

Education in New Zealand

All children aged 6 to 16 years in New Zealand must either attend school or be educated at home. Most children start school when they turn 5.

All children must be enrolled with a school or in home education by their sixth birthday. Once your child starts school they must go to school every day unless they have permission not to, for example because they are unwell. By law, they cannot leave school until after their 16th birthday.

School structure

There are 13 'Years' in the New Zealand school structure. The 'Year' denotes how long a child has been at school. Schooling is divided into 3 stages – Primary, Intermediate and Secondary.

Primary and intermediate school

Schooling begins at primary school. Children can attend either a contributing primary school or a full primary school. Contributing primary schools are more common than full primary schools.

- Contributing primary schools go from Year 1 to Year 6.
- Full primary schools go from Year 1 to Year 8.

If your child attends a contributing primary school, you will need to enroll them with an intermediate school to complete Years 7 and 8.

Secondary school

After your child finishes primary or intermediate school, you must enroll them with a secondary school to complete their final school years. Secondary schools go from Year 9 to Year 13.

Secondary schools are often called college or high school.

Enrolling your child in school

To enroll your child with a school, contact the school to find out their enrolment process and get their enrolment forms.

Your child can enroll as a 'domestic' student if they are either a:

- New Zealand resident or permanent resident
- New Zealand citizen (includes Tokelauans, Cook Islanders and Niueans)
- student visa holder based on your temporary work visa.

You may need to provide the school with evidence of your child's visa status.

Students who are not eligible to enroll as domestic students may be able to enroll as international students. If your child is not covered by the above list, check to see if they need a visa.

New entrants

Children starting primary school for the first time at 5 or 6 years old are called 'new entrants'.

Some schools let new entrants start school at any time during the school year, usually on their fifth birthday.

Other schools use a system called 'Cohort entry', meaning children start school in groups at the beginning of each school term. Which term they start in depends on when their birthday is in relation to the middle of the term. You will need to find out which system your child's school uses.

Whether or not the school uses cohort entry, you still have the option of waiting until their sixth birthday to start your child in school.

New entrants are referred to as either Year 1 or Year 0. Generally:

- children who start the first half of the calendar year are referred to as Year 1
- children who start in the second half of the calendar year are referred to as Year 0.

Children with previous schooling

If your child is starting school as a newcomer to New Zealand, and they have already had some schooling, you can enrol your child in school at any time of the year.

They will automatically be placed in the same school year as other children of the same age. For example, if they are 10 years old, they will probably be placed in Year 5 or 6 with other 10-year-olds.

If they are secondary school age, they will be placed in the Year that allows them time to complete their National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) qualifications. Your child will usually be assessed during their last three years at school (Years 11–13). They can achieve NCEA at three levels in a wide range of courses and subjects.

Because each situation is different, it is best to contact the school before you enroll your child to talk about which Year would best meet their needs.

What New Zealand schools are like

School sizes in New Zealand can vary. Most schools have between 100 and 2000 students.

New Zealand school students enjoy focused, personal attention from teachers. Learning involves a balance of practical and theoretical learning. Teachers encourage students to think creatively, independently and analytically.



New Zealand schools are well equipped with computers, the Internet and other technology. They also have a lot of room for outdoor play and sport. Schools usually have their own playing fields and sometimes a swimming pool. They also have cultural activities.

Teachers support many different activities out of school hours, for example coaching sports teams, leading drama clubs and school music groups.

School students also get opportunities for educational trips that allow them to explore and learn about New Zealand's natural surroundings. They get the opportunity to challenge themselves with outdoor activities they might otherwise never experience.

Discipline in schools

Your child will be made to feel comfortable and safe at school in New Zealand. It is illegal in New Zealand for anyone to use physical force to discipline a child.

A parent may only use limited force to prevent a child from harm. A teacher may not use force in any situation, so physical discipline of children, like smacking, caning and strapping is not allowed. School punishments usually involve extra homework or staying late after school to do tasks while supervised by a teacher.

One of the regional Community Law services has a publication about the rights of children and ways that schools are allowed to discipline children.

Types of schools and costs

There are 3 types of schools in New Zealand.

- State schools are owned and funded by the government.
- State integrated schools are government funded but may also charge compulsory fees.
- Private schools charge set fees for a term or year.

State schools

Most children attend state schools (also known as 'public schools').

