

Building the foundations for education success



The declining state of our once world-class education system

New Zealand's education system is in freefall. Since 2009, New Zealand has been experiencing overall declines in achievement for reading, maths and science¹. Almost one in five (18%) year 9 students in New Zealand fails to achieve even a 'low' standard of mathematics compared to just 11% in 1995 when the study began².

It is not just by international standards that New Zealand is slipping. In 2022, less than half of students gained University Entrance – the gateway to greater job opportunities and higher incomes³.

Most parents of school-age children will have recognised that something is not quite right in schools. Yet the education system makes it almost impossible for parents to track whether their kids are learning and achieving at the level they ought to be at.

As a result, some students are leaving the compulsory schooling system without the basic literacy and numeracy skills needed to thrive in society. Teachers are overloaded trying to put together a coherent curriculum and interpret whether the kids in their classes are on the right track. And employers despair at how poorly prepared new workers are as those kids transition from the schooling system to the workforce.

There are big disparities in students outcomes within and between schools. In a ranking of educational equality across early childhood, primary and secondary school, New Zealand ranked 33 out of 38 advanced economy school systems⁴. The performance gap in reading scores at Grade 4 (or NZ year 5) has New Zealand ranked as second-worst out of 31 school systems.

For those who are engaged in education issues, these figures will not be a surprise (although the implications are still as disturbing). What is surprising is the unwillingness to actually make changes that will turn these statistics around.

If anything, the education sector has responded to signs of failure by dropping standards further, hoping that by setting a lower bar kids might still have a fighting chance.

ACT has read the research and listened to feedback from across the country to identify the key areas where changes need to be made:

- School attendance levels are at crisis point. This is both a symptom of a failing education

system and a cause of further under-performance.

- Educational disparities are starting to show from the first day kids start primary school. Access to high quality early childhood education can help mitigate other socio-economic disadvantages.
- Students are falling through the gaps because there are inadequate opportunities to check-in and ensure students are performing at the expected level and how much value a given school is adding to its students' progress.
- Students are not consistently being taught the knowledge and skills that parents and future employers would expect, leaving a perception gap between what the Ministry of Education believes schools are for, and what the rest of society believes.

ACT's education policies are designed to enable real choice in schooling options, while ensuring that there are consistent and basic educational standards that all schools and students must meet. New Zealand has experienced 20 years of consistently lowering the bar and lowering expectations for student achievement. ACT will restore aspiration to the education system.

The stakes are too high to get this stuff wrong. Almost every aspect of a person's adult life will be defined by the education they receive as a child. An education crisis today will turn into a crime crisis, a vulnerable children crisis, an economic crisis and an inequality crisis tomorrow.

ACT has a plan to bring about real change and turnaround this country's downward trajectory and it starts with education.

To succeed in education, you have to show up



ACT will:

- Develop a traffic light system for unjustified absences, which will be publicly available in real-time. The traffic light system would entail additional responsibilities for schools and parents based on risk level.
- Redirect funding from centrally controlled truancy services so that schools can fund or purchase services directly.
- Ensure the process for schools referring families to Oranga Tamariki is simplified and more flexible.

1. https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/196629/PISA-2018-NZ-Summary-Report.pdf

2. https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/205693/TIMSS-2018-Year-9-Maths.pdf; https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0014/13820/TIMSS-2002-03-Maths-and-Science-Achievement-in-NZ-Year-9-Summary-Report.pdf

3. https://www.parliament.nz/en/pb/order-paper-questions/written-questions/document/WQ_06316_2023/6316-2023-chris-baillie-to-the-minister-of-education

4. https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/an-unfair-start-inequality-children-education_37049-RC15-EN-WEB.pdf

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One of the surest signs that the current education system is failing is when kids are not even bothering to turn up to school. Low attendance rates are both a symptom and a cause of a failing education system. They are a symptom as they indicate neither the relevant students nor, often, their parents see value in the education provided. They are a cause as failing to attend school only sets a child back further.

For anyone who cares about the drivers of poverty, inequality and youth crime, getting these kids back in school should be a top priority.

The most recent data on attendance rates between school deciles shows that only 23.2% of decile 1 (lowest decile) schools report regular attendance, compared with 49.8% for decile 10 (highest decile state and state-integrated schools)⁵.

