

Volunteers Enriching Education in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Wellington School of Business and Government, June 2022

Executive summary

- Online survey of New Zealand's early childhood education services, schools and kura in late 2021/early 2022 presents a picture of the extent of volunteering and the impacts of involving volunteers and other helpers in education settings and identifies ideas to address volunteering challenges faced by the sector.
- Over 83% of respondents involved volunteers in their school, early childhood education service or kura, with volunteers most important in primary schools, rural schools and early childhood centres, and Playcentres.
- Parents and whānau are the mainstay of volunteers in education, with other volunteers including teachers and other school staff, local community members, external organisations, and students.
- Volunteers have a positive impact on early childhood education services, schools and kura, and are essential to the running of facilities and services (e.g. through fundraising, governance, learning support, and trips). Community engagement and relationships through volunteering impact on students' learning opportunities and extension programmes, and educators feel the loss of these relationships during Covid has caused disconnect with communities.
- The main challenges of involving volunteers are compliance issues (including police vetting, child protection policies, and health and safety legislation), finding volunteers, and the administration required to involve volunteers.
- The Covid protection framework's red traffic light setting and the vaccination mandate restricted volunteers' engagement in early childhood education services, schools and kura. The largest impact was when the school or centre's community chose not to vaccinate; the absence of volunteers disrupted home-school relationships and, in some cases, affected the ability to operate education services.
- Educators identified that support for volunteering in the education sector could include a single place to access trained and vetted volunteers, guidelines for involving volunteers in education, and possibilities for funding volunteering.

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Introduction

Volunteers gift their time and skills across New Zealand yet organisations that involve volunteers have been hard hit by the global pandemic and the restrictions that have been required. In the education sector, early childhood education services, schools and kura have seen impacts on student achievement, community relationships, and their ability to provide some services, activities and events.

In 2021 and early 2022, at New Zealand's Covid protection framework red traffic light setting, volunteers were deemed 'unnecessary visitors' and unable to be on-site at early childhood centres, schools and kura. The Government's vaccination mandate for the education sector included volunteers, and forced the education sector, perhaps for the first time, to consider who was volunteering in their centre, kura or school and required the collection of evidence around vaccination status of those involved.

This exploratory research surveyed senior leaders in New Zealand's early childhood education services, schools and kura to share their experiences of volunteers and volunteering in their centre or school and the impact of Covid restrictions. The research gives a picture of the extent of volunteering and the impacts of involving volunteers and other helpers in education settings and identifies ideas to address volunteering challenges faced by the sector.

Survey of New Zealand's early childhood education services, schools and kura

The survey was conducted online between November 2021 and February 2022 with a random sample of senior leaders in New Zealand early childhood education services, schools and kura. Volunteering was defined in the survey as *acts or activities that can be known as service or helping out, or as mahi aroha or tūao*. This research uses "volunteers" and "volunteering" to capture all these activities and people involved in the school, kura or early childhood education service.

There were 159 respondents with 132 usable responses coming from four categories of education services: Early Childhood Education services (which includes early learning services, kindergartens, Playcentres, and kōhunga reo) (58% of responses), Primary schools (21%), Secondary schools (8%), and Other (which included Regional health services, teen parent units, Kura kaupapa Māori and Area schools) (13%). 23% of respondents identified as Special Character schools or services.

All regions were represented in the sample and the largest groups of respondents were from Auckland/Tāmaki-makau-rau (28%), Canterbury/Waitaha (17%) and Wellington/Te Whanga-nui-a-Tara (12%). The location of respondents were categorized into Metropolitan centres (34%), Regional urban (45%) and Rural (22%).

"The richness of what our school and associated kindergartens can deliver is directly related to the amount of effort provided by our parent and other volunteers."

Primary School Wellington

"[The vaccine mandate] has restricted the availability of volunteers and meant that many activities had to be cancelled."

Primary School, Wellington

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Volunteers are important to New Zealand’s education sector

Volunteering is important in every category of education service surveyed. Over 83% of respondents involved volunteers in their school, early childhood education service or kura.

On a scale of 0 (not important) to 10 (extremely important), volunteers are most important in primary schools (mean importance 8.4), followed by secondary schools (6.7) and early childhood centers (6.6). Volunteers are most important in rural schools and centers (8.6) and all responding Playcentres said volunteers were extremely important (10.0).

