MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
TE TĀHUHU O TE MĀTAURANGA

Education Report: Re-engaging ākonga in education following the COVID-19 Delta outbreak

To:	Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister of Education Hon Jan Tinetti, Associate Minister of Education		
Cc	Hon Kelvin Davis, Associate Minister of Education Hon Aupito William Sio, Associate Minister of Education		
Date:	9 September 2021	**Priority:**	High
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Purpose of Report

This paper proposes a package of support for schools, communities and whānau to re-engage learners in education following the current COVID-19 lockdown at Alert Levels 4 and 3.

Summary

1. Attendance and engagement are critical factors in achieving education success for learners that are impacted by a range of in-school and home and community influences. Attendance has been declining for a number of years and the Ministry is developing a broad-based work programme to address this.
2. There is clear and consistent data that previous COVID-19 lockdowns during Alert Levels 4 and 3 had particular impacts on attendance and engagement, in particular for Māori and Pacific young people. Disruptions caused by lockdowns have caused attendance and engagement issues to grow in both volume and breadth.
3. In response to the current lockdown, the Ministry of Education is already undertaking a number of activities to support learners and the education sector. These include, for example, broadening distance learning options, distributing devices and learning packs to secondary students in low deciles schools, providing regular information to education services and supporting teacher wellbeing.
4. Following the current disruptions to learning caused by COVID-19 Alert Levels 4 and 3 lockdowns, we consider there is a specific need to support learner re-engagement in education. In order to have the greatest impact, this additional work needs to support educationally powerful relationships between learners, schools and communities, to deliver locally developed interventions that reach learners with the greatest need and leverage existing community networks and services in order to support the return to face-to-face learning at Alert Level 2.
5. Equity must continue to be the priority in how we respond to the impacts of COVID-19. It will be important to support Māori and Pacific learners, disabled learners and learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

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6. The Ministry of Education has developed a proposed package to strengthen efforts to re-engage learners in education and to build and maintain educationally powerful connections to support this. We have identified some baseline funding to cover some aspects of this approac 9(2)(f)(iv) [redacted]

7. The proposed package comprises three interlinked components:

   a. **replenishing the Urgent Response Fund ($20 million in 2021/22 only)** to support the schooling and early learning sectors (including alternative education settings) to support wellbeing and re-engage learners;

   b. **increasing targeted support for Māori and Pacific community providers** 9(2)(f)(iv) [redacted] to support learners and whānau to have what they need and feel safe returning to face-to-face learning and leverage local community networks and services to support re-engagement; and

   c. **redeploying Te Kura 400 (TK400) to support at-risk learners in Auckland ($2.266 million in 2021/22)** to support young people in Auckland who have disengaged or are at-risk of disengaging in their education.

Recommended Actions

The Ministry of Education recommends that you:

a. **agree** to seek funding of 9(2)(f)(iv) [redacted] for a package designed to re-engage learners in education following the COVID-19 lockdowns and including:

   i. a replenished Urgent Response Fund ($20 million);
   ii. increased targeted support for Māori and Pacific community providers 9(2)(f)(iv) [redacted]; and
   iii. redeployment of Te Kura 400 (TK400) to support learner engagement in Auckland ($2.266 million).

Agree / Disagree

b. **note** that you may like to forward this briefing to the Minister of Finance and discuss the option of accessing the CRRF fund with him;

c. **note** officials will continue to provide you with further detailed advice on the delivery and design of this package, as you advise officials on how you would like to proceed.

d. **not release** this paper due to Budget sensitivities.

Release/Not release

Andrea Schöllmann
Deputy Secretary
Education System Policy
__/__/____

Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister of Education
12/9/21

Hon Jan Tinetti
Associate Minister of Education
__/__/____

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Background

1. Attendance and engagement in the schooling sector have been declining across our Education regions since 2015, across all ethnicities, deciles and year levels. The decline is not evenly spread, however, and attendance rates are lower for ākonga Māori, Pacific learners, disabled learners and those in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. This is a complex issue that is subject to a range of in-school and home and community factors.

2. In response to the ongoing concerns about the decline in school attendance, we have developed material to identify and frame actions that could collectively address the in-school and home and community factors that impact on school attendance [METIS-1269290 refers]. We are currently preparing a Cabinet submission about the response to overall attendance issues for your consideration.