Attendance rates vary by region: the South Island had regular attendance rates of 61–63% while Te Tai Tokerau (Northland) had the lowest attendance rate at 48.1%. There are also differences by ethnicity, with 71% of Asian and 63% of European students attending school regularly in Term 1 2023, compared to 45% of Māori and 48% of Pasifika students.

The first step for dealing with this truancy crisis is to get a better handle on how schools are coping across the country. At the moment, some schools are simply not reporting attendance data at all. As of August 2023, 380 state or state-integrated schools had not reported their attendance data for either term 3 or term 4 of 2022, almost a year later⁶.

School attendance data is subject to publishing lags, meaning it is hard to get a handle of the issue in real-time. Term 3 2022 data was only published in February 2023 and term 4 2022 data was only published in May 2023—a delay of a few months each⁷.

ACT will require every school in New Zealand to fill out an electronic attendance register accessible by the Ministry of Education. Schools will be required to record which students have not attended school on a particular day and whether that absence was justified or unjustified. The data from the electronic register will be used to publicly report on a real-time traffic light system and will entail additional accountabilities for schools and parents. It would work as follows:

- Green light, high attendance (up to 10% absence). These schools will still be required to attempt to make same-day contact with the absent students' families where the absences are unjustified.
- Orange light, irregular attendance (10–30% absence). These schools will be required to develop a plan to reintegrate the students back

into regular attendance with the caregivers responsible.

- Red light, chronic absenteeism. (more than 30% truant). Schools may attract an ERO investigation and would be at risk of statutory intervention.

ACT would also empower schools to deal with truancy by redirecting the money currently being spent on centrally-controlled attendance services. At the moment, contracts for attendance services are held at a national level. Schools have little choice over service provider or how that service is delivered. ACT's policy would enable schools to contract or deliver an attendance service that works best for them and their student population. The funding would be weighted to the Equity Index, so schools with more vulnerable student populations would receive more funding. For example: a poor school with 600 students could have an allowance of about \$113 per student, or \$67,800 for hiring an attendance officer.

Crucially, the method for delivering the services would not be prescribed; a group of smaller schools could band together to hire their own officer or attendance services could be contracted from an NGO that serves wider community needs. If families are keeping kids home because they cannot provide lunches or uniforms or footwear, then attendance services may take a less punitive approach and instead focus on meeting the identified needs.

Finally, ACT acknowledges the challenges schools are up against if parents simply do not take school attendance seriously. A different approach is needed if parents simply don't care. ACT would clarify and simplify the process where schools can refer students and their families to Oranga Tamariki for an intervention. Changes would include simplifying the steps schools need to take before making a referral — schools have the knowledge and should have discretion over what steps they believe are appropriate and necessary. Schools would also be able to refer children that are not enrolled in any school. In 2022, nearly 10,000 5 to 13-year-olds were not enrolled in the official school system⁸. Clearly, stronger mechanisms are needed to address situations where parents pull a child out of a school and the school has reason to believe the student has not been enrolled in another school.

Some kids are showing up to primary school not knowing how to hold a pencil

5. <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/attendance>

6. https://www.parliament.nz/en/pb/order-paper-questions/written-questions/document/WQ_01295_2023/1295-2023-chris-baillie-to-the-minister-of-education

7. https://www.parliament.nz/en/pb/order-paper-questions/written-questions/document/WQ_01295_2023/1295-2023-chris-baillie-to-the-minister-of-education

8. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/primary-school-aged-children-not-engaged-in-formal-education/LXPIO2CJ5JAFDIFBN6MG557KY/>



ACT will:

- Extend the B4 School Check to include education progress as well as health. These checks will help develop an evaluation of ECE sector performance and how providers are contributing to child development. Over time, ECE providers that fail to contribute to outcomes may risk losing their funding or the ability to be licensed as an education provider.
- Remove regulations in the ECE sector that cannot be justified on a legitimate health, safety and wellbeing basis, or are not supported by robust evidence and cost-benefit analysis.
- Introduce stronger methods for cracking down on ECEs that breach health and safety standards.

actually contributing to child development should be a priority. ACT would start by expanding the B4 School Checks that are available to every child at the age of 4⁹. The B4 School Checks are conducted by Plunket and other providers to check the health of the children before they start school and asks some questions about their general cognitive development. They can be conducted at a variety of locations to meet the needs of parents, including at ECE centres. Though the checks are optional for most parents, they are strongly encouraged and are compulsory for some beneficiaries with children under five.

