



Insights for school leaders: Evaluation of Counselling in Schools

The Education Review Office looked at the effectiveness of the Counselling in Schools programme. Our evaluation found that counselling improves students' mental health, and we also saw some encouraging signs of improved learning and wellbeing more widely.

This guide will be helpful for school leaders who work with counsellors or are considering working with counsellors. It shares some key findings and suggestions for practical actions that are relevant to your role.

The Counselling in Schools – Awhi Mai Awhi Atu programme (Counselling in Schools) was rolled out in primary, intermediate, and some small secondary schools. It's available in selected schools in most regions, with a particular focus on schools with the greatest need. ERO evaluated the programme over three years.

What did ERO find out?

Counselling can reduce distress and improve learning, attendance, and behaviour outcomes

Most students who receive counselling support show improved psychological health, and this has a lasting, positive impact. Eight in ten students reported improved psychological health after receiving counselling, and those students with high levels of distress are likely to show the most improvement. It's also encouraging that we saw improvements in students' attendance, behaviour, and learning progress.

Practical actions for school leaders

These findings and lessons from the evaluation will be useful for school leaders that work with counsellors, or are considering doing so.

Leaders can help counsellors build strong relationships with the school community. Strong relationships will help counsellors to understand your school, build trusting relationships, and become part of the school community; all of which help with their work with students. For example, we heard about counsellors talking informally to teachers and students during break times.

Leaders can make sure there are multiple referral pathways. Most referrals to counsellors tend to be made by teachers and school leaders, and these are usually related to clear signs of distress like behaviour issues. Sometimes students with less observable signs of distress, such as grief, are missed. Having multiple ways to refer to counsellors, including through parents and whānau, and self-referrals by students themselves, can help to respond to a wider range of needs. For leaders, this could mean sharing clear information with students and parents and whānau, about how to self-refer or refer their children.

Leaders can choose an in-school venue for counselling carefully. We heard that it's important to have dedicated, safe spaces for counselling sessions, and that it makes a difference when counsellors are regularly visible and available at the school. We heard that this helps to normalise counselling and reduce stigma.

Leaders can provide opportunities for counsellors to collaborate with school staff. We found that it's valuable for counsellors to have opportunities to collaborate with teachers and leaders, and to connect with other services provided by the school that can have links to counselling, for example school nurses and Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLBs).

Reflective questions

These questions could be useful topics of discussion between school leaders, staff, counsellors or counselling providers.

- How can we work together to support counsellors to engage and build relationships with staff, students, and parents and whānau?
- Do parents and whānau have clear and useful information about how to refer their children for counselling? How about students – can they self-refer easily?
- Pacific, Asian, and Middle Eastern, Latin American, African (MELAA) students are less likely to access counselling. How can the school and counsellors work together to ensure *all* students are able to benefit from counselling support?
- What is the best space for in-school counselling space at the school, that students know about and can easily access? How might we help students to feel safe and not stigmatised when accessing this space?
- How can we support counsellors to connect and collaborate with other staff? What are the key roles in the school that we should ensure that counsellors can link with – for example teachers, school nurses, or RTLBs?

Want to know more?

- *Someone to talk to: Evaluation of Counselling in Schools* is our **full report** about this evaluation: <https://www.evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/someone-to-talk-to-evaluation-of-counselling-in-schools>
- A short **summary** of that report is here: <https://www.evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/someone-to-talk-to-evaluation-of-counselling-in-schools-summary>



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