

We Asked Early Childhood Teachers What They Need. Their Answers Should Shape the Future of the Sector.

By Kathy Wolfe, Chief Executive, Te Rito Maioha Early Childhood New Zealand

With over 3,000 members and students, Te Rito Maioha has been speaking with kaiako, centre leaders and student teachers across Aotearoa New Zealand about the challenges facing early childhood education.

While their experiences varied, a consistent picture emerged. Teachers spoke of increasing numbers of tamariki with complex learning, behavioural and wellbeing needs. They described growing difficulties attracting and retaining qualified teachers, rising operating costs and concerns that funding is failing to keep pace with the realities of delivering quality education and care.

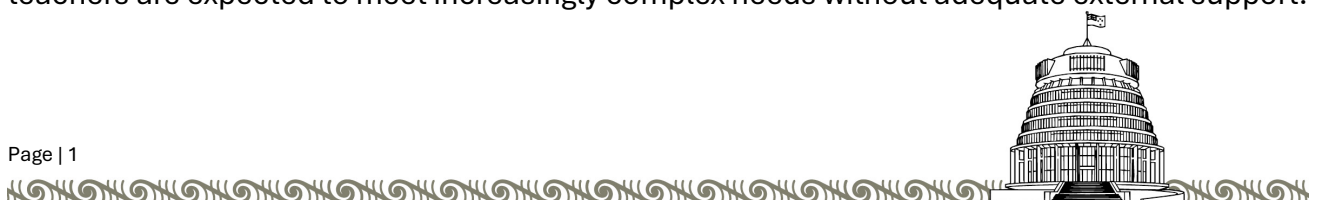
Taken together, members responses point to a sector under increasing pressure. While the commitment and professionalism of teachers continue to sustain the system, there is growing concern that goodwill alone cannot continue to absorb the cumulative impact of workforce shortages, increasing learner needs and financial pressures.

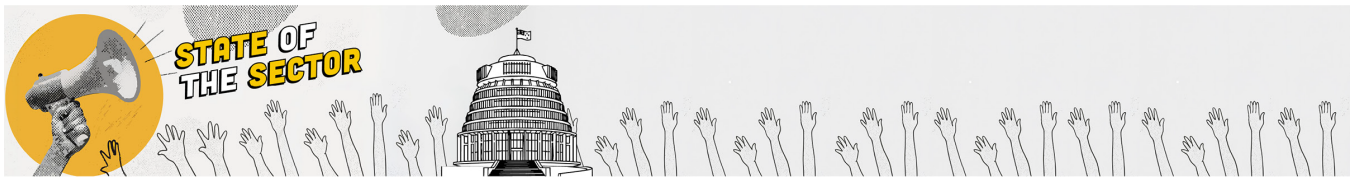
This should matter to every New Zealander because early childhood education is not simply a service that allows parents to participate in the workforce. It is one of the most important investments we make in our children's future learning, wellbeing and development. The experiences children have during their earliest years help shape the foundations for communication, social competence, emotional regulation, confidence, resilience and future educational success.ⁱ

New Zealand has long recognised the importance of quality early childhood education and has built a system that is internationally respected for its focus on qualified teachers, child wellbeing and curriculum leadership through Te Whāriki.ⁱⁱ That reputation has not emerged by accident. It has been built through deliberate choices to invest in a teacher-led profession and to recognise that educating young children requires specialist pedagogy, knowledge and expertise.

The responses we received suggest many within the sector are concerned that those foundations are coming under increasing pressure.

One of the strongest themes emerging from our conversations was concern about the growing complexity of children's needs. Teachers described supporting increasing numbers of tamariki requiring behavioural, developmental, learning, language and emotional support. Many reported lengthy waits for specialist intervention services and situations where early childhood teachers are expected to meet increasingly complex needs without adequate external support.





One respondent captured the challenge succinctly:

"The gap between current teacher-to-child ratios and the increasingly complex needs of the children in our care. While centres may be operating within regulated ratios, these ratios do not always reflect the reality of supporting children with additional learning, behavioural, or developmental needs."

This is not a reflection of any unwillingness to support diverse learners. Inclusion remains one of the great strengths of New Zealand's early childhood education system. However, effective inclusion requires resources, specialist support, time and appropriate staffing. When these elements are absent, teachers face the difficult challenge of balancing the needs of individual children with the needs of the wider learning community.

