

# An argument for school-funded counselling for children in Years 1-8.

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Counsellor Education Community Day  
Tuesday 11 November 2025  
University of Waikato



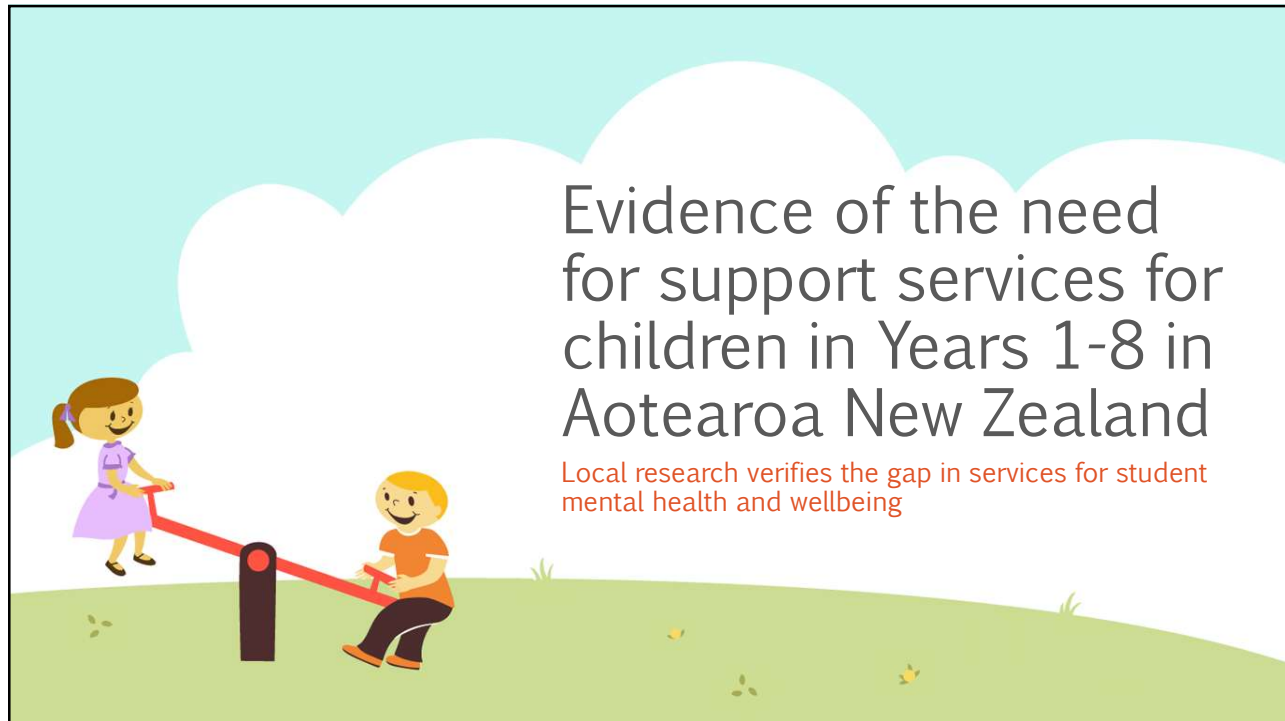
1

Overview – we know that children can benefit from counselling in schools;  
Why not provide counselling more freely in Years 1-8?

- Evidence of the need for mental health and wellbeing support services for children in Years 1-8 in Aotearoa New Zealand
- Evidence of the benefits to children (and families and schools) from counselling, including to their mental health and school learning and attendance outcomes
- Proposal to argue for school-funded counselling for children in Years 1-8 (as is the case for young people in Years 9-13)



2



## Evidence of the need for support services for children in Years 1-8 in Aotearoa New Zealand

Local research verifies the gap in services for student mental health and wellbeing

3

### Distress, waitlists and unmet needs: Parents' reports of child psychological difficulties in Aotearoa New Zealand (Kercher et al., 2023)

NZ primary-aged children are experiencing more symptoms of psychological distress than previously reported and extensive difficulties accessing treatment.

- This study investigated psychological symptoms and treatment experiences among primary-aged children.
- An online survey of parents assessed children's anxiety, depression, attentional, emotional, conduct and peer problems, and experiences seeking psychological treatment.

There is a need for further screening and increased access to treatment to prevent worsening mental health outcomes in children

- Participants were 412 parents or caregivers of children aged 5–11 years, in NZ, recruited via community and parenting social media groups across NZ, including a link to the survey.
- Based on 382 parental reports, between 24.9 and 34.6% of children experienced abnormal-range symptoms. Older children had higher distress, depression, and anxiety.



