

Secondary School Pathways and Transitions to VET and Employment

Phase 3: Future Focus



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The School-to-Work Interface: Future Focus

Executive Summary

This report represents the third and final phase of the Secondary School Pathways and Transitions to VET and Employment Project commissioned by Food and Fibre Centre of Vocational Excellence (Food and Fibre CoVE).

Having now largely completed the project, we wish it had a different name.

“Transitions” is a problematic concept. It suggests a handover, from one thing to another. “Pathways” is better, but it can also reinforce unhelpful value judgements about the relative value of different pathways.

We believe, instead, our country needs a well-functioning “school-to-work” (secondary-tertiary-employment) **interface**, with flexible permutations of educational and training options, including pathways, to deliver co-ordinated, complementary, and well-integrated programmes that support young people to **progress** from school to their next steps in learning and work, and life.

The government often refers to the “secondary-tertiary interface”. They’ve got the “interface” right, but “secondary-tertiary” refers to two types of education delivery, over which the government and its Ministry of Education has significant policy and resourcing levers. But “secondary to tertiary” is not the real journey that the young person is on. The real journey and outcome involve progression, in effect a “school-to-work” interface, based around secondary-tertiary-employment education and training pathways.

For employers and industry this acts as a workforce and skills development pipeline; for the education system it acts as both a pipeline and a value chain; and, most importantly, for the individual it provides a structured way to develop and progress their knowledge, skills and understandings to underpin their desired future.

Building on our previous data inquiry and policy review, this future-focused report presents innovative approaches to creating effective pathways between secondary education, vocational education and training, and employment.

Through a series of interviews with educational leaders, industry representatives, and policy experts, we have identified promising practices that demonstrate how the school-to-work interface can be structured and delivered to better serve young people, industry, and communities.

The case studies that follow illustrate enterprising and innovative examples of how schools, tertiary providers, and employers are breaking down traditional barriers and creating seamless learning journeys for students. These examples are not presented as perfect solutions, but rather as working models that highlight both innovations and challenges in developing effective school-to-work pathways, particularly for the food and fibre sector.

Our findings emphasise the need to shift from thinking about 'transitions' between discrete education stages to 'progression' through a structured interface that spans Years 12-14 (including the first year beyond formal schooling). We advocate for a system where dual enrolment becomes a default option for senior secondary students, supported by more flexible funding arrangements and curriculum approaches.

This report is designed to provide practical insights for educators, industry leaders, and policymakers seeking to strengthen the pathways between education and employment, particularly in the food and fibre sector.

Introduction and Purpose

Background

The Secondary School Pathways and Transitions to VET and Employment Project was commissioned by Food and Fibre Centre of Vocational Excellence (Food and Fibre CoVE) to understand and seek evidence of the effectiveness of the 'ecosystem' between secondary school and the Food and Fibre sector.

This project has been structured in three phases:

1. **Phase 1: Data Inquiry** - We gathered and analysed evidence on the effectiveness of the current interface between secondary schools and the food and fibre sector, particularly through Secondary-Tertiary Programmes (STPs) such as Trades Academies.
2. **Phase 2: Policy Review** - We examined the current policy and operational environment that either enables or constrains an effective school-to-work interface.
3. **Phase 3: Future Focus** - This current report, which brings together insights from innovative practices and models to suggest systemic and operational changes that could improve the school-to-work interface.

Previous Findings

Our data inquiry (April 2024) provided compelling evidence of the effectiveness of Secondary-Tertiary Programmes, particularly Trades Academies, in supporting successful transitions to the Food and Fibre sector. Key findings included:

- Young people who completed food and fibre Trades Academy programmes were significantly more likely to enter the industry (60% probability compared to 18% for those without Trades Academy experience).
- These students were also more likely to remain in the industry (46% staying three years or more, compared to 21% without Trades Academy experience).
- Trades Academy graduates earned more, both initially and over time, suggesting they entered the industry at higher skill levels or progressed more quickly.
- The positive effects of Trades Academy participation were consistent across all ethnic groups.

However, our policy review (October 2024) identified significant structural barriers to scaling these successful approaches:

- The current 'tack-on syndrome' treats vocational education as separate from mainstream curriculum rather than a valuable and integral part of learning with a curriculum that facilitates both vocational and university learning opportunities.
- Funding for interface programmes is fragmented across separate schemes (STAR, Gateway, Trades Academy and the Youth Guarantee, and Māori and Pacific Trades Training (MPTT) Funds in tertiary) with different eligibility criteria and administrative requirements.
- School timetables, staffing arrangements, and curriculum priorities often create practical barriers to implementation.
- The system still prioritises university pathways despite only about 30% of school leavers progressing directly to university.

These findings highlighted the need for a more coherent, integrated approach to school-to-work progression, such as a pathways-based curriculum, particularly for the approximately 60% of students who are neither university-bound nor currently engaged in formal interface programmes.

Purpose of this Report

This future-focused report aims to:

1. Highlight innovative models and practices that are effectively connecting secondary education, tertiary education, and employment.
2. Identify common themes and success factors across these models.
3. Provide practical recommendations for scaling and sustaining effective approaches.
4. Contribute to system-level thinking about how to create a more coherent and effective interface between education and employment.

By highlighting what is working well in specific contexts, we hope to inspire and inform broader improvements to the school-to-work interface, particularly for the Food and Fibre sector.

A Vision for the Future School-to-Work Interface

From Transition to Progression

Throughout our research, we have consistently found that the language of 'transitions' reinforces an unhelpful separation between secondary and tertiary education, and between education and employment.

This separation creates artificial “lift and shift” points where young people must navigate between systems with different expectations, languages, and cultures.

Instead, we propose thinking about this as a 'progression' through a structured interface that spans from Year 12 through to Year 14 (including the first year beyond formal schooling). This conceptual shift recognises that:

- Learning continues beyond school into tertiary education and/or employment.
- Competencies and capabilities are about acquiring skills and knowledge and developing understandings about applying them.
- Tertiary and work-based learning can start while at school.
- Schools have a responsibility that extends to post school engagement.
- Employers and tertiary providers have a role in supporting earlier stages of the learning journey.
- Young people benefit from continuity and support across this interface.

As one former school principal we interviewed put it: **"We need to stop treating it as a handover or 'lift and shift', and start thinking about it as a progression, where you're safely moving forward from being a foundational learner to being on a pathway."**

Creating Structured Pathways That Work for All Students

Currently, approximately 30% of school leavers progress directly to university, while another 10-12% participate in some form of interface programme such as Gateway or Trades Academy. This leaves around 60% of students who are neither university-bound nor engaged in formal interface programmes and deserve opportunities more aligned with their futures.

Our vision is a system where:

- Every student from Year 12 onward has access to learning opportunities that connect meaningfully to potential future pathways.
- Dual enrolment becomes a default option for all learners rather than a special programme for a limited number of students.
- Curriculum and timetabling are structured to support integration between school-based and workplace or tertiary-based learning.
- Assessment and credentialing recognise learning across different environments.
- Industry and employers are systematically engaged as partners in education, not just as destinations after education.

- The interface offers structured access to Secondary-Tertiary-Employment Programmes (STEPS).

This vision is not about tracking students into academic or vocational streams. Rather, it recognises that all pathways require both academic and practical learning, and that all students benefit from opportunities to explore potential futures through authentic experiences.

The Case for System-Level Change

While many of the case studies in this report demonstrate what is possible within the current system, they also highlight the barriers created by existing structures, funding arrangements, and mindsets.

A truly effective school-to-work interface requires changes at multiple levels:

- **Policy level:** Consolidating funding streams across senior secondary and foundation tertiary, removing regulatory barriers, actively support and utilising dual enrolment and creating incentives for collaboration.
- **Institutional level:** Redesigning timetables and learning programmes, staffing arrangements, delivery modes, and curriculum to support integrated pathways and learning.
- **Cultural level:** Shifting mindsets about the value of different pathways and the relationship between academic and vocational learning, and education and the world of work.
- **Individual level:** Supporting educators, employers, and young people to navigate new possibilities.

These changes are ambitious but achievable. They build on existing strengths in the system while addressing identified gaps and barriers. They also underpin the importance of a tripartite partnership between education, industry and government (well-recognised internationally).

Key Themes and Recommendations

Ecosystem Development: Building Effective Partnerships

The most successful interface programmes we observed were characterised by strong partnerships between schools, tertiary providers, employers, and industry bodies. These partnerships went beyond transactional relationships to create genuine ecosystems of mutual benefit and shared purpose.

Recommendations:

1. **Develop regional networks** that bring together schools, tertiary providers, employers, and industry bodies to coordinate STEPs and pathways, and share resources.
2. **Establish clear roles and responsibilities** for each partner, recognising the distinct contributions of schools, tertiary providers, employers, industry bodies, and government.

3. **Invest in relationship management** through dedicated staff positions that span institutional boundaries.
4. **Create formal agreements** that clarify expectations, commitments, and processes for collaboration.

Implementation Approaches: Integrating Vocational Pathways into Core Curriculum

A common challenge identified by schools was the difficulty of integrating vocational pathways with traditional subject-based curriculum structures. We have seen schools who have found innovative ways to redesign their curriculum and timetabling to support more integrated approaches.

Recommendations:

1. **Use Vocational Pathways as a curriculum design tool**, not just as a career's guidance framework.
2. **Adopt flexible timetabling** that allows for longer blocks of time for project-based or workplace-based learning.
3. **Use a variety of delivery modes** and/or blended learning models.
4. **Develop integrated assessment approaches** that recognise learning across different contexts.
5. **Provide professional development** for teachers in contextualising curriculum to industry settings and work integrated learning in general.

Funding and Resources: Maximising Existing Streams and Removing Barriers

Our policy review identified approximately \$300 million across various funding streams related to the secondary-tertiary-employment interface. However, this funding is fragmented across separate schemes with different eligibility criteria and administrative requirements.

Recommendations:

1. **Consolidate secondary and tertiary funding streams** for STAR, Gateway, Trades Academy, Youth Guarantee and MPTT into a single, flexible allocation.
2. **Adopt a student-centred funding model** where resources follow the learner across different learning environments.
3. **Remove restrictions** on secondary students being paid for work experience and other work-based learning programmes.
4. **Explore micro-credentials** and skills standards as mechanisms for recognising learning across secondary and tertiary settings, including the NCEA.

Student Experience: Creating Coherent Learning Journeys

Students in effective interface programmes described experiencing coherent learning journeys that connected their school-based learning with workplace or tertiary-based experiences. This coherence was deliberately designed and supported by educators and employers.

Recommendations:

1. **Develop individualised learning plans** that span school and workplace/tertiary learning – STEPs).
2. **Provide wraparound support/shared pastoral services and systems** for students navigating multiple learning environments.
3. **Create explicit connections** between school subjects, employability skills, workplace applications and competencies.
4. **Support students to document and reflect** on their learning and skills across different contexts.

