



Learning in residential care: A guide for social workers

Education has the power change to the lives of the children and young people that you work with – particularly the children and young people in residential care. The education students receive in residence can reconnect them to their learning and change their lives. ERO talked to students, teachers, leaders and social workers, as well as government representatives and the three providers of residential care, to find out about how well education is going in these settings. Your interest, support and involvement in the learning of these students in residential care can make a big difference.

This short guide for social workers that work with students in residential care draws from ERO's new report: *Learning in Residential Care*, 'They knew I wanted to learn'. It:

- shares what we heard from the young people we talked to
- describes what we heard from teachers and leaders
- shares what research tells us about what good education provision for these students looks like
- gives 'big picture' findings about how well everyone is working together to help these students learn, and where improvements could be made
- sets out actions you can take to strengthen teaching and learning in residential care
- shares what our recommendations are for improvement overall.

What do we know works?

Education in residential care has the most impact when everyone involved has clear, shared understandings of what good education provision looks like, and systems and resources are in place to support teachers.

Research here and internationally tells us that students in residential care benefit the most when there is:

- quality transitions in and quality transition out of residence
- support for their education needs
- appropriate teaching practice and meaningful lessons
- positive, nurturing relationships and environments
- whānau or caregiver involvement in their learning
- effective leadership and a focus on improvement in the school.

What students told us

Staff are building strong relationships with the students. The students were positive about their learning and they told us that the relationships that teaching staff develop with them are positive and nurturing. Ninety-two percent of students agreed that their teachers help them to learn.

“I haven’t been told I’m anything or somebody as much as I have in here.”

“Some boys here see teachers as a burden – that changes here.”

Students identified their learning outcomes as “the best thing about learning here”. Ninety percent agreed that they are learning things that will help them when they leave the residence.

They told us they liked the progress they had made in their learning. They also talked about how learning in residential care built their self-belief.

“A lot of certificates ... very proud of them. Before I came here, I didn’t know what credits were.”

“[This residence] got me back to year levels where I need to be.”

However, we also heard that for some students that there was a mismatch in the quantity and difficulty of work they are expected to complete. Students in residential care sit fewer achievement standards than they do outside residence which can limit their pathways. Some students will have better pathways if they sit more achievement standard or higher-level vocational standards while in residential care.

Students said they would like more whānau or significant adult involvement in their learning, particularly sharing their educational achievements.

“I think our family should receive a report of how we are achieving. I want to make my mum proud. Isn’t it every family’s main priority to see how their kid is doing?”

What social workers told us?

We heard from social workers about the challenges you face navigating the education system and that it isn’t your area of expertise.

You are often the adult in the student’s life that the provider turns to. We heard that providers give you updates on the students’ progress, but when that happens you aren’t sure what you are expected to do with them, or how to use them to:

- support the student's learning
- connect the student’s whānau to their learning.

You told us that you have difficulties finding students a pathway to continue their learning.

We heard how you find it hard to find a school to take a student – that you are often looking for any programme that will take them. We also heard that you weren't always aware of the tertiary options available for students.

You also told us that it would be better if the students transition between residence and community were staggered – starting with them returning to school before leaving the residence.

The challenges you face are having an impact on students' achievement – not planning for students' transitions, including identifying future study options in their home location means that any gains in students' engagement and achievement in residences is quickly lost.

What did we find?

We visited eight sites and across the sites we saw considerable variability in practice. In two of the eight sites ERO has recommended providers take immediate action to improve provision.

This is not a new finding. Over the last decade ERO has reviewed education for these priority students and consistently found that the quality of education they receive is too variable and too dependent on where in the country they are.

Overall, ERO's evaluation had seven key findings:

1. Students in residential care are positive about their learning. Their pass rate of NZQA assessments attempted is high when in residence but they are often studying credits with limited pathways.
2. Students' learning is disrupted and disconnected as they transition between provision.
3. There is no agreed education model or a clear picture of what high quality education looks like for these students.
4. The model of education provision in residences makes it harder to grow expertise and is contributing to high levels of variability of provision.
5. There is a commitment to improving outcomes for Māori and culturally responsive practice, but practice is variable.
6. There is some good practice and some workforce capability to support positive educational outcomes.
7. There is a lack of opportunities for whānau and caregivers to connect to their children's learning.

How can we shift things?

Based on this evaluation we have identified three action areas to raise the quality of education for these priority students.

Area 1: To improve the quality of the students' education while in residence ERO recommends:

- developing a quality practice framework
- making available specialist training and professional networks
- enabling information to follow the student.

Area 2: To grow expertise and reduce variability of provision ERO recommends:

- re-examining the model of provision and developing options for a new model. Options should include:
 - an overarching (Tuakana) provider with local (Teina) sites
 - a strong network of providers.

Area 3: To increase students access to high quality education after leaving residence ERO recommends:

- considering education navigators to support student pathways
- earlier planning for pathways after residence
- investigating additional in-school support for students.

While some these changes require government to make some decisions, there changes that you can make right now, including:

- helping connect whānau to students' learning. You can get some ideas on how to do this by looking in our report where we describe an example of good practice in building a relationship between the residence and the students whānau.
- helping prepare students to leave residence and continue on their study. You can include their future study plans in their 'All about Me' plan and you can talk to your local schools and local tertiary institutions about the range of opportunities available.

If you want to find out more about our evaluation on learning in residential care, you can read our reports:

- *Learning in Oranga Tamariki Residential care: 'They knew I wanted to learn'*
- [ERO Special Review: Kingslea School](#)
- [ERO Special Review: Central Regional Health School \(Te Au Rere a Te Tonga; Epuni\)](#)
- [ERO Special Review: Te Poutama Ārahi Rangatahi](#)

We appreciate the work of all those who supported this evaluation, particularly the students, whānau, social workers, 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 learning in residential care, along with a short summary of the findings, on ERO's website www.ero.govt.nz.



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