



Someone to talk to: Evaluation of Counselling in Schools

SUMMARY



Students' mental health is strongly linked to their engagement, achievement, and school attendance. Counselling in Schools is an initiative which began in 2021 with the aim of providing evidence-based counselling support in primary, intermediate, and small secondary schools, to help young people thrive at school.

The Education Review Office looked at the effectiveness of Counselling in Schools, how well it reached the students it is targeted at, the impact it had, and some lessons for counselling programmes in the future. We found that counselling improves students' mental health, and we also saw some encouraging signs of improved learning and wellbeing more widely.

The Counselling in Schools - Awhi Mai Awhi Atu programme (Counselling in Schools) was rolled out in primary, intermediate, and some small secondary schools. It's available in selected schools in many regions, with a particular focus on schools with the greatest need.

Counselling in Schools involves working with community providers to develop a counselling approach that meets the needs of each school. Counselling within the programme involves a mix of individual, parent and whānau, group, and whole school sessions. The aim is to improve mental health for children and young people with mild to moderate needs, in an accessible setting – and for students who need a higher level of support, referrals are made to other services.

The Education Review Office (ERO) wanted to understand how effective Counselling in Schools has been. We evaluated it over three years. We were especially interested in:

- how well it reached the students it is targeted at
- the impact it had on students
- lessons we can learn for implementing counselling programmes in the future.

The findings and lessons in this summary are unpacked in further detail in our full *findings report* and *technical report*, available on ERO's website www.evidence.ero.govt.nz.

Key findings

Finding 1: Mental health needs for children and young people are rising, and it is impacting on their learning outcomes.

Worryingly, emotional distress is increasing for Aotearoa New Zealand's children. Among those aged 14 or younger, it is estimated to have increased from 9 percent in 2016/17 to 13 percent in 2022/23.¹ The ongoing impacts of Covid-19 are a likely driver.

As well as being concerning for children's wellbeing, this also matters for their school achievement. Increased emotional distress and mental health needs have been found to significantly impact learning outcomes.

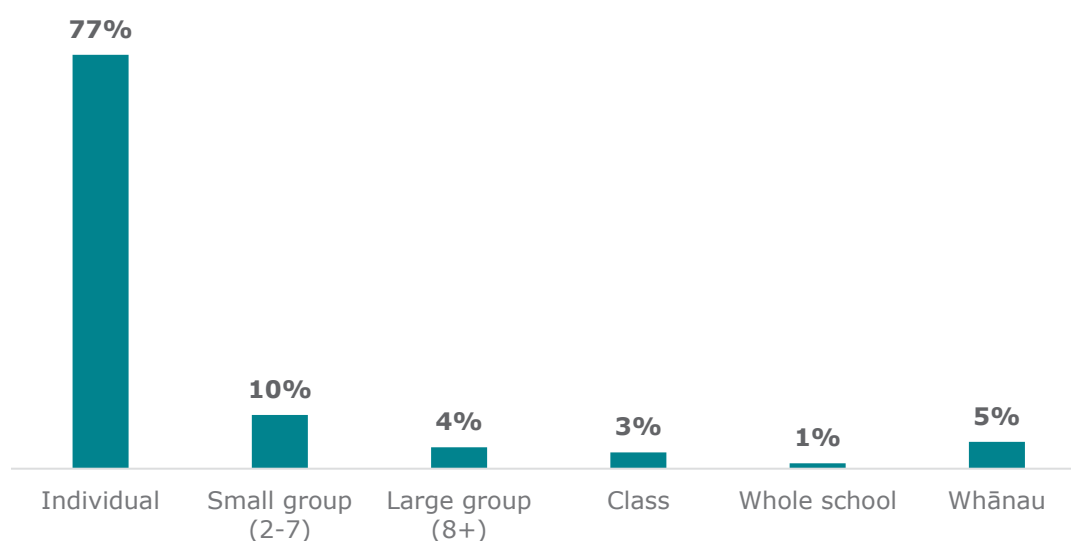
How effective was the implementation of Counselling in Schools?

Finding 2: The Counselling in Schools programme has evolved to be a mix of models that delivers mental health and social support to students.

Counselling in Schools offers a variety of types of counselling for students who need support. These are made available on the school site.

