September 2026

What the media told New Zealand about education

Reform, contest and the missing pathway



Social Herds

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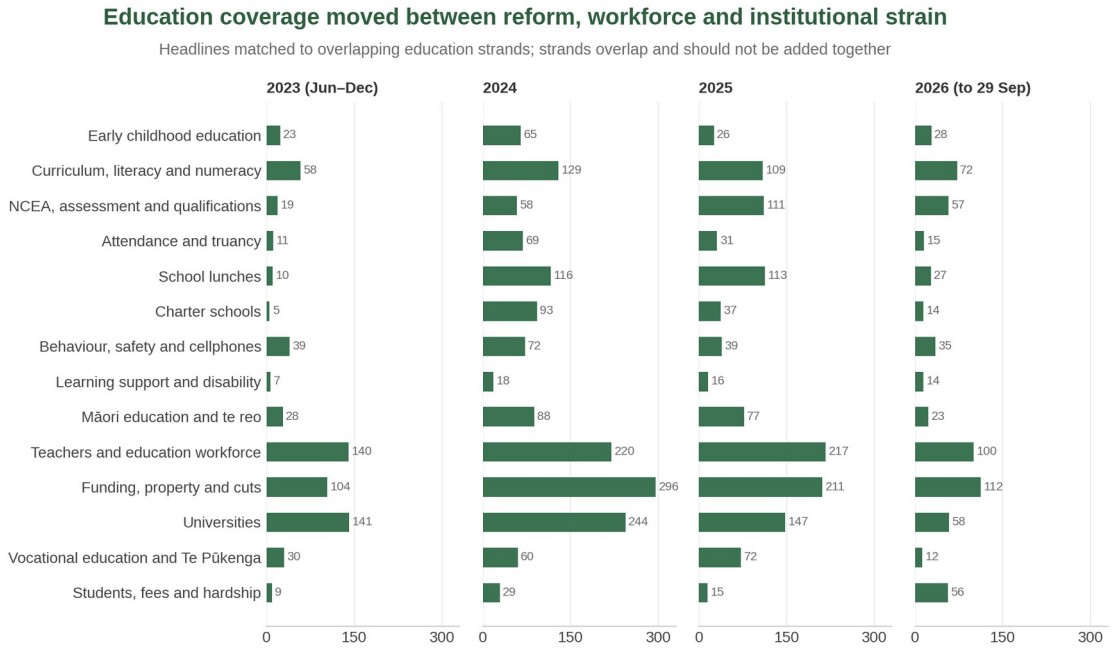
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1 Executive summary

This report examines what New Zealand's media told—and enabled New Zealanders to understand—about education between June 2023 and 29 September 2026. It analyses **3,606 education headlines** published across 124 outlets. Education represented 4.2% of the 84,950 headlines in the Social Herds record and was the sixth most frequently reported topic over the period.

FIGURE 1



The coverage did not describe one education problem. It moved among early childhood fees, ratios and pay parity; school attendance and truancy enforcement; literacy, numeracy and a rewritten curriculum; the replacement of NCEA; school lunches and charter schools; teacher strikes and shortages; behaviour and learning support; university deficits and job cuts; and the dismantling of Te Pūkenga. Attention followed the reform calendar. Charter schools and attendance peaked in 2024; lunches peaked twice, with the cheaper model in 2024 and its troubled rollout in early 2025; the NCEA replacement and curriculum rewrite peaked in the second half of 2025. By September 2026, education had become an election contest over pausing those reforms and cutting student loans.

The reporting showed substantial government activity. A cellphone ban was introduced, attendance reporting and enforcement were tightened, lunches were redesigned and re-contracted, charter schools were re-established, the curriculum was rewritten, NCEA was confirmed for replacement, school property management was moved to a new agency, and the vocational system was restructured again. Teachers, principals, unions and institutions challenged much of it in public.

Media coverage did not establish whether these changes improved learning. Only about one education headline in ten used outcome or measurement language of any kind—results, pass rates, achievement, data or evaluation. The share was lowest where public money and structural change were greatest: 2.7% of charter-school headlines, 3.4% of vocational headlines and 5.6% of university headlines. Of 252 headlines naming school lunches, 35 concerned contracts, suppliers or jobs and 23 concerned food safety; at most five connected lunches to learning, attendance or achievement. When the PISA 2025 results were released in September 2026, seven headlines covered them over two weeks; none linked the results to a specific reform.

The **strongest finding is a lack of continuity along the learner pathway.** Headlines commonly reported one stage—an announcement, a contract, a consultation, a strike or a restructure—without following it

through to teaching capacity, participation, learning, qualification and later opportunity. Responsibility was divided among ministers, the Ministry, ERO, NZQA, school boards, tertiary institutions and the Tertiary Education Commission, and no single institution was visibly accountable for the complete result.

These gaps leave five challenges requiring continuing scrutiny:

I. whether curriculum and qualification reforms improve learning for the students previously left behind, rather than simply changing what is taught and assessed;

II. whether higher attendance and school lunches translate into participation, wellbeing and learning, rather than compliance and contract management;

III. whether the teaching and learning-support workforce has the capacity to deliver reforms that arrived together;

IV. whether removing Treaty obligations and redirecting targeted funding narrows or widens gaps for Māori and Pacific learners; and

V. whether the restructured vocational and university sectors retain regional access, programmes and completion rates once they leave the headlines.

The report shows that education reform, and resistance to it, were made highly visible.

