



Insights for school leaders:

How well is NCEA Level 1 working for our schools and students?

In 2024, changes to NCEA Level 1 were rolled out nationwide. ERO looked at how well it is working and how the delivery is going. We found that, despite the changes that have been made to improve the qualification, NCEA Level 1 isn't yet a reliable measure of students' knowledge and skills, and is not preparing all students well for their future.

This guide highlights key findings and recommendations from ERO's report.

ERO looked at how well NCEA Level 1 is working for schools and students

Leaving school with higher qualifications leads to a range of more positive life outcomes, including better chances of employment, so it is important for Aotearoa New Zealand's young people that our national qualification is as effective as it can be. ERO looked at how well NCEA Level 1 is working for schools and students since the recent change roll-out.

To do this, we looked at the national and international evidence base and surveyed hundreds of Year 11 students, as well as teachers, leaders, parents and whānau, and employers. We also held interviews and focus groups to hear from Year 11 students, teachers, leaders, parents and whānau, employers, subject associations, school boards, secondary tertiary providers, and a range of experts to understand the impact of the NCEA Level 1 changes.

What did ERO find out?

NCEA Level 1 is optional, and an increasing number of schools are opting out of offering it.

In 2024, one in eight schools aren't offering NCEA Level 1 and for 2025, just under one in five schools plan not to offer it (with one in 10 schools still deciding). Schools in high socio-economic communities with higher NCEA achievement are least likely to offer NCEA Level 1. Schools in low to medium socio-economic communities are more likely to offer NCEA Level 1, valuing it as an 'exit qualification' for students who leave at the end of Year 11.

Schools are finding the new NCEA Level 1 unmanageable in its first year, and it is likely that some issues will remain after the initial change.

NCEA Level 1 is unmanageable for leaders and teachers, and the additional workload for the Principal's Nominee is especially high and is unlikely to reduce over time. Administering additional external assessments (co-requisites and submitted reports) is logistically challenging – however schools do value the standardisation introduced by the co-requisite.

NCEA Level 1 is not yet a reliable measure of knowledge and skills.

Three in five teachers and almost half of leaders report NCEA Level 1 is an unreliable measure of students' knowledge and skills. NCEA Level 1 difficulty still varies between subjects and schools, due to the flexibility that remains. Submitted reports are the biggest concern due to risks for authenticity.

NCEA Level 1 is manageable for students, but is not motivating all students to achieve as well as they can.

The new larger standards are resulting in assessments happening at the same time, which can lead to student workload issues – but just over two-thirds of students find their workload manageable. Teachers report NCEA Level 1 doesn't motivate students to achieve because students who 'fail' early in the year feel there isn't a way of catching up, and high-achieving students can reach the required credits needed for NCEA Level 1 before the end of the year.

Progressing through NCEA levels and on to future pathways can be challenging.

NCEA Level 1 remains difficult to understand, and it can be hard for students to make good choices about courses. Nearly two in five students report they didn't know enough about NCEA Level 1 when they made their course choices. NCEA Level 1 wasn't set up to – and so doesn't – provide clear vocational pathways, with almost half of students on vocational pathways reporting that NCEA Level 1 isn't preparing them for their future. It also isn't always preparing students with the knowledge they need for NCEA Level 2.

Some aspects of NCEA Level 1 aren't working as well for Māori students, Pacific students, and students who qualify for Special Assessment Conditions (SACs).

NCEA Level 1 is not delivering for all student groups. Māori students, Pacific students, and students who qualify for SACs are more likely to report that NCEA Level 1 is too difficult.

Students and parents and whānau mainly value NCEA Level 1 as a stepping stone to NCEA Level 2. Employers value other skills and attributes over NCEA Level 1.

Students on an academic pathway, and their parents and whānau, value NCEA Level 1 as preparation for NCEA Level 2 because it provides study skills and exam experience, when many students haven't done exams before. Parents and whānau assume that employers value NCEA Level 1 as a recognised national qualification, but just over two in five employers don't consider it when making recruitment decisions.

Implementation has not gone well.

Seven in 10 teachers and half of leaders report they weren't prepared to fully implement the changes at the start of 2024. They feel like they are 'building the plane while flying it' and are frustrated they couldn't start implementation earlier, due to a lack of guidance and resources. Information has been unclear and inconsistent, and changes have been happening late into implementation.