Assessment and Credentialing: Recognising Learning Across Environments

A key challenge identified by schools and employers was the recognition of learning that occurs outside traditional classroom settings. Innovative approaches to assessment and credentialing are emerging to address this challenge.

Recommendations:

1. **Develop shared assessment approaches** between schools and tertiary providers/employers.
2. **Explore micro-credentials** and skills standards as mechanisms for recognising specific skills, knowledge and their application.
3. **Support recognition of prior learning** for workplace and community experiences.
4. **Ensure achievement in vocational contexts** counts meaningfully toward NCEA and relevant tertiary qualifications.

Industry Engagement: Meaningful Participation Beyond Work Experience

Effective industry engagement goes beyond providing occasional work experience placements. It involves employers as partners in designing, delivering, and assessing learning.

Recommendations:

1. **Involve employers in curriculum and work integrated learning design** to ensure relevance and currency.
2. **Create structured opportunities** for workplace learning with clear learning outcomes.

3. **Support industry personnel** to develop teaching and mentoring skills.
4. **Recognise and reward employer contributions** to education.

Measuring Success: Evidence-Based Approaches

Our data inquiry demonstrated the value of robust evaluation of interface programmes. However, we also found significant gaps in current monitoring and evaluation.

Recommendations:

1. **Resume systematic evaluation** of Trades Academy and other interface programmes.
2. **Track long-term outcomes** for students participating in STEP and pathway programmes.
3. **Develop broader and clearer measures of success** beyond credential results and progression to further education or employment outcomes.
4. **Share data and insights** across schools, tertiary providers, and employers and industry bodies.

Scale and Sustainability: Pathways to Wider Implementation

The innovative approaches highlighted in our case studies often depend on exceptional leadership and local circumstances. Scaling these approaches and how to develop customised methodologies requires systematic support and enabling conditions.

Recommendations:

1. **Create 'flat pack' models** that provide clear guidance for implementation while allowing for local adaptation.
2. **Invest in leadership development** for school, tertiary organisation and industry leaders.
3. **Establish communities of practice** for sharing knowledge, solving common problems and building shared understandings.
4. **Align policy settings** to remove barriers and create incentives for effective practice, innovation and enterprise.

Case Studies of Innovation and Enterprise

The following case studies illustrate how schools, tertiary providers, and employers are creating effective interfaces between education and employment. Each case study highlights specific innovations and approaches that address the themes and recommendations outlined above.

Manurewa High School: A School-Led Ecosystem for Integrated Pathways



Introduction

Manurewa High School in South Auckland stands as a powerful example of how secondary schools can transform from traditional academic institutions into comprehensive pathway providers. This fundamental shift in thinking has enabled the school to grow from serving 50 students in Vocational Pathways programmes a decade ago to over 645 students today, making it the largest school-led Trades Academy in New Zealand.

Because of the scale of the Trades Academy, the school roll - 2,330 - is higher than its classroom capacity, because every day of the week a significant number of students are out on their placements, with employers or tertiary providers.

"We took everything off-grid. When the kids are learning outside the school, they're off-grid, but it's part of their overall programme - there is nothing they are 'missing'."

– Steve Perks, Trades Academy Director

Ecosystem Development: Building Comprehensive Partnerships

Manurewa High School exemplifies the ecosystem approach identified in our [policy review](#) as essential for effective school-to-work progression. The school has developed partnerships across multiple sectors, working with over 15 secondary schools in the Tāmaki Makaurau region as an umbrella provider.

Their partnerships extend beyond traditional educational relationships to include major employers like, ASB, Auckland Airport, EY, Hynds, IBM, Naylor Love Construction, Spark, The Warehouse Group and Westpac, as well as innovative programmes with the Ara Education Charitable Trust for house refurbishment projects and Ara P-TECH for pathways into the IT industry. They also work alongside the Wiri Business Association to match and make work experience and employment opportunities for local businesses and students.



The school's Business Academy, established with support from alumni John and Léonie Hynds of the Hynds Group, demonstrates how community leadership can drive educational innovation. As Principal Pete Jones noted: ***"We've got a lot of wrap-around support services where we have navigators that help the kids for up to two years post-school."***



Implementation Approach: Solving the "Tack-On Syndrome"

Manurewa High School directly addresses what our policy review identified as the "tack-on syndrome" - where vocational programmes are treated as separate from mainstream education rather than integrated into the core curriculum. The school's solution was radical: they completely redesigned their timetable to ensure students attending off-site programmes aren't missing core learning.

"The biggest thing we did when we first started was say, right, when the kids are outside, they're off-grid, and there's nothing they were missing," said Pete Jones. This approach means students in trades programmes receive a coherent educational experience rather than being forced to "catch up" on "missed" schoolwork.

The school operates what they describe as "probably the most complicated timetable of any school" to accommodate diverse pathways while maintaining educational coherence. This includes innovative scheduling such as "Future Wednesday" - a weekly programme offering diverse learning opportunities that provide flexibility for students in various pathways.

Manurewa Vā Ta Ako					
TIME	MANE	TUREI	WENEREI	TAITE	PARAIRE
8.20am	Staff Briefing Kaitiaki Roopu Meeting	Planning and Senior Tracking Time *	8.20 – 9.20 Wed PL	Planning and Senior Tracking Time *	Staff Briefing
9 – 9.40	Kaitiaki	AkoConnect Kaitiaki (T1 Wk 2-5 T4 Wk 7-9)		Kaitiaki	AkoConnect Kaitiaki (T1 Wk 2-5 T4 Wk 7-9)
9.40 – 11.10	Akoranga 1	Akoranga 1	9.30 – 11.00 Waananga 1	Akoranga 1	Akoranga 1
11.10 – 11.40	Interval	Interval	11.00 – 11.30 Interval	Interval	Interval
11.40 – 1.10pm	Akoranga 2	Akoranga 2	11.30 – 1.00 Waananga 2	Akoranga 2	Akoranga 2
1.10 - 1.50	1.00 – 1.40 Lunch				
1.50 – 3.20	Akoranga 3	Akoranga 3	1.40 – 2.30 Waananga 3	Akoranga 3	Akoranga 3
			2.30 – 3.30 Staff Non-Contact		
3.30 – 4.30	Middle Leaders / Groups Meetings Alternate Weeks	Learning Area			

Funding and Resources: Leveraging Lead Provider Status

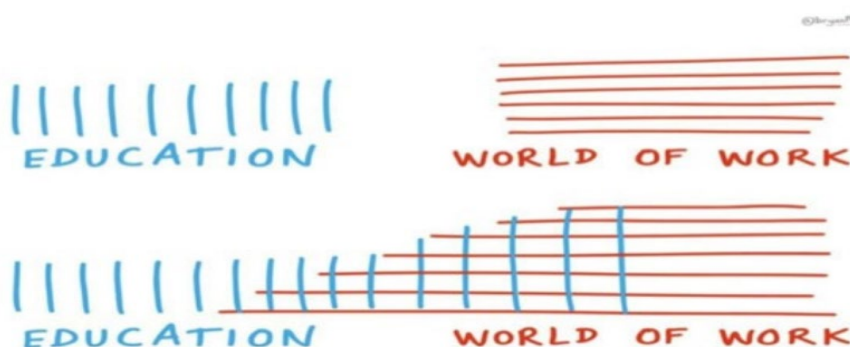
The school's transformation began when they became a lead provider, giving them control over funding and programme design. **"Being a lead provider, we can decide how we set this all up,"** Pete Jones says. This status has enabled creative approaches to resource allocation, including:

- Establishing multiple enterprises including a commercial kitchen that supplies the school lunch programme, and local community providers.
- Creating a makerspace that produces goods for sale.
- Developing recycling initiatives that turn waste into revenue.
- Operating an urban farm (Te Maara Kai) that provides learning opportunities and commercial returns including regular produce deliveries into Auckland's CBD restaurants.
- Partnerships such as an urban farming collaboration with Organic Market Garden farmers



Student Experience: Comprehensive Support and Real-World Learning

Manurewa High School's approach extends far beyond traditional academic boundaries. Students participate in genuine work experiences, from refurbishing houses destined for demolition to operating commercial enterprises.



The school's support system includes pastoral care that continues post-graduation: Pete Jones: ***"We track them from when they leave school. We track destination data from where they go, and we do a follow-up in March."***

Assessment and Credentialing: Integrated Qualifications

Manurewa High School demonstrates how vocational and academic learning can be integrated through coherent credentialing. Students achieve NCEA qualifications while simultaneously gaining industry-relevant skills and tertiary credentials. The school's timetable design ensures students can access both traditional academic subjects and vocational programmes without compromise.

Industry Engagement: Beyond Traditional Work Experience

Rather than offering tokenistic work experience, Manurewa High School has developed substantive partnerships where employers become genuine partners in education delivery. Companies like Naylor Love Construction have moved beyond simple work placement to become integral parts of the educational process, with students working on real projects that contribute to business outcomes.

The school's relationship with employers is reciprocal - they provide skilled, work-ready graduates while employers contribute expertise, equipment, and real-world learning opportunities.

"If my son grows up to be anything like these young men, I'll be a proud dad."

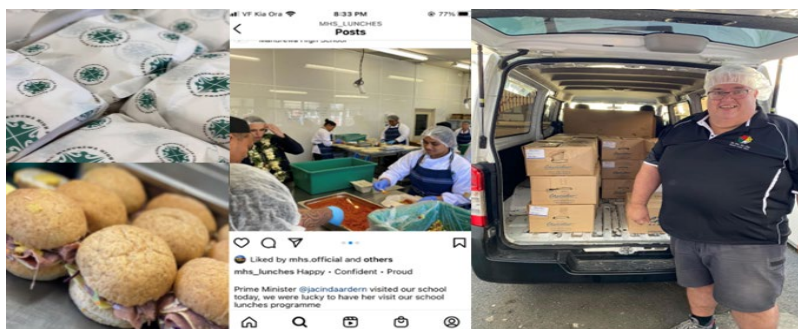
– Manurewa High School Employer Partner

Community Engagement: Addressing Local Needs

The school's programmes directly address community needs and economic realities. Located in South Auckland, with significant Pasifika and Māori populations, the school has designed programmes that recognise cultural values while preparing students for economic participation.

Their approach includes:

- Free lunch programmes that support students during off-site learning
- Driver licence training as part of the curriculum
- Digital literacy programmes
- Financial literacy education
- Support for students from alternative education providers.



Measuring Success: Outcomes-Focused Approach

The school measures success through multiple metrics that extend beyond traditional academic achievement:

- 85% progression rate to tertiary education or employment
- 90-95% NCEA Level 2 or Level 3 achievement rate
- Successful engagement of alternative education students
- High levels of employer satisfaction with graduates
- Growing demand from other schools to join their umbrella model

Scale and Sustainability: A Replicable Model

Manurewa High School's Trades Academy growth from 50 to 645 students over a decade demonstrates the scalability of their approach. Their umbrella model now serves 15 secondary schools, showing how successful innovations can be extended beyond single institutions. The school's diverse revenue streams from commercial enterprises contribute to programme sustainability.



