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Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga | Ministry of Education
nationalcurriculum.refresh@education.govt.nz

Feedback on the draft Health and Physical Education Years 0-10 learning area

Question 4: Purpose statement

The Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand (the MHF) notes that the purpose statement includes the aspiration to enable students to “thrive mentally”, yet mental health is only invoked implicitly in the teaching sequence. We suggest defining what it means to “thrive mentally” (i.e., define positive mental health or wellbeing) in the purpose statement (e.g., “Positive mental health is a state of wellbeing that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to their community. It is nourished by things like strong social connections, physical health, cultural identity and self-care”).

We also suggest including knowledge of mental wellbeing or positive mental health within the teaching sequence (e.g., “having good mental wellbeing means being able to cope with the stresses of life, realise your abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to your community...”).¹

Question 12: Overall comments

Introduction

The MHF is grateful for the opportunity to provide feedback about the draft Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum for Years 0-10. Our feedback is based on our position and expertise as a charity that promotes everyday actions that lift mental wellbeing, provides tools that support people through tough times, and

¹ World Health Organization. (2025). *Mental health*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>.

advocates for a better mental health system and society. The MHF has more than a decade's worth of experience engaging extensively with teachers and schools in the design and delivery of school-based wellbeing promotion programmes, such as Sparklers, Pause Breathe Smile and a high school wellbeing pilot programme.

We acknowledge that mental health education and mental health promotion are overlapping but distinct disciplines, and our expertise is primarily in mental health promotion. We also note it is difficult to accurately compare the new draft content to the previous HPE curriculum, because it is not yet clear what supplementary resources/guidance will accompany the new material. For these reasons, we have provided only high-level feedback on the draft HPE content.

General feedback

The MHF is pleased that HPE is being retained as a learning area in the new NZ Curriculum, and we support the addition of new material on increasingly pressing topics like online safety.

We also support the intention to simplify and clarify the required learning so teachers can more easily put the content into practice. However, we do not believe the right balance has been struck with the new draft content. The learning outcomes are now so specific and narrow that they risk directing teachers to take a one-size-fits-all approach, with little flexibility to adjust to the unique needs and context of their students and local communities.

There are also many omissions that are exclusionary, do not reflect modern understandings or best practice in health education, and/or go far beyond what's necessary to make the content easier to teach.

Mental health and wellbeing

We are highly concerned that the draft HPE curriculum contains almost no direct references to mental health and wellbeing, in contrast to mental health being a key area of learning in HPE since 1993 (supported by a comprehensive mental health education guide). Mental health and wellbeing are mostly only invoked implicitly and in the context of other knowledge areas (for example, it is mentioned that a balanced diet, positive body image, participation in sport and good self-care supports mental health, mental wellbeing and resilience). This does not align with consensus on the importance of mental health among Aotearoa New Zealand's education sector and public.

At a minimum, we recommend naming mental health and wellbeing as a core concept of HPE and acknowledging this in the purpose statement, introduction and the teaching sequence, such as by replacing the “body | mind” title with “physical and mental health/wellbeing” and consistently referencing mental wellbeing or positive mental health in the knowledge and practice areas.² This would include defining positive mental health (e.g., “a state of mental wellbeing that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to their community”)³ as distinct from a deficit-focused understanding of mental health (that focuses only on illness, disorder or challenges). Ideally, we recommend aligning the knowledge and practices in the new curriculum with the “key learning” in pages 59–65 of the 2022 mental health education guide, as this is thorough, holistic, and inclusive, and addresses community and societal factors.

Across the limited mental health-related content and in general, we are disappointed in the reduced focus on communities and society. The content appears to be much more focused on the individual (e.g., on self-care) compared to the previous curriculum. While self-care/individualised knowledge and practices are important, they do not interrogate the social and environmental factors that affect health and wellbeing. Health education experts recommend that a comprehensive, truly educative approach to mental health education includes both a focus on individual health and wellbeing and wider factors, including the study of social inequalities and enabling students to take action against injustice (i.e., is grounded in a socioecological perspective).⁴ This includes attention to and critical reflection on social issues such as gender and sexual inequalities, racism, ableism, discrimination, and bullying.

We note that the 2022 mental health education guide, and related 2020 relationships and sexuality guides, were an important update/supplement to the 2007 HPE curriculum, providing practical advice (e.g., lesson plan guidance)⁵ to support teachers and schools to deliver health education in ways that are effective,

²World Health Organization. (2025). *Mental health*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>.

³ World Health Organization. (2025). *Mental health*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>.

⁴ Fitzpatrick, K., Wells, K., Tasker, G., Webber, M., & Riedel, R. (2018). *Mental health education and hauora: Teaching interpersonal skills, resilience, and wellbeing*. NZCER Press.