Different types of volunteers are involved in New Zealand’s education sector

Parents and whānau are the mainstay of volunteers in education (Figure 1). Over three-quarters of schools and early childhood education services involve parents, caregivers, and other family members, rising to 96% of responding primary schools and all responding secondary schools.

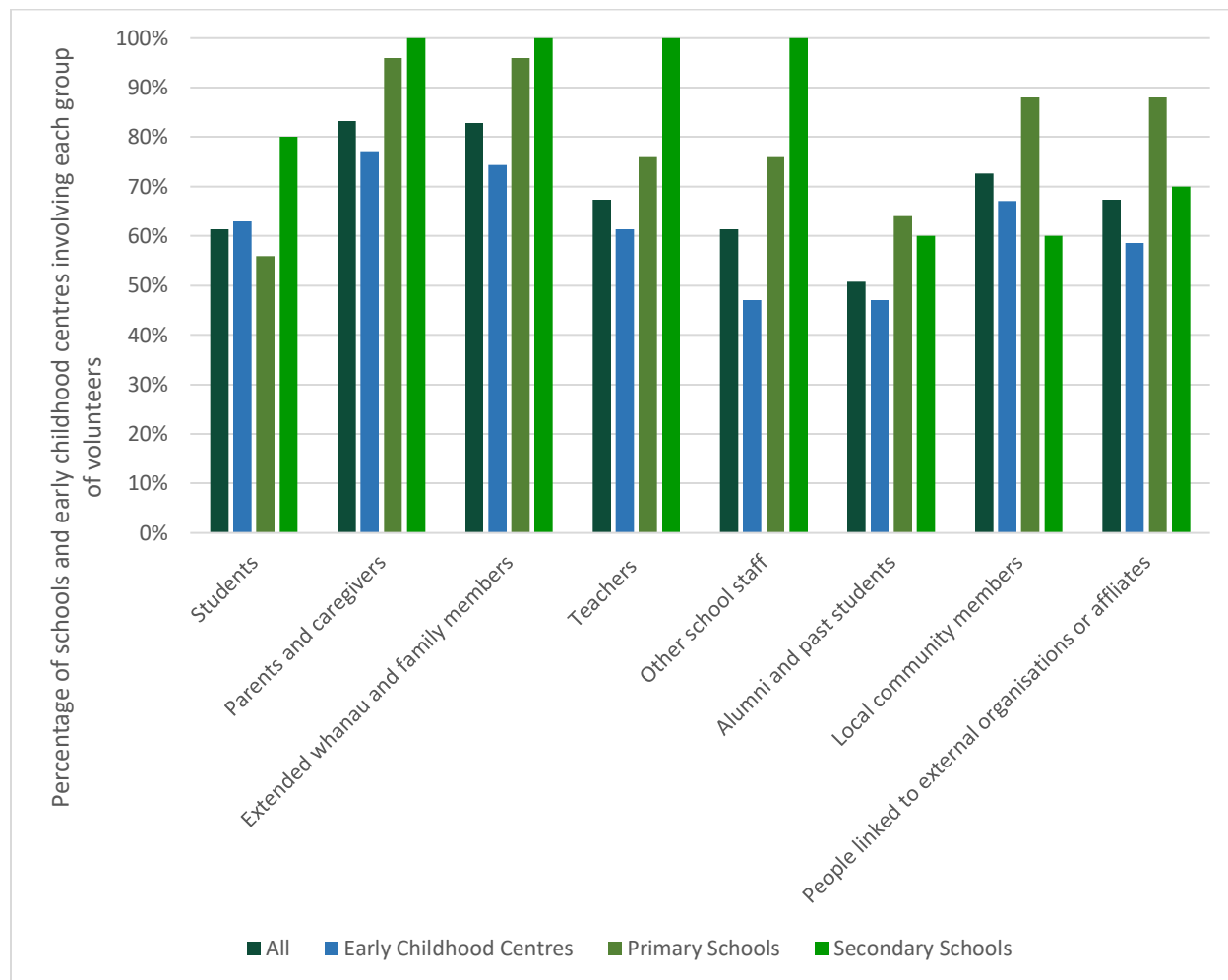


Figure 1 – Who volunteers in New Zealand’s schools and early childhood centres

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Teachers and other school staff are involved in volunteering in all secondary schools, and three-quarters of primary schools. Many primary schools (88%) also involve their local community and external organisations as volunteers.

