

**In Confidence**

Office of the Minister of Education

Cabinet

**Increasing face-to-face onsite education for Alert Level 3 regions**

- 1 This paper seeks agreement to a range of changes to the Alert Level 3 Step framework for education settings, so that learners in years 0 to 10 can return to face-to-face onsite education.

**Relation to government priorities**

- 2 The proposals in this paper support the Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Executive Summary**

- 3 Currently, in Alert Level 3 regions, schools are only open for face-to-face instruction for students whose parents or caregivers have to work outside the home and there are no other supervision options, a small number of year 9 and 10 students sitting NCEA exams and year 11 to 13 students. Therefore, the majority of children are participating in their education by distance.
- 4 This has particular negative impacts for Māori and Pacific children, those living in disadvantaged households with inequitable access to connectivity and devices. Disabled children and children with learning support needs have also found lockdowns particularly challenging.
- 5 On 5 November 2021, based on advice from the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education increased bubble sizes for early childhood services from 10 to 20, schools from 10 to 20, and tertiary education organisations from 10 to 25, in areas operating in Alert Level 3 Step 2. This increase in bubble size allowed more children and students to return to their education services enabling more parents and caregivers to go to work.
- 6 I am now proposing that we move to greater access to face-to-face learning in Alert Level 3, to enable parents and whānau to return to a higher level of normality, and focus on giving children the opportunity, before the Christmas break, to reconnect with their teachers and friends. This will also support parents and caregivers returning to work. This aligns with the progressive reopening of businesses as we move from Alert Level 3 to the COVID Protection Framework.
- 7 While returning to face-to-face onsite education will be best for most children and young people, this must be done in a way that is safe for children, students, and staff.
- 8 On 11 October, Cabinet agreed to vaccination and testing requirements for most people that work with children and young people in education services [CAB-21-MIN-0414]. Cabinet also agreed to a range of other health measures that will apply to early childhood services and schools as more children and students return to onsite learning [CAB-21-SUB-0415]. These measures are intended to minimise the

risk that COVID may pose, particularly for those who are unable to get vaccinated, and while children have a low risk of becoming very ill, they can carry the infection back to their homes and make vulnerable and unvaccinated family members ill.

- 9 The Ministry of Health has advised that the risk of transmission within education services is relatively low if public health measures are followed. A 3 November public health risk assessment for education settings operating at Alert Level 3 concluded that the public health risks of re-opening schools are outweighed by the benefits. As long as sufficient processes are in place to minimise the risk of transmission, the reopening of schools is supported by the health assessment.
- 10 However, allowing greater access to face-to-face learning significantly increases people movements and interactions within communities.
- 11 I am proposing a range of specific conditions for the increase in access to face-to-face onsite learning from 17 November:
  - 11.1 children and students in years 0 to 8 are able to return to face-to-face onsite learning in cohorts, with the numbers of students attending each day limited so as to reduce transmission risk. The children of parents who need to return to work will be able to attend full-time as part of the onsite cohort. Students should remain in their classroom group within the cohort. From 17 November, cohorts will replace all current bubble arrangements for schools.
  - 11.2 students in years 7 and 8, and any staff member working to provide, or support the provision of, their education, are required to wear face coverings indoors, unless they have an illness, condition or disability that makes wearing a face covering unsuitable (students in years 9 to 13 are already required to wear face coverings indoors).
  - 11.3 students in years 9 and 10 are able to return to face-to-face onsite learning. As they are able to be vaccinated and are required to wear masks, when returning to school, they will be treated the same as year 11 to 13 students.
- 12 I am also proposing additional resources and counselling services to support primary aged students returning to school. This is in response to the recent public health risk assessment for education settings that recommended wraparound services for the return to face-to-face learning.
- 13 In this paper the term 'school' is used broadly to encompass other schooling settings, including teen parent units and alternative education settings. It does not include OSCAR. The Ministry of Social Development is undertaking further work to consider reopening OSCAR with the appropriate measures.
- 14 The Ministry of Education has been engaging with school sector leaders to socialise both the practicality of operating in cohorts, and the willingness of schools and their communities to return to face-to-face learning. The key message from schools is that they are operating in very diverse contexts, and there are varied levels of confidence amongst whānau and communities as to how safe it is for students to return.
- 15 I propose that the Government's announcement of these changes focus on allowing the school system to increase access to face-to-face learning rather than on

“reopening”. I also propose that I announce a period of a week for schools to socialise with communities and whānau how they will manage this.

