



**Te Tāhuhu o
te Mātauranga**
Ministry of Education

Report: Consideration of the future of Westbridge Residential School

To:	Hon Erica Stanford, Minister of Education		
Date:	12/12/2025	Deadline:	23/02/2026
Security Level:	In-Confidence	Priority:	High
From:	Ellen MacGregor-Reid Te Tumu Whakarae mō te Mātauranga Secretary for Education	Phone:	9(2)(a)
Drafter:	Simon Blatchford Manager, Network Strategy and Planning Network and Regulatory	METIS	1354661

Why are we sending this to you?

- The Education Review Office (ERO) has raised concerns about the standard of tuition, behaviour management practices and student health and safety at Westbridge Residential School (Westbridge).

What action do we need, by when?

- We are seeking your consideration of the future of the school, and a decision to begin a consultation process on the possible closure of Westbridge Residential School.
- Please return the signed paper by 23 February 2026.

Key facts, issues and questions

- Westbridge is a specialist residential school. It is often a school of last resort for students who have experienced challenges in their local school and within their local community. It provides for students that are 9-15 years of age that have highly complex and challenging behavioural and social needs.
- In December 2024 the Acting Secretary for Education advised the Westbridge Board of changes to decisions about enrolments in Westbridge and required the Board to provide an action plan to address concerns raised by ERO.
- We considered that the action plan was not robust and took steps to appoint a Limited Statutory Manager (LSM) to support the board. This intervention was raised to commissioner level in June 2025.
- ERO visited Westbridge again at the end of Term 3, 2025 (9-10 September) and has recently provided its final report. While it acknowledges that there have been improvements, ERO continues to have concerns with health and safety, lack of therapeutic supports for students,

and teaching and learning at the school. The report concludes that given the ongoing issues that have been identified, closure of the school should be considered and the current students be supported into alternative provision.

- The Standards and Monitoring Service (SAMS) undertook a Developmental Evaluation of Westbridge in October 2025. This was part of its review of the three residential special schools commissioned by the Ministry in response to the December 2024 letter from ERO regarding Westbridge, and had a different set of review criteria to the ERO review. The SAMS report highlights Westbridge's strengths, as reported by ākonga and whānau. It also details areas where practices at the school can be improved. In particular these support EROs concerns around educational achievement (planning, access to an NCEA curriculum) as well as updating policies for the future governing board, and supporting transitions in and out of the school.
- We have considered the details of the ERO and SAMS reports alongside the response from the Commissioner to the draft ERO report, and the place of Westbridge in the schooling network.
- We are seeking your decision on the future of Westbridge Residential School to either:
 - Consult on possible closure of Westbridge Residential School; or
 - Westbridge Residential School continues to operate, with continued operational and governance support until systems and processes are embedded and its ready to operate independently. As part of this option we will do work to consider other changes such as a reduction in the age range of the intake.
- We recommend that you initiate a consultation process on the possible closure of the school.

Alignment with Government priorities

1. This report aligns with government priorities for education by targeting effective learning support interventions for students with additional needs.

Background

Enrolments

2. As a residential special school Westbridge is funded on a notional roll and enrolments are made by an agreement between parents and the Secretary under section 37 of the Education and Training Act 2020 (the Act). Students are typically enrolled for a few months during which time their families and whānau are also supported to make positive changes. Students then return to their communities or return to their local school (or where appropriate receive education through another means e.g. Te Kura, the Correspondence School).
3. Before enrolling at Westbridge, most students will have had support through the Te Kahu Tōi Intensive Wraparound Service (IWS); and this intervention has not been successful in supporting the student and their whānau to build the skills that are needed to successfully access local education.
4. In the past Westbridge has had students that are 8-12 years old. In recent years however the cohort has changed to include 13-15 year olds. These older students have more complex and challenging social, and /or learning needs (including drug and alcohol use), and also require the school to provide access to NCEA pathways.
5. Over the last five years the roll at Westbridge has averaged 9-10 students. The roll declined to six students, as of July 2025, [REDACTED] 9
[REDACTED] 2

