He Taonga Te Reo

A paper from Te Huarahi Māori Motuhake



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Recommendations

1. That the paper be received; and
2. That PPTA calls on the Minister of Education to explain how the changes to the renewed curriculum will generate equitable opportunities for Māori to achieve as Māori; and
3. That PPTA calls on the Minister of Education to explain how the renewed curriculum will serve to meet our Te Tiriti obligations to protect and foster te reo me ōna tikanga in general stream classrooms where 97% of rangatahi Māori sit; and
4. That PPTA commissions Kaupapa Māori research to understand the lived experiences of kaiako, ākonga and their whānau in relation to the teaching and learning of Te Reo Māori me ōna tikanga in New Zealand schools, and that this is properly funded and a date set for the research to be reported back.

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1 Introduction

Ko tōku reo tōku ohooho, ko tōku reo tōku māpihi maurea, ko tōku reo tōku whakakai marihi.

My language is my awakening, my language is the window to my soul, my language is the ornament of my aspirations.

1.1. Historically, the education system in New Zealand was used as a tool of assimilation that suppressed te reo Māori. Colonial education policies, including the Native Schools system, promoted English-only instruction and discouraged Māori language use, positioning English as the language of "civilisation" [1] and success.

1.2. The effects were severe. In the early twentieth century, most Māori children were fluent speakers of te reo Māori, but by the 1970s the language had drastically declined. Dr. Richard Benton's research showed that fewer than 20 percent of Māori children could speak te reo Māori fluently.[2] The findings showed that te reo Māori use was in rapid decline and in danger of disappearing.

1.3. In response, Māori communities led a powerful movement for language revitalisation. The 1972 Māori Language Petition, signed by more than 30,000 people[3], demanded that te reo Māori be taught in schools and marked a turning point in the public recognition of language loss and subsequently the beginning of revitalisation efforts.

1.4. In 1986 the Waitangi Tribunal affirmed in the Wai 11 Te Reo Māori claim[4] that te reo Māori is a taonga protected under Article 2 of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and that the Crown has an active duty to protect and promote the language.

1.5. The Māori Language Act 1987[5] marked a critical turning point. It affirmed te reo Māori as an official language of Aotearoa New Zealand and recognised it as a taonga protected under Te Tiriti o Waitangi. This milestone was not an act of goodwill by the Crown, but the result of persistent activism and advocacy.

1.6. In response from Māori communities, grassroots Māori-medium education pathways[6] included Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust, Kura Kaupapa Māori, and Wharekura. These initiatives became central to restoring and strengthening te reo Māori, particularly among younger generations, and demonstrated the determination of Māori communities to reclaim and protect their language for future generations.

[1] https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/te-kaharoa/index.php/tekaharoa/article/view/117/108

[2] https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/maori-language-dying-or-reviving From 1973 to 1979, Dr Richard Benton and his team interviewed 6,470 Māori families throughout the North Island of New Zealand. A total of 6,916 household heads took part in the survey, supplying extensive information about their knowledge of the language,

[3] https://teara.govt.nz/en/te-reo-maori-the-maori-language/page-4 In 1972 Ngā Tamatoa and the Te Reo Māori Society collected over 30,000 signatures on a petition to Parliament calling for the government to offer Māori language in schools.

[4] The Report of the Waitangi Tribunal on The Te Reo Māori Claim. https://www.waitangitribunal.govt.nz/en/reports-and-documents?Query=The+Report+of+the+Waitangi+Tribunal+on+The+Te+Reo+Māori+Claim.+&action_search=Search&WaiNumber=&Roi=&PublishedFrom=&PublishedTo=&Type= https://www.waitangitribunal.govt.nz/en/reports-and-documents?

[5] The Māori language Act (1987) https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1987/176/en/latest/#DLM124116

[6] New Zealand History https://nzhistory.govt.nz/women-together/te-kohanga-reo

2 Government Undermining of Te Reo Māori 'Active Protection'

2.1 We are witnessing the current government drive a wave of curriculum, legislative, and policy reforms that weaken, remove, and diminish Crown obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi, including its responsibility to actively protect and promote te reo Māori.

2.2 Recent education and legislative reforms signal a significant shift away from Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations and the protection of te reo Māori within education. The Ministry of Education confirmed that legislative amendments removed the explicit obligation for school boards to "give effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi." 7

2.3 Currently, the Education and Training (systems reform) Amendment Bill8 will overhaul the New Zealand education system by centralizing regulation, establishing new property and oversight agencies, and expanding charter schools.

