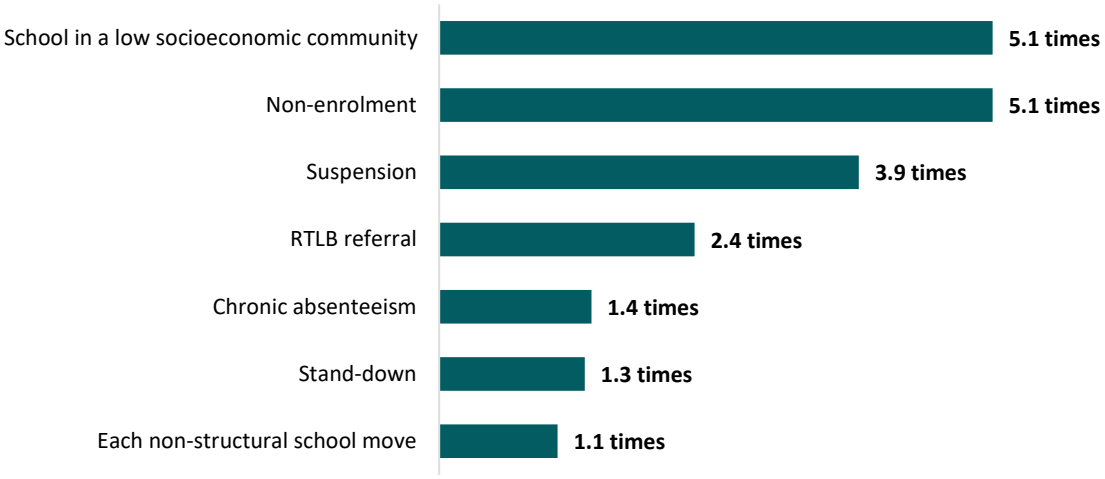


Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data, 2022-2024*

3) What makes students more likely to enter these settings?

We found that students who experience gaps in learning, such as being unenrolled, stood down or suspended, chronically absent, or frequently changing schools, are more likely to leave mainstream education. Students from low socioeconomic communities or with additional needs are also more likely to be referred to these settings.

Figure 9: *Increased likelihood of students entering an alternative setting, by risk factor*



Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data, 2022-2024*

Students from schools in low socioeconomic communities are over five times as likely to be referred to alternative settings.

Socioeconomic context is one of the strongest predictors of referral to alternative settings. Students attending schools in low socioeconomic communities are 5.1 times as likely to be referred than students in high socioeconomic communities. We also heard that schools in these communities face compounding challenges, including poverty, housing instability, transience, limited access to health and social services, and broader community vulnerabilities.

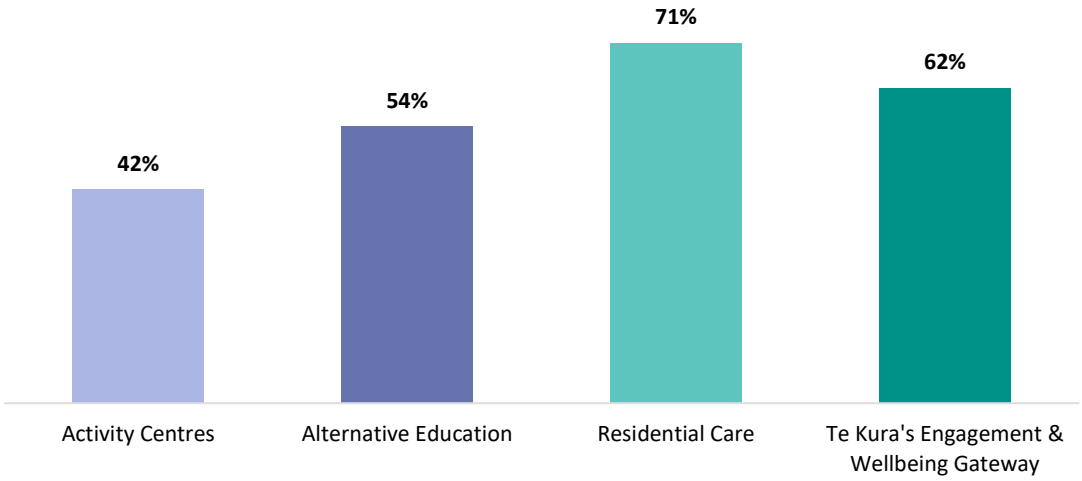
These pressures mean that many student needs require significant support.[7] When schools do not have access to the scale or intensity of the support they need, we heard that students are more likely to fall behind academically and disengage from learning, increasing the likelihood of referral to alternative settings.

Students who have previously been non-enrolled are also over five times as likely to enter an alternative setting.

Students who have spent time out of school are 5.1 times as likely to enter an alternative setting than those who have remained continuously enrolled – making non-enrolment one of the strongest predictors of referral.

Across all alternative settings, 60 percent of students have a history of non-enrolment, with rates highest in Residential Care at 71 percent. These figures highlight the strong link between disrupted enrolment and persistent disengagement.

Figure 10: *Percentage of students who have experienced non-enrolment at least once, by setting*



Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data*

We heard from school leaders that non-enrolment typically occurs during critical transition points, such as moving between schools, following an exclusion, or when students drop out without being picked up by attendance services. It can also result from unstable home environments, frequent moves between care placements, or parents not enrolling their child in a new school.

Leaders of alternative settings told us these gaps in schooling often lead to severe academic setbacks. They described some students arriving with limited literacy, numeracy, or foundational knowledge, and noted that some secondary-aged students are working at early primary levels. This makes re-engagement in a mainstream classroom extremely challenging.

> "These students missed out on so many foundation stones. Like this morning, we were teaching a student how to use a protractor. He's 14 years old and this is the first time he ever heard about angles."
>
> **RESIDENTIAL CARE LEADER**

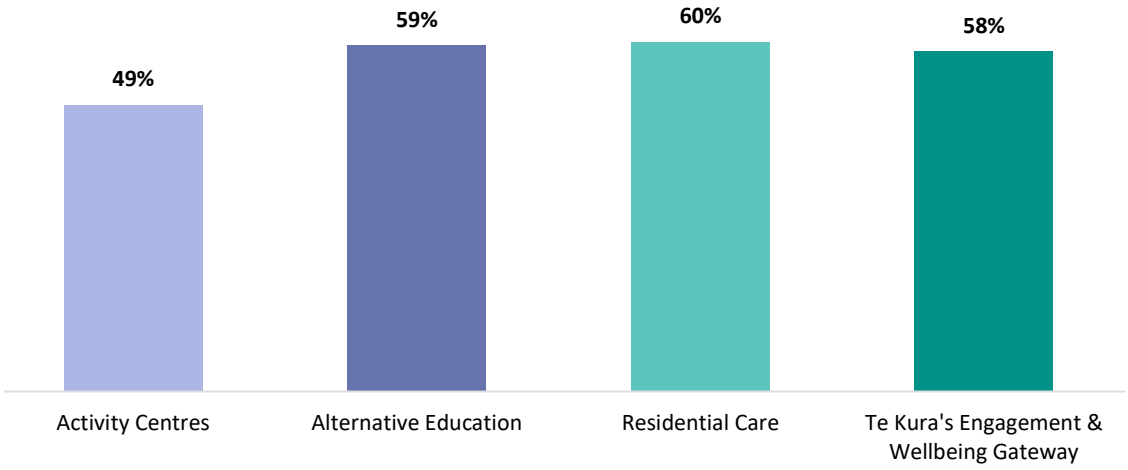
We found that the impact of non-enrolment goes beyond academics. We heard from a school leader that extended periods out of school erodes students' confidence, motivation, and sense of belonging, creating a cycle of disengagement that can be very difficult to break. This is particularly true for students with a history of care involvement or contact with Youth Justice services, who often face multiple and overlapping barriers to re-engagement.

Students with recent histories of chronic absence are 1.4 times as likely to enter an alternative setting.

Chronic absence is also a strong predictor of future disengagement from mainstream schooling. ERO's 2024 report on chronic absence shows that extended time away from school, including periods of non-enrolment, often leads students to fall behind academically, lose motivation, and find it difficult to resume regular participation.[8] Over time, these patterns create significant gaps in foundational learning, making it increasingly difficult for students to keep pace with their peers or participate meaningfully in class.

Across alternative settings, around 60 percent of students have a history of chronic absence.

Figure 11: *Percentage of students who have ever been chronically absent in the three years prior to leaving mainstream school, by setting*



Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data, 2022-2024*

Chronic absence can begin as early as primary school and often persists into secondary years. It includes not only full-day absences but also patterns of truancy, where students attend school but skip classes or disengage while present. The reasons are varied and complex. Teachers and leaders told us that some students feel unsafe or unwelcome due to bullying, rigid rules, or peer conflict, while others struggle with poor sleep habits, excessive gaming, or low motivation.

Ultimately, chronic absence creates a cycle of disconnection: students fall behind, feel unsuccessful, and become even less motivated to attend.

> "There's a cohort who are disengaged from school. They're just not attending. I would probably call them Covid babies. They had big gaps in their primary and intermediate. And it's been hard for their families to just support them to stay in learning rhythms."
>
> ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION LEADER

Students who have previously been suspended are almost four times as likely to enter an alternative setting, and those who have been stood down are 1.3 times as likely.

We found that experiencing disciplinary actions such as stand-downs and suspensions makes a student significantly more likely to disengage from mainstream education and enter alternative pathways. Suspensions are particularly predictive, increasing the likelihood of referral by 3.9 times, while stand-downs make students 1.3 times as likely to be referred. These actions commonly respond to behaviours linked to unmet needs including trauma, emotional dysregulation, or mental health challenges.[9] While schools may recognise these underlying issues, we heard that

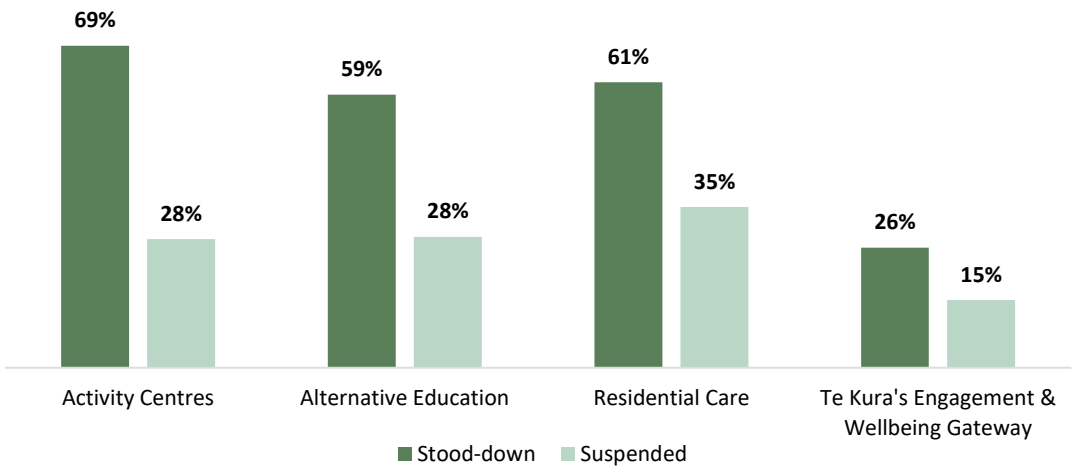
they often lack the capacity to provide intensive support, resulting in students being removed from learning environments altogether.

Across all alternative settings, we found that a substantial proportion of students have a history of stand-downs or suspensions. Activity Centres have the highest levels, with nearly seven in ten (69 percent) of students previously stood-down and almost three in ten (28 percent) suspended at least once.

Students who have experienced disciplinary actions are similarly over-represented in Alternative Education and Residential Care – around six in ten (59 and 61 percent, respectively) have had at least one stand down. Over one-third (35 percent) of Residential Care students have had at least one suspension.

In contrast, students in Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway have notably lower rates, though a significant minority have still experienced standdowns (26 percent) or suspensions (15 percent).

Figure 12: *Percent of students who have been stood down or suspended from school at least once, by setting*



Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data*

Behaviours leading to these actions often involve serious incidents such as fighting, assaults, weapons possession, and substance use. We heard these behaviours not only disrupt the student's own learning but also compromise the safety of others, making re-enrolment or access to alternative settings difficult. Extended periods without formal learning further compound disengagement and limit future educational opportunities. We also heard about the limits of what some settings can safely provide, with one Alternative Education leader noting that programmes must balance group composition, staffing, and safety needs.

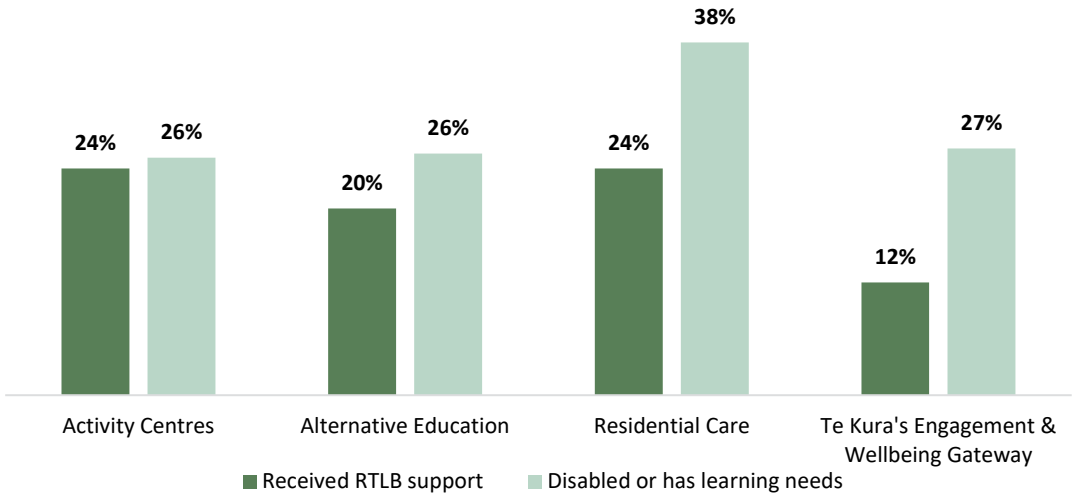
> "Sometimes referrals to us don't work because the kids bring a different dynamic [and we can't take them]."
>
> ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION LEADER

Students experiencing high and complex needs are far more likely to be referred to an alternative setting.

Students with disabilities or learning support needs are disproportionately over-represented in alternative settings, and prior engagement with specialist services is a strong predictor of entry. Across all settings, one in four (27 percent) students report having a disability or learning need; this rises to nearly two in five (38 percent) students in Residential Care.

Having received Resource Teacher: Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) support is linked to a markedly higher risk of referral – students are over twice (2.4 times) as likely to enter an alternative setting. RTLBs provide specialist, school-based support to help teachers address students' learning and behaviour needs, with a focus on early intervention and strengthening classroom practice. Fifteen percent of students in alternative settings have previously received support from services such as RTLB, with higher rates in Activity Centres and Residential Care (24 percent) and Alternative Education (20 percent). These patterns suggest that, while schools identify and attempt to support these students, the level or type of support can fall short of meeting their complex needs. Or, when students reach the end of Year 10 and RTLB services end, there are no available services to fill the gaps other than alternative settings.

Figure 13: *Percentage of students who have received RTLB support, and have a disability or learning need, by setting*



Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data (2022-2024), and survey data*

The students and parents we spoke to commonly told us they were managing overlapping challenges – mentioning neurodiversity (often undiagnosed), Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, chronic health conditions, learning disabilities (e.g., dyslexia), and serious mental health needs (e.g., anxiety, PTSD, OCD, panic disorders). Parents, students, and staff in alternative settings describe these challenges being frequently compounded by experiences of trauma, Covid-19 related disruptions, and addictive behaviours.

When these learning and mental health needs are mismanaged or unmet, we heard that they often present as behaviours that schools interpret as disengagement or non-compliance.[10] Some students told us they struggle to concentrate, experience heightened anxiety, or feel overwhelmed in classroom environments. They described this leading to chronic absenteeism, irregular attendance, and withdrawal from learning activities. Parents told us that students sometimes express distress through disruptive behaviours, aggression, or anger management issues. These behaviours can result in disciplinary action or exclusion, further disconnecting students from education and reinforcing cycles of disadvantage.

> "Schools lack what is necessary to properly look after and teach neurodivergent children... My children were punished for their neurodivergent behaviours, and the school was always calling me to come deal with them or just pick them up."
>
> **TE KURA PARENT – ENGAGEMENT AND WELLBEING GATEWAY**

One leader described disruptive behaviour as a coping response when learning needs went unidentified.

> "A student that we moved [to Alternative Education] used very poor behaviour to mask anyone finding out about her extremely low literacy and numeracy levels, due to learning problems connected with auditory processing and some phonics issues."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION LEADER**

Natalia is a 15-year-old student enrolled in Alternative Education. Identified as gifted at the age of six, she has long demonstrated exceptional intelligence. However, she also has a complex set of needs, including PTSD and OCD.

Her challenges began in primary school, where limited understanding of her needs led to repeated dismissals of her concerns by teachers. This contributed to escalating acts of defiance, such as leaving school grounds. The disruption of Covid-19 further destabilised her routines and contributed to growing disengagement.

The family sought support from multiple services—including Health School, social services, counselling, RTLB, and mental-health providers—but none delivered sustained or coordinated assistance.

Efforts to reintegrate Natalia into mainstream schooling also faltered: although her mum arranged transition visits and communicated with school leaders and teaching staff, agreed support plans were not implemented, and Natalia was quickly redirected to the principal's office.

Natalia's mum felt hopeless at this inaction despite her attempts at advocacy. Reflecting on this, she told us:

"I was desperately [thinking] 'please somebody save us'. She's a beautiful, fun, joyful girl, but you've got to be willing to see her."

Over time, her parents felt increasingly blamed rather than supported, and after years of unsuccessful attempts to secure appropriate help, they ultimately removed her from the mainstream system.

These experiences have left Natalia with deep mistrust of schools. They amplify her anxiety, trigger shutdowns, and reinforce a cycle of disengagement and risky behaviours.

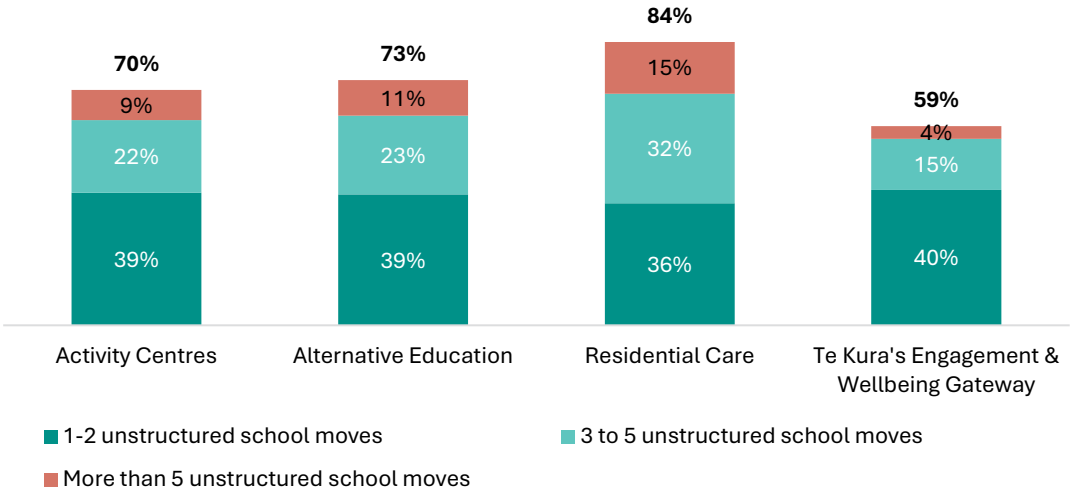
Every time a student moves schools, they become 10 percent more likely to enter an alternative setting.

Frequent, unstructured school moves are also a risk factor for disengagement from mainstream education. Each unstructured move (i.e., moves other than standard transitions between primary, intermediate, and secondary) disrupts educational stability and increases the likelihood of entering an alternative setting by almost 10 percent (1.1 times). Over three in ten students in Activity Centres (31 percent) and Alternative Education (34 percent) have had three or more unstructured moves, increasing their likelihood by 30 percent or more.

The impact of this kind of transience is particularly pronounced in Residential Care, where instability is far greater than in other settings. Nearly one-third (32 percent) of students in Residential Care have experienced three to five unstructured moves before their first entry into any setting, and a further 15 percent have had five or more. This level of instability has clear implications for Oranga Tamariki, particularly around how care arrangements prioritise educational continuity and the extent to which children can remain in the same school rather than being moved repeatedly.

We also heard similar concerns about students in transitional or emergency housing, who are often shifted between locations based on housing availability. This increases the risk of repeated school moves and ultimately heightens the likelihood of educational disengagement.

Figure 14: *Percentage of students who have experienced unstructured moves, by setting*



Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data, 2022-2024*

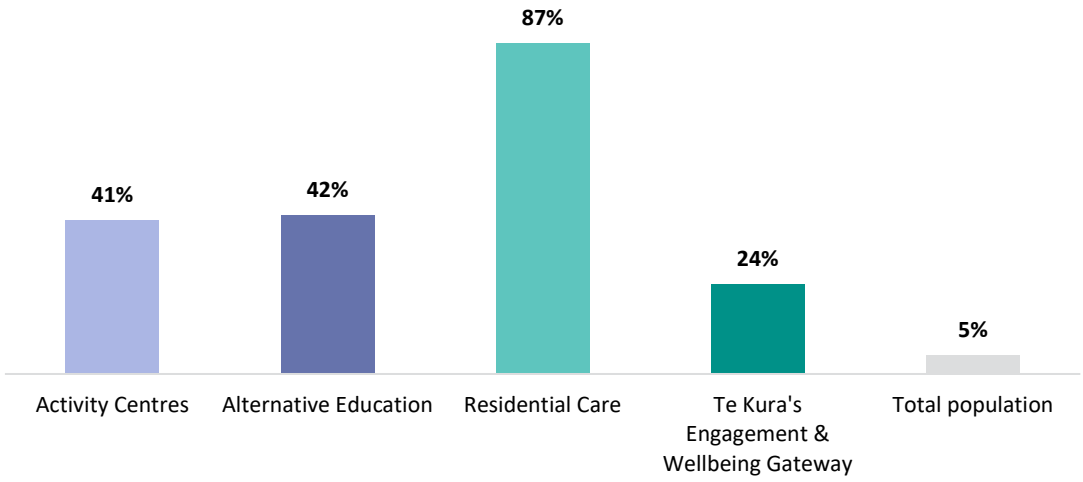
We heard that these moves interrupt learning, break relationships, and undermine a student's sense of belonging, often leading to substantial gaps in education and reduced engagement. School leaders report that frequent moves make it difficult for students to form relationships or feel connected to a school community. Information about students can be lost during transitions, making it harder for schools to identify needs and provide timely support. Students who attend multiple schools across their primary and secondary years frequently have significant gaps in learning, particularly during critical periods for building literacy and numeracy. As one school leader explained, frequent moves make it difficult for relationships and belonging to develop at all.

> "You don't have a relationship with [transient] kids. And they don't have a relationship with or a sense of belonging to your school either."
>
> **SCHOOL LEADER**

Students with Oranga Tamariki involvement are over-represented in alternative settings.

Students who have been involved with Oranga Tamariki[k] are disproportionately represented across all alternative settings. Over four in ten students in Activity Centres (42 percent) and Alternative Education (41 percent) had some engagement with Oranga Tamariki at age 15. While lower than in other alternative settings, involvement remains elevated among students in Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway, with around one-quarter (24 percent) having Oranga Tamariki involvement at age 15 – still well above the 5 percent observed in the total population. As we'd expect, the proportion is high for students in Residential Care at age 15 (87 percent), underscoring the strong link between care involvement and the nature of Care and Protection and Youth Justice residences.

Figure 15: *Percentage of students who have been involved with Oranga Tamariki at age 15, by setting*



Source: *Calculations based on data in the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI), Stats NZ*

Being in care can disrupt a student's educational continuity. Teachers and leaders told us that changes in caregivers or placements can force children to change schools or relocate to new regions when local options are unavailable. We heard that each move compounds transience and instability, making it harder for students to maintain attendance, form relationships, and stay engaged in learning.

k Being in the care of Oranga Tamariki means a child or young person lives with approved caregivers because they are unsafe, neglected, abused, or their care needs cannot be met at home. Care is a protective arrangement and may be temporary or long-term. It provides stability and safety when a family-based solution is not immediately possible. Oranga Tamariki involvement, by contrast, means a child or young person usually remains living at home while the agency works with the family to address concerns, support wellbeing, or reduce risks.

> "[Some students] in care homes are moving in and out. The consistency of landing them is just more complex."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION LEADER**

These disruptions are often accompanied by significant challenges at home. We heard from leaders that many young people in care have experienced family violence, substance abuse, or environments where basic needs such as food, safety, and emotional care are not consistently met. This instability contributes to trauma, emotional dysregulation, and difficulty developing the social and life skills needed to thrive in school. Just as unstable care arrangements lead to frequent school moves, unstable home environments can make it difficult for students to attend regularly, regulate their emotions, engage in learning, or avoid behaviours that further disrupt their education. Again, this is particularly heightened for students in Residential Care facilities, as indicated by their involvement with Care and Protection orders and Youth Justice arrangements.

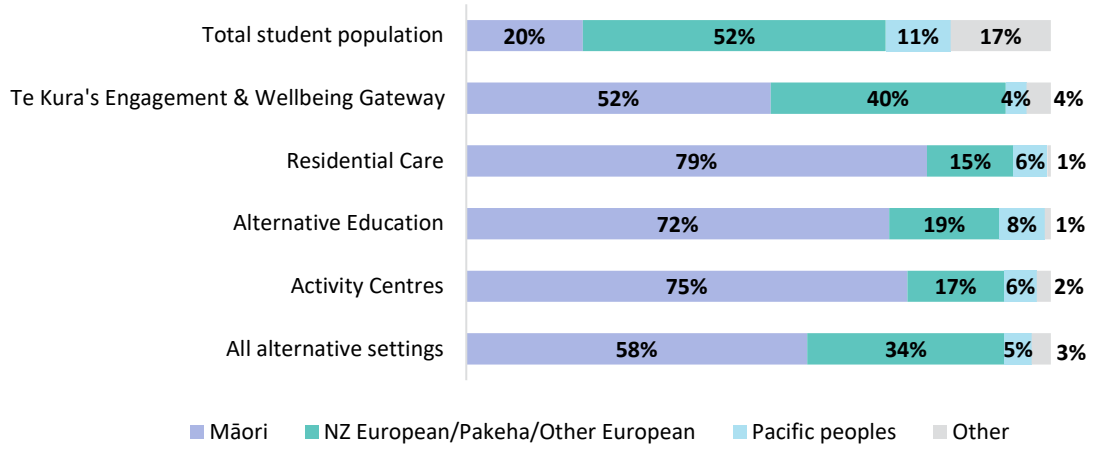
> "[Most] kids [don't] come to us from what you would call a functioning home life. There's poverty, violence, drugs, gangs, all that stuff."
>
> **RESIDENTIAL CARE LEADER**

Ultimately, involvement with Oranga Tamariki reflects a compounding set of risk factors – including instability in living arrangements, disrupted schooling, and unmet basic needs – that significantly increase the likelihood of disengagement from mainstream education and entry into alternative settings.

Māori students are more at risk of entering alternative settings.

Māori students are significantly overrepresented in alternative settings. Although Māori make up one-fifth (20 percent) of the overall student population, they account for around three-quarters (75 percent) of students in Activity Centres, just under three-quarters (72 percent) in Alternative Education, over three-quarters (79 percent)in Residential Care, and just over half (52 percent) of those enrolled at Te Kura through the Engagement and Wellbeing gateway.

Figure 16: *Proportion of student enrolments by ethnicity within each setting*



Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data, 2022-2024*

Māori students are more likely to enter alternative settings, reflecting underlying inequities. Māori are consistently overrepresented across each of these risk factors. Higher rates of poverty, housing instability, and health challenges contribute to irregular attendance and disengagement, which in turn increase the likelihood of referral into alternative provision.[11] These inequities create environments where Māori students face greater barriers to sustained participation in mainstream schooling.[12] [13]

> "It's a constant struggle getting the boys to school, due to the challenges that they face outside of the school walls."
>
> **SCHOOL LEADER**

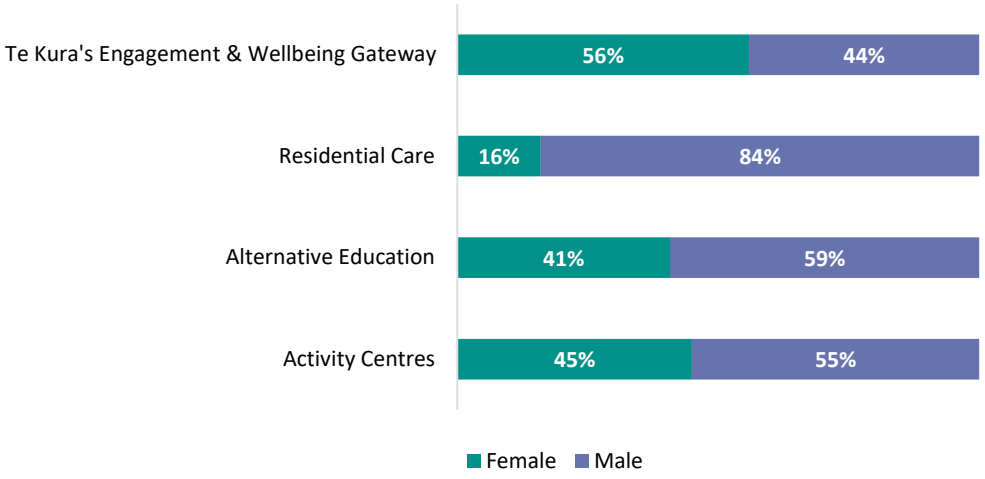
We heard from Māori students that they often feeling a lack of belonging in mainstream schools.[14] [15] [16]

> "School makes me feel dumb."
>
> **MĀORI STUDENT IN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION**

Girls are more likely to be referred to Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway and boys are more likely to be referred to other settings.

Boys are over-represented in all settings except Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway. This is most evident in Residential Care, where more than eight in ten (84 percent) students are male. In contrast, girls are slightly more likely to enter Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway, where over half (56 percent) of students are female.

Figure 17: *Proportion of student enrolments by gender within each setting*



Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data, 2022-2024*

These gender differences may reflect how behaviour is interpreted. Behaviour from boys is sometimes seen as disruptive or troublesome, prompting disciplinary responses like suspension or exclusion.[17] In contrast, we heard that similar behaviours from girls are more likely to be interpreted as signs of unmet needs or mental health challenges, prompting referrals to Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway rather than disciplinary action. This pattern is reflected in referral data – Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway has a higher proportion of girls, and mental health challenges are the most common reason for enrolment in its Engagement and Wellbeing gateway.

> "I was bullied, hurt, anxious, overwhelmed, and overstimulated at the various schools I attended [...] because of my sensory needs."
>
> **FEMALE STUDENT IN TE KURA – ENGAGEMENT AND WELLBEING GATEWAY**

4) Why are students referred to these settings?

a) Who initiates referrals?

Participation in these settings is sometimes by student or parent choice and sometimes driven by the students' previous school.

Students enter alternative settings for different reasons, and, except for Residential Care, the decision can come from either the school or the family. In some cases, the student or their parents and whānau believe an alternative setting will better meet their needs. In others, the referral is initiated by the school because mainstream education is no longer working for the student and a change is required to re-engage them in learning.

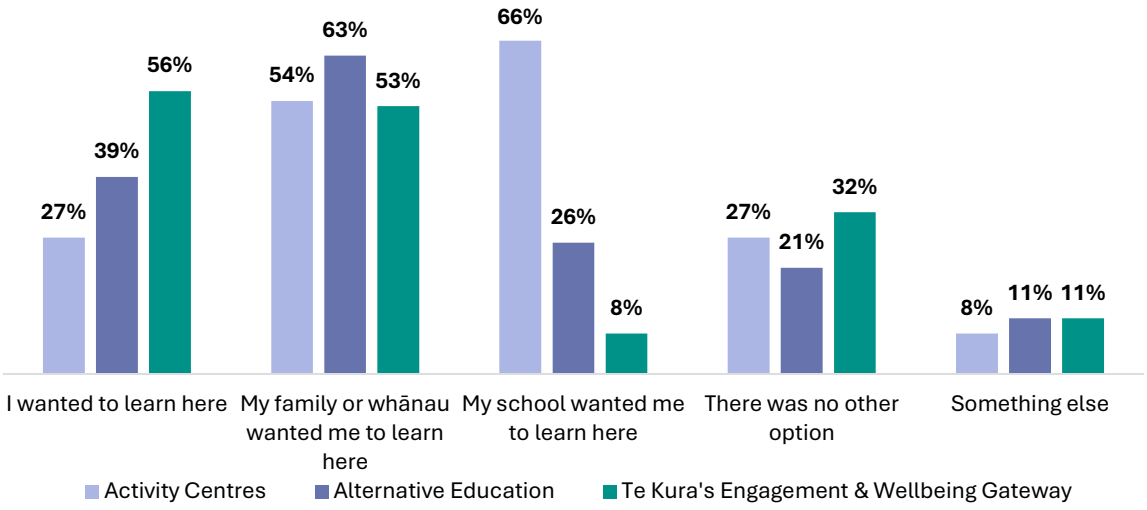
Two-thirds (66 percent) of students in Activity Centres report that their previous school wanted them to learn in that setting, underscoring the strong role schools play in identifying students whose behaviour or attendance puts them at risk of disengagement. Around one-quarter (27 percent) of these students say they wanted to attend, and half (54 percent) report that their parents and whānau supported the move.