3. While work continues to address the long-term, systemic issue of attendance, we also need to focus on re-engaging children and young people in learning as the current COVID-19 lockdown lifts. Attendance is a necessary precursor for engagement in learning, and a useful proxy measure, but we recognise that engagement requires learners to be present, ready and able to learn.

The impact of previous lockdowns on attendance and engagement

4. Previous lockdowns have negatively and inequitably impacted on attendance and engagement in education. Following the previous lockdowns nationally and in Auckland, the Ministry of Education's data has shown that:

    a. negative impacts of COVID-19 on attendance are heavily concentrated in primary school students, especially in Years 1-2. Senior secondary school students have experienced meaningfully increased attendance compared to last year, although we know that attendance rates for Māori and Pacific secondary school students have continued to decline;

    b. COVID-19 appears to be substantially worsening existing inequities in school attendance and engagement, particularly in Auckland and particularly for Māori and Pacific students;

    c. students are most likely to have reduced their attendance in response to COVID-19 if they attend a low decile school, are in earlier year levels, are Pacific or Māori, or participate in Māori medium education; and

    d. about 40 per cent of students with reduced attendance did not have concerning attendance patterns at the beginning of the 2020, prior to COVID-19.

5. What this shows is that while the impacts of COVID-19 and lockdowns on attendance and engagement are disproportionately impacting our Māori and Pacific young people, the effects are also being felt by individual students who previously had good attendance patterns. We are also concerned about the impact of COVID-19 and lockdowns and attendance and engagement for disabled learners and learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The problem is growing in both volume and breadth and is impacted by a range of in-school and home and community factors.

COVID-19 and current support for learners, whānau and schools

The Ministry of Education is directly supporting learners, whānau and schools

6. As the nation transitions between COVID-19 Alert Levels, the Ministry of Education is already undertaking a number of activities to support the education sector and learners These comprise a suite of initiatives intended to support and maintain the engagement of learners and educators in the immediate term, including:

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a. *broadened access to distance learning* via dual tuition through Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu (Te Kura) to support students whose schools are unable to provide sufficient support for their learning at home following the change in alert levels;

b. *distribution of devices to senior secondary students and learning hard packs* to learners to continue their learning from home (with a particular focus on learners in low decile settings);

c. *extensive communications activity and tool development* — updated and republished web guidance, strategies and tools for schools to support learning progress and give wellbeing advice in the context of COVID-19 disruptions;

d. *Employment Assistance Programme* services have been extended to all teachers and support staff and are now freely available over the next three months to support their wellbeing and mental health. To date, this funding has been underspent;

e. *extending the Hardship Fund for Learners* which the COVID-19 Ministerial group recently agreed to increase by $20 million [CMG-21-MIN-0011 refers]. This was established in 2020 to provide temporary financial assistance for enrolled tertiary learners facing hardship due to the COVID-19 pandemic [CAB-21-MIN-0108 refers]; and

f. *collecting and reporting physical attendance* at school since coming out of lockdown in 2020. Ministry analysts work in regional offices to support schools to interpret and respond to their own data. The Ministry is also continuing to publish weekly reports on Education Counts on attendance, which will inform ongoing policy development.

Broader Government and community actions to support whānau will also help remove barriers to re-engagement in education

7. Central government, local government, and communities are also taking action to support whānau to meet their needs and mitigate the negative economic and health impacts of COVID-19. These actions, including a strong public health and mental health response, help whānau to meet their basic needs so learners can safely go back to school and focus on education.

8. We recognise that the additional Whānau Ora funding, to help whānau respond, recover and rebuild from the COVID-19 pandemic, and Youth Mental Wellbeing Funding, will both contribute to reduced barriers to re-engagement for some learners. Whānau Ora will deliver particular benefits to Māori and Pacific communities.

9. To support the wider Government response, Ka Ora, Ka Ako | Healthy School Lunches is transferring an underspend of approximately $6.1 million (from the programme operating at limited capacity during the national lockdown) to the Ministry of Social Development to help meet the immediate needs of whānau through food parcels and essential wellbeing packs.

10. While these actions are not primarily aimed at re-engaging learners in education, we consider that they present significant opportunities to build stronger relationships between schools and community service providers to address some of the home and community factors that impact on attendance and engagement.

Proposal: Urgent funding to support re-engagement in education

11. While continuing to support the education sector to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19, we consider that there is now an urgent need to prioritise the implementation of an equitable, robust response to support re-engagement in education. To be successful, this additional support should be delivered with schools and communities to reach those with the greatest need as communities transition to Alert Level 2. This would both build on and be

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complemented by other forms of support being delivered at national and local levels, with a particular focus on meeting specific local needs for learners.