Governance of Westbridge

6. The Ministry has found it challenging to appoint a school board with the skills and experience to effectively govern Westbridge. In 2014 a combined board for Westbridge Residential School and Halswell Residential College (Halswell) was appointed. Halswell is the only other co-educational residential specialist school in the country. You have recently approved the splitting of this combined board (at its request) as it found governance at two sites that are so distant from each other to be challenging. The schools will have separate governance from 31 December 2025. We intend that during 2026 Halswell will have its own board, and the Commissioner will continue to provide governance for Westbridge if Westbridge continues to operate

Actions in response to ERO findings prior to the September 2025 report

7. ERO has raised concerns about the operation of Westbridge. This has included issues about the high numbers of reported incidents of physical assaults and property damage, appropriate teaching for secondary students in particular and levels of achievement for all students, professional development for staff and behaviour management at the school.
8. In late 2024 ERO asked the Acting Secretary for Education to exercise discretion to withhold the enrolment of students into Westbridge. In December 2024, the Acting Secretary advised the Board, that with immediate effect and until further notice, she would be making decisions about enrolments to Westbridge personally, and not by way of delegation as had been the case,
9. The Secretary's letter highlighted for the Board that its ability to support new enrolments was a priority, and the Board was asked to provide its view on this. On 17 January 2025 the Board provided operational information on its enrolment and induction process.

10. The Secretary's letter also required the Board to provide an action plan under section 174 of the Act to address the areas of concern raised by ERO. We considered that the action plan was not robust and took steps to appoint a Limited Statutory Manager (LSM) to support the board. This intervention was raised to commissioner level in June 2025. Currently the Commissioner governs both Westbridge and Halswell.

Historic claims

11. There are a number of historic abuse claims from previous students at Westbridge. These are being worked on by the Commissioner. Should a decision be made to close the school, the claims will revert to the Crown.

ERO findings

12. ERO raised the following concerns about the operation of Westbridge at the end of 2024

Area	Issues / concerns
Health and Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> While ERO's July 2024 report noted improved behaviour management at the school, including using restraint when needed, in December 2024 ERO highlighted high numbers of student and staff assaults and property damage. Police were called to the school on three occasions in Term 4, 2024 9(2)(a) [REDACTED] It was noted that previously such incidents were managed without Police support.
Practices and systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff, systems and practices at Westbridge were considered ill equipped to meet the complex needs of students. Some staff felt underprepared to manage the complex behaviour of older students. Students were not receiving therapeutic programmes or accessing educational psychological support or other specialised therapeutic services. 9(2)(a) [REDACTED] In 2023-24 the number of enrolments increased including the number of students with complex and challenging behaviours. This included female students and 15 year olds which was different to previous cohorts. This mix provided additional risks to the safety and welfare of students.

Teaching and Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behavioural needs resulted in ongoing disruptions to learning programmes. • Westbridge is not accredited to offer NCEA courses, and secondary students access these through dual enrolment at Te Kura.
Enrolment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ERO recommended that all enrolments were withheld until such time as the school can confirm to ERO and the Secretary, that it has in place the necessary programmes and capability to cater for the needs of those students who meet the criteria for enrolment at Westbridge.

Response to ERO's December 2024 concerns

13. In response to ERO's concerns:

- The Board took immediate action to access expertise in trauma-informed staff training and strengthened the school's behaviour policy and procedures to guide practice.
- We had discussions with the school leaders and hostel managers, and planning for how the Ministry could support the school was initiated.
- The Acting Secretary then wrote to the Board explaining that she would be approving all enrolments personally, and this has been the case for 2025. The Acting Secretary also asked for information about the Board's view on its ability to support new enrolments, which was provided in mid-January 2025, and required the Board to provide an Action plan in response to ERO's areas of concern.
- In March 2025 an LSM was appointed to the combined board. This was escalated to Commissioner in June 2025.

14. ERO has continued to review the school regularly, most recently in September 2025. Following the September 2025 review ERO highlighted the following:

Progress has continued to be made in:

- A reduction in the number and severity of behavioural incidents in line with the reduction in the number of students.
- Improved provision of regular training and professional development for staff.
- Access to psychological and specialist services – although limited to students who arrive with this support, rather than being available for all students (the school does not access external referrals for specialist services).
- The review of the school's philosophy of care being completed.
- The social and behavioural goals for each student being monitored and regularly reviewed.
- Curriculum provision - the recently appointed deputy principal is taking initial steps to improve teacher planning, academic tracking and establishing clearer expectations for teaching practice.