- 16 A combination of changes to existing COVID Act Orders or Alert Level Requirement Orders, Secretary for Education directions, and guidance will be required to give effect to these proposals.
- 17 It should be noted that, depending on the numbers of teachers who have not received their first dose by vaccine by 15 November, some schools may need to maintain some level of distance learning for the remainder of Term 4.

## Background

- 18 The current education settings for Alert Level 3 regions include:
  - 18.1 The requirement that education entities keep groups appropriately sized and stable (COVID-19 Public Health Response (Alert Requirements) Order (No 12) 2021).
  - 18.2 Keeping children, students, and teachers in groups that are appropriately sized and stable. Based on advice from Ministry of Health, as of 5 November the Ministry of Education has set bubble size as:
    - 18.2.1 early learning services to no more than 20. Teachers and children are also only allowed to attend one service.
    - 18.2.2 allowing students in years 1 to 10 to attend learning face-to-face onsite in bubbles of no more than 20.
    - 18.2.3 For tertiary education organisations (TEOs) remote learning is recommended, or, where this is not possible, in strictly managed small classes of 25 people or less.
  - 18.3 The ability for students in years 11 to 13 to attend onsite learning from 26 October.
  - 18.4 An Alert Level Requirement Order, requiring staff and students in years 9 to 13 to wear a face covering when indoors.
  - 18.5 Requiring education services to follow a range of health measures, including maximising the time outdoors for students and staff, and ensuring exercising and singing is done outdoors [CAB-21-MIN-0415].
  - 18.6 A range of vaccination, testing and record keeping requirements, for education services and for most people who are likely to have contact with children and students in delivering a service [CAB-21-MIN-0414 refers].
- 19 A 3 November public health risk assessment for education settings operating at Level 3 concluded that:
  - 19.1 the public health risks of re-opening schools in Alert Level 3 areas beginning the week of 15 November is low.
  - 19.2 the public health risks of re-opening schools are outweighed by the benefits.

- 19.3 from a public health perspective, schools starting the week of 15 November is supported.
- 19.4 that ahead of reopening, the Ministry of Education is encouraged to provide detailed guidance for schools to ensure there are sufficient and detailed plans and processes in place to minimise the risk of transmission, including:
- 19.4.1 Vaccination records for staff and pupils.
  - 19.4.2 Appropriate ventilation and physical distancing for classrooms.
  - 19.4.3 Plans to support distanced drop off and pick up for students.
- 19.5 schools are likely to need support from wraparound services (e.g., mental wellbeing for students and staff) once reopened.
- 20 As of 8 November, parts of Waikato are at Alert Level 3 Step 2, Auckland is at Alert Level 3 Step 1, and Northland is at standard Alert Level 3.

### Analysis

- 21 While students in years 11 to 13 in Alert Level 3 areas have been able to return to face-to-face learning from 26 October, and the sizes of bubbles across early learning, schooling and tertiary education settings have recently increased, most students continue to learn from home. We know from overseas evidence that long periods away from schooling increase the risk of disengagement from learning and of students falling behind in their learning. It is also likely that students are also missing the benefits of culturally sustaining practices such as kapa haka, being in te reo Māori rich environments, and sporting and leadership activities. Principals in Auckland are reporting falling levels of engagement with distance learning as the time away from schooling increases.
- 22 Enabling students in years 0 to 8 to return onsite in limited numbers and in classroom groupings, and years 9 and 10 in line with health guidance, represents the next step in a phased return to regular onsite learning. However, I acknowledge that some parents and whānau will be hesitant to have their children return to face-to-face learning.
- 23 Any return must be consistent with health advice, and the conclusions of the risk assessment, including in relation to the use of face coverings and ventilation expectations. I am therefore proposing measures to mitigate any potential risk of transmission. These include school cohorting, and mandatory mask wearing for year 7 and 8 students and any staff member working to provide, or support the provision of, their education.
- 24 In addition, the Alert Level 3 requirements outside of places of learning must be maintained. We know from other jurisdictions that the out of school activities create a greater risk of transmission than what happens at places of learning.
- 25 Allowing students in years 0 to 10 to return to face-to-face onsite learning, will enable better learning outcomes and has a positive effect on equity issues. The evidence shows that face-to-face learning works best for most learners. Prolonged school absence due to lockdowns has been found to be harmful to the social, physical, and emotional wellbeing of children and students, especially those living in

disadvantaged households.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, international evidence shows that many students made little or no progress while learning from home during lockdowns.

