

A people-centred recovery: Prioritising social infrastructure for a Just Transition out of the Covid-19 crisis.

Discussion paper | April 2020 | NZEI Te Riu Roa

The Government is planning significant public investment in “shovel-ready” physical infrastructure projects to create jobs, stimulate the economy and address the country’s infrastructure deficit as we look to recover from the Covid-19 crisis. NZEI Te Riu Roa welcomes this investment. But if we want to have a truly people-centred and Just Transition out of the Covid-19 crisis, it is vital we also invest in our social infrastructure – including health, the arts, and of course our education system.

We welcome the Prime Minister’s invitation to submit our view on where investment in social infrastructure should be directed.

The social and economic wellbeing of Aotearoa’s youngest citizens is a hugely important issue for our post-Covid-19 recovery. We support the Prime Minister’s goal to make New Zealand the best place in the world to be a child. We urge the Government to continue to put tamariki and their learning at the centre of every aspect of the recovery plan.

Now is our opportunity as a nation to create a world class, inclusive public education system that will meet the needs of our tamariki, their parents and whānau in the post-Covid-19 recovery environment – and one that will give them the resilience to cope with future challenges to

come. Investing in this social infrastructure will not only create jobs and stimulate the economy, but will pay countless other social and economic dividends in the coming decades.

Transiting out of the Covid-19 crisis will need the support of a dynamic, modern education system. Life after Covid-19 will be different. When we get there, we don't have to continue to live with the unacceptable inequalities of our old 'normal'. We have the opportunity - and the responsibility - to create a new and better Aotearoa society with an education system that meets the needs of everybody.

Our view is that any social infrastructure investment should adopt a Māori first approach - Moku te Ao. Adopting this approach is to ensure that investment is consistent with the principles of Te Tiriti and the obligations of the parties.

We believe that education infrastructure should prioritise investment in the following areas. We see this investment is consistent with what NZ needs in the immediate recovery phase but ongoing. It also draws largely on commitments already made or indicated and hence is largely consistent with government policy. However there is now an urgency in response and as a result we ask for a reprioritisation of both policy and resourcing.

The opportunities posed by the crisis allow for bold initiatives that will quicken the pace to achieve a quality public NZ education system that delivers for all, at all levels while being job rich and which ensures opportunities for the low paid.

1 Building the Education Workforce

- Addressing the inequity in resourcing across the system including reprioritising the resourcing into primary;
- Immediate steps to address the teacher shortage;
- Increasing the investment in learning support to meet the acknowledged mental health challenges posed by the Covid crisis as well as the need to address the increasing challenges of the pre Covid situation;
- Build a qualified para professional support workforce to support teaching and learning.

2 Building a Quality Public Early Childhood Education System

- Develop and implement a staged plan for public provision of ECE;
- A 100% qualified ECE teacher workforce;
- A teaching workforce that is centrally funded;
- A focus on resourcing quality of teaching and learning rather than quantity (participation).

Our approach acknowledges the considerable investment in physical infrastructure projects in education such as building upgrades and new schools, which we welcome.

A Māori-first approach

While each item on this list represents an opportunity to invest in the future of our education system, they also represent an opportunity to do things differently.

Successive governments have advocated the necessity to provide increased funding to Māori in an effort to make Aotearoa society more equitable. But inequality and inequity remains and, unfortunately, stems directly from the education system. Limited school achievement leads to limited employment opportunities; limited employment leads to limited life chances for whānau. Uplifting Māori starts with our education system.

We encourage the Government to take a Māori-first approach in taking up, engaging with, and implementing any of the recommendations below – prioritising Māori thinking, learning and practice. Not only because ‘what is good for Māori is good for everyone’, but because a Māori-first approach is the only way we can honour Te Tiriti while creating an education system that is uniquely ours.

Priority education investment for the Covid-19 Just Transition

A Building the Education Workforce

The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its people. Our education system needs quality teaching to support learners in the immediate post-Covid-19 environment. It is particularly critical that our youngest citizens get teaching from qualified staff who are trained to know how to meet their learning and pastoral needs.

There is a need to quickly remedy the resourcing gap between primary and secondary as identified in the Tomorrows Schools Task Force report *Our Schooling Futures: Stronger Together* and implement its recommendations. To do so is to enable primary schools to not just meet the Just Transition challenges out of Covid but to secure a quality public education system.