In Alternative Education, the pattern is different. Only a quarter (26 percent) of students say their school wanted them to enter Alternative Education. Instead, over six in ten (63 percent) report that their family wanted them to enrol, and almost four in ten (39 percent) say they personally wanted to learn in that setting. This indicates a stronger pull from students and whānau, rather than push factors from schools.

Referrals to Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway are often more driven by students and family. Around half of students in the Engagement and Wellbeing gateway report that they (56 percent) or their family or whānau (53 percent) wanted them to enrol, while only 8 percent say their school wanted them to attend. This reflects Te Kura's distinctive role as a home-based learning option, commonly chosen by families seeking continuity of education while supporting health, wellbeing, or engagement needs that may make face to face schooling difficult.

In contrast to other settings, placement in Residential Care is determined by Oranga Tamariki and/or courts for non-educational reasons. Students, their parents and whānau and schools have no role in initiating referrals.

Figure 18: *Percentage of students reporting who wanted them to learn at their alternative setting, by setting*[l]



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

Schools told us they usually make a referral once they have exhausted the support they can realistically offer. Leaders told us they sometimes reach a point where mainstream settings simply cannot provide the intensity or type of support a student needs. In some cases, they describe alternative settings becoming the only remaining place where meaningful support is available. These settings offer smaller class sizes, more flexibility, and programmes targeted to students' social, emotional, or behavioural needs.

In some other cases, referrals are made where a student's behaviour is perceived to pose a risk to their own learning or the safety and learning of others. For these schools, alternative settings are seen as enabling more targeted support than can be sustainably provided within mainstream schooling environments.

Proactive referrals to Activity Centres are also used by some schools to prevent exclusions and expulsion. This may explain why a larger proportion of students report that their school wanted them to learn in Activity Centres compared with other settings. These centres can provide short-term, intensive support to help students re-engage and regulate, with the goal of returning to mainstream education.

> "We have an agreement with all the schools [that feed into the Activity Centre] – if a student is at risk of suspension, they jump the queue."
>
> **SCHOOL LEADER**

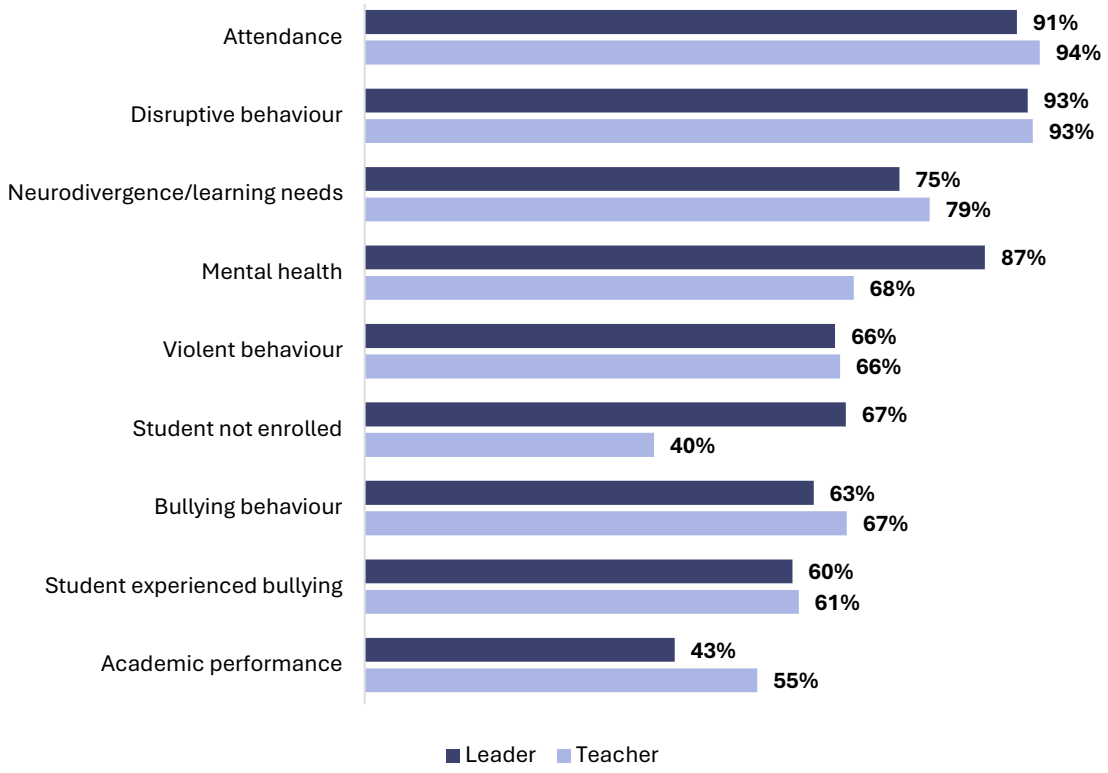
l Residential Care is excluded because students are not placed in these settings for school-related reasons. Totals may sum to more than 100 percent for any given setting because respondents could select more than one option.

b) What are the reasons students are referred?

Referrals are primarily triggered by attendance issues, behaviour concerns, and complex needs.

Poor attendance, challenging behaviour, and complex needs are the most common reasons students are referred to alternative settings. Data from parents, whānau and students shows that these issues often overlap rather than occur in isolation.

Figure 19: *Percent of setting leaders and teachers reporting reasons students have been referred to their site in the last 12 months*



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

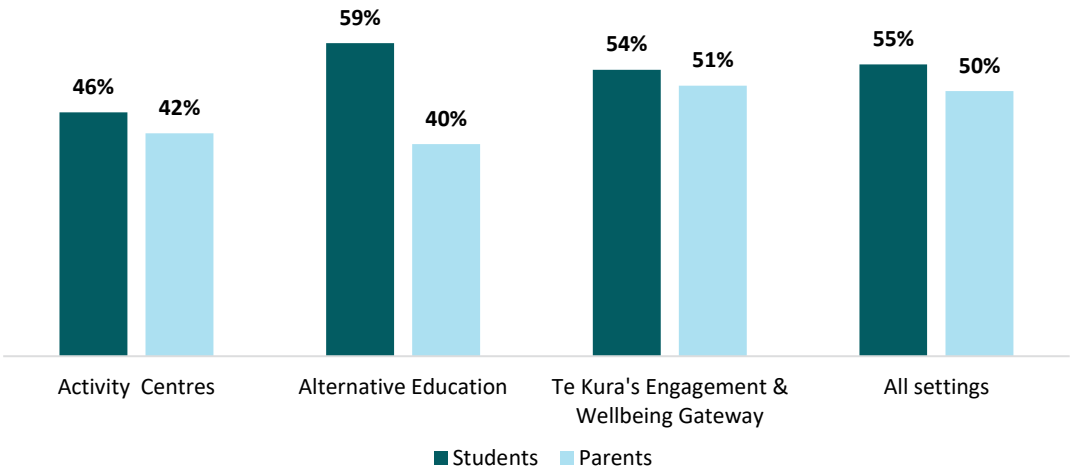
Poor attendance is a key reason for referrals into alternative settings.

Chronic absence is the most cited reason for referrals across all settings. In Alternative Education and Activity Centres, over nine in 10 teachers (93-100 percent) and leaders (90-100 percent) report receiving referrals primarily due to students' poor attendance at school. Leaders of mainstream schools echo this pattern, identifying poor attendance as the number one reason for their referrals.

Overall, half (50 percent) of parents and over half (55 percent) of students report they are learning in an alternative setting because they found it hard to attend school regularly.

> "[At mainstream school] my attendance was like 15 percent."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION STUDENT**

Figure 20: *Percentage of students and parents reporting poor attendance as a reason for learning at their site, by setting*[m]



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

But non-attendance is rarely just about skipping school – it often signals deeper challenges. ERO's previous research and conversations with students confirm that poor attendance often reflects bullying, mental health struggles, unmet learning needs, or stress from complex home environments.[18]

Some students we spoke to describe sensory overload in mainstream classrooms (e.g., from crowded spaces, constant movement, and noise) which made school feel overwhelming. Others spoke about negative experiences, such as being bullied or singled out, which reinforced their reluctance to attend. For a few, peer dynamics and pressure contributed to truancy.

> "I've got ADHD [...] but the teachers at college, they don't really care. They still think you're a normal person and they tried to give you this work and expected you just to do it, like it's not a problem. My attendance got down to like 12 percent [...] at one point. And so, they wanted me gone."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION STUDENT**

m Residential Care is excluded because students are not placed in these settings for school-related reasons.

> "[Bullies] were calling me and my friends the N-word. And they told us to go back to our country."
>
> ACTIVITY CENTRE STUDENT

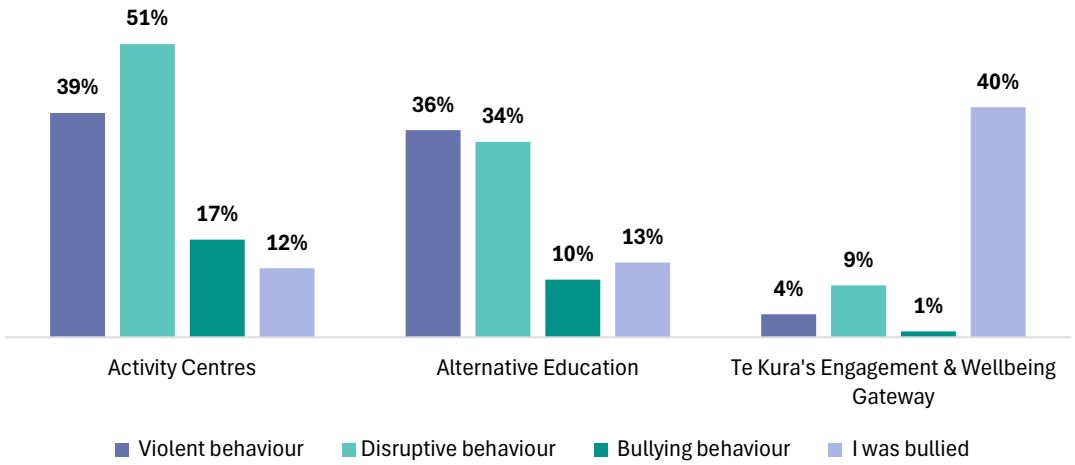
Behavioural misconduct commonly leads to referrals into Alternative Education and Activity Centres.

Behavioural issues are another major driver of referrals. In Alternative Education and Activity Centres, over nine in ten teachers (93-96 percent) and leaders (93-100 percent) report receiving referrals for disruptive behaviour.

Across all settings, a substantial proportion of teachers and leaders also report referrals related to violent behaviour (66 percent) and bullying (63-67 percent). These include disruptive behaviour in class, fighting, vaping, swearing, and, in some cases, violence. Schools often cite these behaviours as grounds for disciplinary action and subsequent referral.

Student perspectives reflect these patterns. Over half (51 percent) of Activity Centre students and a third (34 percent) of Alternative Education students, say they were referred because they were disruptive in mainstream classrooms. In addition, almost four in ten Activity Centre students (39 percent) and Alternative Education students (36 percent) say they are learning there because of violent behaviour.

Figure 21: *Percentage of students reporting behaviour as a reason they at an alternative setting, by behaviour type and setting*[n]



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

n Residential Care is excluded because students are not placed in these settings for school-related reasons.

Staff in alternative settings express concern that thresholds for referral may be shifting, reflecting reduced tolerance or capacity in mainstream settings to manage student behaviour.

> "Previously, we had cases where kids are being abused, missing big gaps of school, quite high risks, high needs. Now we are getting kids that just have an attitude. I feel like teachers are becoming less tolerant in mainstream."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION TEACHER**

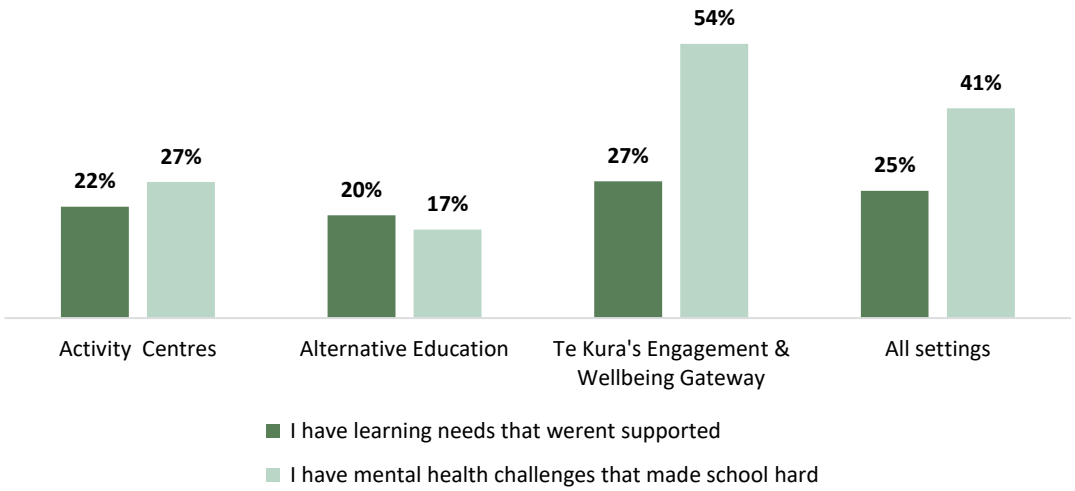
In contrast, students in Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway are far less likely to be enrolled due to violent, disruptive, or bullying behaviour. Instead, they are more likely to report they were bullied themselves (40 percent).

Having complex needs is also a common reason students are referred out of mainstream to alternative settings, particularly for Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway.

Mental health challenges and unsupported learning needs frequently contribute to referrals. Nearly nine in ten (87 percent) alternative setting leaders cite mental health as the reason students are referred to them, and three-quarters (75 percent) report unmet learning needs as the reasons.

Overall, a quarter (25 percent) of students report they are learning in their setting because of learning needs that were not supported at their old school, and four in ten (41 percent) are because of mental health challenges that made school hard. These figures are highest in Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway, where over half of students say they are learning there because of mental health challenges.

Figure 22: *Percent of students reporting learning needs or mental health as reasons they are learning at their site, by setting*[o]



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

Staff in alternative settings report that attendance or behavioural issues often mask these more complex needs. We heard that students with ADHD, autism, anxiety, or learning difficulties can find face-to-face mainstream school environments overwhelming because of noise, movement, and the social and academic demands of the classroom. While mainstream schools have improved their understanding of diagnoses and student needs, leaders acknowledged that there are still limits to what they can offer, particularly when specialist staff and resources are scarce.

> "If the schools helped with my learning needs and ADHD, I wouldn't have to be [here]."
>
> **TE KURA STUDENT – ENGAGEMENT AND WELLBEING GATEWAY**

When referrals are initiated by parents and whānau or students, the reasons are often different. Parents and whānau told us they sought alternative settings because their child's needs were not being met in mainstream school, despite repeated advocacy. For some, negative experiences (e.g., bullying, feeling unsafe, or a lack of belonging) made attending school a barrier. For these parents and whānau, the alternative setting was not seen as a last resort, but as a positive choice to re-engage their child in learning.

While schools may focus on the visible behaviour (e.g., lateness, disruption, or withdrawal) parents and whānau are more likely to identify what sits beneath these patterns, including anxiety, unmet learning needs, or social challenges. This insight shapes their decision to seek an environment that addresses root causes rather than simply managing symptoms.

o Residential Care is excluded because students are not placed in these settings for school-related reasons.

Maia is a 15-year-old student currently enrolled in Alternative Education. Her challenges with mainstream schooling began early. By Year 8, she had almost fully disengaged and was frequently absent. Although she tried to re-enter education when starting secondary school, her experience remained largely negative.

Maia told us she often felt unsupported in class, especially when she struggled to understand the work. She recalled receiving little help from teachers, leaving her to cope on her own. She also described the school environment as rigid and heavily rule-bound, with a strong reliance on punitive discipline. Over time, these experiences built up, contributing to frustration, isolation, and a deepening sense of disconnection from learning.

For Maia, repeated negative encounters like these shaped school as a place of punishment rather than learning. As her disengagement grew, so did her frustration, which began to show through more challenging behaviour toward teachers and peers. By the end of Year 10, this culminated in a formal disciplinary process and eventually her expulsion from school.

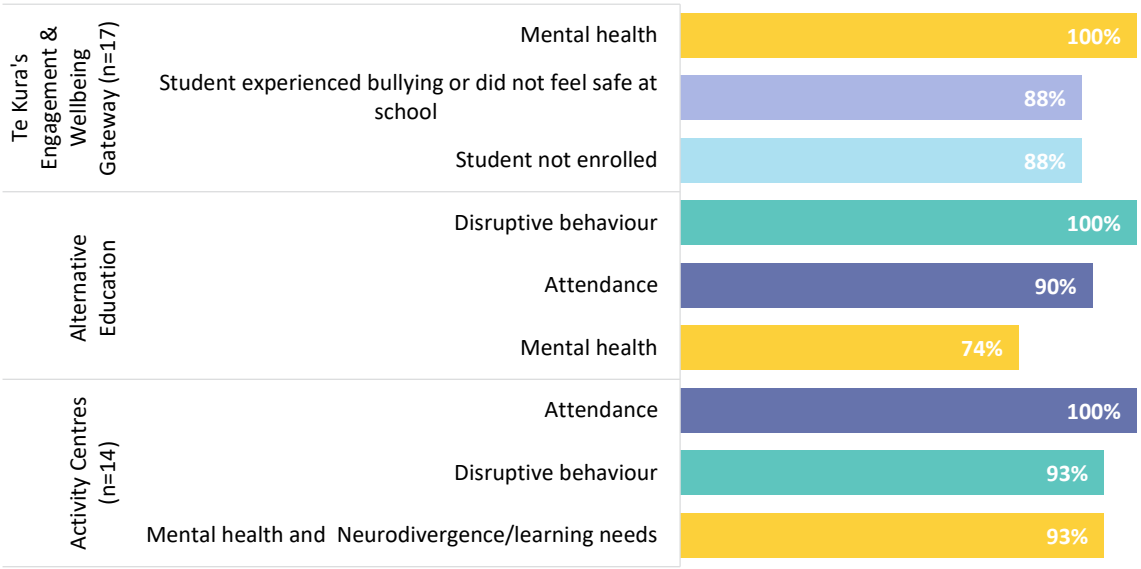
After leaving mainstream education, Maia spent several months at home waiting for an Alternative Education placement. During this period, she had no structured learning and her daily routines became increasingly disrupted. This extended gap further widened the challenges she would face on re-engagement.

c) How do referral reasons vary across settings?

While students may be referred to alternative settings for similar reasons, which setting they are referred to can be based on the intensity and type of need.

Although the reasons for referral (e.g., chronic absence, behavioural challenges, or non-enrolment) may appear similar across settings, the level and complexity of needs vary. Referral patterns reflect both student need and schools' views on the likelihood of returning to mainstream schooling – students with lower-level challenges are more often referred to Activity Centres, while those with more serious or persistent issues are referred to Alternative Education.

Figure 23: *Percentage of setting leaders reporting the top reasons students are referred to their site, by setting*[p]



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

Activity Centres generally support students with moderate needs. Teachers and leaders say that students arrive at their sites with issues related to attendance (100 percent), disruptive behaviour (93-96 percent), and mental health challenges or unmet learning needs (81–93 percent and 85–93 percent), with violent behaviour less common (50–62 percent).

Alternative Education works with students facing more entrenched barriers. Teachers and leaders say this includes disruptive behaviour (93–100 percent), attendance issues (90–93 percent), and violent behaviour (66–68 percent), alongside mental health needs (66–74 percent) and unmet learning needs (68–73 percent). They also note that many students have large learning gaps and negative schooling experiences.

Residential Care serves students with the highest and most complex risks, entering through Oranga Tamariki or court decisions due to serious harm, offending, or unsafe home environments. Many have long histories of disengagement and involvement with care or Youth Justice services.

Referrals into Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway differ again. Teachers and leaders say that mental health needs (100 percent) and unmet learning needs (71 percent) are very common, with far fewer instances of violence or disruptive behaviour. Many students were previously unenrolled (88 percent), bullied or felt unsafe in their prior school (88 percent).

p Residential Care is excluded because students are not placed in these settings for school-related reasons.

Overall, while attendance and behaviour drive referrals across settings, the intensity and complexity of need increase from Activity Centres through to Residential Care, with Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway serving students whose challenges relate more to health, safety, and access than severe behavioural issues.

However, referral options are also significantly limited by regional availability.

While referrals to alternative settings can be guided by the nature and severity of a student's needs, they are also heavily influenced by regional availability. Many providers operate at or near full enrolment, meaning that even students who meet the criteria for a setting may not secure a place. Over one-third (35 percent) of mainstream school leaders report having referrals declined 'often' or 'sometimes', and seven in ten (70 percent) of these cases are attributed to a lack of available spaces on-site.

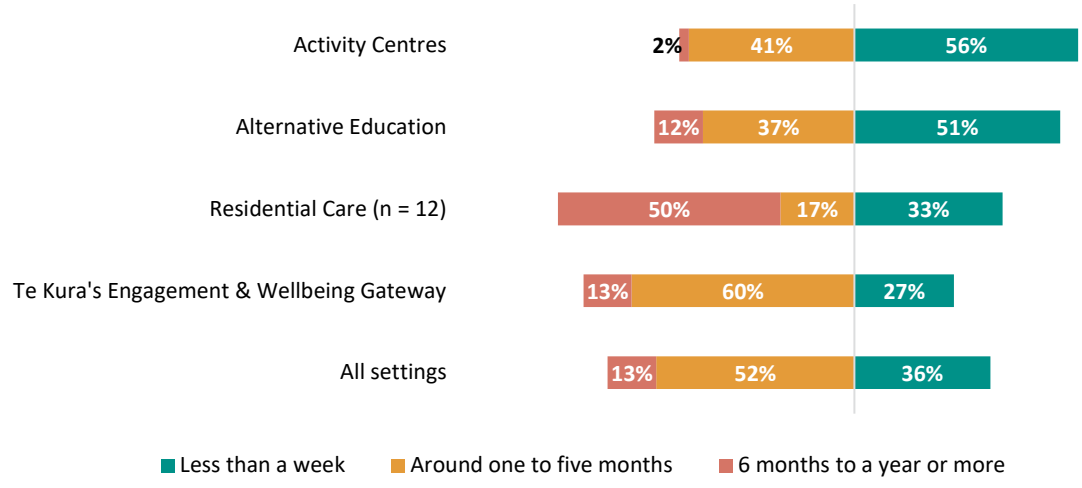
This creates a situation where referral choices are shaped as much by geography as by need – a 'postcode lottery' in which the options available to a school depend on what services exist locally and whether spaces are open. As a result, schools in some regions have greater flexibility and access to specialist support, while others face significant constraints, leading to inequities in provision.

5) How long do students wait to enter these settings?

Concerningly, students miss an average of three months of school between leaving mainstream school and entering a setting.

A significant challenge for many students is the gap between the end of formal education at a mainstream school, and the start of their education at an alternative setting. On average, there is over a three-month (13-week) gap from schooling.

Figure 24: *Percentage of students reporting length of wait between leaving school and starting at their site, by setting*



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

During this transition period, most students do not receive any formal education. This means that every additional delay, whether due to administrative processes or site capacity, results in lost learning time. For students who are already disengaged or struggling, these gaps can deepen feelings of isolation and make re-entry even harder.

Wait times vary depending on the setting, but Alternative Education and Activity Centre leaders told us that most sites operate at full capacity, creating long waitlists. Referral processes often involve multiple agencies, and delays occur when schools cannot provide sufficient information about the student at the time of referral.

Placement decisions also consider cohort compatibility to maintain safety and wellbeing, which can further extend wait times. Leaders often describe the need to balance inclusion with safeguarding responsibilities, particularly where placing students together could retraumatise others.

> "There are kids out there that we can't take. And I often won't take Youth Justice. I've got kids that have been victims of sexual offending, I can't put [those kids] in that position of having someone on an [electronic monitoring] bracelet on our site."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION LEADER**

For students, these delays can mean weeks, or even months, without structured learning.

> "[Between expulsion and starting here] I just stayed home and be a bummer. Stayed up all night. Went to sleep during the day."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION STUDENT**

While Te Kura can accept more students because of its online model, teachers express concern about the growing caseload and the complexity of students referred through the Engagement and Wellbeing gateway. All referrals must be assessed by the Ministry of Education, which can create administrative delays. Although this process should help ensure Te Kura is the right fit, it also means students often experience significant gaps between leaving their previous school and starting at Te Kura. Teachers note that long gaps out of formal education often affect students' learning readiness and behaviour when they arrive at Te Kura.

> "[Some] students come to Te Kura with... learning and behavioural issues. Sadly, many of them have been out of school for up to a year or more and have poor routine and study abilities."
>
> **TE KURA TEACHER**

These delays are not just logistical – they have real consequences. We heard that students lose continuity in learning, routines break down, and some turn to risky behaviours during this time. Students with mental health challenges, unmet learning needs, or complex needs told us the absence of structured support can worsen anxiety and isolation.[19] Leaders of alternative settings noted that, for students with prolonged delays, it will take more time and effort to settle them into alternative settings, re-establish routines and learning readiness. When capacity constraints and administrative hurdles slow transitions, students are left without the support they urgently need.

Conclusion

Understanding the key risk factors and referral reasons for entry into alternative settings helps identify students who need additional support to remain engaged in mainstream schooling. Evidence indicates that these students are more likely to come from low socioeconomic communities, have experienced disrupted learning, and present with complex behavioural, learning, and mental health needs. Students are also entering alternative settings at younger ages and are often waiting extended periods between leaving their previous school and beginning in an alternative setting. These referral patterns highlight limitations in mainstream education provision and its capacity to respond to diverse and complex needs. The next chapter examines these students' short-term and long-term outcomes.

Art from students learning in alternative settings

Part 3: What are the education outcomes for students in these settings?

Educational and wellbeing outcomes are critical foundations for young people's futures. Although students in alternative settings often show early improvements in attendance and wellbeing, these gains are too often not converted into sustained academic progress or stronger life outcomes. Consequently, students in alternative settings achieve at significantly lower levels than their peers. This chapter examines the education outcomes for students learning in alternative settings.

What we looked at

This section examines the extent to which students achieve positive outcomes while learning in alternative settings. We looked at the following outcomes:

- **Progress,** which reflects improvements in maths, reading and writing.
- **Achievement,** which includes gaining NCEA qualifications, with particular emphasis on NCEA Level 2 or higher.
- **Attendance and engagement,** which considers whether students attend more regularly and engage in learning more than they did at their previous school.
- **Wellbeing and sense of belonging,** which looks at whether students feel safe, supported, and cared for; whether they build positive relationships, understand rules and routines, and manage emotions effectively – because these factors underpin readiness to learn.

These outcomes are critical indicators of education success and align with the domains of ERO's School Improvement Framework, which underpins how ERO evaluates schools across New Zealand.

To understand the education outcomes of students in the four alternative settings, we looked at:

- Our surveys and interviews of students, parents and whānau, school leaders, and setting teachers and leaders
- National administrative data from the Ministry of Education
- Stats NZ's Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI)
- Previous ERO reports, including the review of Alternative Education (2023) and attendance (2025).

This chapter sets out:

1) How much progress students make
2) What levels of achievement students reach
3) Whether students attend and engage in learning more
4) How strong students' wellbeing and sense of belonging are
5) How educational outcomes differ for different groups of students.

What we found: an overview

Students in alternative settings make less progress in their learning than they did at their previous schools.

- **Nearly half of students say they are doing the same or worse** in reading (51 percent), writing (45 percent), and maths (46 percent) since starting at their alternative setting.

Students' wellbeing and attendance improve in alternative settings, but this is often not resulting in better educational achievement. Four in five students leave without any NCEA qualifications.

- **Most students report positive wellbeing outcomes in alternative settings**, particularly in face-to-face environments.
- **Attendance also improves.** Across settings, roughly two-thirds of students and parents – 68 and 65 percent – say attendance is better now than at their old school.
- **Despite these improvements, students in alternative settings rarely achieve a qualification.** Three in five (60 percent) students in alternative settings aspire to achieve NCEA qualifications. However, four in five (82 percent) students aged 17+ leave without any.

These findings are set out in more detail below.

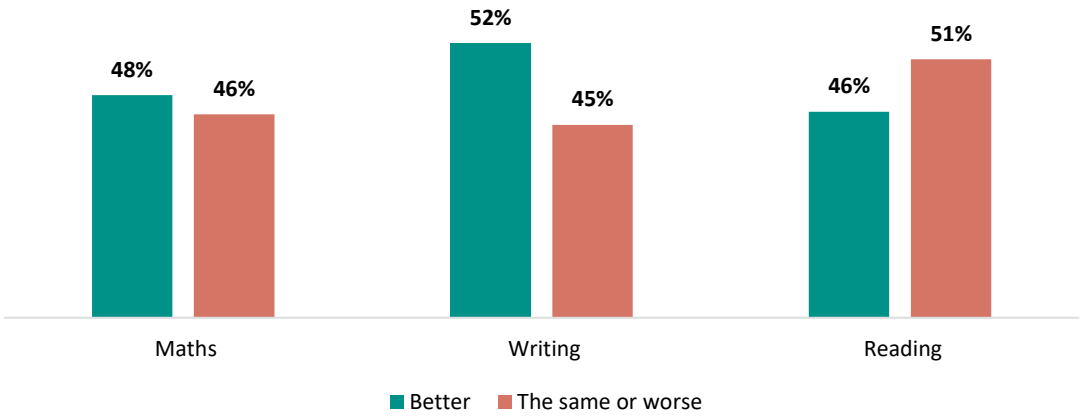
1) How much progress do students make?

Students often arrive in alternative settings with very low learning levels. For these students, progress often means steadily moving closer to expected year-level performance rather than meeting those expectations immediately. Tracking progress is critical, as it shows whether students whose schooling has been disrupted are rebuilding the foundational knowledge, subject-specific skills, and wider learning capabilities required for future education, training, and employment. When students make measurable gains in literacy, numeracy, other curriculum areas, or their individual learning goals, it reopens pathways that might otherwise remain closed.

Nearly half of students report not making progress in literacy and numeracy.

Around half of students in alternative settings report making no gains in core learning: 51 percent in reading, 45 percent in writing, and 46 percent in maths. These students say they are doing the same or worse with these subjects since starting at their alternative setting.

Figure 25: *Percentage of students reporting they are doing better or the same or worse since they started at their site, by subject*



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

Across settings, teachers emphasise that most students arrive with significant learning gaps, long periods of disengagement from school, and low motivation. We heard that many start well below expected levels and lack the foundational skills needed to access wider curriculum content. Because these gaps are most pronounced in basic literacy and numeracy, teachers report that their instruction in the early stages focuses heavily on catching students up in these areas. Even small gains are considered substantial achievement relative to students' starting point.

Teachers told us how prolonged disruption to learning affects students' confidence, memory, and ability to sustain effort.

> "[Students] have additional needs. [For many students] we know straight away that their memory - they need repetition... A lot of them have such low resilience, and such gaps in their learning. It's difficult to get them to push through and build [learning] momentum."
>
> **RESIDENTIAL CARE TEACHER**

> "Some young people come in here knowing they're going to go back to school, and we're setting them up with literacy and numeracy rhythms to get them back into school."
>
> **ACTIVITY CENTRE TEACHER**

However, we heard that academic progress is often limited by the time required to settle students before learning can begin. Many arrive struggling to manage their emotions, disconnected from routines, and not ready to engage. Teachers consistently describe the need to rebuild trust, establish predictable structures, and address wellbeing needs before introducing academic expectations. For some students, this settling phase occupies a substantial part of their time in the setting.

> "[Students] need consistency and routines and expectations and someone holding them accountable and a strong kaupapa. And then from there, we build them up. Unless we can be an environment in which young people see themselves as learners again, feel safe enough to build trust with an adult, you can't really get any of the learning."
>
> ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION TEACHER

Teachers report that, once students feel settled, their readiness to learn improves but sustaining academic progress remains difficult. They explain that gains may stall due to health issues, changes in living arrangements, inconsistent attendance, or ongoing difficulties with self-management and routine. For some, even small improvements are hard to maintain.

2) What levels of achievement do students reach?

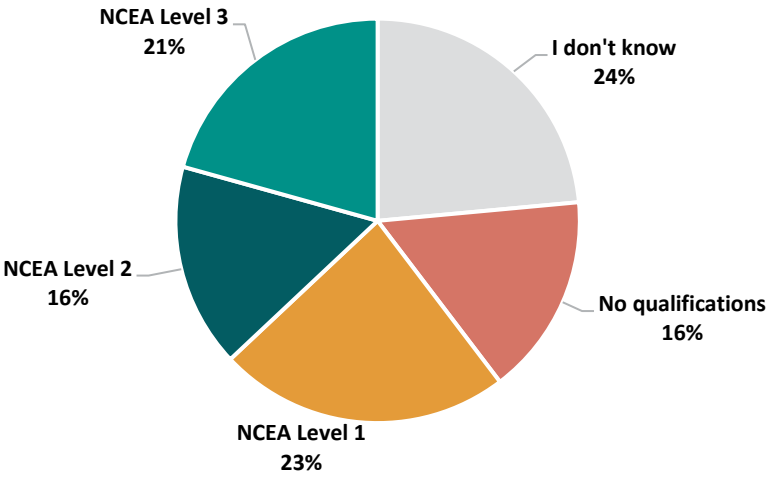
Achievement of qualifications is a key indicator of how well alternative settings change educational trajectories. Gaining recognised qualifications, particularly NCEA Level 2, is important for access to further education, training, and employment.

