

Independent Review Report for Te Paepae o Aotea Board

17 October 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings of an independent review conducted in response to concerns raised by parents regarding the senior timetable at Te Paepae o Aotea. The review, carried out by Maurie Abraham from HMWLead, examined the 4-subject senior timetable, time spent on team-building activities, student enrolment trends, and the school's response to parent concerns.

Senior Curriculum and Timetable

- The current timetable limits most senior students to 4 subjects, with some flexibility in the Taupaenui blocks.
- Some students reported experiencing subject clashes or inability to take desired courses over multiple years.
- Some students reported that they had a clear pathway and were able to take the courses they needed.
- The school has finalized a new timetable structure for the next year, including 5 option lines.

University Entrance

- There is no evidence that the current structure acts as a barrier to achieving University Entrance.

Time Spent on Team-Building Activities

- Daily 30-minute Whānau Hui sessions and weekly Tuakana Teina sessions are held.
- Parents recognize the importance of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) but have concerns about implementation and time allocation.
- Student opinions on these activities vary, with some seeing value and others finding them less engaging.
- Such elements in a timetable are common-place in many secondary schools.

Student Enrolment and Retention

- The school experienced a 6.3% drop in enrolment from March to July 2023, which decreased to a 3.7% drop for the same period in 2024. (A drop is expected as students graduate to employment throughout the year.)
- Year-to-year retention rates vary, with lower rates observed in the transition from Year 11 to 12 (81%) and Year 12 to 13 (74%).
- The school's market share of regional enrolments decreased slightly from 21.16% in March 2023 to 19.44% in March 2024.
- There has been a reduction in the number of students transferring to another school in the second year of operation.

Response to Parent Concerns

- Complainants feel their concerns have not been taken seriously by school leaders.
- School leadership had already moved to implement a 5-option timetable for seniors in 2025 prior to this review starting.
- The board and school leadership do need to think carefully about how they consistently promote and communicate the strategic drivers of the school and how they shape the actual practices and structures in the school in an attempt to relieve concerns that emerge when non-traditional approaches are adopted.

Recommendations

Academic Timetable

- Implement the planned 5 option timetable option, ensuring equitable distribution of subjects across all lines. The school must avoid the appearance of a hierarchy of subjects by putting careful thought into the allocation of subjects across the 5 lines. In doing this, the prime driver should be the provision of the spread of subjects most beneficial to the range of students.
 - The 5th option line should not be the place that is dedicated to support classes and/or independent work. Rather, these opportunities should be in the appropriate lines that create the greatest range of combinations for students.
- The school must communicate clearly to the community about the 5 options and how this change will meet the needs of the students. Some in the community will see this as “window dressing” and no significant change to the status quo, especially when the 5 option structure will not remove all clashes and multi-level classes.
- The school may wish to consider beginning a programme of seeking feedback from alumni part way through their university studies.

Social Emotional Learning

- Work with staff to deeply explore the ‘why’ of Whānau Hui and Tuakana Teina so that the lack of buy-in is diminished.
- Review the programmes delivered within Whānau Hui and Tuakana Teina, drawing on both student and staff voice, to better ensure relevance and engagement.
- Communicate clearly with the parent community about the ‘why’ of such programmes and the results of any review. The use of positive student voice about these programmes should be central in that communication.

Roll

- Keep a record of the destinations of all leavers from each year level to be aware of any trends that may emerge over time.
- The school, with the support of the data being supplied by the Ministry of Education, should track market share of enrolments to be aware of any emerging trends.

Complainants Not Feeling Heard

- The board and school leadership do need to think carefully about how they consistently promote and communicate the strategic drivers of the school and how they shape the actual practices and structures in the school in an attempt to relieve concerns that emerge when non-traditional approaches are adopted.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Te Paepae o Aotea Board sought an independent review following a letter of concern received from parent representatives. The complainants expressed dissatisfaction with the current 4-subject senior timetable and its perceived impact on student learning and university preparation.

1.2. Summary of Complaint

- 1.2.1. Complainants are unhappy with the 4-subject senior timetable and want a fifth subject introduced, at least as an option.
- 1.2.2. Complainants believe too much time is spent on team-building activities to the detriment of academic learning.
- 1.2.3. Complainants feel the promised Individual Learning Pathways is not being delivered as a result of a timetable that limits choices, creates clashes, acts as a barrier to UE and limits success at university.
- 1.2.4. Complainants feel their concerns have not been taken seriously by school leaders.

