

MANUREWA HIGH SCHOOL

Hauora at work

Situated in a low-income area, Manurewa High School is New Zealand's largest Decile 1 school, and one of New Zealand's most culturally diverse school communities.

The story of Manurewa High School isn't just one of 'moving learning online' or 'digital transformation'; it's about fundamentally re-imagining the role of school within our community, and the way we think about leadership.

Manurewa High School principal Pete Jones is a true believer in servant leadership, and a true supporter of Liverpool FC — a support that, along with his work ethic and deep belief in the transformative power of education, he credits in large part to his granddad. Pete came to Manurewa High School from the UK after 10 years' teaching, starting in Manchester's inner-city suburb of Moss Side, an area deeply affected by racial tensions at the time, followed by 10 years in business. Pete and his family fell in love with New Zealand as visitors, and emigrated in 2006 to make Auckland their home.

Pete's first job in New Zealand was at Manurewa High School, joining the PE department. In 2016 he was appointed as the school's principal.

'Honestly, I'm still shocked and surprised to be in the role. I



genuinely didn't believe I would ever be in this position, and honestly it shouldn't be me — we have some amazing Māori and Pasifika leaders who are more than ready to step into the role, and no one understands the community we serve as they do. Whatever we've done here, it's nothing that I've done — ever — on my own. We are all leaders here; we achieve together as a team,' says Pete.

Manurewa High School has been on a journey of transformation for some time, changing their approach to learning, to leadership, and to kaitiaki (guardianship). Structural changes — doing away with the traditional timetable in favour of a more open model of learning blocks; bringing emphasis to hauora (the Māori concept of wellbeing); recognising that learning can happen anywhere, at any time, with anyone; and

integrating things that have traditionally sat outside curriculum into students' formal learning journey — had all begun before the Covid lockdown. However, the pandemic accelerated that transformation dramatically.

'There is so much in Māori culture that absolutely makes sense. Take the concept of hauora, for instance — and why it should be part of someone's life. We should be teaching it in schools across New Zealand, and we are here.'

The school has also transformed its leadership model to explicitly talk about servant leadership and distributed leadership. Anyone can be a leader, anywhere, any time. 'We ask: "How are you supporting the community?"' explains Pete. 'We don't work in a traditional hierarchy. We tipped that pyramid on its side, with everyone working to serve one another, and serve our community.'

As the Covid-19 pandemic began

to emerge, the school community was understandably nervous about its impact. An outbreak of measles a year earlier had attracted a great deal of public attention. Whānau within the school community live in relatively large ‘bubbles’, and the impact of that on community transmission had been clear during the measles outbreak.

‘When lockdown was announced we were already planning for it. By then we had about 50 per cent of our rangatahi — our young people — not turning up to school, with family keeping them at home because of the virus.’

The school has been integrating computer hardware into learning through ‘BYOD’ (bring your own device) for some years now, so theoretically all the pieces were in place to enable a transition to learning online, remotely. However, the ‘digital divide’ — the profound disadvantage experienced by those unable to connect to the internet — challenged that. ‘Our challenge as the largest Decile 1 school in New Zealand was “How do we make sure our kids are not disadvantaged, and that the divide doesn’t keep growing?”’ says Pete.

‘Our team stepped up brilliantly, and practically. In those two days [after the announcement of the forthcoming lockdown and] before lockdown we gave out 240 laptops — every spare laptop we had in the school — to kids who didn’t have devices at home. We normally held these in school for students without devices, now we distributed them for the rangatahi to take home. We were one of the first schools to submit our needs to the Ministry of Education, and one

of the first to receive the additional devices they were providing for our students.’ For those without a device or connectivity, the school provided physical, printed learning packs.

‘We cleared out the school of food, making up a huge number of food parcels for our most at-risk families.’ Typically, Manurewa High School feeds two meals a day to between 15 and 20 per cent of the school population. ‘We knew going into lockdown that lots of our families were going to be doing it really tough.

‘We made our absolute focus looking after one another. We set up hauora bubbles — groups of people checking in with each other, looking out for each other. Our kaitiaki — every teacher is a kaitiaki with a group of students from across all year levels — checked in with their students regularly, too. We made hauora — wellbeing — our absolute priority. Whatever came after that was going to be a bonus.’

As the primary community hub for many, the school’s staff worked hard right through lockdown, providing support, connecting those in the community with emergency needs to the right agencies, and all the while working at keeping students engaged with their learning.

The lockdown experience showed clearly how important facilitation in school is to many students’ learning, and also the need to provide students with the skills — not just technological, but learning skills — to thrive in a remote learning environment. ‘We found that, at best, about a third of our kids were able to stay engaged actively with their

learning — and for a whole host of reasons. Of course there was the inability to access the internet or get access to a device — right through to kids who had access but didn’t have the learning skills to cope in that environment.’

As lockdown eased, and the return to school began, the team made sure the community was looking forwards. ‘We staggered our return to school, and focused on reconnecting and re-engaging with learning. We celebrated being able to come back safely, and that we hadn’t lost anyone from our community to Covid-19. We specifically did not focus on “what was missed”, but instead on “where to from here?”’

The pandemic served to dramatically accelerate the changes that were already underway. In Pete’s words, they decided to ‘embrace the disruption, and just jump in with the sharks — to be agile and get things done. There was an opportunity in the disruption of Covid to push forward with positive change.

‘If secondary education were a business, we’d have gone bust years ago. We’ve been saying “we do it this way, and you will do it the way we tell you” for decades . . . “you’ll sit in a classroom with this many people of this age and listen to a teacher”. It’s antiquated, and not relevant to how we need to prepare young people with the skills they need for the lives they’ll live.

‘The easy thing to do would’ve been to come back “as normal”. Instead, we’ve made it hard mahi for ourselves — and we’ve really challenged people through that. The reality is it was never going to be normal again. Covid was one of those “reset” moments.’

The school engaged its community, asking whānau and potential future employers what they want from Manurewa graduates. Instead of the expected response around formal qualifications, three key themes emerged. They wanted graduates to be happy, confident and proud. Those outcomes are now driving deep innovation within the school’s approach to learning.

‘We’re focused on supporting the ability of our ākonga (students) to engage in akoranga (learning). Improve confidence in cultural identity — emphasising being confident in where you’ve come from, acknowledging all those who have put you where you are, the Māori concept of whakapapa — then moving forward with self-determination. It’s not our job to tell you what to do — it’s our job to prepare you, and make you aware of what’s out there.’

Some classes within the school are now taught online, giving students the chance to develop those skills with support from a teacher as needed. ‘The future of work is changing so fast, and looks so different. My granddad was 45 years as a bricklayer with the same company — that’s simply not the future for these kids. Since Covid we’ve specifically brought online learning into the senior curriculum.’

Pete concludes: ‘I think it took Covid to really highlight to the nation that digital connectivity is a necessity now, and we need to teach these skills. Success for our kids, it’s not about potential or effort — it’s about ensuring they’re starting on the same start-line.’