



# ‘Built in, not bolted on’: Evaluation of education at specialist day schools

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM SCHOOL REVIEWS

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Specialist day schools provide education to disabled students with high and very high needs.

The Education Review Office (ERO) recently completed individual reviews of the quality of education provision in all 27 specialist day schools across Aotearoa New Zealand. This report provides a summary of the findings of the 27 individual reviews. ERO found that the quality of education for students at specialist day schools is good and their education experiences are positive. The reviews also found that these schools are playing a critical role as experts in supporting non-specialist schools.

However, ERO also found that currently there are barriers to students accessing specialist schools and specialist schools could be better supported.

This summary provides an overview of what we found and our recommendations for improvement.

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## What we looked at and why

Disabled students<sup>1</sup> have the same rights to enrol and receive a quality, inclusive education in state schools as other students. ERO has completed individual reviews of the quality of education provision in all 27 specialist day schools<sup>2</sup> across Aotearoa New Zealand. This report provides a summary of the findings from these individual reports and builds on ERO's 'Thriving at School?' report<sup>3</sup> that looked at the quality of education provision for disabled students enrolled in their local primary and secondary schools.

## What are specialist day schools?

For disabled children to thrive in education, they may require adaptations and support to ensure they can fully participate. Many disabled students attend their local schools with additional support, but for some students they and their parents decide that attending one of 27 the specialist day schools across the country will best meet their needs. Access to a specialist day school is provided either with the agreement or direction of the Secretary of Education<sup>4</sup>.

Specialist day school provision includes education at a dedicated specialist school site or through satellite classes at local schools where students receive specialist teaching in a local school environment through the specialist day school.

Specialist day schools all employ therapeutic specialists (physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech-language teachers, and psychologists) who support the students' overall development. Assistive technology also plays a significant role in the education of many students and is a key area of specialisation for these schools.

Specialist day schools also provide outreach services for students receiving Ongoing Resourcing Support (ORS<sup>5</sup>) enrolled in their local school. This includes the provision of specialist teaching support, along with support and guidance for teachers and staff to adapt programmes and teaching practices to meet the specific needs of students with additional needs.

## Who attends specialist day schools?

Students who attend specialist day schools must be verified as entitled to Ongoing Resourcing Support (ORS). Thirty-seven percent of students funded by ORS are in specialist schools.

Many students who enrol with specialist day schools have diverse, complex, and fragile needs.

At July 2023, a total of 3,988 students were enrolled in specialist day schools across Aotearoa New Zealand. Over a third (36 percent) of students in these schools had Very High needs. This represents 53 percent of all verified Very High needs students. The remaining two-thirds (64 percent) of students in specialist day schools were verified as having High needs.

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<sup>1</sup> Disabled students are children and young people with significant needs for ongoing support and adaptations or accommodations to enable them to thrive in education.

<sup>2</sup> Specialist day schools do not include regional health schools, residential specialist schools, the national schools for blind or low vision or hearing-impaired students, or Kingslea.

<sup>3</sup> Education Review Office. (2022) *Thriving at School: Education for Disabled Learners in Schools*.

<https://evidence.ero.govt.nz/media/cvqeq54g/thriving-at-school-education-for-disabled-learners-in-schools.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Section 37 Education and Training Act 2020.

<sup>5</sup> ORS students receive free schooling in Aotearoa New Zealand from ages five to 21 years. They are required to have an Individual Education Plan that outlines their goals for learning and accommodations. ORS students represent 1 percent of those with the highest needs among Aotearoa New Zealand students.

## Key findings

ERO has identified 11 key findings in four areas:

- Area 1: Access and choice for parents
- Area 2: Quality of education
- Area 3: Transitions and pathways
- Area 4: Support for specialist day schools

### Area 1: Access and choice for parents

**Finding 1: Demand for specialist day schools has increased rapidly, particularly for students with Very High needs.**

Specialist day school rolls have grown by 62 percent since 2013. The greatest increase has been in those students with Very High needs (an 81 percent increase).

**Finding 2: Uncertainty about the future of specialist day schools has meant supply of specialist day school places has not kept up with demand and has limited parental choice.**

No new specialist day schools have been established for more than 50 years, but there has been an expansion of satellite classes based in local school settings. Most specialist day schools reported to us long waitlists. Schools reported across the network a total of 681 students waiting to enrol at the start 2024. This includes 319 students in Auckland and 125 students in Wellington.

