



# Insights for school leaders:

## Review of relationships and sexuality education

Relationships and sexuality education (RSE) is required to be taught in all state and state-integrated schools. RSE is important to children's and young people's physical and mental health, and their safety. However, there are differing views on what, when, and how much should be taught in schools.

The Education Review Office (ERO) reviewed RSE to understand how well it meets the needs of students, expectations of parents and whānau, and capabilities of schools. This guide sets out our key findings and recommendations.

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### ERO looked at how well RSE is taught

ERO found that relationships and sexuality education (RSE) is critical to the learning, development, and wellbeing of Aotearoa New Zealand's young people. We continue to have a range of worrying health and safety issues that directly relate to relationships and sexuality, including family and sexual violence, bullying, and racism. At a time where young people are increasingly exposed to harmful online content, including pornography and misinformation through social media, and hate speech, we heard that RSE plays an increasingly important role.

ERO's evaluation found that while there is widespread support from students and parents and whānau for RSE being taught in schools, there is inconsistency in the RSE teaching and learning that students experience. What students are taught, when they are taught it, and how much they are taught can depend on where they go to school.

### What did ERO do?

We took a mixed-methods approach to assess what is and isn't working in RSE, and why. We focused our investigation on the experiences of students, teachers, leaders, school boards, and parents and whānau across Aotearoa New Zealand. We visited a wide range of schools, including co-educational, girls' and boys' schools, rural and urban schools, primary, intermediate, secondary, and area schools, state and state-integrated (including faith-based) schools, and schools with high Māori and high Pacific rolls. We visited schools across the country and surveyed over 12,000 people.

We also invited a wide range of stakeholders to speak with us. We heard from parent and whānau groups, external providers of RSE, agencies related to youth mental health, sexual health, and health more broadly, professional teacher associations, cultural and faith-based groups, non-government organisations (NGOs), and advocacy groups. We also worked with an Expert Advisory Group which included academics, educators, practitioners, and other RSE experts.

## What did ERO find?

### There is wide support from students and parents and whānau for RSE being taught

Most parents and whānau support RSE being taught in schools, and parents and whānau who know more about what is being taught are happier with RSE. Primary school parents and whānau are slightly less supportive than intermediate and secondary school parents and whānau, due to concerns about RSE content being appropriate for their children's age. Six percent of parents and whānau withdraw their child from RSE.

Over nine in 10 (91 percent) students support RSE being taught in schools. Girls are more likely to support it being taught, with 95 percent of girls and 88 percent of boys supporting it.<sup>a</sup>

“For teenagers [it's] a scary world of technology where everything is super easy to access, but there's also a lot of information that collides with one another. I think the class was super beneficial, giving you not just healthy information, but also broader information.”

YEAR 13 STUDENT

### Students' gender, faith, and sexuality impacts how well RSE meets their needs

Boys are more likely to want to learn all topics later than girls, reflecting that boys may go through puberty later. The most common topics they want to learn about later are human reproduction, different sexual identities, and romantic relationships including intimate relationships. Girls often want to learn more and earlier on key topics. Over a quarter of girls want to learn more about managing feelings and emotions, and gender stereotypes. Over three-quarters of girls want to learn about friendships and bullying, and personal safety including online safety, earlier.

Students in girls' schools are more likely to learn about consent, different sexual identities, and gender identity than students at co-ed schools.

Students of faith are more likely to want to learn less about gender identity and different sexual identities than students who do not practice a faith. Secondary school students from rainbow communities<sup>b</sup> want to learn about all RSE topics earlier than other students.

a While our proportion of gender diverse student responses is representative of the population, these numbers are too low to statistically compare to boys and girls.

b In our report, we use the term 'rainbow communities', aligning with guidance from the Public Service Commission. This is a broad umbrella term that covers a diversity of sexual orientations as well as gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics (including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, ace identities, and more).

## There are diverse views among parents and whānau on what and how RSE should be taught

Thirty-four percent of parents and whānau think that RSE should be taught, but what or how it is taught should change. The proportion is higher for primary school parents and whānau than secondary because of concerns about RSE content being age appropriate. More than half of primary school parents and whānau want human reproduction, gender identity, and gender stereotypes covered later.

The most common topics that parents and whānau want their children to learn *more* about are consent, romantic relationships, and health and contraception. The most common topics that parents and whānau want their children to learn *earlier* are friendships and bullying, personal safety including online safety, and managing feelings and emotions.

Parent and whānau views are split on teaching about gender identity, different sexual identities, and gender stereotypes. A 'split' view means that there are significant groups at both ends, wanting to learn more/less, and earlier/later.

Parents and whānau who practice a faith want less RSE, in particular around gender identity, different sexual identities, and gender stereotypes, because of concerns that this content does not align with the views outlined in their faith, and that it is the role of their church or faith-based community to teach RSE to their child—especially some of the more sensitive topics.

