



Bridging the gap:

How well do we support students learning in alternative settings?

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?

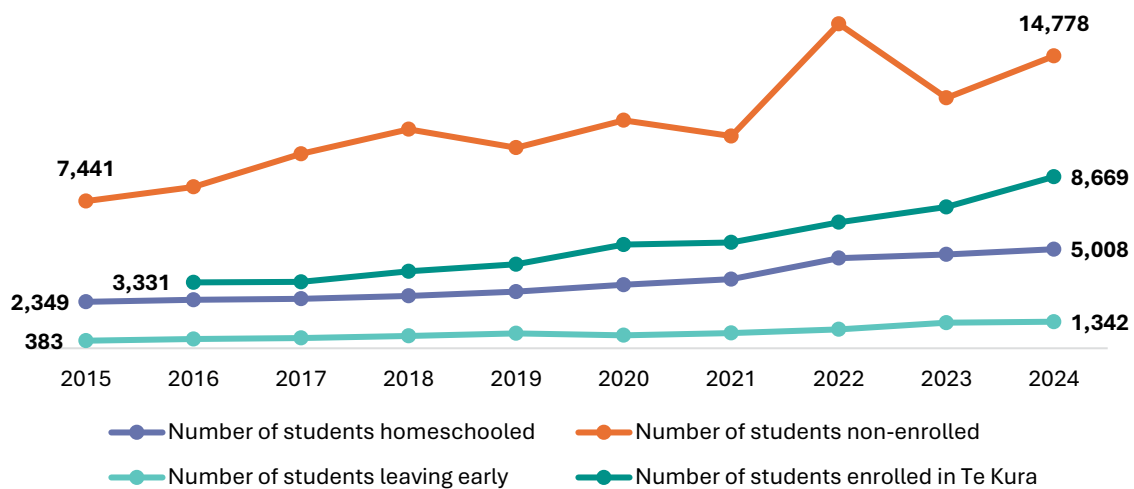
Finding 1: The number of young people not in mainstream¹ schooling is increasing, and this is deeply concerning.

The number of children outside mainstream schooling is rapidly increasing. The number of non-enrolled and homeschooled children (aged 12 to 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.

Figure 1: Number of students leaving mainstream school from 2015 to 2024, by pathway



Source: Calculations based on Ministry of Education data, 2015–2024

¹ By mainstream, we mean an in-person school environment where all learners participate together and are taught by registered teachers.

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 to 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 communities² 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.

² 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 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.

“She probably had about two weeks of schooling for her whole entire intermediate years.”

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PARENT

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.

Table 1: *Risk factors impacting students’ likelihood of entering an alternative setting – predictive odd ratios based on logistic regression modelling.*

Risk Factor	Increased likelihood of students entering an alternative setting
School in a low socioeconomic community	5.1
Non-enrolment	5.1
Suspension	3.9
Referral to Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLB)	2.4
Chronic absenteeism	1.4
Stand-down	1.3
Each non-structural school move	1.1

Source: Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data, 2022–2024.

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.

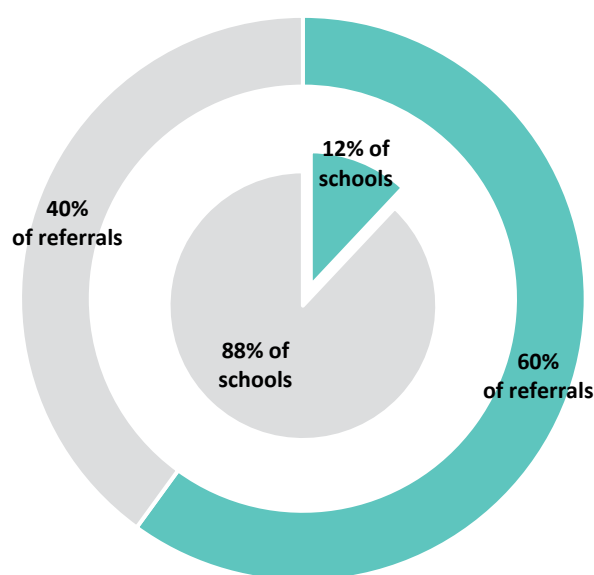
Referral activity is highly concentrated, and socioeconomic disadvantage alone does not account for these differences. Sixty percent of all referrals between 2022 and 2024 come from just 12 percent of schools.

“They’re someone else’s responsibility now.”

SCHOOL LEADER



Figure 2: Percentage of referrals to alternative settings, by school contribution



Source: Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data, 2022–2024.

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.

“We are highly engaged in this [interschool network] 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

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.