15. ERO's most recent report identified the following areas of concern:

Area	Issues / concerns
Health and Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ERO considers that student health and safety remain a concern. Assaults and property damage continue. Some incidents, such as continued physical aggression towards teaching staff are not always documented or recorded by teachers. • As the school does not make external referrals for specialist services and staff do not directly apply for additional support, there have been gaps in continuity of care and support for students before, during and after enrolment at Westbridge. • There are some student behaviours that staff still feel unprepared to manage. • Students say they are dissatisfied with the school environment and would prefer to attend elsewhere.
Practices and systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further work is needed to ensure the consistent implementation of the school's philosophy of care. • Inadequate transition into, through and beyond Westbridge Residential School.
Teaching and Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Despite some improvements, the curriculum at Westbridge is not currently fit for purpose for secondary students. • Teacher planning varies as student information is often incomplete or it is not used to support learning or measure progress. • While social and behavioural goals are monitored, progress in learning (including assessments) is not uniformly tracked or documented. • Individual education portfolios lack curriculum related goals, and most students are not meeting their formal learning goals. • Quality and variability of teaching, including inadequate support for students to meet their goals.

16. ERO concluded their report with a recommendation that the Minister consider closure of the school, and that the Ministry finds other educational options for current students.

Comments from the Commissioner

17. The Commissioner provided the following information as a reflection of the draft Progress Report Term 3, 2025 (Annex 2). She subsequently provided further information to us in reaction to ERO's confirmed report.

In relation to student health and safety

18. A key focus for the school has been managing health and safety risks. Under the Commissioner, the school has used a more comprehensive data collection model for any health and safety incidents. This has resulted in more data being collated about incidents,

and more minor incidents documented, as well as more details. Overall, this information has allowed more in-depth monitoring of the incidents.

19. While there has been a reduction in the roll there has been increased proportional attention per student, with higher levels of reporting and follow up. This has led to an increased visibility of incidents.

In relation to teaching and learning

20. The Commissioner agrees with the comments from ERO about teaching and learning. Although practices have strengthened, there is more work to be done. This will be the next priority focus for the school.

Comments from the Ministry

21. We note that ERO has based its recommendations on data gathered from its school visits. We are informed that its final report has been reviewed externally in addition to its usual quality assurance processes. See Annex 1 for the information we have from ERO (including its latest report).

Health and Safety - Behaviour management and student incidents

22. The Commissioner's feedback on the draft ERO report (see Annex 2) highlights that the school is now gathering more detailed incident data including about all incidents, using improved reporting practices. She notes that this information provides improved accuracy and enhances document quality. It is also used to inform proactive interventions and means that there is better visibility of risk.
23. The Commissioner notes that the number of incidents per student per month is stable. For September 2025 there were 3 incidents per student, compared with 4.5 in September 2024 and 3 in October 2024. The Commissioner has also noted that the low roll number and contextual factors make for high variability in the number of incidents.
24. Given the change in data gathering we are unable to be confident that there has been an increase or decrease in the number of severe incidents that are taking place.
25. We support the actions that the Commissioner has taken with increased monitoring and analysis of incidents but note that this process has not yet resulted in a decrease in the number incidents per student per month.
26. We are also aware that health and safety has been a key focus for the school with the following actions:
 - Professional development on a range of topics related to behaviour management has been and continues to be provided for all staff. There is regular Team Teach refreshers, and 95% of staff have signed up for Team Teach de-escalation training. two staff are already accredited Team Teach trainers. Staff state they are more confident in managing behaviour and intervening early.
 - Strategies for managing potential situations have been implemented at the school and hostel.
 - Students measurable progress in social and behavioural goals are monitored and regularly reviewed.
27. In additional information provided by ERO they note that during an onsite hui, teachers reported that there was no clear threshold for what constitutes a recordable incident which does not align with the feedback received from the commissioner.
28. ERO has raised the concern that students are not given access to therapeutic support or specialist support. The Commissioner reports *Where students come with IWS packages, the*