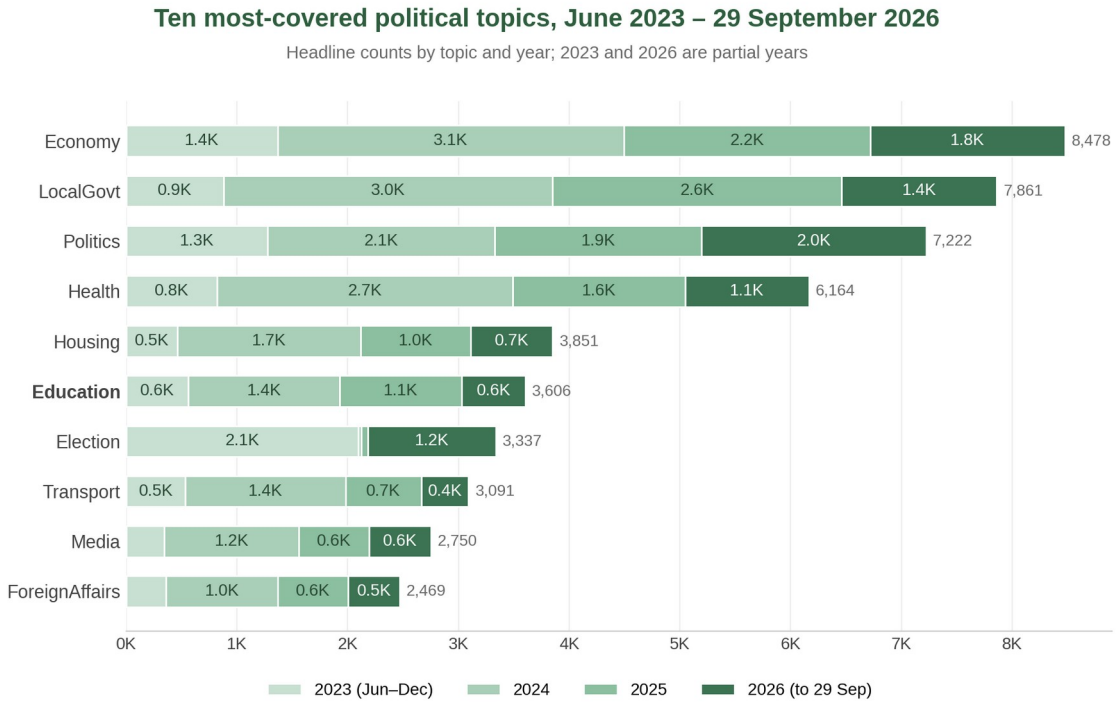
What the reporting did not resolve was whether more New Zealand learners were attending, learning and leaving education with a viable next step.

2 Background

2.1 Education is a persistent public issue

Education was one of the most consistently reported topics in the Social Herds headline record. Between 1 June 2023 and 29 September 2026, 3,606 of the 84,950 recorded headlines—4.2%—were classified under Education. There were 557 in the partial 2023 period, 1,372 in 2024, 1,102 in 2025 and 575 in 2026 to 29 September. Education ranked sixth by headline volume in 2023, seventh in 2024, fifth in 2025 and eighth in the partial 2026 period.

FIGURE 2
The prominence given to education by New Zealand media



RNZ carried the largest share with 970 education headlines, followed by the *New Zealand Herald* (465), *The Post* (417), Stuff (261) and the *Otago Daily Times* (251). Most coverage was conventional reporting: 2,717 headlines were classified as Reporting, 309 as Alarm, 305 as Analysis and 275 as Opinion. To 30 June 2026, only 59 headlines—1.8%—were coded as positive in direction.

The tone hardened over the period. Alarm-framed headlines rose to 12.9% of education coverage in 2026, compared with between 6.6% and 9.0% in earlier years. The negative-direction code does not show the same rise: 19.2% of education headlines were coded negative between January and June 2026, compared with 18.6% in 2024 and 23.9% in 2025. Its use changed across the whole dataset from July 2026, so later months are not compared (see Appendix). The paywalled share rose steadily, from 21.9% in 2023 to 33.7% in 2026. Frequency and tone do not prove that education worsened. They do show that **education remained a substantial and increasingly contested public issue, and that access to its coverage narrowed.**

2.2 One topic contains several education systems

Education is often discussed as though it were a single public service. In practice, early learning, compulsory schooling, tertiary study and vocational training have different providers, funders, measures and ministers. Parents of pre-schoolers need affordable, safe care. School students need to attend, be fed and supported, and learn. Teachers need workable reforms and pay. Tertiary students

need access and a pathway to work. Institutions need financial viability. Government must weigh cost, evidence and public expectation.

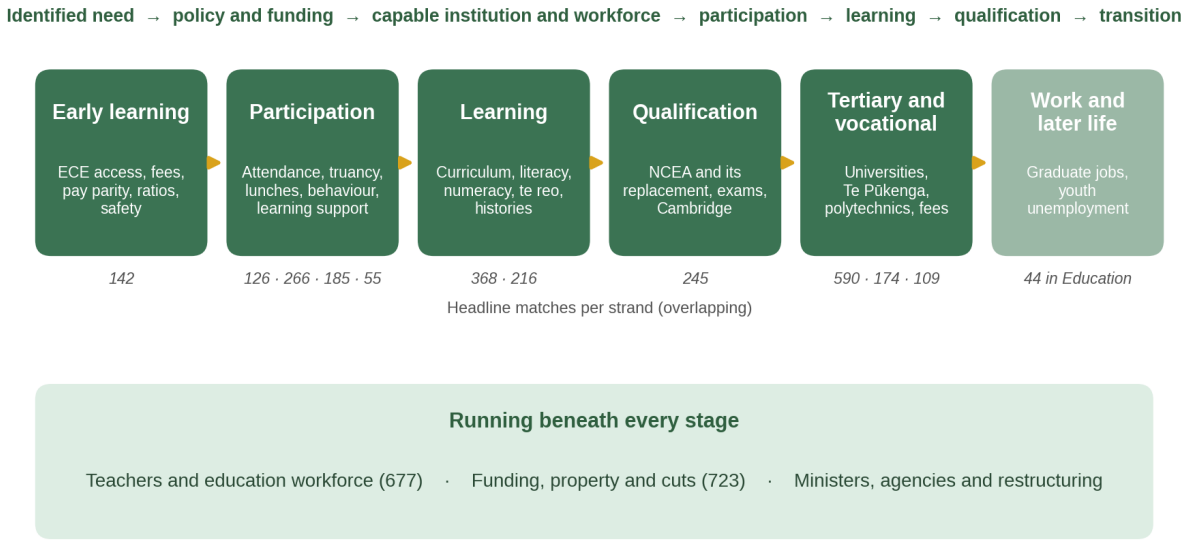
These expectations can reinforce one another, but they can also conflict. A more prescriptive curriculum may improve consistency while adding to teacher workload. Tighter attendance enforcement may lift the numbers while pushing the causes of absence out of view. Cheaper lunches may widen reach while reducing quality. Restructuring a polytechnic may restore its finances while removing a regional course.

The relevant question is not simply whether a reform raises standards. It is which learners it is meant to help, at which stage, through which institution, and how success will be measured.

FIGURE 3

New Zealand's education pathway as presented through the headlines

Each stage was reported; the connections between stages were reported far less often



Strand counts are directional keyword matches and overlap. The final stage draws on headlines within Education only.

2.2.1 The measurement gap

Media coverage and political claims did not consistently assess education against the same outcome. A curriculum could be announced, contested and implemented without later coverage testing whether students learned more. An attendance improvement could be reported without distinguishing better engagement from more effective enforcement. A lunch programme could be judged on price, contracts and mould rather than whether hungry children learned better.