ACT would keep the health check at age four, but would introduce a second education check that would be conducted before the child starts primary school (or close to the first day). B4 School Check practitioners would be able to give parents information about what the second check would entail, and would encourage parents to get their kids the help they need to prepare.

The second B4 School Check would include some basic school readiness measures such as a child's ability to:

- read their own name,
- know the alphabet,
- hold a pencil and pick up a book correctly,
- identify things that are the same and distinguish them or group them, (i.e. 4 cats, 8 dogs and 1 mouse),
- match items in a shape box (i.e. putting the triangle in the triangle-shaped hole) , and
- communicate thoughts and ideas.

The check would be conducted at the child's ECE if it is before they start school, or would be conducted by the primary school if the child did not attend ECE or has not yet completed the check.

Data from these checks would be centrally collected and consolidated. Central collection and consolidation will provide two benefits: Firstly, the government and policymakers will get a better idea of the real state of school readiness in New Zealand. Secondly, as the check will include information about ECE attendance, policymakers will also gain more knowledge of how ECE providers are contributing to child development.

Once the system has bedded in, ECE providers that consistently fail to contribute to child development would lose their funding.

The next big issue with ECE comes down to access. In 2022, parents were having to wait up to 18 months

Some kids will start primary school with an ability to recall their favourite story, the capacity to write their name, and hold complex conversations. Other kids do not know how to hold a pencil.

Normally when people talk about children being disadvantaged in the school system they are referring to the income of the child's parents. But there is another kind of disadvantage that impacts kids from the first day they start primary school: school readiness.

The academic literature shows that high quality ECE services are an important protective factor in helping children overcome initial disadvantage⁹.

The problem is that there is little information currently available on the performance of New Zealand's ECE sector. The Government currently sets regulations and targets for inputs such as teacher qualifications and the curriculum but does not effectively measure the educational and developmental outcomes.

In 2016, the Government's chief education scientific advisor at the time, Professor Stuart McNaughton, described the lack of information on ECE outcomes as "unethical": "I think it's unethical to not know how well we're serving our kids...We don't know in any systematic sense just what the quality really is like on the ground, other than using indicators of 'good practice'. We don't know as much as we should know"¹⁰.

It is time the government starts measuring the results it gets from its investment in ECE.

Ensuring taxpayers' investment in ECE services is

9. https://www.oecd.org/education/school/NEW_ZEALAND_policy_profile_-_published_3-8-2012.pdf (<https://www.oecd.org/education/school/NEW%20ZEALAND%20policy%20profile%20-%20published%203-8-2012.pdf>); <https://www.growingup.co.nz/news/research-signals-potential-new-directions-for-school-readiness-policy>

10. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/the-primary-issue-have-kids-got-the-skills-they-need-to-start-school/YWEUIIIQ7PL7PUVLGEDZF4QY/>

11. <https://www.plunket.org.nz/plunket/what-we-offer/b4-school-check/>

for a place at an ECE centre, with teacher shortages playing a large part¹².

At the moment, ECE providers need to comply with a slew of different regulations before they can open their doors in the morning. Over-regulation is not only restricting the supply of new ECEs and the availability of places in existing ECEs, it is exhausting the workforce. Regulations have become so overly prescriptive of how qualified professionals undertake their day-to-day tasks, it is no wonder that 74 per cent of ECE teachers believe the Government is taking the sector in the wrong direction¹³.

ECE regulations should be in place to ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of kids. Regulations or funding based on proxies for educational quality (such as mandating higher teacher qualifications or curriculum compliance) should only be in place if the evidence is robust and would pass a cost-benefit test. For example, there might be evidence to suggest ECE teachers with PhD qualifications make the most difference to child development. However, mandating this as a minimum requirement across the population would doubtless increase the costs of delivering ECE and reduce access.