Educational Achievement

- ### Other risks

- ### Students dissatisfied

- ## SAMS Report

- [IN-CONFIDENCE - RELEASE EXTERNAL]

- The residential PKW role has further developed as recommended. PKWs have close connections with ākonga, they keep records, plan progress and put in place strategies
- Handover notes and meetings take place between school and residential staff (and residential staff on different shifts)
- Holistic, person-centred planning. Ākonga and whānau contribute goals and take part in celebrations to acknowledge progress
- Residential staff plan and support group and individual activities focused on interests, self-regulation and growth opportunities
- Staff have undertaken professional development – trauma informed practice training and Team Teach behaviour de-escalation, as well as syndrome specific training and PB4L refresh.

39. The recommendations from SAMS include that the school should:

- Review the current multiple plan approach (IWS plans, IEPs, PPPs) and create an overarching document capturing the goals of the referrer, whānau and ākonga.
- Collaborate with local schools to access NCEA curriculum that can be tailored for ākonga strengths, learning styles and future plans (eg Supported Learning Standards and vocational programmes).
- Further incorporate planning for home and community support in the transition out of Westbridge.
- Add consent forms to include agreement to use of CCTV monitoring.
- Review school policies when the new school governance is established.

Ministry comments

40. We note that SAMS makes no specific mention of risks of assaults or property damage at the school. SAMS do recognise that the NCEA curriculum provided at Westbridge for secondary students could be better suited for their needs by collaborating with local secondary schools.
41. There is also recognition that students transitioning to and from Westbridge find it challenging and that there may be more local support for them and their whānau that staff can help put in place within their communities.
42. Whilst the SAM and ERO reviews use different methodologies considering different scopes, there is alignment between the SAM's recommendations and the ERO areas of concern.

Commissioner comments

43. The Commissioner has responded to the SAMS recommendations noting that:

- Work has begun on unifying the IWS, IEP and PPP plans into a single coherent plan for each student.
- The school has begun to explore partnerships with local secondary school (Massey High School), training provider (MITO) and Supported Learning programmes (SPEC, Supported Learning Resources) to create flexible NCEA and vocational pathways.
- Westbridge will expand transition processes to include more deliberate connections of whānau to external support, community services and funded options appropriate to ākonga needs.

- Westbridge have revised our whānau agreement and consent documentation to include an explicit section on CCTV use in the school and residences.
44. The Commissioner also commits to using the constructive and future-focussed evaluation as a catalyst for continued growth, innovation and improvement.

The Ministry has provided the following support for Westbridge in 2025

45. During this year we have provided the following support for Westbridge board, staff and students:

Category	Support
Learning support delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular Educational Psychologist support. This has included professional development for staff across a range of topics (including Trauma and its impact and Creating Connections). Staff have found these sessions helpful. • A workshop on communication in different situations (developed by an Education Psychologist and Speech Language Therapist).
Health and Safety - Behaviour Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive Behaviour for Learning (PB4L) workshop with ongoing PLD planned.
Curriculum Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff PLD about curriculum, using personal planning documentation and data. • Curriculum Advisory Service working with the DP to undertake a full curriculum review. • Also undertaking a review with staff of the strategic plan, annual plan, Te Mātaiaho framework, CAS rubric.
Governance Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appointment of an LSM to support the operation of the board 17 March 2025. Triggered by lower-level interventions not resulting in improvement as expected. • Appointment of a commissioner 19 June 2025. Escalating to Commissioner from LSM due to the significant work still to be completed.

Finances for the Combined Board

46. The most recent financial accounts for the combined board are 2024. At that time working capital was \$2.335 million, available cash was \$2.019 million, and cash investments were \$3.314 million.
47. The combined board's operating surplus for 2024 was \$72,000.
48. The above information indicates that as at the end of 2024 the combined board of Halswell and Westbridge was in a sound financial situation. This is expected to continue through 2025.

Legislative authority

49. The Act allows you to disestablish a specialist school if you are dissatisfied with the manner in which the school or service is being conducted, Section 197(2)(a).
50. Section 199(1) requires consultation with the Board before being satisfied the school should close and Section 199(2) a further 28-day period for final arguments if there are any. In this case consultation would likely be with the Commissioner, although they can go to the wider school community if they choose, to gather feedback.
51. Under Section 209 consultation is also required with boards of all state schools whose rolls might be affected. If agreed, we would do this on your behalf (and as it is a national school, inviting comment through the Bulletin which is emailed to schools nationally and the Education Gazette).