### Area 2: Quality of education

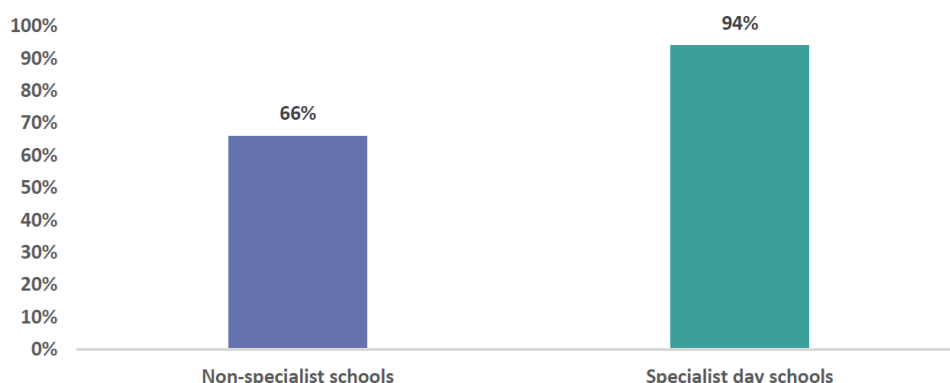
**Finding 3: Students experience a quality education.**

ERO visited and evaluated all 27 specialist day schools and found across schools a good quality of education provision. Parents' levels of satisfaction are also higher for students in specialist day schools than parents of disabled students in local primary and secondary schools<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Note: Disabled students in non-specialist (local) schools include children with a range of needs, a smaller percent have very high needs than those in specialist schools.

**Figure 1:** *I am generally happy with the quality of my child's schooling – non specialist day school vs. specialist day school (parent responses)*



*“My child is doing so well this year at school, and his needs are met fully. Having come from a mainstream school, which was not set up for his complex learning needs, the difference is truly amazing. He is safe, happy, engaged, and learning well at his level.”*

- SPECIALIST DAY SCHOOL PARENT

*“A great experience. We found our place after a very difficult experience at a mainstream school.”*

- SPECIALIST DAY SCHOOL PARENT

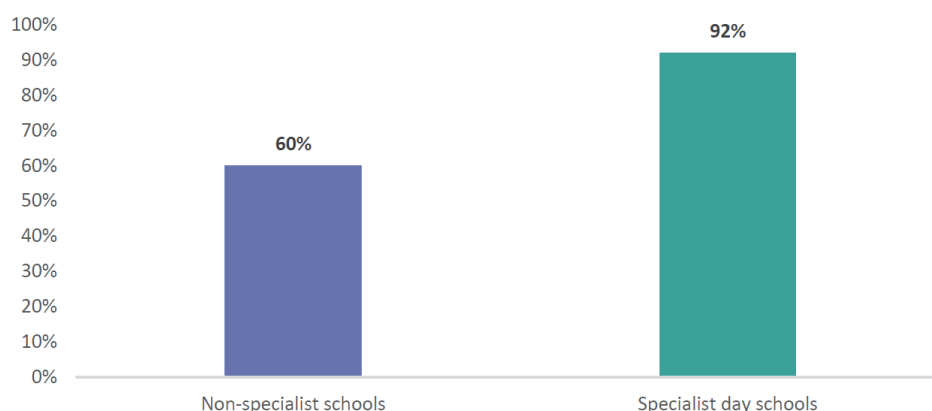
*“This school has been pivotal for my daughter's schooling. She loves going to school and we are noticing massive changes with her speech. The teacher/teacher aides are all friendly and welcoming. Love this school.”*

- SPECIALIST DAY SCHOOL PARENT

**Finding 4: Students experience highly adapted and individualised programmes of learning within each school.**

ERO's review of specialist day schools found that students experienced a highly adapted programme of learning tailored to their abilities and interests. Nine out of 10 parents agreed that their children are learning about things at school that are important and of interest to their child. Parents also reported that their children's schoolwork has the right amount of challenge.

**Figure 2: My child's school work has the right amount of challenge – non specialist day school vs. specialist day school (parent responses)**



*“In mainstream I wasn’t asked what I should teach her or what they should do next. The specialist school know how to look after her in a very holistic way.”*

– SPECIALIST DAY SCHOOL PARENT

**Finding 5: Students benefit from highly personalised support and specialist teaching approaches.**

In its evaluations of each school, ERO found that strategies from speech language therapists, occupational therapists, and physiotherapists are reinforced by teachers and teacher aides within teaching programmes and individual learning plans. A range of collaborative specialist teaching approaches are used. Eight out of 10 (85 percent) parents were satisfied with these approaches and their impact on their children.

