



Thriving at School? Education for Disabled Learners in Schools

SUMMARY



Disabled learners have the right to enrol and receive a quality, inclusive education at their local school. When disabled learners receive a quality, inclusive education they are more likely to achieve better outcomes, are more likely to 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 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 with significant needs for ongoing support and adaptations or accommodations to enable them to thrive in education.¹

Approximately 11 percent of 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 a quality, inclusive education in state schools as other learners.³ 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 meets their needs. Like all learners, they need to receive quality teaching in supportive environments, and with strong partnerships with their whānau.

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 Strategy, 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](#)

3. The right to inclusive education has been strengthened in the Education and Training Act 2020 to reflect New Zealand's commitment to the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD)

How well are disabled learners doing?

1. Disabled learners are still experiencing exclusion

We found that many disabled learners are being discouraged from enrolling in their local schools, are being asked to stay home due to resourcing issues, are being stood down, and are having to move schools. Too many are also not supported to take part in wider school activities.

- A fifth of disabled learners had been discouraged from enrolling at a local school.
- A quarter of disabled learners had been asked to stay at home.
- Secondary school disabled learners are two to three times more likely to be stood down or suspended than non-disabled learners.⁴

“I always get sent home. It's hard to learn when I don't get the chance.”

DISABLED LEARNER

2. Disabled learners are enjoying school, but too many are not progressing sufficiently

“I love school, its great and my teachers are great. I love being with the other students. I love being treated the same way as them and given the same opportunities. It is important to me to be included in all aspects, not just being present.”

DISABLED LEARNER

We found most (two in three) disabled learners enjoy learning at their school. However, disabled learners are more than twice as likely to leave school with no qualifications.

- One in four disabled learners at secondary school also indicated that they were not supported to take the courses that interested them most.
- Only half of parents and whānau thought their disabled child was progressing well as a learner.
- Some expressed frustration that the school is not engaging their child or setting expectations at the right level.

3. A significant proportion of disabled learners do not feel accepted or that they belong

We found most (81 percent) disabled learners reported having teachers who are kind, helpful, and care about them. However, a significant proportion do not feel accepted or that they belong at school. Some experience bullying and, sadly, do not have good friends at school.

- More than a quarter of disabled learners do not feel accepted for who they are.
- Almost a third of disabled learners do not feel they belong at school.
- A third of parents and whānau reported their disabled child did not have good friends.

4. Ministry of Education (2020) [He-Whakaaro-the-educational-experiences-of-disabled-learners.pdf](https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/2020/12/he-whakaaro-the-educational-experiences-of-disabled-learners) (educationcounts.govt.nz)

“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 than other disabled learners

We found that disabled learners with more complex needs had poorer experiences and outcomes than learners with mostly physical or sensory impairments.

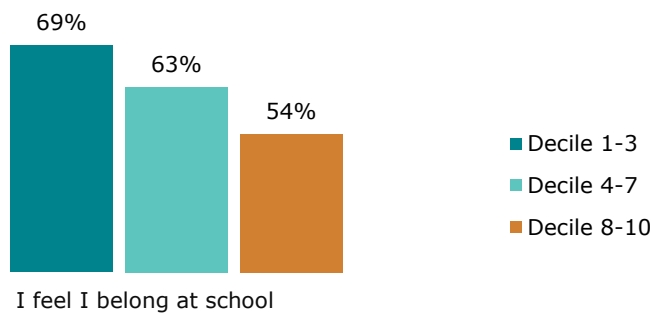
What are the differences between schools?

1. Disabled learners in schools serving lower socio-economic communities report better outcomes

Not all schools are welcoming of disabled learners, resulting in inequities for disabled learners. Disabled learners in low decile⁵ schools reported more positive outcomes on a range of measures than those at high decile schools. Their whānau are also more satisfied with how the school is supporting their child's learning.

Figure 1: *Disabled learners' feelings of belonging at school: School decile comparison*

How much do you agree with the following statement?
(Disabled learners survey: % who strongly agree or agree)



2. Schools with high numbers of Māori students tend to have a stronger culture of inclusion of disabled learners and their whānau

We found that whānau whose disabled learner is in a school with a high Māori roll, are more positive about how the school includes their child and are more satisfied with how the school deals with any issues/concerns about their child's learning. Teachers in these schools also reported greater inclusion.

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

We found many committed schools, and a range of good practice in providing education for disabled learners. But we also found six areas that need to be strengthened.

5. In this report we use school decile as a proxy for the socio-economic status of the communities a school serves. We note the Ministry of Education is currently rolling out a new Equity Index to replace the school decile system.