Three in five students hope to gain formal qualifications.

Three in five (60 percent) students in alternative settings say earning an NCEA qualification is one of their learning goals.

> "If they get Level 2, it just opens up so many more pathways for them."
>
> ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION LEADER

Figure 26: *Percentage of students reporting the highest NCEA qualification they hope to achieve as part of their learning goals*



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

Despite NCEA's importance, two in five (40 percent) students report having no clear qualification goal. Around a quarter (24 percent) are unsure about what they want to achieve and 16 percent state that they do not aspire to any qualification.

> "To be honest, I don't want NCEA right now. I might want it [later], but not right now. I just want to get a job and get some money and get started on stuff."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION STUDENT**

We found that this uncertainty reflects broader issues across alternative settings, where many students are unclear about how qualifications work, which credits count, and what is needed for different pathways. We heard that some students do not fully understand the qualifications or credits they can gain, or how these relate to future options. For example, students in Residential Care were sometimes unaware that vocational credits may not meet university entry requirements. This lack of clarity can lead students to set goals that do not align with the qualifications they are working toward, creating a mismatch between their aspirations and their eventual attainment.

> "We have a youth arrive thinking he had about 30 credits from another private training establishment. Some kinds of internal credits. They are like monopoly money. Not on his record of qualifications. So, we have to tell him the reality."
>
> **RESIDENTIAL CARE LEADER**

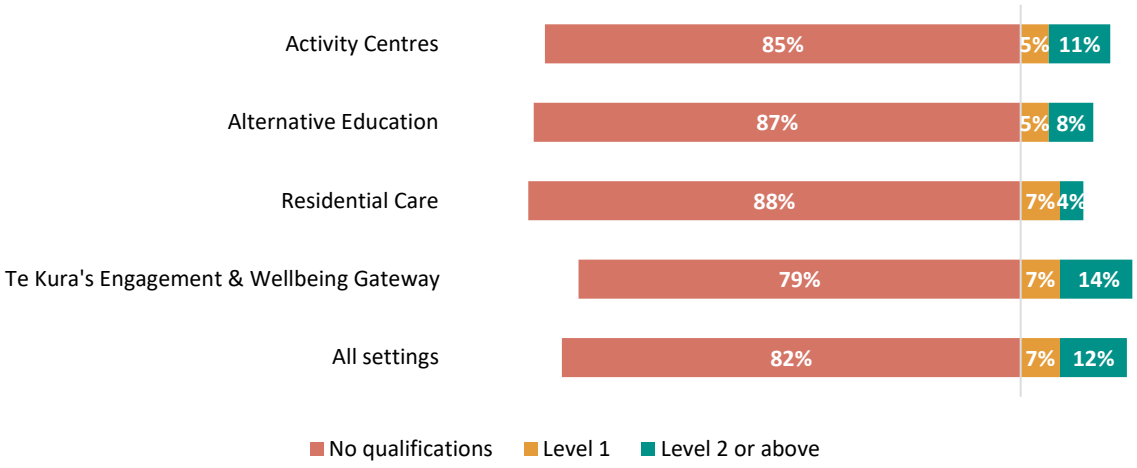
Although aspiring for NCEA, some students describe doubts about their ability to succeed in academic learning.

> "I'm interested in biology and want to get University Entrance to study medical imaging. But it depends on what my wellbeing is doing and my anxiety. If I can handle it, I would like to go to Otago Uni."
>
> **TE KURA STUDENT – ENGAGEMENT AND WELLBEING GATEWAY**

Despite aiming for NCEA, few students achieve these qualifications.

Across all four alternative settings, four in five (82 percent) students aged 17 or older leave without any NCEA qualification.

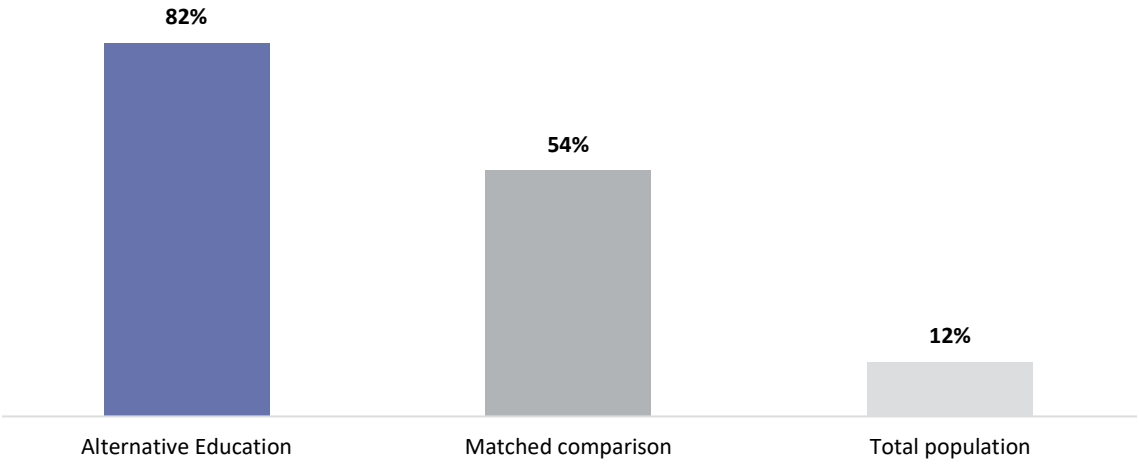
Figure 27: *Percentage of students with highest NCEA qualifications achieved by the time they leave their site, by setting*



Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data, 2022-2024*

Students in alternative settings are less likely to achieve NCEA than similar students in mainstream school. ERO's 2023 review of Alternative Education found that half (54 percent) of a matched comparison group left school without any qualifications – a third lower than students in Alternative Education.

Figure 28: *Percentage of students leaving school without a qualification*



Source: *Education Review Office (2023). An Alternative Education? Support for our most disengaged young people.*

3) Do students attend and engage in learning more in alternative settings?

Regular attendance is a critical predictor of student success. When students attend school consistently, they are more likely to achieve academically, build positive relationships, and stay engaged in learning. Conversely, irregular attendance is strongly linked to lower achievement, increased risk of disengagement, and long-term negative outcomes such as reduced employment opportunities. Improving attendance is key to ensure all students have access to the full benefits of education.[20] [21] [22]

Attendance improves in all alternative settings, with nearly seven in ten students reporting better attendance than in mainstream school.

Across all alternative settings, two-thirds of students (68 percent) and parents (65 percent) report attendance has improved.

Figure 29: *Percentage of students and parents reporting student attendance has improved since starting at their site*

Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

We heard from leaders and teachers that attendance is better if students' attendance goals are co-developed by students, their parents and whānau, and staff, and when supported by services (e.g., Attendance Services).

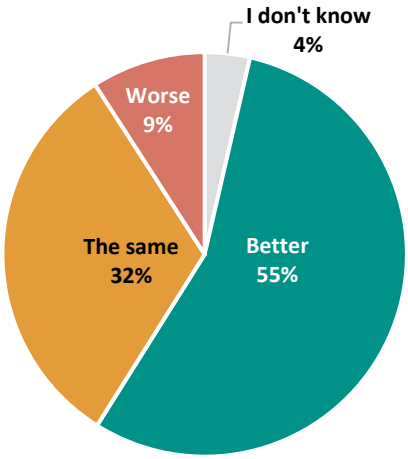
A sense of belonging to school has a big impact on student attitudes to daily attendance.[23] Students consistently told us their attendance improves because they feel safe and supported at the alternative setting.

> "It's definitely somewhere I want to be. Because my attendance went from down there to up here."
>
> **ACTIVITY CENTRE STUDENT**

> "I have never been late once!"
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION STUDENT**

More than half (55 percent) of students say they enjoy learning more than they did in mainstream school, which has flow-on effects for stronger engagement and attendance.

Figure 30: *Percentage of students reporting their enjoyment of learning is better, same or worse since they started learning at their setting*



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

> "I come most days. I actually enjoy coming here. I think my chances are pretty good here."
>
> **ACTIVITY CENTRE STUDENT**

As an online school, Te Kura monitors engagement rather than attendance, and around six in ten (59 percent) students say they participate in learning more than they did at their previous school. Te Kura defines engagement as submitted work, activity on the My Te Kura platform, teacher check-ins, and participation in Huinga Ako sessions. However, expectations are low, and teachers express concerns that these expectations as minimal thresholds do not provide an accurate picture of students' actual participation.

> "I think our expectations of students are far too low. Submitting one piece of work per month is all that's required to stay on the roll, and even with the non-returners process, they can technically remain enrolled for up to three months with just that single submission."
>
> **TE KURA TEACHER**

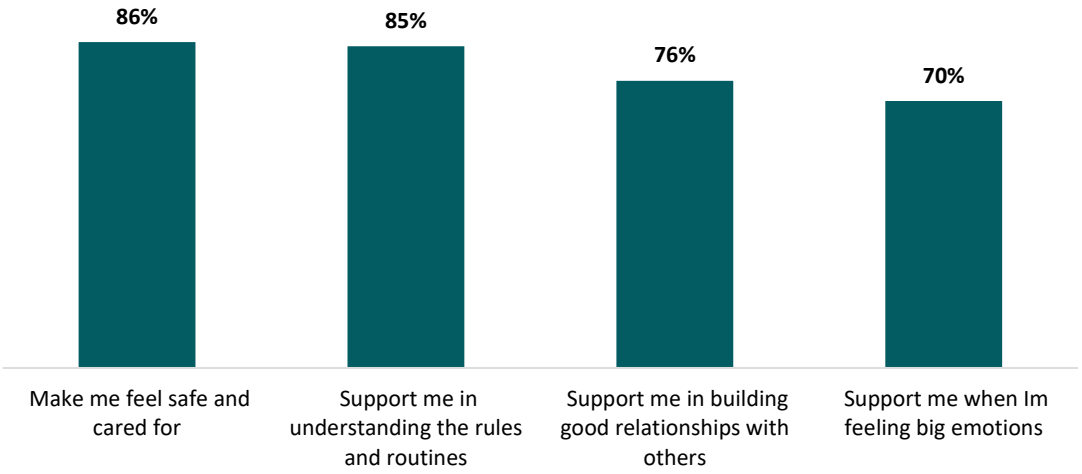
4) How strong are students' wellbeing and sense of belonging?

Student wellbeing is a prerequisite for student success. Students who feel unsafe, stressed, or emotionally overwhelmed often struggle to focus, process information, or engage meaningfully in education. Alternatively, students with strong wellbeing feel safe, calm, and connected. They trust the adults around them, have a sense of belonging, and can regulate their emotions. These conditions enable students to attend regularly, participate actively, and make progress.[24] [25]

Wellbeing is strong in alternative settings, primarily in face-to-face environments.

Wellbeing is generally positive for most students in alternative settings, particularly in face-to-face environments. Almost nine in ten students report feeling safe and cared for in alternative settings (86 percent) and supported in understanding rules and routines (85 percent). Three-quarters (76 percent) of students feel supported to build good relationships with others, and seven in ten (70 percent) feel supported when they're feeling big emotions.

Figure 31: *Percentage of students reporting they 'strongly agree' or 'agree' that their alternative setting teachers and tutors do the following things to help them feel okay*



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

Overall, students in face-to-face environments experience the greatest wellbeing gains due to strong individualised support, clear routines, and wrap-around services. Students told us that being in alternative settings help them to develop social skills, emotional regulation, and confidence these issues, especially at senior levels.

> "I was so used to being ignored or brushed off [at mainstream school]. But when I came here, I was really shocked when they actually listened."
>
> **ACTIVITY CENTRE STUDENT**

> "When I first came here, I was doing so bad. I've seen a lot of change in myself, a lot of the bad habits that I had are now gone."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION STUDENT**

In contrast, Te Kura offers flexibility and reduced sensory stress, which benefits some students, but others struggle with isolation, lack of structure, and limited opportunities for social connection. Many students we talked to in the Engagement and Wellbeing gateway struggle with these issues, especially at senior levels.

> "I would like more opportunities to meet with other teenagers and do cool things"
>
> **TE KURA STUDENT – ENGAGEMENT AND WELLBEING GATEWAY**

> "I miss the face to face with teachers and engagement with my peers. I feel on my own."
>
> **TE KURA STUDENT – ENGAGEMENT AND WELLBEING GATEWAY**

5) How do education outcomes differ for different groups of students?

More Māori students are making progress in alternative settings.

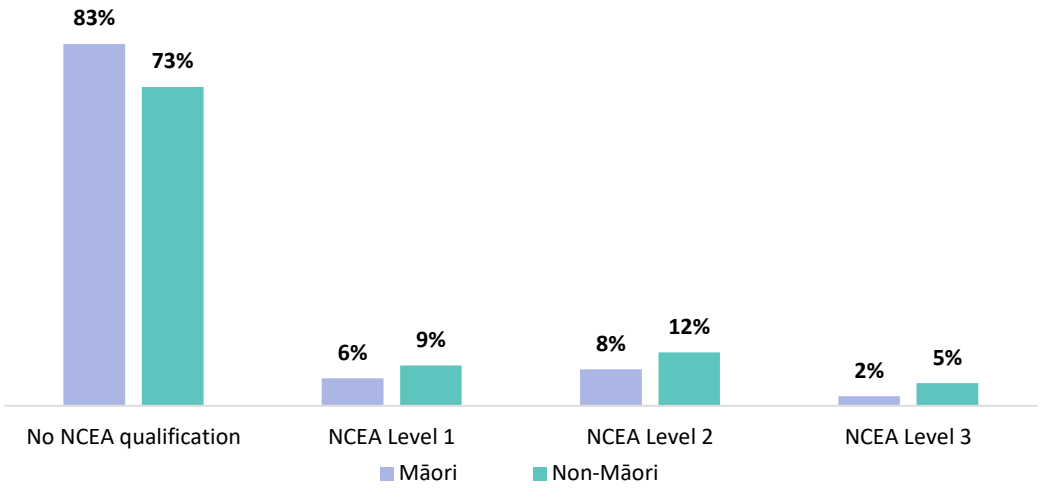
Māori students report relatively strong progress in literacy, especially in reading and writing. About half (52 percent) say they are improving in reading and three in five (59 percent) in writing, compared with around two in five non-Māori students (43 percent reading and 46 percent writing). In maths, Māori and non-Māori students report similar levels of progress.

> "What I really improved on, in my learning, is my reading. And sometimes I'm getting good at my maths, but not really really good. My tutors actually take the time to help me when I don't understand and keep going with it."
>
> **MĀORI STUDENT**

However, Māori students are less likely to achieve a qualification.

Despite making progress, most Māori students still leave alternative settings without NCEA qualifications. More than four in five (83 percent) do so, compared with fewer non-Māori students (73 percent).

Figure 32: *Percentage of Māori and non-Māori students leaving their alternative setting with each NCEA qualification level*



Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data, 2022-2024*

Wellbeing outcomes are equally strong for Māori students and non-Māori students – over nine in ten Māori students and non-Māori students (93 percent and 90 percent, respectively) report feeling safe in their setting.

Attendance patterns are similar. Māori and non-Māori students are equally likely to say their attendance has improved since entering their setting (70 percent and 66 percent, respectively).

Boys report more progress, but girls are more likely to achieve a qualification.

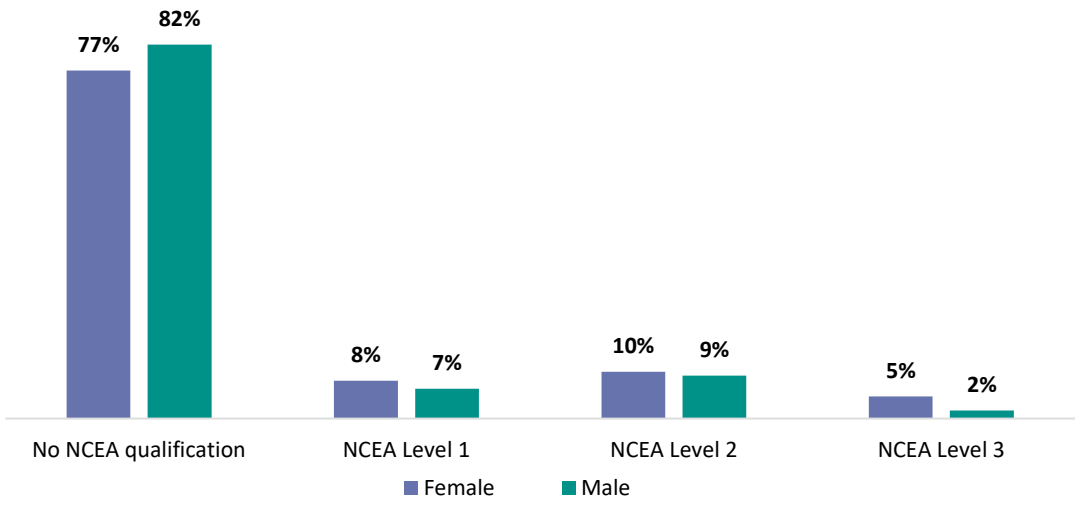
Across genders, the main difference in progress is in maths. Boys are more likely to say they are improving (60 percent), compared with fewer than half of girls (44 percent).

Boys also report slightly more progress in reading than girls (52 percent compared with 44 percent) and writing (56 percent compared with 51 percent). However, these differences are small.

> "Our teachers here make you understand and help more. They didn't just tell you what to do, they actually show you how to do it. [What's progressing well for me] is... my maths. I never used to like maths, before [I came] over here."
>
> **MALE STUDENT**

Girls are more likely to gain higher-level qualifications, particularly NCEA Level 3, and boys are more likely to leave without any qualification (82 percent compared 77 percent). This pattern is consistent with mainstream schools, where girls achieve NCEA more often.[26]

Figure 33: *Percentage of students leaving alternative settings with each NCEA qualification level, by gender*



Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data, 2022-2024*

Most boys and girls report positive wellbeing outcomes, with over nine in ten feeling safe and supported (92 and 91 percent, respectively). Around two-thirds also report improved attendance (68 percent for boys and 66 percent for girls).

Students in Oranga Tamariki care experience stronger attendance outcomes.

Students who are currently, or have previously been, in the care of Oranga Tamariki report similar progress to students without care experience. While they report slightly higher progress in reading (52 percent), writing (59 percent), and maths (55 percent) than other students (47 percent, 52 percent, and 50 percent), these differences are not significant.

Wellbeing outcomes are also similar. Most students with care experience report feeling safe and supported in their setting (94 percent), which is much the same as students without care experience (91 percent).

Attendance is where the biggest difference appears. Nearly eight in ten students with care experience say their attendance has improved since entering their setting (79 percent), compared with around two-thirds of other students (66 percent). This higher attendance partly reflects that some students in Oranga Tamariki care live in Residential Care, where education is provided on site and attendance is required. However, other settings don't have these same requirements.

Conclusion

Placements in alternative settings can lead to improvements in students' wellbeing, sense of belonging, and attendance. Many students feel safer, more supported, and more engaged in learning than they did in mainstream school. For some students, alternative settings help rebuild routines, confidence, and readiness to learn, creating conditions where learning becomes possible again.

However, these improvements are rarely translating into sustained academic progress or recognised qualifications. Too few students achieve NCEA, including those who aspire to do so, and most leave alternative settings without the credentials needed for further education, training, or employment.

The next chapter sets out how these educational outcomes can result in poorer life outcomes and higher long-term costs to the system.

Art from students learning in alternative settings

Part 4: What are the longer-term outcomes of students who attended alternative settings?

Education experiences and outcomes can shape a person's longer-term future. This chapter examines the pathways students take after leaving alternative settings and their outcomes across employment, health, housing, and involvement with public services. The findings highlight the implications when alternative settings become a student's final place of learning.

What we looked at

This section examines student pathways out of alternative settings and their lifelong outcomes. To do this, we looked at:

- National administrative data from the Ministry of Education
- Stats NZ's Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI)
- Previous ERO reports, including the review of Alternative Education (2023) and attendance (2025).

To support ERO's 2023 review of Alternative Education,[27] the Social Investment Agency used IDI analysis to compare long-term outcomes for Alternative Education students with a matched group of mainstream students with similar backgrounds and levels of disadvantage.[28]

For this review, we used similar analysis to look at the long-term outcomes of students in all four of our settings and how they compare with the outcomes of the matched students from the 2023 analysis. As noted in Part 2, students in Alternative Education are as disadvantaged as – and in some areas more disadvantaged than – students in other alternative settings. Because the comparison group was matched to Alternative Education students based on these disadvantage factors, the comparison cohort was selected to reflect similarly high levels of disadvantage.

When we cannot make comparisons with the matched group of students, we use the general student population as a reference point. While this doesn't control for underlying differences between groups, it gives useful context and helps illustrate the scale of disparity in outcomes across the alternative settings.

This chapter sets out:

1) What pathways students take after leaving alternative settings
2) What students' lifetime outcomes are.

What we found: an overview

Fewer than one in six students return to mainstream school.

- **Successful return to mainstream school is rare**. While one in three (31 percent) students say they plan to return to school, fewer than one in six (16 percent) actually return and remain in school. We heard that reintegration is often poorly planned, inconsistently supported, or not prioritised by schools.

Worse education outcomes lead to worse lifetime outcomes for these students. Compared to similarly disadvantaged students, they are less likely to be wage earners, more likely to rely on benefits and more likely to enter the criminal justice system.

- **Students in alternative settings are 10 to 30 percent less likely to be wage earners and up to 1.5 times more likely to rely on a benefit.** By early adulthood, around half of students (46-57 percent) from alternative settings aren't earning wages and around three-quarters (64-79 percent) receive a main benefit.
- **These students, except for those from Te Kura, also have up to three times the rate of offending.** More than three in ten (31 percent) Alternative Education and Activity Centre students, and over half (54 percent) of Residential Care students, had a court charge by age 24.

Students in alternative settings cost the Government far more across their lifetimes.

- **By age 25, these students cost between $170,000 and $770,000 more, compared with the general population** – 18 times higher for students in Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway, 27 times higher for Activity Centre students, 28 times higher for Alternative Education students, and 80 times higher for those in Residential Care. Not providing the support these students need early in life leads to escalating needs and costs later.

These findings are set out in more detail below.

1) What are students' pathways after leaving alternative settings?

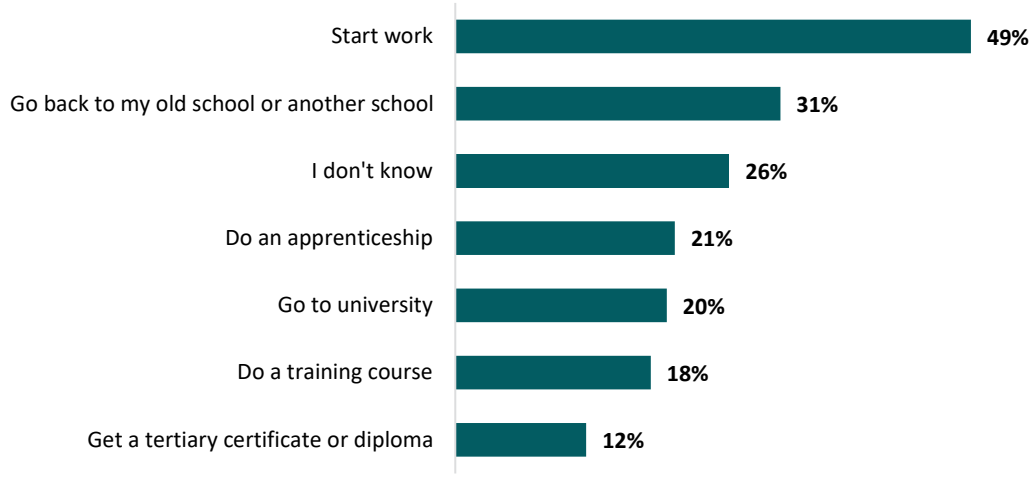
Ensuring that students in alternative settings move into positive future pathways is a critical measure of success.

In this section, we examine students' aspirations for their futures after leaving alternative settings and compare these with the pathways students have taken. Additional diagrams illustrating students' pathways into and out of alternative settings are provided in Appendix 1.

Around one in three students plan to return to mainstream school.

Students in alternative settings are ambitious. Almost half (49 percent) plan to enter employment, around one-third (31 percent) intend to return to school, and one in five aims for university (20 percent) or an apprenticeship (21 percent). Others consider training courses (18 percent) or tertiary certificates/diplomas (12 percent). Just one-quarter (26 percent) remain unsure of their next steps.

Figure 34: *Percentage of students reporting their plans after leaving their alternative setting*



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

Return to mainstream schooling is most common in Activity Centres where placements are short-term – over four in five (83 percent) say they intend to go back. In contrast, students in Alternative Education are far more likely to plan for employment (71 percent), with fewer expecting to return to school (14 percent).

> "I'm gonna get a job as soon as I'm 15."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION STUDENT**

> "[For] those that do want to try to return we will try but most do not achieve this outcome, so we focus more on progression into further learning and/or employment."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION TEACHER**

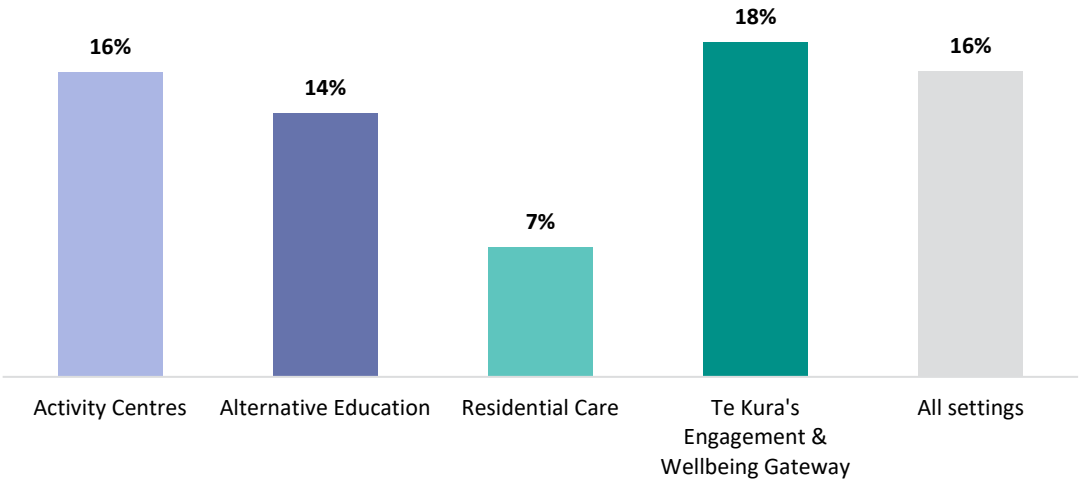
Aspirations for further education are highest in Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway and Residential Care, with around a quarter (25–27 percent) aiming for university and nearly one in six (13–16 percent) for tertiary certificates or diplomas.

> "I would get a Bachelor of Commerce with a triple major in finance, marketing, and something else."
>
> **RESIDENTIAL CARE STUDENT**

In reality, fewer than one in six students return to and remain in mainstream school after learning in an alternative setting.

Returning permanently to mainstream schooling after entering an alternative setting is possible, but uncommon. Only 16 percent of students return to mainstream school after their first alternative placement and remain there. Students in Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway are the most likely to return (18 percent), followed by Activity Centres (16 percent), Alternative Education (14 percent), and Residential Care (7 percent).

Figure 35: *Percentage of students who return and remain in mainstream school after leaving an alternative setting, by setting*



Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data, 2022-2024*

One in six students are referred to other alternative settings or bounce back and forth between mainstream and alternative settings.

Some students move between multiple settings after leaving an alternative setting. One in six (17 percent) students transition to another alternative setting as their next place of learning or attempt to return to mainstream but end up back in an alternative setting.

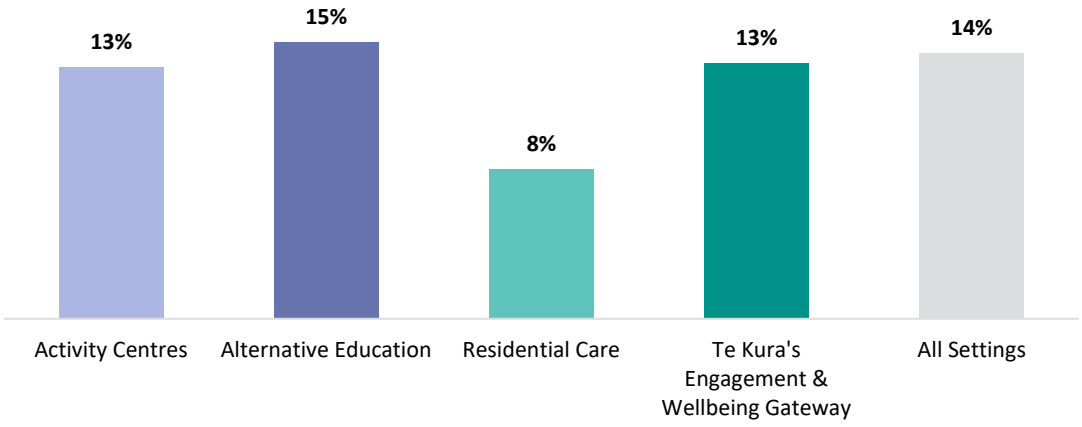
Transitions between alternative settings typically occur for two reasons – ongoing or increasing support needs or a mismatch between the setting and the students' needs. For example, we heard about students who started in an Activity Centre but later transitioned to Alternative Education because their challenges were more complex than first thought. Others may return to mainstream schooling but re-enter alternative settings when reintegration is unsuccessful.

> "We got a student trying to go back into mainstream and it didn't work out, and he came back... until he turned 15 or 16 and then went over to another alternative programme. I'd assume it was just the same sort of issues that got them here in the first place."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION TEACHER**

Only one in seven students leave their alternative setting for tertiary education.

Across alternative settings, one in seven (14 percent) students leave their alternative setting to enter tertiary education. This includes university study, polytechnic or Te Pūkenga programmes, wānanga, or other certificate- and diploma-level courses.

Figure 36: *Percentage of students who enter tertiary education after leaving an alternative setting, by setting*



Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data, 2022-2024*

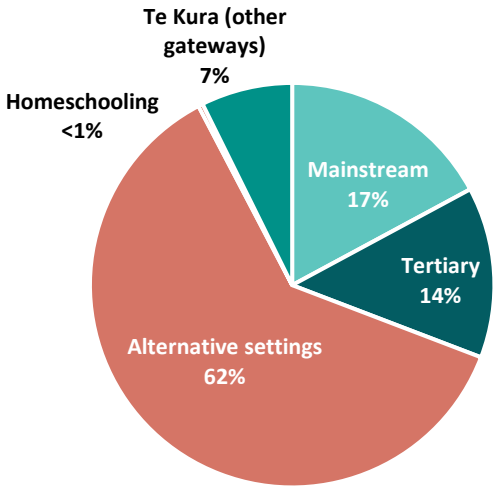
Many other students move into vocational education when they turn 16. However, available pathways are narrow and usually focused on a few industries.

> "So, when they get to 16, ideally, we will transition them to skills for trade, skills for work, vocational pathways. But the pathways are really narrow. There is basically mechanics, carpentry, sometimes hospitality. Those are the pathways that we'll look at for transitioning."
>
> ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION TEACHER

An alternative setting is the final place of learning for more than three in five students.

The most common outcome is that students finish their formal education at their alternative setting. Three in five (62 percent) of these students have an alternative setting recorded as their final place of learning. While there is limited data on where these young people go after they finish education in alternative settings, we know that many don't move into sustained employment after leaving, as discussed in the next section.

Figure 37: *Percentage of students' whose last place of learning is an alternative setting or other learning location*



Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data, 2022-2024*

2) What are students' lifetime outcomes?

Lifetime outcomes of students in alternative settings are worse than similar students in mainstream school.

The table below compares outcomes for students who attended alternative settings with a matched group of similarly disadvantaged students who stayed in mainstream schooling. The results show consistent gaps across income, crime, and health. In almost every area, students from alternative settings experience worse long-term outcomes, suggesting ongoing challenges that extend beyond their time in education.

Table 6: *Outcome comparisons between students in alternative settings and similarly disadvantaged students who remain in mainstream school from the 2023 review*

Outcome	Measure	Comparison of students in alternative setting to similar mainstream group
Income	Any wages	Less likely
	Any benefit	More likely
Crime	Offender – any offence	More likely*
	Offender – violent offence	More likely*
	Victim of violent offence	More likely*
Health	Emergency department admissions	Probably more likely

*Excludes *Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway*

By early adulthood, students from alternative settings are less likely to be wage earners and more likely to be receiving welfare benefits.