- 26 Lockdowns have been stressful for many learners and their whānau, with many children and students reporting increased rates of anxiety. This approach would mean children and students can socialise with their friends again and could reduce other anxieties caused by distance learning. It is important that those learners who do not feel comfortable returning to onsite learning are supported in their learning and wellbeing.

*Cohorting for students in year 0 to 8*

- 27 To support schools to bring students back to school safely in greater numbers, I propose that from 17 November 2021, schools and kura in Alert Level 3 regions be able to provide cohort based face-to-face learning for students in years 0 to 8. Cohorts will limit the numbers of students attending each day. This is intended to reduce transmission risk.
- 28 From 17 November, cohorts will replace all current bubble arrangements for schools.
- 29 This will involve different arrangements for different schools. Schools must allow for the children of essential workers, other workers, and those children who are unable to remain home to attend full time, whereas other students will need to attend in alternating cohorts. I am confident that schools are best placed to make arrangements for this mix of students within the broad health requirements.
- 30 This enables schools to plan to have whānau groupings attending the same school to attend on the same days. Students must also stay in regular class groupings to avoid widespread mixing of students indoors.
- 31 Feedback on cohorting from sector representatives has been mixed. Many were unsure how many learners returning to face-to-face learning would be safe. The logistics of designing a cohorting approach that met the needs of parents and whānau needing to return to work, and staffing requirements, was a concern. Representatives commented that they wanted a set model that they could follow, with room to make adjustments for the needs of their communities.
- 32 Schools will have to manage their cohort arrangements to prioritise students who have to attend onsite full-time, along side those students whose parents want them to return to school. While schools are best placed to plan for cohorts, some principals have expressed concern about having to decide which students are able to attend school in person and which students must stay home on a given day.
- 33 While I do not think it is appropriate for the Ministry of Education to prescribe a set model of cohorting, this is new territory for all of us and schools should not be left to figure this out entirely for themselves. I have asked the Ministry of Education to develop guidelines schools can consider when developing their approaches to cohorting.

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<sup>1</sup> Urgent measures needed to allow the safe re-opening of Auckland schools – Public Health Expert, University of Otago, New Zealand

- 34 The Ministry will also work with composite schools to develop and approach that best meets their specific needs.
- 35 This approach is also consistent with that taken in several other jurisdictions. For example, different forms of rostering or cohorting of students has been used in Germany, Canada, and Victoria as part of their phased face-to-face reopening of schools. Evidence has shown that such approaches reduce both the likelihood and the size of outbreaks.<sup>2</sup> Spain also used bubbles or groupings to manage the risk of transmission.

*A return to school for students in years 9 and 10*

- 36 I also propose that from 17 November 2021 students in years 9 and 10 are able to return to face-to-face learning at schools and kura in regions in Alert Level 3.
- 37 As these learners are eligible to be vaccinated, are already required to wear coverings, and are of an age where they can be trusted to maintain physical distancing requirements, which are all protective factors against transmission. They will also in the majority of situations, be joining students at school who are able to be vaccinated. Additionally, as we get closer to the end of the year senior students will increasingly go on study and exam leave, and the numbers of students physically on site at schools will reduce which further lowers the risk of transmission.
- 38 Year 9 and 10 students returning to a secondary school with other vaccinated students in years 11 to 13 can follow the same guidelines already in effect. Sector leaders have told the Ministry that they feel relatively comfortable with the return of students in years 9 and 10 as they have recently put in processes to welcome back years 11 to 13.

*Face coverings*

- 39 In line with the risk assessment, I am also proposing to require that face coverings be worn indoors by children and students in years 7 and 8 in Alert Level 3 regions (except where due to an illness, condition or disability wearing a face covering is unsuitable) and any staff member working to provide, or support the provision of, their education. Students in years 9 to 13 are already required to wear face coverings. Parents should wear face coverings when dropping off and picking up students from school and remain distanced from the school as much as possible.