Key Innovations and Elements for Others to Consider

- **Integrated Timetabling:** Complete curriculum redesign eliminates the "tack-on" problem by ensuring students in off-site programmes are part of and complementary to the overall programme.
- **Lead Provider Model:** School-controlled funding and programme design enables innovative approaches and responsive curriculum development.
- **Commercial Enterprises:** Multiple revenue-generating businesses provide authentic learning while contributing to programme sustainability.
- **Comprehensive Partnerships:** Relationships extend beyond work experience to genuine industry partnerships and collaborations in programme delivery.
- **Wrap-around Support:** Navigation services continue for up to two years post-graduation, addressing transition challenges identified in our research.
- **Community-Responsive Programming:** Programmes directly address local economic needs while respecting cultural values.
- **Umbrella Model:** Extension of successful programmes to multiple schools demonstrates scalability and regional education collaboration.
- **Outcomes Focus:** Clear measurement of success through employment and tertiary progression and results, rather than just school-level academic achievement.

Manurewa High School's transformation illustrates how schools can move beyond the constraints of traditional academic programming to create comprehensive pathways that serve their communities' economic and social needs.

Their approach directly addresses key recommendations from our policy review around integration, funding flexibility, and genuine industry partnerships, while their outcomes validate the data inquiry findings about the effectiveness of well-structured transition programmes.



Primary ITO Trades Academy - A National Industry-Led Model



Overview

The Primary Industry Training Organisation (ITO) Trades Academy represents a unique approach to secondary-tertiary programming in New Zealand's education landscape. As the only Industry Training Organisation (ITO)-led Trades Academy among the 14 officially recognised programmes, it has developed a distinctive national model that directly connects schools, students, and primary industry employers across the country.

Established in 2012 as part of the Youth Guarantee initiative, the Primary ITO Trades Academy now serves approximately 1,160 funded places ¹ annually across around 100 secondary schools nationwide, with many more participating through unfunded places. In total the Primary ITO Trades Academy caters for up to 1300 students per year.

Although seen at times as being Pākehā male dominated, the Trades Academy has 35% female learners and a third of the student body is Māori or Pasifika. Retention is also strong, with 25% of students returning for a second year and 2% return for a further year again.

Its industry-first approach sets the programme apart, whereby the training organisation rather than schools or polytechnics takes the lead in coordinating the entire student journey from

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Of the 1,160 students, 40% are directly tutored through the ITO and 60% through school-delivered contracts.

recruitment to employment. The delivery model and industry support allow the ITO to work in remote areas of the country with smaller wharekura to provide, for example, agricultural education for iwi-based initiatives.

Key Personnel and Leadership

The programme is led by **Nick Wempe**, who oversees the national operation, supported by delivery managers including **Shane Boderick**, and **Eve Williams**, a pathways to industry specialist. The team manages a complex network of relationships spanning schools, employers, and students across both islands, with regional coordinators and specialist staff ensuring quality and consistency of delivery.

Nick's background in vocational education and industry training along with his team's deep understanding of learning in farm environments and of primary sector skill needs has been crucial to the programme's success. As Nick explains: ***"We interview all students planning to enter our programme... we want to see that they have some interest, some aptitude for the industry."***

Ecosystem Development and Implementation Approach

The Primary ITO model demonstrates how an industry training organisation can effectively broker relationships between schools and employers at scale. Rather than treating vocational pathways as "add-ons," the programme has developed an integrated approach where industry requirements drive the educational design.

The programme operates through two main delivery models:

- **60% school-based delivery:** Where Primary ITO contracts directly with schools for the teaching and assessment to deliver programmes using school facilities and sometimes school staff.
- **40% tutor-led delivery:** Where Primary ITO's own tutors deliver practical learning programmes, using employer facilities. Students are picked up from their school and transported to working farms for instruction by the tutors.

This dual approach allows flexibility while maintaining quality control. As Shane notes: ***"The tutor-led programmes are exceptionally strong... we have control over the quality of teaching."***

Funding and Resources Innovation

One of the programme's key innovations is how it has maximised existing funding streams while addressing the reality of unmet demand. While officially funded for 1,160 places, the Primary ITO serves many more students through ensuring placements that have been vacated through a student withdrawal are filled by another student. This can result in up to 1300 students engaging in the Trades Academy placements.

"What we're also doing with schools now is providing a pathway to enable funded students to credit transfer units gained while they were an unfunded student in order to gain the NZ Certificate," explains Nick. This allows students to continue their progression even when official funding places are limited.

The programme also demonstrates the benefits of being a national provider enabling access to courses and a food and fibre pathway which small schools or providers would otherwise be unable to provide.

Demand for places is high. Unfortunately, the growth of the Trades Academy is hampered by the number of placements made available by the Ministry of Education. This also has the effect of limiting participation of funded students to one year in many of the schools, rather than two-years which also hampers those seeking a food and fibre pathway.

Student Experience and Assessment

The Primary ITO has developed a sophisticated student journey that begins with formal interviews to ensure programme fit. Unlike programmes that accept all comers, they actively select students who show genuine interest and aptitude for the primary industries.

Eve Williams emphasises their approach: ***"We're not looking at academic ability, we're not looking at any of those things... purely, can we see them in our industry? Can we train them, for them?"***

Students work towards the New Zealand Certificate in Primary Industries (Level 2), with the flexibility to progress to Level 3 for those staying at school longer. The assessment combines practical on-farm experience with theoretical learning; all aligned with Vocational Pathways requirements.

Completion rates are impressive, with tutors reporting 92-96% attendance rates across programmes - a significant improvement from the 80% rates when the programme began in 2015.

The unit standards completed within the Trades Academy programme contribute towards either NCEA Level 2 or Level 3 study. Last year 54% of students gained units toward NCEA Level 2 with 13.5% of those gaining their New Zealand Certificate in Primary Industry Skills (Level 2). 6.4% of students gained unit standards towards NCEA Level 3. Approximately 20% of students left school for employment, 3% of those gaining apprenticeships did so immediately upon leaving school.

We also know from our earlier independent data analysis of Food and Fibre Trades Academy performance that this engagement level extends into impressive retention in employment outcomes and personal financial outcomes compared to their peers who don't participate in a Trades Academy.

Employer Engagement

The programme's greatest strength lies in its employer engagement. The Primary ITO maintains relationships with well over 100 farmers and primary industry employers who provide genuine learning experiences for students. As an ITO-led academy, its deep connection with employers provides a distinct advantage, with an intrinsic understanding of the industry and employer needs and preferences, and industry realities.

This isn't simply work experience - it's structured learning in authentic industry settings. As Shane explains: ***"We have farmers ringing us... a farmer rang me the other day saying, 'I want to see you guys here at least once a week if not twice a week', it's the highlight of my whole week."***

The programme has been selective about employer partners, ensuring they understand the educational purpose and appreciating the value young people bring to their business rather than seeing students as free labour. This careful curation has resulted in strong industry advocacy for the programme.

Community Engagement and Scale

Operating nationally, the Primary ITO Trades Academy has achieved something unique - a consistent quality experience regardless of location. Whether a student is in Northland or Southland, they receive the same structured programme, quality of instruction, and pathway opportunities.

The programme has gained strong community support, particularly in rural areas where primary industries are central to local economies. Parents and employers increasingly recognise the value, with many family members following siblings through the programme.

Measuring Success and Outcomes

The programme tracks multiple success indicators:

- **Industry Attraction:** Students who complete primary industry programmes are significantly more likely to enter the sector.
- **Industry Retention:** Programme graduates show higher retention rates in primary industries compared to those who enter without prior exposure.
- **Further Education:** 22% of programme completers go on to further primary industry education, compared to 4% of general school leavers.
- **Employer Feedback:** Strong demand from employers for programme graduates, with many offering direct employment or apprenticeship opportunities.

Sustainability and Future Directions

As the vocational education sector undergoes further significant reform, the Primary ITO Trades Academy faces uncertainty about its future structure. However, its track record demonstrates the value of industry-led coordination in secondary-tertiary programmes.

Nick identifies the key success factors: ***"The reason why this programme has been successful is that it's got a sense of priority... it's sits within a big enough organisation to be able to afford the overheads that can ensure there's coherent, cohesive, and connected activity."***

The programme's national scale, industry connections, and quality systems provide a resilient model that could be replicated in other sectors or adapted as the education system evolves.

Key Innovations and Elements for Others to Consider

Structural Innovations:

- **Industry-led coordination:** Training organisation, in reflecting its employment-facing role, takes responsibility for the entire student journey, not just assessment.
- **National consistency:** Standardised quality and progression pathways regardless of location.
- **Flexible delivery models:** Mix of school-based and tutor-led programmes to suit different contexts and school curriculum requirements.
- **Focus on employability skills:** Draws on work-based learning expertise of Primary ITO to ensure learners are well-prepared for employment.

Quality Assurance:

- **Student selection process:** Formal interviews to ensure student programme fit and genuine industry interest.
- **Employer curation:** Careful selection and ongoing support of employer partners to ensure quality placements and safe learning experiences.
- **Performance monitoring:** Regular tracking of completion rates, progression, and employer feedback.

Resource Optimisation:

- **Scale efficiencies:** National operation allows overhead costs to be spread effectively.
- **Creative funding use:** Unfunded places supported through efficient resource allocation.
- **Dual enrolment benefits:** Students remain connected to schools while gaining industry experience.

Partnership Excellence:

- **Genuine industry engagement:** Over 60 employer partners providing authentic learning experiences.
- **School relationship management:** Direct contracts with schools ensuring clear expectations and support.
- **Community integration:** Strong local connections supporting student recruitment and employer engagement.

This model demonstrates how industry leadership can create a coherent, quality-assured pathway that serves students, schools, and employers effectively at national scale.

Feilding High School: A Pioneering Model for Food and Fibre Education



Feilding High School is New Zealand's only dedicated agricultural secondary school, transforming traditional farming education through innovative technology integration and comprehensive industry partnerships. With around 60% of students participating in some form of agricultural programme, this longstanding institution demonstrates how secondary schools can effectively use curriculum innovation to bridge the gap between classroom learning and agricultural careers.

"We are different, and we have the ability to serve kids who want to do agriculture, like no other in our region," explains Principal Nathan Stewart. ***"We have two working farms. We have shearing courses all the time. We've got kids who will turn up to the school ball on tractors and combine harvesters. That's who we are."***

The school's unique combination of working farms, cutting-edge robotic milking technology, and dual academic-vocational pathways offers valuable lessons for schools seeking to develop effective food and fibre education programmes.

Two farms, two pathways, endless possibilities

The school uses NCEA to deliver pathways for both university-bound and vocationally oriented students. The academic pathway supports students to achieve university entrance, while the

Primary Industries Pathway provides hands-on vocational training leading directly to employment.