To test this directly, headlines were searched for outcome or measurement language—results, pass rates, achievement, data, figures, surveys, evaluations, evidence, improvement or decline. Across all education headlines the share was 9.5%. It was highest for attendance (26.2%) and NCEA (20.0%), where official data are released regularly, and lowest for charter schools (2.7%), vocational education (3.4%) and universities (5.6%).

2.2.2 The international benchmarks

New Zealand does have independent, comparable measures of learning, but the headline record barely used them. The OECD's PISA assessment of 15-year-olds produced three headlines naming it when the 2022 results were released in December 2023, plus a Newsroom headline about the same "OECD

school tests". Nothing followed. The IEA's TIMSS and PIRLS studies of Year 5 and Year 9 students were not named in any headline.

The PISA 2025 results were released on 8 September 2026, late in the period covered. Seven headlines followed over two weeks, led by the *Herald*'s "PISA bombshell" analysis of post-Covid stabilisation and a narrowing equity gap (9 September), RNZ's report that New Zealand sat below a group of world leaders (9 September) and a further *Herald* analysis asking whether New Zealand children are bad at maths (12 September). **None of the seven headlines connected the results to a specific reform**—the curriculum rewrite, structured literacy, the cellphone ban or attendance enforcement—although each had been justified in part by earlier declines. That connection may appear in later coverage, but it was not part of the headline record at the close of the period.

> **Without consistent measures, reform activity can be reported as progress even when no one has shown that learners are attending more, learning more or leaving with better options.**

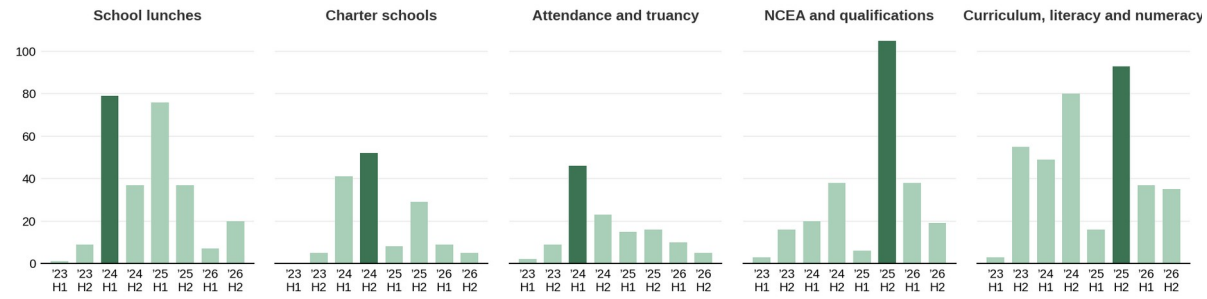
3 Schools: learning, participation and political contest

The school system generated the most concentrated political contest. Curriculum, NCEA, attendance, lunches and charter schools each became the subject of a distinct ministerial programme, and each peaked at a different moment. This sequencing matters: the public saw a series of separate fights rather than a single account of what the school system was being asked to achieve.

FIGURE 4

School debates peaked at different times

Headlines per half-year; darker bar marks each strand's peak. 2023 H1 is June only; 2026 H2 runs to 29 September



Strands overlap. Half-years are January–June (H1) and July–December (H2); 2026 H2 runs to 29 September.

3.1 Curriculum, literacy and numeracy

Curriculum, literacy and numeracy produced 368 headline matches: 58 in the partial 2023 period, 129 in 2024, 109 in 2025 and 72 in 2026. Within this strand, 111 headlines referred to literacy, reading, phonics or writing, 95 to mathematics or numeracy, and 31 to history.

The coverage followed a clear arc. In 2023, the leaked draft science curriculum drew criticism from teachers (RNZ, July 2023). In 2024, attention moved to structured literacy, phonics checks and a maths action plan. By late 2025, the story had become one of implementation strain: RNZ reported in October that hundreds of principals had urged the Minister to halt a "rushed" rollout, and *The Post* reported in November that primary principals were pushing pause on curriculum changes. In 2026, RNZ reported dozens of principal and teacher associations signing a letter opposing the curriculum changes, and *The Post* reported in July on errors in AI-assisted curriculum drafting.

Outcome evidence arrived in fragments. On consecutive days in May 2026, the *Herald* reported encouraging new maths results while RNZ reported that fewer than half of five-year-olds passed the new phonics check after a year of school. Both are legitimate early measures. Neither was connected in the headlines to a baseline, a target or a later follow-up. The one headline that tested a claim of success directly came at the end of the period: *The Post* reported on 29 September 2026 that the Government's claim of "transformational" literacy gains rested on data from 14% of schools.

> **The curriculum debate was conducted mostly as a dispute about content and pace. Whether the new curriculum is improving reading, writing and mathematics—and for whom—had barely begun to be tested in the headlines.**

3.2 NCEA: from declining results to replacement

NCEA was named in 175 education headlines: 13 in 2023, 36 in 2024, 88 in 2025 and 38 in 2026. Before the replacement was announced, coverage concentrated on falling results, failures in online exams and the new literacy and numeracy co-requisite. RNZ reported in December 2024 that 45% of students had

failed that year's online literacy and numeracy tests, and the *Herald* and RNZ reported in November 2024 that ERO had found the revised Level 1 was not working.

The replacement announcement on 5 August 2025 produced the sharpest single-issue burst in the education record: 33 NCEA headlines on 5–6 August and 54 between 5 and 15 August. Coverage then turned to process and division. Newsroom reported nearly 90 principals pleading for the Government to stop a "politically driven" replacement; RNZ reported principals polarised; and four headlines concerned Labour's education spokesperson not responding to briefing invitations. The replacement was confirmed in March and May 2026.

The record shows that the problem with NCEA was widely accepted, but not how the replacement would address it. In July and August 2026, RNZ reported a fall in the pass rate for the critical numeracy test, the *Herald* reported that improvements in NCEA results were undercut by a "long tail of failure", and an RNZ-reported survey found most teachers wanted NCEA improved, not removed. In late August, the *Herald* reported that NCEA underachievement was bigger than previously thought and worsening, and RNZ reported schools adopting an NCEA alternative as the number of unqualified school leavers rose. In September, a PPTA report projected that the replacement would fail more students—the *Herald* put the figure at 14,930 Level 2 students—and the *Herald* and Stuff reported the Minister accusing the union of a "defence of mediocrity". The contest over likely outcomes had begun before the replacement was introduced.