ACT would comprehensively review the swathe of regulations ECE providers face in order to ensure the regulations are workable and do not go beyond what is necessary to ensure health, safety and wellbeing. Regulations and funding based on proxies for education quality would only be kept if they were supported by a robust evidence base and where the benefits exceed the costs.

By cleaning up the set of regulations that ECEs must comply with, ACT will also make it easier for authorities to close down ECEs that put children in danger or risk causing real harm. Between 2017–2023 there were 3190 regulation breaches that were found to be committed by childcare services¹⁴. Of those, 915 were health and safety breaches. Yet an increasing number of ECEs are able to remain open. In 2017, 58 percent of ECEs on provisional and suspended licenses were shut down¹⁵. In 2022, only 16 percent were ordered to close.

Although the numbers may be concerning, it is difficult to tell at the moment how many children are in danger because of these breaches given the sheer amount of health and safety regulations ECEs must comply with. It is also difficult to get an accurate picture of the size of the problem as ERO inspections of ECEs typically only occur if a parent makes a complaint, which in turn requires parents to have a good understanding of everything that goes on when they leave their children for the day.

Cleaning up unnecessary red tape will make the enforcement of regulations more meaningful. If ECEs

are found to have breached a standard, ACT would develop more decisive procedures for revoking a license, as opposed to allowing the ECE to continue to run on a provisional or suspended license. Following these changes, ACT would also increase the number of un-announced ERO inspections for a random sample of ECEs. This will help give assurance to parents and the public about the quality of ECEs and will create a better feedback loop on whether regulations are fit for purpose.

Parents deserve to know how their kids are progressing in school and how their school performs



ACT will:

- Ensure all schools participate in standardised testing.
- Develop an online league table resource, similar to Australia's 'My School', to help parents understand how their school is performing compared with other schools that serve students of similar backgrounds.

Standardised testing is common across many advanced OECD countries as a means of monitoring the education system's performance. It is one of the most effective ways of measuring how individual students perform compared with others in their cohort, and it provides vital information to teachers and parents that can be used to improve a child's learning track.

The information that parents get on the educational progress of their kids varies widely from school to school. While some schools administer tests to inform parents of their child is progressing in math, reading and writing, other parents are left in the dark about whether the child is in need of extra learning support, or faces even greater challenges.

ACT would require schools to conduct e-asTTle tests twice a year and for these results to be reported to parents. But this alone will not be enough to truly empower parents to make the best use of the information they are receiving.

Parents do not simply need to know how their child is performing — they also need to know how the school is contributing (or not contributing) to the child's

12. <https://www.1news.co.nz/2022/06/20/nc-quick-fix-to-ece-teacher-shortage-amid-pressure-on-spots/>

13. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/early-childhood-teachers-despondent-over-state-of-sector-new-survey-reveals/ViROWQ48ZBIFKTGADWIY7465E/>

14. https://www.parliament.nz/en/pb/order-paper-questions/written-questions/document/WQ_22905_2023/22905-2023-chris-baillie-to-the-associate-minister-of

15. https://www.parliament.nz/en/pb/order-paper-questions/written-questions/document/WQ_22911_2023/22911-2023-chris-baillie-to-the-associate-minister-of

progress. Parents of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, or who send their child to a school full of families from disadvantaged backgrounds, might simply internalise the lower educational expectations that some facets of society impose on them. Some parents might not realise that their child's high achievement is occurring in spite of their school, not because of it. There are excellent schools and excellent teachers within the education sector that buck wider trends.

Value-added progress measures in education can be used by both parents and the education sector to identify where the pockets of excellence exist. ACT would develop a platform for parents, education researchers and the wider public to understand how different schools contribute to student progress.

The results from e-asTTle tests will be centrally collated in order to put together an online resource for parents to see how different schools compare. Australia has had over ten years of experience doing just that: its 'My School' platform enables parents and school communities to compare their school's results with neighbouring schools and other 'statistically similar' schools. 'Statistically similar' means that schools with families from relatively well-off families are compared with students from similar backgrounds, and the same goes for students from disadvantaged families. These comparisons help parents and the public avoid disadvantaged backgrounds becoming destiny.