⁵ Waipapa Taumata Rau | University of Auckland. (2023). *Top tips for teaching mental health*. <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/news/2023/08/21/top-tips-for-teaching-mental-health.html>.

safe and inclusive, and create school environments that enhance mental health and wellbeing for all. These guides were informed by awareness of a changing society, shifts in international best practice in health education and knowledge about the determinants of health, and calls from teachers, parents and young people to address in education issues like relationships, sex, gender and sexuality diversity,⁶ consent and violence, and the inclusion of te ao Māori and other cultures. Crucially, they provide guidance on school-wide policies and practices to promote mental wellbeing, safety and inclusivity (i.e., “a whole-school approach” to mental health, relationships and sexuality education, which is considered best practice by entities such as UNICEF, UNESCO and the WHO, and is evidenced to lead to higher student wellbeing levels).⁷

It is unclear if the new HPE curriculum will be embedded in a whole-school approach to mental health. We recommend that the 2022 mental health education guide is retained or adapted when the new curriculum is in place, to continue supporting schools and teachers to implement a whole-school approach.

Māori and cultural diversity

We recommend that the new HPE content is updated to incorporate te ao Māori and the worldviews of other cultures within Aotearoa New Zealand’s student

⁶ Abbassian, A. (2018). *Petition to New Zealand Government: Mandatory ‘consent education’ in secondary school.*

https://www.parliament.nz/en/pb/petitions/document/PET_80291/petition-of-atifa-abbassian-mandatory-consent-education; Hemmings, J., (2021). *Petition to New Zealand Government: Have a set program for sex education amongst all New Zealand schools.*

https://www.parliament.nz/en/pb/petitions/document/PET_111704/petition-of-jessica-hemmings-have-a-set-program-for-sex; New Zealand Herald. (2017, August 7). Sex education must be improved – petition to Parliament. *The New Zealand Herald.*

<https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/sex-education-must-be-improved-petition-to-parliament/WW5PSW3Q7VDSBWDIRQWZINHRQ4/>.

⁷ Lawes, E., & Boyd, S. (2018). *Making a difference to student wellbeing—a data exploration.* NZCER.

<https://www.nzcer.org.nz/sites/default/files/downloads/Making%20a%20difference%20to%20student%20wellbeing%E2%80%94a%20data%20exploration.pdf>; Goldberg, J.M., Sklad, M., Elfrink, T.R., Schreurs, K.M.G., Bohlmeijer, E.T., & Clarke, A.M. (2019). Effectiveness of interventions adopting a whole school approach to enhancing social and emotional development: a meta-analysis. *Eur J Psychol Educ* 34, 755–782.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-018-0406-9>.

population. There are almost no references to te ao Māori in the draft HPE curriculum, which is a disappointing and significant step backwards in comparison to previous curricula. The 2007 HPE curriculum, for example, is explicitly grounded in hauora and Te Tiriti o Waitangi (neither of which are mentioned in the new draft), and is supported by mental health education guidelines that address mātauranga Māori and te ao Māori in a comprehensive way (covering concepts like mana, whakapapa, and oranga mauri, and incorporating te reo Māori throughout) and acknowledge Asian and Pasifika worldviews. Hauora (as represented by Te Whare Tapa Whā) has been included in the curriculum since 1999, and is a well-known, culturally relevant model for teaching holistic health and wellbeing that also reflects and affirms Aotearoa New Zealand's unique constitutional and cultural identity.

In addition to being useful and culturally relevant for Aotearoa New Zealand students, reflecting mātauranga Māori and te ao Māori in the curriculum supports ākonga Māori (Māori students) to thrive in school. Research indicates that ākonga Māori do well when "being Māori" is affirmed; when te reo Māori, mātauranga Māori, and tikanga Māori are valued; and when teachers are guided to understand and support culturally sustaining attitudes, skills, and practices.⁸ There are also

⁸ Bishop, R., Berryman, M., Tiakiwai, S., & Richardson, C. (2003). *Te Kōtahitanga: The experiences of year 9 and 10 Māori students in mainstream classrooms*. Māori Education Research Institute, University of Waikato. https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/7532/te-kotahitanga.pdf; Tuuta, M., Bradnam, L., Hynds, A., Higgins, J., and Broughton, R. (2004). *Evaluation of the Te Kauhau Māori Mainstream Pilot Project: Report to the Ministry of Education*. Ministry of Education. https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/6968/te-kauhaua.pdf; Webber, M. (2015). "Optimizing Māori student success with the other three Rs: Racial-ethnic identity, resilience and responsiveness." In *Routledge international handbook of social psychology of the classroom*, ed. C. Rubie-Davies, J. Stephens, and P. Watson, pp. 102–111. Routledge; Webber, M., & Macfarlane, A. (2018). "The transformative role of iwi knowledge and genealogy in Māori student success." In *Handbook of Indigenous Education*, ed. E. A. McKinley and L. T. Smith, pp. 1–25. Singapore: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-1839-8_63-1; Webber, M., & Macfarlane, A. (2020). "Mana tangata: The five optimal cultural conditions for Māori student success." *Journal of American Indian Education*, 59, (1), 26–49. <http://doi.org/10.5749/jamerindieduc.59.1.0026>; Riwai-Couch, M. (2022). *Niho Taniwha: Improving teaching and learning for ākonga Māori*. Huia; Ratima, M. T., Smith, J. P., Macfarlane, A. H., & Macfarlane, S. (2020). *The Hikairo Schema for Primary: Culturally responsive teaching and learning*. NZCER Press; Karaka-Clarke, T. H., Smith, J. P., Rātima, M. T., Macfarlane, A. H., Macfarlane, S., et al. (2021). *The Hikairo Schema for Secondary: Culturally responsive teaching and learning*. NZCER Press.