Analysis existed—but readers had to assemble it

Explanatory material was available but fragmented. In 2025–26, 20 NCEA headlines were classified as Analysis—eight free and 12 paywalled—and seven as Opinion, of which three were free and four paywalled. Free analysis included *The Conversation*'s pieces on why NCEA was introduced and on the influence of Cambridge, Stuff's account of how NCEA's flexibility was being gamed, and RNZ's explainers on the replacement and on how schools would decide between academic and vocational paths. Paywalled analysis included the *Herald*'s assessment of who might "fall through the cracks", its account of why principals were split and *The Post*'s examination of why abandoning NCEA was not clear-cut.

A determined reader could build a reasonably full picture from free sources. It required knowing which questions to ask and searching across outlets. Someone following one free outlet was unlikely to see the whole argument—what was changing, what the old qualification had been designed to do, which students were at risk and whether schools could deliver the new system. This assessment is based on headlines and access classification, not on the full text of each article.

3.3 Māori education: learning issue and constitutional argument

A broad search for Māori education, te reo Māori, kura, Treaty and related terms identified 216 headlines. Within these, 41 referred to the Treaty or Te Tiriti—27 of them in 2025—and 25 to te reo Māori.

Coverage clustered around decisions about authority and content rather than learning results. RNZ reported in June 2025 that Māori and Pacific learners had been removed from extra education funding priorities, and in August 2025 that the Minister had cut Māori words from future junior readers. Late 2025 was dominated by the removal of Treaty obligations from school boards: RNZ reported that ministers had been warned against the change, and the *Otago Daily Times* reported that schools opposed it. In December 2025, RNZ reported the Minister's claim that the shift from a Treaty focus to closing the achievement gap was "paying off". In May 2026, Waatea News reported Labour pledging to restore the commitments.

That claim created a clear accountability test: if the achievement gap is now the measure, it should be reported against. The headline record contained few such measures. One exception was RNZ's report in October 2024 that kaupapa Māori students were more likely to gain NCEA merit and excellence

endorsements—an outcome finding that received little follow-up. Another came in August 2026, when Newsroom reported that record school attendance masked a persistent gap for Māori students.

3.4 Attendance and lunches: participation before attainment

Attendance and truancy produced 126 headline matches and school lunches 266, with 252 headlines naming lunches directly. The two belong together analytically: curriculum reform cannot help a child who is absent or hungry.

Attendance

Attendance was the most measurement-heavy school strand. Thirty-six headlines referred to rates, data, improvement or decline, compared with 18 emphasising fines, prosecution or crackdowns and 15 referring to causes such as illness, poverty, transport, disability or mental health. Coverage moved from alarm—RNZ reported in October 2024 ERO's finding that chronic absence had reached "crisis levels"—to improvement, with RNZ reporting in August 2025 that term-two attendance had reached a three-year high.

The causal story was thinner. The *Herald* reported in September 2025 that one in four schools was struggling to meet the Government's goal, and RNZ reported in June 2025 that there was little evidence the schools' truancy fund had worked. In April 2026, RNZ reported a parent being prosecuted over a child's absence, and in August RNZ reported that school absences due to illness were at their highest level in three years. Headlines showed that attendance was rising and enforcement was increasing. They did not establish how much of the improvement came from enforcement, from reduced illness or from changes in engagement.

School lunches

Lunches became one of the clearest event-driven stories in the dataset. Coverage moved from proposed funding cuts in March 2024 to the cheaper model announced in May 2024—22 lunch headlines between 9 and 13 May—and then to the contract won by a consortium led by a global catering company in October 2024. The rollout in February 2025 produced 47 lunch headlines in a single month, 25 of them framed as Alarm: late and missing deliveries, repetitive and burnt meals, "halal-friendly" meals containing ham, and an MPI investigation of the provider. Later in 2025, the story was about complaints, a dead larva, waste and the exclusion of Compass from the next round. In December 2025, mouldy lunches at Christchurch's Haeata Community Campus became a public dispute between the school and the Associate Minister. In July 2026, 15 lunch headlines appeared in ten days after the Auditor-General's review; *The Post* reported that only half of the meals served in 2025 had met health and nutrition standards.

The coverage scrutinised procurement, price and food safety in detail. Of the 252 lunch headlines, 35 concerned contracts, suppliers, tenders or jobs, 29 cost or funding, 23 food safety and contamination, 15 nutrition standards and seven waste. **At most five connected lunches to learning, attendance or achievement**—the purpose the programme was meant to serve.

3.5 Charter schools

Charter schools produced 149 headline matches, 93 of them in 2024. Coverage followed the policy from the coalition agreement through $153 million of Budget funding (RNZ, May 2024), Cabinet papers warning of higher costs and marginal benefits (RNZ, May 2024), the bill's final reading (RNZ, September 2024) and the announcement of the first schools. Unions and Labour opposed the model throughout.

By 2026, the questions had shifted to delivery. The *Herald* reported in January that the Associate Minister had found converting state schools tougher than expected, RNZ reported in November 2025 that the Kelston Boys' High School conversion bid had been abandoned, RNZ reported in July 2026 that no independent testing was planned for charter-school students, and in September that two former

charter schools were under scrutiny for growing debt and illegal board appointments. Only 2.7% of charter-school headlines used outcome language. The central accountability question—whether charter students learn more than comparable students elsewhere—was barely visible.

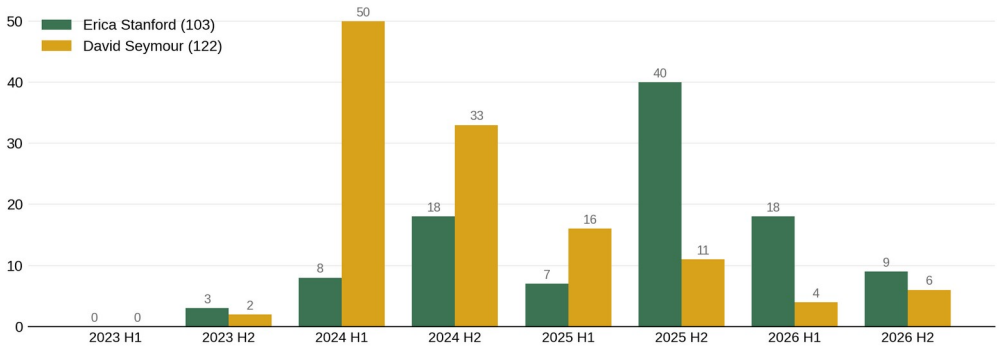
3.6 Stanford and Seymour were not interchangeable

Erica Stanford was named in 103 education headlines and David Seymour in 122, but in different policy spaces and at different times. Seymour's visibility was concentrated in 2024 (83 headlines), and across the period he was associated most with lunches (36 matches), charter schools (31) and attendance (17). Stanford's visibility peaked in 2025 (47 headlines), associated with curriculum (23), NCEA (17) and Māori education and the Treaty (17).