- 77 percent of Counselling in Schools sessions are individual sessions.
- 14 percent are group sessions.
- 1 percent are whole school sessions.

¹ From the 2023 *New Zealand Health Survey*, published by the Ministry of Health.

Figure 1: *Session types*

In schools, most referrals are made by teachers. Three in 10 of the programme’s counsellors have a counselling accreditation, six in 10 have some other accreditation (e.g., as occupational therapists), and the rest have no accreditation. Nine out of 10 Counselling in Schools counsellors are supervised by a registered counsellor. We know from international evidence that accreditation matters. A large-scale analysis of 107 studies shows that being a licensed counselling professional does make a difference to the quality of counselling – although there were benefits noted from non-licensed counsellors too. In our study, we heard that it was important to match the type of counsellor to the specific needs of the school.

“We try to come up with what the school wants and what they feel would be important. So, there’s no real strong differentiation in the type of provision, be it arts therapy, occupational therapy, or counsellor. It’s more about the type of person and matching to the school.”

PROVIDER

How well did the programme reach the target students?

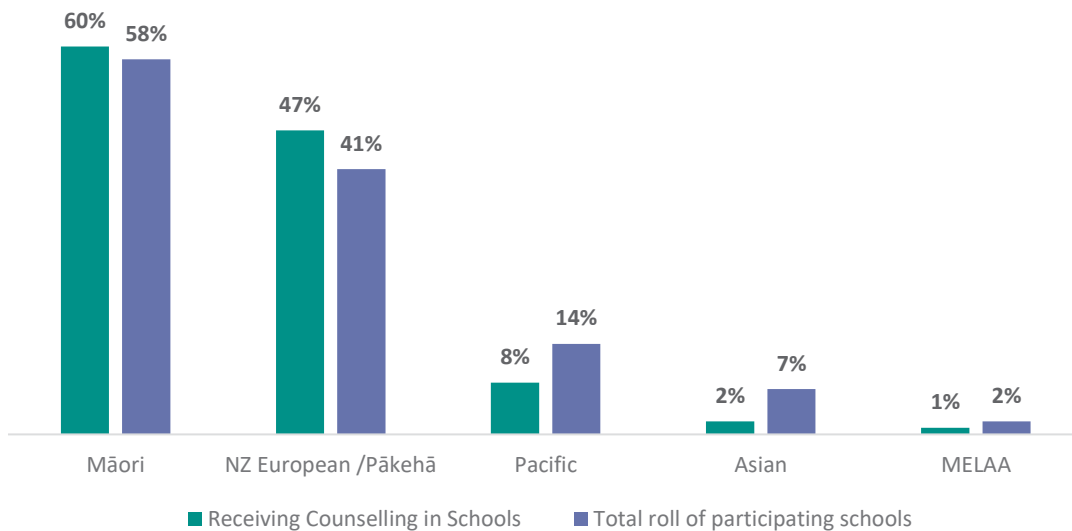
Finding 3: The programme successfully reaches primary school students in low socioeconomic areas who are in psychological distress. It reaches some groups who do not typically access counselling, such as Māori students and boys, but reaches lower numbers of Asian, Pacific, and MELAA students.

Encouragingly, the programme is reaching the students who most need support. Eight out of 10 schools where students can access Counselling in Schools are in low socioeconomic areas, reflecting the programme’s aim to reach schools with higher need.

Individual students are referred to counselling for a range of reasons, including behaviour (24 percent), anxiety, stress, trauma (16 percent), and relationships (15 percent). Seven in 10 (71 percent) students entering counselling are identified as being in distress, meaning that their pre-test mental health score represents the level of distress that is typical of those entering therapeutic services.

Māori students make up 60 percent of students receiving counselling. The proportion of Māori and NZ European/Pākehā students that access counselling is the same or higher than the school roll. But Pacific (8 percent), Asian (2 percent), and MELAA (1 percent) (Middle Eastern, Latin American, African) students are under-represented. This could mean that different approaches are needed to make sure that students of these ethnicities are being supported with mental health needs.

Figure 2: *Percentage of students accessing Counselling in Schools compared to total roll of participating schools, by ethnicity*



More boys access Counselling in Schools (55 percent) than girls (45 percent). This could be because school staff usually refer students for observable issues like behaviour (the most common referral reason), and boys are twice as likely to be referred for behaviour compared to girls.

