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Media Release

For immediate release



Drownings Forecast to Soar as Swimming Ability Sinks

Water Safety New Zealand (WSNZ) today released research indicating that the swimming ability of our youth has reached a crisis point and forecasts that continued failure to address this issue will inevitably result in a significant increase in drownings in New Zealand.

Matt Claridge, General Manager states: “when the findings of the research are matched with increases in population and increasing participation in water based activities, we believe the drowning toll will exceed 150 deaths per annum within the next 12 years and then up to 180 beyond 2030.”

New Zealand already has one of the highest rates of drowning in the developed world, currently averaging 114 per annum (2003-2007).

“The underlying basis and ability to enjoy aquatic environments and recreation is the ability to swim and survive. WSNZ commissioned Nielsen’s to investigate the swimming skills of students, following a similar study conducted in 2001. The findings revealed the ability of our young people to swim and survive is deteriorating and has reached a crisis level. This decline can be directly attributed to inadequate opportunities to develop this fundamental skill.”

Historically schools were the primary channel for the provision of learn to swim education but the research has shown that parents can no longer expect their child’s school to provide them with these necessary skills.

“Learn to swim lessons were an integral component of the education delivered through the school system but this is no longer the case. Changes to the school curriculum and reduced funding have resulted in swimming lessons having a lower priority.”

Claridge admits that some schools continue to provide an excellent service in this area of a child’s education but argues that the research clearly shows the majority of schools are struggling to provide this service, evidenced by only 50% of year 6 children being able to swim 25m.

“Unsurprisingly we have found that it is schools with a high decile rating that are able to provide adequate opportunities. These are also the kids who are also most likely to be involved with



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additional instruction outside of the school. Sadly, there is a direct correlation between socio-economic status and access to learn to swim opportunities and it's just not good enough."

To WSNZ, this indicates the issue is due to more than just a failure in school based delivery. Claridge firmly believes that improving school based delivery is the most appropriate channel for learn to swim education in New Zealand.

"In Australia and Great Britain the issue has been identified and action taken to ensure school aged children learn to swim. It's remiss that we do not ensure our children develop these fundamental skills. The Government and its Ministries need to consider the priority and level of resource provided to schools in this area. Perhaps most important of all is that communities recognise the importance of the issue and coordinated action is taken to improve the situation."

"We know that the earlier the process of learning to swim is initiated, the better the results. It is important to capture an entire generation and ensure all our youth have equal opportunity."

WSNZ is advocating that government and its agencies work together to develop a plan that encourages and supports schools, and that learning to swim once again be a compulsory component of the curriculum and reinstated in all schools.

...Ends...

The Executive Insight of the report; ***'Investigating Issues Relating to School Student Swimming and Water Safety Skills'*** follows this media release. The full research document is available on request from:

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**Investigating
Issues Relating
to School
Student
Swimming and
Water Safety
Skills**

22 August 2008

Executive Insights

Business Needs Assessment

Water Safety New Zealand (WSNZ) have commissioned The Nielsen Company to conduct research to examine the swimming and water safety skills of students at the end of Year 6 and Year 8. This study is a follow up to a similar study carried out in 2001. Findings from this study will be used to inform the physical education component of the curriculum and identify areas of development.

Executive Insights

Students' swimming skills and water safety capabilities

- **Compared with the results obtained from the 2001 survey, teachers' perceptions of the level of swimming and aquatic skills their students possess are getting worse.** Teachers' perceptions of the proportion of Year 6 students who can achieve certain tasks has decreased across all measures.
- Teachers believe a quarter of their Year 6 students are not able to get across a distance of 25m, or manage to keep afloat and tread water.
- At Year 8 level, four in ten (41%) teachers say that at least half of their students are capable of performing these tasks.
- The level of aquatic abilities increases from Year 6 to Year 8 for all measures with the exception of 'Cannot swim at all' and 'Has no water confidence', indicating a group of students fail to achieve these basic aquatic skills by the time they head off to secondary school.

Physical resources

- Of the 349 schools that completed the survey, 80% have a swimming pool and the other 20% do not have their own pool. The same response bias was apparent in 2001.
- **Of the 69 schools without a swimming pool, 35% said they had a pool that has been closed.**
- The majority of schools with a pool use their own pool for Year 1-3 students and their Year 4-6 students, but less than half use it for their Year 7-8 students. Feedback indicates that schools' own pools tend to be shallow and/or too short to teach aquatic and swimming skills adequately to older students.
- Up to almost 80% of schools with a pool are able to deliver 20 or more swimming sessions a year while only 10% of schools without a pool can achieve this.