Respondents interpreted the category of “students” differently, with some schools clearly focused on their pupils’ volunteering activities and others, particularly early childhood education services, using student to mean those currently in training to be teachers gaining work experience in their Centres. This impacts the reliability of the student data but highlights the differences of the perception of volunteering across the sector.

Spotlight on Rural Education

Rural schools and early learning services are particularly reliant on parents and whānau (96%) and all rural respondents (100%) involved volunteers from their local community, compared to 74% in metropolitan areas and 65% in regional urban locations.

Positive impact of volunteers

The impact of involving volunteers is positive and, for many, volunteers are essential to the ongoing running of their facilities and services, through fundraising, resources, maintenance, governance and administration, and as additional learning support in the classroom and non-funded extension programmes, and on excursions and trips.

A comment from a Primary School in the Bay of Plenty captured the overall sentiment of the positive impact of involving volunteers in education:

“Volunteers are one of the key pillars/pou that any kura can have. They do have an impact and it is not until you notice they are not onsite and notice the target results are not at their expected levels, do you realise that they are an intricate part of a students health and wellbeing and especially to ensure that these students become an 'leader of their own learning'. Volunteers that give their time and resources cannot be taken for granted and are like gold, they provide us with rangatiratangi, kaitiakitanga and manaakitanga.”

“Tamariki are able to participate in more activities during school and outside of school hours. Enables the community to have a positive input into the learning of the tamariki. Builds positive relationships between school, whānau and community.”

Primary School, Bay of Plenty

Engagement and relationships created with the local community and the favourable impact on children directly were recurring positive themes. Volunteers are providing additional perspectives, skills and expertise to the children and staff of early childhood education services, schools and kura. Volunteers are seen as role models for children, able to share in the role of enabler, and offer a level of intergenerational awareness, empathy and cultural growth through diversity.

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Through the community engagement and relationship links volunteering facilitates, many early childhood education services, schools and kura were able to bring in additional resources, support, perspectives, ideas, and connections, including activities which are un-funded in the current system or low priority in service budgets. Volunteers provide these early childhood education services, schools and kura with opportunities to extend their programmes in valued ways and provide whānau volunteers the opportunity to own and share in the development of the learning service. In some cases, these relationships have developed into workforce pathways when whānau chose to follow a career into education because of their volunteering experiences.

Many respondents commented on the loss of these relationships during the Covid lockdowns and the exclusion of volunteers during the most restricted levels of the Covid protection framework, and due to the Government vaccination mandate in the education sector. This caused distress and disconnection from local community networks and supports which resulted in some services experiencing staff, volunteers, families and their children leaving their service. Losing connections with their volunteers was devastating to some early childhood education services, schools and kura who anticipate that to build back trust and meaningful relationships will take many years.

Involving volunteers can have challenges

Recognition of the value of involving volunteers in education did not hide the challenges that this involvement brings. Negative impacts of involving volunteers mainly relate to difficulties in volunteer management and onboarding practices. Some respondents indicated that the amount of time required to administer, supervise, and monitor their volunteers is not repaid in value added to their service or school programme. Some experience communication barriers and a lack of continuity when involving volunteers with variable availability.

Survey respondents were asked about a range of challenges that may face those involving volunteers (Figure 2). Compliance issues, such as police vetting, child protection policies, and health and safety legislation, are a challenge for 6 out of 10 New Zealand education institutions (63%), with 58% saying finding volunteers is a challenge. The administration required to involve volunteers is a challenge for almost half (48%) of responding early childhood education services, schools and kura.

"This is how we continue to strengthen links with our wider community. It provides opportunities for whānau, extended whānau and community to take ownership of children's learning and share their strengths and knowledge. Especially our kaumātua and kuia."

Early Childhood Centre, Bay of Plenty

"We are a small rural school and the impact is being felt with regard to further isolation from our community and the loss of our additional learning programmes at this time."

