



**STRICTLY EMBARGOED FOR PUBLICATION UNTIL
5AM MONDAY 14 SEPTEMBER 2026**

Student perspectives on curriculum, implementation, and assessment reform

This report draws together the themes most frequently and strongly expressed by students in Years 11–13. The emphasis is on themes with High or Very High overall weight, while lower-frequency or mixed positive views are included where they clarify the balance of student perspectives.

The primary evidence base for this report is qualitative data collected through student focus groups in six different schools across New Zealand.

How to read the ratings

- Frequency reflects how often a theme appeared across the student focus groups, using the qualitative categories reported in the source table
- Convergence combines the reported frequency, consistency, and strength of sentiment. It indicates the analytical prominence of a theme, not a respondent count
- The ratings are qualitative. They should not be interpreted as population estimates or statistical prevalence.

Curriculum reform

Curriculum reform produced strong and consistent messages about the importance of subject choice, flexibility, and clear links to future pathways. Students viewed these features as central to engagement and motivation, and warned that greater compulsion or narrower pathways could weaken participation among learners whose strengths and aspirations do not fit a conventional academic route.

Subject choice and flexibility	Frequency High	Convergence High
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- Students identified subject choice as a major driver of engagement, motivation, and achievement
- They valued being able to select subjects aligned with their interests, strengths, and future aspirations
- Choice also serves an exploratory function, allowing students to test possible areas of study and develop clearer post-school plans
- The student-level implication is that flexibility helps sustain effort and gives learners greater ownership of their pathway.

Risks from reduced curriculum flexibility	Frequency High	Convergence High
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- Increased compulsory requirements and narrower curriculum pathways were widely viewed as likely to reduce engagement for some learners
- Students stressed that learners do not have the same strengths, interests, or aspirations, and that uniform requirements may not accommodate this diversity
- Greater compulsion was associated with lower attention, effort, and motivation in subjects that students do not enjoy or feel capable in
- The common concern is heightened disengagement among learners who do not thrive in traditional academic pathways.

Future pathways and relevance	Frequency Moderate - High	Convergence High
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- Students valued clear connections between school learning and university, trades, apprenticeships, employment, and other training pathways

- Practical and real-world learning was viewed as increasing relevance, improving engagement, and helping students make informed career decisions
- Students emphasised that the system must accommodate multiple destinations rather than assuming a single trajectory
- Where pathways are clear, students can better understand the purpose of their learning; where they are limited or unclear, uncertainty and disengagement may increase.

Curriculum relevance and personalisation	Frequency Moderate - High	Convergence High
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- Learning was considered most valuable when it aligned with students' interests, strengths, circumstances, and aspirations
- Flexibility in subject combinations and assessment approaches was seen as better able to support varied learning styles
- The shared design signal is to retain room for personalisation rather than treating all learners as if they learn and progress in the same way.

Higher-stakes subject requirements	Frequency Moderate - High	Convergence High
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- Students were concerned that requirements to pass a set number of subjects could create a sharper threshold between success and failure
- They saw a risk that difficulty in one subject could have consequences for the entire qualification and reduce opportunities for partial success or recovery
- The implication is that curriculum and qualification rules should recognise uneven learner strengths and provide credible recovery pathways.

Implementation reform

Students experienced implementation primarily through the information, teaching, and support available to them. Their understanding of reform was often fragmented, and the quality and accessibility of support differed across contexts. The student evidence therefore places communication and system literacy alongside teaching quality and support as core implementation requirements.

Understanding of reforms	Frequency High	Convergence High
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- Student understanding of NCEA and proposed reforms was often incomplete, fragmented, and superficial
- Some students knew individual elements of change but lacked a coherent view of how the system or reform package fitted together
- Many described “learning as they go”, rather than beginning with a clear understanding of requirements and implications
- The implementation risk is that students cannot plan confidently when the purpose and mechanics of change remain unclear.

Communication and change management	Frequency High	Convergence High
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- Students often received information through peers, social media, or family rather than through structured and authoritative school communication
- Communication within and across schools was described as inconsistent, partial, or absent in some cases
- Students identified clear, timely, and consistent explanations as essential to reducing confusion and enabling preparation
- The system implication is that communication is not merely administrative; it is a core condition for informed participation and success.