Teacher shortages in schools and ECE have been persistent over many years. Solving these shortages long term ultimately relies on making the profession attractive and sustainable, but alongside this, the Covid-19 recovery presents a unique opportunity to attract a wide variety of New Zealanders into the profession through incentivised retraining.

The Government should place a greater value on te reo Māori so that there are incentives for speakers to gain employment within the education system.

Women have historically borne - and will continue to bear - the burden of both work and caring roles in many essential services, including education. We will need their contributions, and now is the time to ensure low paid women in particular are fairly recognised and rewarded for their skills and expertise.

Experience from Christchurch shows the enormous mental health challenges following a crisis. The education sector needs to draw on that experience and resource for the inevitable demands.

Smaller class and group sizes make a significant difference to the quality of teaching and learning across schools and ECE. Research shows that school students in smaller classes are more likely to be attentive and participate in learning, achieving greater success at school as a result. In early childhood settings, the “bubbles” and larger space requirements under Level 3 are the non-Covid norm in many other countries, because smaller group sizes and better child to teacher ratios mean children are safer, less stressed, and are able to have higher quality interactions. This leads to better learning and developmental outcomes.

Immediate response actions

1. Guarantee funding so that all staff and relievers across ECE and schools continue to be paid in full for the remainder of 2020, and so that ECE providers can make decisions based on health and safety, not their commercial viability.
2. Moving all of the resourcing priorities arising from the Tomorrows Schools Task Force Recommendation 7 (Improving Resourcing) to Priority A (within 18-24 months).
3. Increase funding for specialist Learning Support staffing.
4. Ensure funding and regulation enables reduced ratios and smaller group/class sizes across schools and centres to ensure safer physical distancing throughout the Covid-19 crisis.
5. Incentivise entry into teaching with voluntary bonding for all initial teacher education and fees-free training for teaching students from the second semester of 2020

Initial recovery actions

1. Ensure all teacher aides – who support learners facing the greatest challenges – are employed permanently, paid centrally, are on pay rates adjusted for pay equity and have career pathways that enhance teaching and learning.
2. Rapidly progress pay equity for all other school support staff.
3. Fund a pathway to pay parity for ECE teachers.
4. Re-introduce the target of 100% qualified teachers in ECE by 2023.

5. Increase investment in all aspects of Learning Support, including the rollout of tranche two of Learning Support Coordinators across all schools and ECE services.
6. Fund staffing for smaller class sizes in schools.

B Building a Quality Public Early Childhood Education System

More than 93% of children under 5 in Aotearoa participate regularly in early childhood education, but our current highly privatised market model of ECE – based on child occupancy rates and delivered through atomised services operating in a highly competitive market – is not the best way to deliver the best educational and developmental outcomes.

The model’s inequities and deficiencies have been further highlighted by the Covid-19 crisis. A majority of our nation’s ECE services would have fallen over without ongoing public funding (by way of a continuation of regular ECE funding and the Covid-19 wage subsidy scheme). This risk has not diminished and will grow as unemployment lifts.

While compulsory sector staff have largely been supported through the crisis by their schools and state funding, support and pay for ECE staff has been hugely inconsistent across the country.

The Covid-19 crisis presents a unique opportunity to fast track turning the tide on privatisation and through an effective plan to implement staged change towards greater public provision of ECE.

Initial recovery actions

1. Develop and implement a staged plan for public provision and funding of ECE.
2. Develop an integration model with appropriate legislative instruments to move ECE services who voluntarily transition from private to public (similar to that used with special character schools in the compulsory sector).

3. Ensure planned provision of a public ECE network, integrated with schooling and kura where possible, with hubs of kindergartens and other willing community services.
4. Permanently restore maximum numbers in ECE centres to 75 from the current 150 and introduce ratios of 1:3 for under-2s.
5. Incentivise ECE services to be a part of a quality public system of provision by increasing the funding band for public centres with 100% qualified teachers, establishing parity in the sector through a Fair Pay Agreement and collective agreements, centrally funding salaries for services that have opted into public provision and placing conditions on the receipt of all public funding (across the sector) to ensure it is used solely for the purposes of delivering high quality teaching and learning.