State schools are funded by the government and the education is free for domestic students up to 19 years of age. However, parents usually need to pay for things like school uniforms, stationery, exam fees and some course-related costs.

You may also be asked to pay for some learning experiences outside the classroom, like school trips or sports events and other activities that are not part of the school curriculum.

- If the event is part of the core education curriculum your child has a right to take part even if you do not pay the additional cost.
- If it is not part of the core curriculum your child can be excluded if you do not pay the cost.

State integrated schools

Just over 10% of students are enrolled in State integrated schools.

State integrated schools are schools with a 'special character'. This means they may be run by a particular religious faith, eg Catholic, or use specialist education methods, like Steiner and Montessori schools.

Education in state integrated schools is also funded by the government, but they usually charge compulsory fees — also known as 'attendance dues' — to help maintain their facilities. The amount is typically around NZ\$1,500 a year.

Private schools

Just under 5% of children attend private schools.

Some private schools take both boys and girls (known as co-educational or 'co-ed' schools). Others are single sex schools for either boys or girls. Some private schools have boarding facilities so students can live there during the term.

Private schools are not government funded — they charge set fees by the school term or year. The amount is typically around NZ\$20,000 a year. You may be able to get financial assistance to pay the fees.

Home schooling

Home education, or 'home schooling', is an option in New Zealand.

Parents and caregivers who want to educate their child at home need to first get approval from their local Ministry of Education office.

School hours, terms and holidays

The school day usually starts at 9am and ends at 3 or 3:30pm.

The school year starts in January. There are 4 terms in a year, with 2-week breaks between them and a 6-week summer break at the end of the year.

- Term 1: late January to early April — then a 2-week break
- Term 2: May to early July — then a 2-week break
- Term 3: late July to late September — then a 2-week break
- Term 4: mid-October to mid-December — then a 6-week summer break.

School zones



Check out 'zoning' rules and whether it will affect the choice of schools for your children.

Most schools in New Zealand are grouped into areas known as 'zones'. Children are usually expected to attend a school in the zone where they live.

If you live in an area close to a school (the school's zone), your child is guaranteed to get a place at that school. If you want your child to go to a school outside the area where you live, you may have to apply, but a place isn't guaranteed.

Higher education and training

When your child gets to senior secondary school (Years 11 to 13), you will be thinking about what they want to do after they leave school and what their education and career options are.

Youth Guarantee courses provide students aged 16–19 with an opportunity to study towards NCEA Level 1–3 or Level 1–3 certificates at tertiary providers free of charge. These courses are usually vocationally focused.

Higher education in New Zealand is not limited to universities and institutes of technology or polytechnics. We have a wide range of other options, including:

- vocational training — training for a particular trade, type of job or profession
- apprenticeships — a formal arrangement to learn from an expert while working
- 'on-the-job' training — learning as you work.

Mark these sentences as T (True) or F (False).

- ☐ 1. Most children start school at the age of six.
- ☐ 2. Attendance is strict.
- ☐ 3. Intermediate schools are meant to level up students who attended a contributing primary school.
- ☐ 4. Compulsory education finishes at the end of secondary school.
- ☐ 5. Enrollment processes are uniform throughout the country.
- ☐ 6. Any student can join a school at any time of the year.
- ☐ 7. Foreign students have to take an admission exam.
- ☐ 8. Schools have sports facilities.
- ☐ 9. There are no after school activities.
- ☐ 10. Physical punishment is not allowed.
- ☐ 11. Schools charge fees.
- ☐ 12. There are no religious schools.
- ☐ 13. Home schooling must be authorised.
- ☐ 14. The school day is six or six and a half hours long.
- ☐ 15. School breaks last three months in all.

Answer these questions.

- 1. How is the school system divided?
- 2. What is the difference between a contributing primary school and a full primary school?
- 3. What are secondary schools often called?
- 4. Who are "domestic" students?
- 5. Who are "new entrants"?
- 6. What is "Coho entry"?
- 7. What does National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) consist of?
- 8. What does school punishment consist of?
- 9. Which schools charge fees?
- 10. Up to what age is education free for domestic students?
- 11. What kind of expenses must parents provide for?
- 12. What are "co-ed" schools?
- 13. How is the school year divided?
- 14. When are the school breaks?
- 15. What higher education options are there?