12. While Auckland remains at Alert Level 4, there is a critical need to commence this work now to ensure schools and communities, and the Ministry, are ready to provide funding and support when and where it is needed. This is a key lesson learned in the previous administration of funding in Auckland following the last nationwide lockdown in 2020.

13. Equity must continue to be the priority in how we respond to the impacts of COVID-19. This will require a particular focuis on Māori and Pacific learners, disabled learners and learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

14. Our proposed package comprises three interlinked components, further outlined below:

    a. replenishing the Urgent Response Fund ($20 million in 2021/22 only);

    b. increasing targeted support for Māori and Pacific community providers 9(2)(f)(iv) ; and

    c. redeploying TK400 to support at-risk learners in Auckland ($2.266 million in 2021/22).

Replenishing the Urgent Response Fund ($20m in 21/22)

15. The replenished Urgent Response Fund will enable schools to address some of the in-school factors that impact on attendance and engagement. It will also support schools to build stronger relationships with learners, whānau and communities.

16. Results from an Outcomes Survey on the impact of the Urgent Response Fund (URF) are due in October, but preliminary analysis indicates that schools, kura and early learning services me ngā kōhanga reo that received funding experienced an increase in attendance, re-engagement and wellbeing post-lockdown. We received positive feedback from the sector on the URF, as it supported an approach that valued frontline, locally-led decisions to support education providers to re-engage learners.

17. Examples of initiatives funded through the last round of URF include:

    a. A primary school in Hawke's Bay | Tairāwhiti employed Sāmoan and Māori mentors who connected with whānau and tamariki to build relationships and improve attendance;

    b. A Kāhui Ako in Auckland comprising early learning services, primary, intermediate and secondary schools employed navigators to work directly with whānau to connect with services in their communities and reduce anxiety around children returning to school; and

    c. In Nelson, local high schools worked together to establish collaborative school and industry pathway opportunities to support learners at risk of leaving school early and being unemployed.

18. A more fulsome summary of information about the URF is attached as **Annex 1**.

19. This evidence is consistent with research undertaken by the Education Review Office about post-lockdown re-engagement which highlighted the importance of, among other things: prioritising wellbeing and connection for learners in tangible and visible ways; responding rapidly to concerns within their local context; strengthening relationships for learning between learners, whānau and education services; and ongoing communications with learners and whānau[1].

[1] This research is summarised in *Learning in a Covid-19 World: The Impact of Covd-19 on Schools* and *Learning in a Covid-19 World: Supporting Secondary School Engagement* | Education Review Office (www.ero.govt.nz)

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20. We propose replenishing the URF to make funding available again for state and state-integrated schools, kura and centre-based early learning services (including ngā kōhanga reo).

21. The URF was based on the principle of frontline decision making. We intend to replicate that approach, but with a sharpened focus on those most in need of support - Māori and Pacific learners, learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, disabled learners and primary-school aged learners. The fund will be distributed across the 10 Education Regions using the Equity Index, with additional weightings for Auckland due to the length of time spent under Alert Level 4 and associated impacts on mental and physical wellbeing. We have confirmed that local relationships and infrastructure developed to support the implementation of the URF remain active and ready to implement this second round.

22. The Ministry of Education will evaluate the replenished fund to understand the impacts on outcomes for learners and education providers, including access to resources and support, attendance, attainment and learning progress.

Increasing targeted support for Māori and Pacific community providers 9(2)(f)(iv) in 21/22)

23. Following previous lockdowns nationally and in Auckland, Māori and Pacific learners, particularly primary school-aged Pacific learners, took the longest to return to school at 2019 levels. Given the infectiousness of the Delta variant and the centring of the impact of this outbreak on Auckland, Sāmoan and broader Pacific communities, officials are expecting this cycle to play out again, though with more children not returning at first and taking longer return to previous attendance levels.

24. Overall, the negative social and economic effects of lockdown disproportionately impact Māori and Pacific communities. We are also aware that Māori and Pacific families often had variable relationships with local education services prior to the advent of COVID-19 and look to Māori and Pacific social services, iwi and church organisations for information and support. Additional support is needed to respond to the impacts on these learners' and their families' ability to participate fully in education. We consider that supporting communities and whānau directly, as well as schools, will strengthen the impact of this response and support a triangulated response.