"We've got some learners that find it very, very hard to sit in rows and write because they've been brought up on farms," Nathan observes. "Our kids will milk before they come to school, they'll work all weekend. They will drive tractors for mum and dad. They love it, and they work long hours. While formal classroom learning does not always appeal as long as they can continue learning and it is going to lead to a career - these students will turn up and work until they've saved the money to go and buy their Toyota Hilux."

The curriculum spans Years 9-13 with carefully structured progression, integrating Primary ITO (Industry Training Organisation) supported Levels 1-3 programmes directly into the secondary curriculum. These provide students with nationally recognised qualifications in tractor operation, animal handling, shearing, and farm safety before graduation.

Nathan emphasises the practical outcomes: ***"Our job is to support every one of these young people successfully into their next step. These students will go to Canada, they'll go to Australia, they'll drive tractors, they'll shear sheep. When they come back and share their stories - that's outstanding. But schools are typically pigeonholed for university preparation, when actually there could be 16-year-olds starting apprenticeships because they're ready to go."***

Revolutionary technology meets traditional farming

The school made history by becoming the first school in the Southern Hemisphere to install a DeLaval VMS (Voluntary Milking System) robotic milking unit at their dairy farm. This investment transformed the agricultural education by providing students with hands-on experience using industry-leading technology.

The 16-hectare dairy farm, Ngākaunui, operates 50 Friesian cows, with the robotic system generating extensive real-time data on animal health, milk production, and milking frequency. Students extract and analyse this performance data, learning to make informed decisions about feed management and animal welfare. Different school faculties now utilise farm data, to contextualise the learning, in their curricula.

Complementing the high-tech dairy operation, the 81-hectare farm, Manawanui, also provides traditional sheep, beef, and forestry experiences. Students manage breeding ewes, finish trade lambs annually, raise dairy-beef cattle, and maintain production forestry. The contrasting farms ensure students graduate with comprehensive agricultural and forestry knowledge spanning both cutting-edge technology and time-tested farming practices.



Navigating system barriers and seeking flexibility

Despite the school's successes, Nathan highlights ongoing challenges with the current education system not recognising the broader appeal of the industry customised learning provided by Feilding High School. ***"We are confined by the rules - if you live on the wrong side of the road, you can't come to the school,"*** he explains. ***"We have the ability to serve kids like no other in our region who want to do agriculture. So why can't a kid from out of zone, recognising our special character, come here?"***

The school also faces frustration with the barriers to interoperability with tertiary-level programmes: ***"We are keen to offer a diploma in agriculture through Lincoln University. We can't access the funding because we're a secondary school. We've got the farms, we've got the expertise, we've got Board members pushing to make this happen, but we keep hitting roadblocks."***

Nathan advocates for more flexible approaches: ***"What we're really saying is, should we get rid of the NCEA structure and instead have some students do the BCITO stuff, doing standards and programmes that are relevant? At the moment, our kids are pigeonholed because of NCEA requirements."***

Industry partnerships that create real pathways

The school's success stems from deep-rooted partnerships with agricultural businesses and training providers. Carrfields Livestock serves as the primary sponsor, providing work experience opportunities and scholarships. H&T Agronomics partners in conducting grass variety trials on school farms, giving students exposure to real agricultural research.

"More and more employers are saying 'we just want good people first' - people with the right attitude," Nathan notes. "Some of our kids will go home and help with fencing. The biggest thing they can buy isn't a car - it'll be a ute², and it'll be for work, and they'll be so proud of how many hours they're working."

Student pathways lead in multiple directions. Academically inclined graduates typically progress to Lincoln or Massey University for agricultural science degrees, while vocationally inclined students transition to prestigious cadetships or direct employment. The school's Primary ITO qualifications and the practical learning in their school programmes ensure these students arrive ready to work, and with recognised certification.

The challenge of supporting diverse learners

Nathan recognises students have different needs and readiness levels: ***"Some students are ready to leave at 16 because of their maturity and where they're going. Others need the opportunity to continue being nurtured. For some, having one day a week out on a farm opens their eyes - they don't know what they don't know. All of a sudden, it can make school and learning more relevant."***

He emphasises the importance of timing: ***"There's probably a level of fluidity that would be beneficial, but you've got to have structure too. Some kids might need to straddle between school and work for a while, others might need to just be brave and go fully."***

The school strives to balance these different needs while maintaining high standards: ***"We've got to make sure every learner gets served well. Some will need economics or accounting because they'll go into agribusiness. Our challenge is serving everyone while recognising we're different from other schools."***

Agribusiness integration and real-world learning

The school has successfully integrated agribusiness studies, recognising the commercial aspects of modern farming. ***"We did agribusiness – we were one of the first schools with that programme,"*** Nathan explains. ***"We've got kids doing business-type subjects, and if you want another pathway, we have agriculture as well. It's about creating alignment and context."***

Students engage with actual farm financials, learning accounting through real farm business operations. ***"The teachers can talk to each other and use agriculture as context,"*** Nathan notes, highlighting the cross-curricular benefits.

² We were reliably informed that the Toyota Hilux is the most desirable option.

Building community support and school identity

Nathan emphasises the importance of community engagement: ***"In our town, we are right in the heartland, yet we still have Drama, we still have Music - it's not all about Agriculture. But kids whose homes are on the wrong side of the road could come here and do agriculture in a real setting."***

He advocates for greater school choice based on educational pathway focus: ***"At the moment, you can choose a school based on your gender, your ethnicity, your religion, but you can't choose a school based on educational pathways. In a country where agriculture is our largest economic export, imagine if you could choose a school because you want to do agriculture."***

Assessment and pathway recognition

The school grapples with assessment challenges in the current system. ***"We have kids who struggle with traditional assessment but excel in practical applications,"*** Nathan explains. ***"There's got to be recognition that employment is an outcome too - not just University Entrance."***

He sees potential in vocational pathways, since the subject-based paradigm is getting increasingly cluttered – for example agribusiness, alongside economics, accounting, and commerce. When contextualised in terms of an industry-facing pathway, these subjects come to life in terms of their practical application and can help students gain underlying and transferable skills before they specialise in specific vocations.

Vision for the future

Nathan's vision extends beyond current constraints: ***"What we're asking for is simple - in a country where agriculture is our major economic export, imagine if you could choose to go to high school because you want to do agriculture. Why can't you choose based on the subject or vocation you wish to pursue?"***

He sees technology and flexibility as key: ***"Students need to see learning as something that continues. They might do unit standards; they might come back later for diplomas or degrees. Learning should be seen as ongoing, but it's got to be meaningful and connected to what they want to do."***

Lessons for innovative agricultural education

Feilding High School's approach offers several key insights for schools developing food and fibre programmes. The dual-pathway system acknowledges that students have different goals and learning styles, providing rigorous options for both university preparation and direct workforce entry. The integration of industry-standard technology and qualifications ensures graduates possess immediately applicable skills, while strong industry partnerships create authentic learning experiences and clear post-graduation pathways.

Nathan's experience highlights the need for system flexibility: ***"Sometimes the good thing is just to stay at school and do your best at the basics to keep all doors open. But the challenge is we've been quite hesitant about people going out two days a week for agriculture - there are timetabling challenges, but they can be overcome with creativity."***

The school demonstrates that effective agricultural education requires significant infrastructure investment, but the return appears in graduate employment rates, industry recognition, and the school's ability to attract students nationwide. By treating farms as integrated teaching laboratories rather than separate entities, the school maximises educational value while maintaining commercial viability.

As Nathan Stewart concludes: ***"We need to keep experimenting, keep trying things. We need to be more playful and willing to take risks. Let's keep experimenting and keep finding ways to serve our students better - whether they're going to university or vocational education, or straight into the workforce."***

Key innovations and highlights

- **Dual-pathway system** offering both university preparation and direct workforce entry routes.
- **Two working farms** providing authentic learning environments with both high-tech and traditional operations.
- **Primary ITO qualifications** integrated within secondary school curriculum.
- **Cross-curricular integration** with farm data used across a range of different school subjects.
- **Strong industry partnerships** providing authentic work experience and employment pathways.
- **Boarding facility** attracting students from across New Zealand.
- **Flexibility advocacy** challenging zoning restrictions to serve students based on educational pathways.
- **Real business operations** through student-managed agricultural enterprises and integrated learning in commerce and agriculture.
- **Recognition of diverse learner needs** balancing academic and practical approaches.
- **Community-centred approach** serving the local agricultural economy while maintaining comprehensive education.

Bay of Plenty Futures Academy: Community and Culture delivers for Food and Fibre



In the heart of New Zealand's Bay of Plenty (BOP) region, two innovative Trades Academies have been quietly revolutionising how young people connect with food and fibre careers. Both the BOP Futures Academy, led by Trident High School in Whakatane, and the Primary Industry Training Organisation (PITO) Trades Academy demonstrate how genuine community partnerships, and a network of kura can transform vocational education from a collection of disconnected programmes into a thriving ecosystem that serves both learners and local industry needs.

Building Networks from the Ground Up

The Trades Academies' success in the region stems from what Julia Pura-Mackenzie, a Principal Advisor - Secondary Transitions at the Ministry of Education, and a key architect of the regional network, describes as organic relationship building that started with genuine community need. The model is responsive - rather than imposing external programmes, they respond to what communities and employers are seeking.

A local organic farmer concerned about succession planning approached Te Kura at Ruatoki asking for young workers. This simple request sparked a collaboration that would be replicated across several wharekura, schools and employers across the Bay of Plenty.

Julia recalls, ***"Out of the blue came this request from a farmer, and from the resulting kōrero, all that blossomed."***

She explains the early meetings at the wharekura saw the farmer, local farm Trust members, several staff from the PITO Trades Academy led by Ginny Vincent, and the Ministry of Education investigate the viability of creating a programme for rangatahi to learn the basic skills needed for farming.

Four years later that farmer's legacy continues, with students still working at his farm illustrating what Julia describes as lasting employment pathways that benefit both young people and rural businesses.

This grassroots approach differs fundamentally from top-down education initiatives and imposing external programmes, to forging natural occurring relationships and delivering what communities and employers are seeking.

Using this methodology, the projects with both Trades Academies have expanded to include workplace-based learning in industry such as timber processing, iwi-led curriculum and workforce development in aquaculture, and construction projects that serve real community needs.

Julia recounts, ***"We were approached by one timber processing company who were keen to engage with a couple of students in a work-based course which could lead to the possibility of employment thereafter."*** To boost numbers of students, the Bay of Plenty Futures Academy met with six regional timber processing companies to see if they would be interested in forming a collective to offer this opportunity to students in their respective areas.

In a response to local iwi, Ngāti Awa, who shared with local education leaders that housing was an issue for their people, BOP Futures Academy and Ministry of Education worked with three local secondary schools to create different construction pathways. One partnered with Kāinga Ora and built a house for them. One collaborated with a local business owner who had houses to renovate, completed the renovation and then sold the property. And the third school chose to restore a caravan and raffled it off to people in the community.