strong links between a positive sense of one's own identity, feelings of connectedness to people and place, and mental wellbeing.⁹

References to other cultures' perspectives on health and wellbeing (e.g., those of Pacific and Asian peoples) have also been removed, which is exclusionary and does not accurately reflect Aotearoa New Zealand's cultural diversity.

Relationships and sexuality

While we do acknowledge the inclusion of consent (including respecting a person's right to change their mind, and the relationship between consent and coercion and power imbalances, etc.), in general, the coverage of relationships, gender, sex and sexuality in the new draft curriculum is concerning. As health experts have raised,¹⁰ the reference to "sex education" rather than "relationships and sexuality education" is regressive and out of alignment with the evidence-informed, international shift away from a narrow focus on the biological, physical aspects of sexual and reproductive health to a more holistic approach that extends to the social, emotional and spiritual dimensions of human sexuality (e.g., covering relationships, consent, digital sexual content, sexual orientation, and gender).¹¹

There is almost no information on sexual orientation, gender identity, gender diversity, or intersex variation in the new draft content. Gender is only mentioned twice – once regarding gender roles and once regarding identity (and not until Year 9), and information on LGBTQIA+/rainbow communities is completely absent. This is exclusionary, risky to positive identity development and detrimental to a safe/inclusive school environment, and (from an education standpoint) denies young people the right to be informed/educated about key aspects of relationships and sexuality – topics they are likely to encounter and have questions about as they grow up (either personally or in their communities). As put by Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa: "Omitting these topics means that young people miss out on critical skills

⁹ Jose, J. S. P. E. (2014). "The protective influence of family connectedness, ethnic identity, and ethnic engagement for New Zealand Māori adolescents." *Developmental Psychology*, 50(6), 1817–1826; Jose, P. E., and Pryor, J. (2010). "New Zealand youth benefit from being connected to their family, school, peer group and community." *Youth Studies Australia*, 29(4), 30–37.

¹⁰ E.g., Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa. (2025). *New curriculum regressive and fractured*. <https://sexualwellbeing.org.nz/new-curriculum-regressive-and-fractured/>.

¹¹ The Education Hub. (2022). *An introduction to relationships and sexuality education (RSE)*. <https://theeducationhub.org.nz/an-introduction-to-relationships-and-sexuality-education-rse/>.

and knowledge to understand themselves and the world they live in. This puts young people's safety at risk – both within and outside school."¹²

Online safety/digital wellbeing

Digital/online environments and the way children and young people engage with them have changed significantly since 2007 and continue to change rapidly, making this a critical moment to enshrine in the curriculum knowledge and practices that support children and young people's digital wellbeing (or their safe, appropriate, wellbeing-enhancing use of digital/online technologies and media). Digital literacy or fluency (as described in <https://healtheducation.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/NZHEA-Mental-Health-Resilience-2nd-ed-2021.pdf>) is a key lever in supporting children and young people's digital wellbeing. We are therefore pleased to see material on digital literacy and online safety included in the new HPE curriculum. However, this might be better framed neutrally (e.g., "digital/online wellbeing" rather than "staying safe online") to emphasise that when equipped with the right tools, knowledge and practices, children and young people can gain from online/digital experiences as well as avoid harm/risk.

We would suggest consulting with young people, parents and caregivers, and online safety experts on this content.

We also suggest considering how teachers (who in Years 0-10 are often generalists) can be adequately supported to teach this technical and evolving subject – we have heard that some teachers are concerned the teaching time allocated to HPE is too short to cover all the content in the new draft curriculum.¹³

¹² Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa. (2025). *New curriculum regressive and fractured*. <https://sexualwellbeing.org.nz/new-curriculum-regressive-and-fractured/>.

¹³ Gerritsen, J. (2025, November 5). Less Māori in school curriculums not the result of a directive – ministry. *RNZ*. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/577832/less-maori-in-school-curriculums-not-the-result-of-a-directive-ministry>.