4

## Exploring the Integration of Student Mental Health and Wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand Primary Schools' Strategic Plans (Fraser, 2024)

- Fraser (2024) “examines the integration of student mental health and wellbeing initiatives and goals within the strategic plans of a random sample of 100 primary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand” (p. i).
- There is an “increasing prevalence of mental health and wellbeing issues among primary school-aged children in Aotearoa New Zealand (Mental Health Foundation, 2024)” (p. 99).
- “While many schools include goals and initiatives that could potentially benefit student mental health and wellbeing, they do not always explicitly plan for or prioritise these benefits” (p. i).
- “only 36% of the sampled strategic plans included goals and/or initiatives likely to support student mental health and wellbeing” (p. 99).
- Among an overview of initiatives and programmes currently available to schools, Fraser listed a single counselling initiative, *Counselling in Schools*

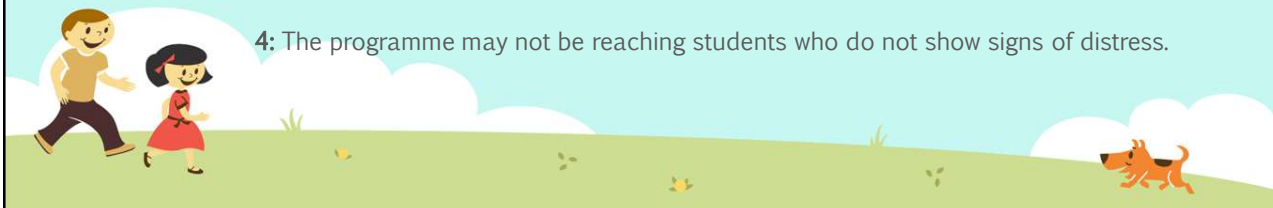


5

## *Someone to talk to:* *Evaluation of counselling in schools (ERO, 2024)*

Findings: These are four of the eight findings discussed.

- 1:** Mental health needs for children rising and impacting their learning outcomes.
- 2:** The CiS programme has evolved to be a mix of models that delivers mental health and social support to students
- 3:** The programme successfully reaches primary school students in low socioeconomic areas who are in psychological distress. It reaches some groups who do not typically access counselling, such as Māori students and boys, but reaches lower numbers of Asian, Pacific, and MELAA students.
- 4:** The programme may not be reaching students who do not show signs of distress.



6

## Awhi Mai, Awhi Atu - Counselling in schools (CiS)

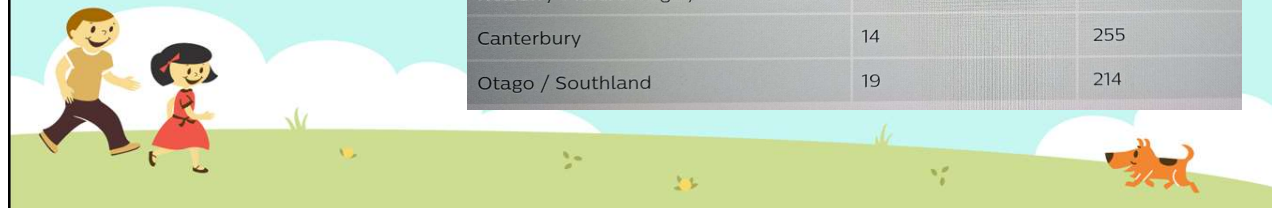
85% primary  
7% intermediate  
8% secondary

97% state  
3% state integrated

2022 – 141 schools  
2023 – 215 schools  
2024 – 243 schools

77% individual counselling  
10% group sessions  
5% whānau sessions  
3% class sessions  
1% whole school session

Region	Participating schools	Total schools
Northland	39	141
Auckland	3	497
Waikato	39	248
Bay of Plenty	0	169
Hawkes Bay / Gisborne	74	153
Taranaki / Manawatu / Whanganui	28	210
Wellington	17	248
Nelson / Marlborough / West Coast	0	113
Canterbury	14	255
Otago / Southland	19	214



7

## Counsellors in NZ primary schools: What's happening in Years 1-8? (Flanagan, 2021)

...interested in documenting the experience of NZ schools where counselling is offered in Years 1-8.

- Primary-aged children in Aotearoa New Zealand appear to be experiencing **a range of challenging circumstances** that highlight the need for the kind of support that counselling can offer.
- key issues in a 'decile 5' school that young people come to consult James, a student-counsellor about:
- "... students cutting, self-harm, anxiety, depression, relationship difficulties, suicidal thoughts, suicide plans. Eating difficulties. Living with disabilities, an illness. So quite a wide range [of issues] ... anxiety and depression have been really prevalent. So has cutting".

- Self-harm was also reported in other schools, across the socio-economic range. This comment is from Hayley, a SENCO/LSC in a decile 10 school:
- "... self-harm is definitely on the increase ... we're noticing it more in primary. Lots of talk about it, there's definitely an increase in the talk about self-harm, and the attempts of self-harm".
- "We've been lobbying the Ministry [of Education] for a long time ... When I say 'we', I mean collectively intermediate school principals, but also primary school principals in terms [of] mental health [needs]. It just seems to get bigger and bigger. And the onus on teachers to respond to mental health issues just seems to get increasingly consuming ... (Melissa, intermediate school principal).



8



## Evidence of the benefits to children (and to families and schools) from counselling

Research (international and local) shows that counselling can support children and their learning

9

## Mana Ake – a MoH response to the 2011 Canterbury earthquakes and the 2019 mosque attacks

Mana Ake – Stronger for Tomorrow provides mental health and wellbeing support for children in primary school years 1-8 across Canterbury and Kaikōura.

