

Building the Future: Early Childhood Education

Set up for Success

National wants to ensure children are **Set Up for Success** when they start school through consistent, high-quality experiences in Early Childhood Education.

The early years of a child's life lay the foundations for everything that follows. Early Childhood Education should help every child develop the language, social, physical and early learning foundations they need to thrive when they start school.

Today, we do not have a clear shared picture of what being "school ready" looks like in New Zealand.

Teachers tell us children are arriving at school with a wide range of skills and levels of readiness. That can include differences in oral language, listening and following instructions, holding and controlling a pencil, recognising their own name, interacting with other children and managing age-appropriate self-care.

There are some important foundations that help children make a strong start at school. National wants to make those expectations much clearer, give parents better information about how their child is progressing, and make sure extra support is put in place early where it is needed.

Set Up for Success will establish clearer developmental milestones throughout ECE, drawn directly from **Te Whāriki**, the New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum, so parents and teachers have a shared understanding of what children should be developing and when.

Parents will receive clearer and more regular information about how their child is progressing against those milestones, making it easier for families and ECEs to work together and for additional support to be provided early where a child needs it.

Before children transition to primary school, a new **School Start Check** will bring that information together and provide a clear picture of the foundations a child has developed and where they may need further support.

National also wants children spending significantly less time learning through screens.

Screens and individual devices have become increasingly common in children's lives and in education. For our youngest children, we want greater emphasis on books, handwriting, conversation, hands-on activities and direct interaction with teachers and other children.

We have already seen through the cellphone ban in schools what clear limits around technology can achieve by reducing unnecessary distraction and allowing students to focus more closely on their learning.

We will now take that approach further.

National will end screen and individual-device use in ECE and place tight limits around their use in primary schools.

Technology still has a place in education, but it should enhance learning, not become the default way children learn.

We will also place a renewed emphasis on handwriting. Writing by hand is an important part of learning to read and write, and the writing components of twice-yearly primary school assessments will be completed on paper.

Every child should arrive at school as ready as possible to learn, participate and make a strong start to their primary school journey.

A re-elected National Government will:

End screen use in ECE and tightly limit it in primary schools

- **End screen and individual-device use in ECE.**
- **Tightly limit screen and individual-device use in Years 1 to 3**, with age-appropriate limits for older primary students.
- Ensure technology is used where it enhances learning rather than becoming the default way children learn.
- **Prioritise handwriting**, including requiring the writing component of twice-yearly primary school assessments to be completed on paper.

Require ECEs to report on children's progress against developmental milestones

- Introduce clear and measurable developmental milestones throughout ECE, drawn directly from **Te Whāriki**.
- Give parents clearer and more regular information about how their child is progressing against those milestones.
- Ensure families and ECEs can work together and, where a child needs extra help, support can be put in place early.
- Continue the rollout of the strengthened **Early Intervention Service** to provide targeted support where children have additional needs.

The milestones will cover areas such as oral language and communication, listening and following instructions, fine motor skills, early literacy and numeracy, social development and age-appropriate independence.

Introduce a School Start Check

National will introduce a **School Start Check for every child before they transition to primary school**.

There are some important foundations that help children make a strong start at school. These include being able to communicate, listen and follow instructions, hold and control a pencil, interact with other children, recognise their own name and manage age-appropriate self-care.

The School Start Check will:

- set clear expectations about the foundations children should be developing before they start school
- draw those expectations directly from **Te Whāriki**
- bring together information about how the child has progressed throughout ECE
- give parents and schools a clear picture of how ready the child is to start school
- identify where a child may need additional support so it can be provided early.

The School Start Check will **not be a pass-or-fail test and will not prevent a child from starting school**.

The aim is simple: to give every child the strongest possible foundations for learning before they walk through the school gate.

Fiscal impacts

A significant part of the support infrastructure is already funded through the \$266 million Early Intervention Service expansion. The screen rules themselves are primarily regulatory, and the milestone reporting and School Start Check will be designed to build on information ECEs already collect.

Set Up for Success

The evidence behind the policy

Children develop quickly in their first five years. When a child needs help with language, behaviour or other foundations, it is better to identify that need early than wait until they arrive at school.

Set Up for Success will introduce clearer milestones throughout ECE, regular progress information for parents, earlier support and a School Start Check. It will also remove screen use from ECE and place tight, age-appropriate limits on screen use in primary schools, with exemptions for disability and specific learning needs.

What ERO found

ERO reported that a large New Zealand study found 20 per cent of five-year-olds struggling with oral language. Only one-third of new entrant teachers surveyed by ERO said most children began school at the expected oral-language level. Fifty-three per cent of parents said their ECE service had not provided information about their child's oral-language progress. [1]

ERO recommended: [1]

- clear and consistent oral-language progress indicators across Te Whāriki and the school curriculum
- better tools for ECE teachers to track progress and identify difficulties
- an oral-language assessment when children start school so support can be tailored
- regular progress updates for parents and whānau, with targeted support where it is needed

These recommendations are central to Set Up for Success. Parents will get clearer information, teachers will be better able to identify concerns, and children who need extra help can receive it earlier.