Concerns about staffing levels are not new. In 2023, Te Rito Maioha and Childspace *delivered a petition* to Parliament calling for a 1:4 teacher-to-child ratio for children under three years of age. The proposal reflected the sector's understanding that lower ratios would enable more responsive care, stronger relationships and better learning outcomes.

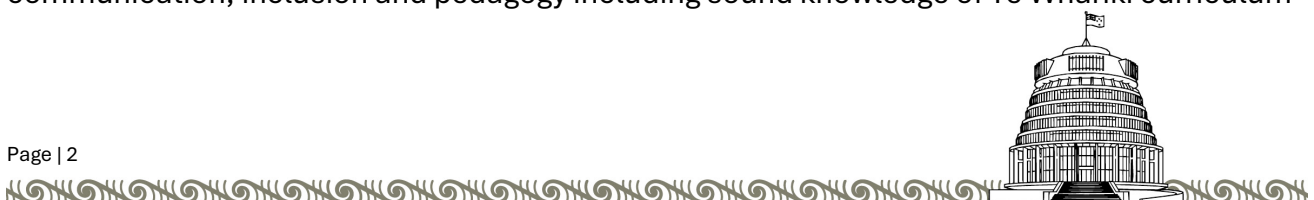
While the petition was not successful in part due to push back from sector membership organisations who cited workforce shortages and implementation costs, many of the issues that gave rise to the petition remain evident today. You can read the report from the Submission Committee *here*. The reality is that teachers continue to identify staffing levels, increasing complexity of children's needs and the challenge of providing meaningful individual support as significant barriers to delivering the quality of education and care that tamariki deserve.

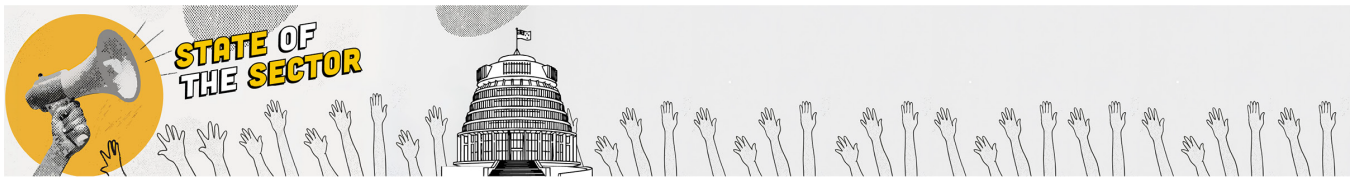
These concerns sit alongside growing worries about workforce sustainability. Teachers described increasing workloads, difficulties recruiting qualified staff, and rising levels of fatigue and burnout. Some expressed concern that experienced teachers are leaving the profession altogether, while others questioned whether enough people are being attracted into the sector to meet future demand by having experienced teachers in front of and alongside tamariki.

Several respondents linked these pressures directly to staffing levels and support for diverse learners. One teacher's comment was particularly stark:

"No additional support for children with diverse needs," which reflects a concern raised repeatedly throughout the responses and highlights the growing gap between expectations and available resources.

The importance of these concerns cannot be overstated. Quality early childhood education depends on qualified teachers. Research consistently demonstrates that the quality of teacher-child interactions is one of the strongest predictors of positive outcomes for children.ⁱⁱⁱ Qualified kaiako bring specialist knowledge of child development, learning, assessment, communication, inclusion and pedagogy including sound knowledge of Te Whāriki curriculum





and how to utilise this in teaching and learning. They are trained to recognise developmental concerns, support diverse learning needs and intentionally foster children's learning and wellbeing.

When conversations about affordability and sustainability begin to focus on reducing qualification requirements or weakening professional expectations, it is worth remembering what is at stake. The question should not be how cheaply we can provide early childhood education, but how we can ensure every child has access to the quality education and care they deserve.

Respondents also highlighted the impact of rising costs and funding pressures. Many described increasing fees for families, delaying maintenance, reducing professional development opportunities or postponing investments that would normally contribute to service improvement and keeping children safe.

As one centre leader explained, *"all our operating costs have risen, and our funding is not even covering staffing costs. So we rely on parental fees to cover the rest."*

Another respondent highlighted the impact on families:

"We have had families disenroll their child due to travel cost, affordability and no food for lunches."