FIGURE 5

Two ministers, two different education debates

Education headlines naming each minister, by half-year



Treating this simply as "government education policy" would conceal two distinct agendas. Seymour's programme was about choice, compliance and cost; Stanford's was about content, standards and qualifications. Each generated a different kind of contest—and each should be assessed against its own stated outcome.

What was done	The Government changed curriculum, assessment, attendance and lunch settings, re-established charter schools, confirmed NCEA's replacement and removed Treaty obligations from school boards.
What received scrutiny	Implementation pace, consultation, lunch contracts and food safety, charter-school costs, ministerial conduct and the place of Māori knowledge all attracted sustained coverage.
What remained under the radar	Whether the combined changes improved learning and participation; whether attendance gains reflected engagement or enforcement; and whether lunches or charter schools improved outcomes for the students they were meant to reach.
The accountability test	For each reform: the learner group, intended outcome, baseline, delivery institution, timetable and measure of sustained improvement.

4 Workforce, behaviour and learning support

Every school reform depends on the people who deliver it. Coverage of the education workforce was substantial but was more often framed as an industrial dispute than as a question of whether the system had the capacity to implement change.

4.1 The workforce is the delivery mechanism

Teacher, principal, union and workforce terms produced 677 overlapping matches. A narrower search for strikes, pay offers, collective agreements and union activity identified 120 headlines: 23 in 2023, 31 in 2024, 46 in 2025 and 20 in 2026.

2025 was the peak. Stuff reported in May that Ministry of Education staff would strike for the first time in two decades; *The Press* reported in July that 2,300 learning-support staff would strike; RNZ reported in August that secondary teachers were striking over an "insulting" 1% pay offer, and in October the start of seven days of secondary strike action. Shortages also appeared: the *Northern Advocate* reported in August 2025 that Northland schools were rostering students home, and the *Herald* reported in March 2026 PPTA warnings that booming rolls and immigration were fuelling a teacher shortage.

A few headlines made the delivery connection explicit. *The Post* asked in August 2025 whether a new curriculum would add to the pressure of staff shortages, and reported a parent's concern about NCEA changes landing on an "overworked" teacher workforce. These were exceptions. **Pay disputes and reform programmes were reported in parallel, but seldom as a single question of capacity.**

4.2 Behaviour, safety and cellphones

Behaviour, safety and cellphones produced 185 matches. Cellphones accounted for 47 headlines, 25 of them in 2023 when National announced the ban. The cellphone story is one of the few in the record with visible follow-through: RNZ reported in December 2023 that the Ministry had advised there was "marginal" evidence for the ban, and in November 2025 that a review had found it was working.

Physical behaviour moved in and out of view. RNZ reported in March 2024 that stand-down rates were the highest in 20 years; the *Herald* reported in July 2026 that student assaults had hit a record high. In the week of 3 August 2026, 13 headlines followed ACT's proposal to allow teachers to use "reasonable force" and the response to it. Newsroom and *The Post* reported teachers' response that rising assault stand-downs required support, not force—but the causes of the rise were less visible than the proposal. Stuff's analysis of "the stark education numbers" behind the proposal (18 August 2026) was a rare attempt to supply them.

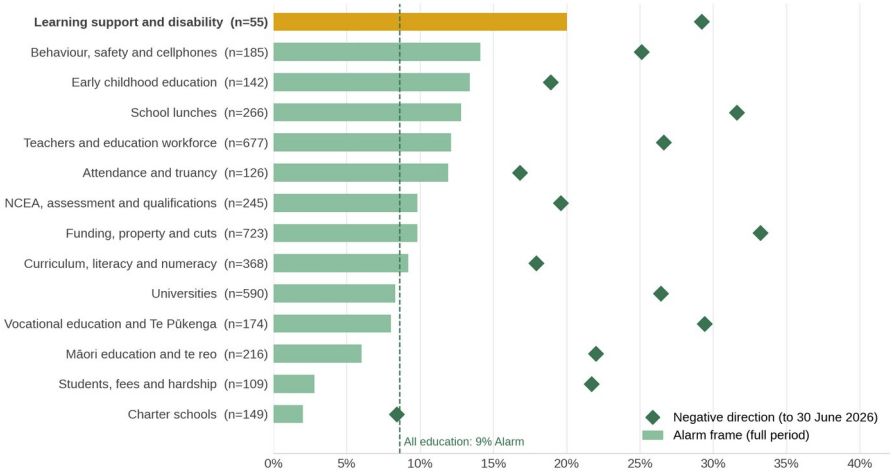
4.3 Learning support: small signals, large gaps

Learning support and disability produced only 55 matches, yet they carried the sharpest signal: 20.0% were framed as Alarm, the highest share of any strand, and, to 30 June 2026, 29.2% were negative, against 8.6% and 21.5% for education overall.

FIGURE 6

Small strands can carry the sharpest signals

Share of each strand's headlines coded Alarm (bars) and Negative (diamonds)



Negative direction is measured to 30 June 2026 because the code's use changed across the dataset from July 2026.

Coverage reported a $646 million learning-support boost (1News, May 2025) alongside continuing shortfalls. *The Press* reported in October 2025 that more than 5,000 children were waiting for specialist learning support; RNZ reported in February 2026 that some teacher aides were working two jobs; *The Post* reported in May 2026 that one school had been forced to choose between a heat pump and a teacher aide, and in September 2026 that learning-support demand had blown past the Government's forecast. Funding announcements and shortfalls appeared as separate stories. The headlines did not establish whether the new funding reduced waiting times or improved support.

Low volume should not be read as low importance. A national average can improve while learners with complex needs wait for assessment, cannot access a suitable school or depend on precariously funded support.

4.4 Early childhood education

Early childhood education produced 142 matches—and 39.4% were paywalled, the second-highest share of any strand. Coverage concerned fees, the FamilyBoost rebate, pay parity, ratios and a regulation review. Two headlines illustrate the measurement gap. The *Herald* reported in July 2025 that just 153 families were receiving the maximum FamilyBoost credit, and Newsroom reported in July 2026 that officials admitted there was no evidence behind childcare staffing ratios. Between them, they show a policy measured by uptake and a safety standard that had not been measured at all.

