

A Spotlight on Ōtaki College

A journey of transformation



This spotlight describes one school's journey to transform as an environment that values the cultural background of its students, and is using hybrid learning as a focus for developing stronger whānau relationships, going deeper in learning and achieving greater coherence across all areas.



Ōtaki College is a co-educational secondary school catering for students from Years 7 to 13. 47% of the 472 students identify as Māori.

Why did you make this change?

A little background to the change

Over the last several years, Ōtaki College has been working through a process of transformation since 2009 with the arrival of the current principal, Andy Fraser, whose initial focus was on resetting the culture of the College to become a community college. This involved creating strong relationships with the community and working with them to make the school a place that reflects the values and culture of the community, and re-vision the school as a place where Māori learners - and their whānau - could feel like they belong.

As this significant cultural change became embedded, the focus shifted to what was happening in the classroom and looking to improve the achievement of learners. The College became involved as a part of the Manaiaakalani project, introducing a rigorous pedagogical approach that is shared across the whole school and whole community, creating a platform for big change. A key part of this approach was the provision of digital devices for learners and a school-wide use of the online environment and digital tools for sharing resources and creating learning artefacts. This programme provided access to the Woolf Fisher research which provided strong data to support the approaches and decisions being made within the school. It also provided access to the digital intensive PLD for teachers which enabled and empowered them to use digital technologies in meaningful and powerful ways in their work with learners.

The school leadership then decided to take another step in terms of pedagogical practice, with a focus on 'going deep' in the learning, and embracing a more intentional focus on the development of competencies required for lifelong learning. In 2019 the school became a part of the Deep Learning (NPDL) project developed by Michael Fullan and his team in Canada, and led in New Zealand by CORE Education. This programme was just beginning to have an impact within the school when COVID-19 entered New Zealand.

With the work that had been put into building strong family/whānau relationships and the investment in a strong and reliable digital infrastructure and staff who were well supported in their pedagogical use of digital technologies, the school was very well positioned during lockdowns to ensure learning continued online while neither teachers nor learners were able to attend in person.

What did you do?

The journey into hybrid learning began late in 2021 as a result of discussions among the SLT when it became apparent that the school and its staff would likely face additional challenges in 2022 when COVID was expected to spread more widely across NZ, and schools would be required to accommodate significant staff and student absences over a period of time.

Understanding the power of a shared pedagogy through the experience of Manaiaikalani and the impact of this on uniting staff provided the platform for the school leadership to say to staff, “we are going to provide our learning in this way, and provide the structures, rubrics and processes to support learners - all of which is grounded in the values that Ōtaki College and community shares”. Capturing the pedagogical approach of Learn Create Share, with the Competency focus on NPDL has certainly proven to be the way to go for the College!

The introduction of a common planning template across all areas of the school has proven to be extremely effective. This has enabled all teachers to plan with an alignment to the overarching vision and values of the school, and maintain an overview of how key competencies are being addressed. This is proving to be significant in the development of school-wide coherence and transparency in planning and pedagogical approaches which ultimately impacts the experience of learners in a positive way.

In preparation for the 2022 school year, the SLT asked staff to make a commitment to further develop and add learning resources to their class sites so that all classes would have an online aspect to them - so that all learners would be in a position to be able to continue with their learning whether at home or at school.

It was not a case of ‘teaching in the classroom’ and having kids look into it from home; rather, it focused on creating learning experiences that could be engaged with at home, that were authentic and purposeful, and that would enable the learner to more seamlessly transition back into the classroom settings when they returned. Staff explored things like recording the introduction to the unit and making that available to learners in both contexts and then providing the resources and support materials to allow them to be able to continue with their learning.

What have you learned?

A key lesson through all of this experience has been the absolute importance of placing the learner at the centre of everything we do. This means focusing on their hauora/wellbeing, understanding their individual context and needs, and working to design learning that addresses these things. This also includes their parents/whānau as ‘partners’ in supporting this learning - at home and at school. Relationships are key, and good, two-way communication is vital. The College benefited

from already having well-established relationships with the community and with parents/whānau which could be leveraged through this period of change.

Another important lesson was about placing an emphasis on the development of competencies before content. This means ensuring there is an explicit focus on addressing these competencies in the learning design, including a focus on how they will be measured and assessed throughout. It is not sufficient to simply make content and resources available and hope students will learn from them. The focus needs to be on the learning, explaining and describing expectations, and creating an explicit focus on the development of things such as self-management skills, critical thinking and communication skills for example. This is where the NPDL frameworks have been extremely valuable across the whole school.

Next, students learning at home must have the opportunity to engage fully with meaningful tasks. That means when they do come back to school they’ll still be up with where their peers are. We committed early on to ensuring that learners will have the opportunity to transition seamlessly between learning at home and learning at school. This has been achieved through ensuring the focus of learning tasks provided online for learners at home are aligned with what is happening in school, and avoiding any tasks or activities that are simply ‘time fillers’ until students are able to resume learning in class.

We have also learned a great deal about the benefits of staff working as a collective, and the support they are able to provide each other. This was particularly evident where staff provided support for one another when it came to the use of digital technologies, tools and environments. The sharing of expertise and knowledge like this has helped accelerate the use of the online environment and online tools as a part of our response.

What was your change strategy?

Our change strategy has been predicated on a number of things happening already in the school, including:

- » Leveraging the Learn Create Share pedagogical framework, together with the availability of devices for students provided through participation in the Manaiaikalani project
- » The foundations laid for deep learning through the introduction of NPDL
- » The existing school-wide use of department websites to share content and information related to courses, content and assessment etc.
- » The introduction of, ‘spirals of inquiry’ as a framework for teacher inquiry

Just prior to the initial COVID-19 lockdowns, the College had identified four champions in the staff to become deeply immersed in the NPDL programme - empowered with time and resource to do this. When they were sufficiently confident with it, they began working alongside other staff and working towards a school-wide adoption. The intention was to see the change that was desired achieved through “a revolution of the people”.

In late 2021 the leadership formulated a plan to build on what was already in place and make adaptations to existing practice to achieve a coherent learner experience across both in-person and online environments. Two curriculum leaders were added to the lead team and they are now encouraging whole departments to take the initiative.

What advice do you have for other schools?

As a principal of a secondary school you hold a privileged position that links with the community you serve, and your primary focus must be on serving the young people in your charge. It is important that you recognise this and that your leadership is demonstrated in this way.

You can't achieve a response as an individual; you need the support and commitment of those around you. You need to work within the supportive culture of the school - vision, values etc. - which recognises the strengths of individuals on the staff and draws on those to achieve what is required. The ultimate goal is to achieve coherence across the school, its programmes, its 'ways of working' and its approach to things including assessment, for example. There must be transparency in all of this so that all teachers, students and parents/

whānau are able to see, know and understand what is happening and what is expected of them.

So what is next?

As the leadership and staff at Ōtaki, we are committed to following through on the plan we put in place last year, and to progress our plans to ensure we are operating in a way that will enable us to respond quickly and effectively to the needs of every learner - regardless of whether they are learning in-school or at home.

We are also committed to working with and supporting other schools in our community to bring a level of alignment across a range of things we are doing as a Kāhui Ako, including the development of a local curriculum and supporting each other professionally.