Finding 4: *The programme may not be reaching students who do not show signs of distress.*

Three-quarters of referrals to counsellors are made by school staff, and one-quarter of students are referred due to their behaviour. Students are also referred for a wide range of other reasons, including grief and anxiety. ERO found that students with more hidden signs of distress are less likely to receive support, as it is harder for teachers to observe their distress.

“Every child is evaluated on a needs-basis, from the behaviours that they were displaying and the level of disruption they were causing. If someone’s really highly in need, they’ll be prioritised over other people.”

TEACHER

What was the impact on students?

Finding 5: Counselling in Schools successfully reduces psychological distress for students, particularly for students who have more severe distress, and these improvements are sustained.

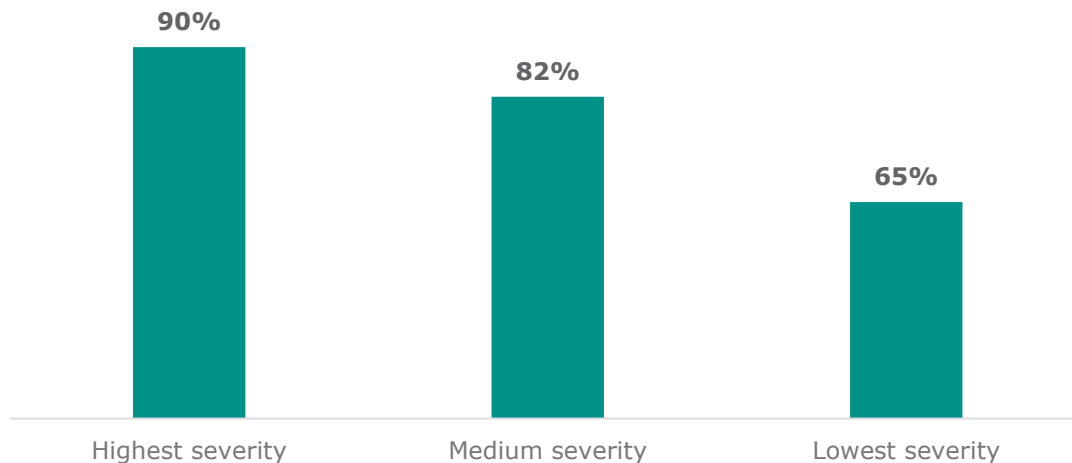
Encouragingly, eight in 10 students (80 percent) report improved psychological health after receiving counselling, and students with the most psychological distress have the largest improvement. Of the 71 percent of students who entered counselling reaching the clinical cutoff for distress, almost half no longer reach the cut-off for psychological distress at the end of counselling. This is a very positive outcome.

“My child is changing right before my eyes like a flower blossoming. There’ve not been so many tantrums anymore. She’s not taking it on herself when the grown-ups are having a bad day.”

PARENT

The greatest improvement is for students who experience the most severe distress before starting counselling. Ninety percent of those with the highest severity of mental health distress at the start improve.

Figure 3: *Percentage of students with mental health improvement by mental health severity before counselling*



This improvement lasts. Ninety-one percent of teachers and 98 percent of parents and whānau report students’ mental health improves following counselling. Four in five teachers (80 percent) report the improvements are still evident after six months, and three-quarters (74 percent) of parents and whānau say their child continues to show the improvements to mental health that they gained through counselling.

“I learnt that I could control my emotions and get into class in the mornings, and I could get support from my friends.”

STUDENT

“They seemed happier and like they had a weight lifted off their shoulders.”

