



Building the Future:

Education Manifesto 2026



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Our vision

Every child deserves an education that opens doors. The knowledge to understand the world, the skills to contribute to it, and the confidence to build a successful future.

National's vision is a world-leading education system that raises achievement and gives every young New Zealander the opportunity to succeed.

A child's background, postcode, or learning needs should never set the limit on what they can achieve.

We believe in high expectations for every child, excellent teaching in every classroom, and additional support when needed.

A great education is the foundation of opportunity for individuals and of stronger economic growth and prosperity for New Zealand.

That starts in the early years, with children developing the language, skills and confidence they need for school.

It continues through a clear, knowledge-rich curriculum, effective teaching, regular assessment, and warm, dry classrooms.

It means parents knowing how their child is progressing, teachers having the training and resources to teach well, and young people leaving school with credible qualifications and pathways into further study, training and employment.

Over the past three years, National has begun a transformation of education. We have restored a focus on the basics and backed teachers with the tools to deliver them.

Encouraging results are beginning to emerge. Our next term will build on that foundation: helping children arrive at school Set Up for Success and giving them More Time Learning once they get there.



1. Reforms to date

When National came into Government, too many children were missing school or reaching secondary school without strong foundations in reading, writing and mathematics. The curriculum lacked clarity, assessment was inconsistent, and teachers were too often left without the resources and specialist support they needed.

The warning signs had been clear for years. New Zealand’s PISA mathematics score fell from

523 in 2003 to 479 in 2022 equating to a loss of two years of learning for our 15-year-olds in 2022 compared to 15-year-olds in 2003.

Our response has been to put ambition, achievement and evidence at the centre of the education system, with a target of 80 per cent of Year 8 students at or above the expected level in reading, writing and mathematics by 2030.

Teaching the Basics Brilliantly

Our focus	What we have delivered or funded
Strong foundations	An hour a day of reading, writing and mathematics; structured literacy and a new mathematics curriculum.
Practical classroom resources	More than one million mathematics books and resources, alongside decodable readers, teacher guides and curriculum support.
Clear information for parents	20- and 40-week phonics checks and twice-yearly assessment in reading, writing and mathematics for Years 3–8.
Support where it is needed	Nearly \$750 million for the largest expansion of learning support in a generation, alongside targeted literacy and mathematics intervention.
Better places to learn	Around \$2.7 billion across three Budgets for school property, with nearly 1,600 additional classrooms and learning spaces fully funded.
Focused classrooms	Phones away during the school day, and end to open plan classrooms and a renewed focus on attendance and learning.





A clear, knowledge-rich national curriculum

National has rebuilt the curriculum around the knowledge and skills children should learn, year by year. Internationally benchmarked content and clear progressions give teachers, parents and students greater certainty about what success looks like.

New primary English and mathematics content was introduced from the beginning of 2025. We have developed the wider Years 0–13 curriculum and are supporting implementation with practical teaching materials.

Maths workbooks, textbooks and teacher guides, literacy resources, science and music kits, and lesson-planning support help teachers spend more time teaching.

A nationally consistent curriculum gives every child access to a world-leading education, wherever they live and whichever school they attend.

Transforming reading, writing and mathematics

We have required an hour a day each of reading, writing and mathematics in primary and intermediate schools and mandated structured literacy, including phonics.

Children are explicitly taught the building blocks of reading, alongside vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, spelling, and writing.

We have invested in teacher training, decodable books, and classroom resources to make these changes work. Structured mathematics gives children a clear sequence of learning and the practice they need to master essential skills.

For children who need additional help, we have expanded structured literacy intervention and mathematics support. Intensive small-group teaching in reading and maths, together with writing and mathematics acceleration programmes give students the opportunity to catch up before gaps become entrenched.

Knowing how every child is progressing

Parents deserve clear information about their child's learning. Teachers need to identify gaps early and know what to teach next. National has made regular assessment and clear reporting a core part of the education system.

