

Youth representatives from Whangārei

Young people in the region shared their diverse experiences with the Inquiry, including the financial pressures they felt from losing their jobs, not continuing with tertiary education and feeling isolated from their family and friends.

We heard about how the vaccine mandate created divisions within families and wider communities, with some young people experiencing threats and bullying from their peers.

Representatives also shared how they struggled with conflicting information on social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Instagram. This led to some of their peers developing a broader distrust in science and medical advice. The representatives told us that the pandemic shifted how some young people think about the world, going from an optimistic mindset to one that is largely cynical.

In preparation for future responses, they suggested that more investment be made into schools to teach online critical thinking skills, and face-to-face communication be prioritised over social media campaigns.

Māori health providers forum

Representatives at this forum told the Inquiry that:

- vaccine mandates created divisions within communities and affected relationships between providers and whānau.
- organisations found creative solutions to retain staff who did not wish to receive a COVID-19 vaccine, including redeploying them into telehealth services and back-office roles.
- restrictions on home visits and cultural practices conflicted with the core Māori values of manaakitanga (hospitality, care, respect) and rangatiratanga (self-determination).

While acknowledging that the use of lockdowns reduced the number of deaths and had environmental benefits, the representatives also highlighted the fractures in the education system and the increased mental health and wellbeing impacts.

Education providers forum

Representatives at this education providers forum shared with the Inquiry the extent to which technology and connectivity barriers played a role in disrupting education services during the pandemic. Little-to-no access to Wi-Fi, computers and reliable internet sources were identified as the main issues. To combat this, education providers personally delivered hard copy learning materials to families living in remote areas.

They noted that students also showed a reluctance to participate in online learning and experienced socialisation challenges when returning to in-person learning environments.

Improved community awareness of family needs and enhanced partnerships with local services were identified as positive outcomes from the pandemic response and were recommended for future pandemic responses. Improving technical connectivity in rural areas, maintaining cultural practices during emergencies, and addressing fundamental inequities in infrastructure and housing were also identified as key recommendations for future preparedness.