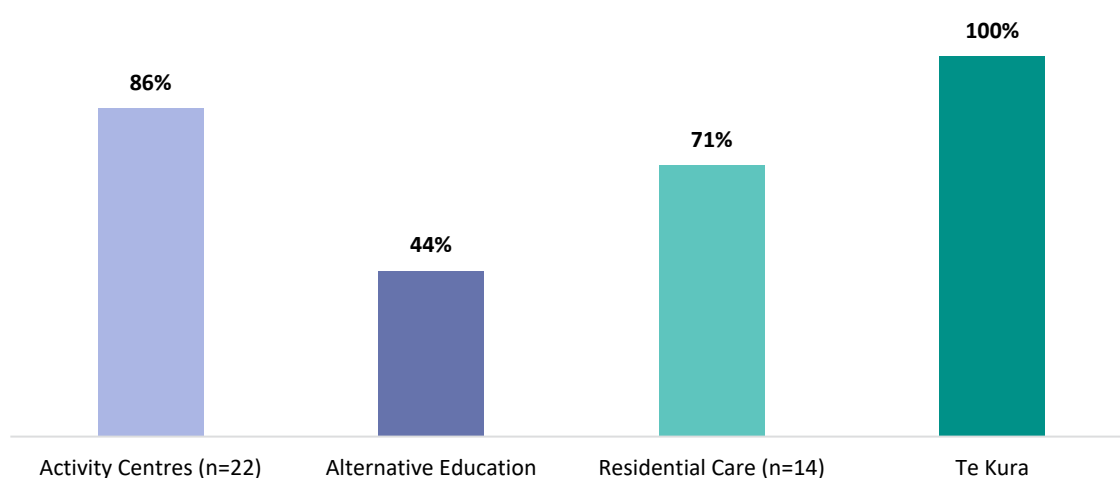
“[It's] like hitting the lottery if you actually get a place, you know. We had to wait eight weeks to get that boy a place [at the Activity Centre].”

SCHOOL LEADER

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.

Figure 3: Percentage of alternative setting teachers reporting they have a relevant teaching qualification, by setting



Source: Calculations based on survey data

“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

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.

“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

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.

“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

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.

“We don’t teach any algebra. We don’t teach science. We teach social studies in our kind of thematic learning. Even then... there’s a huge gap.”

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION TEACHER

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.

“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



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?

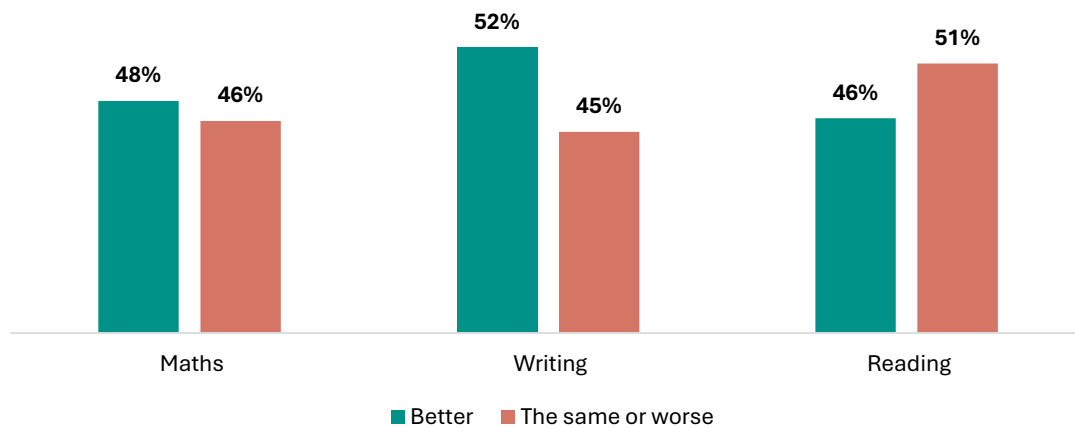
Finding 14: Fewer than one in six students return to mainstream school.

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.

Figure 4: *Percentage of students reporting they are doing better, or the same or worse, in core learning areas since starting at their alternative setting*



Source: Calculations based on survey data

“My daughter is very intelligent, but has done quite badly academically... I know she’s capable of so much more.”

PARENT

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.

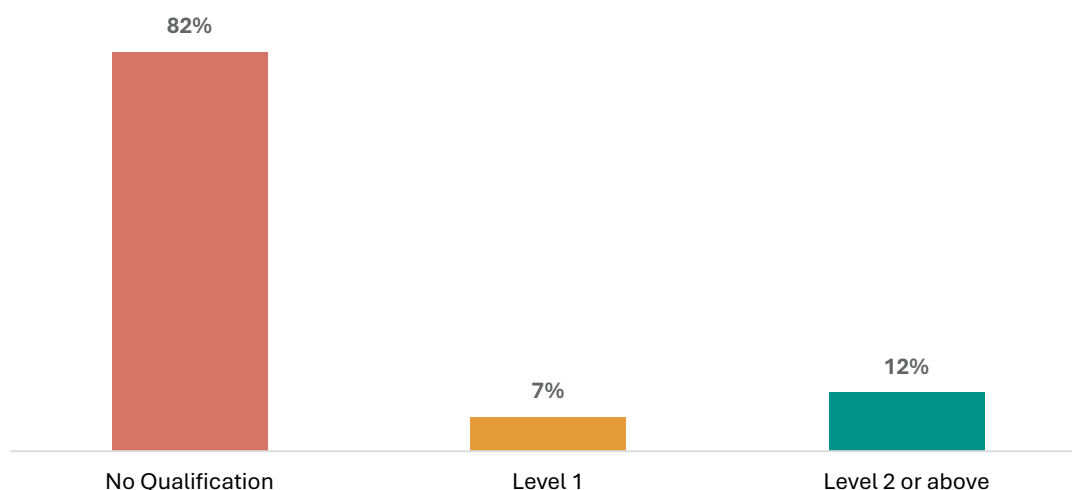
Most students report positive wellbeing outcomes in alternative settings, particularly in face-to-face environments.