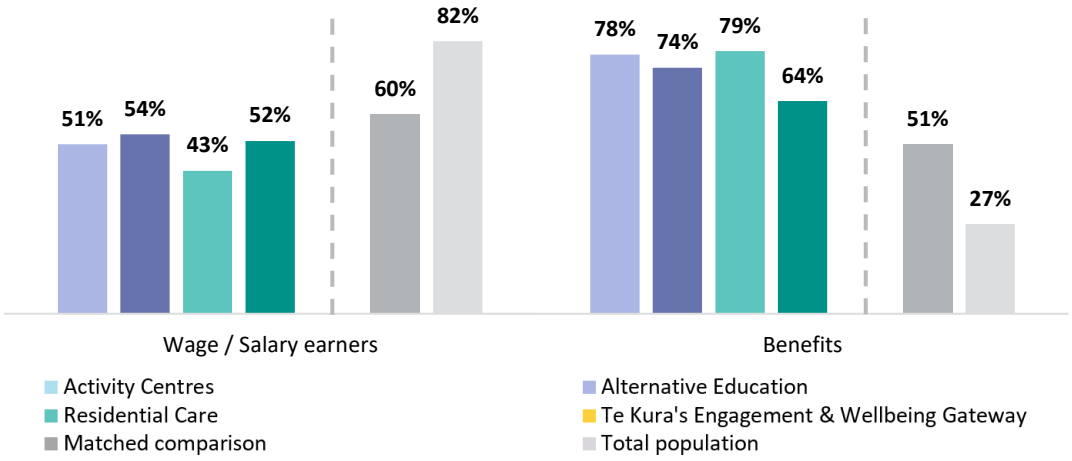
By age 24, around half (51-54 percent) of young people who have been in Alternative Education, Activity Centres, or Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway are wage earners. Even fewer young people from Residential Care become wage earners – just two in five (43 percent).

These rates are well below similar young people in mainstream education, of whom three in five (60 percent) are wage earners by 24-years old. They are also much lower than the general population, of which four in five (82 percent) 24-year-olds are wage earners.

Receiving a benefit is very common among young people from alternative settings – around three-quarters are receiving a main (Tier 1) benefit by age 24.[q] This is far higher than similar young people in mainstream education (half receive a benefit) and almost three times the national rate (around a quarter receive a benefit). Young people who went through Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway are slightly less likely to be receiving a benefit, but around two-thirds are still doing so – well above the national average.

q Tier 1 (main) benefits are the main income support payments people receive when they are not in paid work or cannot work full-time. This includes benefits such as Jobseeker Support, Sole Parent Support, and Supported Living Payment.

Figure 38: *Percentage of young people from alternative settings, a matched comparison group, and the total population who are wage or salary earners or are receiving a Tier 1 benefit at age 24*



Source: *Calculations based on data in the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI), Stats NZ*

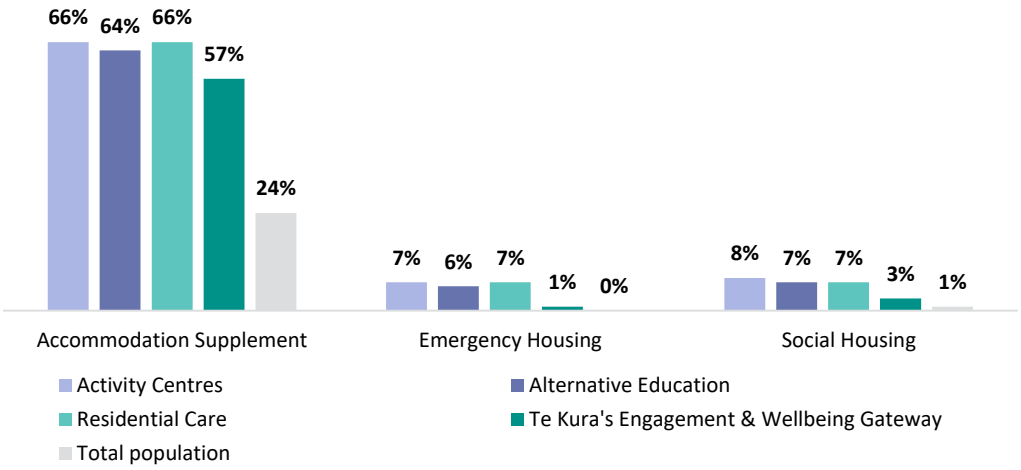
Students from alternative settings are far more likely to rely on housing support.

By age 24, up to two-thirds of young people who have spent time in alternative settings receive government financial support for their housing, through the Accommodation Supplement. This is more than twice the national rate (24 percent). In comparison, only about half of similar young people who remained in mainstream education received any benefit at all, including the Accommodation Supplement.

Housing insecurity is also much more common among people who have been in alternative settings. At age 24, six percent are living in emergency housing, compared with one percent of the general population. Rates are lower for those from Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway, whose emergency housing use is similar to national levels.

There is a similar pattern for use of social housing. By age 24, three percent from Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway and seven percent from other alternative settings are living in social housing, compared with one percent of the general population.

Figure 39: *Percentage of young people from alternative settings and the total population receiving housing support at age 24, by setting*



Source: *Calculations based on data in the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI), Stats NZ*

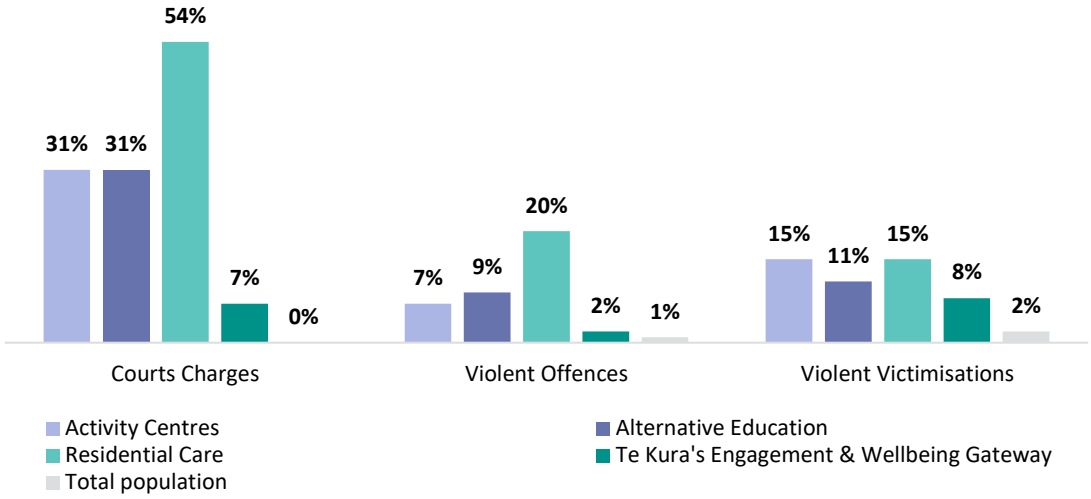
Students in alternative settings, except for those in Te Kura, are up to three times more likely to enter the criminal justice system.

By age 24, contact with the courts is common among people who have been in alternative settings. Three in ten (31 percent) young people from Alternative Education or Activity Centres had a court charge by this age, compared with fewer than two in ten (18 percent) similar young people who stayed in mainstream school. Rates are highest for those who have been in Residential Care, where more than half (54 percent) have had a court charge by age 24.

Violent offending is also more common. By age 24, seven to nine percent of young people from Activity Centres and Alternative Education have been convicted of a violent offence, compared with one percent of the national population. Violent offending is highest for those who attended Residential Care – one in five (20 percent) have a violent conviction by age 24.

Young people from alternative settings are also much more likely to be victims of violence. By age 24, more than one in ten (11-15 percent) have been victims of a violent offence, compared with only two percent of the general population. Victimisation rates are lower for similar young people outside of alternative settings, but still higher than the national average.

Figure 40: *Percentage of young people from alternative settings and the total population with courts charges, violent offences and victimisations at age 24, by setting*



Source: Calculations based on data in the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI), Stats NZ

Students in alternative settings also have poorer health outcomes.

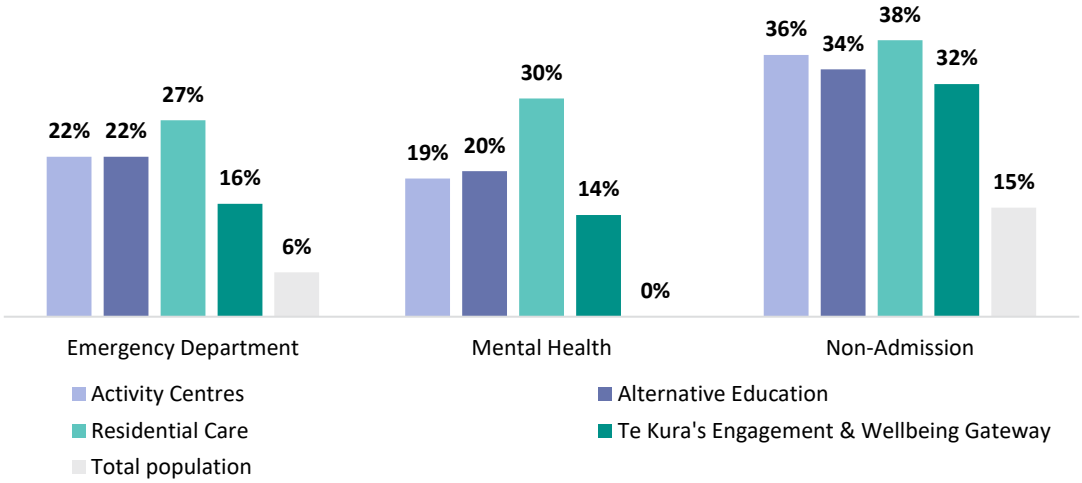
By age 24, young people who have spent time in alternative settings have poorer health outcomes than the general population.

Emergency hospital visits are much more common. Around one in four (22-27 percent) young people from Activity Centres, Alternative Education, or Residential Care have been treated in an emergency department by age 24. This is almost four times the national rate (6 percent). Rates are lower for those from Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway (16 percent), but still well above average.

Mental health outcomes are particularly concerning. By age 24, around one in five (19-20 percent) of young people who have attended Activity Centres or Alternative Education have received a specialist mental health referral. Rates are highest among those who have been in Residential Care (30 percent) compared with less than one percent of the general population.

Ongoing health needs are also more common. Over one-third (35 percent) of young people from alternative settings have accessed non admitted patient care by age 24, more than double (15 percent) the rate for the national rate.

Figure 41: *Percentage of young people from alternative settings and the total population receiving different health services at age 24, by setting*



Source: *Calculations based on data in the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI), Stats NZ*

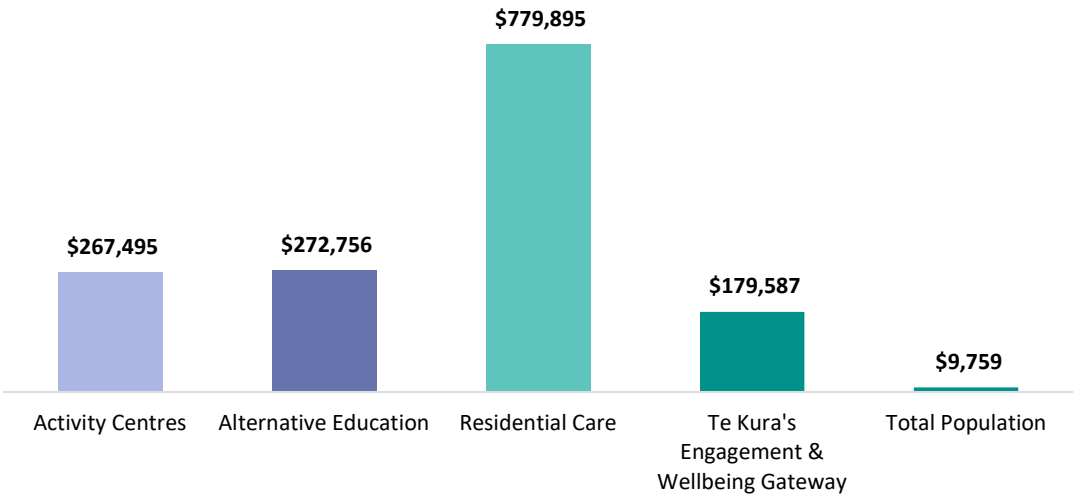
Students in alternative settings cost Government far more across their lifetimes.

Students who spend time in alternative settings place a much higher long-term demand on government services, which leads to substantially higher lifetime costs.

By age 25, the total cost to government for these young people already far exceeds that of their peers who remained in mainstream education. Costs are around 18 times higher for young people from Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway, 27-28 times higher for those from Activity Centres and Alternative Education, and around 80 times higher for those who have been in Residential Care.

These higher costs are not driven by education spending alone. They mainly reflect ongoing use of social welfare, justice services, Oranga Tamariki, and health services. This shows that, well beyond school, people who have spent time in alternative settings continue to need significantly more support than their peers, resulting in much higher costs accumulating over time.

Figure 42: *Cumulative fiscal cost at age 25, by setting*



Source: *Calculations based on data in the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI), Stats NZ*

Conclusion

Students who attend alternative settings have limited pathways after leaving, and for most, these settings become their final place of learning. While some students move into tertiary education, employment, or return to mainstream schooling, these outcomes are uncommon.

As shown in this chapter, leaving education from an alternative setting is associated with poorer long-term outcomes, including lower employment, higher reliance on income and housing support, greater contact with the justice system, and poorer health by early adulthood. These patterns result in a significantly higher long-term demand on government services, particularly across welfare, justice, health, and care systems. Without stronger and better-coordinated support during and after placement in alternative settings, poor outcomes continue to accumulate over time, with substantial costs for individuals, parents and whānau, and government.

The next chapter sets out what good provision should look like in these settings to maximise outcomes for students.

Part 5: What sort of education provision drives good outcomes for these students?

There is a substantial body of evidence on what supports positive outcomes for disengaged students in alternative settings. Research from both New Zealand and overseas highlights what works for young people with disrupted schooling, complex needs, and prolonged disengagement. This evidence shows that high-quality provision depends on a combination of strong pastoral care and robust educational support. This chapter outlines how the evidence base informs our understanding of what effective provision in alternative settings should include.

What we looked at

We reviewed research into education for disengaged students in alternative settings and young people with disrupted or complex learning histories, identifying consistent themes across both New Zealand and international evidence.

We looked at:

- Previous ERO reports, including the review of Alternative Education (2023), behaviour in classrooms (2024), and the guidance report on school leadership (2016)
- International and New Zealand literature and research.

This body of research describes the conditions that support re-engagement, sustained participation, academic progress, and successful transitions for students in non-mainstream settings.

We worked with an expert group of researchers, providers, and education officials to distil the evidence base into key components of effective practice. These components shaped our understanding of what high quality provision is throughout this report.

What we found: an overview

Good provision in alternative settings requires six key components.

- Based on the evidence, the following components represent aspects of provision most strongly associated with positive outcomes for disengaged students.

Table 7: *Components of good education provision in alternative settings*

Components of effective provision	Description of component
1) Teaching practice	Evidence-based adaptive teaching strategies.
2) Quality curriculum	Coherent and structured curriculum balancing core learning areas and flexible delivery.
3) Leadership, evaluation, and system support	Strong leadership, professional capability, and continuous improvement.
4) Pastoral care, relationships, and wellbeing, including: — the physical environment — how safe and supported students feel, especially those who have experienced trauma	Safe and inclusive environments that fosters trust, belonging, and wellbeing.
5) Transition support and pathways, including: — transitions into provision — transitions out into further learning, training, or employment	Smooth transitions into, through, and out of the setting with clear pathways to further education, training, or employment.
6) Parent and whānau engagement	Active involvement of parents and whānau in learning and decision-making.

For each component, we used the evidence base to describe what high quality practice should include and how these elements contribute to positive outcomes for disengaged students.

Effective teaching practices provide disengaged students with the explicit structure, clarity, and tailored support to rebuild confidence and close educational gaps.

Effective teaching practice refers to the use of clear, structured instruction and adaptive support that helps students understand what they are learning, and how to succeed. For disengaged or at-risk students, whose prior schooling may have been disrupted, these practices are particularly important because they provide the predictability, clarity, and guided steps needed to re-enter learning. Strong teaching helps students experience early success, rebuild academic confidence, and make steady progress over time.

Good teaching practice looks like:

- **Having access to high-quality, registered teachers.**

  Research shows that students achieve better outcomes when taught by well-qualified teachers.[29] [30] Registered teachers bring training in curriculum design, assessment, and evidence-based teaching practices. This ensures structured, consistent, and effective learning experiences.[31]

  This is particularly important for students in alternative settings, who often need targeted, responsive teaching to re-engage with learning. It is also critical for delivering secondary-level curriculum, where subject knowledge and understanding of qualification pathways are essential for students to achieve NCEA and move successfully into further education, training, or work.

- **Using core teaching strategies.**

  Disengaged or at-risk students often present with significant learning gaps, inconsistent attendance, and low academic confidence. ERO's national review of Alternative Education highlights the prevalence of high and complex needs in this cohort, including substantial literacy and numeracy deficits that require targeted, systematic instruction.

  The evidence base suggests effective teaching strategies include regularly checking students' understanding,[32] giving constructive feedback,[33] differentiating instruction,[34] and providing explicit teaching with clear modelling and guided practice.[35] It also highlights the importance of connecting learning to students' prior knowledge and identities,[36] and using Individual Learning Plans to set personalised goals.[37] [38]

  These practices are effective, because they make expectations explicit. Students can see what 'good' looks like before working independently.[39] Instructions become clearer and more accessible, and the pace can be adjusted to match diverse learning needs.[40] This builds self-efficacy and gives students a greater sense of control over their learning.[41]

  Core teaching practices also provide structure, which are essential for students who have experienced disrupted schooling. Step-by-step teaching reduces ambiguity and cognitive load, making success criteria visible and achievable. This helps rebuild confidence, close learning gaps, and support steady academic progress.[42]

  Individual Learning Plans strengthen this work by enabling personalised goal setting, monitoring progress, and tailoring instruction to individual circumstances.[43] Research shows they support meaningful, individualised pathways, especially for students at risk of disengagement.

- **Using assessment to inform teaching and learning.**

  Students in alternative settings often have uneven prior knowledge and learning gaps that may not be immediately obvious. Regular, low-stakes assessments help teachers identify what students understand and which foundational skills need strengthening. These quick checks allow teachers to adjust instruction immediately, and ensure students are working at the right level.[44]

  Research shows that short, targeted re-teach cycles produce the largest gains for lower-attaining students.[45] These are brief, focused teaching moments that occur immediately after a quick check for understanding to address a particular error in a student's thinking. Formative assessment also accelerates progress by providing timely, diagnostic feedback that clarifies next steps in learning.[46]

A coherent and structured curriculum, delivered flexibly, helps students re-enter learning and progress.

The curriculum encompasses the subjects, learning materials, and pathways made available to students, including opportunities to work towards recognised qualifications and develop skills for future education or employment. In alternative settings, it is important that the curriculum is both coherent and flexible – broad enough to offer meaningful options, yet adaptable to individual needs. This includes ensuring the curriculum is well-structured and clearly sequenced, with flexibility in how it is delivered so that students can access learning in ways that best meet their needs. Disengaged students are more likely to re-engage when the curriculum feels relevant, personalised, and clearly connected to who they are and where they want to go, giving their learning purpose and direction.

A good curriculum looks like:

- **Having the right curriculum resources and materials.**

  Given their educational disadvantage, students in alternative settings need curriculum materials that are clear, accessible, and designed to support step-by-step progress. [47] When teachers have fit-for-purpose resources, they can plan learning sequences that align with the national curriculum and follows a coherent sequence.

  Alignment with the national curriculum is important for helping to rebuild clear pathways for these students, to ensure they are taught the knowledge and skills needed for recognised qualifications and make it easier for them to transition back to school. This supports continuity, reduces further gaps, and keeps students connected to national expectations.[48]

- **Providing enough academic challenge.**

  Academic challenge is essential in alternative settings because many students arrive with disrupted educational histories and significant gaps in their learning. A curriculum that offers appropriate stretch helps rebuild these foundations, giving students structured opportunities to catch up and develop the knowledge and skills needed for future qualifications, training, or employment.[49]

High expectations also strengthen students' belief in their own ability. Research shows that when teachers maintain ambitious expectations, students who have previously underachieved develop stronger self-efficacy, greater motivation, and improved academic outcomes.[50] [51] These gains are particularly important for at-risk students who often enter alternative settings with low confidence and a history of negative school experiences.

Lowered expectations place these students at further risk. Studies find that when expectations are lowered, these students receive less rigorous work, fewer opportunities to succeed, and reduced academic support, which contributes to ongoing underachievement.[52] Ensuring the curriculum remains challenging helps counter these patterns. It communicates to students that they are capable of meaningful academic success and that their teachers believe they can progress. This sense of belief matters because many of these students have internalised negative messages about their academic ability over time.

→ **Supporting strong academic pathways.**

It is important that the curriculum, whether delivered for a short period or over a longer placement, aligns with each student's intended qualification pathway, including pathways back into formal schooling and towards recognised qualifications.[53] In alternative settings, the curriculum needs to remain flexible and broad, while still maintaining a strong focus on core areas such as literacy and numeracy.[54] Strengthening foundational reading and maths skills helps address gaps created by disrupted learning, reduces cognitive overload, supports targeted intervention, and helps rebuild students' confidence and engagement.[55] [56]

Alongside this, the curriculum must also offer practical and life-skills learning that reflects students' interests, needs, and future goals.[57] This balance ensures that students are both reconnected to essential academic learning and supported to develop relevant skills that prepare them for further education, training, or employment.

Leadership makes a big difference in alternative settings when it ensures staff are suitably trained, information is used wisely, and different services work together to support students.

Leadership refers to the systems, behaviours, and decision-making practices that guide staff, shape expectations for students, and ensure learning environments are safe, inclusive, and well organised. In alternative settings, strong leadership is vital because it brings coherence to teaching, pastoral, and curriculum practices, and ensures that staff have the support and capability needed to meet diverse and complex student needs. Effective leadership drives continuous improvement and is closely linked to higher-quality provision and better outcomes for students.[58]

Good leadership looks like:

- **Setting high expectations for staff and demonstrate strong practice.**

  In alternative settings, it is important that leaders set clear expectations for staff to ensure consistent and effective practice. Many alternative settings rely on staff who may be unqualified, early in their careers, or working in voluntary or youth-work roles. This makes leadership guidance especially important. Research shows that strong and strategic school leadership is essential for creating equitable learning conditions, building coherent professional expectations, and improving outcomes for underserved or vulnerable students.[59] [60]

  High expectations for staff also contribute to the creation of safe and inclusive environments. Inclusive leadership practices emphasise setting direction, modelling professionalism, and ensuring all staff adopt approaches that promote safety, belonging, and consistent routines – key conditions for effective learning, especially for at-risk students.[61] [62] These practices help ensure that students experience stability and predictable adult behaviour, which is particularly important when they have previously encountered inconsistent or low-quality educational experiences.

- **Supporting the workforce's capability.**

  Effective provision in alternative settings depends on a well-supported workforce. Research shows that staff in alternative provision face distinct pressures due to the complexity of students' needs, the diversity of provider types, and the frequent reliance on unqualified or early-career staff. These pressures mean workforce capability must be deliberately built and continually strengthened.[63]

  Evidence indicates that high-quality practice in alternative settings relies on intentional professional learning, targeted coaching, and structured collaboration. Leaders in high-performing alternative settings invest in ongoing development to ensure staff have the skills required to meet the breadth of academic, behavioural, and wellbeing needs presented by students.[64] Workforce capability is also strengthened when staff have opportunities to work alongside other agencies, mainstream schools, and cross-sector partners. Collaboration is identified as a core component of effective alternative provision, enabling staff to draw on specialist expertise and improve consistency across settings.[65]

  Professional development also plays an important role in increasing stability and quality. Research into New Zealand's alternative provision sector shows that staff need access to structured, ongoing professional learning to grow the specialised skills required to support students with complex learning and behavioural needs.[66] [67] This includes training in trauma-informed practice, culturally responsive approaches, literacy and numeracy support, and relationship-based pedagogies. When PLD and coaching are embedded into regular practice, staff are better equipped to provide consistent instruction, respond to student needs, and maintain safe, predictable environments.

- **Having a clear plan to improve practice and in turn, improve students' academic outcomes.**

  Improving outcomes in alternative settings requires a deliberate and structured approach to evaluation. Effective provision depends on leaders and staff embedding evaluative thinking into daily practice so that decision-making is informed by evidence rather than assumptions. Research shows that data-based decision making helps educators identify learning needs, adapt instruction, and improve student outcomes.[68]

  Regular review of individualised learning plans and close monitoring of academic, attendance, and wellbeing indicators ensure that support is responsive and aligned to each student's progress. Using disaggregated data also helps identify inequities and patterns that may not be visible at a whole-group level, strengthening early intervention and more targeted support.[69] [70]

  A systematic approach to data use creates shared expectations among staff, supports timely course-corrections and adjustments to programmes, and improves accountability for student progress. [71] Evidence shows that schools with clear data routines are more effective at sustaining improvement and achieving better outcomes for students.[72]

Integrated pastoral practices are essential for reducing the underlying challenges that hinder students' learning and engagement.

Pastoral support refers to the intentional strategies educators and support staff use to create safety, care, and holistic support for students, particularly those who have faced vulnerability or disrupted schooling. In alternative settings, strong pastoral approaches help stabilise students' wellbeing, build trust, and remove barriers to learning, allowing young people to re-engage with education more confidently.

Good pastoral practices look like:

- **Cultivating trust and sense of belonging for students.**

  Safety, predictability, and positive relationships are foundational to engagement and learning. Research consistently shows that when students feel safe, supported, and connected at school, they are more motivated, display stronger behavioural outcomes, and achieve at higher levels. [73] Large international studies find that perceptions of school safety and positive teacher–student relationships are strong predictors of students' sense of belonging, which in turn supports engagement and academic success.[74]

  A sense of belonging is particularly important for students in alternative settings, many of whom have experienced strained relationships with previous educators. Systematic reviews emphasise that belonging is a key protective factor for students at risk of feeling alienated, and that supportive, predictable school environments are crucial for re-engagement.[75] Students who report feeling connected to their learning community attend more regularly, participate more positively, and show stronger academic persistence and achievement.[76]

  This aligns with evidence from ERO's previous reports demonstrating that positive climate factors – such as stable routines, respectful interactions, and reliable support structures – are preconditions for learning and improved behaviour.[77]

- **Providing extensive wrap-around support, including access to specialist support.**

  Effective alternative provision models routinely combine instructional support with wrap-around services that address the full range of factors affecting students' ability to engage in learning. As discussed, research shows that the students served in alternative settings often experience complex combinations of mental health needs, adverse life events, social stressors, and practical barriers that directly affect their ability to engage in learning. Models of effective alternative provision consistently highlight the importance of integrating instructional support with coordinated pastoral, social, and therapeutic services that respond to these wider challenges. ERO's 2023 review of Alternative Education identified fragmented support pathways as a barrier to student progress and emphasised the need for multi-agency collaboration to meet the complexity of students' circumstances.[78]

  International evidence further reinforces that combining academic and wellbeing supports improves engagement, attendance, and learning. Multi-Tiered Systems of Support and comprehensive school mental health frameworks demonstrate that when schools integrate academic, behavioural, and mental health interventions, students receive more timely and coordinated assistance, leading to stronger participation and improved outcomes.[79] Research on school belonging also underscores that many at-risk students require targeted wellbeing supports in order to reconnect with learning; when these needs are met through coordinated wrap-around systems, students show greater attendance, more positive behaviour, and improved achievement.[80]

  A critical part of comprehensive pastoral support is access to specialist services. Students in these settings often present with complex or co-occurring needs, including trauma exposure, mental health conditions, neurodevelopmental differences, or undiagnosed learning needs. Specialist professionals such as psychologists, counsellors, therapeutic practitioners, and health or diagnostic services provide expertise and interventions that generalist staff are not equipped to deliver. Their support includes assessment, therapeutic intervention, diagnostic clarification, and clinical input that directly influence students' regulation, attendance, and readiness to learn.[81] [82] Evidence shows that specialist expertise is particularly important for students at risk of emotional or behavioural disengagement, as school-based mental health professionals can offer focused therapeutic support that stabilises functioning and strengthens students' capacity to participate in learning.[83]

- **Using approaches that acknowledge students' complex needs.**

  Evidence shows that students in alternative settings experience significant factors that influence their ability to engage in learning, requiring staff to employ intentional, adaptive pedagogies rather than traditional classroom practices.[84]

Restorative practices are approaches that emphasise repairing harm and strengthening connections, often through facilitated conversations and collaborative problem-solving that support students to take responsibility. They are particularly important in alternative settings because many students identify poor teacher-student relationships as a major contributor to their earlier disengagement.[85] [86] Restorative practice offers a structured way to rebuild trust, repair harm, and sustain mana-enhancing relationships – an approach that aligns closely with the needs of this cohort. Research from New Zealand,[87] [88] Scotland,[89] and Australia[90] demonstrates that restorative practices can effectively address student misbehaviour while reducing the use of punitive disciplinary measures, showing clear benefits for students with complex behavioural needs.

Trauma-informed practices involve creating learning environments where staff recognise how trauma affects a student's emotions, behaviour, and learning, and respond in ways that promote safety and regulation. Because trauma can narrow a student's 'window of tolerance', it can make everyday classroom demands overwhelming, affecting their ability to manage emotions, focus, and participate safely.[91] Trauma-informed approaches help staff create predictable routines, calm and supportive environments, and clear expectations – conditions shown to reduce stress responses and support cognitive processes, such as working memory and attention.[92]

Culturally responsive practices refer to teaching approaches that make learning relevant and effective by drawing on students' cultural knowledge, identities, lived experiences, and ways of communicating. These practices are especially important in alternative settings because many students – particularly Māori – have experienced prior schooling where their cultural identities were not recognised or valued, contributing to feelings of alienation and disengagement. Research shows that culturally responsive pedagogy strengthens students' sense of belonging and improves engagement and achievement by creating learning environments where their cultural backgrounds are acknowledged as assets, not barriers.[93] [94]

→ **Ensuring appropriate delivery models.**

In-person delivery is essential in alternative settings because students in this cohort need consistent adult contact, stability, and close supervision – supports that online or distance models cannot reliably provide. For many students with disrupted educational histories, daily face-to-face interaction with a trusted adult is a key factor in re-establishing safety and engagement. In-person provision also enables the ongoing relationship-building that research identifies as fundamental to students' sense of belonging and connection to learning.[95]

High staff-to-student ratios enable staff to provide the intensive, individualised support required in alternative settings, where many students present with complex learning, behavioural, and wellbeing needs.[96] Research indicates that 1:1 instruction is most effective for producing strong learning outcomes.[97] However, even smaller groups (e.g., one teacher to two-five students) allow for monitoring of students' progress, responding quickly to emerging issues, and tailoring learning to gaps that may not have been addressed in previous schooling.[98]

Effective transitions for these students must include early planning, coordinated supports, and clear connection to future education, training, or employment.

Transition support refers to the planned strategies and processes that help students move successfully into, through, and beyond alternative settings. It plays a crucial role in reducing anxiety, building confidence, and maintaining continuity of learning for students whose education has been disrupted. Rather than simply managing enrolments or exits, effective transition support intentionally builds on students' strengths, responds to their individual goals, and sustains their engagement throughout each stage of change.

Good transition support looks like:

- **Strong onboarding practices.**

  Strong onboarding practices are vital in alternative settings because early, structured transition planning helps students re-engage and reduces the risk of further disconnection. Effective dropout-prevention and transition frameworks emphasise beginning planning at entry and revisiting goals regularly to maintain momentum and ensure continuity of support.[99]

  Strengths-based transition approaches also improve outcomes by identifying students' assets, supporting self-awareness, and involving them actively in goal-setting; these practices promote higher expectations, increase students' confidence in their capabilities, and create more authentic, personalised transition plans – factors shown to enhance engagement and lead to more successful post-school pathways.[100] [101]

- **Maintaining a strong connection with mainstream school and planning for reintegrating.**

  The most effective approaches keep students linked to their enrolling school, set a clear expectation of return, and actively plan for reintegration.[102]

  This works best when transition planning starts as soon as a student enters an alternative setting.[103] Planning should be ongoing, involve students and whānau, and be supported by a consistent adult who provides continuity, regular check-ins, and personalised support throughout the placement, especially at entry points. [104] [105] [106]

- **Providing meaningful pathways into further training or employment.**

  Providing meaningful pathways into further training or employment is crucial for students whose goals do not include returning to mainstream schooling. Transition-focused education research emphasises that post-school planning should be embedded throughout a student's programme, rather than added at the end. It positions transition preparation as a core organising framework for secondary education – one that guides all learning experiences and opens multiple, clearly defined pathways aligned with a young person's strengths, interests, and aspirations.[107]

A key component of this approach is embedding career education, vocational exploration, and work-based learning into everyday teaching. These elements help students build self-determination, understand workplace expectations, and develop the competencies needed for adult life. Transition-focused education has been shown to improve students' motivation and increase successful movement into further education, training, or employment by providing real-world relevance and clearer post-school pathways.[108] [109] [110]

What are other jurisdictions doing?

United Kingdom (UK) model

The UK approach prioritises keeping students connected to their home school when behavioural, attendance, or engagement concerns arise. Schools typically begin with internal alternative provision rather than external placements, with two main models in use: embedded and parallel.

