

Enabling schools to introduce a cohort entry policy

The Education Act 1989 now allows schools to adopt and enforce a cohort entry policy after consulting with their community. Cohort entry refers to children starting school as a group, at the beginning of a term, as opposed to starting school on their fifth birthday.

There is evidence that successful transition from early childhood education to school has a positive effect on a child's later social and educational outcomes. Some primary schools considered that continuous entry was limiting their ability to effectively manage the transition process and made it difficult for new entrants to build relationships with their peers. The Advisory Group on Early Learning recommended amending the Education Act to enable schools to enrol students on a cohort basis.

How does a cohort entry policy work?

Adopting a cohort entry policy increases the ability of schools to put in place school entry arrangements that best meet the needs of their schools and community.

A school with a cohort policy in place can enrol beginning students to start school at the start of the term closest to the child's fifth birthday. This is calculated on a mid-point between the first days of two consecutive terms. A child whose fifth birthday falls before the mid-term date can start school at the beginning of that term. If they turn five after the mid-term date, they start the following term. Parents also have the choice of waiting for the next cohort entry point if they feel their child is not ready to start school.

The cohort entry policy:

- only applies to children aged four or five who have not previously enrolled in a school
- does not apply to children starting school at six. This means that parents choosing not to start their child until the age of six **must** ensure they start school by their sixth birthday
- does not apply to already enrolled 4 or 5 year olds who go on to enrol at another school

Responsibilities for the board - consultation

When developing a proposed cohort entry policy or considering whether to revoke such a policy that is in place, the board must take "all reasonable steps" to find out and take into account the views of current and prospective parents, staff and early childhood services in the local community (section 5C(1)).

Ministry of Education policy has added: 'Schools can choose to consult a wider community group if they wish, which may include other local primary schools, local iwi or hapū, and their Community of Learning | Kāhui Ako.'

The board must also "take all reasonable steps" to give notice of at least one term to the Secretary for Education and the groups named in section 5C(1) before a cohort policy takes effect or is to end.

Where do I get advice?

NZSTA will continue to update and advise you through factsheets, newsletters, and our website.

You can call **0800 782 435** or email actupdates@nzsta.org.nz.

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More about consultation

Questions to ask as part of the consultation could include:

- Would you support a cohort entry policy at xyz school? If yes, why? If no, why not?
- Do you consider any individuals or groups would be disadvantaged by the adoption of a cohort entry policy at xyz school?
- Do you consider any individuals or groups would benefit from the adoption of a cohort entry policy at xyz school?
- If xyz school adopts a cohort entry policy, would you consider enrolling your child(ren) at an alternative school that does not have such a policy?
- If xyz school adopts a cohort entry policy, would you be more likely to enrol your child(ren) as a result?

Does the board have to have a cohort entry policy in its governance framework?

There is no requirement for a board to include a cohort entry policy in its governance framework. A board that has adopted a cohort entry policy may choose to add its own cohort entry policy that would incorporate the legal requirements. Such a policy could also include additional consultation it wishes to undertake around considering whether to continue or revoke its cohort entry policy.

Where do I find this in the Education Act?

Section 5, 5A, 5B and 5C.

When do the changes take effect?

These provisions took effect from 3 July 2017.

Update

As at December 2018, a bill is before Parliament that if passed, will mean a child won't be able to start at a school with a cohort entry policy earlier than their fifth birthday.

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