4.5 Funding, property and the Ministry

Funding, property and cuts produced the largest strand, with 723 matches. School property was a distinct story: the *Herald* reported in February 2024 the Prime Minister's announcement of an independent review of school property; RNZ reported in July 2024 that 100 building projects had been put on ice; and RNZ reported in July 2025 the creation of a new agency to manage school property, followed by $413 million of upgrades in September 2025. Property coverage made cost control visible. Whether cheaper, standardised builds met demand in growth areas was less clear.

What was done	Pay rounds were negotiated amid strikes; learning-support funding was increased; a cellphone ban was introduced; ECE funding and rules were reviewed; school property was moved to a new agency.
What received scrutiny	Strikes, pay offers, behaviour, the reasonable-force proposal, learning-support waits, ECE safety and school-building delays.
What remained under the radar	Whether the workforce had the capacity to deliver simultaneous reforms; why assaults and stand-downs were rising; and whether new learning-support funding reduced waits.
The accountability test	Report workforce supply, learning-support waiting times and behaviour data alongside each reform that depends on them.

5 Tertiary and vocational education

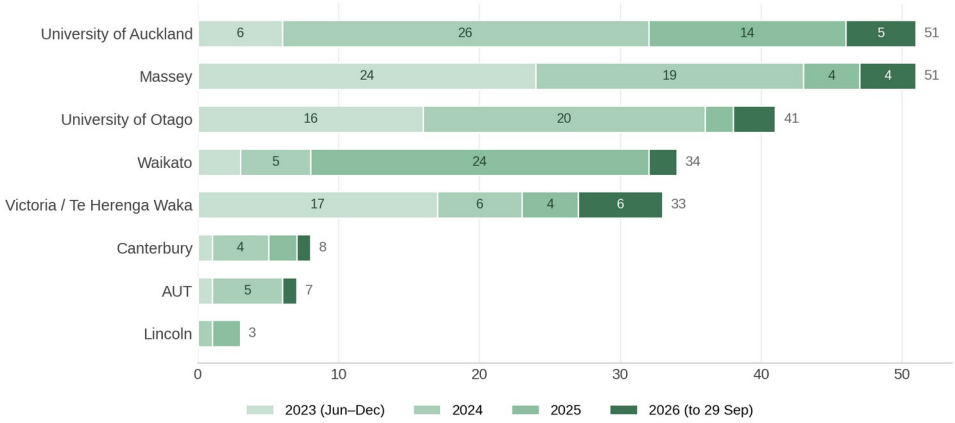
5.1 Universities appeared as separate institutions, not one sector

Universities generated 590 headline matches, concentrated in 2023 (141) and 2024 (244). A search for university cuts, job losses and deficits identified 81 headlines, 52 of them in 2023, when RNZ reported Victoria University axing 229 jobs and six courses and the Manawatū Standard followed Massey's redundancies.

FIGURE 7

Universities appeared one institution at a time

Education headlines explicitly naming each university, by year



Explicit naming only; local shorthand and campus names may understate Canterbury and Lincoln.

Attention was uneven and institution-specific. Massey appeared through restructuring and regional provision, Victoria through job cuts and finances, Otago through deficits and student life, and Auckland through academic freedom and campus disputes. Waikato was almost entirely a medical-school story: 47 headlines referred to a medical school, 40 of them in 2025, when the *Herald* reported the Government's $230 million commitment. Other system-level stories were brief: the Marsden Fund changes produced 14 headlines, all in 2024, and fees-free produced 35, of which 23 came in 2026 after the *Herald* reported that the scheme would be scrapped.

The record showed institutions under financial strain. RNZ reported in August 2024 that university finances were worse than they appeared and that two universities were at high risk. It did not show a sustained account of the sector as a whole—how many places, programmes and staff New Zealand needs, and whether cuts at one institution are offset elsewhere.

5.2 Te Pūkenga as a continuity test

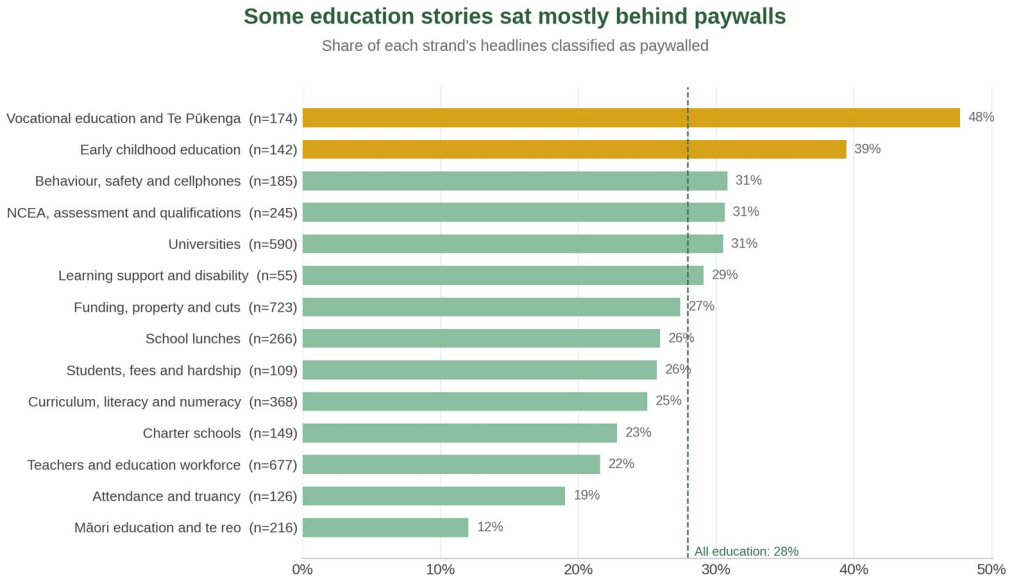
Te Pūkenga was named in 66 headlines: 18 in 2023, 31 in 2024, 17 in 2025 and none in 2026. Polytechnics were named in 76, peaking at 38 in 2025. The vocational strand as a whole produced 174 matches, but only 12 in 2026.

Coverage followed the institution to its end. Headlines reported deficits, executive pay, cost-cutting and asset sales; The Post reported the break-up in December 2023; and RNZ reported in July 2025 that ten polytechnics would return to regional governance. Staff distress, course losses and campus closures were visible, including forestry, agriculture and creative programmes. Then the coverage largely stopped. In December 2025 RNZ reported the first council appointments after Te Pūkenga; in July 2026 Newsroom reported officials warning that polytechnics were at risk. The first outcome signals arrived only at the end of the period: RNZ reported on 31 August 2026 that university enrolments

were rising while trades training struggled, and on 4 September that apprenticeship numbers had hit a 15-year low. Neither headline connected the figures to the restructuring.