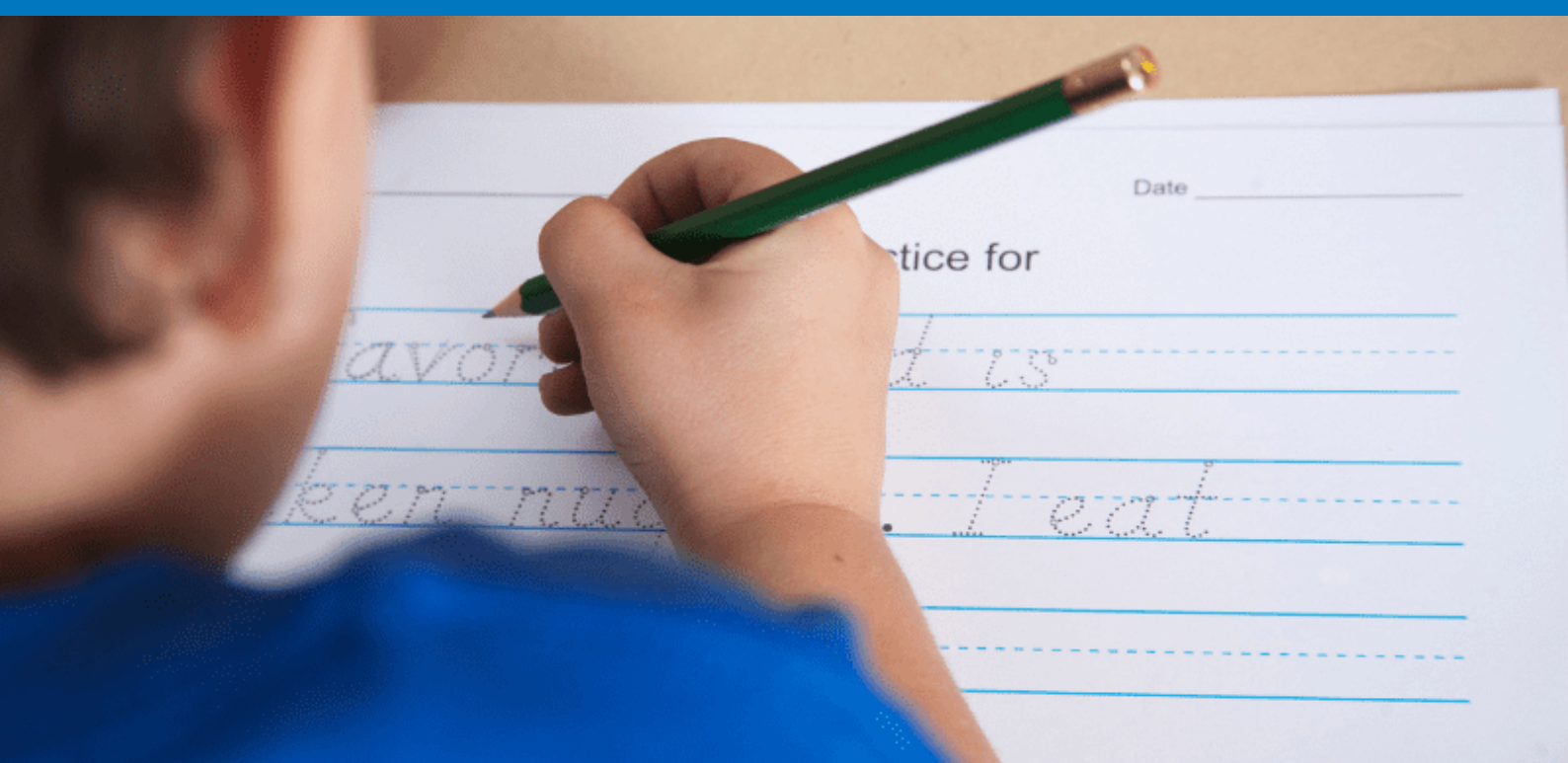
- Phonics checks at 20 and 40 weeks of schooling to identify children who need additional reading support.
- Twice-yearly assessment in reading, writing, and mathematics for Years 3–8 provides a consistent picture of progress.
- The free SMART assessment tool supports teachers with marking and reporting, alongside the option of using PAT.
- Early mathematics checks, including the Year 2 numeracy check and Year 5 multiplication and division check, strengthen our focus on essential skills.
- The Parent Portal gives families practical guidance and resources to support learning at home.

