



‘Online Panel Discussion
“**Activating Advocates for
Better Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)**”
30 March 2026

Panellists

- Dr. Rachael Dixon, Senior Lecturer, University of Canterbury
- Dame Sue Bagshaw, Chair and Founder, The Youth Hub
- Olivia Stapleton, Head of Policy and Advocacy, Mental Health Foundation
- Janet McAllister, Communications Specialist, Auckland Women’s Health Centre
- Holly Davies, Student and Youth Advocate, Victoria University of Wellington

Moderator

- Jackie Edmond, Chief Executive, Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa

Summary

Proposed Changes to RSE

Panellists shared information about the ways in which the new proposed curriculum diverges from what has been done in the past.

- Proposed changes to the RSE curriculum that were characterised as **positive** included:
 - The highly prescriptive and explicit approach which should, in theory, reduce inconsistency which has been a significant issue for the provision of RSE in schools.
 - All schools will have to teach RSE to all year levels; it is compulsory/mandatory.
 - The removal of community consultation for schools. This has been a challenging experience for schools as frequently parents who are not supportive are a vocal minority which can derail the provision of comprehensive RSE for all students in a community.

- Proposed changes to the RSE curriculum that were characterised as **negative** included:
 - There is very little time to cover a lot of information (3 hours in primary/intermediate, 4.5 hours in secondary).
 - The omission of information on healthy intimate/romantic/sexual relationships, gender diversity, gender identity, sexual orientation/LGBTQIA+.

- While some information which was previously in RSE (e.g. reproduction and inclusivity) may be moved to other areas of the curriculum, this fragmentation loses the possibility to tie these elements together clearly and provide a comprehensive conceptual framework around RSE.
- RSE is now referred to as “Sex Education” and does not begin until Year 8.

Reflections on the importance of RSE:

- Note about the persistent gender norms and the need to breakdown the shame and stigma around sex and sexuality. It is crucial to overcome the fear of sex to provide holistic information.
- There is primarily heteronormative messaging and information provided in much sexuality education and the need to ensure that young people are taught information in an inclusive manner, so they do not end up having to teach one another.
- It is critical to provide information on the diversity of sexual orientation and gender identity. An intersectional feminist approach is a useful framework for comprehensive RSE.
- There is a pressing need for effective pedagogy and commensurate training which allows teachers to feel comfortable providing RSE.
- RSE creates cultural scaffolding of respect and the importance of making sure that the content is rooted in Te Tiriti o Waitangi.
- There could be usefulness in having RSE specialist teachers.
- There is value in the use of drama and song in conveying RSE messages and information.
- The dangers and challenges of navigating online spaces is considerable for young people today. They may not receive information about what is safe or normal. There is also too much focus on “stranger danger” and not enough focus on how the people you know and trust may ask you to do things (e.g. send nude photos), making it more complicated to determine how to respond.
- Young people report a real dissatisfaction with the risk-based discourse in RSE as it does not capture the positive elements of this part of life.
- Young people want to see themselves and their reality reflected in the content of RSE.

EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY TACTICS AND TOOLS

- For effective advocacy, an influencer who shares your perspective can be a very powerful messenger to communicate information to a broad audience.
- Linking RSE to a news event is a way to garner media attention.

- Submissions to government do not need to be complicated – they can provide simple information which provides perspective on who you are, what you think, why this is important to you, and what you want to change.
- There are ways to motivate people who sit on the fence - encourage them to share what they feel is important to them and their whanau.
- Stories and storytelling are very effective tools to communicate common values and use a personal framework to convey the point you are trying to make.
- Sign and share petitions on RSE.
- Email local and regional politicians to let them know RSE is important and what you want to see included.

www.sexualwellbeing.org.nz