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Ministry of Education
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By email: healthandsafety.info@education.govt.nz

Tēnā koutou

Draft guidelines for schools developing a firearms policy

The New Zealand Nurses Organisation *Tōpūtanga Tapuhi Kaitiaki o Aotearoa* (NZNO) welcomes the opportunity to briefly comment on the above consultation document, which is directly relevant to nurses working with and within schools; professionally relevant to the nursing profession in relation to child and adolescent health, particularly mental health; and more widely relevant to the social determinants of health. This submission is informed by consultation with members and staff, including school nurses and members of the College of Child & Youth Nurses, the College of Primary Health Care Nurses and Mental Health Nurse Section, te Rūnanga o Aotearoa and professional nursing, research and policy advisers. NZNO has also consulted with health sector colleagues and warmly supports the Public Health Association's submission.

NZNO **does not support** the Ministry's draft guidelines, or any school developing a narrowly focused firearms policy. We recommend instead that the Ministry directs its energy to providing comprehensive and consistent guidelines for *all* educational facilities including early childhood centres, primary and secondary schools and tertiary institutes, to develop a policy to support mental health and wellbeing, and reject violence and offensive weapons. Schools, like hospital and other public places, should be violence- and weapon-free at all times.

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About the New Zealand Nurses Organisation

NZNO is the leading professional nursing association and union for nurses in Aotearoa New Zealand. NZNO represents over 49,000 nurses, midwives, students and health workers on professional and employment-related matters. NZNO is affiliated to the International Council of Nurses and the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions.

NZNO promotes and advocates for professional excellence in nursing by providing leadership, research and education to inspire and progress the profession of nursing. NZNO embraces te Tiriti o Waitangi and contributes to the improvement of the health status and outcomes of all peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Firearms are not the issue

NZNO takes the view that violence is a serious public health issue, and that a systemic, d integrated approach that aligns health, education, social development and justice policies is needed. Although nurses confront, and are at times subjected to, violence in the course of their work, it is comparatively rare, and contact with firearms is rarer still. School nurses estimate that about 1-3% of their work involves treatment of serious harm from assault with a weapon, often knives but, more commonly, “whatever comes to hand” eg a hammer from the woodwork room, a chair or a desk. However, the mental and physical health of young people is significantly affected by other forms of violence - domestic and family violence, bullying, threats and intimidation, peer pressure, etc - the impact of which is indicated by high rates of youth depression, anxiety, suicide and ...more violence.

The overriding priority for schools must be to ensure a safe, violence-free space, and to support the mental health and wellbeing of students and staff. The development of a firearms policy is a ‘red herring’, and a dangerous one, as it focuses attention on a minute risk, while ignoring the larger one, and effectively legitimises firearms in schools. We think it likely that an unintended consequence will be to encourage schools to consider how they could include firearms in their programmes, for instance to attract interest from students.

Although we are somewhat protected in Aotearoa from, for example war and access to weapons in comparison with other countries, we shouldn’t forget that we are living in a very uncertain world, with

climate change, new technologies, and accelerating social changes which threaten traditional social structures and the planet, nor that we are on the edge of a region which has already seen significant conflict and where certainly international tensions between political giants are being played out.

Exposure to, and the threat of, violence whether directly, or through news and social media and entertainment can be disturbing, stressful and depressing for children growing up. The physical presence, and normalisation of weapons inevitably reinforces negative concepts, for instance that weapons are common or necessary, that problems are settled through conflict, that people are powerless. Conversely, acting to stop violence, to deliberately articulate the rejection of weapons and violent behaviour, and to affirm peace and justice, can be reassuring and inspire hope and confidence in the future. Given our current rates of youth suicide and issues with mental health, we suggest the Ministry should be sending very clear messages that weapons have no part in the school curriculum, but that education to support resilience, wellness and positive social relationships is integral to all learning environments.

A comprehensive education policy

The legal framework for firearms is very clear. The Ministry should clarify that firearms and other offensive weapons may not be taken into any educational institute under any circumstance. This is consistent with rules for other public spaces including hospitals, airports, courtrooms etc. A single policy for all learning environments is necessary to reinforce a single and consistent message that violence is unacceptable in any circumstance. Contrary to the 'no gun' policies that prevailed in all our early childhood centres (kindergartens, play centres etc) late last century, it is disturbing to find that 'Evolve' early childhood "learning" centres (a US education model) have introduced toy gun kits to 'teach' children 'gun safety'. For this reason we advocate that any policy regarding weapons apply to both private and public preschools as well as primary and secondary schools. No preschooler needs to learn 'gun safety' because no preschooler should be exposed to guns in a school, any more than primary or secondary students need to be. We urge the Ministry to act immediately to ban the toy gun kits and stop this unnecessary and culturally insensitive and inappropriate education.

In conclusion, NZNO **recommends** that you:

- do not proceed with the guidelines;

- demonstrate leadership by clarifying that no offensive weapon is allowed in any learning and education centre; and
- develop guidelines for schools to develop policies which support mental health and wellbeing and eschew violence.

Nāku noa, nā

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marilyn Head". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first name "Marilyn" and the last name "Head" clearly distinguishable.

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