*“We know he is safe and that his sensory needs are met – which is huge for us. I think he would be surviving at mainstream, whereas because he is getting all his needs met, he’s thriving at special school. But also importantly, he is receiving full-time education – our mainstream school told us if he went there, we would have to pick him up at 12 noon every day because they couldn’t keep him safe after that.”*

– SPECIALIST DAY SCHOOL PARENT

*“Our child is now part of a supportive whānau based school where he went from non-verbal to 70 percent talking and I owe it all to the dedicated team at the specialist school.”*

– SPECIALIST DAY SCHOOL PARENT

**Finding 6: Schools’ properties do not fully meet the complex needs of students or meet demand for enrolments.**

In our visits to sites across Aotearoa New Zealand, ERO found that many buildings were not suitable to meet the needs of students. Many properties are of poor quality, older, and require significant upkeep. In addition, the properties do not always meet the needs of both students with very high physical needs and those with cognitive and high behavioural needs. There are also examples of more recent builds being unsuitable for students with high and complex needs, particularly autism.

## Area 3: Transitions and pathways

### **Finding 7: A growing number of specialist day schools are providing separate tertiary classes.**

Each of the 27 schools have developed more targeted programmes for students in the last four years of their education as they prepare to transition to life after school at age 21 years. A growing number of specialist day schools provide separate tertiary classes and spaces away from the base school as part of this transition process. A key aspect of these programmes is continuing to build students' life skills and readiness for employment or training through work experiences and involvement in community activities.

### **Finding 8: Students' transitions into specialist day schools are generally managed well.**

ERO observed good transitions into specialist day schools and parents confirmed high levels of satisfaction, with eight out of 10 parents very satisfied or satisfied with transitions into the school. However, there can be cultural barriers, including for Māori, in ensuring effective transitions.

*"An excellent first year at school. Very experienced teacher and specialist staff kept us well informed of any therapy goals and programmes."*

- SPECIALIST DAY SCHOOL PARENT

*"(Transition into schools )was partially successful. I'm quite protective, my different cultural background, Māori, it's about the wairua. They just didn't get the wairua that was required. I don't know if they understand, ... they've done the best they can do but they are not there yet."*

- SPECIALIST DAY SCHOOL MĀORI PARENT

### **Finding 9: Transitions for students leaving school are variable.**

While transitions are a focus for specialist day schools, arrangements are localised and dependent on the quality of different community support arrangements. Access to employment consultants and further education and training are not consistent. Student and whānau experiences are highly dependent on where they are located and the strength of agency coordination. Only 51 percent of parents were satisfied with transitions for students leaving school.

*"Transitioning out after 21 years old - we're starting that now. It's hard because you don't know what's going to be available. We have had a meeting working together to look at what his life is going to look like after school."*

- SPECIALIST DAY SCHOOL PARENT

*"It is sad that this school environment comes to an end at age 21. None of us wants this."*

- SPECIALIST DAY SCHOOL PARENT

## Area 4: Support for specialist day schools

### **Finding 10: There is a lack of clarity nationally of what success for disabled students should look like and how learner progress should be measured.**

The current New Zealand Curriculum does not provide clear expectations for teaching programmes, achievement, and progress for students working at pre and within Level 1. National assessment tools are not available and expectations for students' achievement and progress are unclear.

*“Our child has been at a special school for 11 years and we have not once been told where she is at against the learning standards – never, despite previously having really good teachers who got her to write, read and spell.”*

– SPECIALIST DAY SCHOOL PARENT

### **Finding 11: There is an absence of national leadership development for leaders of specialist day schools.**

Principals of special day schools undertake a highly complex role and much of their training occurs while in their role. Leaders manage the requirements of larger budgets linked to teachers, teacher aides, and specialist therapy provisions for students. Given the complex needs of their students, including very high health needs for many, health and safety matters are more complex. Operating satellites in host schools and tertiary classroom management further adds to the complexity of the leadership role.

One specialist day school in Auckland has the principal managing 29 satellite classrooms situated in 15 host schools. This is in addition to the management of the base school itself and a tertiary space.

ERO found that leaders of specialist day schools could be better supported to undertake this difficult role.

### **Finding 12: There is inadequate access to meaningful professional learning and development (PLD) for specialist day school staff.**

ERO found that, more than in other parts of the sector, ongoing professional learning and development are key priorities for specialist day schools<sup>7</sup>. Principals reported that initial teacher education opportunities for teachers working in specialist day schools are very limited. Therefore, schools become the trainers of staff new to working in specialist day schools.

