

Case study 3

Promising results from Massey High's four-year Te Kotahitanga journey



Above photo of Massey High School principal Bruce Ritchie and Te Kotahitanga lead facilitator Robin Knox.

It's been more than four years since Te Kotahitanga was introduced at Massey High School – and principal Bruce Ritchie and lead facilitator Robin Knox believe it's now become part of the school's core business.

"That's because we've worked really hard to fully integrate Te Kotahitanga into the life of our school," says Robin, a former maths teacher who now leads the school's Te Kotahitanga team of six teacher facilitators.

Te Kotahitanga (meaning unity) is a research and professional development programme for teachers of learners in years 9 and 10. It aims to improve the achievement of Māori learners by changing teaching practice and introducing a culturally relevant pedagogy of relations.

Massey is one of 12 high schools that signed up for the programme in 2004. That first year, 30 teachers from Massey High took part in the programme. By the end of 2007, 96% (or 161) of Massey High teachers had taken part in Te Kotahitanga training – a rate the school is both proud of and trying to maintain in the face of ongoing staff turnover.

Developed by Waikato University in 2001, the programme began as a series of interviews with Māori students, their teachers, principals and whānau about the barriers to learning. These narratives and the ministry's Poutama Pounamu Research and Development Centre provided the basis for developing an effective teacher profile and a professional development programme for teachers. Today, it is a fully-fledged programme running in 33 schools.

Bruce says Te Kotahitanga has had a profound influence on all aspects of school life. But one aspect he is particularly pleased about is the school's ever-improving NCEA achievement results.

NCEA Level 1 results for Māori learners have increased from approximately 35% in 2004 to approximately 51% in 2007 – around 3% higher than the national average for Māori learners.

Meanwhile, NCEA Level 2 results for the school's Māori learners show an increase of approximately 22% over the same period. NCEA Level 3 achievement rates have increased by more than 30% in that time. Massey High's Level 2 and 3 results are about 10% higher than the national average for Māori learners.

The school has yet to close the gap between the achievement rates of the decile-5 school's Māori learners and its general learner population. But Bruce is convinced they are on the right track.

He says Te Kotahitanga has taught Massey High staff a lot about effective teaching, particularly the importance of building mutually respectful relationships with learners that also recognise the cultural capital that learners bring with them to the classroom.

Looking around the school, it is evident the programme has had an impact on the school's overall culture and direction. Te reo Māori me ona tikanga is evident on classroom walls and the staffroom and workrooms feature references to Te Kotahitanga goals and philosophies. Learners are proud to identify as Māori, speak te reo, and participate in kapa haka.

The school's bilingual unit, set up in 2005, is another important development within the school that aims to support the teaching and learning of te reo Māori and reinforce the importance of culture in the learning process.

Te Kotahitanga practices such as teacher observations, feedback, feedforward and co-construction meetings are widely used across the school curriculum with nearly all teachers. The facilitation team works through this challenging professional development cycle with each teacher, each term.

Other programmes, including academic counselling and mentoring, work alongside Te Kotahitanga to raise overall learner achievement.

"These are all significant and important changes," says Bruce. "Every single thing reinforces the next and means we're all heading in the same direction, striving to achieve the same results."

Bruce uses the analogy of a four-legged stool to represent the way things are working at Massey High. The seat of the stool is student learning and achievement. Stool legs represent the strategic focus of the school's various programmes and initiatives – one leg is parents, one is teachers, one is learners and one is school systems. If you remove one of the legs the stool falls over.

"You can find Te Kotahitanga in our work across all four areas," he says.

Meanwhile, Robin says staff members work towards helping Māori learners to feel they belong in the classroom and that they have something of value to contribute. Staff members also continue to build on and improve their own knowledge about things Māori and the Māori world.

"Our growing confidence and understanding have led to some innovative approaches to getting whānau more involved in the school," she says.

Annual parent-teacher meetings are an excellent example. as is academic counselling.

Academic counselling was introduced in 2007 and involves every learner and his or her dean developing a personal education plan for the learner. Parents are included in the process on Academic Counselling Days. Today, more than 75% of parents come to the meetings – up from a 10% turnout.

"A good number of whānau attend because they feel welcome and know we care about their children," says Robin.

"Staff formally invite all parents, close the school for a day, advertise the meeting in four different languages, provide parents with user-friendly NCEA information and give parents one point of contact for their child. Kai is served, baby-sitting is provided and the emphasis is on making parents feel comfortable and involved in their child's education."

Alongside these school initiatives, Te Kotahitanga has an impact on the school's teachers, individually and in small and large groups, helping them become more effective teachers and building a growing professional learning community.

The challenge for the next four years, agree Bruce and Robin, is to keep building on what they've achieved – and to make the changes sustainable over the long term.

"We're happy with where we're at – but we're not complacent. There's still plenty more to do," says Robin.