Access narrowed the story further. Vocational education had the highest paywalled share of any strand, at 47.7%. The *Otago Daily Times* carried 41 vocational headlines, of which 36 were paywalled; RNZ carried 55, all free.

FIGURE 8



The structural decision was reported. Whether learners and employers kept access to programmes, staff and qualifications in the regions once the new polytechnics began has not yet been tested.

5.3 Education does not end at graduation

The pathway from education to work was barely visible within the Education category. A tight search for graduates, school leavers, apprentices, trainees and youth unemployment found 44 education headlines. A further 14 were filed under Employment, Economy, Labour Market and Welfare, mostly concerned with young people unable to find work. Newsroom reported in March 2026 that joblessness was making new graduates question the worth of university; RNZ reported the same month that graduates were being "pushed, not pulled" to Australia.

A report filtered only to Education would miss much of this. Student loans became the clearest bridge late in the period: 31 education headlines referred to loans, 20 of them in 2026, as National proposed lower repayments for graduates who stay in New Zealand (31 August) and Labour proposed writing off 10% of some balances (28 September). Both were framed around the brain drain. Even so, debates about qualification design and tertiary restructuring ran largely separately from reports about whether young people could use their qualifications.

What was done	Te Pūkenga was dismantled and regional polytechnics restored; universities cut staff and programmes; the Waikato medical school was approved; fees-free was ended.
What received scrutiny	Deficits, job cuts, course closures, academic freedom, executive pay, the medical-school business case and the end of fees-free.
What remained under the radar	Regional access and programme continuity after restructuring; completion; whether training matched workforce demand; and what happened to graduates.
The accountability test	Funded place → enrolment → completion → destination → employment and earnings, by region and field of study.

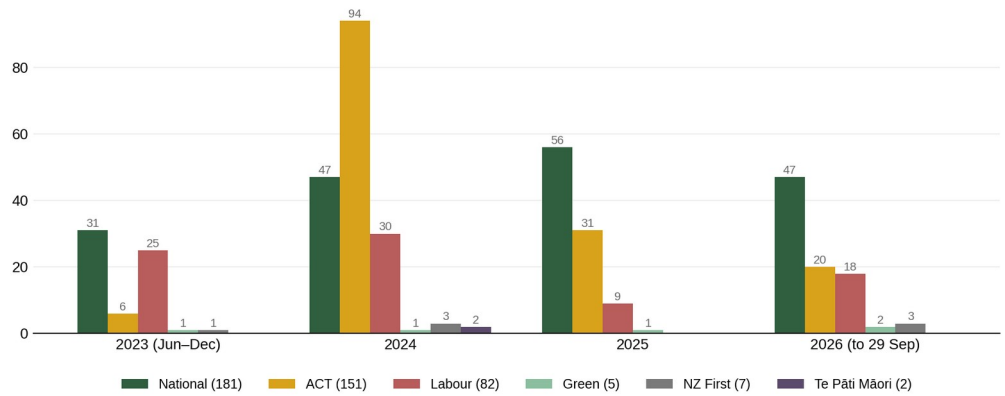
6 Education as a political contest

Education coverage was politically lopsided. National and its ministers were associated with 181 headlines and ACT with 151, compared with 82 for Labour, seven for New Zealand First, five for the Greens and two for Te Pāti Māori.

FIGURE 9

Party-associated education headlines

Headlines naming a party or a leading party figure; directional name-matching, not schema coding



Directional name-matching of party names and leading party figures; headlines can name more than one party.

ACT's visibility peaked at 94 headlines in 2024, driven by Seymour's lunches, charter-school and attendance programmes. National's rose to 56 in 2025 with the NCEA and curriculum reforms. Labour's fell from 30 in 2024 to nine in 2025: in the year NCEA's replacement was announced, its most concentrated education coverage concerned its spokesperson's failure to respond to briefing offers. Labour's visibility recovered to 18 in 2026, 11 of them after mid-August as the election campaign began. It pledged to pause the curriculum overhaul and NCEA changes, create a body to oversee curriculum and assessment, reinstate climate change in the curriculum and write off 10% of some student loans. National campaigned on lower loan repayments for graduates who stay, and a ban on screens in early childhood education.

The contest therefore centred on government decisions rather than competing plans:

- charter schools, which Labour said it would abolish again;
- school lunches, their cost, suppliers and food safety;
- attendance enforcement and prosecution of parents;
- the replacement of NCEA and the pace of curriculum change;
- the removal of Treaty obligations, which Labour pledged to restore;
- ACT's 2026 "reasonable force" proposal for disruptive students; and
- in the 2026 campaign, Labour's pledge to pause the curriculum and NCEA changes, and competing student-loan policies.

Peaks in the graph measure visibility, not the quality of proposals. Headlines reported announcements, criticism and disagreement, but rarely compared parties against a common test: what each would do to raise achievement, who would benefit, what it would cost and how progress would be measured.

What was done	The governing parties advanced distinct education programmes; opposition parties opposed individual reforms.
What received scrutiny	Ministerial decisions and conduct dominated. Opposition policy was visible mainly as reaction until the 2026 campaign, when Labour proposed pausing the reforms.
What remained under the radar	What a pause would replace the reforms with, alternative plans for achievement, attendance and the workforce, and the evidence behind them.
The accountability test	Whether each party offers a funded, measurable pathway from identified need to improved learning.

7 What the headline frames reveal

Reporting dominated, accounting for 2,717 of the 3,606 headlines. Analysis (305) and Opinion (275) together made up 16.1%. The accountability tags identified 200 capability signals, 130 pressure signals, 53 governance signals and 41 integrity signals; because coding is less complete in earlier years, these are minimum counts and not a clean trend.

The strand profile shows where coverage tested results and where it did not.

Strand	Headlines	Alarm	Negative*	Paywalled	Outcome language
Attendance and truancy	126	11.9%	16.8%	19.0%	26.2%
NCEA, assessment and qualifications	245	9.8%	19.6%	30.6%	20.0%
Students, fees and hardship	109	2.8%	21.7%	25.7%	17.4%
Behaviour, safety and cellphones	185	14.1%	25.1%	30.8%	15.7%
Learning support and disability	55	20.0%	29.2%	29.1%	12.7%
Curriculum, literacy and numeracy	368	9.2%	17.9%	25.0%	12.5%
Teachers and education workforce	677	12.1%	26.6%	21.6%	11.1%
Early childhood education	142	13.4%	18.9%	39.4%	9.9%
School lunches	266	12.8%	31.6%	25.9%	7.5%
Māori education and te reo	216	6.0%	22.0%	12.0%	6.9%
Funding, property and cuts	723	9.8%	33.2%	27.4%	6.8%
Universities	590	8.3%	26.4%	30.5%	5.6%
Vocational education and Te Pūkenga	174	8.0%	29.4%	47.7%	3.4%
Charter schools	149	2.0%	8.4%	22.8%	2.7%
All education	3,606	8.6%	21.5%	27.9%	9.5%

**Negative direction measured to 30 June 2026. Strands overlap. "Outcome language" is a directional keyword search for results, pass rates, achievement, data, figures, surveys, evaluation, evidence, improvement or decline.*

The distribution suggests a familiar gap. Education generated sustained reporting, but a much smaller share explicitly tested whether a reform or institution had produced the result it promised. Where official data arrive on a regular schedule—attendance and NCEA—coverage measured more. Where change was structural or contractual—charter schools, polytechnics, universities and lunches—it measured least.