What being ready for school means

ERO's work on the transition to school found that teachers and ECE staff saw readiness as broader than early reading and maths. They pointed to oral language and listening, following instructions, holding a pencil, managing classroom routines, self-regulation and age-appropriate independence with lunch, bags and toileting. [2]

The School Start Check will bring this information together before a child moves into primary school. It will not be a pass or fail test. Its purpose is to show parents and schools where a child is doing well and where further support may be needed.

Building on Te Whāriki and Kōwhiri Whakapae

The Ministry of Education's Kōwhiri Whakapae resource already covers social and emotional learning, oral language and literacy, and maths. It describes progress through four overlapping phases linked to Te Whāriki, but those phases are deliberately not age-based. [3]

The policy will build on Te Whāriki and Kōwhiri Whakapae. Education and child-development experts will help turn the key foundations into clear, age-appropriate milestones that can be reported consistently to parents.

Why reduce screen use

Two GUSTO studies followed children over time. One linked screen exposure at 12 months with differences in brain activity at 18 months and poorer attention and executive function at age nine. A later study linked higher screen use in early childhood with poorer academic performance and working memory. The studies involved 437 and 502 children respectively. [4][5]

Both studies mainly measured viewing at home and cannot prove that screens caused the outcomes. They add to the case for caution about prolonged screen use among very young children.

What the wider research shows

A 2024 review covered 100 studies and 176,742 children under six. Programme viewing and background television were associated with poorer cognitive outcomes, while adult co-use was associated with better outcomes. [6]

An analysis of 42 studies and 18,905 children linked greater screen use with lower language skills. Educational content and watching with a caregiver were associated with better skills. The amount, content and context of screen use all matter. [7]

The World Health Organization recommends no sedentary screen time for infants and one-year-olds, and no more than one hour a day for ages two to four. These are whole-day health guidelines, not classroom rules. [8]

Screen use at school

PISA 2025 found that New Zealand 15-year-olds used devices at school for learning for 2.5 hours a day, compared with an OECD average of 1.7 hours. Thirty-eight per cent reported distraction by other students' devices in most or every science lesson, compared with 28 per cent across the OECD. [9]

Across OECD countries, students reporting distraction tended to perform worse, although the difference within New Zealand was not statistically significant. Moderate device use for learning was associated with better results than either no use or very high use. This supports clear limits and purposeful use. [9]

Why handwriting matters

Writing by hand helps build the brain pathways children use to recognise letters and learn to read. Research found these pathways became active after children wrote letters by hand, but not when they typed or traced them. [10][12]

Handwriting can also improve memory and understanding. A review of 24 studies found students who took and reviewed handwritten notes did better in later assessments than those who typed. Writing by hand may help because students must process the main points rather than simply copy them. Research with school-age children also found they wrote faster and produced longer pieces by pen than by keyboard. [11][13][14]

Governments overseas are also acting

New South Wales will introduce no individual device use in public preschools and daily limits of 15 to 45 minutes in primary school. Victoria will require minimal use in Foundation to Year 2 and a 90-minute daily cap in Years 3 to 6 from 2027. [15][16]

What Set Up for Success will do

- Introduce age-appropriate ECE milestones drawn from Te Whāriki and Kowhiri Whakapae
- Give parents regular, plain-language progress information against a progression framework.
- Identify needs earlier and connect children with support.
- Introduce a School Start Check before primary school.
- Remove screens from ECE and introduce tight limits in lower primary schools with age appropriate limits for upper primary.
- Add a paper-based writing component to twice-yearly primary progress checks.

Sources and links

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2. [Education Review Office Starting School Together What Do We Know.](#) Published in 2022
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4. [Law and others Associations Between Infant Screen Use EEG Markers and Cognitive Outcomes.](#) GUSTO cohort study published in 2023
5. [Yang and others Screen Viewing Time and Subsequent Academic Performance and Working Memory.](#) GUSTO cohort study published in 2026
6. [Mallawaarachchi and others Early Childhood Screen Use Contexts and Cognitive and Psychosocial Outcomes.](#) Systematic review published in 2024
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13. [Jared Cooney Horvath Written Testimony to the United States Senate Committee on Commerce Science and Transportation.](#) Submitted in 2026
14. [Flanigan and others Typed Versus Handwritten Lecture Notes and College Student Achievement.](#) Meta-analysis published in 2024
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16. [Victoria Department of Education Digital Learning Policy](#)