What is ERO recommending?

ERO is recommending a wide range of improvements at a system level – including quick changes, reform options, implications for Levels 2 and 3, and lessons for future implementations. There are 21 recommendations in total across four areas, summarised in the table below. For more detail, see the full report here: <https://evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/set-up-to-succeed-how-well-is-ncea-level-1-working-for-our-schools-and-students>.

Area	Recommendations summary
1) Quick changes. These aim to improve the fairness and reliability of NCEA Level 1 and help with external assessment challenges.	Replace the submitted reports, resource schools for the additional external assessments, extend the transitional period for literacy and numeracy requirements, and rethink how external assessments are conducted for practical knowledge.

<p>2) Reform NCEA Level 1 – To improve the quality and credibility of the qualification longer term.</p>	<p>Decide on the purpose of NCEA Level 1, considering the following three options: drop it entirely; target it as a foundational qualification; or make NCEA Level 1 more challenging to better prepare students for NCEA Level 2 and stretch the most academically able.</p> <p>Reduce flexibility in the system and reduce variability between credits.</p> <p>Retain fewer, larger standards to support deeper learning and reduce flexibility in the system, but put more weight on assessments later in the year.</p> <p>Strengthen vocational options and develop better vocational pathways.</p>
<p>3) Make changes to NCEA Levels 2 and 3 – Some issues at NCEA Level 1 will also apply at Levels 2 and 3.</p>	<p>Reduce flexibility in the system and decide on the model for NCEA across all levels (including deciding how many years of assessment is right).</p>
<p>4) Improve implementation of future changes – Using lessons from the implementation of NCEA Level 1.</p>	<p>Sequence changes and signpost earlier; provide better information, supports and resources to schools; involve experts in the changes; and coordinate information and resources better.</p>

Reflective questions for school leaders

Through our fieldwork, school leaders told us about practical actions that made a difference for their schools. The below questions could be useful for leaders to reflect on individually or with teachers.

What are the most useful connections my school can make?

Some strategies that schools told us work well are...

- **Connecting with subject associations** – these have played a key role in supporting teachers by keeping them updated, connecting them with each other, and providing classroom resources.

“Subject resources have come from our own subject associations. [They] have done all the work to give us the [resources], not the Ministry of Education.”

TEACHER

- **Connecting with other schools for support** – Working in a cluster is especially helpful for small schools, who have fewer staff to share the load of implementation. Schools have valued working with other schools for moderation and sharing resources.

How can I support my students (and their parents and whānau) to make good choices for NCEA?

Schools told us that the key areas of support are...

- **Talking students through their options** – NCEA needs to be well understood so that students can make the right choices for their future. However, NCEA is complex due to its flexible nature. Students like it when their schools run an ‘option day’.

“Every year we have option days. The teachers will explain that subject to us and we choose which one suits us best in terms of academic achievement, as well as the way it helps us best learn.”

STUDENT

- **Helping parents and whānau to understand how NCEA works** – parents and whānau can find NCEA difficult to understand, which can leave students managing their own NCEA journey. Parents and whānau want clear key information around what the different types of assessment look like, how co-requisites work, and marking criteria.

“I don’t understand the differentiation between ‘understanding’ (for Merit) and ‘comprehensive understanding’ (for Excellence) in the marking description.”

PARENT AND WHĀNAU

How can we support our school’s Principal’s Nominee?

A strategy that schools told us works well is...

- **Developing new systems** that reduce their administrative load or support them to complete their extra tasks – such as keeping track of which students need to be entered in co-requisites.

“[There is a] huge Principal’s Nominee workload, [but] I’ve been very well supported.”

PRINCIPAL’S NOMINEE

Want to know more?

To find out more about how well NCEA Level 1 is working for schools and students, check out ERO’s evaluation report and summary. These set out the recommendations we are making for improvement across the NCEA system, and can be downloaded for free from ERO’s Evidence and Insights website: www.evidence.ero.govt.nz.

We appreciate the work of those who supported this research, particularly the students, parents and whānau, school staff, subject associations, employers, tertiary providers, school boards, and experts who shared with us. Their experience and insights are at the heart of what we learnt.



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