Mana Ake kaimahi (workers) are employed by one of [13 NGO providers](#) and support schools, families and whānau when children are experiencing issues that impact their wellbeing such as managing emotions, friendship skills, self-esteem, and coping with change.

Kaimahi have a diverse range of skills and include social workers, counsellors, teachers and youth workers.

<https://manaake.health.nz/>

- Barnardos
- Chch Methodist Mission
- Community Wellbeing North Canterbury Trust
- Family Help Trust
- Family Works
- He Waka Tapu
- Hornby Presbyterian Community Trust
- Te Hā o Te Ora Kaikoura Health
- Purapura Whetu
- Stand Children's Services
- Tangata Atamotu Trust
- St John of God Hauora Trust Waipuna
- Youth Alive Trust

10

## Final Evaluation Report: Mana Ake – Stronger for Tomorrow (Malatest International, 2021)

Table 6. Kaimahi backgrounds updated to 31 December 2020 (n = 79).

Professional background	Number (%)
Social worker	26 (33%)
Youth worker	17 (22%)
Teachers (including ECE)	11 (14%)
Child and family worker	7 (9%)
Counsellor	6 (8%)
Nurse	4 (5%)

What difference did Mana Ake make for schools? (p. 206)

Most schools felt that the Mana Ake response:

- Gave them guidance
- Reaffirmed what they were doing
- Helped provide stable support
- Kept them up to date about what was happening
- Provided accessible presence for in-school support
- Provided clear trustworthy resources and advice

One school felt they could have been supported more



11

## *Someone to talk to: Evaluation of counselling in schools (ERO, 2024)*

### Findings

- Remaining findings of the eight listed
- **5:** CiS successfully reduces psychological distress for students, particularly for students who have more severe distress, and these improvements are sustained.
- **6:** Counselling in Schools also shows signs of improving students' attendance, engagement, and learning progress.
- **7:** Students who entered counselling with the highest mental health needs are also most likely to see improvements in attendance and in their learning progress.
- **8:** Teachers report that Counselling in Schools improves overall classroom behaviour.



12

## Someone to talk to: Evaluation of counselling in schools (ERO, 2024)

Four lessons:

**1:** Investing in psychological support in primary schools can reduce distress and improve learning, attendance, and behaviour outcomes.

**2:** Counselling in primary schools works best when on the school site, and when students receive more than three hours of support.

**3:** Having multiple referral pathways by teachers, students, and parents and whānau, is potentially important in order to capture students who do not exhibit obvious signs of distress.

**4:** The programme is promising but we need to understand more about which elements are key to success to be sure it can be effectively replicated in a wider range of schools.



13

## Measuring effectiveness of counselling in primary schools – UK research

Agency provider (Place2Be) of individual and group counselling services

Lee, R. C., Tiley, C. E., White, J. E., (2009), The Place2Be: Measuring the effectiveness of a primary school-based therapeutic intervention in England and Scotland. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 9 doi: 10.1080/14733140903031432

Daniunaite, A., Cooper, M., & Forster, T. (2015). Counselling in UK primary schools: Outcomes and predictors of change. *Counselling & Psychotherapy Research*, 15(4), 251–261.

Toth K, et al. (2020). What issues bring primary school children to counselling? A service evaluation of presenting issues across 291 schools working with Place2Be. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 20, 571–579. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.1002/capr.12333>

Toth, K., Golden, S., & Sammons, P. (2024). Investigating the academic attainment and progress of children in receipt of individual counselling: A matched comparison study of primary school age children in England. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 24, 1269–1279.

<https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.1002/capr.12741>



14



Proposal: to argue for school-funded counselling for children in Years 1-8


That the government should explore funding as it is for young people in Years 9-13 in State and State-Integrated secondary schools through the Full Time Teacher Equivalent (FTTE) mechanism)

15

## Local NZ research on counselling in primary schools (Reynecke, 2025)

*What are the perspectives and experiences of counsellors and pastoral leads regarding the Ministry of Education's recent support of counselling in primary schools in Aotearoa NZ?*

Multiple perspectives in the study reflected ... differences in understanding of counselling provision. It included participants' understandings of their school's pastoral care system and their mental health framework to support student wellbeing. The value and placement of the counsellor within this framework differed according to the availability of a suitable, qualified counsellor. The similarities of participants' counselling set-up demonstrated this shared responsibility and the need for counselling guidelines (p. 67).



16

## Local NZ research on counselling in primary schools (Strachan, 2024)

*Building the plane as you fly it: Researching guidelines for counselling in the unique context of primary and intermediate schools.*

The findings revealed that policies for school counselling in primary and intermediate schools need to be developed in partnership with key stakeholders and support the contention that the keys to partnership lie within te Tiriti o Waitangi (p. ii).

Strachan provides a draft set of guidelines for counselling in primary schools (pp. 101-107).



17

To develop an effective counselling service for children in Years 1-8, a culture of professional counselling, and a professional identity of qualified counsellors in primary schools, should be developed.

Discuss!



18

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