*Risks*

- 40 The return to face-to-face learning has the potential to create equity issues for students who do not return to face-to-face learning. Schools must ensure that they continue to provide equitable access to education for all learners whether they are onsite or learning from home, and support teachers to provide both face-to-face and online learning opportunities.
- 41 While onsite learning will be possible for more learners, it is important that those in Alert Level 3 areas do not get complacent. Alert Level 3 restrictions will still apply, including to any activities outside of places of learning. Under Level 3 household bubbles are still required. At present children can have playdates with one other

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<sup>2</sup> Model-driven mitigation measures for reopening schools during the COVID-19 pandemic | PNAS

household at a time — as long as they are outside. It is also permitted to expand household bubbles to bring in people who live alone, caregivers or close whānau. Family bubbles are encouraged to be kept small and exclusive. These requirements will continue to apply even if more children and students are able to return to onsite learning.

- 42 Interactions between learners, families, and members of the public will also likely increase during drop off and pick up times and as learners start using school transport.
- 43 There is also a risk that some children and students may find these changes to their learning environment challenging and this may impact their participation, engagement, and sense of wellbeing. I am aware that there is a risk that some parents will not feel comfortable sending their children back to onsite learning.
- 44 However, I am confident that these risks can be mitigated through the multiple layers of protection that I have proposed and with clear communication to schools, kura, students and their parents about the health measures that will be in place. I also expect the Ministry of Education to be working closely with schools on how to provide responsive supports and guidance.

## Implementation

- 45 There is little support within the sector currently for widescale reopening of schools in Auckland. Sector representatives have indicated that their communities are hesitant to return to schools out of fear of the risk of transmission. While they recognise that schools will have to reopen eventually, they would more time to get their schools physically ready, including to meet ventilation expectations and to put in place plans for increased expectations around contact tracing and testing. It will also be important for leaders to support their teachers to get mentally and emotionally ready for the shift back to face-to-face teaching and to provide confidence to whānau and communities that it is safe for their children to return.
- 46 I acknowledge that the education sector is being asked to do a lot. But these multiple layers of protection, including classroom groups, mandatory face coverings, vaccinations and testing for adults, ventilation, and limiting the numbers of students on site through cohorts are intended to keep children, students, and staff safe while increasing the ability for them to reconnect their school community.

### *Cohorting arrangements for students in years 0 to 8*

- 47 The Ministry will provide guidance on how to manage the cohorting of learners and will host a series of webinars for teachers across the motu, to engage with hybrid learning and experienced educators to discuss the processes to provide complimentary learning experiences both face-to-face and online at home.
- 48 This will not be a one size fits all approach, and schools will have to consider factors individual to them. This will include the physical space they have available to spread learners across, which classes are the most well ventilated, and the ability to engage students in classes outdoors. Leaders will also need to work with parents and whānau, with guidance from the Ministry of Education, to determine how to best divide their student body into cohorts to best meet their needs. They will also have

to work through how to best maintain classroom groupings, including staggering break times.

- 49 The Ministry will also work with education peak bodies, including the New Zealand School Trustees Association (NZSTA), Te Runanga Nui o Nga Kura Kaupapa Māori, Nga Kura a Iwi, New Zealand Pasifika Principals Association, other principal associations, and teacher unions to support them to implement these new requirements.

*Provision of remote and face-to-face learning options*

- 50 To support a staged reopening of onsite face-to-face participation and engagement, educators will rely more heavily on a mix of approaches. Educators will need to be able to provide remote and face-to-face relationships, sometimes at the same time, using a range of technologies and pedagogical approaches.
- 51 Additional supports may be required for those students who need to remain learning at home to ensure that they have the same learning opportunities as those who are receiving face-to-face teaching. Where schools, kura and early learning services need additional support to ensure sufficient resources and learning materials are made available for ākonga learning from home (whether this be because of the staged reopening arrangements or for other reasons), the Ministry will continue to offer distance learning supports. Under the latest resurgence, the Ministry has supplied over 123,000 learning packs to education regions under Alert Level 3, as well as producing and broadcasting live and on-demand television content (alongside a range of other supports).
- 52 Through funding previously agreed by Cabinet and Ministers with Power to Act [CAB-21-MIN-0329, CMG-21-MIN-0006 refer], the Ministry has resources to support schools, kura and early learning services through the remainder of the school year. In particular, over 100,000 learning packs remain available for distribution (noting that these are identical to packs previously distributed and may not be appropriate for learners who have previously received these), as well as a further 57,000 new learning packs in production. We also have produced new television content which will continue to broadcast through to the end of the school year (along with a mixture of previously aired content).
- 53 As COVID-19 policy settings continue to shift, our distance learning response must evolve to best meet the needs of the education sector. A more flexible approach to support which better empowers the education sector to tailor supports and resources to meet the needs of their learners is required. We will shortly provide you with further advice on how we intend to support schools, kura and early learning services in 2022 and beyond.

