



Insights for counsellors and counselling providers: 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 in-school counsellors and counselling providers. It shares some key findings and lessons from our evaluation that are relevant to the counsellor 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. Some of the evaluation's findings and lessons are relevant to in-school counselling provision more generally – these are summarised in this guide.

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.

Building strong relationships is important to help counsellors understand and become part of the school community

Relationships between counsellors and the school's staff, students, and parents and whānau make a difference. Good relationships help counsellors to understand the school, build trust with students, and become part of the school community; all of which help with their work with students.

It's useful for counsellors to have opportunities to collaborate with 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). This helps counsellors to fit their work in with the specific needs and opportunities at the school.

School leaders have a key role in promoting good collaboration, but counsellors can work to:

- ensure that other school services are being engaged where necessary
- collaborate with the other staff and connections in the school on a student-by-student basis so that needs are being met.

Having multiple referral pathways is helpful. Our evaluation found that most referrals to counsellors tend to be made by teachers and school leaders, and these are usually related to observable signs of distress like behaviour issues. Sometimes students with less observable signs of distress, such as grief, are missed. Having multiple ways that students can be referred to counsellors, including through parents and whānau, and self-referrals by students themselves, can help to respond to a wider range of needs. Counsellors can work with schools to share clear information with students and parents and whānau, about how to self-refer or refer their children.

Counselling in primary schools works best when there is a suitable in-school venue. We heard that it's important to have dedicated, safe spaces for counselling sessions. Students told us that it makes a difference when their counsellors are regularly visible and available at the school. We heard that this helps to normalise counselling, reducing stigma so students feel more comfortable accessing counselling support. Students, teachers, and parents and whānau told us that having counsellors on-site also means better access for those in remote areas and improves the uptake of counselling.

In-school counselling works best when students receive more than three hours of support.

More counselling hours positively impacts students' learning and engagement, as well as their mental health. Students who receive at least three hours of counselling are more likely to show improved mental health, learning, and engagement outcomes.

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>
- The companion guide *Insights for school leaders* includes some reflective questions that encourage **school leaders** to work well alongside counsellors and providers: <https://www.evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/insights-for-school-leaders-evaluation-of-counselling-in-schools>



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