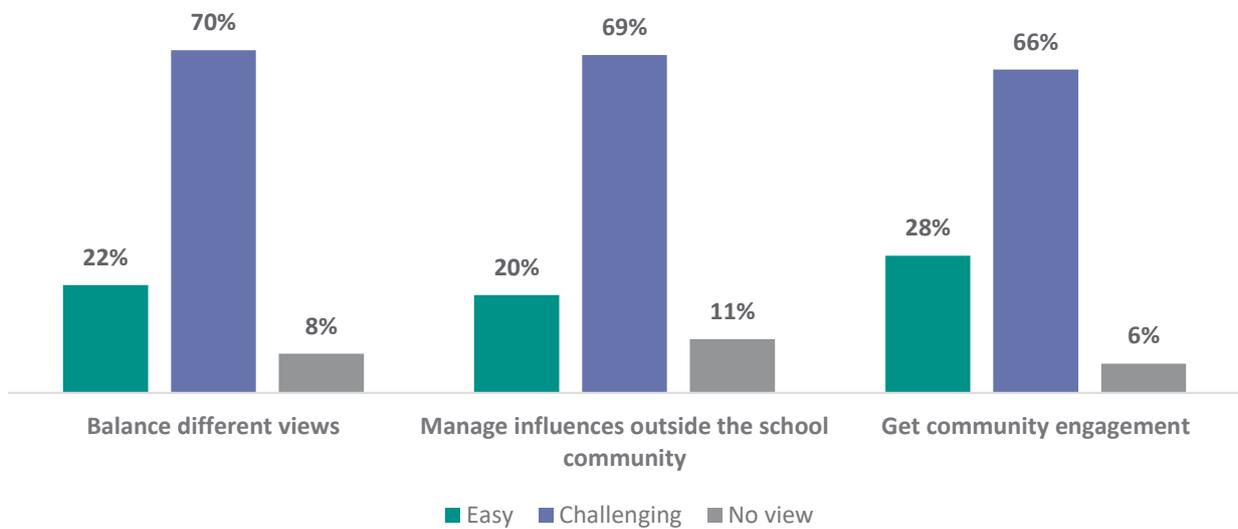
Parents and whānau of students from rainbow communities are more likely to want their children to learn about all RSE topics earlier, especially topics on diverse identities and bodies. They want coverage of these topics so that their children can be confident with their body and body image, feel empowered, and see themselves in their learning. Parents and whānau of girls want their children to learn about changes to their body and consent earlier, compared to parents and whānau of boys.

## Schools face significant challenges in consulting on what to teach in RSE, particularly rural schools and schools with a high Māori roll.

Schools are required to consult their community on the delivery of their health curriculum (which includes RSE) at least once every two years. We found that schools find consulting difficult and divisive – almost half of school leaders find consulting challenging or very challenging. In the worst cases, consultation processes result in abuse and aggression. Newer principals find it particularly challenging.

Rural schools find it especially challenging to maintain relationships with parents and whānau during consultation, because consultations often involve the wider community. Around half of schools with a high Māori roll find it challenging to consult with their community, because these schools often need to consider more carefully how to build trust with whānau Māori and which methods of engagement will work best.

Challenges with consultation can result in schools scaling back RSE teaching for their students.

**Figure 1:** School leader views on how challenging they find aspects of consultation

“I believe that the school, with respect to its RSE education, has gone backwards because of the process. Now we’re in a situation where we’ve lost ground - fear from our staff that they’re going to get slammed, and heightened fear in the community that the school is going to slip stuff in.”

**BOARD PRESIDING MEMBER AT A PRIMARY SCHOOL**

## Teaching RSE can be stressful, particularly for primary teachers

Almost one third of teachers find teaching RSE stressful. Teachers in primary school find it more stressful than teachers in secondary school because they usually aren’t subject specialists and because they are often dealing with parent and whānau concerns about what is age-appropriate to teach. This puts pressure on teachers.

“Parents become abusive to teachers, and even start very difficult conversations outside of school - in the street or supermarket. They are very picky about every word that is used. As teachers, if we mis-speak once, just a wrong word or even looking the wrong way then we can be under fire from the parent community.”

**PRIMARY TEACHER**

## What is ERO recommending?

### Area 1: Extend teaching and learning of RSE into senior secondary school.

The findings show that RSE is a key area of learning for children and young people, particularly at a time of increased risks through social media and harmful online content. In senior secondary school, timetables are crowded and students have choice about the subjects they study. But even in this context RSE is too important to leave to chance. While RSE is compulsory from Years 1 to 10, the Government should consider how to extend RSE teaching and learning into Years 11 to 13 (including whether it should be compulsory).

### Area 2: Increase consistency of what is taught.

The findings show that RSE is not being consistently taught across schools. There is variability in what students are taught and when they are taught it depending on where they go to school.

ERO has also found that not all teachers are well prepared to teach RSE, particularly in primary schools where RSE is often taught by the classroom teacher. It is important all teachers have the skills and support they need. The Ministry of Education should clarify the knowledge, skills, and understanding students are expected to develop, provide evidence-based resources and supports, and professional development during their initial teacher education, as well as ongoing professional development.

### Area 3: Look at the consultation requirement on boards.

ERO has found that the requirement for school boards to consult at least once every two years is creating significant challenges for schools. Schools are caught between opposing perspectives from parents and whānau, as well as external influence from individuals and groups not directly connected to the school. School staff can be subject to ongoing abuse and intimidation. Some schools respond by scaling back RSE teaching, which results in students missing out on learning opportunities.

The Government should consider replacing the requirement on school boards to consult the school community on RSE (as part of the Health and Physical Education curriculum) with a requirement to inform parents and whānau about *what* they plan to teach and *how* they plan to teach it, before they teach it. Schools should also ensure that parents and whānau know that they can withdraw their children from any element of RSE that they are uncomfortable with.

## Want to know more?

To find out more about how RSE is working in our schools, check out our main [evaluation report](#), and short [insights guide for school boards](#). These can be downloaded for free from ERO's Evidence and Insights website, [www.evidence.ero.govt.nz](http://www.evidence.ero.govt.nz).



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o Aotearoa**  
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