The Curriculum Insights and Progress Study now measures reading, writing and mathematics annually at Years 3, 6 and 8. This gives New Zealand a clearer national picture and helps direct support to the students that need it most.

Backing teachers and school leaders

National has refocused professional development on literacy, mathematics and assessment, strengthened expectations for initial teacher education, and invested in support for aspiring and new principals.

We have expanded opportunities to train in schools so more New Zealanders can learn on the job. From 2027, the School On-site Teacher Training programme will offer up to 660 places, rising to 704 each year from 2028, with a focus on secondary teaching where the need is greatest. Participants will receive a \$20,000 grant from next year.



We are also helping with the cost of teacher registration and practicing certificates through to 2028. Stronger subject knowledge, an understanding of the science of learning and practical classroom preparation will help ensure beginning teachers are ready to succeed.

The largest expansion of learning support in a generation

National has invested nearly three-quarters of a billion dollars in learning support. High expectations must be matched by the help children need to meet them.

- Learning Support Coordinators for all schools with Year 1–8 students from 2028.
- More than 560 additional early-intervention teachers and specialists, and learning support extended from ECE through to the end of Year 1.
- Guaranteed, uncapped funding for every child verified for the Ongoing Resourcing Scheme.
- 1000 specialist places at any one time provided by the private sector to ease pressure on waitlists.
- Additional teacher-aide hours and training to support children with behavioural, emotional and neurodiverse needs – building to two million extra hours every year from 2028.
- Funding for three new special schools and 142 specialist classrooms, alongside accessibility improvements.

This expansion will help identify needs sooner, support families earlier and give teachers greater access to specialist expertise.

Warm, dry classrooms and better value for school property

Doing the basics brilliantly also means providing safe, warm, and dry classrooms. National inherited 352 school property projects without the funding to deliver them and classrooms costing around \$1.2 million each. We commissioned an inquiry and changed how school property is planned, funded, and delivered.

Across three Budgets, this Government has invested around \$2.7 billion in school property. Nearly 1,600 additional classrooms and learning spaces have been fully funded, providing more than 23,000 additional student places. In 2024, 583 classrooms were delivered, 31 per cent more than in 2023.

Repeatable designs and offsite construction have brought the cost of most classrooms below \$650,000, close to half the inherited cost. More than \$330 million saved through this approach has been reinvested in school property.

Maintenance funding has increased by \$880 million over our first two Budgets, more than twice the previous 6 years combined. We have raised the base rate for five-year property funding by 50 per cent, from \$30 to \$45 per square metre, and doubled the minimum allocation for small schools from \$45,000 to \$90,000 as schools enter their new funding cycles.

The New Zealand School Property Agency began operating on 1 October 2026. Its dedicated board brings commercial and construction expertise to building, managing and maintaining school property, supporting a long-term approach that gives school communities greater certainty and drives better value for money.

Credible qualifications and pathways for young people

National is replacing NCEA with qualifications that parents, employers and tertiary providers can trust. A clear senior secondary curriculum and stronger subject-based assessment will give students the knowledge and skills they need for their next step.

The new Foundational Award in literacy and numeracy will be introduced at Year 11 in 2028, followed by the New Zealand Certificate of Education at Year 12 in 2029 and the New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education at Year 13 in 2030.

Nine new industry-led subjects will strengthen vocational pathways and connect school learning with the world of work. We are also expanding Trades Academies, with places set to nearly double to 20,000 by 2030. Young people should have rigorous, credible options that match their strengths and aspirations.

Results: raising achievement

There is still a very long way to go, but the evidence is beginning to show an encouraging change in direction. Teachers and school leaders are putting the reforms into practice, and children are starting to benefit.