2.4 In the Department Report to the select committee, overwhelming opposition from submitters put forward a strong case for parliament not to proceed with many of the proposals.

2.5 Many submitters argued the Bill weakens Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations and minimises Māori voice in education. They also criticised the lack of meaningful engagement with iwi, hapū, and Māori education stakeholders, viewing it as a breach of the Crown's partnership obligations.

2.6 PPTA Te Wehengarua claimants in the Wai 3553 claim argue Te Mātaiaho changes actively dismantle structures designed to support and protect te reo Māori and mātauranga Māori in education.

2.7 Te Mātaiaho (2025) and the refreshed curriculum further reduce the mana of te reo Māori, mātauranga Māori, tikanga and Te Tiriti across learning areas, repositioning Māori knowledge as supplementary rather than foundational.

2.8 The original 2023 Te Mātaiaho refresh was viewed by many as a move toward a more equitable and Tiriti-honouring curriculum that centred Māori knowledge systems and decolonised educational delivery.

2.9 Critics including Bruce Jepsen and Dr Therese Ford of Te Akatea (Writers of 2023 version) described the 2025 revision as a significant shift toward prescription, standardisation, and the reassertion of Eurocentric knowledge systems- one that privileges Eurocentric pedagogy and epistemology over the original intent.9

2.10 These changes shift te reo Māori from a Tiriti-protected responsibility to a more optional, less visible, and increasingly marginalised presence within education and public life.

2.11 It is unacceptable that te reo Māori is not available and readily accessible for ākonga wanting to learn te reo Māori.

[7] https://www.teaonews.co.nz/2025/11/11/school-boards-no-longer-required-to-give-effect-to-te-tiriti-minister-set-to-explain-to-iwi-leaders/

[8] https://www.legislation.govt.nz/bill/government/2025/228/en/latest/

[9] https://www.teaonews.co.nz/2025/11/04/school-curriculum-will-perpetuate-racism-and-ongoing-inequity-in-our-schools/

3 Reclamation

3.1 This paper acknowledges the long struggle of Māori communities to reclaim and revitalise te reo Māori after generations of suppression within schools and public institutions. The 1972 Māori Language Petition, led by groups including Ngā Tamatoa and Te Reo Māori Society, demanded recognition and protection for the language after Māori children had been punished for speaking te reo Māori in schools.

3.2 Te Reo Māori expert, Professor Rawinia Higgins claim “It can take one generation to lose the language and three generations to restore it.” Many language experts acknowledge that revitalising te reo Māori is a long and difficult journey, made even harder by generations of suppression. Yet, as the indigenous language of this land, its protection and restoration are matters of justice and collective responsibility.

4 Māori Identity and Trauma

4.1 Te reo Māori is deeply connected to Māori identity, culture, and wellbeing. In a Literature Review prepared for Te Mātāwai on ‘Te reo Māori trauma,’[10] defined te reo trauma as 'the emotional, psychological, physical and spiritual harm and distress experienced by Māori individuals due to a lack of proficiency in te reo Māori.'

4.2 The trauma associated with its suppression is rooted in colonisation and harmful education practices that contributed to lasting social, cultural, and economic inequities for Māori. Under Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the Crown has a responsibility to address this historical harm and actively protect and revitalise te reo Māori.

5 Kaupapa Māori Education

5.1 As of 1 July 2025, only 3.3%[11] of students were enrolled in Māori medium education, while 97% attended English medium schools. Additionally, 65.6% of students were not enrolled in Māori language learning, including more than 254,000 students eligible for Māori Language Programme funding who received no te reo Māori education at any level. Education is not meeting the language needs of Māori learners.

6 Crown Obligation and Protection

6.1 The debate is therefore not simply about language preference, but about power, history, and Crown obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi. The Waitangi Tribunal has recognised te reo Māori as a taonga protected under Te Tiriti[12], meaning the Crown has an active duty to protect and promote it. Critics argue that reducing funding, visibility, and institutional support undermines that obligation and reinforces existing inequalities rather than addressing them.

[10] Authors Dr. Raukura Roa and Professor Tom Roa review of te reo Māori trauma.tematawai.maori.nz/sites/default/files/2025-12/TRAUMA-LIT-REVIEW-v10.pdf

[11] Education Counts https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/maori-language-in-schooling

[12] https://nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/maori-language-week/waitangi-tribunal-claim

6.2 The coalition government is failing in it's obligation to actively protect te reo Māori rigorously pushing policy legislation to rid itself of any and all obligations to uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the protection of te reo. These changes are viewed by many as part of a broader neoliberal agenda that prioritises privatisation, standardisation, and market-driven reforms, including the expansion of charter schools, while reducing collective responsibility for equity, public education, and Te Tiriti-based commitments.