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 over leave without any.

Figure 5: Percentage of students with highest NCEA qualifications achieved by the time they leave their site

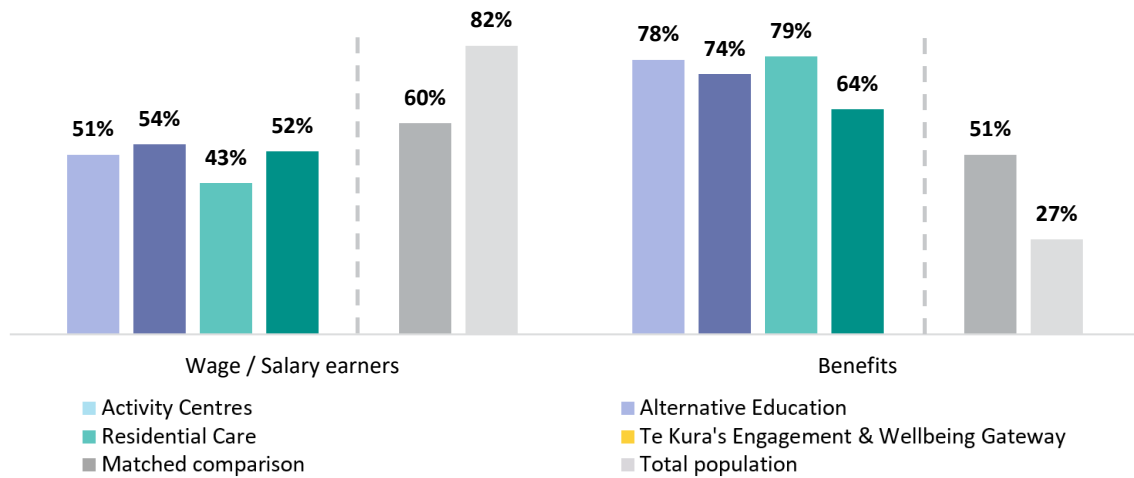


Source: Calculations based on Ministry of Education administrative data, 2022-2024

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.

Figure 6: 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



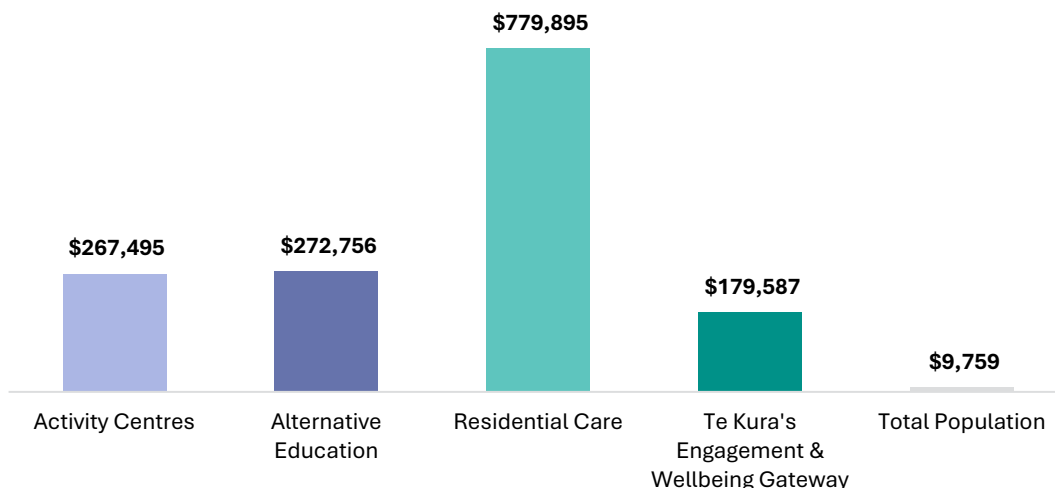
Source: Calculations based on data in the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI), Stats NZ

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.

Figure 7: Cumulative fiscal cost at age 25, by setting



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

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, 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 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 on-site 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.

What ERO did

For this report, we gathered data during Term 3, 2025. We conducted 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 from:

Action	Who
Over 1,500 survey responses from:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → 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:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → 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:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → 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).



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