Think tank The New Zealand Initiative has already completed a value-added study of schools using NCEA level 2 results and found that high-performing and underperforming schools exist across all deciles¹⁶.

In Australia, the 'My School' tool was used by lower socioeconomic status families to find better performing schools, showing that it can be a powerful means of reducing inequality¹⁷.

A review of the 'My School' tool by the Australian Productivity Commission found parents across the board feel empowered to take the information provided by My School to school meetings to discuss the reason for poor performance. This has particularly been the case in remote Indigenous communities where community leaders have taken the profiles of similar schools to their school leaders to query why their schools are under-performing, and hold them accountable for the achievement of their children¹⁸.

New Zealand's historical reluctance to implement standardised testing does not affect students who have good teachers or go to good schools as those students are likely already exposed to standardised testing. The students who miss out are those that are disadvantaged. Over time, parents will also be able to

use this information to make more informed choices about what school they send their child to. Rather than using proxies for school quality such as decile (or the recently introduced equity index rating), parents will be able to see how schools can contribute to students' progress, comparing schools with similar student backgrounds.

The curriculum should not be a political weapon



ACT will:

- Set minimum criteria that any curriculum taught in New Zealand primary schools must follow but would allow for multiple curriculum versions to become available.
- Put out a Request for Proposal for primary curriculum writers, requiring writers to set out how they propose to meet the minimum criteria that has been set. The contracts will be largely – if not wholly – commission based. The writers would earn royalties based on the number of schools who have chosen to adopt their version of the curriculum.

The New Zealand primary school curriculum to date has served New Zealand poorly: it has failed to set up all students with a shared set of foundational knowledge and it has led to greater workloads for teachers who are required to fill in the gaps.

The Labour Government have undertaken a 'curriculum refresh' that was meant to address some of the deficiencies that education experts have been pointing out for years. Though there is a greater level of prescription in the new curriculum and a greater focus on literacy and numeracy, which is welcome, the actual content of the 'curriculum refresh' threatens to send this country backwards.

What ACT has learned about the Labour Government's additions to the curriculum so far should raise significant concern. Examples include:

- Mātauranga Māori (Māori cultural knowledge) is now infused into every learning area, including science. Some academics have tried pointing out that science and Mātauranga Māori are distinct bodies of knowledge that do not naturally combine together. They were shouted down as being offensive and racist – simply indicating that Mātauranga Māori's addition to the curriculum cannot be justified

16. <https://www.nzinitiative.org.nz/reports-and-media/reports/in-fairness-to-our-schools/>

17. https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/4642413/n2023n05.pdf

18. https://www.pc.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/199678/sub046-education-evidence-attachment.pdf

on intellectual grounds.

- The history curriculum divides history into villains and victims, contains significant gaps, and pushes a narrow set of highly political stories from our past.
- The proposed science curriculum teaches five main topics: the Earth system, biodiversity, food, energy and water, and infectious diseases. It does not specify the teaching of physics or chemistry, with a focus on the philosophy of science rather than basic scientific knowledge.
- Despite the significant struggles Kiwi kids already face in maths achievement, the Ministry of Education may make it even worse by making maths an instrument for social justice. Parents will be confused when they hear that teaching maths isn't about helping kids solve basic problems as they navigate the world, but instead about addressing 'social justice and equity'. ACT exposed Labour's draft plan for teaching maths which:

*"uses maths to develop critical awareness about wider social, environmental, political, ideological, and economic issues. Critical maths recognises the importance of understanding, interpreting, and addressing issues of power, social justice and equity in the community and the wider world. Akonga are encouraged to interrogate dominant discourses and assumptions, including that maths is benign, neutral, and culture-free."*¹⁹

ACT acknowledges that going down the road of the United States' 'curriculum wars', where the national curriculum is treated as a highly politicised tool for indoctrination is not a good thing. Radically changing the curriculum every time there is a change in government is unlikely to improve the quality of education, and it is not fair on teachers either – not to mention the expense. So far, the Ministry of Education has spent \$13,086,856 on the curriculum refresh²⁰.

And yet, by nature the national curriculum is such an important component of the education system that New Zealand cannot afford to get it wrong.

New Zealand's experiments with maths (the Numeracy Project,) and literacy (balanced literacy) teaching also demonstrates the consequences when official Ministry of Education requirements and guidance are out of step with a robust and growing evidence base.