Students remain in their mainstream class group and continue to follow regular routines, maintaining curriculum alignment and daily contact with peers and teachers. Additional help is provided in or around the classroom, but students stay part of the core timetable and school community. Because the support is woven into existing systems, staff oversight, expectations, and pastoral relationships remain consistent. This model is designed as a short-term, targeted intervention that keeps students connected and reinforces the expectation of returning fully to mainstream learning.

Parallel provision, by contrast, provides support in a separate on-site space away from the mainstream class group for all or most of the school day. These units have their own routines, staff, and sometimes a different curriculum. Students often spend longer periods in this environment and have less day-to-day interaction with mainstream teachers. While still physically located on the school site, this model operates more like an internal version of external alternative provision, offering more intensive support but weaker integration with mainstream learning.

Across both models, a defining feature of the UK approach is the assumption that students will return to mainstream learning. Alternative provision units are not intended as long-term placements; they provide structured, relationship-based interventions that help students re-engage academically, emotionally, and socially. Because they remain within the school, students stay connected to their peers, teachers, and the wider school community – reducing the disconnect and stigma often associated with external placements.

Where off-site provision is required, schools and providers jointly establish a reintegration plan from the beginning. This includes clear criteria for readiness, agreed roles, and regular progress reviews. Schools stay involved through frequent contact, visits, and progress reporting on attendance, behaviour, and learning. Reintegration is coordinated across agencies, and support continues after return to maintain stability and reduce the risk of further exclusion.[111] [112]

Strong parent and whānau engagement is essential for keeping these students connected, supported, and progressing.

Parental engagement refers to the intentional strategies that help parents and caregivers stay connected to their child's learning journey in alternative settings. It is an essential part of supporting continuity, reinforcing learning, and strengthening wellbeing, even though engagement can be challenging due to complex family circumstances or past schooling experiences.

Good parental engagement looks like:

- **Involving parents and whānau in planning, and decision making throughout the time students are in the settings.**

  Involving parents and whānau in planning and decision-making throughout a student's time in an alternative setting is critical for sustaining engagement and supporting positive transitions. This means parents and whānau are actively consulted in shaping individualised learning plans, onboarding processes, goal setting, and transition planning, and are supported to understand their child's progress and the pathways available to them.[113] Whānau partnerships strengthen shared responsibility for learning, and help ensure that decisions reflect both the student's aspirations and the cultural context they are embedded in.[114] Likewise, parents also need to be clear on future plans, including return-to-school strategies or vocational pathways.[115]

Conclusion

International and domestic research shows that effective alternative provision relies on a coherent set of conditions that help young people re-engage with learning and rebuild confidence.

High-quality teaching is central. Students benefit from explicit, well-structured instruction, consistent routines, responsive assessment, and teaching that adapts to individual needs. A strong curriculum reinforces this by aligning with national expectations, providing appropriate challenge, and supporting transitions through career education and work-based learning.

Effective leadership sustains these conditions by building staff capability, setting clear expectations, and using data to support continuous improvement. Pastoral support underpins engagement, particularly when it is delivered through close, consistent relationships.

Part 6: How good is education provision in these settings?

Weak educational outcomes in alternative settings are directly related to the quality of education provision that is delivered. There is significant inconsistency in critical aspects of the model and how these are applied across settings. This includes core elements such as teaching practice, curriculum, and leadership, as well as support components such as pastoral care, transition planning, and engagement with parents and whānau. This chapter outlines how the system of alternative provision in New Zealand currently delivers on these core aspects of effective practice.

What we looked at

Part 5 outlined the key features of education provision that underpin strong outcomes. In this chapter, we take those domains of quality and assess the extent to which the four alternative settings – and the system overall – deliver on them in practice. Our analysis considers the extent to which the system is configured to support positive student trajectories and respond to the risk factors or predictors of entry identified earlier. In doing so, we examined:

- Our surveys and interviews of students, parents and whānau, school leaders, and setting teachers and leaders
- National administrative data from the Ministry of Education
- Previous ERO reports, including the review of Alternative Education (2023).

This chapter sets out:

1) How good education provision is overall in these settings
2) How strong teaching practices are
3) How strong curriculum is
4) How strong leadership is
5) How strong pastoral support is
6) How strong processes for onboarding students are
7) How strong supports for future pathways are
8) How strong parental engagement is.

What we found: an overview

The quality of teaching practice is too variable in these settings. Not all settings provide enough explicit teaching or qualified teachers.

- **Too few alternative settings have registered teachers.** At Te Kura, all staff in educator roles have a teaching qualification, while in Alternative Education, fewer than half (44 percent) do. Registered teachers bring training in curriculum design, assessment, and evidence-based teaching practice. When students do not have them, it affects the quality of teaching they receive and limits the learning progress they are able to make.
- **Students aren't always getting the explicit teaching they need.** One in six (17 percent) teachers report that they do not regularly use explicit instruction. Fewer than one-third (31 percent) of students in Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway report regularly learning through direct teacher instruction due to its distance learning model.
- **Teachers lack the teaching resources they need.** Across all alternative settings, up to 65 percent of teachers say that not having the right tools and resources gets in the way of supporting students.

Students' opportunities are limited by too few subject options and lack of access to formal qualifications.

- **Students can often access only some subjects**, rather than the full range available in mainstream schools. Learning is primarily focused on foundational literacy and numeracy. Te Kura is the only setting that offers access to the full New Zealand Curriculum.
- **Students are rarely challenged.** Settings usually deliver the content below students' educational level and often do not provide strong academic or vocational pathways. A reason for this is that learning does not always align with qualification requirements, reducing opportunities to build the skills they need.
- **Access to qualifications and pathways for young people are constrained.** Almost half (48 percent) of students say there is no clear pathway for them when they leave.

Leadership is strong, but it is often constrained by systemic pressures.

- **Leadership is strong across most alternative settings**, with high expectations that staff ensure safe learning environments. Many leaders take on responsibilities beyond their formal roles, to meet the needs of their students and teams. This means that the leadership model in smaller settings is heavily reliant on individual effort and is difficult to sustain.
- **Workforce instability limits leaders' ability to support quality teaching** and professional development.

These students need intensive support. Pastoral support is strong in alternative settings, but access to specialist services is inconsistent.

- **Pastoral support is a strength, particularly in face-to-face settings.** Staff cultivate trust and safety so that students feel grounded and ready to learn, and some settings provide extensive support to remove underlying barriers to learning.
- **Access to specialist services – such as counselling, mental health support, youth work, and therapeutic interventions is uneven across settings and not proportionate to the level of student need.** In many places, support depends on local relationships, the arrangements of managing schools, or the goodwill of individual practitioners, rather than a consistent model of provision.
- **Online learning does not meet these students' wider needs.** It cannot provide the same immediate, relationship-based engagement available in face-to-face settings, leaving many students without the support they need.

Parental engagement is inconsistent across settings and tends to decline over time, with the highest involvement occurring at enrolment.

- **The level of engagement from parents is inconsistent across settings.** Te Kura places a stronger emphasis on parental engagement, by formally recognising parents and whānau as supervisors of their children's learning. This inherently requires closer and more consistent involvement in their education. Parental engagement is mixed in Alternative Education and Activity Centres and is harder to acquire in Residential Care, due to the structural and situational barriers of children often being in state care.
- **Parental engagement is highest during enrolment.** However, it tends to decline over time, with limited opportunities to support students' learning.

These findings are set out in more detail below.

1) How good is education provision in these settings overall?

We assessed each setting against the key domains of quality educational provision as set out in Part 5 of this report.

For each of the domains, we defined and assessed key components individually, then combined these assessments to reach an overall judgment. Our judgments draw on data from multiple sources, including surveys, administrative records, interviews and focus groups, and IDI analysis.

Education provision in alternative settings is generally weak.

Overall, we found provision to be generally weak across alternative settings, though Activity Centres demonstrate comparatively stronger practice. The rubric below represents a summary of our findings regarding the quality of practice delivered in each setting, as discussed throughout this chapter.

Table 8: *Overview of quality of practice in alternative settings*

Practice domain	Activity Centres	Alternative Education	Residential Care	Te Kura - Engagement & Wellbeing gateway
Teaching practice and use of assessment				
Curriculum				
Leadership				
Pastoral support				
Pathways in and out of setting				
Parental engagement				

Excelling:	The setting demonstrates consistently high performance. This is the highest judgment.
Doing well	The setting demonstrates mostly strong and consistent practice. Key conditions for success are in place and there is a focus on improvement.
Working towards	There are gaps in performance; aspects of improvement are evident but there is variability.
Improvement required	There are significant and sustained gaps in setting performance and urgent improvement is needed.

2) How strong are teaching practices?

The quality of teaching practice is too variable in alternative settings.

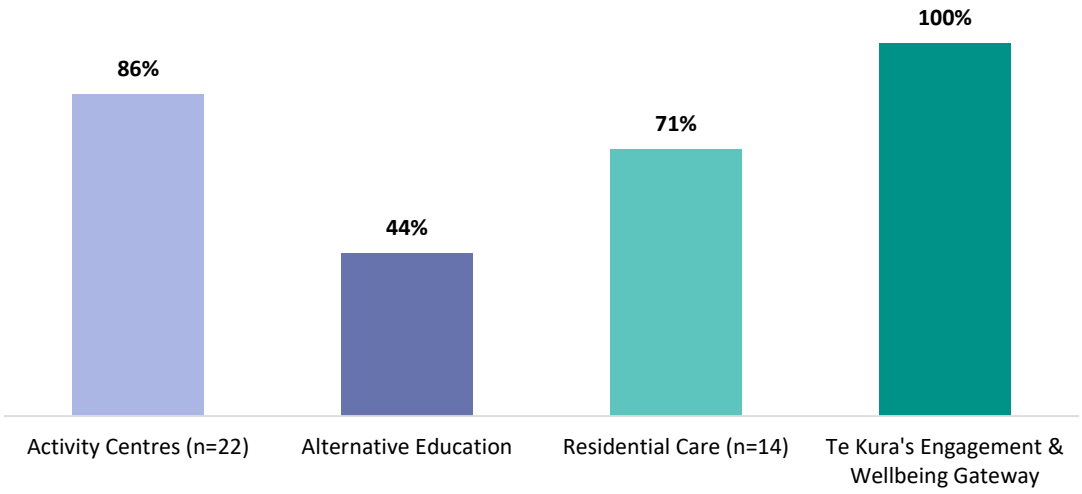
Students aren't consistently supported to re-engage with learning or achieve strong learning outcomes. There is wide variation across different alternative settings, with some demonstrating effective practices and others not.

Access to registered teachers is inconsistent across settings.

Access to registered teachers significantly varies across settings. In Te Kura, all educators in teaching roles are qualified teachers – they are typically secondary-trained and able to deliver quality teaching for secondary-level learning.

Activity Centres and Residential Care providers are required to employ qualified registered teachers on site, alongside a team of support staff. However, of the 22 teaching roles in Activity Centres, only 19 have a teaching qualification (86 percent). Similarly, for Residential Care, 10 of the 14 teaching roles have a qualification (71 percent). The proportion of qualified teachers is even lower in Alternative Education – fewer than half (44 percent) hold a teaching qualification.

Figure 43: *Percentage of alternative setting teachers reporting they have a relevant teaching qualification, by setting*



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

Across Activity Centres and Residential Care, many registered teachers are only primary-trained. This means they bring strengths in foundational literacy and numeracy, which is particularly valuable for students with gaps in these core learning areas. While primary-trained teachers are able to deliver teaching at secondary levels, they can lack subject-specific expertise and understanding of

qualification pathways needed to confidently deliver and assess secondary-level curriculum, particularly when supporting students to achieve NCEA.

Alternative settings also often rely on staff that are trained in other relevant fields such as youth work or social work. ERO's 2023 review of Alternative Education found that, while staff often bring strong interpersonal skills and experience in supporting young people, they might have limited knowledge of curriculum or the science of teaching.[116] Without secondary-trained registered teachers, there can be significant variability in the quality of teaching and learning between sites and providers.

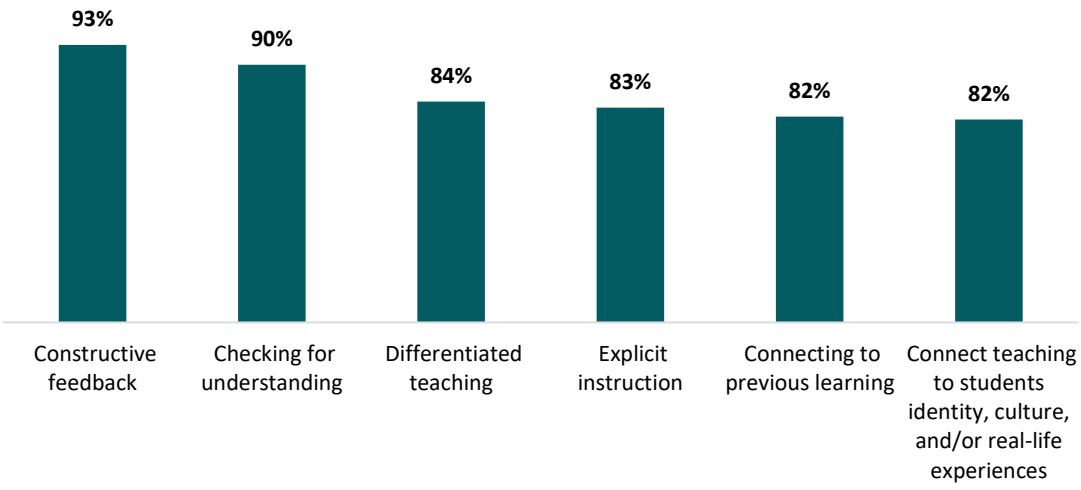
> "It's bullshit – schools that have registered teachers send them to us because they can't meet their educational needs. How are students meant to be learning with staff who are well intentioned but have no idea about the curriculum?"
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION LEADER**

Overall, inconsistent standards for using qualified teachers make it harder to ensure quality teaching, which is appropriately structured, deep, and aligned with the curriculum.

Students aren't always getting the explicit teaching they need.

Teachers in alternative settings are inconsistently using good teaching strategies. One in six teachers are not consistently using explicit instruction (17 percent), connecting students to previous learning (18 percent), or connecting teaching to students (18 percent). However, teachers are more consistently using constructive feedback (93 percent) and checking for understanding (90 percent).

Figure 44: *Percentage of alternative setting teachers reporting they use different teaching practices 'all of the time' or 'most of the time'*



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

The use of explicit teaching varies across settings. At Te Kura, only one in three (31 percent) students in the Engagement and Wellbeing gateway report regularly learning through direct teacher instruction. Te Kura is presented with a unique challenge due to it distance learning model. In this model, students are not engaged in learning at the same time. Instead, students work through online modules, reading, and tasks independently, often with limited opportunities for explicit instruction, or for teachers to check understanding and provide constructive feedback in real time. As a result, some teachers describe feeling that their role centres more on marking submitted work, than providing direct instruction re-engage.

> "There is no requirement for 'teachers' to actually teach. We are markers first, and teachers only if we volunteer our time - of which, there's only a small handful of people who actually do teaching."
>
> **TE KURA TEACHER**

In the absence of explicit instruction for students in the Engagement and Wellbeing gateway, parents told us that students need to maintain high levels of self-regulation and be independent students. This expectation is particularly difficult for students in this gateway, as most have been referred specifically because they are disengaged, and require structured, supported learning to re-engage.

> "It's an unhelpful assumption that ākonga who have been failed by mainstream teaching and learning practices will succeed in an online learning environment."
>
> **TE KURA TEACHER**

We heard that individualised teaching is strongest in environments with high levels of adult attention and responsiveness – including Alternative Education, Activity Centres, and Residential Care sites. Teachers describe how small roll sizes, low staff-to-student ratios, and flexible learning spaces mean staff can closely monitor progress, respond immediately to learning needs, and adapt instruction in real time. This results in highly targeted teaching practice that supports engagement and confidence.

In Residential Care, we found that the high staff-to-student ratio means students receive frequent, well-sequenced and, often, one-to-one support. Conversely, we heard at Te Kura the number of students per teacher is high, and learning is delivered as coursework rather than classes, as part of the online delivery model. This constrains teachers' ability to provide individualised instruction and learning plans.

> "Having lower ratios could improve engagement and achievement. It is hard finding time to ring and follow up when you have 160 + curriculum and 16 kaimanaaki ākonga. Some that are not engaging can fall through the cracks."
>
> **TE KURA TEACHER**

We also heard that Te Kura's operating model introduces a tension between wellbeing and academic priorities. Huinga Ako – the only in-person sessions available to students – have increasingly been directed towards pastoral and wellbeing activities, reducing their use for more intensive instructional support. Teachers told us they feel discouraged from providing academic help in these sessions, limiting opportunities to address students' learning needs.

> "Our Huinga Ako – which, five years ago, were personalised learning areas where ākonga could meet their kaimanaaki and kaiako to discuss careers, pathways, and progress – have become sessions where games and playtime are prioritised."
>
> **TE KURA TEACHER**

Across settings, individual learning plans play a crucial role in supporting individual students' needs. Teachers report that these plans help them better understand a student's background and academic history and align programmes, pastoral supports, and teaching strategies to the student's strengths and needs. At some sites, we heard these plans are developed with students and families to build an overall picture of students' learning history and their learning goals.

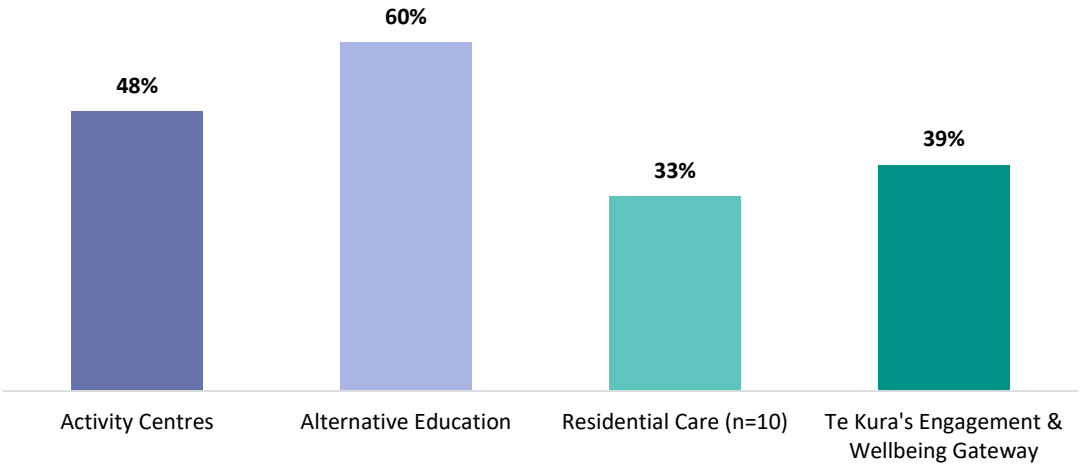
> "We use a learning story, which tell a bit of what they've learned at school, how do they like to learn, where do they see their learning."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROVIDER**

Where plans are less developed or not actively used, the potential for individualised support is reduced. One in four (25 percent) students in Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway report not receiving a learning plan within two months of starting.

Assessment is not being used effectively to inform teaching and learning.

Use of assessment is weak across all settings. Depending on the setting, between one-third (33 percent) to almost two-thirds (60 percent) of teachers say that the ability to collect and use student data effectively is a barrier to providing targeted support.

Figure 45: *Percentage of alternative setting teachers reporting that collecting and using student data gets in the way of supporting students well 'a lot' or 'some' [of the time], by setting*



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

We heard providers typically rely on primary-level assessment tools to gather students' data to inform teaching. These approaches provide initial insights into students' capabilities and help identify immediate learning gaps. Teachers at one Activity Centre told us they use diagnostic and progressive tools (e.g., e-asTTle,[r] or running records for reading) to assess literacy and numeracy, which inform their intervention. Some sites use daily or weekly self-review sessions that allow students to reflect on their short-term goals and received tailored feedback.

> "There's massive decoding of learning – to find the gap, plug it, then on to the next gap. Sometimes there's no quick fixes to it."
>
> **RESIDENTIAL CARE LEADER**

While these approaches allow progress to be measured during students' time in alternative settings, many of the tools in use are designed for primary-level contexts and do not align well with secondary-level expectations or curriculum pathways. Their use often reflects the reality that students arrive with limited information about their prior learning or are performing at a significantly lower academic level than peers their age.

In Residential Care specifically, the short duration of some Youth Justice placements further limits the feasibility of formal assessment. At some sites, assessments are scheduled for a fixed point each term. However, students are often no longer in the setting when these assessments occur, meaning they miss key assessment opportunities altogether. As a result, it is difficult to gather consistent or comparable data about their learning during their placement.

r e-asTTle is an online assessment tool, developed to assess students' achievement and progress in reading, maths, writing. The reading and maths assessments have been developed primarily for students in years 4–10, but because they test curriculum levels 2–6 they can be used for some students in Year 3 and higher year levels. The e-asTTle writing tool has been developed for the assessment of students in years 1–10.

Overall assessment quality is constrained by tool limitations and inconsistent prior information, reducing the extent to which teaching can be accurately aligned to long-term, secondary-level expectations.

3) How strong is the curriculum?

Students' opportunities are limited by too few subject options and lack of access to formal qualifications.

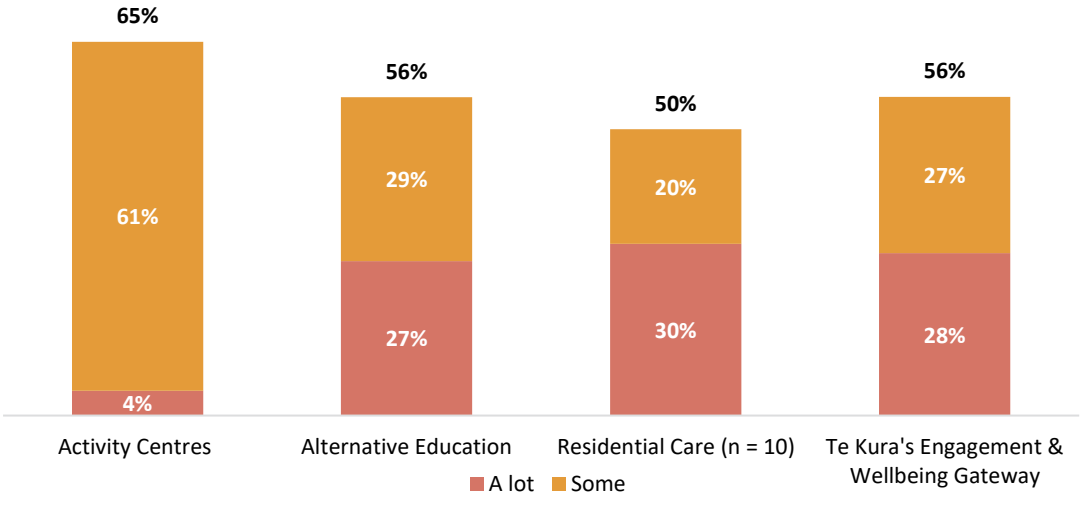
Across settings, we found that curriculum quality is weak. Many students only have access to a narrow range of subjects, and opportunities to work towards formal qualifications are limited. The curriculum often does not align with year-level expectations, nor provide the level of academic challenge students need. This lack of breadth, depth, and qualification pathways is a significant gap in provision and contributes to ongoing inequities for students in alternative settings.

Teachers do not have the resources they need to deliver a quality curriculum.

Across Activity Centres, Alternative Education, Residential Care, and Te Kura, half or more (50-65 percent) of teachers do not have the rights tools and resources to consistently support students well. This constrains what is taught, limits academic challenge, and narrows students' pathways.

Delivering a high-quality curriculum requires materials that align with the appropriate year level and support students to work towards recognised qualifications. In alternative settings, this is often difficult. Resource availability is uneven across settings and frequently insufficient.

Figure 46: *Percentage of alternative setting teachers reporting not having the right tools and resources gets in the way of supporting students well 'a lot' or 'some [of the time]', by setting*



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

In Activity Centres and Alternative Education, teachers consistently told us they lack basic materials required to deliver learning beyond core literacy and numeracy. For some, essential items such as Common Assessment Activity[s] practice books for Years 10 and 11 are unavailable due to cost pressures. Combined with their lack of secondary-level subject-specific expertise (e.g., in science, technology, advanced maths, arts), this means programmes default to foundational work or unit standards that are easier to supervise and assess without specialist training.

> "We used resources like Twinkl.[t] Little bits and pieces."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION TEACHER**

Many students arrive at alternative settings working far below age-expected curriculum levels, and teachers tell us this means they need additional support to deliver high-quality learning at these levels.

> "We need access to the Ministry funded PD [professional development] on structured literacy which is only for teachers who teach 0-8. The majority of our ākonga are at that level."
>
> **ACTIVITY CENTRE TEACHER**

As a state school, Te Kura is resourced to deliver the full range of New Zealand Curriculum subjects and employs subject specialist teachers. This supports students to access a broad curriculum and to progress through standards at a flexible pace that suits their learning needs. In the secondary years, the strong subject-specific focus means that explicit literacy and numeracy instruction is less visible across programmes.

Teachers at Te Kura also report that some learning materials are not well-adapted for effective online delivery and don't align well with the recent NCEA and curriculum changes. While out-of-date resources are used to varying degrees across the four settings, Te Kura teachers with secondary training are more likely to raise concerns about this. Students in Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway and their parents also said they would benefit from increased access to physical resources, such as workbooks, science kits, and art materials, to enrich and extend their learning.

s Common Assessment Activities in New Zealand are standardised, digital, externally marked assessments for NCEA literacy (reading/writing) and numeracy. They are taken in Years 10-12.

t Twinkl is a provider of online teaching resources and worksheets, mainly for Primary and Intermediate students.

> "I wish Te Kura had other resources for students to use. Most of the work is completely online based. I would love if there were workbooks sent out to students, books and further reading provided, physical activities and tasks."
>
> TE KURA STUDENT – ENGAGEMENT AND WELLBEING GATEWAY

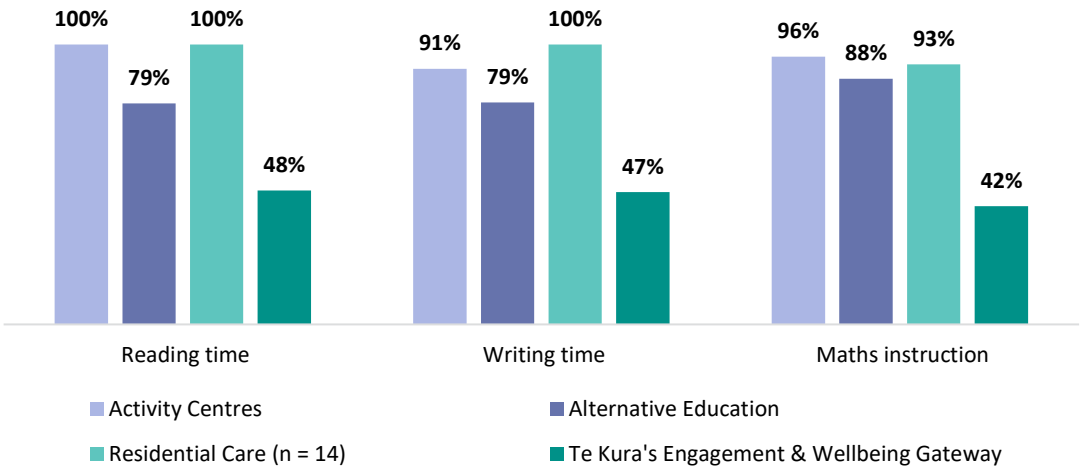
Across Residential Care sites, resourcing challenges further restrict curriculum breadth. Without consistent subject specialists, programmes rely on unit standards that do not always support pathways like University Entrance. Students echo these concerns. They describe outdated, broken, or missing equipment that undermines their learning experiences – for example, broken music gear or the absence of materials needed for practical subjects. Safety requirements at Residential Care also means that there is restriction to what the sites can offer their students. For example, students may only be permitted pencils and paper, with limited access to laptops or digital tools for learning.

The curriculum offer is narrow in some alternative settings.

Curriculum across alternative settings is often dominated by foundational and vocational learning. This focus reflects that many students arrive following disengagement from schooling and with significant gaps in literacy and numeracy. This emphasis can narrow the curriculum, compared to what students would be offered in mainstream school.

In Activity Centres, Alternative Education, and Residential Care, many or all teachers provide dedicated reading, writing, and maths instruction on at least three days each week. In Residential Care, learning is delivered primarily through unit standards or practical tasks rather than structured academic programmes.

Figure 47: *Percentage of alternative setting teachers reporting they spend 3 or more days a week on reading, writing or maths, by setting*



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

Te Kura offers a broader curriculum, covering more NCEA subjects, vocational courses, and extracurricular options than other settings. Most teachers and leaders (85–100 percent) agree that this breadth supports pathways to qualifications, training, employment, and further education. However, students in Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway are not receiving enough explicit literacy and numeracy teaching to address gaps in learning and progression. Fewer than half of teachers report providing reading (48 percent), writing (47 percent), or maths (42 percent) instruction at least three days a week, which risks gaps in learning and progression.

The curriculum does not provide enough academic challenge for many.

Given their gaps in prior learning, it is concerning that alternative settings often don't provide enough challenge. Students frequently told us tasks are too easy or repetitive, particularly when resources designed for primary students continue to be used with older students.

For example, students learning through Prodigy Maths told us that it is boring and insufficiently challenging. This aligns with teachers telling us they intentionally start students at lower levels to rebuild confidence following disengagement. While this approach can be effective initially, we heard it often persists longer than necessary, resulting in learning remaining below an appropriate level even after students have settled.

> "Learning here is easier. Less work. I can always complete them. Like yesterday I completed two modules. A lot easier to read as well."
>
> **ACTIVITY CENTRE STUDENT**

This approach means that the curriculum used is not doing enough to close the gaps in student's prior learning, with students not achieving the gains they might otherwise make.

Even within Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway, where curriculum breadth is strongest, students and teachers report that academic challenge is not always present. Some students on academic pathways say the work is less demanding than at their previous schools, indicating that expectations are not always aligned with their capability or aspirations. Alternatively, we heard concerns from some teachers and parents that the interest-driven approach, while engaging for some students, might not offer meaningful progressing and depth needed for academic learning.

> "When we first started, there was an in-person science class and that was amazing and a full class of children would go every week... but now it is more of a social get together which my son enjoys but the children just play games."
>
> **TE KURA PARENT – ENGAGEMENT AND WELLBEING GATEWAY**

Overall, the curriculum does not support strong academic pathways.

Academic and vocational pathways are unevenly supported across alternative settings. Neither is sufficiently well provided for, but vocational options receive comparatively more attention and resourcing than academic ones. This imbalance is most pronounced in Alternative Education and Residential Care, where provision for both pathways is weakest.

In some settings, students describe taking courses such as welding, traffic management, and hospitality, alongside work-readiness activities such as CV writing, budgeting, preparing for driver licences, and completing first aid. Some parents and students told us they value these experiences because they feel meaningful, are aligned with employment goals, or are practical for future training or work. But access to vocational courses varies widely and depends on funding arrangements.

> "You don't always get to do a course here, because it might cost too much and it has to get approved by three, maybe four people. And the timing, you might just ask for it too late, and then you have to leave [the site]."
>
> **RESIDENTIAL CARE STUDENT**

The over-reliance on vocational and experiential learning can result in limited preparation for academic qualifications or further study. This learning also limits student achievement to NCEA unit standards, including for English and maths.

These unit standards for English and maths are not transferable if a student returns to mainstream schooling and cannot be counted toward NCEA, meaning students must complete the relevant co-requisite again in mainstream school to achieve their full NCEA certificate. Although this arrangement was designed to increase equity for students enrolled with providers that don't offer achievement standards, it can unintentionally disincentivise students from returning to mainstream school.

> "[Literacy and numeracy unit standards are a] big thing for us. I don't know what we're going to do when those alternative standards for literacy and numeracy disappear. I cannot see, at the moment, how most of our students are coping with the literacy required in the numeracy assessment tasks."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION LEADER**

In Residential Care, we heard that some students gain NCEA credits through health and wellbeing unit standards, but these do not count toward University Entrance. This has created confusion and reduced motivation, particularly for students who aspire to academic options, or whose goals change over time. Staff-to-student ratio requirements at Residential Care also mean that accessing learning with external providers are not always feasible. This further constrains the range course options available. Similar patterns have also emerged in Activity Centres and Alternative Education.

> "I get credits for random stuff. Like I get credits for doing table tennis. I mean, if I could learn things that I want for my job, you know, like algebra?"
>
> **RESIDENTIAL CARE STUDENT**

4) How strong is leadership?