"The different communities showed their support of these new initiatives," Julia shared. ***"There are stories of allied trade business owners who openly welcomed the rangatahi to do work experience with them on non-building days; one community was vocal in their support on social media, praising the school and students for undertaking such a project; and for another, Steve and Karyn Jones of Bay of Plenty House Removals offered their support, donating a house, the removal costs and provided yard space at their premises for the students to work on the house."***

BOP Futures Academy Manager, Cindy Lee, has supported this way of working because as she says, ***"It cements a strategic foundation for the Futures Academy, to seek and support opportunities of collective impact, to help unleash our young people's potential. This authentic, employment skills rich, vocational learning lifts our students' capabilities and aspirations, both personally and within our communities."***

Transforming Student Engagement Through Real Purpose

The Academy's impact on individual students illustrates the power of connecting education to real-world purpose. Academy Manager, Cindy Lee is based at Trident High School and leads the

operational management for the Bay of Plenty-wide network, shares the story of a student who arrived with just 45% attendance and deep disengagement from school: ***"Mum was at her wit's end with trying to get her to school. They came in to see the Careers Advisor, who explained about the hair salon course opportunity and where it leads"***.

The Careers Advisor shared, ***"That for her to be considered for a slot the following term she needed to be at school, engage in her learning and then we could look at getting her on the taster."*** The transformation was remarkable. The student's attendance jumped to over 80%, she successfully completed two 'taster' courses and is now fully engaged in a full year Level 2 course with 87% attendance, planning to continue to full-time tertiary study at Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology.

"This story is not uncommon to many students who attend Futures," Cindy observes, noting that such turnarounds have become a defining characteristic of their approach.

The Academy serves over 865 students across 45 schools throughout the Bay of Plenty, with approximately 60% of participants identifying as Māori. This high Māori participation reflects both the cultural responsiveness of the programmes and their alignment with community needs.

As one rural kura principal noted in their feedback, the Academy ***"creates a learning environment that promotes life skills, social skills, and self-efficacy"*** while helping students navigate between Te Reo Māori and English contexts with growing confidence.

Authentic Industry Partnerships in Food and Fibre

The food and fibre pathways within the Academy demonstrate how genuine industry engagement and partnerships can create meaningful career preparation. Unlike superficial work experience programmes, these partnerships involve employers as co-designers of learning experiences.

Julia told us how they worked with the PITO Trades Academy to deliver programmes that meet both educational requirements and industry needs. Students don't just visit farms; they participate in real agricultural operations, from machinery work to animal husbandry, under the guidance of experienced farmers who understand both the practical and educational aspects of their roles.

The Primary Industries pathway encompasses agriculture, horticulture, forestry, and aquaculture, with programmes delivered through partnerships with the PITO Trades Academy, Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology, Woodwise industry training and local employers.

Students can earn New Zealand Certificate qualifications in Agriculture (Farming Systems) and Primary Industry Skills, Forestry Operations, and Timber Grading while still at school, creating "head starts" on industry training in their future jobs. These qualifications are not tokenistic add-ons, but integrated components of coherent learning programmes that prepare students for immediate employment or further study at a tertiary institution.

Forestry programmes exemplify this integration particularly well. The Academy offers New Zealand's only secondary school-based pathway and coursework leading to a Diploma in Forest Management Level 6, delivered through partnerships that include simulator training and real forest operations. Students work with companies like Sequal Lumber or PukePine, or participate

in government forestry scholarship programmes, creating clearer pathways from school to apprenticeships, employment, and managerial roles.

Cindy notes that several Futures Academy graduates have returned as employers themselves, hiring new Academy students and maintaining the cycle of community investment.

Cultural Foundation as Educational Strength

One of the Academy's most distinctive features is its integration of Māori cultural development with vocational training. This isn't cultural embellishment added to mainstream programmes, but fundamental redesign that recognises cultural identity as an asset in workforce preparation.

The partnership with Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Awa provides students with regular cultural wānanga, including three-day noho programmes to combine 'Ngāti Awatanga' traditional knowledge with contemporary vocational skills.

Julia Pura-MacKenzie explained how this cultural foundation enhances rather than detracts from employment readiness: ***"Both the BOP Futures Academy and PITO Trades Academy create equitable opportunity for our kura Māori and for those kura who are in isolated areas. They support our kura to provide learning environments that promote not only academic skills but also life skills, employment skills, social skills and self-efficacy from a Māori worldview."***

Te Wharekura o Ruātoki is a total immersion kura. Their take on the benefits: ***"The Futures Academy courses allow our students to learn how to communicate more confidently in English and highlights the advantage of knowing their own language and identity, giving them more confidence to take up new challenges."***

This cultural responsiveness provides relevance which extends beyond language to encompass traditional knowledge systems that complement modern industry practices. Students learning agriculture, for example, engage with both contemporary farming methods and traditional Māori land management practices.

Those students who signed up for an aquaculture marine programme at the local college in Ōpōtiki, can be assured that the course creation was led by the local iwi, Te Tāwharau o Te Whakatōhea. They worked in collaboration with iwi experts, science experts from the Cawthron Institute, mussel farm and factory leaders, workforce implementation leads from Aquaculture New Zealand, and Ministry of Education and PITO Trades Academy staff to incorporate modern marine biology with traditional Māori ecological mātauranga (knowledge) accumulated over generations.

This integration creates graduates who bring unique perspectives to their workplaces while maintaining strong connections to their cultural identity.

Regional Coordination and Systemic Impact

The Academy's regional hub and spoke model demonstrates how vocational education can achieve scale while maintaining local responsiveness. Rather than centralising all training in one location, they coordinate multiple hubs across Rotorua, Tauranga, Taupō, and the Eastern Bay of Plenty. This distributed approach allows students to access specialised training without the disruption and cost of long-distance travel, while enabling smaller schools to offer programmes they couldn't sustain individually.

Julia emphasises this coordination requires ongoing relationship management rather than formal bureaucratic structures: ***"We work very closely and frequently with all key stakeholders, industry leaders and employers, training providers, community leaders, and of course kura themselves"***. She explains, ***"We are always looking to connect new pathway training opportunities to schools and students."*** This personal, facilitative and relationship-based approach enables rapid response to emerging opportunities while maintaining quality standards across the network.

The Academy's growth from 514 students in 2018 to over 865 in 2024 reflects an expansion built on deepening community engagement. Cindy reports their impact data shows consistently high positive progression rates, with students moving into employment through apprenticeships and further education or training at rates significantly above national averages.

More importantly, these progressions reflect genuine career development rather than just random work experience placements, with many students progressing within integrated pathways from school through training to leadership roles.

Addressing System-Level Challenges

The Academy's leadership has identified structural barriers that limit the potential of their successful model. They argue that the current funding system, with its separation of school, tertiary, and Youth Guarantee funding streams, creates artificial barriers to integrated delivery. ***"The wider Youth Guarantee initiative and brand, led by the Ministry of Education, was used as the umbrella for a much wider range of delivery permutations designed for and implemented at the interface of secondary and tertiary education and employment, but that this coordination has weakened over time."***

The Trades Academies also had to navigate changes in tertiary provider capacity and capabilities, with some traditional partners reducing their community engagement due to financial pressures. Julia describes how they've responded by developing new partnerships, including supporting industry professionals to establish their own workplace-based training to build stronger employment pathways for students.

"This year we piloted students gaining workplace-based training in local sawmills, and within the Patchel Engineering Workshop, and next year we will pilot a Whānau Ora/Health and Social workplace-based training option with Te Whatu Ora and a local service provider," said Cindy.

Cindy observes that demand for Trades Academy places consistently exceeds supply, with schools regularly requesting additional courses they can't always accommodate. The Futures Academy's 2024 student survey shows that 70% of students want two or more days per week of trades training, yet how the Academy intersects with school funding, limits some schools to opt for single-day programmes.

Despite this constraint, the high demand reflects both the effectiveness of the model and the limitations of treating vocational education as supplementary to rather than central to senior secondary school education.

Evidence of Impact and Sustainability

The Trades Academies' impact extends beyond individual student success stories to measurable improvements in educational and employment outcomes. Cindy reports that since the inception of Trades Academies in 2011, retention rates in Years 12 and 13 have improved, NCEA Level 2 pass rates have increased, and students have gained access to training they wouldn't otherwise experience.

"Students who do well at the Trades courses may not excel in any of their other school subjects, so it is great that they have found success, recognition, and aspiration through their Trades course. For some, it is the first time ever in their learning career that they have experienced this." she notes.

More fundamentally, Julia argues that programmes like the Futures Academy and PITO Trades Academy demonstrate learning pathways that challenge educational assumptions about students' capability and career potential. ***"I believe that vocational education needs to have more prominence in the curriculum settings in the school setting,"*** she observes, arguing that the artificial separation between academic and vocational learning limits opportunities for most students.

The success of the Trades Academies in attracting and retaining Māori students particularly demonstrates its potential for addressing educational equity. With 60% Māori participation in a system where Māori students often experience lower engagement and achievement, the academies show how culturally responsive, skills-based vocational education can become a vehicle for educational success and employment opportunity rather than a consolation prize for academic failure.

Implications for System Reform

The BOP Futures Academy's experience offers crucial insights for broader vocational education reform. Cindy Lee and Julia Pura-MacKenzie advocate for treating the senior secondary school years as an integrated progression from school-to-work rather than separate academic and vocational tracks. Cindy shared her vision is ***"Senior school should be about preparing our young people to become skilled, confident, and capable employees. Every course they take should have an explicit lens, context, or experience towards helping students on their employability transformation journey."***

Julia suggests, ***"I would argue we need to be thinking around year 11 to 14,"*** proposing that post-compulsory education should be conceived as a unified pathway system rather than disconnected institutional silos.

The academies' model demonstrates effective vocational education involves genuine partnerships where industry, education providers, and communities share responsibility for outcomes. This goes beyond traditional work experience to encompass co-designed programmes, shared resource investment, and mutual accountability for student success. As Julia notes, ***"Employers and industry stakeholders have to shift their mindsets just as much as schools"*** if genuine education-to-employment ecosystems are to develop.

The success of the model also highlights the importance of local leadership and community ownership in vocational education design. Rather than implementing externally designed

programmes, they've created responsive systems that adapt to community social and economic needs while maintaining educational quality.

This approach suggests effective vocational education policy should enable and support local innovation rather than mandating standardised solutions.

Connections to Research Findings

The mahi of both the BOP Futures Academy and the PITO Trades Academy together exemplify many of the key findings from recent research on secondary-tertiary transitions:

- **Early exposure increases engagement:** Students who participate in Trades Academies show significantly higher retention and achievement rates, validating the academies' approach of providing early access to vocational experiences.
- **Industry partnerships improve outcomes:** The academies' genuine employer engagement creates clear pathways to employment and further training, addressing the research finding that successful progression requires active industry participation.
- **Cultural responsiveness enhances rather than detracts from employment preparation:** The academies' integration of Māori cultural development with vocational training demonstrates how cultural identity can strengthen workforce readiness.
- **Regional coordination maximises limited resources:** The 'hub and spoke' model shows how smaller communities can access specialised vocational training through collaborative approaches, addressing the challenge of providing diverse pathways in areas with limited individual school capacity.
- **Flexible funding arrangements enable innovation:** The academies' success despite funding constraints highlights the research recommendation for more flexible, outcomes-focused funding that supports integrated delivery rather than maintaining artificial programme boundaries.