ACT will put an end to the 'curriculum wars' that risk arising between different governments, while ensuring that any curriculum taught in New Zealand schools meets the standards required to set all kids up with a set of foundational knowledge and skills. Rather than

simply rewriting Labour's version of the curriculum – and to avoid doubt, this needs to be done – ACT would reform the Ministry of Education's role to that of curriculum approver, rather than curriculum writer.

The Ministry of Education would be required to approve curriculums based on a set of criteria that have been designed to ensure international best-practice and some consistency between schools. The criteria would also require the level of specificity necessary to ensure the Ministry, parents and the public would be able to follow what would be taught in the school that adopts a given curriculum. The criteria will include:

- A science-based approach to adapting the curriculum to meet progressions in cognitive development.
- A structured system that builds a foundation of skills and knowledge in core subjects.
- A level of detail that would provide clear guidance to teachers about what to teach and when, and transparency for the public to follow what they can expect schools to deliver.

- Content that is evidence-based and secular (excluding religious studies).

By setting the criteria, rather than prescribing the curriculum or content, there is the potential for multiple Ministry of Education-approved curriculums with New Zealand based content.

This policy avoids pouring large amounts of taxpayers' money into a curriculum that may or may not stick. Instead, the contracts for writing the curriculums would be largely commission-based. Each writer would receive royalties based on the number of schools that adopt their curriculum. This will ensure that the writers develop a curriculum that meets the needs of teachers, local communities and the aspirations of individual schools.

Some New Zealand schools are already adopting alternatives to the national curriculum, by offering the Cambridge curriculum at primary level. ACT's policy simply expands the options available to schools who are wanting to offer a quality, evidence-based, local curriculum.

All students deserve to receive an education where they gain a foundational base of skills and knowledge, regardless of what school they go to. Teachers also deserve more concrete guidance and materials to reduce the workload and guesswork currently required of them. Yet there is more than one way to design a curriculum to meet these needs, and ACT acknowledges there is a plurality of views within the education sector.

19. <https://www.act.org.nz/ideological-maths-teaching-a-cruel-distraction>

20. https://www.parliament.nz/en/pb/order-paper-questions/written-questions/document/WQ_23545_2023/23545-2023-chris-baillie-to-the-minister-of-education

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What does this mean in practice? It means reaching a middle ground between the vague curriculum framework model that increased teacher workloads and disparities between schools, and rolling out a nationwide curriculum that does not meet the preferences and needs of all school communities.

Mātauranga Māori can be incorporated into a curriculum, or not, but it needs to be done in a coherent manner that meets evidence-based standards. Financial literacy could be included as a standalone topic but curriculum writers could also make the case that another subject deserves higher priority. Inherently diverse topics such as history will not have government-imposed value judgements attached to the curriculum. And if parents are dissatisfied with the curriculum their school teaches, they can move to a school that offers a better fit.

Schools deserve options and ACT's policy will ensure those options are of a high and certified standard.

NCEA should impart the skills and knowledge students need to participate in the workforce and higher education

ACT will:

- Refuse to lower the bar for literacy and numeracy standards. ACT will conduct another set of mock exams in 2024 to gauge progress on higher literacy and numeracy standards, and commit to enforcing higher standards from 2025.
- Abolish University Entrance as a separate qualification and replace NCEA level three requirements with the current University Entrance requirements.
- Ensure employers' and tertiary institutions' input is included in the development of achievement and unit standards.



The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) has undergone a number of changes since it was first introduced in 2002. Though there may be valid disagreements over what knowledge and subjects should be compulsory at a high school level, it should not be a matter of dispute that NCEA qualifications must provide high school leavers with

the ability to participate in the labour market and wider society.

That is not the case at the moment. In 2018, a public survey found that only around half of respondents agreed that NCEA is a valuable qualification²¹. In 2023, a survey of 543 New Zealand business indicated that the number of job applicants that are lacking literacy and numeracy skills has increased significantly in just a year: from around 22% to around 44%²².