Curriculum impact

- **Priority attached to gaining aquatic and swimming skills appears to be declining.** Schools with a pool tend to place greater priority on swimming and water safety than schools without a pool. In 2001, compared with other parts of the physical education programme, swimming and water safety skills tended to be given a higher priority by schools with a swimming pool, but in 2008 such schools no longer give such a priority to aquatic skills.
- Views of the adequacy of the level of guidance in setting expectations of delivery tended to be favourable, although a quarter of principals believed

the curriculum needs to be more specific and more up to date. They need to be updated as such that they provide guidelines to schools rather than 'expectations'.

- Around two thirds of schools set goals for each individual student at all year levels, but a quarter tend to set overall goals for the year that are not student specific.

Delivery

- At the schools that have their own pool, it is mainly the class teacher who sets the programme and delivers the swimming instruction, while at the schools without a pool these are mainly undertaken by the class teacher or an external swim instructor.
- For most schools the average session length is 30 minutes.

Ability to deliver

- The amount of time since a teacher's last training is the same for Year 6 and Year 8 teachers. Nearly half of the teachers from both year levels have not had any swimming or aquatics training in the last six years. This suggests a decline in the recency of swimming training, as in 2001 only a third had not had training in six years or longer.
- **More than 60% of teachers feel they would benefit from professional development.**
- At all year levels, schools with a pool rated their ability to deliver aquatics training much higher than the schools without a pool.
- Overall most teachers are reasonably confident in their abilities to identify students who have a fear of water and being able to encourage water safety in these students.

Influence factors

- In general, factors related to pool temperature, maintenance and costs are perceived as having a negative influence on students learning to swim competently.
- In general, *teacher to pupil ratios* is the common factor that can influence negatively at all year levels.
- Parental attitude is regarded as a key influential factor by teachers, both from a positive and a negative perspective. Parents condoning their child's reluctance to swim is seen as an important issue that needs to be addressed.
- The extent of *school's programmes* and *availability of appropriate teaching resources* are seen as the most positive factors. The cost imposed on students is seen only by a few as a potential negative influence, while over a half of respondents consider the *cost incurred by students* has no influence at all.
- Children's interest and enthusiasm for swimming, as well as teacher interest and enthusiasm for swimming were rated as positive by over three quarters of schools.

**Need for
Ministry of
Education
Support**

Need for Ministry of Education Support

- Several schools cite lack of funding and support from the Ministry of Education, and volume of regulations as factors that resulted in the closure of their pool.
 - Other schools struggle to provide swimming and aquatics training at outside facilities and say the Ministry is not doing enough to provide funding and resources to assist them with this.
 - A quarter of teachers feel that the current curriculum is too out of date and not specific enough. They believe they will be able to better deliver swimming instruction with a revamped swimming curriculum.
 - Six in ten teachers feel they would benefit from professional development. This is an area that the Ministry needs to address in order to bring teachers swimming instruction skills up to date.
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Recommendations

Recommendations	This 2008 study among teachers and school principals indicates that aquatic skills among Year 6 and Year 8 school students are declining, and that a range of pressures and factors are contributing to a lessening of priority for swimming and aquatic skills in schools. On the basis of these research findings, we recommend that consideration is given to the following.
Ministry of Education	The Ministry of Education should be involved in all recommendations mentioned. More funding is the most frequently mentioned message that schools believe will aid in them being able to deliver better standards of aquatic and swimming instruction. Providing more professional development for teachers is also an area that the Ministry needs take an active role in.
Pools	More needs to be done to encourage and support schools in keeping and maintaining their pools. Results show that schools with pools can deliver greater opportunities for students to learn aquatic and swimming skills. As for schools without pools, more needs to be done to address the increasing costs these schools face in trying to provide aquatic and swimming skills instruction to their students. Pool hireage, instructors, travel and time are just some of the mounting costs these schools must pay in order to provide instruction to their students.
Curriculum	Principals feel that the biggest issues with the current curriculum is that fact that it is out of date and too vague. In order for more schools to provide effective aquatic and swimming training, the curriculum needs to provide more specific guidelines about expected outcomes.
Training and Resources	More opportunities for professional development need to be made available to teachers in order to address the lengthening gap since the last training session teachers undertook. As up to 90% of schools use classroom teachers for swimming instruction, it is paramount that teachers have the opportunity to up date their swimming instruction skills to ensure they are teaching appropriate skills in the most up top date manner. Resources also need to be made more available. The fact that a quarter of teachers don't use a resource to plan their swimming session, coupled with the amount of time since most teachers last training session, many teachers may be inadequately prepared to deliver aquatic and swimming skills instruction.
Parental Influence	Parents are seen as one of the most influential factors when it comes to a student's opportunity and ability to learn aquatic and swimming skills. Teachers indicate that parents condoning their child's reluctance to swim is a major barrier to teaching aquatic and swimming skills and this needs to be addressed. More needs to be done to convey the importance of swimming programmes, in order to get more parents encouraging their children to swim.