

Strengthening teacher authority and stopping class disruption

ACT will give teachers a clear legal power to remove disruptive students. This will protect staff who act in good faith, and back the right of the majority to learn – without any return to physical discipline.

Classroom disruption by a few steals valuable learning time from the majority of well-behaved students, who want to learn.

In 2024 the Education Review Office (ERO) found that behaviour is a major problem in New Zealand schools, with behaviour consistently worse than in peer countries.

Around half of teachers deal with disruption in every lesson, and 47 per cent say they lose 40 to 50 minutes or more a day managing it.

New Zealand has recorded the lowest disciplinary score in mathematics classes of any OECD country in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and we are regularly in the bottom quarter of PISA countries for behaviour in English classes.

According to the ERO classroom behaviour is a key driver of teachers leaving the profession, with half saying it has a large impact on their intention to continue teaching.

01 Power to remove disruptive students

ACT will give classroom teachers an explicit legal power to direct a student to leave the room for serious or persistent disruption, backed in law, very much like the operation of the school cell phone ban.

Under the new law defiant students must leave the classroom.

This is a fast, frontline tool held by the teacher, sitting below formal stand-down and suspension processes.

Removed students go to a supervised, staffed space in the school, such as an existing pastoral office, deans' room, or learning support room. This is not an empty or lockable room, a distinction that separates it from the seclusion rooms banned in 2017 following the Miramar case, where children were locked in confinement as punishment.

If a student refuses, it is escalated to a dean or senior leader rather than left with the teacher, and continued refusal triggers a mandatory parent meeting on the first occurrence.

Where a student refuses to leave after being lawfully directed to do so, and refuses again after escalation, staff may use reasonable force to remove the student from the classroom.

02 Protect teachers acting in good faith

ACT will give clear legal protection to staff who use reasonable and proportionate intervention to prevent harm, so that order in the classroom can be maintained.

This includes reasonable physical restraint where necessary to prevent harm, consistent with the existing boundaries under Section 99 of the Education and Training Act 2020.

The protection will also include reasonable physical restraint to prevent the destruction of property.

ACT will clarify the boundaries already set under Section 99, so teachers know exactly what is permitted and are protected when they act reasonably, without unnecessary paperwork.

03 Consequences for assaulting teachers

ACT will ensure any assault on a teacher, student, or any member of school staff triggers an automatic school response: immediate removal, then a mandatory stand-down or suspension, ending the current school-by-school inconsistency.

Where an assault crosses a criminal threshold, the first occurrence is referred to Police Youth Aid under the existing Oranga Tamariki Act, with no need to wait for repeat offences.

04 Parents share responsibility

ACT will require a parent or guardian meeting when behaviour repeats or turns serious.

For low-level disruption, a parent meeting is only required if the parent has not already engaged with the school in good faith. This targets parents who are disengaged, not those already working with the school.

For violence, threats, intimidation, or destruction of property the meeting is mandatory on the first occurrence.

A student refusing to leave the classroom when lawfully directed by a teacher is treated as a further trigger for a mandatory first-occurrence meeting, the same standard applied to violence, threats, or intimidation. Where a parent does not engage with a required meeting, that non-engagement itself triggers escalation, either to the Ministry of Education or into the same Oranga Tamariki and Police Youth Aid pathway used for assault under point 03.

Where a parent fails to attend a mandatory meeting without a reasonable excuse they can be fined, similarly to the regime used for school attendance. The fine would be up to \$300 for a first offence and up to \$3000 for subsequent offences.

Parents may also be held financially liable for the cost of deliberate property damage caused by their child at school, recoverable as a debt if unpaid.

What changes in law

ACT will amend the Education and Training Act 2020 to create the removal power, clarify good-faith intervention, mandate the automatic response to assaults, require parent meetings, escalate cases of parental non-engagement, and make parents liable for deliberate property damage caused by their child.

Section 80 of the Act will also need updating to reflect the mandatory nature of stand-downs and suspensions.

When the school system lets a disruptive few wreck a whole class, it fails those who play by the rules. ACT will strengthen authority on the frontline and defend every child's right to learn.