In response to concerns that the bar had been set too low for numeracy and literacy standards, New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) ran a pilot with higher standards. The results of the September 2022 trial were shocking, with over 40% of students failing the reading component and over half failing the writing component²³. The roll-out of the new standards has been postponed, purportedly to give schools time to prepare their students. Some principals are calling for the higher standards to be dropped entirely²⁴.

If the bar is set too low, then the qualification becomes meaningless and the burden is put onto others (either employers or tertiary institutions) to fill whatever gaps remain in skills and knowledge.

This might not seem like a problem to most people – as long as the skills are being taught somehow, at some time. But it reflects a massive waste of resources. At least \$2.5 billion is spent on secondary schools alone each year²⁵. The least you would expect from this investment would be the ability for secondary school leavers to know how many minutes there are in an hour²⁶. It is also a drain on productivity as it defers employer and tertiary institution time and resources away from conducting their business or providing the service they are meant to.

ACT agrees that given the low base that many students are starting from, delaying the roll out of higher literacy and numeracy standards until 2025 is the only option. However, schools will be expected to make the most of this grace period to prepare teachers and students. ACT will conduct another set of mock exams in 2024 to gauge progress and commit to enforcing the higher standards from 2025. If students fail to meet the new standards, they will be given the opportunity to re-try every six months until they get there. It is better to keep on trying until students meet the standard, rather than lowering the standard for all.

ACT will also make changes to NCEA level three to ensure it is a meaningful qualification that signals real skills. University Entrance as a separate standard has always been a bit of a puzzle. A significant proportion of students are gaining NCEA level 3 but not University Entrance.

21. <https://conversation.education.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/NZCER-NCEA-Review-Report-FINAL4.pdf>

22. <https://emalive.co.nz/documents/advocacy/Skills-Shortage-Survey-Results-2023.pdf>

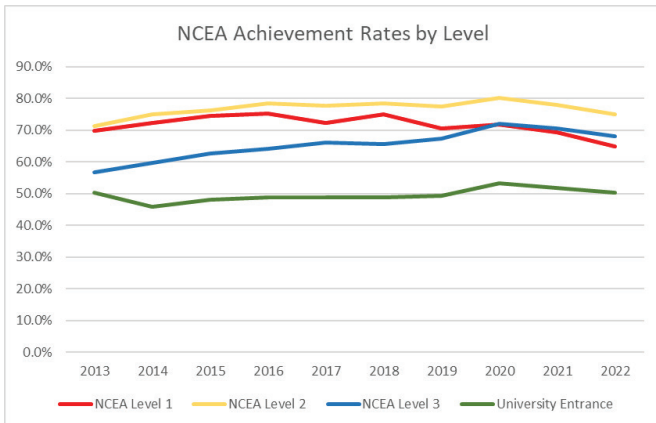
23. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/making-the-grade-second-ncea-literacy-and-numeracy-test-results-show-drop-in-reading-increase-in-writing-and-numeracy/FSSJVSVT2JAIZH5Y3KJNZPHTA/#:~:text=A%20smaller%20trial%20in%202021,not%20functionally%20literate%20or%20numerate>

24. <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2023/06/education-secondary-teachers-union-can-see-benefit-to-delay-of-ncea-level-1-changes-after-jan-tinetti-refuses-to-rule-it-out.html>

25. <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/funding-to-schools>

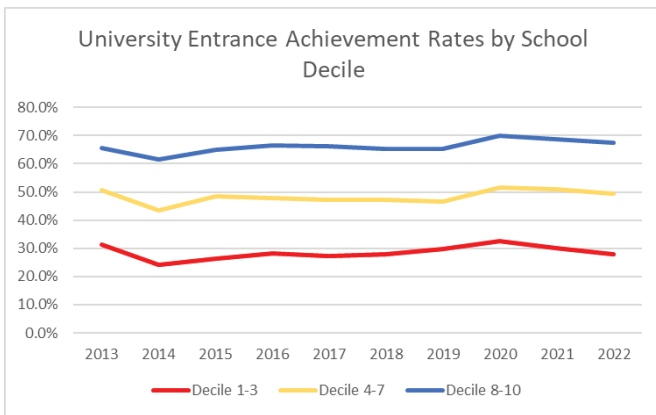
26. <https://www.mz.co.nz/news/national/465909/teens-could-fail-basic-literacy-numeracy-ncea-standards-report>

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Source: <https://www.nzqa.govt.nz/assets/About-us/Publications/stats-reports/NCEA-Annual-Report-2022.pdf>

The results are particularly concerning as it is the most disadvantaged students who are most likely to miss out.



