

RESEARCH BRIEF 3

**PLD, NCEA changes,
and teachers' work**

Findings from NZCER's National
Survey of Secondary Schools

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Background

The National Survey of Schools is part of the New Zealand Council for Educational Research's (NZCER's) Te Pae Tawhiti programme of research. NZCER has run a national survey of secondary schools every 3 years since 2003, with the latest surveys completed online between August and December 2021.

This document is part of the National Survey's research brief series, where we present findings that are useful for policymakers and school leaders. A complete report including all teacher responses to the latest 2021 national survey can be accessed [here](#).¹

Research Brief 3 explores interactions between schools' Professional Learning and Development (PLD) cultures, teachers' general attitudes towards NCEA changes, teachers equity-related attitudes towards NCEA changes, and teachers' working experiences (their views about their morale and workload).


KEY MESSAGES

- **This brief highlights the positive association between a perceived culture of ongoing PLD and teachers' general attitudes towards NCEA changes.**
- **When teachers have more positive attitudes towards the NCEA changes in general, they are more likely to understand how these changes can improve outcomes for Māori learners, Pacific learners, and those with disabilities and who need learning support.**
- **A strong culture of ongoing PLD is positively associated with teachers' morale and more manageable workload.**

Suggested citation for this research brief

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¹ [https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/Teacher perspectives 2021-national-survey-secondary-schools](https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/Teacher%20perspectives%202021-national-survey-secondary-schools)



1.1 Why teacher attitudes towards NCEA changes matter

NCEA is part-way through an ambitious change process in response to a large public consultation exercise that took place in 2018. The consultation process resulted in a set of recommendations to guide the work of Subject Expert Groups as they reviewed the suite(s) of standards available to assess subjects offered in their area (referred to as RAS—Review of Achievement Standards).

Two of the seven key changes recommended for RAS were to make NCEA more accessible and to keep Level 1 as an optional level for students who were unlikely to go on to complete an NCEA qualification at level 2. Both these ideas are potentially challenging if teachers still view NCEA assessment as a sorting mechanism, both in terms of rationing learning success and in establishing foundations for different learning pathways.

How teachers understand and embrace the new ideas in NCEA and their possible impacts could be essential for further changes to occur, considering one key obstacle to educational change is the fuzziness of new ideas and the strength of old ideas (Jónasson, 2016). Given that teachers are perceived as the agents of educational change (Priestley et al., 2014), this brief focuses on teachers' understanding of underlying purposes of the NCEA changes and the degree to which they support those intentions (their attitudes towards the NCEA changes).

Exploring teachers' understanding and attitudes towards NCEA changes is important, not only for the implementation of the new changes, but also for teachers' own working experiences. Previous research has found salient differences among how schools and teachers enact the same educational shift (Evans, 2000). As suggested by Priestley et al. (2014), whether teachers' current practices and beliefs can be compatible with the new ideas depends on how those changes are understood and acted upon by the teachers. In addition, teachers' working experiences can be largely related to whether they have clarity about the changes and whether they have been prepared to frame the changes around established practices.

1.2 How PLD can support the transition within NCEA changes

In their responses to the 2021 secondary teacher survey, New Zealand teachers asked for much more help to enact the NCEA changes, and indicated that personal learning is required before they can support students to incorporate mātauranga Māori into teaching and learning (Alansari et al., 2022). This finding suggests that more targeted PLD should be designed and offered to teachers to support them to navigate the transitions more smoothly.

New Zealand studies showed that teachers can be better prepared to adapt to and implement educational change through ongoing PLD and within school collaboration, during which the combined collective knowledge can be harnessed (Fletcher et al., 2020). PLD can not only offer the knowledge and support required in the educational changes, but can also help teachers to better understand the intentions of the shifts and contribute to their beliefs in the impacts of the changes in practices.

1.3 Teacher workload and morale

We asked teachers about their work experiences (workload and morale) in our national surveys. Teacher morale is described as “how teachers view themselves, their roles and the level at which their needs are met by the organization” (Mboweni & Joyce, 2022, p.30), which is important for developing a conducive environment for teaching and learning.