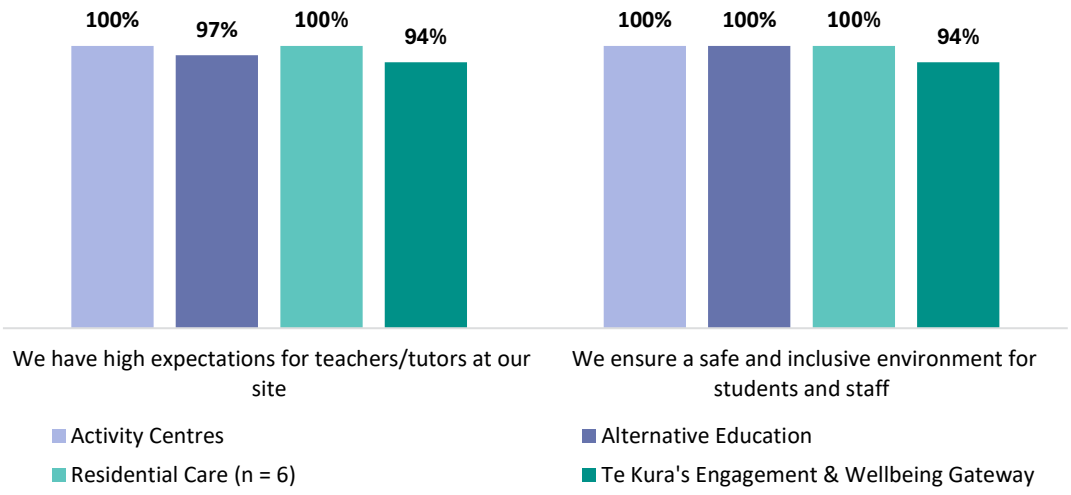
Leadership is often constrained by systemic pressures.

There is strong leadership across alternative settings, but its impact is often limited by wider pressures. Leaders told us they often work with unclear expectations, inconsistent support, and limited resources. This restricts their ability to drive improvement and maintain high-quality practice. As a result, students do not consistently benefit from the stability, coherence, and strategic direction that effective leadership should provide.

Leaders set high expectations for staff and frequently demonstrate strong practice.

Across all alternative settings, leaders set high expectations, collaborate with staff, and focus on safety and inclusion. Almost all leaders report having high expectations for staff (97 percent) and ensuring safe, supportive environments (99 percent).

Figure 48: *Percentage of alternative setting leaders reporting they 'strongly agree' or 'agree' that they have high expectations for staff, and they ensure a safe and inclusive environment, by setting*



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

In the smaller settings – Activity Centres, Alternative Education, and Residential Care – high expectations are established through modelling exemplary practice. Leaders do this by working directly with students, stepping into classrooms, assisting with behaviour, and filling operational gaps.

> "I can't just come in and just sit in the office... If I can't sit out there and hang with my kids and release pressure on my staff, then I'm not the right leader. I've got to be able to collaborate with them, and I got to be able to do every aspect of their job. I've got to be able to write ILPs [individualised learning plans], I've got to be able to do the assessments, I've got to show them that I can do it too."
>
> **RESIDENTIAL CARE LEADER**

At Te Kura, leadership operates differently due to the scale and structure of its national distance model. The two-tiered model means national leadership sets strategic expectations for regional leaders to interpret and implement across dispersed hubs. Although Te Kura leaders also set high expectations, their influence is exercised indirectly through systems, frameworks, and strategic direction rather than daily visibility.

However, the leadership model in smaller settings is heavily reliant on individual effort and is difficult to sustain.

With smaller providers, leaders frequently step far beyond their formal responsibilities to keep provision running, resulting in heavy workloads. This is particularly evident in Alternative Education and Activity Centres. We often heard that leaders' responsibilities are demanding and create risk for staff wellbeing, succession planning, and the long-term stability of the provision.

> "I'm here and I go hard, so I know it's not sustainable. I don't want that model for my staff. And it's modelled in Alternative Education all the time, then there's the scramble of trying to find someone else."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION LEADER**

With its national distance model, Te Kura faces a different challenge – one which is less about heavy workloads and more about strategic load. Leaders must guide a large, distributed organisation while navigating competing pressures around online versus face-to-face provision. Leaders and teachers report a lack of clarity about strategic direction, which contributes to variation in implementation across hubs.

> "There are aspects of the wellbeing strategies at Te Kura that are really good. But there's no alignment. Each region (seven in total) sort of does their own interpretation of wellbeing"
>
> **TE KURA LEADER**

Leaders are unable to maintain a stable workforce or provide consistent professional development.

Leaders in all four settings told us that workforce challenges limit their ability to maintain high-quality teaching and stable environments. Almost seven in ten (69 percent) leaders report that hiring appropriately skilled and qualified staff poses a barrier for their site.

In Activity Centres and Alternative Education, workforce instability is a central pressure point. Leaders report difficulty recruiting qualified staff because salaries are uncompetitive, staffing ratios are inadequate, and there is limited investment in professional development. As a result, leaders often rely on volunteers and part-time staff who are focused on pastoral care rather than formal teaching expertise. We found that this leads to inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and support that students receive.

> "It's not an attractive job. There's no money in it. People get into it because it's vocational, and that's [also] why they fall out of it... they work here because they care."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION LEADER**

While staffing pressures are less acute in Residential Care settings, leaders described operating within a fluid staffing model. This approach allows staff to be deployed across sites within a region in response to changing needs.

Additionally, leaders report that the system does not provide the training infrastructure necessary for developing a specialised workforce. Fragmented access to training – particularly in curriculum design, behaviour support, and trauma-informed practice – means leaders sometimes resort to filling gaps through informal, site-based coaching. Over half (53 percent) of teachers report that lack of training is a barrier, highlighting the need for a more structured and equitable approach to professional learning. A lack of training results in uneven capability across the workforce and reinforces reliance on individual effort, rather than system-supported practice.

> "Because it is a complex system and it's constantly running, it's really hard to just put tools down and train everybody together."
>
> **RESIDENTIAL CARE LEADER**

Similarly, teachers across Te Kura's regional hubs identify a need for further professional learning in key areas, including curriculum design, online teaching approaches, behaviour support, and meeting complex needs. Te Kura is aware that online delivery and large caseloads can limit teachers' ability to build strong relationships with students and is trying address this, in part through more and improved training.

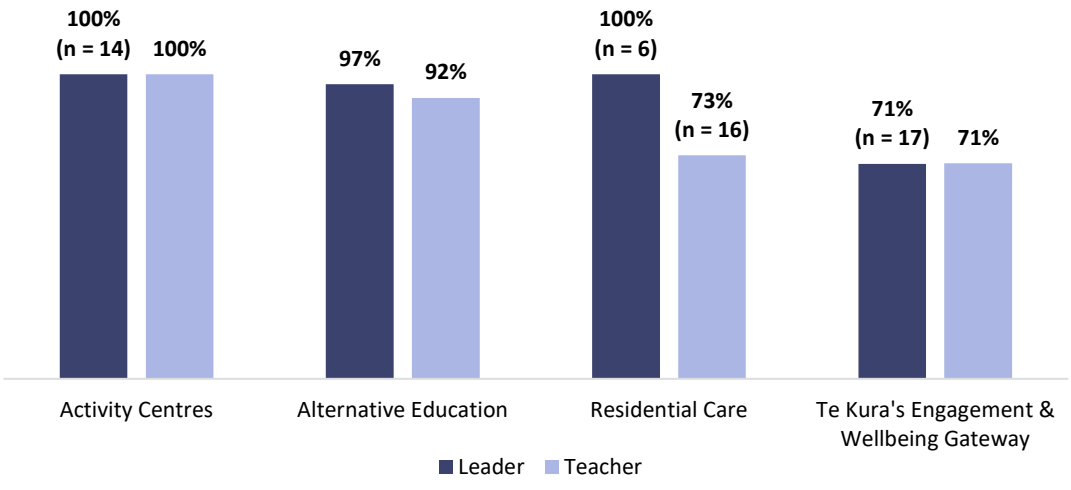
> "[There's a] lack of trauma-informed training. I don't feel that we are supported to engage with the extremely traumatised children who make up the majority of the roll at Te Kura."
>
> **TE KURA TEACHER**

These conditions affect retention – staff experience different expectations, levels of support, and leadership visibility depending on their region, making the workforce feel fragmented and reliant on individual effort.

Data is not being used effectively to strengthen practice or improve outcomes.

While most (91 percent) leaders report using evidence and evaluation to improve education provision, only three-quarters (77 percent) of teachers agree that leaders use evidence and evaluation to improve education provision. This suggests that practice is not yet embedded across the sector. Variation across settings is significant – all (100 percent) Activity Centre teachers report leaders using evidence and evaluation to improve provision, but these rates are much lower in Residential Care settings (73 percent) and Te Kura (71 percent). Because Te Kura comprises the largest proportion of respondents, its lower result substantially influences the overall picture.

Figure 49: *Percentage of alternative setting leaders and teachers reporting they 'strongly agree' or 'agree' leadership uses evidence and evaluation to improve education provision at their site, by setting*



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

In smaller sites, all staff – including leaders – are required to participate directly in programme delivery and day-to-day operational tasks. This limits their ability to allocate time and capacity to more strategic pursuits. Leaders told us they do not have reliable access to the types of data systems, diagnostic tools, or protected analysis time needed to support consistent, evidence informed decision-making. As a result, leaders and staff rely heavily on contextual knowledge and anecdotal information about students' needs and progress. We found that this does not enable a robust or systematic basis for evaluating programme effectiveness, monitoring progress, or designing targeted interventions.

There are examples of emerging evaluative capability. Some leaders describe using individual learning profiles, reviewing academic information, and reflecting formally on practice to understand what is working and where changes are needed. These behaviours indicate a growing commitment to evidence informed improvement. However, such practices appear to be driven by individual leader initiative rather than sector wide structures or expectations.

5) How strong is pastoral care?

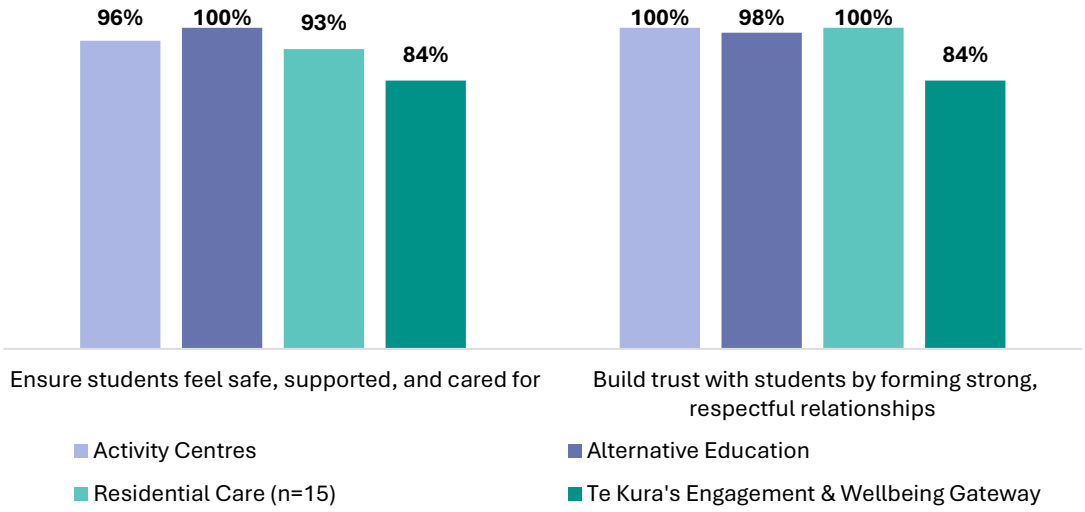
Pastoral support is strong across alternative settings, exceeding the level typically seen in mainstream schools.

Pastoral support in alternative settings typically exceeds what students experience in mainstream schools. Strong, relationship-based pastoral care helps rebuild safety, trust, and emotional stability, providing the foundations students need to reconnect with education and re-engage in learning. This is key, as many students in alternative settings disengaged from mainstream education in part because their wellbeing needs were not met, which can lead to reduced attendance, lower engagement in learning, or escalating behaviour concerns.

Staff cultivate trust and safety so that students feel grounded and ready to learn.

Across all alternative settings, we found that staff place a strong emphasis on trust and safety. Most teachers report ensuring that students feel safe and cared for (84–100 percent) and building trust through strong relationships (84–100 percent). Many students arrive not ready to engage in learning due to experiences of exclusion, trauma, disrupted schooling, or ongoing instability. Pastoral care is the foundation that enables students to participate in education. We heard about how this focus happens through deliberate approaches to every-day interactions and routines that build connection.

Figure 50: *Percentage of alternative setting teachers reporting they ensure students feel safe and supported, and build trust and strong relationships with students, by setting*



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

In Activity Centres, staff told us they consistently begin and end the day with shared routines like karakia and kai, creating predictable points of connection that reinforce belonging. In Alternative Education, students experience close, consistent relationships with staff who know them well, creating a whānau-like environment that supports the rebuilding of trust.

In Residential Care, therapeutic relationship building is a core mechanism for supporting students with high and complex needs. We were told that staff act as stabilising adults through consistent, calm, and respectful responses, particularly during moments of distress or escalation. These interactions provide students with lived examples of emotional regulation and constructive ways of managing relationships. Leaders emphasise the importance of connection to counter prior experiences of punishment or exclusion, and support the development of the emotional safety required for learning.

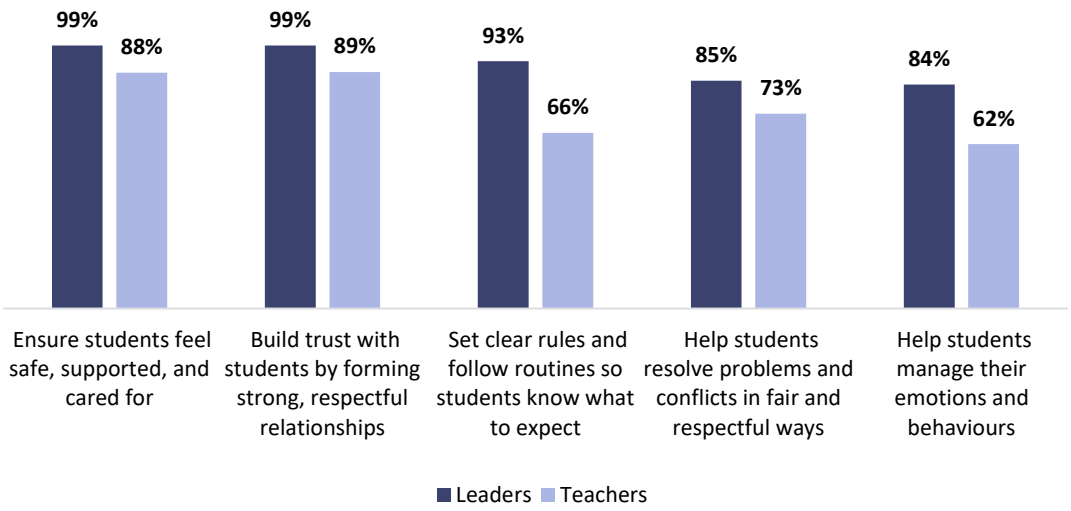
> "That first connection that the teachers make with the rangatahi is crucial. They've got to understand that they're not going to be judged just because they're a 14-year-old brown boy wearing a hoodie."
>
> **RESIDENTIAL CARE LEADER**

At Te Kura this happens through dedicated wellbeing roles that maintain regular contact with students and help build connection within an online environment. Although these interactions look different from face-to-face provision, they offer consistency, responsiveness, and a reliable adult presence.

For many students, these settings provide a critical level of stability and acceptance amongst often disrupted education and complex life circumstances. These practices make a difference for students – teachers in settings that help students manage emotions and behaviour are more than 23 times as likely to observe improved attendance from their students.[u]

> "[Teachers] understand you emotionally. They know if you're having a bad day, they know what to do. [If] you need space, you can go for a walk. [At school] they had a lot of students to deal with. So, I feel like you can't really get that one-on-one attention there."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION STUDENT**

Figure 51: *Percentage of alternative setting leaders and teachers reporting their site places a 'very high' or 'high' focus on the following practices*



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

Some settings provide extensive supports to remove underlying barriers to learning, but access to specialist support is rarely sufficient for the level of need.

Some settings provide extensive supports to remove underlying barriers to learning. Across alternative settings, comprehensive support systems play a central role in helping students address the challenges that prevent them from engaging in learning. These supports often extend well beyond the classroom – offering practical assistance, emotional support, and continuity of care when young people face instability. However, the level and type of support vary markedly by setting, shaped by staff capacity, local networks, and uneven access to specialist services.

u A set of logistic regressions is used to understand how student experiences, school practices, and background characteristics are associated with key outcomes (such as entry into settings, attendance, and intentions to return to school).

Counselling, youth work, mental health support, and therapeutic interventions are inconsistently available and often insufficient for the complexity of students' needs.

In Alternative Education, providers commonly offer extensive pastoral care that encompasses transport, food, clothing, and health-related support to ensure students' basic needs are met. Support frequently extends to whole families, with staff stepping in during crises and providing sustained emotional and practical assistance.

> "They pick me up... I get dropped off... We get hot lunches."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION STUDENT**

> "Whaea [site leader] took the burden off me. I feel lighter... She's my family. We call each other family because this is our family now."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PARENT**

However, access to specialist services is much more variable. Many Alternative Education sites rely on ad hoc arrangements with managing schools or community providers, leading to inconsistent access to counselling or youth work. In some sites, health nurses or external youth organisations visit only occasionally, and specialist support often depends on staff persistence, community relationships, and the goodwill of individual practitioners.

> "The only support we really get is from the health nurse, that comes in on a Wednesday. We've got a youth group that comes in maybe twice a year, leave their cards and stuff, so kids can make contact, for confidential, free-of-charge talks. But other than that, we don't get anything else."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION LEADER**

Activity Centres offer a similar mix of pastoral support and limited specialist provision. Students often benefit from consistent check-ins and occasional visits from counsellors or nurses, but the time allocated to these services is typically very small – sometimes only a few hours a week per site. As a result, access varies significantly. Some centres benefit from routine counselling visits, while others report students seeing a counsellor only once during their entire placement. Like Alternative Education, youth workers are often unavailable, and securing mental health support remains a challenge.

> "We struggle a lot to access mental health resources for this cohort of kids. We've got about three hours a week of guidance counsellor... But even so, three hours is not a lot..."
>
> **ACTIVITY CENTRE TEACHER**

Residential Care settings provide the most intensive and structured comprehensive supports. Alongside therapeutic programmes targeting harmful or offending behaviours, staff teach practical life skills and maintain contact after hours and during holidays to support continuity and reduce reoffending.

> "Having our mentors who keep the connection [with the students] during the holiday and afterhours is key. It stops students from offending."
>
> **RESIDENTIAL CARE LEADER**

Residential Care typically has stronger access to specialist services through onsite therapeutic teams or established clinical support. However, the institutional environment and the strict security requirements around staff ratios, how students can interact with one another, and health and safety rules can limit flexibility, with structured routines and restricted movement sometimes reducing the responsiveness of support.

Te Kura, which has seen rapid growth in enrolments through the Engagement and Wellbeing gateway, is supporting an increasingly complex group of students, yet its specialist support capacity has not kept pace. Many students who would benefit from access to youth workers, counsellors, or therapeutic services are not receiving the depth of support needed, and teachers noted the limitations of relying on curriculum staff to respond to high psychological or emotional needs.

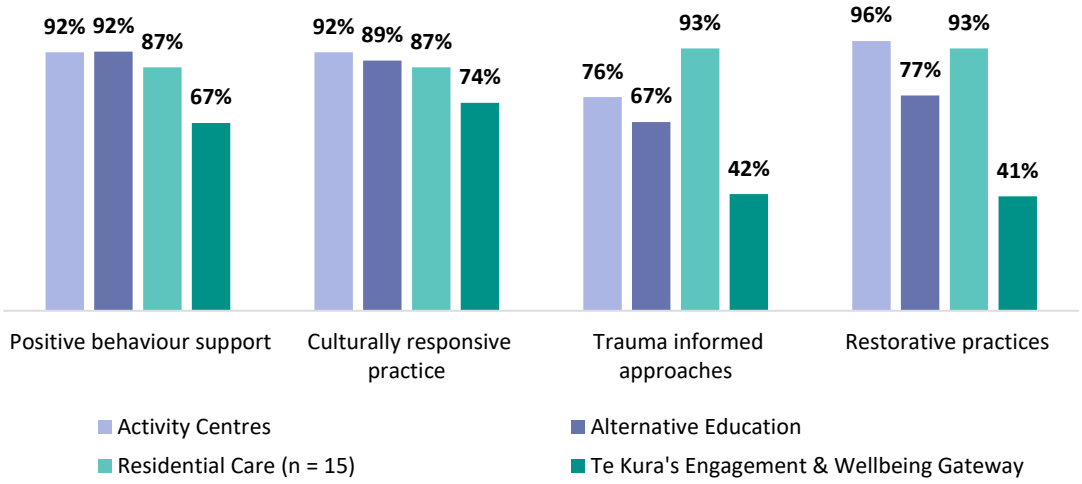
> "I feel more of these ākonga need specifically trained counsellors – not a curriculum kaiako – to support them with these high psychological and emotional needs."
>
> **TE KURA TEACHER**

Staff are inconsistently prepared to support students with high needs.

Because specialist access is limited, staff across all settings described being increasingly responsible for managing complex wellbeing, behavioural, and mental health needs. Teachers and leaders describe managing trauma responses, mental health crises, and challenging family situations without reliable access to expert support.

Against this backdrop, there are some capability gaps in several areas critical for supporting students with high needs. We found that capability is strongest in Residential Care and Activity Centres, where high proportions of teachers report confidence in positive behaviour support, trauma-informed approaches, and restorative practice. In contrast, capability is weakest at Te Kura, where markedly fewer staff report high confidence across all three areas. For example, only two in five Te Kura teachers report that staff have a high ability to support students through restorative practice (41 percent) or trauma-informed approaches (42 percent). These differences highlight uneven access to the skills most critical for supporting students with high and complex needs.

Figure 52: *Percentage of alternative setting teachers reporting the ability of staff at their site is 'very high' or 'high' for different approaches, by setting*



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

These capabilities are key to address the needs of students in alternative settings. Teachers repeatedly describe feeling underprepared and stretched, particularly in Te Kura, where we heard that the complexity of the Engagement and Wellbeing cohort has outpaced available training.

> "Despite years of teaching experience, and parenthood with some training and professional development opportunities, I often feel out of my depth with the level of support a growing number of ākonga need and would like to feel better prepared."
>
> **TE KURA TEACHER**

Online learning does not meet these students' wider needs.

The online learning model, by its nature, poses challenges for Te Kura's ability to embed pastoral support. In face-to-face learning environments like Activity Centres, Alternative Education, and Residential Care, staff can identify student needs early and respond in real time, and are physically present to provide practical assistance, as previously described.

Staff at Te Kura are constrained because of its online delivery model. We heard that some students like the distance model because it offers flexibility and reduces sensory demands by learning from home. However, many other students report that online delivery provides inconsistent access to meaningful pastoral connection, which is especially concerning for senior students, who tend to have less time with their kaimanaaki, and for students in rural areas with fewer opportunities for face-to-face support.

> "The biggest challenge is the isolation factor."
>
> **TE KURA TEACHER**

6) How strong are the processes for onboarding students?

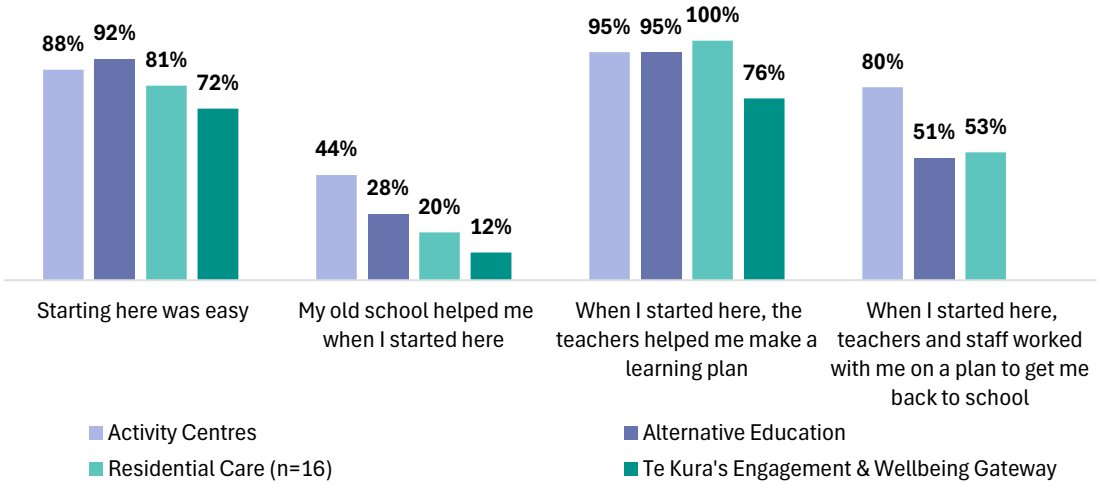
Onboarding practices are strong, but hindered by delays in data sharing.

Transitions into alternative settings are a critical point of intervention. While onboarding processes are generally strong and help stabilise students at entry, reintegration is rarely well supported in practice. A lack of consistency and availability of information compounds this issue.

Transitions into alternative settings are usually well managed.

Many students report that their start was easy (79 percent) and that teachers co-constructed a learning plan at entry (83 percent). Activity Centres demonstrate particularly strong onboarding, with almost all students reporting that teachers helped them create a learning plan at entry (95 percent), that starting was easy (88 percent), and that they began on a plan back to school from the outset (80 percent).

Figure 53: *Percentage of students who 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with statements about onboarding practices, by setting*[v]



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

Across alternative settings, onboarding is described as a deliberate process focused on re-establishing learning routines after disrupted schooling and helping students settle quickly into a structured, supportive environment.

> "[When they start], it's really on us... to show the other young people of how people should be treated here, remind them everyone deserves to be here... [The older kids] are really good at welcoming new people in, show them the ropes and let them know what is okay and what they shouldn't be doing."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION TEACHER**

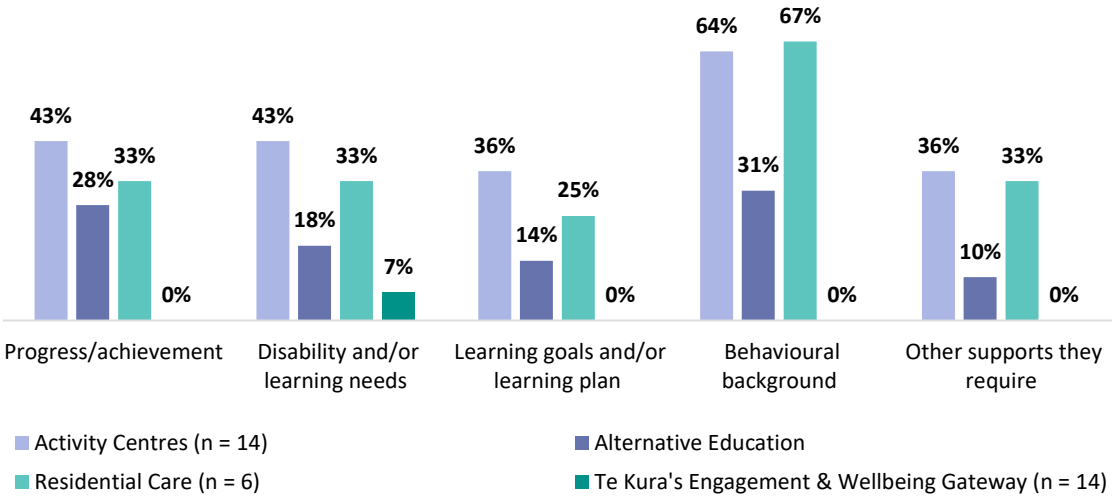
Data sharing delays can affect the quality and timeliness of onboarding.

Despite strong intake practices, we found that onboarding is let down by delays and inconsistencies in data sharing. There are unclear responsibilities for who should provide information when students transition out of mainstream schools. This leads to inconsistency in what information is shared, how complete it is, and whether it arrives in time to support planning. As a result, providers often begin working with students without the information needed at entry, limiting the effectiveness of otherwise well-designed onboarding processes.

v Data for "When I started here, teachers and staff worked with me on a plan to get me back to school" are not available for Te Kura (E&W).

Information flows also differ by setting, with Residential Care consistently reporting the highest levels of information access (up to two-thirds for behaviour backgrounds), while Alternative Education reports the lowest levels across most information types. Activity Centres, which are more closely connected to mainstream schools, also receive more information than other settings. We heard that the information provided is heavily weighted toward behaviour rather than learning needs or academic history. Even in settings with relationships with schools, the information shared does not provide a balanced or sufficiently comprehensive view of students' learning needs.

Figure 54: *Percentage of alternative setting leaders reporting, they receive 'a lot' of information from students enrolling schools or previous place of learning, by setting*



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

It is a challenge for Te Kura that no agency or school holds clear responsibility for initiating the transfer of information when students enrol, and this lack of ownership results in severely limited and often delayed data flows. Leaders report receiving almost none of the information required to form a meaningful understanding of new students.

This means staff begin onboarding with minimal formal insight into students' prior learning or support needs. To compensate, staff describe how Te Kura increasingly relies on direct engagement with students and their parents and whānau to reconstruct learning histories.

> "We visit ākonga at home, large amount of time spent working with other agencies and specialists, on communicating with ākonga and their whānau... I feel like I'm chasing what's going on"
>
> **TE KURA TEACHER**

7) How strong are the supports for future pathways?

Transitions and pathways for young people in these settings are worryingly limited.

While onboarding systems help stabilise students on entry, the supports that guide students out of alternative settings and into future pathways are far less consistent. Pathways from alternative settings – whether back to mainstream schooling, toward vocational programmes, or into further education – are often limited, unevenly planned, and constrained by systemic barriers.

Pathways out of most alternative settings offer little support for successful reintegration into mainstream schooling.

More than four in ten (43 percent) students say that they do not have a plan to return to school, and almost half (48 percent) report having no clear pathway for when they leave. Without structured planning, students are less equipped to reconnect with their enrolling school, meet academic expectations, or re-establish relationships – limiting their chances of a successful return.

Where reintegration planning is deliberate and early, the impact is substantial. Across settings, students who have a return to school plan are 8.5 times as likely to intend to return to school and 2.7 times as likely to continue in education. Their parents are 36 times as likely to expect a return and 3.4 times more likely to expect continued learning. This shows that reintegration planning is not just an administrative task – it can be a powerful predictor of whether students believe school is a viable and supported option.

We found that Activity Centres offer the strongest reintegration pathways, reflecting their design as short-term interventions aimed at returning students to mainstream schooling. Four in five (80 percent) students say they began with a plan to return to school, and over four in five (83 percent) of teachers report establishing transition plans for "most or all" students within two months. The close link between Activity Centres and mainstream schools helps keep pathways open. Information flows are more reliable, re-entry expectations are explicit, and most leaders report sharing comprehensive learning information with receiving schools.

> "So, the school outlined goals of what they want [for students to return]. I always say to the student, 'your school has given me these goals that they want you to work on. Do you think these are relevant? And how do you feel about them?'"
>
> **ACTIVITY CENTRE LEADER**

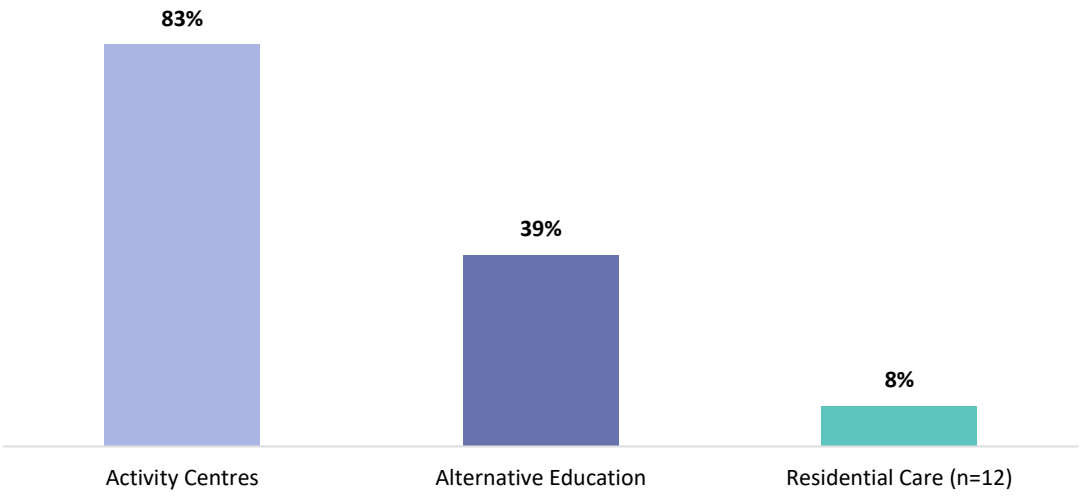
In Alternative Education, we heard that returning to school is neither prioritised nor consistently planned for. Only half (51 percent) of students report starting with a plan to return, and four in ten (39 percent) teachers say most students have a transition plan within two months of starting. As a result, many students, parents and whānau, and staff perceive a return to mainstream schooling as an unrealistic option, largely due to limited planning and the lack of continuity of supports once students leave the site.

> "[Students] struggle when they go back because mainstream school is not set up to support them . They struggle without the support they had with us."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION TEACHER**

Reintegration is further undermined by poor information flows at intake, and stigma from enrolling schools; nearly a third (28 percent) of Alternative Education leaders report that mainstream schools often refuse re-enrolment. As a result, Alternative Education pathways tend to pivot toward vocational options, often at the expense of reopening school pathways or keeping students engaged in NCEA.