The academies' experience suggests an effective school-to-work interface requires systemic rather than programmatic thinking, genuine partnerships rather than token consultation, and cultural responsiveness rather than one-size-fits-all approaches.

As New Zealand considers how to better serve the 70% of students who don't progress directly to university, the BOP Futures Academy and PITO Trades Academy provide a compelling example of what becomes possible when iwi, communities, kura, and industries work together to create pathways that serve both learners and regional economic development needs.

Key Innovations and Elements for Others to Consider

The BOP Futures Academy case study validates and exemplifies several key findings from both the Data Inquiry and Policy Review:

Supporting the Data Inquiry findings:

- **Trades Academies effectiveness:** The Academy's documented success in improving student engagement, retention, and transition outcomes reinforces the research finding that completing trades academy programmes significantly increases the probability of entering and remaining in relevant industries.
- **Industry retention benefits:** Students' positive feedback and high progression rates to further training or employment align with research showing that Trades Academy graduates have superior retention rates and earnings premiums.
- **Pathway coherence:** The Academy's integration of cultural development with vocational training demonstrates how Vocational Pathways can be used as genuine curriculum design tools rather than retrospective credit sorting.

Reinforcing the Policy Review recommendations:

- **Formal evaluation needed:** The Academy's success despite limited formal evaluation supports the recommendation for comprehensive assessment of Trades Academy effectiveness both as educationally and systemically.
- **Programme consolidation:** The Academy's navigation of multiple funding streams (STAR, Gateway, Trades Academy funding) illustrates the "clutter of schemes" problem and the need for consolidated, flexible resourcing.
- **Dual enrolment expansion:** The Academy's model demonstrates the potential for universalising dual enrolment for students from age 16, showing how this can become mainstream rather than alternative provision.
- **Earning while learning:** The Academy's model demonstrates the potential for allowing post-16 students to earn when engaging in workplace learning.
- **Industry-education engagement framework:** The Academy's partnership model exemplifies the recommended shared framework for industry-education collaboration, with genuine co-design rather than token consultation.
- **Pathway micro-credentials:** The Academy's successful integration of industry standards with NCEA achievement demonstrates the potential for specialised pathway micro-credentials and skills standards that serve both educational and employment purposes.
- **Professional development priorities:** The Academy's success highlights the need for teacher professional development in pathway-based curriculum design, work-integrated learning and industry engagement.
- **Addressing esteem issues:** The Academy's high Māori participation and positive student outcomes challenge traditional perceptions about vocational education as a deficit option and demonstrates that relevance is a great predictor of Māori success.

Demonstrating system-level solutions:

- **Regional coordination:** The hub and spoke model shows how to achieve economies of scale while maintaining local responsiveness and addressing the challenge of providing diverse pathways in areas with limited individual school capacity.
- **Cultural responsiveness:** The integration of Mātauranga Māori demonstrates how indigenous knowledge systems can enhance vocational skill and knowledge development.
- **Community ownership:** The Academy's grassroots development illustrates how effective vocational education emerges from community leadership rather than external imposition, supporting recommendations for locally responsive rather than centrally mandated approaches.

Pukekohe High School: Achieving True Integration in Pathway Education



At Pukekohe High School in South Auckland's Franklin District, educators are pioneering an approach to pathway education for their learners that moves beyond the traditional model of separate academic and vocational streams.

Rather than treating Trades Academy programmes as additions to regular schooling, the school has extended its senior curriculum in a pilot starting with Year 12 to achieve genuine integration between practical training and academic learning. This 'beyond the school gate' mentality demonstrates how schools can enhance the effectiveness of existing pathway programmes through strategic curriculum design and partnership management.

The school currently enrolls 65 students across pathway programmes within a Year 12 cohort of about 400. However, demand consistently exceeds available places, with waiting lists for popular programmes. This excess demand demonstrates both the appeal of the integrated approach and the potential for expansion given adequate resources.

From Add-On to Integration



The transformation at Pukekohe High School began with recognition that conventional approaches to pathway education often failed to create coherent learning experiences. Students were frequently caught between disconnected academic requirements and separate vocational training, struggling to see connections between various aspects of their education.

The school's leadership identified this integration challenge as fundamental to improving pathway effectiveness. As one coordinator explained, traditional arrangements meant programmes were ***"very much sitting on top of the existing***

timetable," creating fragmentation rather than coherence in student learning experiences.

The solution involved fundamentally redesigning how pathway programmes operate within the school's overall curriculum structure. Rather than treating Trades Academy attendance as time away from "real" school, the leadership committed to restructuring their entire senior curriculum around integrated pathway delivery.

The school identified four core pathway areas based on student demand and regional industry alignment: automotive, building and construction, electrical engineering, agriculture, and horticulture. These became organising frameworks for redesigned programmes that combine practical training with contextualised academic achievement, delivered through genuine partnership with the Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT).

For example, in March as part of their Agriculture Pathway Programme, students were undertaking farm placements with the Primary ITO and were involved with a project on pest control with Land Based Training, a specialist agricultural Private Training Enterprise (PTE), health and safety training in rural safety and preparing for "Clash of the Colleges" in rural activities.

Strategic Curriculum Redesign

Pukekohe High School's most significant innovation lies in how mainstream teachers adapt their subjects to support pathway progression while maintaining academic rigour. Rather than requiring students to complete disconnected academic subjects alongside their vocational training, teachers redesign achievement standards to align with pathway contexts, employability skills and tertiary preparation requirements.

"We also looked at what were the skills sets that they were looking for in a transition pathway into tertiary and that was particularly for our subjects - the maths, the English and physics were very important," explained one coordinator. This analysis informed collaborative curriculum design that ensures pathway students receive academic preparation relevant to their chosen career directions.

The contextualisation extends far beyond superficial connections. In building pathways, students engage with mathematical concepts through construction projects, develop literacy skills through industry documentation, and explore sustainable practices that influence the industry. The result is academic learning that students recognise as directly relevant to their career preparation.

Crucially, this approach avoids what educators' term "credit harvesting" - the practice of students selecting unrelated Achievement (or Unit) Standards³ purely to accumulate NCEA credits without coherent learning progression. As one teacher noted: ***"Credit harvesting, everybody knows is a nightmare in schools... so we don't really talk standards in the pathways programmes... we just say don't worry about that, we've got that covered, you just need to focus on these skills that you need to move to the next stage."***

Transforming Student Engagement

The impact on student participation and achievement has been substantial and apparent. School leaders report significant improvements in attendance, classroom behaviour, and academic outcomes within pathway programmes. Students who previously struggled with traditional academic approaches now demonstrate sustained engagement and achievement.

"We've got students doing an Achievement Standard at Level 2 in English who would never have considered, let alone done before, doing physics they would never have done before. They are also doing maths, it's contextualised, and they are getting through," observed one coordinator. This represents genuine academic achievement rather than diluted alternatives, with students succeeding in subjects they previously found irrelevant or inaccessible.

The transformation extends beyond academic measures to fundamental changes in student attitudes towards learning and their prospects. Teachers report regular feedback from parents about children who now actively want to attend school and engage with learning, representing dramatic shifts from previous reluctance or disengagement.

Enhanced Partnership Models

Unlike arrangements where schools simply send students to tertiary providers for separate training, Pukekohe High School has developed strategic partnerships that ensure genuine complementarity and progression between learning phases. The relationship with the Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT) exemplifies this collaborative approach.

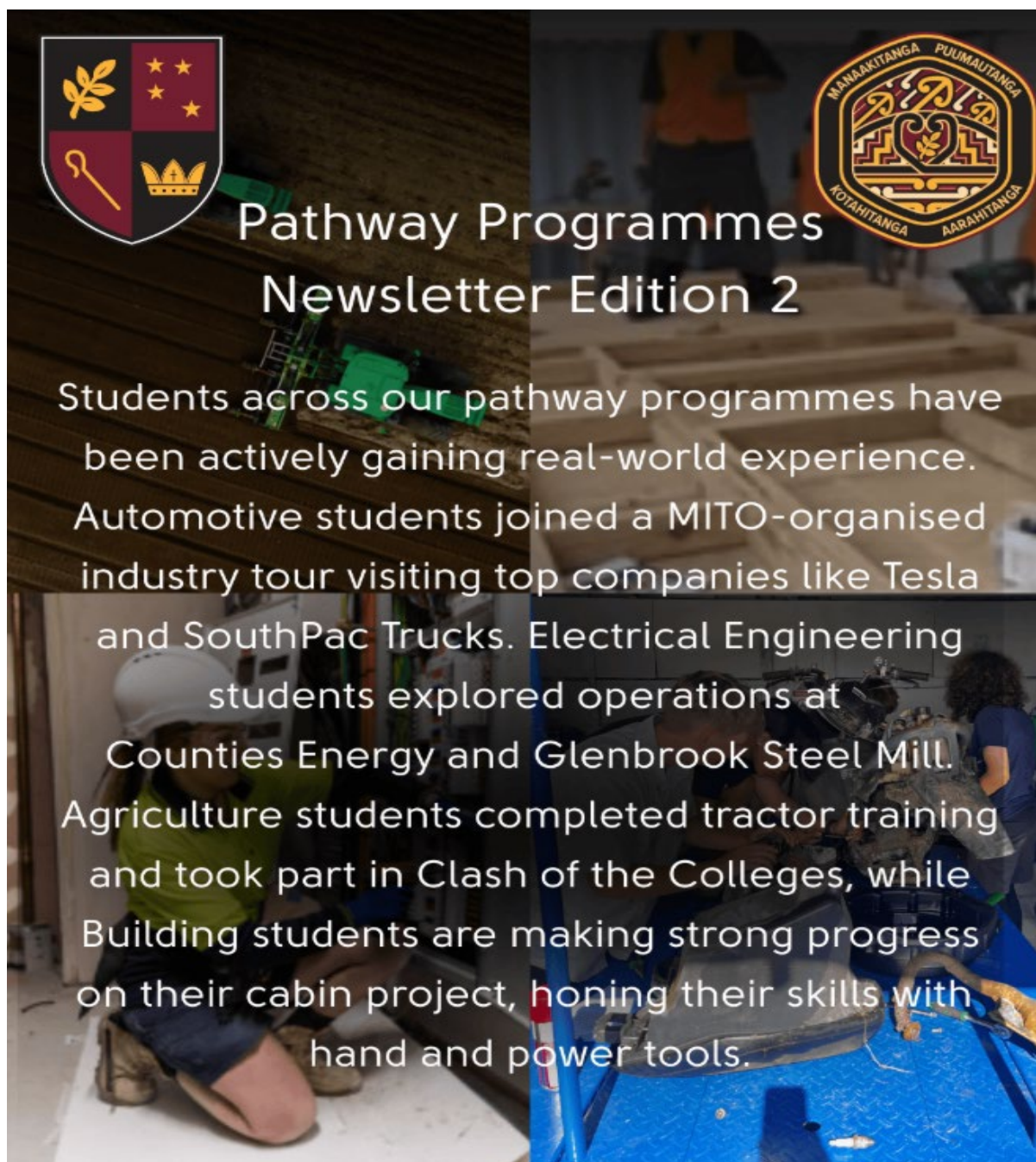
The school's strategy involves honest evaluation of respective strengths and optimal division of responsibilities. As one coordinator explained: ***"I was able to go in and say what you're delivering does not match what we want to deliver, particularly in the engineering space. You've got the facilities and the abilities... so what you're teaching is what we should be teaching in the school. You should be teaching something else."***

This collaborative approach to complementarity and progression ensures students receive foundation-level learning in well-resourced school environments while accessing more advanced technical training and industry-standard facilities through tertiary partners. The result

³ The historical distinction between 'Unit' and 'Achievement' Standards is itself a primary contributor to the divide between academic and vocational learning, and all the parity of esteem issues that go with that.

is genuine progression rather than duplication or disconnection between different learning phases.