1.3. Alleged Consequences of Current Timetable Structure

- 1.3.1. Parents deciding to send their children to other schools
- 1.3.2. Pressure to achieve all standards offered by the 4 subjects
- 1.3.3. Subject choice is being limited at a too early stage
- 1.3.4. Limits entry into some university courses
- 1.3.5. Not enough flexibility in semester course structure as students cannot always select their preferred subjects
- 1.3.6. Inability to guarantee students can take same subject from year-to-year
- 1.3.7. Unacceptable level of subject clashes and having to be taught through Te Kura

1.4. Scope of Review

The review examined:

- 1.4.1. The structure and impact of the senior timetable including time allocation for “team-building activities”.
- 1.4.2. Student enrolment trends and retention rates
- 1.4.3. The school’s response to parent concerns

2. Methodology

The review process included:

- 2.1. On-site visits to Te Paepae o Aotea from September 10 - 12 and October 15 - 16, 2024
- 2.2. Meetings with the Principal, senior leaders, board members and parent representatives
 - 2.2.1. Initial hui with the Principal, Rachel Williams, to deepen understanding of the school, its vision and values and its curriculum structure.
 - 2.2.2. Met with a representative group of the parents including the 2 signatories of the complaint to deepen understanding of their concerns. They also provided the following:
 - Emails from 3 parents and 1 student supporting concerns raised in the complaint
 - An Official Information Act response from the Ministry of Education with data comparing the share of students from the South Taranaki area enrolled in Te Paepae o Aotea in 2019 with 2024
 - 2.2.3. Met with the Senior Leader responsible for senior curriculum to test understanding of how the timetable operated and to get her views on some aspects raised by the parents.
 - 2.2.4. Met with the Board Presiding Member, Will Edwards, and Board member, Neryda Sullivan, to clarify the process being followed, share what had been discovered, and to respond to questions from them.
- 2.3. Student focus groups across different year levels to hear from them about their experiences of the new school, especially in relation to the structure of the curriculum. The three groups were:
 - 2.3.1. Year 11 students
 - 2.3.2. A mixed group of Years 12 and 13 students
 - 2.3.3. Year 13 students involved in a range of leadership at the school
- 2.4. Analysis of school data on attendance, NCEA achievement and enrolment.
- 2.5. Review of Ministry of Education data on regional demographics and enrolment trends. This included:
 - 2.5.1. Demographic information on the South Taranaki District including population projections
 - 2.5.2. Enrolment data, including market share
 - 2.5.3. Destination schools, over a 3-year period for students in the region not enrolled at Te Paepae o Aotea
 - 2.5.4. Mid and end of year student transfers to other schools 2023/2024

3. Findings

3.1. Senior Curriculum and Timetable

- 3.1.1. It is true that the senior curriculum structure requires senior students to select 4 Modules (subjects). Most are full year courses but some run as semesters. However, the Taupaenui blocks in the timetable can be, and are, used for some students to take a fifth subject and/or to manage a clash.
- 3.1.2. There were some students in the mixed Year 12/13 group who stated they had experienced clashes or not being able to take the courses they wanted over multiple years. Most of them, but not all, stated that solutions were able to be found. They claimed to know of other students who had this experience as well.
- 3.1.3. However, every one of the students in the Year 13 group stated that they were able to take the subjects they wanted and what they needed for their pathway. The majority of these students were on an academic pathway towards university. Those students in the group who needed/wanted to be able to take 5 subjects did so in the Taupaenui blocks.
- 3.1.4. Most of the students and parents of the school only know the experience they are having at Te Paepae o Aotea and are not aware that clashes and multi-level classes are inevitable with all timetables. These can be accentuated in a school such as Te Paepae o Aotea because of the relatively small Year 12 (100-130) and Year 13 (60-70) cohorts, especially when the school attempts to provide the broadest range of curriculum as possible.
- 3.1.5. These small numbers reduce the ability to offer multiple classes of the same subject at the same level which can reduce clashes. The school will have the ongoing challenge of grouping subjects in lines that create the least clashes - but there will always be some.
- 3.1.6. As well, with traditionally 25 - 30% of Year 13 students going to University, and wishing to pursue a range of courses of study there, it is very challenging to create a timetable with the resources at the school's disposal (staffing) that meets the needs of all of those 20-25 students. This inevitably results in some mixed level classes and some students being enrolled in Te Kura.
- 3.1.7. These challenges are experienced by most, if not nearly all, secondary schools in New Zealand.
- 3.1.8. **Note**

Prior to the beginning of this review the leadership team at Te Paepae o Aotea had finalised a timetable structure for next year which includes 5 option lines as a result of removing Taupaenui. This will go some way to freeing up some of the restrictions in the current timetable structure.