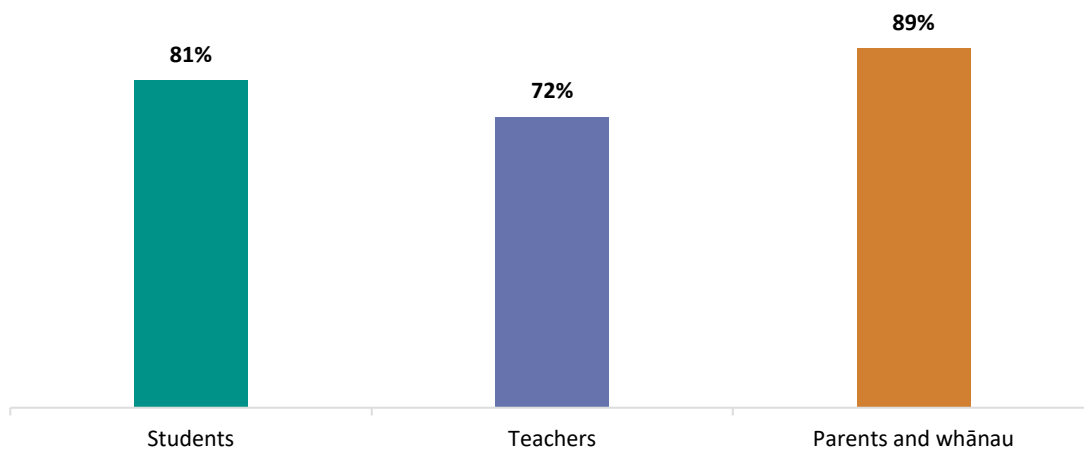
TEACHER

Finding 6: Counselling in Schools also shows signs of improving students’ attendance, engagement, and learning progress.

Improvements in mental health are key to improved attendance, engagement, and learning.

Nationally, learning progress is not consistently measured. In primary schools however, in our study, teachers report there are improvements in learning progress for over half of students who receive Counselling in Schools support.² Eight out of 10 students, and nine out of 10 parents and whānau agreed that counselling improves students’ learning progress.

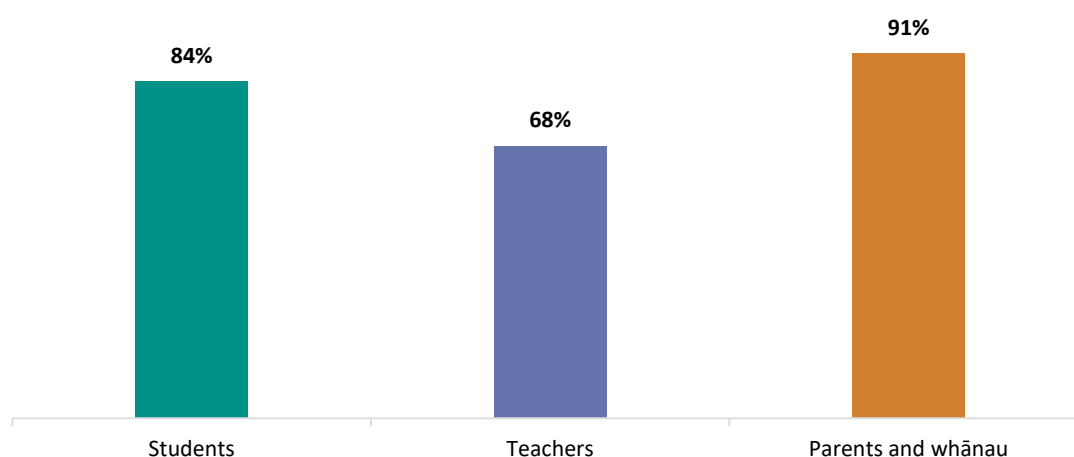
Figure 4: Counselling improves learning progress at school, by survey respondent



Teachers also report improvement in attendance for four in 10 students who attended counselling. Overall, seven out of 10 teachers (68 percent), eight out of 10 students (84 percent), and nine out of 10 parents and whānau agree that the Counselling in Schools programme improves students’ attendance (91 percent).

² This was measured using the Learning Engagement Measurement Tool (LEMT), which is a rating-scale assessment designed by ERO to measure individual shifts in learning engagement. The tool looks at presence (attendance), participation (in learning and with others), and learning gains (achievement and progress). For more information about the LEMT, see our technical report: <https://www.evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/technical-report-evaluation-of-counselling-in-schools>

Figure 5: *Counselling improves attendance at school, by survey respondent*



These improvements are sustained over time, reflecting sustained improvements to mental health. For example, six out of 10 parents and whānau (61 percent) say better attendance is sustained even after their child finishes counselling.

“It’s great that my child has support and his feelings are validated at school and in a school environment. It gives him confidence to come to school.”