Impact if Westbridge is no longer part of the network of learning support provision

Students at Westbridge

52. If, after following due process, you decide to close Westbridge, students at Westbridge at that time will follow transition plans back to other educational settings. These can be developed with the Commissioner and tailored to individual needs. We will work with whānau and the receiving education setting to support these transitions, as it is possible that additional supports may be required.

Consequences of closure for students

53. Should a final decision be made to close Westbridge, it will likely result in a small increase in the number of young people struggling to engage or access education. For whānau who meet the criteria for residential specialist schooling and wish to access it for their tamariki they could wish to access enrolment at Halswell or Salisbury (the other residential special schools). Were these enrolments to be approved, this would change the make-up of the students at these schools and mix students with severe behavioural needs with students that have intellectual disabilities. We do not support this approach as it would likely raise the levels of risk and impact on the positive experiences of current students at Halswell. We note that Salisbury has limited available space and is a single sex school for girls so only female students may be enrolled.
54. Should you decide to consult on the possible closure of Westbridge we will do further work on what other supports may be required for students who might otherwise be eligible to enrol in Westbridge, to access and participate in education. This is likely to include enhanced supports within their current schools and communities.

55. More detail about the implications of the possible closure, should that be your decision, will be provided in future reports. This will include any implications identified through consultation.

School Closure

56. When a school closes the assets, liabilities, and debts of the school board become the assets, liabilities, and debts of the Minister. Should this be your decision the Ministry would manage all aspects of the closure process on your behalf.
- Distribution or sale of the resources etc at the school.
 - Managing any staffing issues / claims.
 - Managing and payment of any historic abuse claims.
 - Management of the property and buildings.
 - Working with unions to support staff in permanent positions to access the surplus staffing options in their collective agreements.

Overall Ministry Comment on the manner in which the school is conducted – s197(2)(a)

57. Although the same Commissioner governs Halswell and Westbridge, Halswell has not experienced the same concerns raised by ERO. ERO has raised a range of issues at Westbridge, a number of which are being prioritised and addressed through the Commissioner and current staff team.
58. We have met with ERO to discuss and understand their findings. Subsequent to the discussion we were provided with some additional data from ERO which supports their conclusions.
59. Our key concerns remain around health and safety at the school and poor educational outcomes at Westbridge Residential School.
60. We are confident that at this time and due to the smaller roll, students are not at the same level of risk around health and safety as at the end of 2024 based on the reporting of the Commissioner.
61. We are not confident that any drop in the number of incidents at the school can be maintained as new students arrive and should there be staffing changes (for example if there was the appointment of less experienced people into leadership roles). This will remain a challenge.
62. The educational risks that ERO raise include providing suitable education to reflect the needs of students and monitoring academic achievement. These are core to school operations. While we acknowledge that some steps have been taken, without appropriate practices being in place and used, we question if Westbridge is providing effectively for its students.
63. The Ministry considers that the ERO concerns described in paragraph 16 of this paper, which are consistent with the SAMs areas for improvement in paragraph 40 and the degree of governance support we have outlined as being necessary for the school to operate currently as well as our level of confidence for sustained improvement provides grounds for you to decide that you are dissatisfied with the manner in which Westbridge Residential School is being conducted and if you agree, we recommend that a process be initiated to commence consultation on possible closure of the school.

64. This process will give the Westbridge staff, students and community the opportunity to comment on the proposal to close the school. We will also invite schools across the country to provide comment about your proposal. The initiation of this consultation process will give you more information to base any closure decision on.
65. If you consider that the information provided in this report shows that Westbridge has not met the threshold for your dissatisfaction with the manner in which it operates, you can decide not to proceed to consultation on possible closure. These options are set out below.
66. We have developed a communications plan. This will be tailored depending on which option you choose.