However, evidence from the 2021 national surveys of secondary schools has shown that, compared to previous years, teachers reported a declining level of teacher morale and increased workload (Alansari et al., 2022). Echoed by the consistent international trend related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Kim et al., 2022), this finding reinforces the importance of exploring the enabling factors of teachers' working experiences in this pivotal moment of educational changes in New Zealand.

It is well-documented that educational reform and changes can influence teacher morale and workload, which is mediated by one significant determinant of morale levels—teachers' attitudes and understanding of such reform or changes (Evans, 2000). How teachers understand and perceive changes to their practice can be related to their morale and how they feel about their workload (Priestley et al., 2014). For example, if the changes were seen as something additional to implement on top of their daily work, rather than as a holistic framework within which coherent educational practice might be developed, then it is more likely for teachers to experience lower level of morale and feel extra workload.

In contrast, the school culture of ongoing PLD and empowerment has been found as part of the enabling factors of teacher wellbeing, which contributes to teachers' understanding of the changes and further promote their own teaching experiences (Gore et al., 2017). As such, teacher attitudes and their working experiences can be perceived outcomes of the educational changes and, in turn, can lead to differences in teaching and learning processes and influence the implementation of the changes. Thus, it is of significance to explore how these factors can be predicted in the context of NCEA changes.

What we wanted to find out

This brief highlights what the national survey can tell us about teachers' perceptions and experiences related to the NCEA changes. We sought to explore the associations between ongoing PLD provision and teachers' attitudes towards NCEA changes, and how this interaction might contribute to teachers' understanding of equity-related impacts of NCEA changes. We also wanted to investigate how these factors contribute to teachers' working experiences (i.e., their morale and whether they feel their workload is manageable). We wanted to explore the interactions between these factors given their key role in the context of educational changes.

For this brief, we posed two research questions:

1. What are the associations between a perceived culture of ongoing PLD and teachers' attitudes towards NCEA changes?
2. Can a perceived culture of ongoing PLD and teachers' attitudes towards NCEA (general and equity-related) act as enabling factors that positively predict teachers' working experiences (workload and morale)?

3 What we did

For the 2021 National Survey project, we surveyed a sample of 5,376 teachers. To ensure national representation of schools across all deciles, teachers were randomly chosen from a stratified sample of Years 9–13 and Years 7–13 secondary schools. A total of 1,093 teachers completed the surveys by December 2021. The responses give a nationally representative picture in terms of school decile and are broadly representative by school area and region.

3.1 Who we asked

We focused on the survey data from the 749 teachers who responded to all key items relevant to this brief in 2021. Most teachers self-identified as New Zealand European Pākehā (79%) and female (65%). Most of them (76%) taught in Year 9–15 secondary schools and were more likely to teach in main urban area (73%).

3.2 What we asked

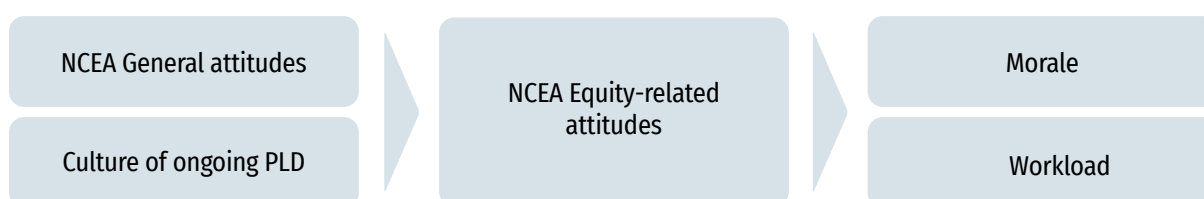
We analysed teacher levels of agreement to survey questions that fall within five main areas:

1. their school culture of ongoing PLD (e.g., “I’ve had good opportunities to see and discuss the work of other teachers in our school”)
2. their general attitudes towards NCEA changes (e.g., “Overall, I am positive about the NCEA and RAS changes”)
3. their equity-related attitudes towards NCEA changes (e.g., “Overall, the NCEA changes will support increased achievement for students with disabilities and those who need learning support”)
4. their work morale (e.g., “I enjoy my job”)
5. their perceptions of their workload (e.g., “My workload is manageable”).

