

20 May 2024

Hon Erica Stanford
Minister of Education

Cc: Hon David Seymour, Associate Minister of Education
Rt Hon Christopher Luxon, Prime Minister
Rt Hon Winston Peters, Deputy Prime Minister
Hon Matt Doocey, Minister for Mental Health and Minister for Youth

Tēnā koe Minister

Open letter signed by 4,280 opposing the removal and replacement of current relationships and sexuality education guidelines in schools and kura

All children and young people deserve to feel safe and included at school and kura, regardless of their gender, sexuality or background. They deserve to be taught how to develop healthy relationships, positive identities and skills to keep each other well, so that school is a place they feel safe returning to each day – and a place where learning is their number one priority.

The Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand and the undersigned are deeply concerned by your Government's commitment to remove and replace the relationships and sexuality education (RSE) guidelines for teachers, school leaders and boards of trustees.

Replacing the current resources:

- disempowers schools, and threatens to derail efforts to create safer and more inclusive school environments, especially for rainbow and takatāpui taura (students)
- tells rainbow staff and taura that they don't deserve to be safe at school or work
- means many taura will miss out on quality, vetted RSE, confining this education "in the home" or to informal sources like peers and the internet
- empowers bullies, and makes it easier for bullying, discrimination and social exclusion to thrive in our schools and communities.

These negative impacts on taura put their mental wellbeing, and futures, at great risk.

We are calling on you to retain the current RSE guidelines, to ensure our schools and kura have the best tools and guidance to keep our tamariki and rangatahi safe, included and informed.

Good-quality RSE can help young people become responsible, healthy and productive citizens;¹ reduce their chances of experiencing violence;² empower them to make healthier choices in their interpersonal lives;^{3,4} and improve their academic performance.^{5,6} It can facilitate positive identity development and feelings of belonging, which are fundamental to wellbeing, mental health and personal achievement.⁷ RSE resources can also support schools to create more effective anti-bullying strategies, by adding measures to deal with bullying related to sexual orientation and gender – and students in schools with effective anti-bullying strategies report less bullying.⁸ In these ways, comprehensive RSE can contribute to enduring positive mental health for our country's future generations.⁹

It's important to remember the RSE guidelines were developed in response to calls to end bullying, violence and child abuse, and help taurua navigate an increasingly diverse,ⁱ and rapidly changing world.¹⁰ The guidelines outline practical tools to teach taurua about consent, healthy relationships, digital safety, sexuality and gender in age-appropriate ways, and were designed after in-depth consultation with schools, communities and young people.

We are concerned the decision to replace the guidelines was made without considering they are already non-mandatory for schools and suitable for all ages. Taurua in years 1-8 and 9-13 are taught from different, tailored documents, with progressive levels of key learning advised for each age group. Schools must consult with parents and caregivers about the content of the health curriculum they teach, and schools have the flexibility to deliver health education in line with the views, beliefs and tikanga of their community. Parents and caregivers have the right to withdraw taurua from sexuality education if they wish. Even if the RSE guidelines are replaced, schools will still need to teach RSE – they'll simply have less comprehensive resources to support that work.

Our tamariki and rangatahi expressly want education programmes in schools to address sexuality and relationships,^{11,12,13} provided in ways that are relevant to their diverse experiences and identities.¹⁴ To not teach anything about these identities will only lead to discrimination and isolation.

ⁱ E.g., in 2019, 9.4% of secondary school students reported attraction to the same sex, 5.6% reported they were unsure of their sexual attraction or not sexually attracted to other people, 1% identified as transgender, non-binary or not cisgender, and 0.6% reported they were unsure of their gender identity ([Clark et al., 2020](#)).

Our tamariki and rangatahi deserve safe school environments, free from bullying and discrimination – and our schools deserve effective, evidence-based tools to make these safe environments a reality.

We know you agree our schools need more practical guidance to set our young people up for success, guidance that resources like the RSE guidelines provide.

We, the undersigned, strongly urge your Government to retain the current RSE guidelines.

Mauri tū, mauri ora,

**The Mental Health Foundation of
New Zealand**

ActionStation Aotearoa

Adhikaar Aotearoa

**Aotearoa Association of Social
Workers (ANZASW)**

Ara Taiohi

Asian Family Services

Atamira Platform Trust

Balance Aotearoa

Barnardos Aotearoa

Burnett Foundation

**CAYAD (Community Action on Youth
and Drugs) Tāmaki Makaurau**

Changing Minds

E Tipu E Rea Whānau Services

Every Gender

Gender Dynamix of Aotearoa

Gender Minorities Aotearoa

Indian Origin Pride

InsideOUT Kōaro

Intersex Aotearoa

**New Zealand Association of
Counsellors (NZAC)**

**New Zealand College of Clinical
Psychologists (NZCCP)**

New Zealand Drug Foundation

**New Zealand Education Institute Te
Riu Roa**

**New Zealand Post Primary Teachers'
Association (PPTA Te Wehengarua)**

**The New Zealand Sexual Health
Society**

**Professional Association for
Transgender Health Aotearoa
(PATHA)**

**The Public Health Association of
New Zealand (PHANZ)**

Q Youth

Qtopia

Rainbow Hub Waikato

Rainbow Path

**Rape Prevention Education Whakatu
Mauri Trust (RPE)**

**The Royal Australian and New
Zealand College of Psychiatrists
(RANZCP)**

Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa

**Society of Youth Health Professionals
Aotearoa New Zealand**

Take Notice

**Te Wāhi Wāhine o Tāmaki Makaurau
Auckland Women's Centre**

**The Theatre in Health Education
Trust (THETA)**

Tīwhanawhana Trust

Youthline

Village Collective

**Signed online by a further 135 schools, organisations and community groups and
4,105 individuals.**

The Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand is proud to be politically neutral. We do not hold biases or preferences towards any political party, and have not joined forces with any political party in our advocacy work.

References for this letter can be found here: mentalhealth.org.nz/resources/resource/references-rse-guidelines-open-letter.