The school has also strengthened connections with regional employers, growing community support and creating opportunities for authentic work experiences. The message is clear that vocational learning complements rather than competes with academic requirements. These relationships extend beyond placement provision to encompass curriculum input, mentoring, and direct recruitment pathways.



The cover image is a collage of three photographs showing students in various vocational settings. The top left photo shows a student working on a green machine. The top right photo shows a student working on a wooden structure. The bottom photo shows a student wearing a white hard hat and a green safety vest, kneeling on the ground. The background of the collage is a dark, textured surface.

Pathway Programmes Newsletter Edition 2

Students across our pathway programmes have been actively gaining real-world experience. Automotive students joined a MITO-organised industry tour visiting top companies like Tesla and SouthPac Trucks. Electrical Engineering students explored operations at Counties Energy and Glenbrook Steel Mill. Agriculture students completed tractor training and took part in Clash of the Colleges, while Building students are making strong progress on their cabin project, honing their skills with hand and power tools.

Regional Coordination Vision

Recognising resource limitations facing individual schools, Pukekohe High School's leadership envisions developing regional coordination that could serve multiple communities and schools across South Auckland more effectively. The school's strategic location in Franklin District positions it well for such coordination.

"I would like to see a regional model where you could have the automotive here and we build something and bring the other schools into it, maybe the tertiary providers come down to deliver in these spaces in the region," explained one school leader. This vision encompasses developing centres of excellence for different pathway areas rather than expecting comprehensive provision from every school.

The regional approach addresses persistent challenges around transport in and out of Auckland, specialised equipment and facilities, and expert staffing while maintaining local connections and community responsiveness.

Rather than centralising all provision, coordinated specialisation allows schools to develop strengths ensuring students across the region can access diverse pathway options.

Managing System Complexities

The school's experience highlights structural complexities within current education systems that require careful navigation to achieve effective integration. Funding arrangements across different government agencies create administrative challenges, while assessment frameworks require ongoing negotiation to ensure coherence between secondary and tertiary requirements.

Professional development for teachers represents an ongoing challenge, as the integrated model requires educators who can contextualise their subject expertise within industry applications while maintaining academic standards. Current system offerings provide limited support for this specialised capability development.

The school has also had to navigate changing tertiary provider capacities as the vocational reform processes continue to affect partner institutions' ability to maintain community engagement and collaborative programme delivery.

Teacher Engagement

The pathway approach has required significant teacher adaptation, creating concerns about increased workload and preparation. However, as programmes proved their effectiveness, staff attitudes shifted towards enthusiasm, enterprise and professional satisfaction.

Working with motivated students who attend regularly and participate actively has renewed professional engagement for many educators. The enhanced learning environment, characterised by smaller classes and clearer programme goals, enables stronger teacher-student relationships that support both academic achievement and personal development.

Some teachers now express a preference for pathway programme involvement due to the improved classroom dynamics and student responsiveness. As one educator observed, ***"strengthening student-teacher relationships through pathway contexts makes everything else easier"*** in terms of classroom management and learning facilitation.

Community and Industry Alignment

Pukekohe High School's pathway programmes align strategically with regional economic development priorities. Franklin District's significant population growth and ongoing infrastructure development creates sustained demand for skilled workers across construction, agriculture, horticulture, automotive and emerging industries.

The school's programmes position students to participate directly in local economic development while building career foundations that can support both immediate employment and longer-term progression. This alignment serves individual student interests while contributing to broader community development objectives.

Local economic development leaders recognise the strategic importance of education-industry coordination, though formal mechanisms for this collaboration remain underdeveloped. The school's approach demonstrates how educational institutions can contribute to the local economy and community development while meeting individual student career preparation needs.

Evidence and Expansion Plans

Establishing comprehensive longitudinal outcome tracking remains challenging but early indicators suggest significant positive impacts across student retention, engagement, and achievement measures. Further, students develop clearer career direction and enhanced employment readiness while maintaining access to tertiary education pathways.

The school leadership recognise that scaling their approach requires addressing systemic barriers around funding integration, assessment alignment, and teacher preparation support. Success depends on developing sustainable models that support genuine integration rather than maintaining artificial boundaries between various aspects of student learning.

Future expansion could encompass additional pathway areas including the Māori economy, health sciences, creative industries, and emerging technology sectors. However, this growth will require resolving current resource constraints and enabling funding flexibility that supports integrated delivery rather than subject-driven programme fragmentation.

Reform Implications

Pukekohe High School's experience provides valuable insights for pathway education enhancement. Their success demonstrates that effective integration requires strategic curriculum redesign rather than superficial programme coordination, while maintaining the fundamental value of Trades Academy frameworks.

The school's regional coordination vision suggests directions for collaborative approaches that optimise limited resources while maintaining local responsiveness and specialisation. Rather than expecting comprehensive provision from every institution, coordinated excellence and shared resourcing can serve wider communities more effectively.

Most significantly, the school's experience highlights how genuine curriculum integration enhances both academic achievement and career preparation simultaneously. Challenging assumptions that these represent competing priorities rather than complementary objectives is an important part of the thinking and leadership approach.

Links to Research Findings and Recommendations

The Pukekohe High School case study validates and exemplifies several key findings from the Secondary School Transitions and Pathways to VET and Employment Data Enquiry and Policy Review:

Supporting the Data Enquiry findings:

- **Trades Academy effectiveness:** Documented improvements in student engagement, retention, and achievement align with research showing positive outcomes from completing structured interface programmes.
- **Academic achievement enhancement:** Students succeeding in English, maths and physics standards they previously avoided demonstrates how vocational contexts can strengthen academic learning.
- **Integration benefits:** The school's curriculum approach exemplifies how pathway frameworks can function as genuine design tools rather than retrospective sorting mechanisms.

Reinforcing the Policy Review recommendations:

- **Programme consolidation:** Navigation of multiple funding streams illustrates complexity issues while demonstrating benefits of integrated approaches.
- **Curriculum integration:** Contextualisation and integration of academic subjects within pathway frameworks shows maintaining rigour and a focus on skill development while increasing relevance.
- **Regional coordination:** The proposed 'centre of excellence' model demonstrates achieving scale efficiencies is possible while maintaining local specialisation.
- **Professional development priorities:** Teacher transformation highlights requirements for pathway-focused capability development.
- **Assessment framework improvements:** Challenges around integrating and aligning different qualification types point toward the greater system flexibility and connectedness that is needed.

Demonstrating system-level solutions:

- **Partnership enhancement:** Strategic tertiary relationships exemplify recommended collaborative approaches beyond simple service arrangements.
- **Community alignment:** Integration with employers and regional economic development shows education serving local economic purposes while meeting individual needs.
- **Holistic integration:** The whole-curriculum approach demonstrates the value of embedding pathway learning rather than maintaining separate streams of learning.

Breaking the Mould: How BUSY School Auckland is Revolutionising Education for Disengaged Youth



On a bustling stretch of Karangahape Road in Auckland's city centre, a revolutionary approach to secondary education is taking shape. The BUSY School, which opened its doors on 7 February 2025, represents far more than just another educational institution—it embodies a radical reimagining of how New Zealand can support its most vulnerable young people to succeed.

A Vision Born from Experience

At the helm of this pioneering charter school stands Moana Va'aelua, a woman whose 25-year journey through New Zealand's education system has uniquely prepared her for this moment.

Of Māngai Cook Island and Scottish descent, Moana grew up in Glen Innes, East Auckland, and attended Tamaki College – positive experiences that deeply inform her approach to educational leadership. Moana recognises the importance of the values and experiences she gained: ***“I am where I am today, a journey influenced by the amazing opportunities offered to me because of the way my school was focussed and supported me and my peers. That experience informs what I do now.”***

She goes on to explain, ***"I believe The BUSY School's alternative approach to education is a vital addition to Auckland. It offers much-needed support to students, families and educational stakeholders who find that the mainstream schooling system may not fully meet their needs."***

This isn't merely rhetoric. The statistics paint a sobering picture: one in five New Zealand school leavers achieve only NCEA Level 1 or less, whilst 10% leave school entirely undecided about their future pathways.

For Māori and Pasifika students in Auckland, the situation is even more inequitable, with NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) rates reaching 23.6% and 20.1% respectively.

The Queensland Connection: A Proven Model Comes to Aotearoa

The BUSY School Auckland represents the first international expansion of a remarkably successful Australian model. Since 2020, Queensland's The BUSY School has grown from a single campus to nine locations, demonstrating both strong demand and proven effectiveness.

The model's success lies in its fundamental reimagining of what school can be for young people who have fallen through the cracks of traditional education.

The Queensland experience shows that students, once written off as "failures", can achieve remarkable transformations. Students who previously couldn't face attending school have achieved 100% attendance rates. Those who believed they had "no future in education" have graduated with straight As and progressed to meaningful careers in health, trades, and other sectors.

Paul Miles, Managing Director of The BUSY Group, emphasises the track record: ***"In Australia, The BUSY School's campuses have already delivered strong results, with graduates achieving comparable academic outcomes to public schools and excelling in apprenticeships and traineeships."***

Revolutionary Timetabling: School That Works Around Life

The most innovative aspect of The BUSY School's approach is its timetabling model. Rather than expecting students to conform to a traditional five-day academic week, The BUSY School prioritises the development of literacy, numeracy and work readiness during on-campus sessions. Students then attend Vocational Training, do work placements in industry or work with health providers for the remainder of the week.

This flexible approach acknowledges a fundamental reality that mainstream education often ignores: many young people have caring responsibilities or face other commitments that make traditional schooling impossible. MBIE research in 2010 showed 40 percent of secondary students were working regularly and 73% working at some point during the school year. The BUSY School's model embraces this reality rather than fights against it.