Curriculum Insights: improvements in primary mathematics and writing

The 2025 Curriculum Insights and Progress Study found statistically significant improvements at Year 6. The proportion meeting or exceeding expectations rose from 30 to 36 per cent in mathematics and from 33 to 38 per cent in writing: gains of six and five percentage

points respectively. Reading results were broadly stable but early phonics results in year one and two were encouraging. These findings show both the progress being made and why our work must continue.

Phonics: stronger foundations from the start

In the first year of national phonics checks, the proportion of children at or above expectations after 20 weeks at school rose from 36 per cent in Term 1 to 58 per cent in Term 3 of 2025.

These checks help teachers identify children who need support early and show encouraging progress in the foundations of reading.

PISA: a narrowing equity gap

PISA 2025 shows New Zealand remains above the OECD average in reading, mathematics and science, with overall achievement stabilising after years of decline.

Most encouragingly, the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students narrowed in all three subjects, driven by gains among students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

Those students made gains equivalent to around a year of learning in science, three terms in mathematics and six months in reading.

These are the first positive results across the education system we have seen in a very long time. While they are only early indicators, we cannot risk losing this progress. The reforms need time to embed, and teachers need continued support to deliver them.

National will stay the course, build on what is working and keep raising achievement for every child.





2. Our 2026 policy: Set Up for Success

Every parent wants their child to start school ready to learn, ready to participate and confident about the next step. The early years lay the foundations for everything that follows. National's Set Up for Success policy will give parents and educators a clearer, shared picture of the knowledge, skills and developmental milestones children should be building before school.

Clearer expectations will make it easier to recognise when a child needs additional help, provide that support earlier and strengthen the transition from early childhood education to school.

A School Start Check for every child

National will introduce a School Start Check, completed in early childhood education before a child starts school, or on school entry for children who have not had one. It will help parents, early childhood educators, and schools understand each child's strengths and where additional support is needed.

The check will cover foundations such as oral language, following instructions, recognising their name, pencil grip and early letter formation, interacting with others and taking turns, and growing independence in self-care, including toileting. Children with additional needs will be supported according to their circumstances.

Clearer milestones and earlier support

National will establish clearer developmental milestones throughout early childhood education and require progress to be reported to parents. Families should know what their child is learning, how they are progressing, and how they can help at home.

Where additional support is needed, children will be connected with the expanded Early Intervention Service. Earlier identification and a stronger handover to school will help more children get the right support at the right time.

More interaction, fewer screens

Technology has a place, but young children need rich language, conversation, books, movement, and direct interaction with adults and other children to build strong foundations for learning.

A re-elected National government will introduce:

- No screens or individual devices use in early childhood education.
- Tight limits on screen and individual-device use in Years 1–3, with age-appropriate limits for older primary students.
- Make the writing component of twice-yearly primary assessments completed on paper.

Set Up for Success will give parents greater clarity, educators shared expectations and children a stronger start to their school journey.

3. Our 2026 policy: More Time Learning

National will give more young people time to build the knowledge and skills they need for a successful future, and make the school calendar more consistent for families.

Lifting school leaving requirements

National will require students to stay at school until they complete Year 11 or turn 16, whichever is later.

Currently, students can leave school when they turn 16. Many reach that birthday during Year 11, allowing them to leave before completing Year 11.

For these students, this will mean staying until the end of Year 11. Those who turn 16 in Year 12 will still need to stay until they turn 16.

We are replacing NCEA, beginning in 2028, with new qualifications backed by a clear senior secondary curriculum and stronger subject-based assessment.

Our expectation is clear. Students should complete a full Year 11 of compulsory science, English and maths, and have the opportunity to gain the new Foundational Award in literacy and numeracy.

The existing early leaving exemption will remain for a very small number of students each year.

Strong literacy and numeracy skills support employment and further learning. Completing Year 11 gives students the opportunity to build those skills and gain the Foundational Award.

Consistent school dates and more time learning

National will set consistent school start and finish dates. Parents have told us how frustrating different dates can be, leaving families juggling childcare and taking extra leave from work.

Building on our progress

Set Up for Success will help children arrive at school ready to learn. More Time Learning will build on that start, raising achievement, closing the equity gap and giving every young person the opportunity to succeed at school and go on to live the life they want.

