



**STRICTLY EMBARGOED FOR PUBLICATION UNTIL
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Teacher and principal perspectives on curriculum, implementation, and assessment reform

This report draws together the themes most frequently raised by teachers and principals and identifies where their perspectives converge. The emphasis is on themes rated High or Very High in frequency, while lower-frequency positive themes are included where they help explain the balance of views.

The primary evidence base for this report is qualitative data collected through teacher focus groups and interviews with principals and senior leaders in six different schools across New Zealand.

How to read the ratings

- Frequency reflects how often a theme appeared in the underlying interviews, using the qualitative categories reported in the source tables: Very High, High, Medium-High, Medium, Low-Medium, and Low
- Convergence is a synthesis of alignment between the teacher and principal evidence streams. “Very strong” indicates closely matched themes with similar frequency and strength in both groups. “Strong” indicates clear alignment with some difference in emphasis or framing
- The ratings are qualitative, not respondent counts. They should not be interpreted as population estimates or statistical prevalence.

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Curriculum reform

Curriculum reform produced the broadest and most consistent concern across both evidence streams. Teachers and principals converged strongly on the risks created by reduced flexibility, narrower pathways, and weaker local and cultural responsiveness.

Loss of curriculum flexibility and local responsiveness	Frequency Very High	Convergence Very strong
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- Teachers and principals identified reduced flexibility as the dominant curriculum concern
- Both groups emphasised that schools need scope to tailor learning to student interests, needs, local contexts, and community priorities
- Greater prescription was associated with reduced opportunities for integrated, project-based, applied, and student-centred learning
- The shared system implication is a weaker capacity to engage diverse learners and respond effectively to different school contexts.

Narrowing of subjects and learning pathways	Frequency Very High	Convergence Very strong
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- Both groups expected subject choice and pathway flexibility to narrow, particularly for vocational, practical, and applied learning
- Teachers stressed reduced student agency and fewer opportunities to move between pathways as interests develop
- Principals highlighted the risk that non-traditional routes will become less available and that students may be locked into pathways earlier
- The common concern is increased disengagement and reduced retention among learners who do not thrive in conventional academic pathways.

Reduced cultural responsiveness and widening equity risks	Frequency High to Very High	Convergence Very strong
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- Teachers and principals linked standardisation with less space for locally grounded and culturally responsive curriculum design

- Both principals and teachers identified disproportionate risks for Māori and Pacific Peoples learners and students in lower socio-economic contexts; teachers also highlighted neurodivergent and English as Second Language Learners
- The concern is not only access to learning, but whether curriculum and pathways fit learners' identities, strengths, and circumstances
- Both groups warned that reduced responsiveness could widen existing differences in engagement, achievement, and progression.

Reduced professional autonomy	Frequency Medium-High	Convergence Strong
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- Teachers and principals described a shift from teachers as designers of learning towards implementers of centrally specified content
- The issue was less frequent than flexibility and pathway concerns, but was strongly expressed where it arose
- The shared implication is reduced professional judgement, weaker ownership of change, and a potential decline in morale.

More structure and clearer expectations	Frequency Low	Convergence Strong but limited
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- A minority in both groups saw value in a more structured curriculum
- This support was consistently conditional on retaining flexibility and providing adequate resources and implementation support
- Positive views were substantially less frequent and less strongly expressed than concerns about prescription and responsiveness.

Implementation reform

Implementation concerns were as strong as curriculum concerns and were often described as amplifying them. Teachers focused on immediate workload and rework, while principals placed additional emphasis on system capacity, staffing, sequencing, and uneven implementation between schools.

Insufficient time, release capacity, and escalating workload	Frequency Very High	Convergence Very strong
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- Both groups identified limited time and release capacity as a critical constraint on implementation quality
- Teachers reported simultaneously redesigning the curriculum, adapting assessment, undertaking professional learning, and maintaining existing teaching responsibilities
- Principals emphasised that implementation cannot be absorbed within current workload structures and requires dedicated capacity
- The shared risks are rushed implementation, reduced teaching quality, stress, burnout, and inconsistent delivery.

Incomplete resources, changing guidance, and repeated rework	Frequency Very High	Convergence Very strong
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- Teachers and principals reported delayed, incomplete, or insufficiently detailed curriculum and assessment materials
- Teachers particularly emphasised rework caused by changing guidelines and the need for schools to develop their own resources
- Principals stressed the need for coherent materials, exemplars, and moderation guidance before implementation
- Both groups concluded that resource gaps undermine confidence and may increase variation between schools.

