



Education for disabled learners: From early childhood to school

SUMMARY



Receiving a quality education, from early childhood education (ECE) through to secondary school, positively affects how well all children and young people do at school and in life – from academic achievement and earning potential to health and wellbeing. Education is even more critical for disabled learners. When disabled learners receive a quality, inclusive education they are more likely to achieve better outcomes, complete secondary schooling and to go on to further study and employment.

This study looked at how well the education system is supporting disabled learners. It found that too many disabled learners are experiencing exclusion. We need to improve education for disabled learners so they can thrive. This summary describes what we found and what is needed to significantly improve education for these priority learners.

Disabled learners are children and young people who face significant barriers to accessing and succeeding in education. These learners have a need for ongoing adaptations and support to enable them to thrive in education.¹

Around one in ten children aged under 15 years are disabled.² Each year government spends over \$1 billion on additional support for these learners and others with educational needs.

What does good education look like for these learners?

Disabled children and young people have the same rights to enrol and receive education as other learners. To thrive, they need to be able to enrol and be fully included in all aspects of education, and for education to be adapted so that the curriculum, teaching, and physical environment meet their needs. Like all learners, they need to receive quality teaching in supportive environments, and with strong partnerships with their whānau.

How well are disabled children doing?

1. Disabled learners are being excluded

We found that many disabled learners are being discouraged from enrolling, asked to stay home due to resourcing issues or for specific activities, stood down, and are having to move schools.

- One in four parents and whānau have been discouraged from enrolling their disabled child at an ECE service.
- One in five disabled learners have been discouraged from enrolling at a local school.
- Nearly one in five parents and whānau have been asked to keep their disabled child at home from ECE, and one in four to keep their child home from school.

“As soon as I open up and tell them, they’re like, ‘oh sorry actually we don’t have space’, or, ‘oh sorry uh I don’t think we can manage him, you’ll have to find somewhere else’, or, ‘I don’t think this place is right for him.’”

PARENT – ECE

“I get excluded from some activities. I’m not allowed to go swimming and that’s my favourite thing to do. ... I hate being left out when everyone else is swimming.”

DISABLED LEARNER – SCHOOLS

1. It includes children and young people with physical, sensory, intellectual, or cognitive impairments, and those with neurodiverse learning needs. The term *disabled learner* is used as it is consistent with the New Zealand Disability, which uses the *social model* of disability. However, we recognise that not all members of this community will identify with this language.

2. Disability survey: 2013 | Stats NZ

2. Disabled learners enjoy ECE and school but may not be progressing sufficiently

Almost all parents reported their child likes ECE and two thirds of disabled learners enjoy school. However, parents and whānau of disabled children are unclear about, or dissatisfied with, how their child's learning is progressing. Many parents and whānau are frustrated their school does not engage their child or set expectations at the right level. When learners do not progress in their learning at a pace that is right for them it impacts how well they do at school.

- Over four in five parents and whānau believe their child feels loved, cared for and comfortable at ECE, and two thirds of learners enjoy learning at school.
- In ECE progress is unclear, and in schools only half of parents and whānau thought their disabled child is making good progress.
- A quarter of disabled learners said they are not supported to take the courses that interest them most.
- Disabled learners are more than twice as likely as non-disabled learners to leave school with no qualifications.

3. Disabled learners' sense of belonging declines as they progress through education

Most parents and whānau of disabled children feel their child has a good sense of belonging at their ECE service, but sense of belonging declines when disabled learners attend school, particularly for those with more complex needs.

- At school almost a third of disabled learners do not feel they belong, and more than a quarter do not feel accepted for who they are.

“Because I am quiet, no-one knows I am always picked on (including threats of physical harm, being followed home). I am too scared to do anything about it and I don't want mum to interfere.”

DISABLED LEARNER

4. Disabled learners with more complex needs have poorer experiences and outcomes

These learners are more likely to find challenges in enrolling and teachers are less confident in supporting them.

- At ECE, parents and whānau of disabled learners with more complex needs are less likely to say their child has a sense of safety and belonging.
- At school, disabled learners with more complex needs are less likely to feel they belong at school, less likely to enjoy learning at school, and less happy with their learning progress.

5. Disabled learners and their whānau have better experiences at schools in lower socio-economic communities and schools with a high Māori role.

Not all schools are welcoming of disabled learners, resulting in inequities for disabled learners. Disabled learners in low decile³ schools have more positive outcomes than those at high decile schools. Whānau whose disabled learner is in a school with a high Māori roll are more positive about how the school includes their child.

3. In this report we use school decile as a proxy for the socio-economic status of the communities a school serves. We note that, at the time of publication of this summary, the Ministry of Education is rolling out a new Equity Index to replace the school decile system.

Which areas of education for disabled learners need to be strengthened?

We found many committed early childhood services and schools, and a range of good practice in education and support for disabled learners. But we also found five key areas that need to be strengthened to provide better education for disabled learners.

1. Leaders are often committed but do not fully understand what is expected or how good their provision is for disabled learners.

We found that many services and schools do not have information about how well they are providing for disabled children, and many lack focus on this important group.

- Nearly half (43 percent) of school leaders and school Boards do not have a full understanding of their legal obligations to disabled learners.
- Two in five ECE service leaders reported provision for disabled children is rarely or never a focus of their internal reviews.

2. Many teachers are not confident teaching disabled learners.

Teacher confidence is low when it comes to adapting their teaching, the curriculum, and assessments for disabled learners.

