### Briefing Note: OECD release of PISA in Focus 100: Have students' feelings of belonging at school waned over time?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To:</th>
<th>Hon. Chris Hipkins, Minister of Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
<td>16 September 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priority:</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security Level:</td>
<td>In Confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>METIS No:</td>
<td>1205679</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draft:</td>
<td>Adam Jang-Jones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Contact:</td>
<td>Dr Philip Stevens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messaging seen by Communications team:</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Round Robin:</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Purpose of Report

The purpose of this paper is for you to:

1. **Note** that a new insights paper from the OECD relating to 15-year-olds' *sense of belonging at school* is due to be released on the night of 17 September.

2. **Note** that the key finding is that, internationally and nationally students' sense of belonging at school has been declining. Sense of belonging is a measure of student's peer relationships and social wellbeing.

3. **Note** that although the reasons for this decline are unclear, the paper hypothesises that the cause may be the rise of mobile internet services.

4. **Agree** that this Briefing will be proactively released.

### Summary

- 'Have students' feelings of belonging at school waned over time?' is the latest in the monthly PISA in Focus (PIF) series produced by the OECD.

- This paper examines a key facet of wellbeing at school: Sense of Belonging. It offers a new analysis of information previously published in Volume II of the international OECD reports for PISA 2015.

- New Zealand is not mentioned in the text but is shown in the figures.

- This paper also acts as a 'curtain raiser' for the coming international release of PISA 2018 findings (due 3 December).
Key findings are that:

- Between 2003 and 2015, across the vast majority of the 30 OECD countries with comparable data, 15-year-old students' sense of belonging at school weakened, especially so from 2012.

- The paper hypothesises this may be linked with the more general decline of offline communities. That is, as students spend increasing amounts of time in online interactions, this reduces or displaces the quality and quantity of offline interactions.

- It finds the timing of the decline consistent with the rise of mobile internet services during this period, but states that more evidence is needed to confirm this link.

- Students were asked the same questions about their belonging at school in PISA 2018. The findings, released this December, will show whether the downward trend is continuing.

Communications messages and questions and answers are attached and we will liaise with your office on the timing and communications.
Background

1. The PISA in Focus series from the OECD is a monthly series of short insights papers that provide further analysis of previously published data from the PISA large-scale international research study.

2. This paper offers a re-analysis of PISA 2015 data and findings previously published in Volume III of the international OECD reports. The decline was also reported in New Zealand’s PISA 2015: New Zealand Students’ Wellbeing report, published on Education Counts in April 2017.

3. In New Zealand, and in the vast majority of countries, sense of belonging at school has weakened since 2003. This is important because Sense of Belonging is a central facet of student wellbeing at school - a measure of student’s peer relationships and social wellbeing. Moreover, the peer support and solidarity implied by a positive sense of belonging at school appears to be a protective factor against hardships and negative wellbeing outcomes.

4. The paper reports on sense of belonging in PISA in 2003, 2012 and 2015 only. However, in New Zealand we have asked the same questions in every PISA since 2000. To evaluate students’ sense of belonging at school, PISA asked students to what extent they agree with the 6 statements below; these are then compiled into an overall index of sense of belonging.
   a. I feel like an outsider (or left out of things) at school.
   b. I make friends easily at school.
   c. I feel like I belong at school.
   d. I feel awkward and out of place in my school.
   e. I feel lonely at school.
   f. Other students seem to like me.

5. Students were asked the same questions about their belonging at school in PISA 2018. The findings, released this December, will show whether the downward trend is continuing.

Key findings

6. Between 2003 and 2015, across the vast majority of the 30 OECD countries with comparable data, 15-year-old students’ sense of belonging at school weakened, especially so after 2012.

7. The reasons for this change are unclear. The paper hypothesises a link with the more general decline of offline communities, as time spent in online interactions reduces the quality and quantity of offline interactions, which it finds consistent with the rise of mobile internet services during this period. More evidence is needed to confirm this link.

8. Of the 6 questions PISA asked students about their sense of belonging at school, the one most strongly linked to academic outcomes and wellbeing outcomes was 'I feel like an outsider (or left out) at school'. In international context, NZ students have had a comparatively large rise in feeling like an outsider, though not measurably different from that in Australia, the UK or Canada.

9. Internationally, those students who reported feeling like an outsider had lower PISA scores, on average, in science than students who didn’t feel like an outsider, and were three times more likely to report lower life satisfaction. (Note: NZ did not ask the life satisfaction question in PISA 2015.)
10. While average performance scores for New Zealand have also declined significantly since 2009, the paper notes there is no relationship across countries between the decline in sense of belonging and changes in average performance. For instance, countries that have increased in average performance over this period have also reported a decline in sense of belonging.

11. The paper concludes with the following recommendations for school staff:
   - Put in place strategies to identify students at risk of social exclusion, providing them with the means to establish positive social ties.
   - Encourage collaboration between all students, and staff and parents, to strengthen everyone's sense of belonging at school.

12. A finer-grained analysis by Ministry research analysts shows the scale and rate of the changes — broadly high and stable from 2000 to 2009 but with indicators of belonging declining in 2012 and again in 2015. The pattern and rate of change is comparable across all ethnic groupings in New Zealand and between girls and boys.

13. It is also important to note that New Zealand 15-year-olds have a relatively low sense of belonging at school compared to their international peers. In 2015, New Zealand's PISA index of sense of belonging was in the bottom 20% of OECD countries, lower than the other majority English-speaking countries.

**Communications Approach**

14. In light of the current national focus on wellbeing, this decline and New Zealand's relatively low sense of belonging strengthens the need for the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy.

15. While the decline in this indicator of social wellbeing is not good, we should accentuate the international nature of the decline and the fact that some amount of the in-school belonging may be being offset by an increased sense of belonging in online communities.

16. The Ministry plays a role in making schools aware of this trend, to support them in putting in place strategies to identify students at risk of social exclusion and providing them — and all students, staff and parents — with the means to establish and maintain positive social ties and collaboration.

17. Top line communications messages and Questions and Answers are attached. We will work with your office on this.

**Proactive Release**

18. We recommend that this Briefing is proactively released as per your expectation that information be released as soon as possible. Any information which may need to be withheld will be done so in line with the provisions of the Official Information Act 1982.

**Annexes**

Annex 1: OECD PISA in Focus 100: Have students' feelings of belonging at school waned over time? [Draft only. Under embargo.]

Annex 2: Communications – Key messages and Questions and Answers