Primary School, Waikato

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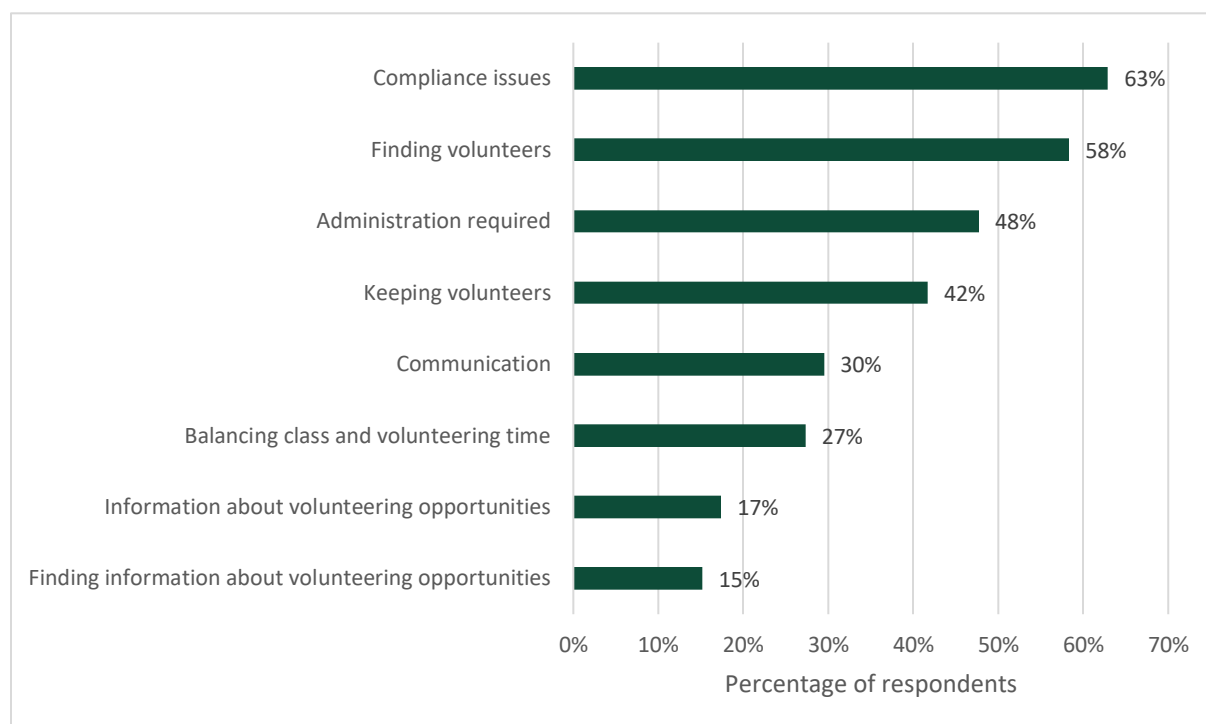


Figure 2 – Challenges of involving volunteers in education

Impact of covid-19 and vaccination mandates on the involvement of volunteers

The survey included questions relating to the impact of Covid-19 and the Government's mandate requiring vaccinated volunteers.

Overall, Covid-19 had a negative impact on most respondents with a reduction in numbers of volunteers able to participate in activities and events. Events and excursions were cancelled or changed, and some found parents and community members are reluctant to return as volunteers after lockdowns, further impacting on enrolment figures and funding.

There was a more mixed response on the impact of the Government's vaccination mandate and opinions varied depending on a school or centre's community support for or against the vaccine mandate being placed on the education sector.

The biggest impacts were felt by early childhood education services, schools and kura whose community of parents were choosing not to vaccinate, which resulted in people leaving

"We lost many work experience opportunities for our older students after the first lockdown in 2020 and we have not been able to pick them up again. From August 2021 we have had to stop all projects involving volunteers."

Special School, Auckland

"Volunteers contribute to the achievement of students, through reader/writers for assessments, and assistance with sports and other EOTC [education outside the classroom] activities... They are important members of our school family."

Secondary School, Canterbury

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the school or centre. In entirely volunteer-run centres this had a devastating effect on adult-child ratios and their ability to operate their service. This disruption to home-school relationships impacted memberships, fundraising and maintenance. With only vaccinated staff and students allowed on-site during teaching hours, this also impacted on some governance roles and on student achievement rates with the loss of their additional learning supports.

In contrast, some schools and centres said they had felt no impact from the mandates and others were expecting that the impact would be felt later into 2022. Some services and schools reiterated that the mandate had kept the students safe by restricting access to vaccinated teachers, professionals, and parents. Regardless of a community's mandate stance, compliance and the need to collect the vaccination status data of volunteers was seen as administratively difficult and time-consuming.

Support needed for volunteering in the education sector

The survey generated suggestions of the support needed to address the challenge of involving volunteers and also highlighted the multitude of definitions and assumptions about volunteering.