The current new structure does have the 5th option with 75 minutes less per week than the other 4 options. This in itself is not a problem, but a number of factors will need to be considered:

- The school must avoid the appearance of a hierarchy of subjects by putting careful thought into the allocation of subjects across the 5 lines. In doing this, the prime driver should be the provision of the spread of subjects most beneficial to the range of students.
- The 5th option line should not be the place that is dedicated to support classes, independent work etc. Rather, these opportunities should be in the appropriate lines that create the greatest range of combinations for students.
- The school must communicate clearly to the community about the 5 options and how this change will meet the needs of the students. Some in the community will see this as “window dressing” and no significant change to the status quo, especially when the 5 option structure will not remove all clashes and multi-level classes.

3.2. University Entrance

- 3.2.1. There is no evidence that the curriculum structure acts as a barrier to achieving University Entrance as the 2023 UE achievement level of 25.4% (higher than schools of equivalent socio-economic status) is within the range normally experienced by Hawera High School (Hawera High School 2021 = 25.7%, 2022 = 25.8%).
- 3.2.2. As well, senior leaders at the school were unable to identify any student from 2023 who wished to go to University who did not achieve UE.
- 3.2.3. An email from one student did claim that she was not prepared well for her first year at university. After only 1 year of operation it is difficult to form a view that this student’s final year at school was so impactful. I can form no conclusion on this aspect, but the school may wish to consider beginning a programme of seeking feedback from alumni part way through their university studies.

3.3. Time spent on Team-Building Activities

- 3.3.1. Each weekday morning all students attend a 30 minute **Whānau Hui**. Dedicating time in such a way is becoming more common in New Zealand schools. The arguments for such an approach include:
 - Section 127 of the Education and Training Act 2020 sets the primary objectives of boards and includes that boards need to ensure that every student can reach their highest possible educational achievement in a physically and *emotionally safe* environment.

- There is a strong base of international and national research (Bishop R. *Te Kotahitanga, Teaching to the North-east*) which indicates that those schools that develop a whānau-like context for learning are the most effective.
 - Two of the three Achievement Challenges of the Kāhui Āko to which Te Paepae o Aotea belongs (which are based on sound evidence and are approved by the Ministry of Education) point to the importance of focusing on relationships and wellbeing. The two Achievement Challenges are:
 - Our goal is to improve educational outcomes, particularly for Māori and other marginalised students, through improving relationships and teacher capability across the Kāhui Ako.
 - Enhance wellbeing by developing a school culture so ākongā can successfully participate in learning and contribute to the community.
 - Extensive community consultation with a range of groups prior to the opening of Te Paepae o Aotea “recognised that timetabling explicit time for teaching this curriculum [SEL] alongside integrating it across the curriculum would help to establish a supportive and positive school culture for all students” and “all agreed that it was conducive to effective teaching and learning and would prepare students well for their futures.” (*Guiding Principles Analysis*)
 - A feeling of belonging to an institution is enhanced when there is an attachment to a smaller group in the school. This sense of belonging leads to deeper engagement with the school and with learning.
 - Time needs to be made available for administration (attendance, achievement tracking etc), pastoral support and the development of important dispositions that support students to engage with school and thrive beyond school
 - The view that as a result of young people’s experience of the Covid pandemic there has been an increase in levels of anxiety and related conditions amongst young people means schools need a place to focus on supporting students.
- 3.3.2. The last block each Friday is **Tuakana Teina**. The intention is for students to interact across the levels within their Awa to promote a sense of care across the year levels. This is also the time when assemblies are held or when outside agencies may run programmes. They are run in this slot to prevent impact on curriculum time. Senior students also get to use this time as they approach Mock Exams as study time.

- Many schools have an assembly time timetabled into their week in a similar fashion.
- 3.3.3. **Parent view.** The parent group did recognise the importance of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) but they did have concerns about implementation, delivery, qualifications of staff in this area and the balance of time allocated to it. Their view was that there was a high level of absenteeism from the morning Whānau Hui sessions.
- This group saw little value in the Tuakana Teina sessions on Friday afternoon with several of them giving permission for their children to be absent from that session to complete course work.
- 3.3.4. **Student view.** The students had a range of views.
- Largely, they saw the value in the cross-level opportunities, especially with them spending a lot of their time across the road in the Senior Village. Some spoke passionately about the activities they had been involved in and saw great opportunities for their leadership. Others stated that there was little mixing between the year levels, though some put this down to the recent focus on study prep for the seniors as they approached mock exams.
 - Many spoke of their desire for there to be more whole school, across levels, spirit-type activities.
 - Some students expressed the view that the methodology of working through slides in Whānau Hui was not very engaging. They emphasised it depended on the teacher and their commitment to the programme. Some stated that some teachers did not follow the programme.
- 3.3.5. **Considerations**
- The amount of time allocated to SEL through Whānau Hui and Tuakana Teina is not out of step with what more and more schools are doing. However, the school should consider the following:
- Work with staff to deeply explore the ‘why’ of Whānau Hui and Tuakana Teina so that the lack of buy-in is diminished.
 - Review the programmes delivered within Whānau Hui and Tuakana Teina, drawing on both student and staff voice, to better ensure relevance and engagement.
 - Communicate clearly with the parent community about the ‘why’ of such programmes and the results of any review. The use of positive student voice about these programmes should be central in that communication.