There is equally little in the way of nationally funded training for specialist day school staff. Consequently, specialist day schools develop and prioritise internal professional development. This training is resource intensive, duplicative, and there is little sharing across the sector.

### **Finding 13: A lack of a clear operational model between specialist and host schools results in students in satellite classes have differing experiences of inclusion.**

Satellite arrangements are negotiated on a case-by-case basis between the specialist and host school. Where things are working well, students in satellites enjoy a high level of inclusion in the day-to-day operation of their host school. This is not always the case. In some situations, ERO

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<sup>7</sup> OECD (2018). TALIS results show Aotearoa New Zealand teachers have low participation in Professional Development associated with teaching students with Special Needs.  
-The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey



identified little integration between the satellite's activities and those of the host. It was equally not always clear who was accountable for what.

*“Our satellite school does not integrate into the mainstream school at all, there is no access to any technology classes for example. I think this limits his experiences. As a high schooler he has much more limited experiences than mainstream learners, no camps, no specialist subject teachers, trips are limited.”*

- SATELLITE PARENT

*“There is no connection between the satellite school and mainstream. Attempts to connect with the mainstream school have always been dismissed.”*

- SATELLITE PARENT

## Recommendations

The debate between specialist and local school settings for disabled students is complex and centres around balancing inclusion with meeting the unique needs of disabled students. As a system, not reconciling this tension has resulted in an absence of clarity around the role that specialist day schools play in the network of provision for disabled students. The consequence has been that policy settings, resourcing, and investment decisions have not kept pace with the changing landscape within which specialist day schools operate.

These findings show that there is potential for specialist day schools to be better supported and play a fuller role in meeting the needs of disabled students. ERO recommends action in four areas.

### **Area 1: Ensure that students and their families can access the right education for them.**

**Recommendation 1:** Develop a deliberate national plan for provision, and work with specialist day schools to respond to the high levels of demand for places, taking into account regional variation in demand and complexity of needs.

**Recommendation 2:** Develop a clear operational model and accountabilities between specialist and host schools to enable students in satellite classrooms to better benefit from inclusive practices and experiences.

**Recommendation 3:** Improve the suitability of specialist day schools' properties and satellite classes to ensure that they are fit for purpose in relation to meeting the complexity of student needs and the forecast increase in students. Budget 2024's significant investment in school property will go some way to supporting this.

### **Area 2: Increase the role specialist day schools can play in supporting all schools to meet the needs of disabled students.**

**Recommendation 4:** Explore options which provide for a more joined up approach across the network of schools in relation to models of provision, curriculum and resource development, capability development, research, and planning.

**Recommendation 5:** Specialist day schools are supported to play a stronger role in helping local schools, including providing specialist outreach services.



### **Area 3: Increase support for specialist day schools through better curriculum and assessment tools and specialist professional development.**

**Recommendation 6:** Develop the New Zealand Curriculum, national assessment, and planning framework for students operating at pre and within Level 1. This would benefit all disabled students working at these levels of the curriculum.

**Recommendation 7:** Better targeted specialist day school professional development for leaders, teachers, specialists, and teacher aides - including strengthening initial teacher education (ITE) pathways.

### **Area 4: Improve transitions for students leaving specialist day schools.**

**Recommendation 8:** Improve and prioritise the national coordination of transitions for students leaving specialist day schools to ensure well managed pathways into employment, training, and community support.

## **Conclusion**

All students are entitled to high quality education, whether this is at their local school or a specialist day school. These recommendations build on ERO's recommendations to also strengthen education for disabled students in local schools. Together the recommendations have the potential to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of disabled students at both specialist day schools and local schools.



## What ERO did

To understand the quality of education at specialist day schools ERO conducted in-depth evaluations of each school. The information gathered was synthesised across the schools. Emerging findings were triangulated through further information gathering and an extensive national synthesis of all evidence.

The evaluation included:

1. Site visits of all 27 specialist day schools.
2. Analysis of school documentation, including strategic plans and reports, training and development documentation, samples of student Individual Education Plans (IEP's).
3. Interviews with school leaders and teachers and observations of classroom practices, and student work.
4. Interviews with the leaders of the specialist therapy team and specialist teacher outreach services.
5. Online interviews with student leaders from most schools.
6. Online interviews with teacher aides.
7. Surveys of parents and whānau.
8. Follow-up phone interviews with parents and whānau who expressed an interest in speaking further with ERO.
9. Analysis of administrative data, including attendance, assessment, and performance data.



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