*Supports to re-engage students in Auckland*

- 54 Ministers have agreed to a package of measures that targets those students in Auckland most in need of support to reconnect and then to engage, including ākonga Māori and Pacific students. This package has a strong focus on equity and on students with moderate to high learning support needs and includes measures to reach out to ākonga and families not yet planning to return to school or kura.



- 55 The Ministry of Education has recently invested \$1.5 million in additional counselling services across New Zealand. The majority (\$950k) of the funding has been allocated, with \$540k of this amount provided to primary schools. In addition, \$150,000 is available in 2021/22 in selected schools in Auckland as part of the core Counselling in Schools initiative roll out. Feedback from the sector indicates that increased funding will better satisfy the demand, and be achievable within existing provider capacity.

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9(2)(j)

*Ventilating indoor learning spaces*

- 57 The Ministry of Education is working with the Ministry of Health to make sure the decisions about ventilating indoor learning spaces align with the most up-to-date health advice, including NIWA's advice that the best way to reduce COVID transmission is by opening doors and windows to create natural ventilation.
- 58 The Ministry is considering how public health measures, including the potential use of active technologies such as air monitoring and air treatment can best be used to provide healthy internal environments. The Ministry has established a building solutions Technical Advisory Panel bringing together air quality, building performance, epidemiological and other experts to inform decision making and to make sure they have a consistent approach, which is specific to education service setting. Further work on ventilation expectations will be done ahead of winter 2022.
- 59 When considering the options, the Ministry will take a targeted approach to providing the most appropriate ventilation solution.

**Financial Implications**

- 60 Face coverings for learners in years 7 and 8 is a small shift from current education settings. Learners in these groups are generally expected to wear face coverings in other contexts due to their age, including inside retail businesses, and on public transport. I therefore expect that the majority of learners will have ready access to face coverings.
- 61 However, if schools identify that their learners have barriers to accessing and using face coverings, they will be able to apply to the Ministry for support, using resourcing previously agreed by Cabinet in the COVID-19 Support Scheme for schools [SWC-21-MIN-0092 refers].

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9(2)(j)

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9(2)(j)

- 64 Therefore, I am seeking your agreement to delegate the authority to myself and the Minister of Finance to discuss and agree funding options with the Minister of Finance to meet the costs associated with this paper. It is likely, this will involve seeking funding from the COVID Response and Relief Fund.

### **Legislative Implications**

- 65 A combination of changes to existing COVID Act Orders or Alert Level Requirement Orders, Secretary for Education directions, and guidance will be required to give effect to these proposals.

### **Impact Analysis**

#### **Regulatory Impact Statement**

- 66 The Regulatory Impact Analysis Team at the Treasury has determined that the proposal extending onsite education for Alert Level 3 regions is exempt from the requirement to provide a Regulatory Impact Statement on the grounds that it is intended to manage, mitigate or alleviate the short-term impacts of the declared emergency event of the COVID-19 pandemic, and implementation of the policy is required urgently to be effective (making a complete, robust and timely Regulatory Impact Statement unfeasible).

#### **Climate Implications of Policy Assessment**

- 67 The Climate Implications of Policy Assessment team has been consulted and confirms that the CIPA requirements do not apply to this proposal as the threshold for significance is not met.

### **Population Implications**

- 68 Māori and Pacific and disabled students are likely to be disproportionately negatively affected by prolonged disconnection from education services and the disruption caused by Alert levels 3 and 4. Evidence indicates that Māori and Pacific and disabled students as well as students in low-decile schools experience additional challenges learning over lockdowns and in online learning environments. In particular, access to devices and connectivity continue to be reported as issues.
- 69 Māori and Pacific and disabled students as well as students from low socio-economic backgrounds are also at greater risk of not re-engaging with face-to-face learning once it becomes available again. While re-engagement post lockdown is of concern for all students, we expect that these issues will look different and be particularly pronounced for these groups.