3.3 How we analysed the data

Figure 1 shows our hypothesised model which presents the possible associations between factors related to the PLD culture in school, teachers’ attitudes towards NCEA changes (general and equity-related), and teachers’ working experiences. We explored whether a culture of ongoing PLD would be related to teachers’ attitudes towards NCEA changes and, in turn, predict how teachers feel about their work (morale and workload views). Data were analysed quantitatively through descriptive techniques, factor analysis, and structural equation modelling. Our analysis enabled exploring whether teachers’ views of their work and their equity-related attitudes towards NCEA changes could be predicted by the PLD and their general attitudes in the model, but causation cannot be inferred.

FIGURE 1 **Our hypothesised model**



4 What we found

4.1 Variations in teachers' attitudes towards NCEA changes

We asked teachers 11 questions related to their attitudes towards NCEA changes. Eight items were designed to probe teachers' general perceptions of NCEA changes, and the other three items probed their equity-related attitudes. Teachers' positive ratings of their general attitudes ranged from 17.6% to 62.9%. Overall, while teachers' general attitudes towards NCEA change appeared to be fairly positive, they showed relatively low levels of agreement with whether NCEA changes could support equitable outcomes for learners (Tables 1 and 2).

TABLE 1 Teachers' general attitudes towards NCEA changes

	% Disagree or Strongly Disagree	% Neutral	% Agree or Strongly Agree
I support the new mandatory literacy and numeracy standards	10.41%	26.70%	62.88%
Having fewer Achievement Standards per subject will help create a better balance between learning and assessment	24.03%	20.56%	55.41%
I understand the curriculum thinking that underpins the new NCEA Level 1 framework for my subject	19.49%	25.23%	55.27%
If we don't assess Level 1 in my subject, it will be harder to prepare students for Levels 2 and 3*	26.17%	18.83%	55.01%
Having fewer Achievement Standards per subject increases the risk that some students will not get enough credits to gain an NCEA award in my subject	26.17%	21.76%	52.07%
Overall, I am positive about the NCEA and RAS changes	27.24%	39.92%	32.84%
Level 1 NCEA assessments should mainly be used for students who might not continue to Level 2	42.32%	27.24%	30.44%
Teacher workloads will reduce with fewer standards	61.01%	21.36%	17.62%

* Item removed during the factor analysis due to the low factor loading.

TABLE 2 Teachers' equity-related attitudes towards NCEA changes

Overall, the NCEA changes will support...	% Disagree or Strongly Disagree	% Neutral	% Agree or Strongly Agree
increased achievement for Māori students	24.17%	48.73%	27.10%
increased achievement for Pacific students	24.30%	53.14%	22.56%
increased achievement for students with disabilities and those who need learning support	33.38%	53.27%	13.35%

4.2 There are associations between an ongoing culture of PLD, teachers' attitudes towards NCEA changes, and teachers' working experiences

We found statistically significant associations between all factors.² Table 3 shows the correlations between different factors. The three strongest associations were between teacher morale and a culture of ongoing PLD ($r = .56$), teachers' general attitudes towards NCEA changes and their equity-related attitudes ($r = .50$) and teachers' morale and their workload ($r = .49$).

TABLE 3 Correlations between different factors

	NCEA general attitudes	PLD	NCEA equity-related attitudes	Morale	Workload
NCEA general attitudes	1				
PLD	.25*	1			
NCEA equity-related attitudes	.50*	.22*	1		
Morale	.32*	.56*	.26*	1	
Workload	.16*	.26*	.18*	.49*	1

* Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed)

² For a breakdown of the other items from PLD and teachers' working experiences, see Alansari, Wylie, et al., (2022) and/or Research Brief 2 of this series (Alansari, Li, et al., 2022).