Teachers spoke of being caught between competing pressures: families already struggling with the cost of living and services facing escalating costs associated with salaries, insurance, utilities, compliance and staffing. Increasingly, providers feel they are being asked to do more with less.

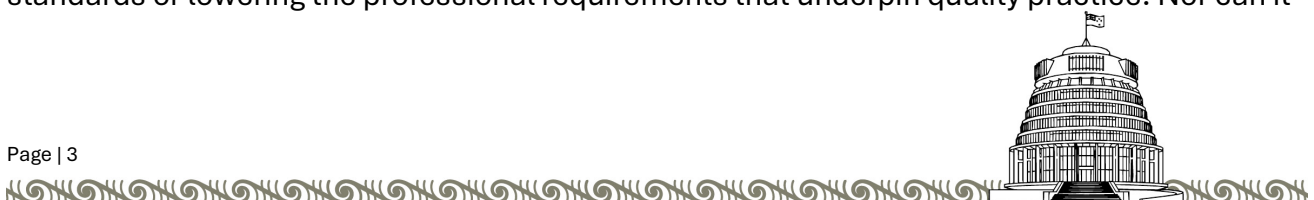
One respondent summed up the biggest challenge currently affecting their ability to provide quality early childhood education by saying *"Supporting whānau with the cost of living while dealing with inadequate funding for services."*

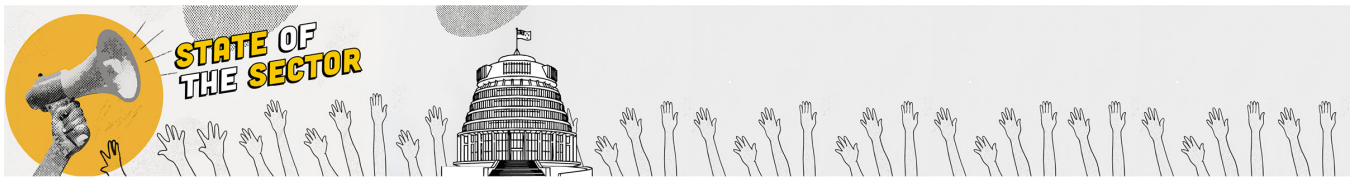
What was particularly striking was the extent to which respondents linked funding pressures back to quality outcomes for tamariki. Decisions about staffing, professional learning and support services are not abstract financial considerations, they directly affect children's experiences and learning opportunities.

This is why framing the future of early childhood education as a choice between quality and affordability is fundamentally flawed.

Parents should not have to choose between affordable early childhood education and quality early childhood education. Children deserve both. Families deserve both. Communities deserve both.

The answer to current challenges cannot be found by reducing expectations, weakening standards or lowering the professional requirements that underpin quality practice. Nor can it





be found by expecting families to absorb ever-increasing costs. Instead, it requires a serious conversation about the level of public investment needed to sustain a high-quality, teacher-led early childhood education system.

The economic case for that investment is compelling. High-quality early childhood education supports workforce participation, enables parents to work and study, contributes to children's future educational achievement and delivers long-term social and economic benefits. International evidence consistently demonstrates that investment in quality early learning generates returns that extend well beyond the education sector.^{iv}

However, the case for investment is not purely economic. It is also about the kind of country we want to be.

New Zealand has built an early childhood education system that recognises children as capable learners, values qualified teachers and places wellbeing at the centre of practice. It is a system that has earned international respect because it prioritises quality rather than simply custodial care.

Those strengths should not be taken for granted.

Quality ECE depends on qualified teachers, sustainable services, appropriate staffing levels, access to specialist support and funding models that reflect the realities of delivering high-quality education and safeguarding children.

The question facing policymakers is simple: will we continue to invest in the conditions that make quality possible, or will we allow those foundations to gradually erode?

For the sake of our tamariki, the answer should be obvious.

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ⁱ Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. *The Science of Early Childhood Development*; OECD (2020). *Early Learning and Child Well-being*.

ⁱⁱ OECD (2021). *Starting Strong VI: Supporting Meaningful Interactions in Early Childhood Education and Care*; Ministry of Education. *Te Whāriki: Early Childhood Curriculum*.

ⁱⁱⁱ OECD (2021). *Starting Strong VI*; Pianta, Hamre & Mintz (2012). *Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)*; Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002). *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years*.

^{iv} Heckman, J. & Mosso, S. (2014). *The Economics of Human Development*; Heckman Equation research programme; OECD (2017). *Starting Strong*