- 70 Increasing face-to-face education may expose students to a greater risk of contact with COVID-19. This will be of particular concern for students aged under 12 who cannot be vaccinated and some disabled students who will be more likely to contract and experience worse symptoms as a result of COVID-19. For large multigenerational households, including for Pacific families, exposure to COVID would have greater impacts. As Māori and Pacific peoples also have traditionally lower vaccination rates, transmission may be of greater risk as a result of increased face-to-face learning. The health measures we implement in schools must be operationalised effectively in order to mitigate this risk.
- 71 The proposal to enable children and students in years 0 to 10 to attend learning face-to-face onsite part-time is likely to have a positive impact by reducing the educational impacts and disengagement caused by the lockdowns. However, the transition to full-time face-to-face learning will not be instantaneous. For children and students with inequitable access to connectivity and devices, continued support is required.
- 72 The proposals relating to cohorts and masks must be implemented in a flexible and accessible way that considers the needs of learners with additional learning needs and disabilities. Not all children and students can wear face coverings or find it easy to interact with those wearing face coverings. Some children and students with particular learning support needs may find cohorting unsettling.

### Human Rights

- 73 There are no human rights implications.

### Consultation

- 74 The Ministry of Health, the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Ministry of Social Development and the Treasury were consulted.

### Communications

- 75 I will communicate Cabinet's decisions to the sector on Wednesday, 10 November, via the usual channels.

### Proactive Release

- 76 I intend to proactively release this Cabinet paper subject to redaction as appropriate under the Official Information Act, once Cabinet decisions have been made.

### Recommendations

- 76 The Minister of Education recommends that Cabinet:
- 1 **note** that, based on advice from the Ministry of Health, bubble sizes in Alert Level 3 Step 2 regions have recently increased to allow up to 20 children and students in licensed early childhood services and schools, and up to 25 students in tertiary education organisations;
  - 2 **agree** that, from 17 November, schools with students in years 0 to 8 are able to provide onsite face-to-face learning for these students in cohorts, with the number of attending each day limited, so as to manage the risk of transmission;

- 3 **note** that from 17 November cohorts will replace all current bubble arrangements for schools;
- 4 **note** that the Ministry of Education will issue guidance for schools on how cohorts could operate at a more detailed level, including for composite schools;
- 5 **note** that the detail of how cohorts will operate in each school will be determined by the board of that school;
- 6 **agree** that, from 17 November, schools with students in year 9 and 10 can provide face-to-face learning for these students;
- 7 **agree** that students in years 7 and 8 and any staff member working to provide, or support the provision of, their education, must wear face coverings when indoors, unless an exemption applies;
- 8 **note** that the Ministry of Education will provide support from baselines if schools identify that learners have particular barriers in accessing face coverings;
- 9 **9(2)(f)(iv)**
- 10 **note** that, where needed, the Ministry of Education will continue to offer distance learning supports to schools, kura and early childhood services for those ākonga learning from home;
- 11 **note** that the term 'school' is used to broadly encompass all school settings;
- 12 **note** that the Minister of Education intends to announce these changes on Wednesday 10 November;
- 13 **agree** to authorise the Minister for COVID-19 Response to issue such drafting instructions to Parliamentary Counsel Office as are necessary to give effect to the above recommendations.

Authorised for lodgement

Hon Chris Hipkins

Minister of Education

## Appendix A

- 1 The Ministry of Education has met with a number of Auckland primary school sector representatives to hear their concerns and test proposals regarding increasing face-to-face onsite education in Alert Level 3 regions. Feedback has been grouped into the following broad categories:

### *Increased risk of spreading COVID-19 through the community*

- 2 The overarching concern with increased onsite face-to-face education was bringing together hundreds of students in schools and kura, then replicating that hundreds of times across the motu. This would create numerous opportunities for the virus to spread from schools and kura and into the community.
- 3 Unvaccinated learners, particularly those under the age of 12 years who are not yet eligible to be vaccinated, while are less susceptible to the virus, could act as transmitters of the virus for staff, other learners, and the community.
- 4 Significant concern was raised regarding the low vaccination rates in certain communities. One case brought home from a school or kura could lead to significant spread through a family, whānau, or community, or a case from home could easily be transmitted into the school or kura. This is particularly concerning in communities where intergenerational living is common, for example Pacific families.