Source: <https://www.nzqa.govt.nz/assets/About-us/Publications/stats-reports/NCEA-Annual-Report-2022.pdf>

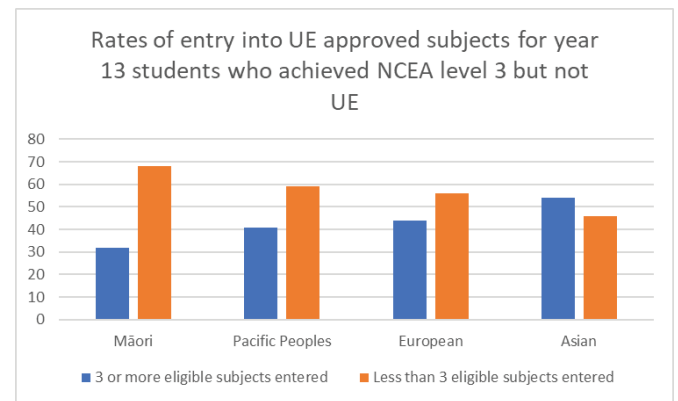
If the purpose of the education system is to ensure every child has the chance to succeed in life, the NCEA system is letting New Zealanders down badly.

While it is true that university is not the best or preferred life course for everyone, the standards as they are currently set are not particularly onerous and the skills and abilities they reflect are not just important for university success. It is not just universities which require University Entrance either, it is a requirement for many polytechnic courses.

The main differences between NCEA level three and University Entrance are gaining some numeracy and literacy credits at levels 1 and 2, and some credits gained from a restricted (but still lengthy) list of subject areas. The label University Entrance implies a high level of academic ability, yet the actual skills it reflects are more aligned with the minimum skills required to participate in a modern economy.

There is evidence to suggest that the huge inequalities

in University Entrance has less to do with raw capabilities and more to do with schools not directing students to the courses they need to attain the required credits. In 2019, 8,333 students achieved NCEA Level 3 and not UE. The most common reason for not achieving UE was that the three-subject requirement was not met²⁷. There is an ethnic inequality element to this story too. More than two-thirds of Māori NCEA Level 3 achievers are not entered for enough credits in UE-approved subjects to achieve the UE requirement. The graph below shows whether students were entered into enough eligible subjects (3 or more) to gain University Entrance. Those entered into less than three subjects would not meet the criteria.



Source: https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/about-us/publications/insights-papers/university-entrance/#e8470_heading1

ACT would abolish University Entrance as a separate standard, and instead make those requirements a standard for NCEA level three. Doing so would mean that those attaining the qualification can signal a shared set of core skills needed to function in the modern economy, and would also avoid some students missing out because of differences in schools' implementation of NCEA. It would not reduce the opportunities to take courses and gain credits in non-academic disciplines, as the old University Entrance requirements still allowed for a number of credits to be gained from the non-restricted list.

Finally, ACT would ensure NCEA prepares students for future employment and study by requiring the curriculum and assessment standards to be developed in consultation with employers and tertiary institutions.

Rather than having NCEA developed purely by bureaucrats, this policy would mean chartered accountants could have input into the accounting curriculum and achievement standards. Agricultural subjects would have input from the farming sector. Universities would have input into the way science, technology, engineering and mathematics is taught at the secondary level.

27. https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/about-us/publications/insights-papers/university-entrance/#e8470_heading1

Building the foundations for education success



The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) would conduct an annual survey of employers and tertiary institutions to measure NCEA's usefulness. This will include questions on whether the course content is relevant, whether the qualification endorsements are meaningful, and whether they provide the right foundation for students to build upon in future education, training or employment. By conducting an annual check-in, NZQA would ensure that NCEA adapts to shifts in the industry and provides a solid foundation.

Whether a student chooses to move from secondary school to university, vocational education or straight to employment, the NCEA system should offer a qualification that gives them the foundation they need to thrive.