



GOVERNMENT INQUIRY INTO MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTION

Submission from the Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand

The Education Council

The Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand (the Education Council) is the independent professional body for teachers from early childhood education through to primary and secondary schooling in English and Māori medium schools and centres.

There are currently around 101,000 practising teachers in New Zealand.

The statutory purpose of the Education Council set out in section 377 of the Education Act 1989 (the Act) is “to ensure safe and high quality leadership, teaching and learning ... through raising the status of the profession”.

We act in the interests of teachers to:

- enable and support leadership to teachers and direction for the education profession, including teacher education and continued professional and leadership development
- establish and maintain criteria for teacher registration, standards for ongoing practice and criteria for the issue of practising certificates
- monitor and maintain the requirements relating to teacher conduct, competence and impairment
- establish and maintain the Code of Professional Responsibility for teachers.

Why this inquiry is important to us

In providing leadership to the teaching profession, the Education Council has a key role in setting expectations for teachers and leaders, so children and young people learn in an environment which is safe and promotes their wellbeing.

We have developed with the profession, the Code of Professional Responsibility (the Code) and the Standards for the Teaching Profession (the Standards) which set out the expected behaviours and practice for teachers.

Wellbeing is at the heart of the Code and Standards. Teachers understand and take ownership of the influence they have on shaping the futures of children and young people and helping them to realise their potential. Families and the wider community trust teachers to guide their children and young people on their learning journey and keep them safe.

Teachers understand and take ownership of the influence they have on shaping the futures of children.

With our mandate to champion teachers, we are not commenting on mental health and addiction services in New Zealand but drawing attention to the significance of a functioning system that supports both teachers and learners to flourish so that more of our children and young people can achieve better outcomes.



Key points

A focus on wellbeing for both teachers and learners

Wellbeing for teachers and learners is symbiotic; children and young people need to be supported so that they can learn effectively, and teachers need to be supported so they can deliver safe and quality teaching and learning.

By setting out expectations of ethical behaviour and of effective teaching practice, the Code and Standards provide the foundation for everything we do in our profession. Teaching is a demanding profession that requires a high level of commitment and energy. To be successful, teachers need to take care of their mental health to enable them to be effective as teachers, and to be a good role model for learners. To do this, teachers must have a sophisticated understanding of learners' needs and the challenges of responding to them while respecting professional boundaries.

We hear that teachers increasingly feel under pressure to meet the needs of learners in ways that are more aligned to expectations on social workers, counsellors and police officers. While all teachers are committed to working in the best interests of learners, children and young people must have access to high-quality counselling and treatment services so they are not reliant on teachers for the specialist help they need.¹

Accordingly, we welcome improvements to ways teachers and learners can access mental health services and support, and clarity on the roles and responsibilities for service delivery. In particular, we welcome recommendations that will improve coordination between the health system and education with deep integration so that support is provided to those who need it, when they need it.

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Inclusivity and diversity

Although mental wellbeing is important for carrying out the responsibilities of teaching, having a mental illness itself does not prevent a person from being a successful teacher. Inclusivity and diversity is critical in the profession because it reflects the many different learners we have in New Zealand classrooms and centres, and the many different people who make wonderful and effective teachers. This includes teachers who have a mental illness.

In our experience at the Education Council, teachers demonstrate a high level of willingness to take responsibility for their mental health. We encourage any action that continues to bring mental health and wellbeing out into the open, where we consider mental health as important as physical health, and remove the stigma and silence associated with mental illnesses.

A culturally responsive system

The Treaty of Waitangi commitments and expectations are embedded in the Code and Standards in recognition of the unique status of tangata whenua in Aotearoa New Zealand. This recognises the value and importance we place on cultural responsiveness to best achieve good educational outcomes for Māori. Our profession also commits to fostering environments where all learners can be confident in their identities, languages, cultures and abilities.

¹ Some guidance counsellors are also registered and certificated teachers.



We support change in the mental health system that meets the needs of a diverse Aotearoa New Zealand including one that upholds the Treaty commitments, and is culturally relevant and responsive. We know in education that part of this response is a stronger connectedness between learners, teachers, whānau, and communities.

Research

There is extensive research and evidence in New Zealand and internationally that tells us about learner wellbeing but much less on the wellbeing of teachers. We do know anecdotally and from teachers' stories that mental health and wellbeing is an issue for our profession in New Zealand. There are teachers suffering from stress and burnout, and at times this can be a factor in cases relating to teacher misconduct or failure to attain competence.

We support a strengthened focus on research, data and information that will help us better understand the challenges faced by teachers in the workplace and how low wellbeing exacerbates the high demands of teaching, and can impact safe and high-quality teaching, learning and leadership.

We support change in New Zealand's mental health system that meets the needs of a diverse Aotearoa New Zealand.