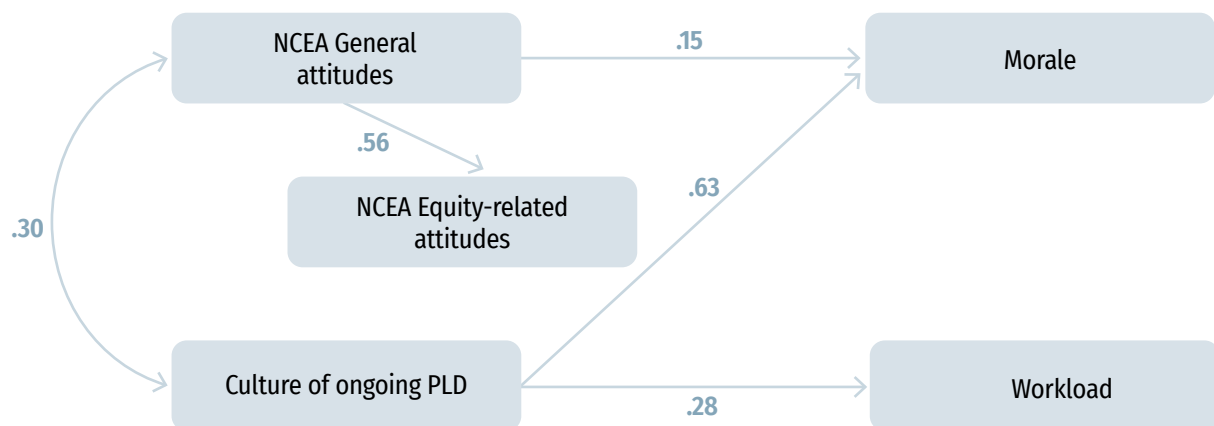
4.3 How teachers view NCEA changes matters

Our analysis emphasised the key role that teachers' general attitudes towards NCEA changes, coupled with ongoing PLD, might play in contributing to their equity-related views as well as how they view their work:

- Having a school culture of ongoing PLD was positively associated with having more positive attitudes towards NCEA changes in general.
- If teachers had generally positive attitudes towards the NCEA changes, it was more likely for them to report that those changes could lead to enhancing equitable outcomes for different groups of students.
- A perceived culture of ongoing PLD is positively associated with teachers' feelings about their work (i.e., their morale and whether they feel their workload is manageable).

In addition, we did not find a direct relationship between a culture of ongoing PLD and teachers' equity-related views. This finding was somewhat unexpected, so we looked back to the detail of the survey items for a potential explanation. We noted that we had measured teachers' perceptions of their school PLD in general, rather than specific professional learning related to the challenge of providing equitable learning and assessment opportunities. The result might have been different if more specific questions had been designed and asked. This finding could be indicative of the importance of targeted PLD content to support the growth of teachers' knowledge and understanding in specific areas of their work.

FIGURE 2 **Our model showing statistically significant paths**
(.1 = weak, .3 = moderate, .5 = strong)





Key messages and implications

This brief pays a particular attention to teachers' perceptions and experiences in the context of educational changes in New Zealand.

Our findings highlight the positive associations between an ongoing culture of PLD and teachers' attitudes towards the NCEA changes, and the role this interaction plays in shaping teachers' equity-related attitudes and their own working experiences.

We found that when teachers felt supported by the ongoing PLD, they are more likely to report positive attitudes towards NCEA changes. The general preparedness and positive attitudes towards NCEA changes can also contribute to better views of the equity-related impacts NCEA changes could achieve. It seems that PLD could serve as a mechanism through which collective support and expertise could be harnessed to equip teachers with the understanding of the NCEA changes required—in terms of knowledge and skills—to make the most positive impact on learner outcomes. In other words, teachers' *understanding* of NCEA changes—through well-designed and tailored PLD—is likely to play a crucial part in the *implementation* of these changes in the years to come.

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