- One in three kaiako (ECE teachers) do not feel confident to deliver a curriculum for disabled children.
- More than half of teachers in schools lack confidence in teaching disabled learners, particularly those with complex needs who require significant adaptations.

3. Guidance and tools that exist for teachers are not widely used.

Te Whāriki – The Early Childhood Curriculum and the national curriculum and assessment framework for schools are flexible and support education for disabled learners. Many guidelines and tools exist for teachers, but many teachers are not aware of these. Teachers also told us they find guidelines and tools are not well-aligned or easy to access and, consequently, hardly ever use them.

- A third (34 percent) of teachers thought that expectations for inclusion of disabled learners are unclear and that there are no guidelines.

4. Partnerships with whānau need to be strengthened and focus more on children's learning.

In ECE, there are strong relationships with parents and whānau of disabled children. Whānau of disabled learners in school find it easy to talk with teachers about their child's learning. But relationships are not focused on supporting disabled children's learning.

- Over half of parents and whānau reported kaiako never or only sometimes discuss their child's next steps in their learning goals with them. Only half of parents and whānau are happy with how the school is working with them in planning their child's individual learning goals.

5. Support is not well coordinated, particularly at transitions.

Parents and whānau find transitions between ECE and school – including having to re-establish the need for support for their disabled child – stressful and overly complex. Communication and the sharing of information between services, agencies and schools is a significant challenge.

Recommendations

Education is still not delivering for all disabled learners, and improvements are needed. Based on this study, we have identified four areas to raise the quality and inclusiveness of education for disabled learners in early childhood, primary and secondary education.

Area 1: Strengthen prioritisation of disabled learners in ECEs and schools, and accountability for how well they are doing.

- Identify and track enrolment, participation, and educational experiences of disabled learners.
- Provide guidance to leaders on expectations for education for disabled learners.
- ERO's evaluations to include a focus on education for disabled learners.
- *ECE only*: Explore policy options to reduce barriers to enrolment and participation of disabled learners.
- *Schools only*: Require schools and Boards to report annually on learning and provision for disabled learners.
- *Schools only*: Act when schools persistently discourage enrolment of disabled learners.

Area 3: Increase parents, whānau and disabled learners' understanding of their education rights, how to raise concerns, make a complaint, or get someone to advocate on their behalf.

- Provide support and accessible resources for learners, parents and whānau on their education rights and entitlements, how to raise concerns and complains, and access advocacy support if they need it.
- *Schools only*: Put in place an independent mechanism for complaints, and report annually.
- *Schools only*: Investigate and act when schools persistently fail to meet the needs of disabled learners.

Area 2: Increase disabled learners' sense of belonging and acceptance, and kaiako and teachers' capability in teaching disabled learners.

- Strengthen initial education and training to ensure a focus on disabled learners.
- Ensure guidance, standards, codes, and inductions include a focus on inclusion of disabled learners.
- Include disability as a priority area in professional learning and development.
- Review the quality of disability-specific professional learning and development.
- Put in place, and increase use of, guidelines, resources, and supports for all educators.

Area 4: Improve the coordination of support for disabled learners, and pathways both in and beyond school.

- Put mechanisms in place to ensure information follows disabled learners across the education setting.
- *Schools only*: Define specialist roles and ensure collaboration to assess and support disabled learners.
- *Schools only*: Improve coordination across agencies on supporting disabled learners' education.
- *Schools only*: Schools to more strongly collaborate and share resources and expertise.

Together, these recommendations have the potential to significantly improve education experiences and outcomes for disabled learners. Improving education for these learners has the potential to dramatically improve their lives and life course. It will take coordinated and focused work across the relevant agencies to take forward these recommendations and ensure change occurs. We recommend that agencies report to Ministers on progress in July 2023.

If you want to find out more about our evaluations of education for disabled children in ECE and schools, you can read our reports:

[How good is education for disabled children? An evaluation of education provision for disabled children in early childhood education](#)

[Thriving at school? Education for disabled learners at school](#)

What ERO did

To understand how good education is for disabled children we gathered information through multiple ways.

Early Childhood Education	Primary and Secondary Education
→ Surveys of 118 parents/whānau	→ Surveys of 355 disabled learners and 509 whānau
→ Surveys of 130 kaiako and 291 service leaders	→ Surveys of 772 teachers, 448 teacher aides, 101 principals and school leaders, 124 Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs)
→ Site visits and observations of teaching and learning at nine services	→ Site visits and observations of teaching and learning at eight schools
→ In-depth interviews with leaders, kaiako and parents/whānau at 22 services, and with leaders and kaiako at an additional two services	→ In-depth interviews with principals, SENCOs, teachers, and teacher aides at 21 schools, and Board Chairs from eight schools
→ Interviews with eight Governing Organisation ⁴ leaders	→ In-depth interviews with disabled learners and their whānau
→ Interviews with key experts, practitioners and agencies supporting inclusive education.	→ Analysis of school policies, strategic documents, learning support reports and Individual Education Plans (IEPs) from 21 case study schools
	→ Interviews with key experts, practitioners and agencies supporting inclusive education

4. Governing Organisations are distinct to governing bodies or boards. Governing Organisations contain multiple services, and have significant agency over services' policies and philosophies. Leaders spoken to were mostly professional practice leaders.

We appreciate the work of all those who supported this evaluation, particularly the disabled learners, parents and whānau, and teachers and leaders who shared with us. Their experiences and insights are at the heart of what we have learnt. You can find the full reports on how good education is for disabled children on ERO's website www.ero.govt.nz.



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