3.4. Student Enrolment and Retention

The complainants claim that more and more families were choosing to send their children to schools other than Te Paepae o Aotea. In fact, some of the complainants were already doing that or planned to do that from next year.

In considering what impact the curriculum structure of Te Paepae o Aotea has had on roll numbers, including transfers to other schools it is important to note the following factors:

- 3.4.1. Traditionally, there has been a loss of local enrolment numbers in Hawera at the end of Year 8 as there is a move, from some in the community, towards boarding and/or religious schools.
- 3.4.2. Traditionally, a number of students in Years 12 and 13 have left on completion of their NCEA Level 2 to begin their employment pathway.
- 3.4.3. The fastest growing schools in the area are the two Kura, which have increased their rolls over the last 5 years by 99% (47 to 93) and 81% (42 to 76) respectively. This will impact on numbers as these schools will draw on students for whom a Maturanga Māori approach is more appropriate.

General roll numbers 2023 - 2024

- 3.4.4. During 2023 there was a drop in the school roll from March 1 to July 1 of 65 students (6.3%). 40 of these students were in Years 12 and 13. One assumption could be that these were students who had gained the qualification they needed and were moving on to employment. This would be worth testing.
- 3.4.5. During 2024, for the same time period, there was a drop of 35 students (3.7%). 19 of these students were in Years 12 and 13.
- 3.4.6. Less students, and a smaller percentage, have left Te Paepae o Aotea in its second year than in its first. **(Table 1)**

Changes in School Roll March 1 to July 1		
Year level	2023	2024
13	-19	-7
12	-21	-12
11	-9	-10
10	-11	-4
9	-4	=
8	-3	-4
7	+2	+2
Total	-65 = 6.3%	-35 = 3.7%

Table 1

3.4.7. While the March 1 roll did drop from 2023 to 2024 (1027 - 910) the retention rate from July 1 2023 to March 1 2024 was 98%.

Year Level Retention Rates 2023-2024 (Table 2)

Year Level Retention Rates July 1 2023 to March 1 2024	
July 1 Year Level to March 1 Year Level	Retention Rate
12 to 13	74%
11 to 12	81%
10 to 11	92%
9 to 10	93%
8 to 9	91%
7 to 8	102%

Table 2

3.4.8. The Year 8 to Year 9 retention rate may be explained by the traditional move to boarding and/or religious schools from some in the community.

3.4.9. The Year 12 to Year 13 retention rate may be explained by the traditional departure of students into employment after achieving NCEA Level 2.

- 3.4.10. It would be worth analysing the reasons for the low retention rate from Year 11 to Year 12 to be aware of the destinations of those 31 students (eg employment, shifting out of the region, enrolment in other schools). It is difficult to know if that pattern existed before and if it is part of a trend as we only have access to one year’s worth of data.
- 3.4.11. Going forward, a similar analysis should be done of the retention rates from Years 9 to 10 to 11 so that the school can be aware of any trends that may emerge.

Market Share of Enrolments

- 3.4.12. Data provided by the complainants received as a result of their Official Information Act Request to the Ministry of Education show that in 2019 25% of Years 9 - 13 students residing in the Transport Eligibility Zone for Te Paepae o Aotea attended other schools which grew to 37% in 2024.
- 3.4.13. According to data provided by the Ministry of Education to the reviewer, Te Paepae o Aotea enrolled 21.16% of the appropriately aged school students in the South Taranaki region in March 2023. This dropped to 20.05% in July 2023 and to 19.44% in March 2024.
- This is a small drop, most of which was experienced in the first 6 months of the school’s opening.
 - Of the 21 schools within the data set provided 12 schools experienced a drop in market share, while 1 remained the same and 8 increased their market share.
- 3.4.14. Such movements are not uncommon, though the school, with the support of the data being supplied by the Ministry of Education, should track this situation to be aware of any emerging trends.
- 3.4.15. An analysis of enrolment numbers from the Territorial Authority in schools other than Te Paepae o Aotea from March 2023 until March 2024 shows an increase of 9 at Stratford High School, an increase of 15 (mostly boarders) at New Plymouth Boys High School and 8 at New Plymouth Girls High School. There was no marked difference in any of the other schools.