Pacific Education Support Fund 9(2)(f)(iv) in 2021/22)

25. Established as part of the Government's response to the nationwide lockdown in 2020, the Pacific Education Support Fund provides a mechanism to respond to both the current needs of Pacific learners and to the specific needs of different Pacific communities as they arise. The Fund, administered by the Ministry of Education, is available for community providers, groups and organisations to help learners and their families to meet education-related and wellbeing needs arising from and/or exacerbated by COVID-19.

26. The additional funding will enable existing and new providers to increase the volume and variety of services they provide to meet demand across Pacific communities, particularly in Auckland. We will ask these providers to strengthen their relationships with local schools and to make active connections with other social services in order to address home and community attendance and engagement factors.

Whānau Engagement Fund 9(2)(f)(iv) in 2021/22)

27. Also established as part of the Government's response to the 2020 lockdown, the Whānau Engagement Fund engages iwi and Māori organisations and entities with the aim of re-engaging ākonga Māori, who became disconnected from their education.

28. The additional funding will enable existing providers to deliver a variety of services to meet the needs in communities that are struggling to access the range of relevant support being delivered, particularly in Auckland.

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Redeploying TK400 to support at-risk learners in Auckland ($2.266m in 21/22)

29. Te Kura 400 (TK400) programme was successfully deployed in Term 4 2020 to support at-risk students to re-engage in education and support their education via a flexible programme mixing online and face-to-face teaching with pastoral support. TK400 was modelled off Te Kura's successful "Big Picture" pilot programme and implemented in response to the engagement challenges and barriers faced by secondary students in Auckland following lockdowns.

30. A recent evaluation of the TK400 programme found that it was successful in reaching at-risk students and had positive impacts on student wellbeing and re-engagement. A total of 193 students were enrolled in TK400, filling approximately half of the 400 places set aside. This enabled the programme to be extended. TK400 ran throughout Term 4 of 2020 and Term 1 of 2021. Nearly three-quarters of students who enrolled in TK400 identified as Māori (49 percent) or Pacific (32 percent). For context, Māori students make up 14 percent of all students in Auckland aged 14 years or older, with Pacific students accounting for 20 percent overall.

31. Based on the level of demand experienced last year, we consider that a programme with 300 places, focused in Auckland over Term 4 2021 and Term 1 2022, would form part of a strong, equitable package to support re-engagement.

Officials recommend seeking funding 9(2)(f)(iv) for this proposal

32. Officials have explored opportunities to fund part of the proposal from within Vote Education baselines. We will reprioritise funding to support the timely administration and evaluation of the Urgent Response Fund and departmental costs associated with increasing support for the Pacific Education Support and Whānau Engagement Funds.

33. Given the timing in the financial year and uncertainty over the medium-term, further funding sources were not able to be identified. 9(2)(f)(iv)

34. The criteria for accessing the CRRF has recently been refined to include criterion that spending be limited to targeted policy responses to the immediate impacts of resurgence-related restrictions on particular demographic groups [CAB-21-MIN-0349]. We consider that the proposals in this briefing align with this criterion.

Risks

35. While officials have correlational and anecdotal data from the original URF, some assumptions have been made about how effective the approach will be this time around, particularly given heightened apprehension around the Delta variant.

36. The timing of the current lockdown (during Term 3) means there is an increased risk that senior secondary students that have disengaged will be less likely to return to complete their studies. If this eventuates, it will limit who funding and support are able to reach.

37. We consider that given most of Aotearoa New Zealand is transitioning to Alert Level 2 from 8 September 2021, there will be some delay between the re-opening of schools, kura and early learning services under Level 2 conditions and the availability of additional funding.

Next steps

38. We recommend that you forward this paper to, and discuss this proposal with, the Minister of Finance.

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39. Should you agree to the package proposed in this paper and to the recommended approach to seek funding from the CRRF, we will draft a Cabinet Paper that we will test with you in the coming days.

40. We will provide you with further advice on the delivery and design of this package.

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Annex 1 – COIVD-19 Urgent Response Fund – examples of support (4 August 2020 – 30 June 2021)

Tai Tokerau, Wellbeing to support attendance
A primary school used the URF for music therapy for a group of ākonga identified as having emotional, intellectual, physical and social needs. In particular, the school wanted to respond to the large number of new entrants starting after COVID-19 with delayed learning and oral language skills, and extreme anti-social behaviours. Registered music therapists worked alongside the SENCO team to provide tailored support for each student. Through this support, the school sought to increase their engagement and access to the curriculum as well as improve their wellbeing and attendance.