A single place to access trained and vetted volunteers

Numerous respondents asked for a single place or site to access available volunteers who are vetted and trained. Acknowledging that teachers and education sector staff are time pressured, these comments indicate a desire for volunteer recruitment to be external to the service or school. This may contradict the comments about the positive influence of local community relationships but is no doubt a way to avoid the time-consuming compliance and training issues that are the top-rated challenge to involving volunteers.

"Development of a volunteer network or pool - already vetted and with basic training."

Primary School, Manawatū

- **What's already available?** New Zealand has a national network of [Volunteer Centres](#), based regionally, which can provide a matching service of available volunteers and deliver training to the volunteer and the service taking them on. Early childhood centres, schools and kura can connect with their local volunteer centre to get support in recruiting volunteers.

Guidelines for involving volunteers in education

Developing communications and guidelines about the expectations and benefits of being a volunteer as well as policies and procedures, including Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health regulations, was the next highest priority for support. These would sit alongside an easing of the compliance burden and a simplified system of police vetting.

"...balancing our commitment to the health and wellbeing of our children and staff vs our commitment to whanaungatanga has been very hard [during Covid] and caused many robust professional discussions."

- **What's Already Available?** General versions of these [guideline resources](#) can be accessed through local [Volunteer Centres](#) and [Volunteering New Zealand](#) who are currently advocating for a simplified and reduced cost vetting system.

Community Education and Care Service, Otago

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Further support and training of governance volunteers in early childhood education services was raised as an issue that impacted on their performance and workload of paid staff. In particular, Playcentres were keen to highlight the position of their centres being fully volunteer-run, governed and delivered and the toll that volunteer exclusion had on their ability to operate. This group also suggested more information was needed about alternatives available in early childhood education services.

Funding volunteers

There were also suggestions for financial incentives for volunteers, including payments to caregivers to stay home with pre-school age children with the assumption that these people would then offer their 'spare' time as volunteers to their local learning service, funding to pay volunteers who are in governance roles, and payments for other unpaid work. These comments speak to differences in understanding regarding a definition of volunteering and who is a volunteer and the role of payments and koha. Ideally, early childhood education services, schools and kura could create a shared understanding of what volunteering means to their community, who that could involve and how they can offer their gift of time in a way that is appropriate for that service or school or kura.

Concluding remarks

With the ceasing of vaccination mandates in education, opening of New Zealand's international border and the reduction in isolation restrictions, by Term 2 of 2022 early childhood education services, schools and kura were able to welcome volunteers back onto their sites. Volunteers were again able to support students and staff in service delivery, programme extension and learning support, and to re-establish their relationships with local community opportunities for their students and whānau.

"They [volunteers] provide different experiences for activities or life skills that we are creating for our tamariki. They give a different perspective to learning for both tamariki and kaiako. They become another safe person for tamariki to connect with."

Early Childhood Centre, Auckland

Early childhood education services, schools and kura are rebuilding home-school-community relationships impacted by the enforced separations. However, the involvement of volunteers is still being impacted by continued high levels of Covid infections, which are impacting on staff levels, student numbers, and volunteer availability and willingness of some volunteers to engage onsite with continued high risk of infection. An increased awareness of the roles and contributions of volunteers in the education sector provides a timely reminder about the importance and impact of parents, whānau, students, staff, and community members on young people in New Zealand.

About the Researchers

Tania Jones manages a coaching and consulting company supporting business leaders and community-led development initiatives. She has over 20 years' experience in not-for-profit governance and a particular interest in youth, social entrepreneurship, and volunteering. She is enrolled in a PhD at the Wellington School of Business and Government, investigating parental involvement and volunteering in secondary schools.

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Karen A. Smith is a Professor and Associate Dean (Learning and Teaching) in the Wellington School of Business and Government. Her research expertise is in volunteer management, and she is particularly interested in how organisations encourage and support volunteers and those involved in managing volunteering. Much of her research is on volunteering in the tourism and events sectors, and most recently she co-edited *The Routledge Handbook of Volunteering in Events, Sport and Tourism*. She has also researched volunteering in areas as diverse as health, emergency management, education and conservation, and is particularly interested in student and employee volunteering.

Both Tania and Karen are committed volunteers, including being elected School Board members and past Chairs of Volunteering New Zealand.

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How to cite this report: Jones, T. & Smith, K.A. (2022) Volunteers Enriching Education in Aotearoa New Zealand. Wellington School of Business and Government, Victoria University of Wellington.