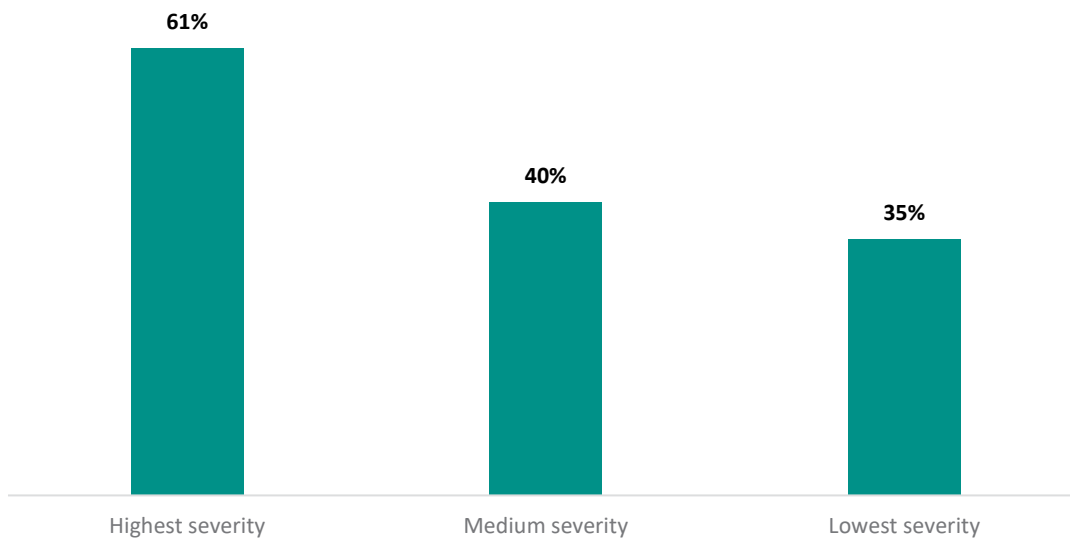
PARENT

Finding 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.

Students with the highest mental health scores had the biggest improvements to their attendance after counselling (61 percent), compared to 35 percent of other students with the lowest mental health scores. Mental health concerns are one of the biggest individual drivers of whether a student attends school regularly or not.³

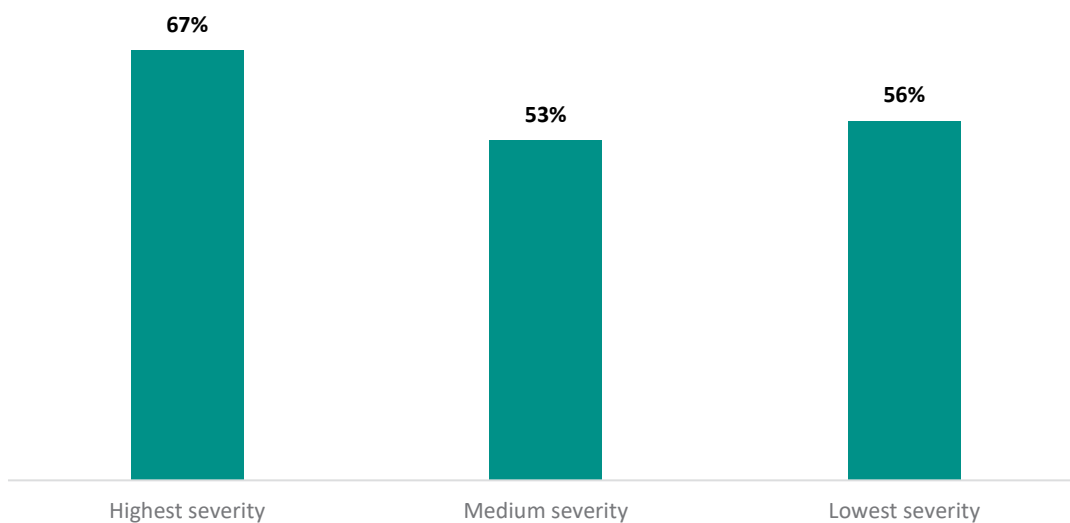
³ ERO (2022). Missing out: Why aren’t our children going to school? <https://www.evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/missing-out-why-aren-t-our-children-going-to-school>

Figure 6: *Percentage of students who showed improvements in attendance by mental health severity*



Students with the highest mental health needs are also more likely to see improvements in their learning. Two in three students (67 percent) with the highest mental health needs on the counselling pre-test saw improvements in learning progress from pre- to post-counselling, compared to 56 percent of students with the lowest mental health needs.