Waikato, Wellbeing to support attendance
The Waikato Women's Refuge – Te Whakaruruhau worked with the regional office to access the URF to support a group of children who were not engaged in education of any sort. The children had been affected by trauma experienced through family harm as a result of COVID-19 lockdowns. Their whānau were living in either safe houses or community houses and being supported by Te Whakaruruhau. Because of the nature of this application, it was managed by the regional office through a contracting arrangement.

The URF was used to fund a child-advocate service for the children. The service worked with whānau to support their tamariki at all stages of a family's journey. This initiative included, a holistic wellbeing programme administered after school, support for school readiness using holiday periods (including support in early learning), and helping whānau to navigate the complex nature of accessing school resources (for example, uniforms or fees). Staff in the different early learning centres and schools who worked with the child advocates indicated they were grateful for the support the advocates provided and for having one point of contact. By the end of the contract, all 45 children supported were successfully re-engaged in education.

Taranaki, Whanganui, Manawatū, Wellbeing to support attendance
A kura set up a nurture space classroom for ninety minutes each afternoon in response to students presenting with challenging behaviour, including aggression and hitting, post-Covid. The nurture space was designed to be short-term with dedicated staffing, although it can be used as long as needed. It was managed by a Teacher Aide experienced with working with children who have challenging behaviour.

The children were carefully selected so that they were in the nurture space with children who would work well together and so that the environment could be geared for their success without any inflammatory triggers. Children were transitioned back into their classrooms when they were ready.

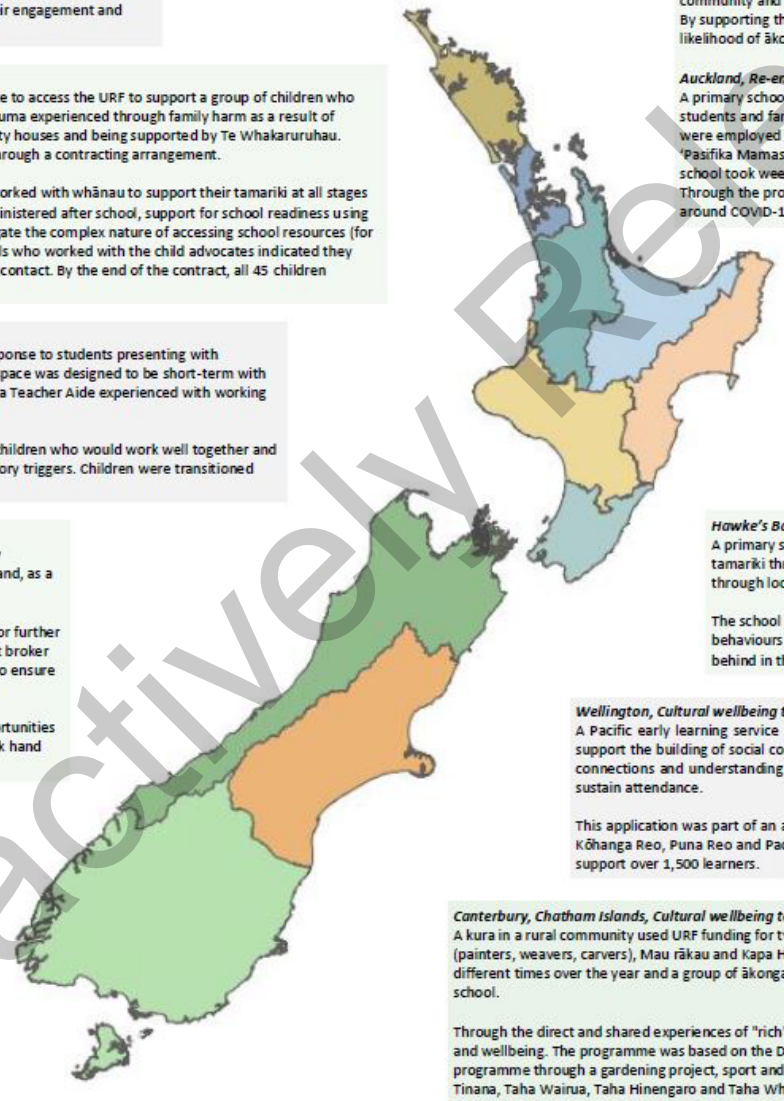
Nelson, Marlborough West Coast, Attendance
Local high schools working together used the URF for a school/employer pathway programme to support students who were at risk of not attending, not engaging and, as a result, unemployment.