7 Why is English being protected when it is not under threat?

7.1 Critics argue that promoting English through official branding and policy changes reinforces an English-first approach despite English already being the dominant language in New Zealand. English was embedded and protected through colonisation, education, law, and government systems, while te reo Māori was actively suppressed within those same institutions.

7.2 The coalition's English First policy[13] is a prime example of government distraction politics and white privilege. Public Service Minister Paul Goldsmith argued that prioritising English "makes sense" because it is spoken by most New Zealanders. However, critics argue this ignores the unequal relationship between the languages. English has never faced the threat of extinction in New Zealand; te reo Māori has.

7.3 Realists view legislative change a dilution of the unique status of te reo Māori. Or as opposition member, (Green Party co- leader) Chloe Swarbrick said, Te Reo Māori and New Zealand Sign Language had been "fought for", [14] while English was "literally beaten" into people.

7.4 Collectively, these changes reposition te reo Māori from a Treaty-protected taonga to something increasingly discretionary.

7.5 The reordering of government branding may appear symbolic, but symbols within state institutions carry political meaning. Reducing funding, visibility, and institutional support for te reo Māori while promoting English is seen by many as contradictory to the Crown's Te Tiriti obligations and risks reinforcing existing inequalities rather than addressing them.

8 Te Ara Tika / The right pathway for te reo Māori

8.1 Te Ara Tika requires education policy that is protected from political interference that actively upholds Te Tiriti o Waitangi, protects te reo Māori, and embeds mātauranga Māori as foundational within the curriculum rather than optional or supplementary.

8.2 The right pathway requires sustained investment in te reo Māori, strong legislative protections, Māori-medium education pathways, meaningful iwi partnership, and curriculum approaches that affirm identity, language, and culture for all ākonga. Clear obligations in legislation are essential because obligations that are explicitly stated are far more likely to be upheld in practice.

[13] https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/595776/government-updates-official-branding-to-highlight-english-over-te-reo-maori

[14] https://www.1news.co.nz/2026/02/20/bill-to-make-english-an-official-language-of-nz-introduced-to-parliament/

9 What is being asked of the Association?

9.1 The Association advocates and takes an active role in protecting Te Tiriti o Waitangi and te reo Māori within education. This includes writing submissions against legislative and curriculum changes that weaken Crown obligations and reduce the visibility of te reo Māori.

9.2 The Association collaborates with other unions and organisations to take a united stand against policies that undermine Te Tiriti, while advocating for stronger constitutional and legislative protections that safeguard Te Tiriti obligations from political interference.

9.3 We are strong and we are united.

9.4 The Association is also being called on to undertake research that supports kaiako Māori and protects Māori-medium and bilingual pathways, with a strong focus on the current status of te reo Māori in education and the impacts of the Te Mātaiaho changes.

10 Why is researching the profession important?

10.1 Research is essential to understanding how recent curriculum and legislative changes are affecting kaiako, ākonga, and whānau, particularly in relation to te reo Māori and Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations. It provides evidence of the impacts on teaching practice, wellbeing, educational outcomes, and the status of te reo Māori within schools, while highlighting the growing burden placed on kaiako Māori to advocate for language, culture, and identity in increasingly unsupportive environments. For ākonga Māori, access to language, culture, and identity is critical to educational success, and the marginalisation of te reo Māori risks further inequities and disengagement. This research also situates current reforms within the broader context of historical educational inequities, examining how they affect the visibility and value of mātauranga Māori and informing pathways toward a more equitable, Tiriti-honouring education system.

11 Conclusion

11.1 Research into te reo Māori in education is essential because it provides evidence of the lived experiences of kaiako, ākonga, and whānau at a time when Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations and the visibility of te reo Māori are being challenged through curriculum and legislative reform. It enables the impacts of these changes on access to te reo Māori, Māori success, cultural safety, and wellbeing to be identified before they become entrenched. As a taonga intrinsically linked to identity, whakapapa, culture, and self-determination, te reo Māori requires ongoing research not only to document emerging issues, but also to protect the gains achieved through generations of Māori advocacy and revitalisation. Ultimately, research plays a critical role in ensuring education policy remains accountable to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, supports equitable outcomes for Māori learners, and strengthens the conditions for te reo Māori to flourish for future generations.