Residential Care has the most constrained pathways for reintegration, largely due to external decision-making and the complexity of students' needs. Teachers describe how they are often excluded from transition decisions and have limited visibility of students' post exit arrangements. This lack of influence is reflected in the very low proportion of teachers (8 percent) who report developing transition plans with most students within two months of entry. Significant barriers arise when reintegration is attempted; half (50 percent) of Residential Care leaders report that mainstream schools often refuse enrolment.

Figure 55: *Percentage of alternative setting teachers reporting 'all' or 'most' students have a transition plan within two months of starting, by setting*



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

As a state school, Te Kura views referrals, including those made through the Engagement and Wellbeing gateway, as long-term enrolments rather than short-term interventions. Its systems, expectations, and supports are built around helping students continue learning within Te Kura, rather than preparing them to return to face-to-face schooling. Reintegration is therefore not an explicit goal, and there are no established models or mechanisms to facilitate it.

Access to vocational pathways is inconsistent and limits transitions into further training or employment.

Future planning toward vocational pathways varies across alternative settings, with funding constraints, geographic isolation, and limited placements restricting opportunities for many students. Where mentoring, liaison roles, and collaborative planning are in place, vocational outcomes improve; however, these supports are not consistently embedded and often depend on individual staff rather than systematised processes.

In Activity Centres, future planning primarily targets a return to school, but for older students, where re-entry is less realistic, plans can pivot to employment or training. Limited NCEA credit accumulation can narrow access to vocational options requiring foundation credits. Leaders and teachers do share comprehensive exit information, and some centres provide extended follow-up, which helps maintain momentum.

Alternative Education demonstrates the most active vocational orientation. Staff describe brokering links to polytechnic and wānanga courses, and employer led programmes (e.g., Red Shirts, OASIS Gateway). However, provision is patchy – many sites rely on individual teacher networks, making opportunities inconsistent and vulnerable to staff turnover. We observed that post exit support is largely informal, and the absence of formal destination tracking limits insight into sustained engagement in work or study.

> “We’d hear bits and pieces [about students] after they leave us. But there’s no real tracking of it. Once we’ve made the transition for them, that’s kind of where it ends.”
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION TEACHER**

Te Kura provides access to a range of vocational exploration opportunities (e.g., STAR, Trades Academy, and Gateway), and students in the Engagement and Wellbeing gateway and their parents say these are valued where accessible. However, we heard that access to these opportunities is uneven across regions, and some programmes should be made available to more students. These limitations largely reflect wider system constraints rather than factors within Te Kura’s control.

> "The Trades Academy is crucial to many of our Year 11+ students, but funding is so tight that... many miss out... it is disappointing to turn [students] away due to placement."
>
> **TE KURA TEACHER**

Teachers describe Te Kura's Leaving to Learn programme as providing valuable opportunities for Year 11–13 students to explore interests and career pathways. However, access to this programme comes too late to guide next steps for the nearly one-third (32 percent) of students in the Engagement and Wellbeing gateway who leave school before Year 11. We also heard that the absence of dedicated Careers Advisors at Te Kura means some parents and whānau seek guidance externally, and post transition oversight is limited – only 36 percent of teachers and 13 percent of leaders report providing follow-up support.

In Residential Care, access to vocational pathways is particularly limited. Security requirements and supervision rules significantly restrict participation in off-site training, and available options are often narrow or poorly aligned with students' needs. As a result, vocational provision is frequently constrained to on-site or adapted programmes, limiting students' opportunities to transition into further training or employment.

8) How strong is parental engagement?

Parental engagement can be challenging and varies across settings.

For many young people, disengagement from mainstream school has also meant reduced or strained communication between home and school. Maintaining strong parental engagement is important because families play a key role in supporting attendance, stability, and learning progress. When engagement is inconsistent or declines after entry, opportunities to reinforce learning, coordinate support, and sustain progress become more limited for students who already face significant barriers to engagement.

Parent engagement often peaks during enrolment but is not sustained.

At Te Kura, we found strong engagement with parents and whānau of students in the Engagement and Wellbeing gateway, particularly during onboarding. Most staff report working closely with parents and whānau at entry, and three-quarters (77 percent) of parents say they were involved in developing learning plans. This reflects the central role parents and whānau play as supervisors, helping create conducive learning environments by managing distractions, supporting tasks, and ensuring access to equipment.

We heard that parental engagement tends to decline over time, with limited opportunities to support students' learning. Ongoing contact from providers can be more about daily behaviours, such as lateness, attendance, and behaviour incidents, rather than updates about learning, overall progress, or next steps. This limits opportunities for parents and whānau to support educational progress and may lead to reduced engagement. Supervisors of students in Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway, who are often parents or whānau members, told us they needed more structured support, including opportunities to connect with other supervisors and share strategies.

> "[There is] no real support [to help us] do a good job of being a supervisor. [It] would be good to have some sessions about effective pedagogy, group facilitation... an opportunity to meet and share practice. I'm concerned about other parents/whānau who do not have the... resources [to supervise] their child."
>
> **TE KURA PARENT – ENGAGEMENT AND WELLBEING GATEWAY**

In Activity Centres and Alternative Education, ongoing parental engagement is mixed. We heard that some parents attend meetings and contribute to transition planning, while others face barriers to participation, including time constraints and previous negative experiences with schools. Staff report that parents often lack visibility of what is being taught, and communication about next steps is inconsistent.

> "There are parents that will come in here, sit down, ask for information about pathway, and what's going on. For those, we will provide everything that we can for their children to be successful. But we're talking one parent out of 30."
>
> **ACTIVITY CENTRE LEADER**

Residential Care sites face the most challenges. Staff told us that engagement is often facilitated through social workers or caregivers rather than parents, reducing direct involvement and making informal communication difficult.

> "There's no parent-teacher interview sort of scenario. The report goes to the social worker, but I don't know if that goes further. I feel like building a relationship with family would be better."
>
> **RESIDENTIAL CARE TEACHER**

Conclusion

Overall, provision in alternative settings relies heavily on individual staff effort and local conditions rather than being supported by a consistently strong model. This results in uneven provision and unequal educational opportunities for students with similar needs. Oftentimes, the quality of education is insufficient to support sustained improvement in outcomes for students. Our findings show considerable variability across the alternative learning system, with students' access to high-quality teaching, curriculum, and pathways differing substantially by setting, provider, and location.

In the next chapter, we focus on the school and system-level factors that contribute to poor provision and outcomes for students in alternative settings.

Art from students learning in alternative settings

Part 7: How good are schools at retaining students in mainstream education?

Reducing the number of students entering alternative provision requires a clear understanding of why schools are referring students and what supports they might need to retain and reintegrate them. Referral rates vary widely and are highly concentrated in a small number of schools. This chapter examines how schools are supporting students to remain engaged, highlighting where retention efforts are working well and where they need to be strengthened.

What we looked at

In this chapter, we explore how effective mainstream schools are at retaining students in mainstream education. We have drawn upon:

- Our surveys and interviews of students, parents and whānau, school leaders, and setting teachers and leaders
- Our key informant interviews with agency representatives and expert advisors
- ERO's school review data
- National administrative data from the Ministry of Education
- Previous ERO reports, including the review of attendance (2025), Alternative Education (2023), and disabled students (2022).

This chapter explores:

1) Which schools refer more students and why
2) What strategies schools are using to retain students
3) How our system supports retention of students in school.

What we found

Students' needs are increasing, and schools are not well set up to meet these challenges.

- **Schools report that increasing numbers of students need support and that schools are not set up to meet this challenge.** Nine in ten (92 percent) leaders in high referring schools report that stronger support for learning needs and neurodiversity would help them retain more students in mainstream schooling. Seven in ten (73 percent) also say that having more effective processes for addressing behavioural issues earlier would support greater retention.

How likely students are to enter alternative settings also depends on the schools they go to. Some schools are much more likely to refer students to alternative settings. Three in five referrals come from just 12 percent of schools.

- **Referral rates vary enormously, with some schools far more likely to refer students to alternative settings than others.** Some schools made only a single referral across a three-year period, while one school referred as many as 177 students – equivalent to about one in eight students on their roll.
- **Referral activity is highly concentrated, and socioeconomic disadvantage alone does not account for these differences.** Sixty percent of all referrals between 2022 and 2024 coming from just 12 percent of schools.

Many schools work hard to support students to stay in mainstream education. Schools that are most effective at retaining students build strong relationships, provide tailored support and create a sense of belonging to the school.

- **Schools with stronger retention deliberately identify and respond to students' barriers to engagement.** These schools often involve parents and whānau, use tailored practices, and offer extensive additional support to address students' barriers.
- **Schools that rarely refer students to alternative settings help students build a strong sense of belonging to their school community throughout everyday teaching and curriculum.** As ERO has previously found, belonging is a key driver of attendance and engagement – students who feel they belong at school are around five times more likely to attend regularly than those who do not.
- **Some schools have created interschool networks** that allow leaders to work proactively with neighbouring schools to support at-risk students through local transfers, reducing the need to refer them out of mainstream education and into alternative pathways.

These findings are set out in more detail below.

1) Which schools refer more students and why?

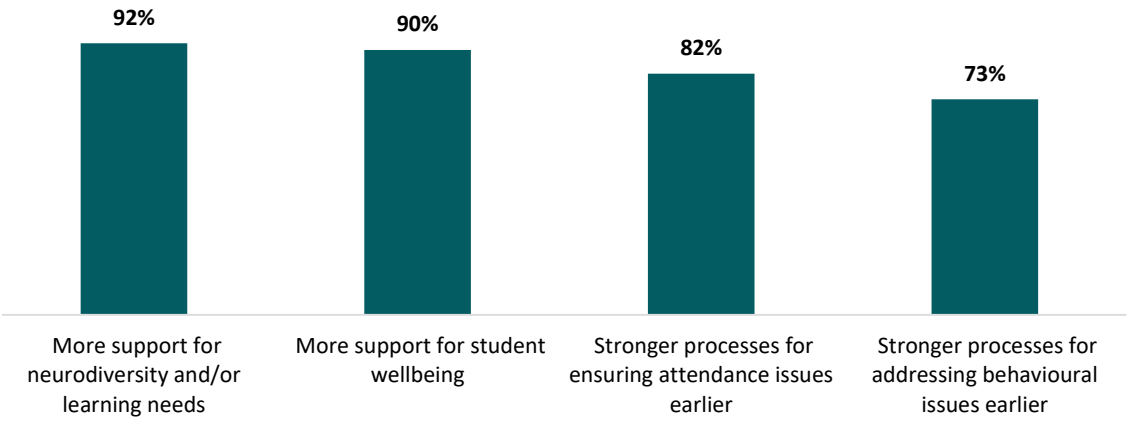
To understand how effective schools are at retaining students in mainstream education, we looked at schools with high and low referral rates to alternative settings to identify patterns and to understand what strategies successful schools use to retain their students.

Students' needs are increasing, and schools are not well set up to meet these challenges.

Increasing numbers of young people are presenting complex behavioural challenges, learning needs, and mental health issues that many mainstream schools lack the capacity or resources to support effectively.[117] High-referring school leaders report that this lack of support contributes directly to students being moved out of mainstream education. Nine in ten high-referring school leaders told us that stronger support for neurodiversity and learning needs (92 percent), and wellbeing (90 percent) would help them retain more students in mainstream education. Seven in ten (73 percent) also say that having more effective processes for addressing behavioural issues earlier would support greater retention.

As discussed in Part 2, students with these needs are more likely to be referred to alternative settings when their behavioral, emotional, and educational needs are not adequately met within their mainstream school setting.

Figure 56: *Percentage of high-referral school leaders who report more support for student needs would be helpful in retaining students*



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

School leaders described substantial efforts to keep students engaged. However, these initiatives may not be feasible for smaller schools that are already operating within limited resourcing constraints.

> "We are a smaller school. Our funding is not huge that you can have resource to spread around."
>
> **SCHOOL LEADER**

Some students in alternative settings told us they would need more consistent support if they were to return to mainstream schooling. They emphasised the importance of extra academic help, more flexibility in expectations, and adults who understand the challenges they face. Even small adjustments, such as clearer explanations or having more opportunities to ask for help, would make a meaningful difference to their ability to re-engage and succeed.

> "[I would need] a little bit of leniency, I guess. Just like, I need help with my work because I don't quite understand it sometimes. The more help I could get would be better."
>
> ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION STUDENT

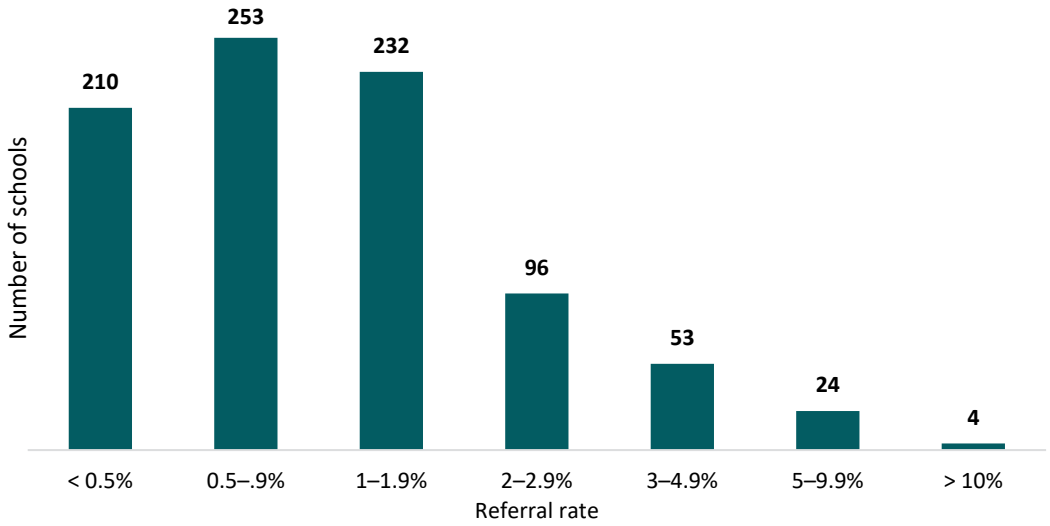
School referral rates to alternative settings vary significantly – from fewer than one in a thousand, to as high as one in eight.

From 2022 to 2024, more than seven in ten (71 percent) secondary schools referred at least one student to one of the four alternative settings, with an average of eight referrals per school each year.

However, referral volumes varied dramatically between schools. Some schools made only a single referral across the entire three-year period, while one school referred as many as 177 students – equivalent to about one in eight students on their roll, with most referrals to Te Kura.

This wide variation suggests that schools differ substantially in how they use alternative settings, with some relying on them sparingly and others using them as a significant part of their response to student need.

Figure 57: *Number of schools by referral rate as a percentage of school roll*



Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data, 2022-2024*

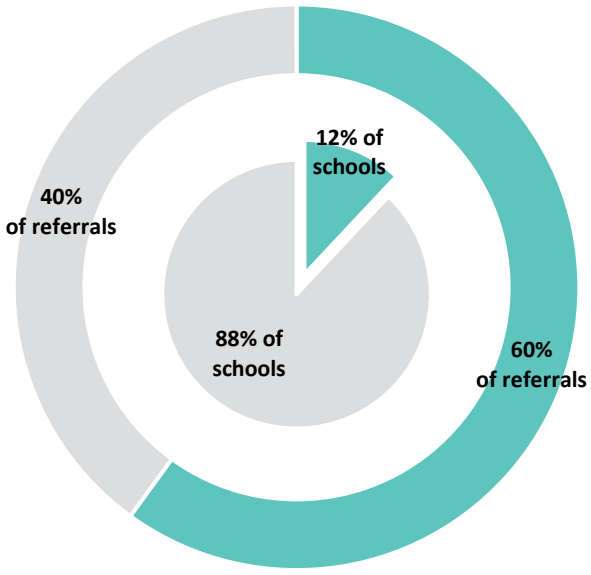
Among schools serving communities with similar levels of socioeconomic disadvantage, referral rates still vary. Three in five referrals come from just 12 percent of schools.

Schools in low socioeconomic communities are more likely to have students who experience challenges that can lead to disengagement.

However, even among these schools, some are referring far more students than others, despite serving student populations with very similar characteristics and backgrounds. When we compared schools with closely matched demographics, attendance patterns, behavioural profiles, and socioeconomic contexts, referrals still varied between schools by 33 percent.

Referral activity is highly concentrated, with three in five (60 percent) of all referrals between 2022 and 2024 coming from just 12 percent of schools. This includes primary schools which account for 1 out of 7 (14 percent) of referrals to alternative settings. Excluding primary schools, the concentration remains high – half of referrals from intermediate and secondary schools come from just 15 percent of these schools.

Figure 58: *Percentage of referrals to alternative settings, by school contribution*



Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data, 2022-2024*

We found that differences in referral practices, school processes, and local approaches to support and decision-making are likely to play a role.

Referral rates can depend on the availability of alternative options within a region.

School leaders told us that the availability of suitable options strongly shapes referral practices. In areas where no nearby face-to-face provision exists, students in remote regions are often referred to Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway by necessity rather than suitability.

Leaders emphasise that the broader issue is the uneven availability of alternative pathways across the country. Schools in rural or geographically isolated communities frequently have few, if any, appropriate local options. This lack of provision directly influences how schools respond to students with high support needs.

> "There are geographical issues in every sense... At one place, they've got 14 places in their alternative provision, and a community of less than 20,000. They need every one of those places. And some areas have got two alternative sites for two high schools in a city."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION LEADER**

School leaders' confidence in alternative setting's effectiveness, and how responsible for the student they feel, influences their referral decisions.

Leaders' confidence in available pathways and underlying philosophies about student engagement influence how referral decisions are made. These factors influence whether a referral occurs, which pathway is selected, as well as when it is considered appropriate, and how responsibility for a student's future learning is understood within the school.

Leaders have mixed views about the different settings. Leaders consistently describe Activity Centres as supportive, relationship-based environments that help students stabilise and reintegrate into school. Because Activity Centres are viewed as short-term, rehabilitative extensions of the school – and not as long-term exits – leaders report being more confident referring students there.

> "There are not enough Activity Centres. They are like gold... They are the middle ground where the focus is getting students back to school in a really short-term, focused way."
>
> **SCHOOL LEADER**

Leaders are less comfortable referring students to Alternative Education. Many view Alternative Education as a longer-term or permanent destination and are concerned that students could disengage from mainstream schooling altogether. This perception makes referral decisions more difficult. Leaders described weighing the benefits of specialised provision against the possibility that a student might not return to school, which in turn shaped the timing and likelihood of referral.

Some leaders describe referral being used not just as a support pathway, but as a way to shift responsibility when they feel they can no longer manage a student. In these cases, once internal supports are exhausted and staff believe reintegration is unlikely, referral becomes a mechanism for moving the student out of the school rather than improving their chances of success.

> "[The students] are someone else's responsibility now. If they go to Alternative Education, there's a high likelihood that they won't return – only because we've been thorough with our processes. You're maxed out on what you can offer. School is not necessarily the right place for them going forward."
>
> **SCHOOL LEADER**

These insights show that referral practices are influenced not only by student needs but also by leaders' views about the purpose and outcomes of alternative settings, the likelihood of re-engagement, and the extent to which the school sees itself as continuing to hold responsibility for the student.

2) What strategies are schools using to retain students?

To understand what helps schools retain students, we looked at approaches taken by low-referring schools and the wider evidence on how to keep students engaged.

Schools support retention by identifying and responding to students' specific barriers to engagement.

Leaders and teachers describe actively supporting students' needs through a range of approaches depending on students' specific barriers to engaging in school.

Almost nine in ten (89 percent) leaders in low-referring schools say that they often involve parents and whānau to support engagement. This involves regular meetings that help identify barriers and connect parents and whānau with additional services they may need, and to ensure that aspirations meaningfully shape each student's learning plan.

> "Often it's the same [barriers] that stop other kids attending – things like transport, food, clothing, not having a home that can support them."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION LEADER**

Schools also report offering extensive additional support to address students' barriers to learning. This includes Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCos), Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLBs), teacher aides and strong pastoral leadership. They also describe collaboration with external agencies such as attendance services, counselling providers, and health services because of broader socioeconomic pressures. Schools also use specialist practices, such as restorative practices, to support students to engage.

Building belonging supports students to remain engaged.

Students feeling like they belong strengthens engagement early and helps prevent attendance and disengagement issues from escalating.

Evidence shows that when schools have predictable routines, shared language, strong teacher–student relationships, and proactive behaviour approaches, they create safe and calm spaces. In these conditions, belonging is stronger and engagement, attendance, and retention improve.[118]

ERO's 2025 Attendance report found that students who feel they belong at school are five times more likely to believe daily attendance is important, while those with leadership or mentoring responsibilities are twice as likely to value attendance.[119] Practices such as tuākana–tēina relationships[w] build pride, purpose, and influence, acting as precursors to improved attendance and retention. Schools with stronger retention embed these practices consistently across school life.

We found that low-referring schools embed belonging and inclusion throughout everyday teaching, curriculum, wellbeing, and behaviour approaches, rather than relying on standalone interventions.

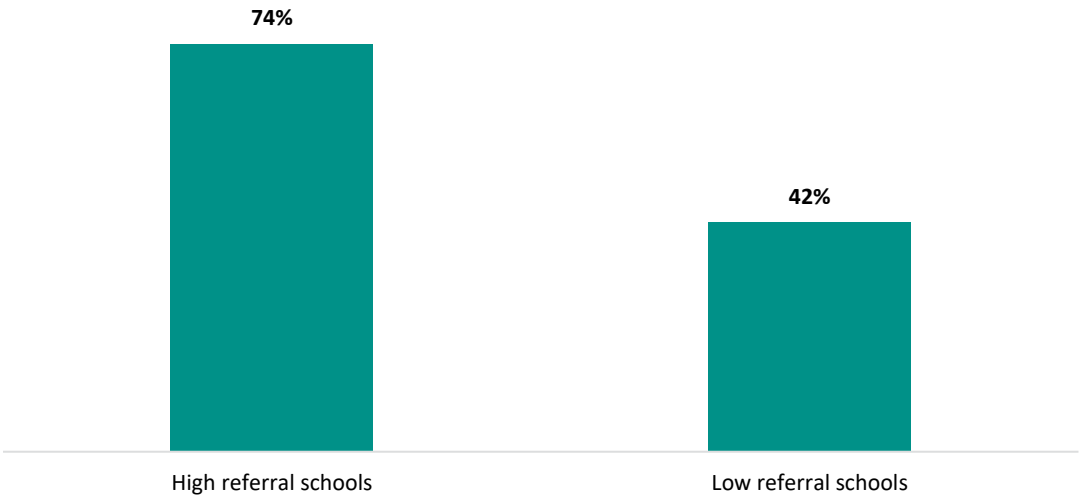
Strong, seamless transitions between primary and secondary schools boost student retention.

A recurring message from staff in alternative settings and leaders in mainstream schools is the importance of a smooth transition from primary, intermediate and secondary schooling. When this transition is difficult, students are far more likely to experience disengagement, and in some cases, this can lead to referral to an alternative setting.

When asked what additional supports would help retain more students in mainstream schooling, leaders in high referring schools most often pointed to the need for stronger transition processes for new secondary students. Three quarters (74 percent) of leaders in these schools said improved transition support would help reduce referrals, compared with fewer than half (42 percent) of leaders in low referring schools. This gap suggests that high-referring schools face greater pressure at this transition point.

w Tuākana-tēina is a Māori mentoring model where an older or more experienced person (tuākana) supports and guides a younger or less experienced person (tēina).

Figure 59: *Percentage of school leaders reporting that stronger processes for supporting new students transition to this school would be helpful in retaining students, by high- and low-referring schools*



Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data (2022-2024), and survey data*

School leaders describe a range of challenges associated with the move from primary or intermediate to secondary schooling. They noted that these learning environments differ substantially in structure and expectations. At secondary school, students move between multiple classrooms, interact with several teachers each day, and must navigate new peer groups, timetable structures, and curriculum demands. These shifts can make school feel disorienting or overwhelming, particularly for neurodivergent students, those with anxiety, or students who have already experienced disrupted learning.

Leaders also highlighted that primary schools typically offer more stable relationships and closer daily monitoring of wellbeing and progress. When students leave this environment, the increased independence expected at secondary level can expose underlying vulnerabilities that were not as visible earlier, leading to dips in attendance, motivation, and behaviour. Schools report that without adequate support, this transitional stress can accumulate quickly, resulting in disengagement within the first term.

Research evidence reinforces the significance of this period. Studies consistently show that the transition from primary or intermediate to secondary school is associated with increased feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression,[120] decreased motivation and engagement,[121] and a decline in academic performance.[122] Although these shifts are part of an expected developmental and structural transition, schools emphasised that they are not inevitable. Schools with stronger, more deliberate transition practices – such as enhanced communication between schools, early identification of vulnerabilities, gradual orientation processes, and more intensive pastoral support – mitigate these challenges.

Strong inter-school networks help schools keep students in mainstream education.

Some regions have developed inter-school networks to reduce the need to refer disengaging students to alternative pathways. These networks create shared responsibility across schools, enabling leaders to draw on one another's pastoral strengths, specialist capabilities, and available places so that students do not fall through the gaps in a single school's system. For many leaders, this collaborative approach provides a meaningful alternative to referring students out of mainstream schooling altogether.

We heard several examples of regional collaboration models that actively reduce the need for alternative placements. In one area, secondary schools meet regularly to discuss students with emerging or complex needs, pooling information early so that timely decisions can be made. Through this process, schools can consider a managed transfer to another local school that may be a better fit – whether because of its pastoral culture, specialist programmes, or leadership expertise – rather than defaulting to an alternative setting. This coordinated model is supported by structured mentoring for students at risk of disengagement, which helps sustain relationships and continuity of support even as students move between schools.

> "We are highly engaged in this model where we move students around schools, rather than out of schools. If students are not getting what they need from this school, they could do with a fresh start somewhere else."
>
> **SCHOOL LEADER**

Conclusion

These findings indicate that the schools are not consistently effective at keeping students engaged in mainstream schooling, even when schools serve similar student populations. This variability means that many students are being referred out of mainstream education not because of their needs alone, but because of differences in schools' capability, capacity, and support structures.

These findings suggest that efforts to improve outcomes cannot focus solely on alternative settings. Strengthening mainstream schools' ability to retain and support students will be critical to reducing demand on alternative provision and ensuring that more young people have access to stable, high quality education.

Part 8: How good is our system of alternative provision?

There is clear evidence that system-level issues are contributing both to the growing number of students leaving mainstream schooling, and to the quality of education they receive once in alternative settings. These weaknesses include fragmented and poorly aligned provision, insufficient funding and oversight, and accountability mechanisms that are not robust enough to support high-quality education. This chapter examines these system-level factors and the extent to which they contribute to the poor educational provision and low outcomes experienced by young people in these settings.

What we looked at

Earlier parts of the report describe how some schools disproportionately refer students to alternative settings, which don't always deliver high quality education nor manage to transition students back to their mainstream school when they are ready. We looked at how system-level factors contribute to these challenges, drawing on:

- Our surveys and interviews of students, parents and whānau, school leaders, and setting teachers and leaders
- Our key informant interviews with agency representatives and expert advisors.

We focused on the following considerations:

1) Expectations of provision
2) Funding and resourcing
3) Roles and responsibilities
4) Accountability mechanisms
5) Inter-agency coordination.

What we found

The alternative provision model is fragmented and has insufficient funding, unclear expectations, gaps in accountability and oversight, and ambiguity in roles and responsibilities.

- **New Zealand's alternative provision system is fragmented.** Access depends heavily on local availability rather than student need, creating a 'postcode lottery' where similar students receive very different support. There is little intentional alignment between students' needs and the settings they are placed in.
- **Inconsistent expectations for alternative provision result in uneven quality.** Without clear, shared standards for what alternative settings should deliver, including expectations for curriculum access, provision varies widely across and within settings.
- **Funding and resourcing do not match students' needs.** Students in alternative settings have complex needs, yet funding does not match this intensity. Staff attempt to re-engage high-needs students without the support required. Short-term contracts further weaken delivery of adequate provision.
- **There are significant gaps in accountability.** Oversight is split between schools and providers, and accountability mechanisms do not drive improvement of outcomes or provision. Existing accountability settings can make it easier for schools to exclude, refer, or discourage high needs students from enrolling than to provide the intensive support these students require. Around seven in ten (69 percent) leaders of alternative settings report schools at least sometimes refuse to re-enrol students.
- **Agencies do not work together effectively, and roles are unclear.** Information-sharing is patchy and slow, coordination is inconsistent, and there are gaps in responsibilities. As a result, students are left navigating a disjointed system at the very moment they most need coherent, joined-up support.

These findings are set out in more detail below.

New Zealand's alternative provision system is fragmented.

A fundamental weakness in the current model is the lack of clarity about why New Zealand operates several different types of alternative settings, or the specific purpose each is meant to serve. The mix of Activity Centres, Alternative Education providers, and Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway has evolved in a fragmented way over time, rather than as part of a coordinated, needs-based system. Much of this expansion appears to have occurred in response to pressure points elsewhere in the system, with new settings emerging as short-term fixes when mainstream supports have failed to meet students' needs.

Some settings seem to have arisen as band-aid responses when local services reached capacity or when no other placement options were available for students with complex needs. Over time, these ad hoc responses became new types of provision, each with its own funding model, governance structure, and expectations, but without a shared design logic or clear criteria for which students each setting is best suited to serve.

This fragmentation is further reinforced by Ministry of Education referral processes. In some regions, caps on Alternative Education or limited spaces in Activity Centres mean students are referred to another setting just because it has capacity, rather than aligning with a student's needs. We heard that this has resulted in more students being funnelled into Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway, in part because it has greater capacity than other settings

> "While I am unsure in many contexts whether Te Kura is the right place for these students, it's often the only place for them."
>
> **TE KURA TEACHER**

Because placement depends so heavily on what is available locally, students with similar levels of need can experience very different opportunities and outcomes depending solely on where they live. We heard that whether a young person receives timely, appropriate alternative provision often comes down to chance – for example, whether an Alternative Education site happens to have space or whether the region has an Activity Centre.

> "[It's] like hitting the lottery if you actually get a place, you know. We had to wait eight weeks to get that boy a place [at the Activity Centre]."
>
> **SCHOOL LEADER**

For students in rural or geographically isolated areas, this sometimes means students are automatically referred to Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway, regardless of whether its online learning model is well suited to their needs. Because the model relies heavily on students being able to self-motivate and engage in learning asynchronously, many referrals through this gateway are unlikely to support successful re-engagement.

> "Students who can't learn in a classroom can probably not learn alone either."
>
> **TE KURA TEACHER**

Without an overarching framework that defines the role and purpose of each setting, entry criteria, and expected outcomes, the system will remain incoherent and inconsistent. Consequently, students will continue to experience a 'postcode lottery': some students receiving early, tailored support, while others are left waiting for help or are placed in settings that are mismatched to their needs.

Inconsistent expectations for alternative provision results in uneven quality.

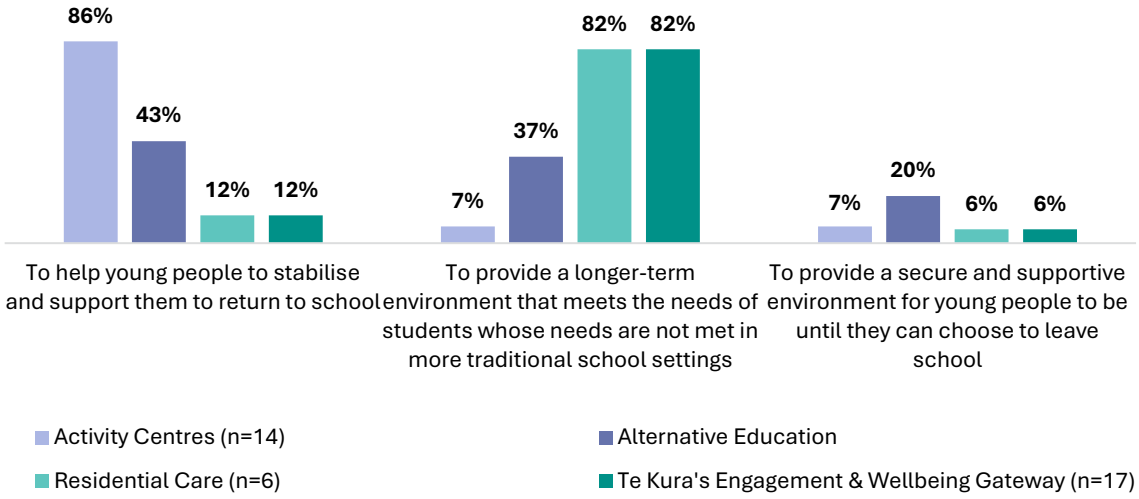
Because there are no clear, shared expectations about what alternative provision should deliver, or which settings are best suited to different students, quality and access vary widely. In practice, what students receive depends more on local decisions and provider capacity than on consistent, system-wide standards.

As described in Part 6, this results in substantial variation in the educational experience of students across alternative settings. Some providers offer rich, student-centred programmes that integrate wellbeing, engagement, and curriculum access, while others focus more narrowly on supervision and containment, with limited attention to learning or reintegration. In the absence of agreed minimum requirements or quality benchmarks, it is difficult to distinguish appropriate flexibility from gaps in provision, allowing low-quality practice to persist with limited scrutiny or intervention.