Collaborative industry and school pathway opportunities have been established for further development and integration into local curriculum. The Education to Employment broker for Marlborough is creating the opportunities and coordinating with the schools to ensure positive pathway options are being developed.

For example, a cross-school aquaculture excursion opened specific pathway opportunities with two students being connected directly with career possibilities (one as a deck hand and the other towards an electrical engineering).

Otago, Southland, Cultural wellbeing to support attendance
A high school working with local primary schools and kindergarten used URF funding to set up a culturally responsive support programme for ākonga Māori, after identifying that their use of existing counselling and support programmes was low. The programme was run during schools sessions and after school sessions. A termly wānanga offered ākonga the opportunity to learn alongside whānau and the community.

As part of the programme, the high school employed a Māori role model from within their own local community who worked with other skilled and knowledgeable members of the community to build trusting and supportive relationships with ākonga, while providing them with the opportunity to extend their Te Ao Māori knowledge, understandings, and skills. It also incorporated pūkenga Māori (skills), kēmu (games), pūrākau (legends) in a relaxed and supportive context.



Auckland, Cultural wellbeing to support attendance
A Kāhui Ako which included a primary school, intermediate school, high school and early learning services provided Hope Navigators to whānau across the cluster. The Hope Navigators were referred by the schools where there were concerns with attendance, lateness and/or behaviour. They visited whānau in their homes to provide information about support in their community and offer the opportunity to work alongside whānau in their journey to Mauri Ora. By supporting the whānau, the Hope Navigators were able to reduce anxiety and increase the likelihood of ākonga attending and engaging in school.

Auckland, Re-engagement in learning
A primary school used URF funding to support the re-engagement in learning of their Pacific students and families by delivering a programme focusing on arts in schools. Teacher Aides were employed to support the programme, working alongside teachers and facilitators. Expert 'Pasifika Mamas' taught weaving to their Pacific students and students from the local high school took weekly drama sessions with the primary and local contributing college students. Through the programme the school sought to dispel any anxieties their Pasifika families had around COVID-19 lockdowns and large families getting sick.

Bay of Plenty, Waiariki, Attendance
A primary school used URF funding to improve attendance, targeting support at both whānau and ākonga. The school employed a qualified teacher with local whānau connections as a 'bus driver' to pick up absent children. As part of their role, they also organised and liaised with whānau where they needed advocacy or help attending appointments, and provided additional support to children with learning support needs and their whānau.

The school recognised that sports and activities were an important way to increase attendance. They used URF funding to cover set up costs and help learners participate both in-school and after school.

Hawke's Bay, Tairāwhiti, Wellbeing to support attendance
A primary school employed Māori and Samoan mentors who connected with whānau and tamariki through Te Ao Māori and Te Ao Pasifika, building on what was established through lockdown to help improve relationships and attendance.

The school also used the URF for additional Teacher Aide time to tackle inappropriate behaviours tamariki presented with after lockdown, and support those that had fallen behind in their learning.

Wellington, Cultural wellbeing to support attendance
A Pacific early learning service used URF funding to work with children and families to develop strategies to support the building of social competence following the disruptive impacts of COVID. Through rebuilding strong connections and understanding individual families' pressures and stresses, the service sought to increase and sustain attendance.

This application was part of an approach by the regional advisory group in Wellington to target URF funding to Kōhanga Reo, Puna Reo and Pacific early learning services. In total, $0.3 million was provided to 45 services to support over 1,500 learners.

Canterbury, Chatham Islands, Cultural wellbeing to support attendance
A kura in a rural community used URF funding for two days a week 'rich' curriculum. This involved the employment of local artists (painters, weavers, carvers), Mau rākau and Kapa Haka tutors. The whole school experienced working with these artists at different times over the year and a group of ākonga worked with the carver to create a "Ngutu" for the front entrance of the school.

Through the direct and shared experiences of "rich" cultural contexts the kura aimed to enrich ākonga, and support attendance and wellbeing. The programme was based on the Drurie (1984) model of Te Whare Tapa Whā. Kaiako will also add to this programme through a gardening project, sport and community engagement. By adding these rich components, all four pou (Taha Tinana, Taha Wairua, Taha Hinengaro and Taha Whānau were catered for.

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