Options for the future of Westbridge Residential School

Option 1 – Consult about the possible closure of Westridge Residential School

Ministry comment

67. The process to progress this option through to closure (if that is your eventual decision) will take approximately 6-9 months as it includes two rounds of consultation. Refer to Annex 4 for a timeline of the process and a letter to the Commissioner informing her of your decision.
68. In conjunction with the Option 1 process, should this be your decision, we would develop a plan to support the ongoing education of students who would have been enrolled at Westbridge.
69. If you agree we will undertake consultation on your behalf under sections 199 and 209 of the Act.
70. If you decide to consult about possible closure of Westbridge Residential School, the rationale contained in this report will form the basis of that consultation therefore we strongly recommend this report be proactively released.

Option 2 – Westbridge School continues to operate, with continued operational and governance support.

Ministry comment

71. This option builds on the work by the Commissioner and staff currently underway. If you choose this option, we will work with the Commissioner to develop a schooling improvement plan that aims to address the concerns raised by ERO including but not restricted to access to NCEA, lack of therapeutic models, high numbers of student incidents and curriculum concerns. This plan will include a range of supports. We will expect the Commissioner to reflect progress against this plan in her monthly reports and meetings with us. To monitor student safety, we will request monthly incident data from the Commissioner.
72. Should you choose this option we will look at ways to enhance provision and safety at Westbridge Residential school. This will include looking at a reduced age group of intakes.
73. This would allow Westbridge to continue to have a role within the network of specialist settings. However, if we were to change the age group this would be a slightly different role and require us to look at other supports for older students.
74. If you choose this option refer to Annex 5 for a letter to the Commissioner informing her of your decision.

Annexes

Annex 1 – Most recent ERO report about Westbridge Residential School and data provided to us from ERO

Annex 2 – Commissioner's feedback on the draft ERO report and feedback on the final ERO report

Annex 3 – SAMS report on Westbridge Residential School

Annex 4 - If you agree to Option 1:

- Timeline for possible closure of the school if this is your decision
- Letter to the Commissioner

Annex 5 - If you agree to Option 2:

- Letter to the Commissioner

Recommendations/Actions

We recommend that you either:

- a) **Option 1: Agree** to consult on the possible closure of Westbridge Residential School on the grounds that you are dissatisfied in the manner in which the school is being conducted. (Ministry preferred option)

Agree / Disagree

or

Option 2: Agree that Westbridge Residential School continues to operate with continued operational and governance support, until systems and processes are embedded, and it is ready to operate independently, and direct the Ministry to do further work to look at ways to enhance safety.

Agree / Disagree

Proactive Release:

- b) **Agree** that the Ministry of Education release this paper in full once it has been considered by you, with any information needing to be withheld done so in line with the provisions of the Official Information Act 1982.

Agree / Disagree

- c) **Note** if you agree to release this report a copy will be provided to the Commissioner.

Noted


Ellen MacGregor-Reid
Secretary for Education

14/12/25


Erica Stanford
Minister of Education

16/12/25

Annex 1: Most recent ERO report about Westbridge Residential School

Proactively Released

Annex 2: Feedback to the ERO report from the Commissioner

Proactively Released

Annex 3: SAMS report on Westbridge Residential School

Proactively Released

Annex 4: Documents to support Option 1: Agree to initiate consultation on the potential closure of Westbridge Residential School

Timeline for the process to consider the possible closure of Westbridge Residential School

Process	Proposed timeframe	Next Step & Comment
Consultation undertaken on the potential closure of Westbridge	Term 1, 2026 (Term 1: Ends 12 April) Consultation 6-8 weeks	As this is a national school, we would use two mechanisms to gather comment about the potential closure of the school: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Bulletin to schools • The Education Gazette
Report developed for consideration of feedback and next steps.	By beginning of Term 2 2026 (Term 2 dates: 20 April – 3 July)	If the decision is that the school should close, progress to second consultation period Letter signed initiating the 28-day period for final arguments (from the Commissioner)
Final arguments (28 days)	Undertaken May – June 2026	Feedback collated and final report developed
Final report	Report developed by end of Term 2	Final decision made (and gazetted if that decision is closure).
		Possible closure (should this be the final decision) could be July or August 2026. If this was the case enrolments would end at the end of Term 2.

Annex 5: Option 2: Westbridge School continues to operate with continued operational and governance support, until systems and processes are embedded, and it is ready to operate independently.

Proactively Released