The small class sizes - typically 10 to 15 students - enable teachers to provide the individualised attention that these young people deserve and need. Unlike mainstream schools where students might be one of 30 in a classroom, rotating through multiple subject teachers daily,

The BUSY School's students work primarily with one or two consistent educators who truly know them.

More Than Education: A Holistic Approach to Youth Development

What sets The BUSY School apart isn't just its innovative timetabling or small classes - it's the comprehensive wraparound support that acknowledges education cannot be separated from students' broader life circumstances. The school provides free uniforms, laptops, meals, and transport assistance, removing the practical barriers that often prevent vulnerable young people from attending school.

"This role as the foundation principal of The BUSY School resonates deeply with my philosophy of fostering inclusive, culturally responsive practices that prioritise student well-being, agency and academic success," Moana notes. Her vision extends beyond academic achievement to encompass the holistic development of each young person.

The school's pastoral care programme addresses the complex mental health needs many students bring with them. Trauma-informed practices recognise many of these young people have experienced significant challenges - from family breakdown to bullying, from financial hardship to mental health struggles.

Rather than expecting students to leave these issues at the school gate, The BUSY School provides the support needed to address them. Education Youth Workers, Counsellors or Psychologists attend campuses regularly and additional allied health support is sourced off-site.

Building Bridges to Employment

Central to The BUSY School's philosophy is the conviction that education must lead somewhere meaningful. Too often, vulnerable young people complete their schooling - if they complete it at all - only to find themselves adrift, with qualifications that don't translate into employment opportunities.

The BUSY School tackles this head-on through its dual curriculum approach. Students work towards their NCEA qualifications whilst simultaneously gaining vocational training and real-world work experience. Each student develops an individualised Career and Pathways Plan, ensuring their education aligns with their aspirations and the realities of the job market.

The school's connection to The BUSY Group's broader ecosystem provides unparalleled access to employment networks. Links to apprenticeship services, group training organisations, and disability employment services are under development and will mean students have genuine pathways to meaningful work. The goal is ambitious but clear: 100% of graduates will progress to employment, or further training and education.

Serving Auckland's Most Vulnerable

The BUSY School specifically targets Year 11-13 students who have disengaged or are at risk of disengaging from mainstream education. These aren't abstract statistics - they're young people with names, stories, and potential that the traditional system has failed to nurture.

The students who walk through The BUSY School's doors might include a young person struggling with anxiety who found the large, chaotic environment of mainstream school overwhelming; or a student whose family circumstances were such they needed to work to support younger siblings, sometimes making traditional attendance challenging. A young person whose learning differences went unrecognised in larger classes, leading to a spiral of failure and disengagement.

For these students, The BUSY School offers something mainstream education couldn't: hope.

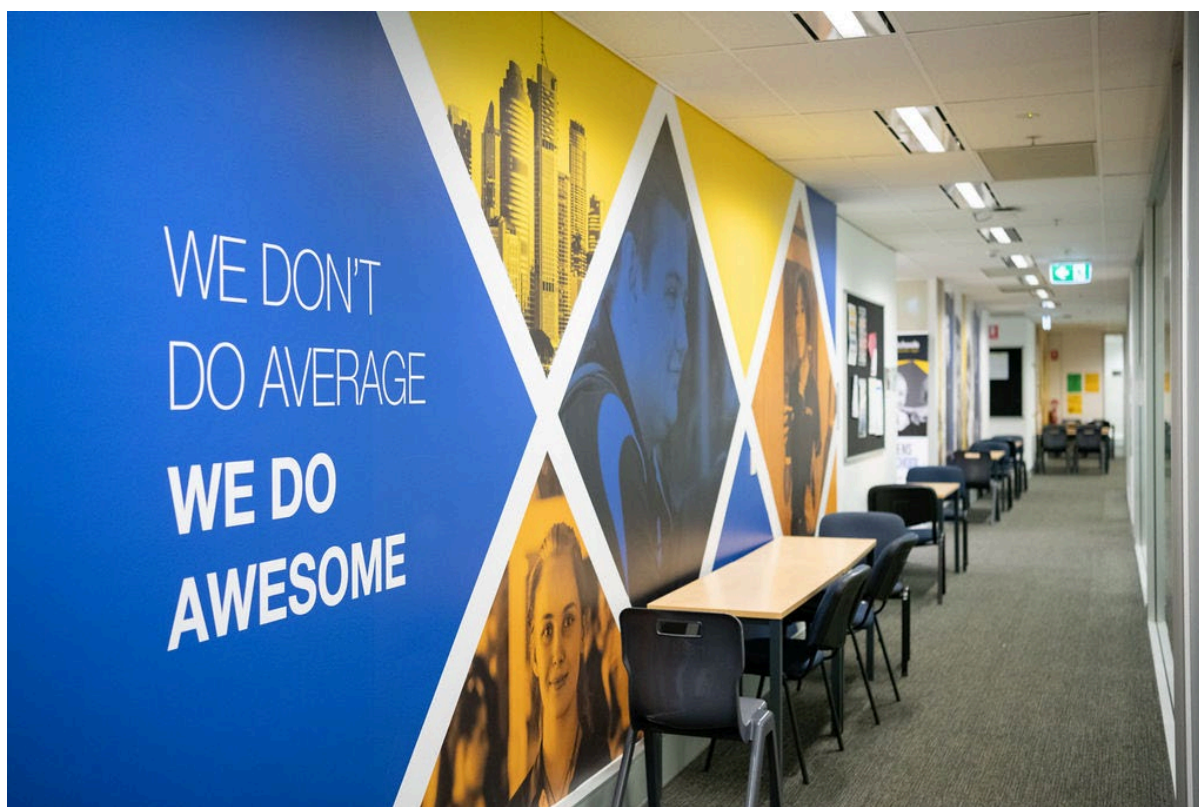
The school's central location on Karangahape Road was chosen deliberately for its accessibility, ensuring students from across Auckland can reach it easily. But more than physical accessibility, The BUSY School offers emotional and cultural accessibility - a place where students feel they belong.

Innovation Within the Charter School Framework

As one of the first seven charter schools to open under New Zealand's reintroduced charter school policy, The BUSY School operates with freedoms that enable its innovative approach. The school can set its own timetables, design its curriculum around student needs, and hire staff based on their ability to connect with and support vulnerable young people, rather than solely on traditional qualifications.

This flexibility is crucial. Research on effective alternative education consistently shows that one-size-fits-all approaches fail vulnerable students. The BUSY School's charter status allows it to be genuinely responsive to student needs, adapting its programmes and support services based on what works, rather than what policy dictates.

The \$153 million government investment in Charter Schools over four years represents a significant commitment to educational innovation. For The BUSY School, this funding enables the comprehensive support services that make the difference between a student succeeding or falling through the cracks.



Cultural Responsiveness in Action

With her Pasifika heritage and deep understanding of Auckland's diverse communities, Va'aelua brings crucial cultural competence to The BUSY School's leadership. The school's approach recognises that effective education for Māori and Pasifika students - who are significantly overrepresented in disengagement statistics - must be culturally responsive.

This means more than token acknowledgements of culture. It means involving whānau and families as genuine partners in education planning. It means recognising the strengths and assets students bring from their cultural backgrounds, rather than viewing difference as a deficit. It means creating an environment where students see their cultures reflected and valued. A young leader from Ngati Whatua visits the campus regularly, informing and shaping cultural events, such as recent powhiri.

The school's commitment to 'fostering inclusive and culturally responsive practices' isn't just educational jargon - it's a daily reality in how staff interact with students, how curricula are designed, and how success is defined and celebrated.

Early Promise and Future Potential

Though The BUSY School has only recently opened its doors, the model's impressive track record in Queensland provides confidence in its potential impact. The rapid growth of The BUSY School across Australia - from one to nine campuses in just four years - demonstrates both the demand for alternative education approaches and the model's effectiveness in meeting that demand.

For Auckland, where youth disengagement rates remain stubbornly high despite various interventions, The BUSY School offers a fresh approach. By combining the best of vocational

and academic education, providing comprehensive support services, and maintaining genuine flexibility around student needs, the school addresses many of the factors that lead to educational disengagement.

The true test will come as the first cohorts progress through the programme. Will The BUSY School Auckland replicate the Queensland success stories of students achieving 100% attendance after years of absence? Will graduates successfully progress to employment or further education? Early indicators are promising, with strong interest from families seeking alternatives to mainstream education.

A Model for the Future

The BUSY School's arrival in Auckland represents more than just another educational option - it challenges fundamental assumptions about how we educate young people, particularly those who don't fit the mainstream mould. In a system that too often writes off students who struggle, The BUSY School insists that every young person has potential waiting to be unlocked.

As Moana Va'aelua puts it, the school's approach **"prioritises student well-being, agency and academic success - in that order"**. By putting well-being first, by giving students genuine agency in their learning journey, academic success becomes possible for young people who had given up on education.

The school's emphasis on employment pathways acknowledges that for many young people, the motivation to learn comes from seeing clear connections between education and their future lives. Abstract academic achievement means little to a student struggling to see beyond their current circumstances. But the promise of meaningful work, of a career that provides both income and identity - that can transform a young person's relationship with learning.

Conclusion: Aligning Innovation with Evidence

The BUSY School's innovative approach parallels and illustrates several key findings and recommendations from the Secondary School Transitions and Pathways to VET and Employment research:

- **Trades Academy Effectiveness:** The BUSY School's vocational integration model aligns with the proven approach of dual education through embedded work experience and industry partnerships.
- **Flexible Pathways and Dual Enrolment:** The BUSY School's timetabling enables genuine workplace learning whilst maintaining academic progress.
- **Student Engagement and Retention:** With 20% of school leavers achieving only NCEA Level 1 or less and 10% leaving undecided about pathways, The BUSY School's individualised Career and Pathways Plans avoids the significant issue of students lacking careers advice.
- **Industry-Education Partnerships:** Successful partnership models show enhanced student motivation and reduced skills gaps.
- **Cultural Responsiveness and Pastoral Care:** With Māori NEET rates at 23.6% and Pasifika at 20.1% in Auckland, culturally responsive approaches are critical. Principal Moana Va'aelua's leadership and the school's whānau engagement model directly address recommendations for strengths-based, culturally appropriate education.
- **Consolidated Funding and Programme Flexibility:** Youth Guarantee funding provides \$2,000 per student for wellbeing support and \$1,000 for transport. The BUSY School's comprehensive support (mental health and wellbeing, uniforms, laptops, meals, transport) exemplifies the wraparound services research shows are essential for vulnerable learners.

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We want to thank all stakeholders who have given us time, input, and support through this research programme. We have benefitted from their wisdom.

Some names are not here, not because we don't want to acknowledge them, but because they spoke off the record.

Some names *are* here, not because we spoke to them, but because their work directly informed or inspired us.

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