### *Concern around the 15 November date*

- 5 There are significant actions currently scheduled for 15 November, including the target date for vaccination dose 1, and the proposed reopening of face-to-face learning in Auckland.
- 6 The vaccination deadline adds uncertainty regarding staff availability, and some schools are unsure about how this will impact their staffing levels if their staff are slow or unwilling to get vaccinated. This may also impact the number of staff they have available to take classroom bubbles and cohorts.
- 7 The increased reopening of schools in Auckland after a relatively short notice period after the year 11 to 13 cohort returned means primary and intermediate principals are still working to understand what this will mean for them and their staff and students. This amount of change in a relatively short period of time could create confusion.

### *Concerns with the logistics of cohorting students, and who should make decisions*

- 8 Many representatives raised concerns with cohorting students for their return to face-to-face learning. It was clear from the comments received that a one size fits all was not an appropriate approach for the development of school cohorts. Schools would need to consider their own characteristics and adopt models that would suit their unique needs. However, schools wanted clear guidance and support from the Ministry.
- 9 Some representatives thought cohorting arrangements should be at the discretion of Tumuaki/Principals, to ensure arrangements met the needs of their students, whānau and communities, including iwi. A broad, mandated approach would not meet local needs, particularly Māori communities. This approach would rely on

increased sharing of information so informed decisions can be made at the local level.

- 10 However, the majority requested more decisions be made by the Ministry of Education, and for clear guidance and direction be provided. This would support school leaders who may be struggling to design a workable cohort approach. It would also avoid situations that could draw complaints from parents and the community, such as where one school or kura had made decisions that may differ to another, or placing schools in the position of telling parents who can and can't come to school.
- 11 Staggering returns to school was widely considered to be the least favourable option. Respondents believed it would be difficult to ensure equity for all learners, and that it wouldn't work for smaller schools and kura with multi-year classrooms (including rural schools), or for parents who needed to work or arrange childcare around school hours.
- 12 Some representatives suggested possible cohorting models, including keeping whānau together to give parents consistency, focussing on having those in their final years at school return first, or having those in their first years of school return first, and have other students remain learning from home. Overly complex models were not preferable.
- 13 Overall, what was important was that whatever approach was decided upon, it had to be clear and consistent so students, whānau, and teachers knew what was expected of them.

#### *Concerns about staff wellbeing*

- 14 The demands on staff have been extensive during the response to COVID-19, both in terms of teaching and learning and also managing their own personal circumstances. Representatives commented that staff wellbeing as teaching and learning requirements continued to change was a top priority.
- 15 For teachers with their own children, a return to face-to-face learning without a corresponding opening of early learning services or increased attendance at their own schools, arranging childcare will be a concern.
- 16 A commonly raised concern was the increased pressure on staff if schools and kura move to a mixture of remote and face-to-face learning to meet the needs of learners both returning to the classroom and those remaining at home. Representatives noted that schools and kura will have to be aware of this when designing and managing their cohorting arrangements.

#### *Concerns about school Resourcing*

- 17 Some representatives were concerned that some schools and kura may have to rely on untrained or unqualified individuals due to reduced teacher numbers. This increased reliance could result in the curriculum not being taught, children with the highest needs not being taught or having their needs met, presenting barriers to inclusion, and a reduction in the quality of education provided.

- 18 Representatives wanted to know how the Ministry of Education was going to support schools and kura to be more resilient in uncertain times, so they were more prepared to pivot to different modes of learning when they needed to. This included access to online learning supports and hard learning packs to support learning wherever it takes place, or access to additional staffing or funding. This included whether schools would have access to itinerant staff such as RTLB or other specialist staff to support learners.
- 19 Access to appropriate relieving staff or replacements for staff who had resigned was raised numerous times, particularly by schools and kura that had specific staffing needs or characteristics that must be met. This included appropriate staff for schools and kura such as Te Kura Kaupapa Māori, Ngā Kura A Iwi, Specialist schools, or Faith Based schools. This will likely impact small, rural, and isolated schools as well.

*Student wellbeing must be prioritised*

- 20 Many representatives thought it was important to be absolutely clear about why onsite face-to-face instruction was increasing – is it for student wellbeing, for supervision while parents return to the workforce, or for learning? Representatives understood the desire to get students back to the classroom but reinforced that it should be done in line with public safety guidelines and not at all costs.
- 21 There was concern that with schools and kura reopening, learners would feel pressure to return to face-to-face learning. Many highlighted that it was important for student wellbeing that they feel comfortable and safe returning to school, and if they did not that online learning provision would remain until they did.
- 22 The wellbeing of disabled learners and learners with additional needs must be considered when developing requirements for learners. Some are likely to have difficulty with some of the COVID guidelines, such as mask wearing and physical distancing, and may find the changes to routines dysregulating. They also have additional needs, such as access to equipment and specialist support that can only be met while physically on site at school.

