

AT A GLANCE

What the Te Poutāhū review tells us about stability and continuity



A New Zealand illustration supporting the case for a Curriculum and Assessment Council

The Ministry of Education has released a summary of the *Independent Workplace Review of Te Poutāhū | The Curriculum Centre*, with the Secretary for Education's response. The response acknowledges changes to scope and timeframes, and the rephrasing of major programmes, under successive governments. The summary reports participants' concerns about unsustainable workloads and the effect of turnover on institutional knowledge. Taken together, they offer a New Zealand illustration of why long-term stewardship of curriculum and assessment matters. NZPF proposes a permanent, statutory Curriculum and Assessment Council to provide that stewardship.

A note on scope. The review describes the perceptions and experiences of 107 current and former Te Poutāhū employees and contractors who chose to participate. Its focus was the working environment and culture, not the curriculum or the substance of Te Poutāhū's work. It made no factual findings and did not test participants' accounts. NZPF makes no comment on the conduct of individuals or the Ministry's handling of the issues described. Participants also raised significant concerns about wellbeing, which lie outside this paper's scope. Our focus is the themes relevant to curriculum stewardship.

Why this matters for school leaders

Major curriculum and assessment reforms affect professional learning, planning, resources, staffing, assessment, communication with parents and communities, and the time teachers need to implement change well. Repeated redirection places strain on schools, leaving little opportunity to consolidate earlier work before new expectations arrive.

The Te Poutāhū review suggests the strain is not confined to schools. Programmes whose scope and timeframes have changed under successive governments, together with the workloads participants described, have weighed on the teams responsible for developing and supporting curriculum and assessment reform.

Greater stability would give teachers, subject specialists, curriculum writers, and school leaders the continuity and time they need to make change work.

1. Repeated change puts pressure on the teams doing the work

The Secretary for Education's foreword lists a sequence of major initiatives, including the COVID-19 response, the curriculum refresh, and NCEA change, followed by further delivery expectations after the new Government formed at the end of 2023. Nearly all participants described their workloads as unsustainable, with some reporting turnarounds of less than an hour or over a weekend, as well as duplication of effort. They understood the Minister's high expectations but said Te Poutāhū needed better internal planning to manage them. Their strongest advice was to scope work programmes fully, with realistic timeframes for delivery and implementation.

The Secretary acknowledges that timeframes for delivering the curriculum and NCEA programmes have been "extended and rephased by successive Governments over the years".

Curriculum development does not sit apart from political direction. When priorities change, schedules and resources change with them.

2. Curriculum expertise needs a secure home

Many participants said they were not always sure whether an instruction came from the Minister's office or senior Ministry leadership. They wanted greater clarity about the source of instructions and the context and rationale for the work they were asked to undertake. The reviewer cautioned against reading this as unwillingness to serve the government of the day, noting that a large number of participants spoke openly about that obligation.

The review identifies written work-commissioning protocols, a strategy for Te Poutāhū, and robust long-term planning as opportunities for improvement. In response, the Ministry has committed to reviewing its commissioning and communications processes, and to developing a strategy and work plan, within three to six months.

The Secretary's response also acknowledges the impact of the Ministry's 2024 restructuring on Te Poutāhū, which had to respond both to a Ministry-wide savings requirement and the Government's decision to defer work on the NCEA change programme. Many staff and contractors were left without work or funding aligned to their roles. Participants said the effects of past restructuring, particularly in 2024, continue to affect them.

The Ministry has now confirmed its organisational design for Te Poutāhū, and the Secretary says the new leadership structure is intended to provide greater stability. NZPF notes, however, that any departmental structure remains open to future change.

This raises a broader question of institutional design: how can Aotearoa New Zealand sustain curriculum and assessment expertise while maintaining clear democratic accountability for education policy?

3. Continuity depends on people who stay

The review reports that contractors made up 36.9 percent of Te Poutāhū's workforce, compared with 7.3 percent across the Ministry. It records 99 acting or secondment arrangements during the previous 12 months, some of which had been in place for more than a year. The reviewer described this as a sizeable figure given Te Poutāhū's 189 permanent and fixed-term staff as at 11 May 2026. Many participants said high turnover, particularly among contractors, affected institutional knowledge.

The Secretary links contractor use to the time-limited, programme-based way large curriculum initiatives have been delivered. She describes the confirmed structure as marking "the beginning of a shift away from the major programmes" Te Poutāhū has been delivering, towards supporting a curriculum that is "embedded, maintained, and improved over time".

Curriculum development relies on accumulated knowledge of what has worked, what has not, and what needs to be sustained.

4. The wider literature

The New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) examined curriculum reform in five jurisdictions in a scoping and narrative literature review (Bolstad & McDowall, 2026). It notes that New Zealand's curriculum update, under way since about 2021, has spanned two governments, with significant shifts in direction, process, and timelines. It also reports research linking major curriculum policy decisions to changes of government or political sentiment, with governments often looking for 'quick wins' within short election cycles (Crehan et al., 2025; Stoll & Sinnema, 2024, both as cited in Bolstad & McDowall, 2026).

A recent editorial in the *New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work* describes education policy as a 'political ping-pong' and argues for placing decision-making one step removed from the politics of the day, through professional, research-informed institutions working with the Ministry of Education (Couch et al., 2026).

The Te Poutāhū summary does not make findings about curriculum governance or the merits of any particular model. Its account of successive programmes, shifting expectations, and concerns about turnover is, however, consistent with this wider literature on the effects of repeated change.

What this means for a Curriculum and Assessment Council

NZPF proposes a permanent, statutory Council responsible for the long-term stewardship of curriculum and assessment from early childhood through secondary school. It would be co-designed with iwi and Māori education partners, recognising existing constitutional relationships.

Governments would still set policy direction, and the Minister would retain final approval of curriculum and assessment specifications. Public reporting to the Minister and Parliament would make the Council's advice and the Minister's decisions visible, helping distinguish professional advice from political choice.

The Council would:

- provide continuity across changes of government
- build and maintain specialist capability

- draw on research and evidence
- work in partnership with educators, communities, and other stakeholders
- support the development, testing, implementation, and evaluation of significant changes, with realistic timeframes and resources.

The aim is stability, not stagnation. The challenge in Aotearoa New Zealand is not a lack of expertise in the sector, but securing the capability and consistency needed.

The Te Poutāhū review illustrates why stability and continuity matter.

Ministry of Education. (2026). *Independent workplace review: Te Poutāhū | The Curriculum Centre, Summary and response report*. ([Link](#))

Bolstad, R., & McDowall, S. (2026). *Changing curriculum: A literature review on drivers of change and teachers' roles in curriculum reform*. New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

Couch, D., Delaune, A., Jones, K. L., Cook, H., & Teschers, C. (2026). Disrupting the disruption of political ping-pong of education in Aotearoa New Zealand. *New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work*, 23(1), 1-5.