Figure 7: *Percentage of students who showed improvement in learning progress, by level of need*



Finding 8: Teachers report that Counselling in Schools improves overall classroom behaviour.

Classroom behaviour is a major problem in Aotearoa New Zealand.⁴ Students, teachers, and parents and whānau all report that Counselling in Schools leads to improvements in students' emotional regulation and behaviour. Three in four teachers (76 percent) also report improvements in wider classroom behaviour due to counselling.

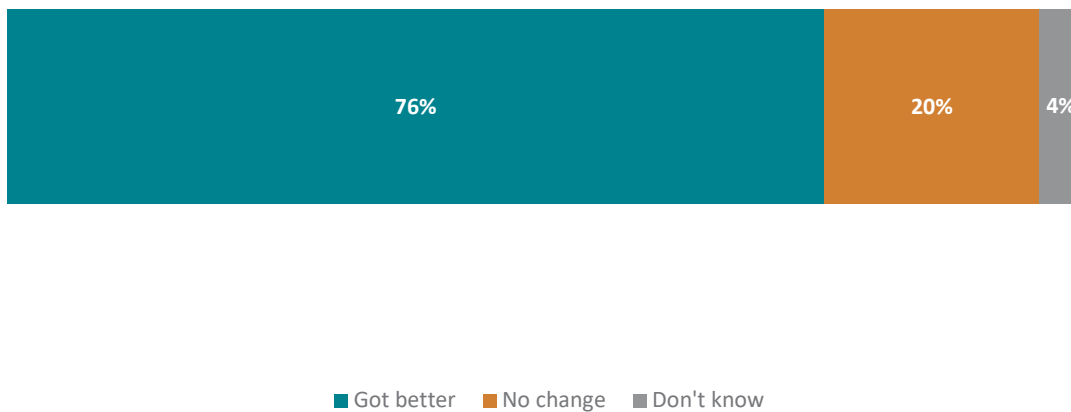
“The behaviours of the ākonga that have received counselling have changed for the better. In turn this has had a positive impact in the classroom, with kaiako focusing on learning rather than behaviours.”

TEACHER

“Students had some good strategies and knew what to do if they were starting to feel like they were getting out of that zone. Then they could just go straight away and do those strategies, and then they'd go back into to the learning, usually without me prompting.”

TEACHER

Figure 8: Teachers' report of behaviours of the wider class following counselling



Students told us they learn strategies to manage their emotions, such as ways to keep themselves calm, express their emotions effectively, and navigate relationships.

“I learned about friendships, speaking up if there were things I didn't like.”

STUDENT

4 ERO (2024). *Time to focus: Behaviour in our classrooms*. <https://evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/time-to-focus-behaviour-in-our-classrooms>

“I learnt different calming techniques and how to express my feelings.”

STUDENT

“We often work with the children that are going to make the biggest difference for the whole classroom in terms of disruption and the other kids’ learning.”

COUNSELLOR

Teachers also told us that the counsellors provide them with strategies and tools to use with students to improve their behaviour.

What have we learnt from the Counselling in Schools programme?

Our evaluation highlights some key lessons for programmes that support primary-aged students’ mental health.

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

The findings of our evaluation show a range of strongly positive outcomes from the Counselling in Schools programme. Students who receive support show significant gains in their psychological health, and this has a lasting, positive impact. Those students with high levels of distress show the most improvement – meaning that the programme is having success in its aim to impact those students who need it most. It’s also encouraging that we saw improvements in students’ attendance, behaviour, and learning progress. Taken together, our findings support investment in mental health support in schools for young students.