Teaching quality and classroom support	Frequency Moderate -High	Convergence Medium -High
- Students identified clear explanations, detailed feedback, and ongoing teacher support as critical to confidence and achievement - Where teaching was perceived as less effective, students reported needing to spend additional time learning material independently - The evidence indicates that variation in teaching and feedback can shape how manageable reform feels at student level.		
Access to support systems	Frequency Moderate -High	Convergence Medium -High
- Students valued tutoring, help sessions, additional learning support, study resources, and peer networks - Access was not always consistent and could depend on a student knowing what was available and having the confidence or capacity to seek help - The equity concern is that students with fewer support networks or lower system literacy may be less able to navigate change successfully.		
Wellbeing and school-life balance	Frequency Moderate -High	Convergence High
- Students linked wellbeing closely to workload, assessment design, and the availability of support - Pressure fluctuated throughout the school year, with periods of clustered and overlapping deadlines making it difficult to maintain balance with work, family, and personal commitments - Students acknowledged that some pressure can prepare them for future demands, but distinguished this from excessive pressure that harms performance and wellbeing - The implementation signal is to coordinate change and assessment demands with students' actual capacity to manage them.		

Assessment reform

Assessment reform generated the strongest student sentiment. Students clearly preferred internal assessment because it allowed feedback, revision, and learning over time. External examinations were associated with stress, memory-based performance, and concentrated risk. However, students also recognised the value of external assessment for comparability, standards, and preparation for tertiary study. Their overall preference was therefore for balance, not the removal of external assessment.

Preference for internal assessment	Frequency Dominant	Convergence Very High
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- Students strongly preferred internal assessments because they allow ongoing feedback, clarification, revision, and improvement
- Internals were seen as supporting deeper engagement with content and providing a more authentic reflection of understanding than a one-off event
- Students also felt they had greater control over planning and effort when assessment took place over time
- The central message is that assessment should support learning as well as measure it.

External examinations as high-stakes events	Frequency Dominant	Convergence Very High
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- External examinations were widely associated with stress, anxiety, time pressure, and intimidating assessment conditions
- Students questioned whether examinations accurately reflect learning, frequently describing them as tests of short-term recall rather than understanding
- Only a small number reported that they perform better under examination pressure
- The principal risk is that heavier reliance on external assessment may disadvantage students whose knowledge is not demonstrated well through timed written exams.

Workload clustering and time pressure	Frequency Moderate-High	Convergence High
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- Multiple internal deadlines occurring together were a significant source of stress, particularly alongside part-time work or family responsibilities
- Some students reported needing to work through the night to complete assessments
- The concern is not simply the volume of assessment, but its timing and concentration across subjects
- The improvement signal is better coordination of assessment schedules across subjects.

Grading system reform	Frequency Moderate	Convergence Medium
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- Students held mixed views about more granular grading systems such as numerical or A–E scales
- Some believed greater detail could increase comparison, competition, and anxiety over small differences in performance
- Others saw clearer progress tracking and wider recognition as advantages, particularly where they were already familiar with those systems
- The evidence supports careful communication and design rather than assuming a uniformly positive or negative response.

Recognition of the role of external assessment	Frequency Lower-frequency positive view	Convergence Qualified
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- Students recognised that external assessment can support standardisation and comparability between schools
- Some also considered examinations useful preparation for tertiary study and a way to demonstrate retained knowledge independently
- These benefits were acknowledged alongside, rather than instead of, concerns about stress and fairness.

Balanced assessment design	Frequency High	Convergence High
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- Students favoured a combination of internal and external assessment that recognises different forms of learning and performance
- Over-reliance on external examinations was seen as concentrating pressure and disadvantaging some learners, while an exclusively internal model could be perceived as lacking external validation
- The strongest student design signal is to preserve balance, credible standards, and multiple ways to demonstrate achievement.

Overall conclusion

The student evidence forms a coherent chain of impact. Reduced curriculum flexibility may weaken motivation and narrow relevant pathways; unclear implementation may leave students unable to understand or plan for change; and heavier reliance on external assessment may concentrate pressure and narrow how achievement is demonstrated. Students therefore point to a reform model that retains meaningful choice, communicates change clearly, provides accessible support, and balances internal and external assessment.

- Highest-weight curriculum signal: protect subject choice, personal relevance, and clear academic, vocational, and employment pathways
- Highest-weight implementation signal: provide clear, consistent, and timely communication supported by strong teaching and accessible help
- Highest-weight assessment signal: retain the learning benefits of internal assessment and avoid over-reliance on high-stakes examinations
- Cross-cutting wellbeing signal: manage assessment clustering and recognise the interaction between workload, support, engagement, and school-life balance
- Cross-cutting equity signal: ensure students with fewer support networks, less confidence seeking help, or different learning strengths are not disproportionately disadvantaged.