*Health measures*

- 23 Most representatives believed that the wearing of masks by students and teachers was a 'no brainer', however the practicalities of this was unrealistic. Teachers found them difficult to talk and teach through all day and getting young children to keep them on all day was very difficult. It was also noted that young children do not physically distance well.
- 24 Concerns were raised about the reliance on natural ventilation through opening windows or having classes outside to reduce or minimise any COVID spread. This was seen as unrealistic due to weather conditions, and it was noted that this would become increasingly problematic as the weather got colder.
- 25 How schools and kura were meant to manage compliance with health guidance was a concern, and many asked for additional support from the Ministry of Education for stronger direction and support to meet these expectations.

*Whether equity for all students can be guaranteed in increased face-to-face teaching and learning*

- 26 For any number of reasons, there are likely to be some students who will not return to school once face-to-face learning restarts and remain learning from home. If schools take a blanket approach and switch fully to face-to-face delivery and stop offering online learning without considering individual students' circumstances, some students could face disadvantage.
- 27 Schools serving communities that have lower vaccination rates, for example lower decile schools with predominantly Māori and Pacific student populations, may choose to not open for face-to-face learning at all, or for a significant amount of time, due to the risk of COVID spread in the community. This would result in inequitable education provision, particularly when higher decile schools servicing populations with high-vaccination rates are increasingly reopening for face-to-face onsite education.





# Cabinet

## Minute of Decision

*This document contains information for the New Zealand Cabinet. It must be treated in confidence and handled in accordance with any security classification, or other endorsement. The information can only be released, including under the Official Information Act 1982, by persons with the appropriate authority.*

### Increasing Face-to-Face Onsite Education for Alert Level 3 Regions

#### Portfolio Education

On 8 November 2021, Cabinet:

- 1 **noted** that, based on advice from the Ministry of Health, bubble sizes in Alert Level 3 Step 2 regions have recently increased to allow up to 20 children and students in licensed early childhood services and schools, and up to 25 students in tertiary education organisations;
- 2 **agreed** that, from 17 November 2021, schools with students in years 0 to 8 are able to provide onsite face-to-face learning for these students, with the number attending each day limited through part-time attendance so as to manage the risk of transmission;
- 3 **noted** that from 17 November 2021, management of numbers on-site through part-time attendance will replace all current bubble arrangements for schools;
- 4 **noted** that the Ministry of Education will issue guidance for schools on how management of numbers on-site, including through part-time attendance, could operate at a more detailed level, including for composite schools;
- 5 **noted** that the detail of how management of numbers on-site will operate in each school will be determined by the board of that school;
- 6 **agreed** that, from 17 November 2021, schools with students in year 9 and 10 can provide face-to-face learning for these students;
- 7 **agreed** that students from years 4 to 8 and any staff member working to provide, or support the provision of, their education, must wear face coverings when indoors, unless an exemption applies or in cases where year 4 to 8 students are in classes where students are predominantly year 3 or below;
- 8 **noted** that the Ministry of Education will provide support from baselines if schools identify that learners have particular barriers in accessing face coverings;
- 9 **9(2)(f)(iv)**
- 10 **noted** that, where needed, the Ministry of Education will continue to offer distance learning supports to schools, kura and early childhood services for those ākonga learning from home;
- 11 **noted** that the term 'school' is used to broadly encompass all school settings;

- 12 **noted** that in finalising the guidance for schools the Ministry of Education will incorporate guidance on staggered drop-offs and pick-ups and teaching outdoors as much as possible;
- 13 **noted** that the Ministry of Education is working with the Ministry of Health on issues concerning ventilating indoor learning spaces;
- 14 **noted** that the Minister of Education intends to announce these changes on Wednesday, 10 November 2021;
- 15 **authorised** the Minister for COVID-19 Response to issue such drafting instructions to Parliamentary Counsel Office as are necessary to give effect to the above decisions.

Michael Webster  
Secretary of the Cabinet