1. Leaders in schools do not fully understand what is expected

There are robust expectations in legislation, and we found most schools had a commitment to welcoming disabled learners. Many schools are also prioritising support for disabled learners. However, nearly half (43 percent) of school leaders and School Boards do not yet have a full understanding of legal obligations to disabled learners and not all schools' policies support disabled learners. Nationally, there is no tracking of progress for disabled learners.

2. Many teachers are not confident in teaching disabled learners

A third of disabled learners do not feel supported to learn in a way that suits them. Among whānau of disabled learners, a similar proportion are not happy with the quality of their child's schooling. More than half of teachers lack confidence in teaching disabled learners, particularly those with complex needs who require significant adaptations (including at NZ Curriculum Level 1). Confidence among secondary school teachers is particularly low.

3. Guidelines and tools for disabled learners are not being used by teachers

The national curriculum and assessment framework is flexible and supports education for disabled learners. However, teachers are not always confident in tailoring the curriculum and assessment to the needs of disabled learners. Most of the guidelines and tools are not well-aligned or easy to access and are hardly ever used by teachers.

4. Partnerships with learners and their whānau can be strengthened

Whānau of disabled learners find it easy to talk to teachers about their child's learning. However, we found insufficient involvement of disabled learners and their whānau in planning their learning. Few (20 percent) schools had good processes for gathering feedback from disabled learners and their whānau about how well the school is meeting their needs and how to improve. Some whānau are, worryingly, not aware of their child's education rights or how to raise concerns.

5. Support for disabled learners to move on from school is not well coordinated

While the majority of whānau are satisfied with how the school helped their child start school, many are not satisfied with how the school is supporting their child to leave school and access pathways beyond school. Lack of information sharing between agencies and schools impacts on pathways for learners.

6. School buildings and facilities are mostly accessible but schools with older buildings still face challenges

The process for making alterations can also be complex and slow. Some whānau reported that modern learning environments with large open classrooms can create sensory overload for some disabled learners, in particular neurodivergent learners.

Recommendations

Education is not delivering for all disabled learners and improvements are needed. We have identified four areas to raise the quality and inclusiveness of education for disabled learners.

Area 1: To strengthen prioritisation of disabled learners in schools, and accountability for how well they are doing, ERO recommends the following:

1. Report nationally and annually on education experiences and outcomes for disabled learners.
2. Provide guidance to Boards and schools on expectations for education for disabled learners.
3. Include education for disabled learners as a focus for all ERO school evaluations.
4. Require all schools to report annually on their plans and progress for disabled learners.
5. Require all Boards to report on provision for disabled learners as part of Board Assurance Statements.
6. Act when schools persistently discourage enrolment of disabled learners.

Area 2: To increase disabled learners' sense of belonging and acceptance in school, and teachers' capability in teaching disabled learners, ERO recommends the following:

7. Strengthen new principal and initial teacher education.
8. Strengthen Beginner Teacher Induction and mentoring.
9. Ensure guidance on professional standards for teaching are explicit on expectations for inclusion of disabled learners.
10. Make disability a priority for Professional Learning and Development (PLD) for principals and teachers.
11. Review the quality of disability PLD for principals and teachers.
12. Put in place, and increase use of, guidelines, resources, and supports for teachers of disabled learners.

Area 3: To increase disabled learners' and whānau understanding of their education rights, how to raise concerns or make a complaint, or get someone to advocate on their behalf, ERO recommends the following:

13. Provide an accessible resource for learners and whānau on their education rights and entitlements and ensure there is access to advocacy support if they need it.
14. Put in place an independent mechanism for complaints, and report annually.
15. Investigate and act when schools persistently fail to meet the needs of disabled learners.

Area 4: To improve the coordination of supports for disabled learners, and pathways both in and beyond school, ERO recommends the following:

16. Clearly define specialist roles and ensure working as a joined-up team to assess and support disabled learners.
17. Ensure that information follows disabled learners across education settings.
18. Improve coordination across agencies on supporting disabled learners' education.
19. Schools to more strongly collaborate and share resources and expertise.

Conclusion

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 evaluation of education for disabled learners in schools, you can read our report: [Thriving at School? Education for Disabled Learners in Schools](#).

What ERO did

To understand how good education is for disabled learners we gathered information through:

- surveys of 355 disabled learners and 509 parents and whānau
- surveys of 772 teachers, 448 teacher aides, 101 principals and school leaders, and 125 Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs)
- site visits and observations of teaching and learning at eight schools
- in-depth interviews with principals, SENCOs, teachers, and teacher aides at 21 schools, and Board Chairs from eight schools
- in-depth interviews with disabled learners and their whānau
- 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.

We appreciate the work of all those who supported this evaluation, particularly the disabled learners and their whānau, 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 learners on ERO's website www.ero.govt.nz.



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