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

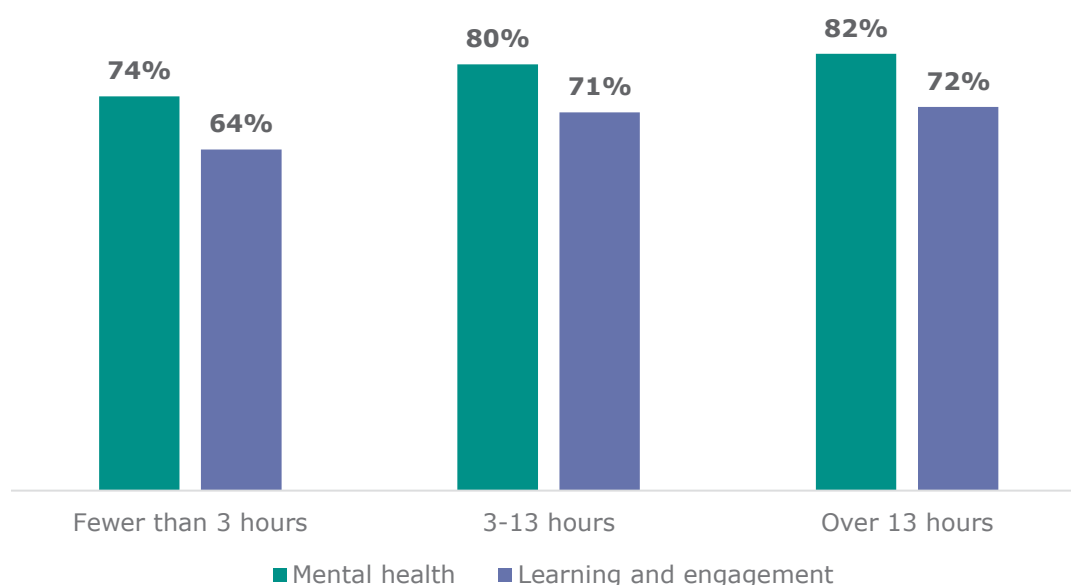
Students, teachers, and parents and whānau all report that having counsellors on-site means better access, particularly for those in remote areas, and improves the uptake of counselling.

“A part of the other battle is that we are so removed from [the city]. At times that travel is a massive barrier for our families. So, having somebody come to [our school] to work with our kids has been ideal.”

SCHOOL LEADER

It is also important to provide a significant amount of counselling. Students who receive at least three hours of counselling are more likely to show improved mental health, learning, and engagement outcomes.

Figure 9: Percentage of students who improve in mental health and learning and engagement, by number of hours in counselling



“[I’d like] to have more days that we can go to our counsellor or have no limit, because some people could just be starting to open up and then their time was up.”

STUDENT

Lesson 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.

Three in four (75 percent) students are referred to counselling by school staff. The next most common referral pathways are through parents and whānau (14 percent) and self-referrals (4 percent). We heard that teachers are more likely to pick up observable issues such as behaviour, leading to the high referral rates for behaviour (24 percent of all referrals), than less observable issues such as grief.

“Kids are quite good at masking, and teachers don’t always have that time to really have those conversations.”

SCHOOL LEADER

A range of ways that students can be referred for counselling is important to help ensure that less observable issues are picked up. This relies on strong relationships between the school and students or parents and whānau, so that they have the information they need to self-refer or refer their children.

Lesson 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.

Counselling in Schools is a promising programme. Positive impacts on mental health are equal to, or better than, other national and international school-based counselling programmes.

However, Counselling in Schools is currently delivered in different ways. ERO recommends there to be more development of the programme specifications to understand both value for money and what elements are key to success, and therefore essential in order to replicate its success in a larger variety of schools.

What next?

To find out more about the evaluation of the Counselling in Schools programme in Aotearoa New Zealand, check out our main evaluation report and technical report. These can be downloaded for free from ERO’s Evidence and Insights website, www.evidence.ero.govt.nz

What ERO did

Data collected for the three phases of this evaluation, over three years, includes:

- surveys of:
 - 458 students
 - 179 teachers and school leaders
 - 128 counsellors and managers
 - 139 parents and whānau
- interviews and focus groups with:
 - students
 - teachers and school leaders
 - counsellors and provider managers
 - parents and whānau
- site visits and online sessions with 17 schools
- administrative data of 5901 students with mental health needs and relevant learning and outcome measures.

We appreciate the work of all those who supported this research, particularly the students, parents and whānau, counsellors, managers, teachers, school leaders, and experts who shared with us. Their experiences and insights are at the heart of what we have learnt.



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