

## **New Curriculum Fails Students and the Nation on Languages**

The Crown's decision to make Te Reo Māori optional in the refreshed curriculum is a clear breach of its obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi to protect Māori rights and safeguard taonga - including language. Over 90% of Māori learners are in English medium schools, which means making Te Reo Māori optional will directly affect the vast majority of Māori students. This move undermines true equity and signals a retreat from our obligations to all official languages — including New Zealand Sign Language, which has also been pushed aside. Our official and indigenous languages deserve commitment and protection, not abandonment.

The New Zealand Association of Language Teachers (NZALT) says the Government's new draft national curriculum "fails to deliver on its own claims" and "marks a new low" for the place of languages in education.

Despite Education Minister Erica Stanford's assertion that the curriculum has been "benchmarked internationally against high-performing systems" and represents "a world-leading education system for every learner", NZALT says this could not be further from the truth.

"There are no high-performing education systems that treat language learning as entirely optional," said an NZALT spokesperson. "Highly regarded jurisdictions like Finland, Singapore, South Korea, and British Columbia all require early, sustained language study. New Zealand's draft curriculum does the opposite."

### **Languages Marginalised**

The new curriculum only encourages schools to include languages. There is no requirement for principals or boards to ensure students gain the cognitive, social, and academic benefits of language learning.

Even more concerning, Te Reo Māori and New Zealand Sign Language—Aotearoa New Zealand's two official and indigenous languages—have been relegated to a column labelled "optional". Schools may omit them entirely or replace them with any "additional activities" they choose.

"Calling this a celebration of who we are as a nation rings hollow," the NZALT spokesperson said. "This policy denies all tamariki, in particular Māori and Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing students the entitlement to learn the very languages that connect them to identity and culture unique to New Zealand."

### **Ignores the Science of Learning**

Research in cognitive science, linguistics, and psychology consistently shows that short, frequent lessons repeated over time are essential for language retention. The

draft's recommended 30 minutes per week at primary and 90 minutes per week at Years 9–10 contradicts this evidence.

Instead, it effectively endorses “language rotations” — short-term, low-impact exposure with little chance of long-term proficiency.

### **Inequitable and Unambitious**

Reducing time to 1.5 hours per week at junior secondary or 30 minutes per week at primary risks widening inequities. Students in large, already well-resourced schools may continue to study languages, while others in less-privileged positions may be offered none. This curriculum does nothing to ensure equality of access to all.

In contrast, Australia's curriculum and reporting authority (ACARA) allocates up to 830 hours of language study by Year 10. New Zealand's draft recommends only about 280 hours, less than one-third.

### **Languages Boost Literacy and Achievement**

“Languages are not optional extras,” NZALT said. “They are integral to literacy, communication, and cultural competence.”

Far from detracting from “the basics,” language learning strengthens them. Extensive research confirms that learning another language enhances literacy, metalinguistic awareness, memory, and problem-solving — all central to academic achievement across subjects.

### **Requirements**

1. A universal entitlement and meaningful access to learning Te Reo Māori and NZSL in Years 0-10
2. A requirement to learn an additional language in Years 9-10.
3. Increased time spent on language learning including the frequency of lessons grounded in the science of learning.

The 14 language teaching associations and communities of Aotearoa assert that language learning is not a luxury. It is a necessity for a fair, internationally benchmarked, and world-leading education system in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Issued by: NZALT (Learning Languages), TRMSAA (Te Reo Māori), STANZA (Spanish), Teachers of Gagana Tokelau, NZAFT (French), NZAJLT (Japanese), GANZ (German), Tolutoluhama (Lea Faka-Tonga Teacher's Inc), Teachers of NZSL (New Zealand Sign Language), Teachers of Te Reo Maori Kuki 'Airani, TOA MATALA Niue Secondary Teachers, NZCLTA (Chinese), NZKLTA (Korean), Fotu o mālama and Fagasa (Gagana Samoa)

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