> "Guidelines from the Ministry are good [in] saying what the Ministry, the managing school, enrolling school or the provider is responsible for. But there needs to be an ability for the Ministry to step in, [for us] to have confidence that this provider is delivering, is meeting standards."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION LEADER**

Unclear expectations also mean that alternative settings do not share a consistent understanding of their purpose. Most Activity Centre leaders (86 percent) view their role as stabilising students and supporting a return to school, whereas most Residential Care leaders (82 percent) and Te Kura leaders (82 percent) see their role as providing longer-term provision when mainstream schools can't meet students' needs. Alternative Education leaders are more divided: around two in five (43 percent) see their role as preparing students to return to mainstream education, a similar proportion (37 percent) see themselves as providing longer-term support, and one in five (20 percent) see their primary function as supporting students until they transition out of schooling altogether.

Figure 60: *Percentage of alternative setting leaders reporting what they perceive to be the primary function of their site, by setting.*



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

Funding and resourcing do not match student need.

We consistently heard that funding and resourcing are not directed to where they can make the most difference.

The system does not provide sufficient early support to keep students engaged in mainstream schools. Leaders in both alternative settings and mainstream schools report that access to specialist services could have prevented students being referred to alternative settings. Getting earlier support could also mean students who are referred to alternative settings have lower needs when they arrive.

This lack of early, preventative support is compounded by the fact that alternative settings are also insufficiently funded. Despite serving some of the most vulnerable young people in the education system, many alternative settings receive less funding per student than mainstream schools. ERO's 2023 review of Alternative Education highlighted just how stark this gap is: Alternative Education sites were funded at $16,536 per place – less than half the cost of a place in a small mainstream secondary school ($36,760).[123]

Funding remains one of the most pressing concerns raised by staff in alternative settings. Nearly nine in ten (87 percent) leaders report that limited access to essential resources is a major barrier to supporting their students. This signals not just a funding shortfall, but a structural mismatch between the level of need and the level of investment – leaving the settings expected to do the most with, in many cases, the least.

> "We've got all these young people that display signs of attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity. We don't get any funding. They don't come with any teacher aides or any support or any information."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION TEACHER**

Leaders further report how short-term contracts and uncertain funding undermine strategic planning, workforce retention, and the development of coherent programmes. While some providers can offset funding pressures through local partnerships or charitable funding, others cannot, reinforcing inequities across regions and settings.

Funding arrangements can also obscure the true cost of provision. For example, some leaders report lump-sum allocations that only cover operational costs and not other aspects of delivery, like specialist educational and wellbeing supports. This results in persistent under-resourcing.

> "That lump sum's gotta pay for the rentals, the transport, the wages, the everything. And when you break it down to that level, it's actually underfunded."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION LEADER**

We also found that workforce capability is unevenly supported. As discussed in Part 6, staff in alternative settings report there is no systematic approach to staffing numbers, required qualifications or access to professional learning and development. As a result, staff in alternative settings are less equipped to teach, especially students with high needs.

> "It doesn't seem to [be] a way of learning, as a sector. Everyone's vying for different things, and everyone is resourced so differently."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION LEADER**

Consequently, we saw that some providers of alternative provision can offer extensive programmes that integrate learning, wellbeing, and pastoral support, while others struggle to meet basic educational and safety standards.

Unclear roles and responsibilities across schools and providers compound these challenges.

Providers often operate at different points in a student's pathway, with overlapping roles and limited clarity about responsibility for specific aspects of support. Almost half (47 percent) of leaders in alternative settings report unclear agreements between schools and providers about who does what is a barrier to supporting their students well.

This is particularly evident in Residential Care, which spans health, Youth Justice, and education. Staff in Residential Care facilities describe statutory supports ending abruptly – for example, when a court order ends and transport assistance stops – without any clear handover to another agency. These gaps quickly become barriers to attendance and engagement, even when a suitable education placement is available.

> "One of the worst situations is where you're balancing the expectations of social workers, where they literally go 'yep, we've got a school' and they drop the kid at the door. And we're like, 'Are we not going to have a conversation about the kid?'"
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION LEADER**

Teachers and leaders across alternative settings report that students often encounter a patchwork of services with variable quality and timeliness at the moments when joined-up support is most critical.

Inconsistent support from the Ministry of Education can cause additional challenges. Leaders in alternative settings report that engagement from Ministry advisors varies across regions, shaped by local capacity, staff turnover, and individual practice. In some areas, advisors maintain strong, ongoing relationships with local schools and alternative settings. In other areas, staff report delays, limited contact, and uncertainty about who to approach for support.

Connections between alternative settings and mainstream schools also vary, reflecting the absence of clear expectations. Staff in Activity Centres have a stronger understanding of their relationship with schools and this results in better access to local school networks, curriculum pathways, specialist support, and deliberate planning for students' return to mainstream education. Where expectations are less clear, such as in Alternative Education or Residential Care, staff often operate in isolation, with limited access to accredited learning, reduced curriculum breadth, and poorly supported transition pathways.

> "We aren't in any zone... or collective of any kind. We are the anomaly."
>
> **RESIDENTIAL CARE TEACHER**

There are significant gaps and inconsistencies in accountability for delivery and outcomes.

Oversight of education provision and outcomes in some alternative settings is spread across schools, providers, and both regional and national parts of the Ministry of Education. No single body has clear responsibility. We also found that accountability mechanisms are not used effectively, and there are few levers to address underperformance or drive improvement in alternative settings.

'Managing schools' are schools that hold contracts with external providers for the delivery education in Alternative Education and Activity Centres. Managing schools are formally accountable to the Ministry for ensuring high-quality provision. The main mechanism for oversight is regular reporting to regional Ministry offices, which can escalate any concerns to national teams. However, we heard these reports are often received passively, with minimal follow-up. Furthermore, when ERO undertakes institutional reviews of managing schools, responsibilities for the education delivered in the Alternative Education site or Activity Centre are not systematically reviewed.

Te Kura, as a state school, is governed by board and is accountable to the Ministry of Education through Annual Reports and ERO reviews. Te Kura has received additional funding for students enrolled through the Engagement and Wellbeing gateway, yet there are no additional reporting requirements to understand the outcomes achieved.

Residential Care sites operate under a mix of governance, accountability arrangements, and reporting requirements. Some sites are run by external providers, while others operate as dedicated state specialist schools. The Ministry of Education and Oranga Tamariki both have oversight responsibilities across different parts of the system, and their priorities don't always align. We heard that this fragmented oversight contributes to variability in provision and education standards.

> "The decision-makers are deciding from a Residential Care regulations perspective. They don't realise that they're actually also obligated to meet educational outcomes [...] They don't actually own the obligation."
>
> **RESIDENTIAL CARE TEACHER**

We also found that current funding and accountability settings discourage providers from trying to reintegrate students into mainstream schooling even when it is the best outcome for the student. In both Alternative Education and Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway, funding is closely tied to the number of students enrolled. This means providers may lose funding when a student transitions back to mainstream education. Because alternative settings often operate on tight budgets and depend on stable funding to cover fixed costs such as staffing, transport, and more comprehensive pastoral supports, early reintegration can create financial pressure.

> "For Activity Centre students the schools still maintain a percentage of funding for that young person. Whereas the funding model is different for Alternative Education [...] they also don't want the kid back"
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION LEADER**

As discussed in Part 7, mainstream schools often don't feel responsible for reintegrating a student either, or for accepting new students from alternative settings. This means students are let down at both ends in the current system.

Weak accountability and incentives undermine retention and reintergration to school.

Current system settings often make referral or exclusion easier for schools than providing the intensive support needed to retain or re-enrol high-needs students. As a result, many students face significant barriers when trying to return to mainstream education after time in alternative settings.

Around three in ten schools report they do not accept new referrals from alternative settings due to concerns about their behaviour (28 percent) or the impact they would have on other students (31 percent), and one-quarter (24 percent) say they lack capability to meet these students' needs. Consistent with this, nearly seven in ten (69 percent) leaders in alternative settings report that schools at least sometimes refuse to re-enrol students. We heard from school leaders who view referral to Alternative Education as the endpoint of their responsibility, with limited ongoing involvement in reintegration planning.

> "We just put [a student in Alternative Education] and assume that they're there. They eventually tell us if they've stopped attending... And take them off the roll."
>
> **SCHOOL LEADER**

Legal settings may be contributing to these poor retention and reintegration outcomes. The Education and Training Act sets out clear compliance requirements for stand-downs, suspensions, exclusions, and expulsions, but does not establish equivalent requirements for retention. ERO has previously found that many enrolling schools did not meet their obligations to support and reintegrate students placed in Alternative Education, and that there were few consequences when this occurred.

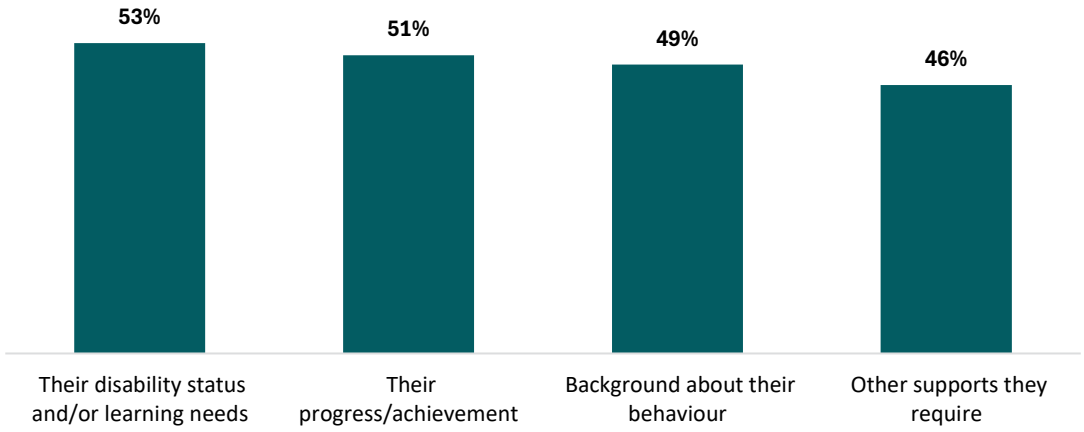
The variable governance arrangements in alternative settings further compound these challenges. Managing schools, which manage contracts with external providers for the delivery education, offer varying levels of oversight. Where oversight is strong, this helps to maintain links with mainstream curriculum and school networks. Other managing schools take a more hands-off approach, which can leave Alternative Education and Activity Centres isolated and reduce the likelihood of successful reintegration for students.

Agencies do not work together effectively.

Coordinated, cross-agency support is essential for supporting students into and through alternative settings, and for re-engaging them in mainstream education. Yet, in practice, the system remains fragmented.

We found that information sharing between settings and mainstream schools is inconsistent and often insufficient. More than six in ten (62 percent) teachers in alternative settings report that limited access to essential student information constrained their ability to meet needs effectively. Only about half of leaders in alternative settings receive key information from a student's enrolling school or previous place of learning, including details about disability or learning needs (53 percent), progress or achievement (51 percent), behaviour (49 percent), or other supports required (46 percent). School leaders, similarly, report receiving limited information when students return from alternative settings.

Figure 61: *Percentage of alternative setting teachers who report they receive 'a lot' or 'some' information from students' enrolling school or previous places of learning.*



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

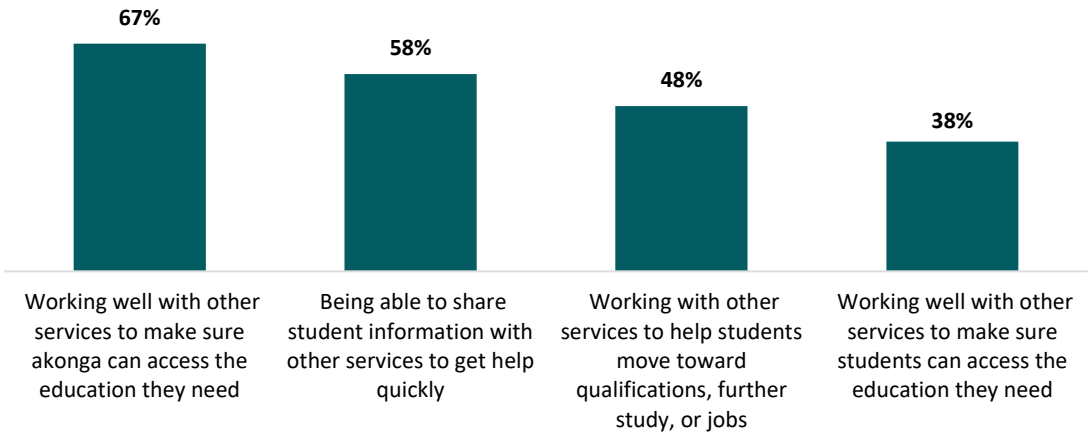
Teachers and leaders told us they often receive incomplete or delayed information, limiting their ability to assess students' needs and provide timely support. They also report that information flows are often manual and labour-intensive, with staff having to chase basic records. When information arrives late or not at all, students miss out on early, targeted support, increasing the risk of further disengagement.

> "A lot of information doesn't come with the students. Suicidal ideation, bullying, anxiety about getting into local space... [Students] come tied in knots, and we need to untangle the knot before we tie the bow."
>
> ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION LEADER

Referral and reintegration processes also vary widely because schools and providers do not work together consistently. Almost half (46 percent) of setting leaders report that unclear or inconsistent systems for placing students in the right learning setting get in the way of supporting students well. Reintegration is similarly challenging, with almost seven in ten (69 percent) leaders unable to find a local school willing to re-enrol students. Exacerbating these issues, one-quarter (24 percent) of leaders meet with an enrolling school only once a year or not at all, limiting opportunities to coordinate effective transitions. We heard that success often relies on individual relationships rather than reliable system-level mechanisms. These gaps undermine timely transition planning and reduce the likelihood of stable re-entry- to mainstream schooling.

Coordination with other sector partners is challenging for alternative providers. More than half (58 percent) of leaders report difficulties in sharing student information with other services quickly enough to secure timely support. Almost half (48 percent) say that working with other services to help students progress toward qualifications, further study, or employment is a barrier. Just under two in five (38 percent) leaders report challenges in collaborating effectively with other services to ensure students can access the education they need. When combined, we found that these barriers limit the system's ability to provide coordinated, responsive support for students.

Figure 62: *Percentage of alternative setting leaders who report the below get in the way of supporting their students*



Source: *Calculations based on survey data*

We heard that when strong coordination does occur, students experience more positive and sustained engagement. Strong partnerships with Attendance Services,[x] Te Kahu Tōī Intensive Wraparound Services,[y] local councils, marae, and iwi further strengthen wellbeing, cultural support, and stability.

> "When you're bringing those [inter-agency] people together, you're talking about what provision there is for these young people, and how we then connect the dots and have a look at each other's practice. That's a highly effective model for collaborating, and it means the korowai around our whānau in the community has got fewer holes in it."
>
> **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION LEADER**

Importantly, the examples of strong coordination and partnership we identified were not the result of consistent system settings or clear expectations. Instead, they were driven by hardworking leaders who had persistently advocated for the establishment of these supports over many years.

Conclusion

This chapter shows that the current system does not consistently support alternative provision to be effective or equitable. Fragmented structures, unclear expectations, misaligned funding, weak accountability, and poor coordination result in provision that operates as a patchwork rather than as a coherent pathway for students who disengage from school.

Without changes to these system settings, quality will continue to vary widely, responsibility for student progress will remain diffuse, and many students with the highest needs will continue to be placed in settings that lack the consistent support required to improve outcomes.

x Attendance Services work with students who are chronically absent and non-enrolled students. They work with schools that have already exhausted their own interventions.

y Te Kahu Tōī Intensive Wraparound Service provides highly tailored, team-based support for children (Years 0–10) with complex needs. It helps keep students in their local school through personalised plans.

Part 9: Recommendations

The six key questions we asked as part of this review led to 18 key findings. Based on these findings, we have identified three recommendation areas to reduce the number of students leaving mainstream schooling and improve the education provision and outcomes of students in alternative settings. This chapter sets out our key findings and recommendations.

ERO was commissioned to explore the increasing number of students moving from mainstream school to alternative settings, and how effective these settings are at delivering education provision and supporting positive outcomes. Our review focuses on four key settings that serve most of these disengaged students: Alternative Education, Activity Centres, Residential Care, and Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway.

We set out to answer six key questions:

1) How many children are not in mainstream school?
2) Why do students enter alternative settings?
3) What are the outcomes for students in these settings?
4) How good is education provision in these settings?
5) How good are schools at retaining students in mainstream education?
6) How good is our system of alternative provision?

In undertaking this review, we drew on evidence from a range of data and analysis, including:

- National administrative data from the Ministry of Education
- Stats NZ's Integrated Data Infrastructure
- ERO's School Improvement Framework
- Insights from ERO's reviews of schools
- A review of the international and New Zealand literature
- ERO's previous reviews of Alternative Education, Activity Centres, Residential Care and Attendance
- ERO's own data collection including over 1,500 survey responses, interviews and focus groups with over 65 participants, including leaders of mainstream schools, leaders and teachers in alternative settings, the students learning in these settings, and their parents and whānau.

From this evidence, we have identified 18 key findings across the following five areas:

- **Area 1:** How many young people are not in mainstream school?
- **Area 2:** Why do students enter alternative settings?
- **Area 3:** How good is education provision in alternative settings?
- **Area 4:** How good is our system of alternative provision?
- **Area 5:** What are the outcomes for students in these settings?

Context

Alternative settings primarily serve students who are experiencing significant disengagement from mainstream schooling, often following sustained disruption to their learning, wellbeing, or participation. Increasing numbers of these students are being referred out of mainstream schools into alternative settings, which are intended to support re-stabilisation and re-engagement, with the aim of reintegration into school or transition into further education, training, or employment. Education in these settings is delivered through a mix of external providers – such as in Activity Centres, Alternative Education programmes, and some Residential Care sites – and dedicated schools, including Te Kura and other Residential Care sites. While diverse in form and purpose, these settings sit at the periphery of the education system and collectively serve overlapping cohorts of students whose educational needs have not been met within mainstream provision.

Key findings

Area 1: How many young people are not in mainstream school?

Finding 1: The number of students not in mainstream schooling is increasing, and this is deeply concerning.

Finding 2: There are signs that students are moving into these settings at a younger age.

Area 2: Why do students enter alternative settings?

Finding 3: Students who are disadvantaged are most at risk of entering alternative settings.

Finding 4: Students who have gaps in their education are at a much higher risk of entering alternative settings.

Finding 5: Students' needs are increasing, and schools are not well set up to meet these challenges.

Finding 6: Māori students are more at risk of entering in alternative settings.

Finding 7: How likely students are to enter alternative settings also depends on the schools they go to. Some schools are much more likely to refer students to alternative settings. Three in five referrals come from just 12 percent of schools.

Finding 8: Many schools work hard to support students to stay in mainstream education. Schools that are most effective at retaining students build strong relationships, provide tailored support and create a sense of belonging to the school.

Area 3: How good is education provision in alternative settings?

Finding 9: Worryingly, students typically lose three months of learning while waiting to access an alternative setting.

Finding 10: The quality of teaching practice is too variable in these settings. Not all settings provide enough explicit teaching or qualified teachers.

Finding 11: These students need intensive support. Pastoral support is strong in alternative settings, but access to specialist services is inconsistent.

Finding 12: Students' opportunities are limited by too few subject options and lack of access to formal qualifications.

Area 4: How good is our system of alternative provision?

Finding 13: The alternative provision model is fragmented and has insufficient funding, unclear expectations, gaps in accountability and oversight, and ambiguity in roles and responsibilities.

Area 5: What are the outcomes for students in these settings?

Finding 14: Fewer than one in six students return to mainstream school.

Finding 15: Students in alternative settings make less progress in their learning than they did at their previous schools.

Finding 16: Students' wellbeing and attendance improve in alternative settings, but this is often not resulting in better educational achievement. Four in five students leave without any NCEA qualifications.

Finding 17: Worse education outcomes lead to worse lifetime outcomes for these students. Compared to similarly disadvantaged students, they are less likely to be wage-earners, more likely to rely on benefits and more likely to enter the criminal justice system.

Finding 18: Students in alternative settings cost the Government far more across their lifetimes.

Areas for action

Based on these key findings, ERO has three areas of recommendations:

- **Area 1: Reverse the trend** – keep more students engaged in mainstream school
- **Area 2: Reform** – to build a nationally coherent, high quality alternative provision system
- **Area 3: Immediate improvements** – to lift outcomes for students currently in alternative provision

Area 1: Reverse the trend – keep more students engaged in mainstream school

There is strong evidence that early, targeted support in mainstream schools can prevent disengagement and reduce referral into alternative settings.

Recommendation 1: Continue to strengthen attendance, learning and behaviour supports. Build on current initiatives and recent investment to ensure schools can respond early, access specialist services, and prevent absence before disengagement become entrenched.

Recommendation 2: Avoid unplanned school moves. Agencies should work together to make sure housing and placement decisions take account of educational continuity and minimise unplanned school changes wherever possible.

Recommendation 3: Increase student engagement by addressing bullying and strengthening belonging. When students feel safe and connected to their school, they are more likely to attend regularly and remain engaged in learning.

Recommendation 4: Provide additional support to schools with the highest concentrations of at-risk students and invest in targeted support for these students. Targeted support such as teacher aides, counselling, and specialist programmes would help these schools respond earlier and more intensively to student need.

Recommendation 5: Ensure there are incentives and expectations for schools to retain students in mainstream education. Clear expectations, greater transparency of referral patterns, and appropriate oversight of decisions to move students out of mainstream education will increase retention.

Recommendation 6: Strengthen accountability for mainstream schools to retain students by requiring transparent reporting on retention and referral into alternative provision. System level reporting to the Ministry of Education on retention and referral patterns would increase visibility of how schools are supporting students to remain in mainstream education. ERO can also monitor retention patterns to support improvement and national oversight.

Area 2: Reform – to build a nationally coherent, high quality alternative provision system

This review finds that alternative provision plays a critical role for some students, but quality and outcomes vary widely. Reform is needed to ensure alternative provision deliver educational outcomes and works as a coherent system.

Recommendation 7: Design and implement a coherent national model of alternative provision. The model should clearly articulate what the different forms of alternative provision are, how they fit together and how they connect with mainstream schooling, so alternative provision operates as a purposeful part of the education system rather than a default pathway for disengaged students.

Recommendation 8: Fund alternative settings at a level that reflects need. Students with higher and more complex needs require more intensive support for their education. This requires funding. Investing in education support for these students has the potential to save greater costs later in their life.

Recommendation 9: Ensure students in alternative settings are taught by a qualified teacher. All students need high quality teaching. This requires an appropriately qualified teacher with access to professional learning and development.

Recommendation 10: Ensure students in alternative settings have access to the full curriculum, including meaningful academic and vocational pathways. Students in alternative provision should have access to the New Zealand Curriculum. Like mainstream education, their progress should be measured and reported on even where delivery approaches differ.

Recommendation 11: Deliver alternative provision onsite or in close connection with schools wherever possible. Locating alternative provision on-site or closely linked to schools supports continuity of learning, coordination of support, and increases the likelihood of students moving back into mainstream school.

Recommendation 12: Strengthen national oversight for quality of education at alternative settings. Clear oversight is needed to ensure alternative provision meets national expectations for quality and outcomes.

Area 3: Immediate improvements – to lift outcomes for students currently in alternative provision

While reform is necessary, action can be taken now to improve outcomes for students currently in alternative settings. These recommendations focus on strengthening the quality, consistency, and coherence of existing provision, so students experience high quality education while reform is underway.

Recommendation 13: Ensure students in alternative settings leave with recognised qualifications or can access other future pathways. Students in alternative settings need the opportunity to achieve recognised school qualifications wherever possible and to move into training, further education, or employment. This requires stronger links between schools, alternative setting providers, and existing training and employment pathways.

Recommendation 14: Strengthen information sharing and clarify responsibility for transition planning. This is needed to ensure learning and progress information is transferred, used, and acted on consistently, supporting continuity of education and well-informed decisions about next steps.

Together, these recommendations are intended to reverse the trend of students leaving mainstream education, increase the quality of alternative provision, and strengthen long-term outcomes for some of the most vulnerable young people in the system. Success will mean fewer students needing to leave mainstream schooling, and better outcomes for those who do.

Conclusion

Too many students are leaving mainstream schooling and entering alternative settings that are not consistently delivering the educational outcomes they need. These settings play an important role in improving wellbeing, attendance, and engagement for highly disadvantaged students, but too often these gains do not lead to sustained learning progress, recognised qualifications, or positive long-term outcomes. The current system is fragmented, under-resourced, and variable in quality, contributing to poorer lifetime outcomes for young people and higher costs to the public.

To change this trajectory, we need to reverse the flow of students out of mainstream education, strengthen the quality and coherence of alternative provision, and act now to lift outcomes for students currently in these settings. Our recommendations are designed to keep more students engaged in school and ensure those who need alternative provision receive high-quality education that opens real pathways to further learning, employment, and participation in society. Better outcomes for these young people are essential for stronger whānau, communities, and New Zealand's future.

Art from students learning in alternative settings

Appendix 1: Student pathways

To help visualise student pathways after leaving their alternative setting, we use the four Sankey diagrams below. These diagrams show how students move between education settings over time.

Reading from left to right, the blocks represent the last place of learning prior to starting at the alternative setting, the alternative setting the students are in, and then the bands between them show the pathways students take. The width of the band represents how many students followed that pathway, so wider bands highlight the most common movements.

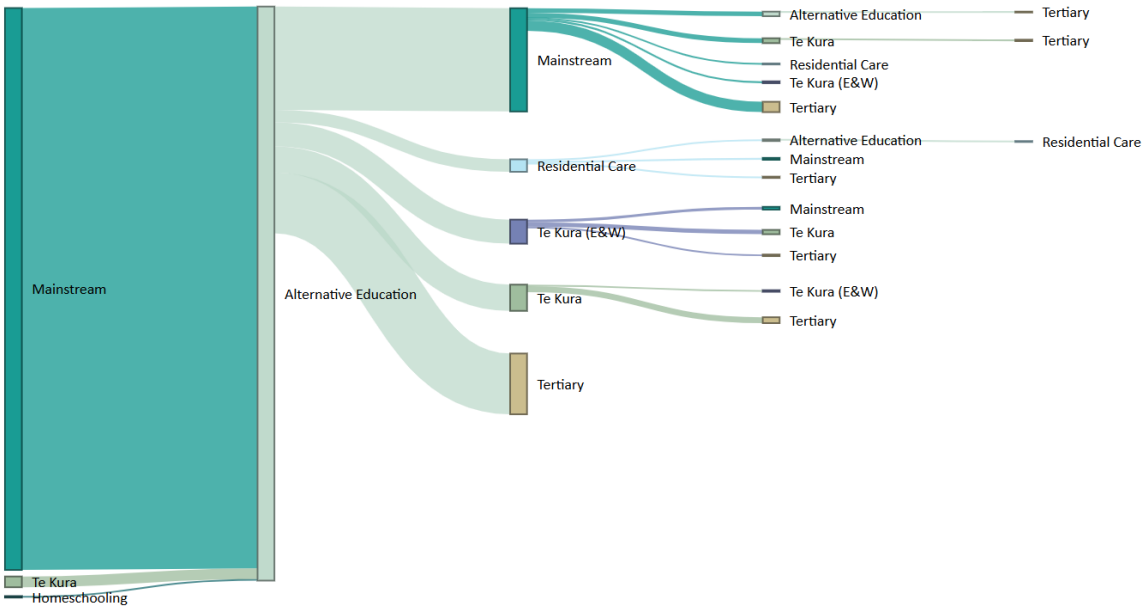
Where pathways lead to multiple places of learning, this suggests that some students move frequently between settings or make attempts to return to mainstream schooling. When a pathway ends without further movement, this indicates that the students remain in that setting for the rest of the observation period or left education altogether, including moving into work or training.

Figure 63: *Activity Centres students' movements between settings.*

Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data, 2022-2024*

Students in Alternative Education between settings have more varied pathways. About 11 percent move to other settings, and 4 percent move back and forth between mainstream and settings.

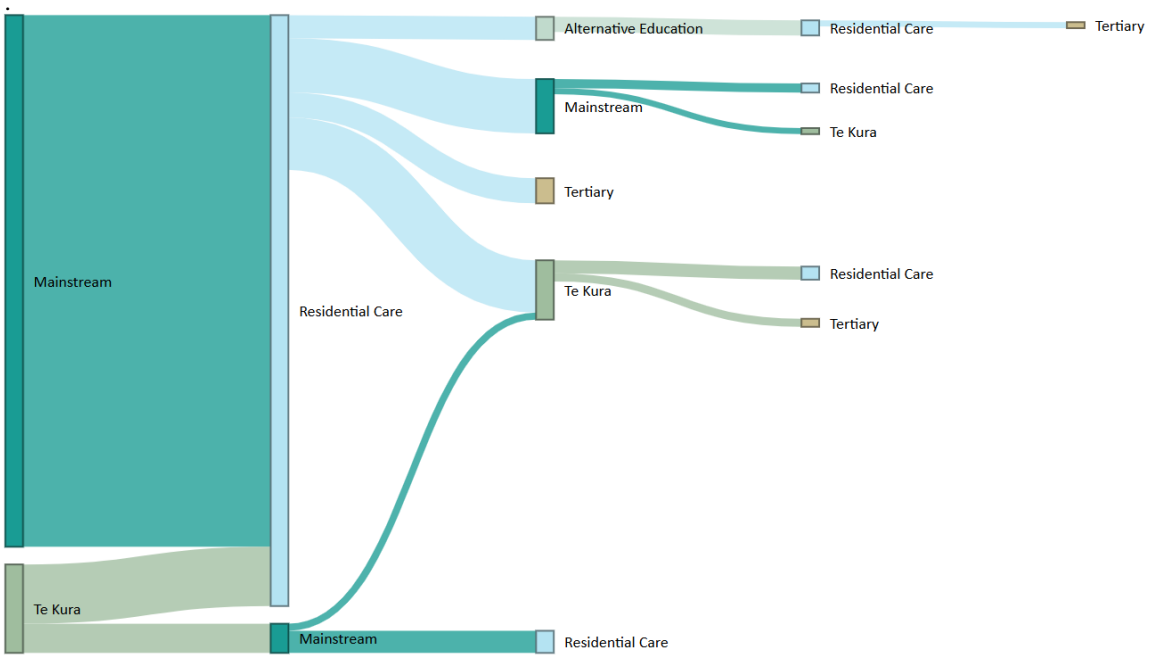
Figure 64: *Alternative Education students' movements between settings.*



Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data, 2022-2024*

Around 13 percent of Residential Care students move into other alternative settings, including Alternative Education or Te Kura. About (7 percent) move back and forth between mainstream and settings, including many that ultimately return to learning in Residential Care.

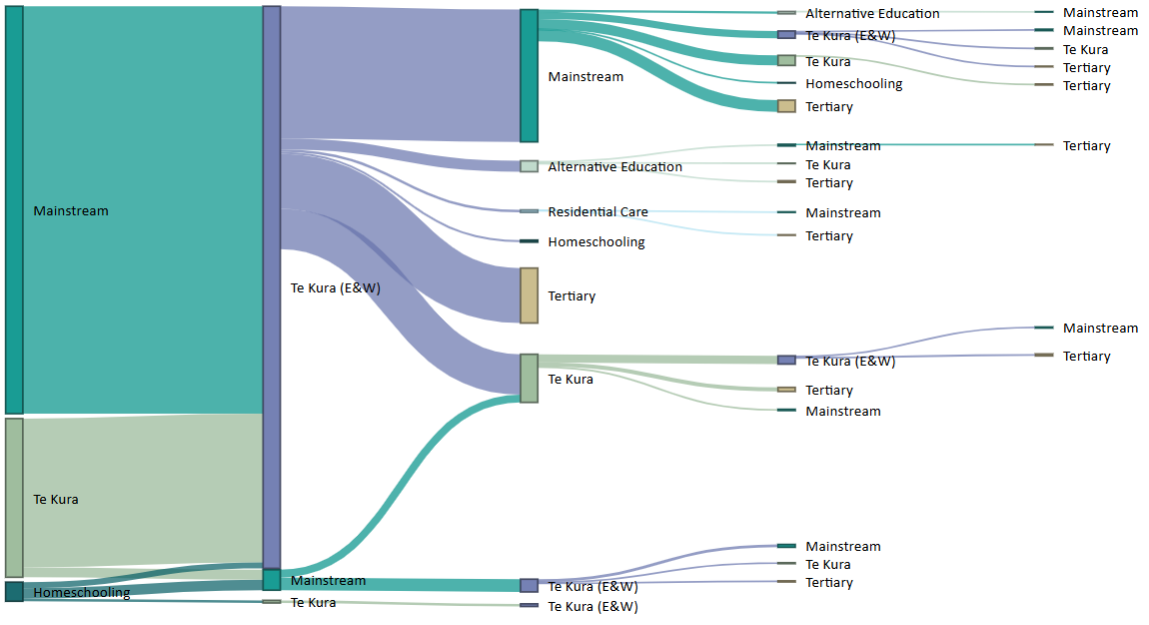
Figure 65: *Residential Care students' movements between settings*



Source: *Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data, 2022-2024*

Students in Te Kura's Engagement and Wellbeing gateway also tend to have lots of different pathways and are more transient than students in other settings. One in ten either move to other settings or move back and forth between mainstream and settings.

Figure 66: *Te Kura Engagement and Wellbeing gateways students' movements between settings.*



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