Professional learning and capability requirements	Frequency Very High	Convergence Very strong
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- Principals rated insufficient professional learning and development as a major risk
- Teachers called for timely professional learning linked to practical curriculum and assessment requirements
- Both groups emphasised that learning must be accompanied by time for collaboration, interpretation, and application
- The common concern is that uneven access to capability development will produce uneven implementation and outcomes.

Staffing shortages and workforce sustainability	Frequency High to Very High	Convergence Very strong
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- Principals highlighted staffing shortages and capability gaps, especially in smaller and rural schools
- Teachers reported high stress, declining morale, burnout risk, and concern about attrition across early-career and experienced staff
- Both groups connected workforce pressure directly to the feasibility and consistency of reform implementation
- The shared implication is that reform success depends on sufficient staffing, the right specialist capability, and sustainable workloads.

Pace, sequencing, and policy clarity	Frequency Very High	Convergence Very strong
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- Both groups described uncertainty and incomplete guidance as major barriers to planning and implementation
- Teachers called for curriculum changes to be embedded before major assessment shifts are introduced
- Principals described the pace as misaligned with system capacity and warned of duplication, rework, and fragmented delivery
- The common improvement signal is slower, staged, and better-sequenced change supported by stable information and early resources.

Assessment reform

Assessment reform generated strong convergence around the risks of greater external assessment and a narrower definition of achievement. Positive views focused on literacy, numeracy, consistency, and comparability, but were less frequent and consistently qualified.

Increased reliance on external, high-stakes assessment	Frequency Very High	Convergence Very strong
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- Teachers and principals identified increased external assessment as the dominant assessment concern
- Both groups believed examinations favour a narrower range of learning and performance styles than internal, practical, collaborative, or project-based assessment
- Participants linked increased external assessment with greater examination preparation, reduced breadth of teaching, and fewer ways for students to demonstrate achievement
- The shared implication is greater disadvantage for learners who do not perform well in high-pressure examination environments.

Reduced recognition of practical, applied, and vocational learning	Frequency High	Convergence Strong
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- Both evidence streams warned that reduced internal and applied assessment opportunities could narrow the recognised forms of achievement
- Teachers stressed the effect on practical and project-based learners, while principals linked the issue to vocational pathways and student retention
- The common concern is that the assessment model may become less aligned with the range of learner strengths and future destinations.

Increased assessment pressure, anxiety, and disengagement	Frequency High to very High	Convergence Very strong
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- Teachers and principals expected greater assessment pressure to increase anxiety and stress for students
- Teachers highlighted early failure, assessment fatigue, reduced confidence, and declining persistence

- Principals emphasised disproportionate impacts on students already facing barriers to achievement
- Both groups connected assessment design with engagement, wellbeing, achievement, and progression.

Stronger literacy and numeracy expectations	Frequency Medium	Convergence Strong but qualified
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- Both groups supported stronger foundational literacy and numeracy as an important reform objective
- The support was qualified by the view that intervention should occur earlier in the schooling pathway and should not rely solely on senior secondary assessment settings
- This was the clearest positive area of convergence, but it was less frequent and less strongly expressed than assessment concerns.

Greater consistency and comparability	Frequency Low-Medium	Convergence Strong but qualified
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- Some teachers and principals saw potential value in more consistent assessment outcomes across schools
- Potential benefits included clearer signals for tertiary education and employment and improved comparability
- Both groups cautioned that consistency should not be achieved at the expense of flexibility, responsiveness, or recognition of diverse achievement.

Overall conclusion

Reduced curriculum flexibility may narrow the ways schools engage learners; implementation gaps may limit schools' ability to manage that change well; and greater external assessment may narrow the ways learners can demonstrate success. Teachers and principals therefore converge on common requirements: reform must preserve meaningful flexibility, be sequenced at a pace the system can absorb, and be supported by complete resources, professional learning, staffing, release time, and clear guidance.

- Highest-frequency curriculum signal: protect flexibility, local responsiveness, cultural responsiveness, and diverse pathways
- Highest-frequency implementation signal: provide sufficient time, stable guidance, complete resources, professional learning, and workforce capacity before major change is enacted
- Highest-frequency assessment signal: avoid over-reliance on high-stakes external assessment and retain multiple credible ways for learners to demonstrate achievement
- Cross-cutting equity signal: assess how the combined reforms affect Māori, Pacific Peoples, neurodivergent, English as Second Language learners, lower socio-economic communities, and students pursuing vocational or applied pathways.