Following responsibility over time would require the media to return to five sequences:

- **Curriculum:** announcement → teacher preparation → classroom use → assessed learning.
- **Attendance:** target → school response → barriers addressed → regular participation → attainment.
- **School lunches:** procurement → delivery quality → uptake → nutrition and safety → learning and wellbeing.
- **Vocational reform:** structural decision → transition → programme continuity → completion → employer outcomes.
- **Learning support:** identified need → assessment → funded support → access → progress.

8 Conclusion

The headline record explains why education remained prominent in New Zealand's public debate. It showed a government moving on almost every front at once—curriculum, qualifications, attendance, lunches, charter schools, property, vocational education and Treaty settings—and teachers, principals, unions and institutions contesting much of it in public. It also exposed disagreement about what success should mean: higher standards, more rigour, better attendance, lower cost, more choice or narrower achievement gaps.

The central weakness was not an absence of reform or of reporting. It was the difficulty of connecting reform to learning. The system contained many decision-makers, many measures and many announcements, but lacked a consistently visible line of accountability from the identified problem to the learner who was meant to benefit. Only about one headline in ten used any outcome language, and the share was lowest where the structural change was greatest.

Future scrutiny should concentrate on a small number of connected measures:

- regular attendance and its causes, not only its rate;
- literacy, numeracy and qualification results for the students previously left behind, including Māori, Pacific and low-income learners;
- teacher and learning-support capacity relative to the reforms being implemented;
- learning-support waiting times and access;
- the results of charter schools and school lunches against their stated purpose;
- regional access, programme continuity and completion after tertiary restructuring; and
- what happens to school leavers and graduates.

Media organisations have an important continuing role. Individual headlines exposed failing lunch contracts, rushed consultations, strained learning support and institutional crises. Stronger accountability will require following those stories over time: returning to commitments, distinguishing implementation from outcome and testing claims of success against the learners they concern.

Political parties should be assessed against the same standard. The relevant question is not which party generates the most education headlines or announces the most reforms. It is which proposals form a credible, funded pathway from identified need to improved learning—and make clear who is responsible if that pathway fails.

> **New Zealand does not lack education reforms or education news. What it still needs is continuity: between reform and teaching capacity, between participation and learning, and between leaving school and a viable next step.**

9 What education policies need to cover

The findings in this report provide a common test for assessing education policies across parties. A credible policy need not solve every problem through one programme, but it should identify the problem it addresses, connect its intervention to a deliverable outcome and make its costs and risks visible.

9.1 Define the problem, the learners affected and the stage

State whether the policy addresses early learning, attendance, literacy and numeracy, qualification design, learning support, behaviour, tertiary access or the transition to work. Quantify the starting position and identify the learners and places affected.

9.2 Show the pathway from policy to learning

Distinguish announcement, legislation, funding and implementation from changes in learning. Set out the steps from policy through teacher preparation and classroom practice to measured progress, and state when results are expected.

9.3 Resource the workforce

Identify the teachers, principals, teacher aides, specialists and tertiary staff needed to deliver the policy, where they will come from and what else they will be asked to do at the same time.

9.4 Measure participation, not only presence

For attendance, lunches and learning support, report whether children are present, fed and supported, and whether that participation translates into engagement and learning. Explain causes of absence alongside enforcement.

9.5 Protect equity and continuity through structural change

Where schools, qualifications or tertiary institutions are restructured, show how Māori, Pacific, disabled, rural and low-income learners will be protected, and how programme access and completion will be maintained during transition.

9.6 Make delivery and outcomes accountable

Name the organisation responsible for each stage, publish milestones and funding, and report against comparable measures over time. The accountability chain should run from identified need to policy, funded programme, capable institution, participation, learning or completion, and the learner's next step.

Applied consistently, this test allows different political approaches to be compared without assuming that one model of schooling, provision or assessment is inherently correct. It asks whether each proposal is matched to an evidenced need and offers a credible, funded and accountable route to better learning.

10 Appendix: scope and method

10.1 Source data

The source is the Social Herds headline workbook (tbl_data_raw_AllData_2026.xlsx), built from the Democracy Project's daily news briefings and classified under the SocialHerd schema. The version analysed contains 84,950 headlines from 1 June 2023 to 29 September 2026. The education subset comprises the 3,606 headlines with Education as the parent topic.

10.2 Limits

- **Unit of analysis:** the headline, not the full article. Counts measure visibility and repetition, not readership, persuasion or the quality of the underlying reporting.
- **Partial years:** 2023 runs from June and 2026 to 29 September. January and March 2025 are only partly covered in the source data, which affects year-on-year comparisons.
- **Direction coding:** the share of headlines coded Negative rose sharply across the whole dataset from July 2026 (from about 16–20% of all headlines to 42–51%), which indicates a change in classification rather than in coverage alone. For education, 19.2% of headlines were coded negative in January–June 2026 and 51.0% in July–September. This report therefore measures negative and positive direction to 30 June 2026 and uses the Alarm frame, which did not change in the same way, as its main measure of tone.
- **Strands:** education strands were identified by keyword searches of headline text and the Child and Subcategory fields. Headlines can match several strands, so strand counts should not be added together. Counts are directional.
- **Outcome language:** a directional keyword search for results, pass rates, achievement, data, figures, surveys, evaluation, evidence, improvement or decline. It identifies headlines that signal measurement; it does not assess whether the underlying article measured outcomes well.
- **Party and minister visibility:** based on name-matching of party names and leading party figures in headline text, not on schema coding. Treat as directional.
- **Accountability tags:** the Flag field is less completely coded in earlier years, so tag counts are minimums.
- **External data:** this report does not incorporate official achievement, attendance or tertiary statistics. Where such figures appear, they are as reported in headlines.