Transfers To Other Schools (Table 3)

- 3.4.16. During 2023 (March to November) 63 students transferred to another school in the region. This compares to 34 during 2024 (March to September):
- 6 of these students transferred to Te Kura and for most of these it was an appropriate enrolment.
 - 5 shifted their residence to another location in the district.
 - 5 shifted to schools with special character.
 - 1 returned to a local district school they had come from.
- Of the remaining 17:
- 2 transferred to New Plymouth Boys High School
 - 2 transferred to New Plymouth Girls High School

- 4 transferred to Stratford High School
- 9 are of destination unknown

Transferring to Other Schools in Region		
Year Level	March to November 2023	March to September 2024
13	0	<5
12	<5	6
11	7	<5
10	22	10
9	11	7
8	5	6
7	15	<5
Total	63	34

Table 3

- 3.4.17. 31 students transferred to another school in the region at the end of 2023.
- 16 of those 31 were at the end of their Year 8, which may be explained by the traditional move to boarding and/or religious schools from some in the community.
 - 2 who transferred at the end of their Year 7 shifted residence to another area in the region.
 - 7 transferred at the end of Year 9
 - A total of 6 students transferred at the end of 2023 at the end of Years 11 - 13.

Conclusions From Roll Data (Table 4)

	2023	2024
Roll Drop March 1 to July 1	6.3%	3.7%
Market Share	July 1 = 20.05%	March 1 = 19.44%
Transfers to Other Schools in Region March to November (March to September 2024)	63	34

Table 4

- 3.4.18. Parents have always decided to send their children to other than their community school. Accepting that there is only 2 years' data to access, one can conclude that the level of roll drop and transfer to other schools that occurred in 2023 has declined in 2024. One would have expected that if there was widespread dissatisfaction with the school's curriculum structure then such movements would have increased in 2024, the school's second year.

3.5. Response to Parent Concerns

The complainants attest that "while many of us spoke individually to senior school leaders earlier in the year, we believe that our concerns have not been taken seriously."

This is difficult to gauge.

- 3.5.1. There is no doubt that concerns were raised with school leaders and there is also no doubt that school leaders were able to respond and justify their decisions around curriculum structures.
- 3.5.2. Not agreeing with the concerns and remaining with the decisions made is not the same as not taking the concerns seriously. In fact, prior to the independent review, school leadership had already moved to implementing a 5 option timetable for seniors in 2025.
- 3.5.3. This suggests that school leadership was listening to the concerns and had been working on how they could accommodate the push for 5 subjects while still staying true to the school's strategic goal around wellbeing and true to their beliefs around the importance of Social Emotional Learning.
- 3.5.4. The board is to be complimented for acting in a timely manner once the complaint, dated 24 June, was received and, most probably, considered at the July meeting, and then engaging an independent reviewer in the first week of August.
- 3.5.5. The board and school leadership do need to think carefully about how they consistently promote and communicate the strategic drivers of the school and how they shape the actual practices and structures in the school in an attempt to relieve concerns that emerge when non-traditional approaches are adopted.

4. Recommendations

4.1. Academic Timetable

- 4.1.1. Implement the planned 5 option timetable option, ensuring equitable distribution of subjects across all lines. The school must avoid the appearance of a hierarchy of subjects by putting careful thought into the allocation of subjects across the 5 lines. In doing this, the prime driver should be the provision of the spread of subjects most beneficial to the range of students.
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- 4.1.3. The school may wish to consider beginning a programme of seeking feedback from alumni part way through their university studies.

4.2. Social Emotional Learning

- 4.2.1. Work with staff to deeply explore the 'why' of Whānau Hui and Tuakana Teina so that the lack of buy-in is diminished.
- 4.2.2. Review the programmes delivered within Whānau Hui and Tuakana Teina, drawing on both student and staff voice, to better ensure relevance and engagement.
- 4.2.3. Communicate clearly with the parent community about the 'why' of such programmes and the results of any review. The use of positive student voice about these programmes should be central in that communication.

4.3. Roll

- 4.3.1. Keep a record of the destinations of all leavers from each year level to be aware of any trends that may emerge over time.
- 4.3.2. The school, with the support of the data being supplied by the Ministry of Education, should track market share of enrolments to be aware of any emerging trends.

4.4. Complainants Not Feeling Heard

- 4.4.1. The board and school leadership do need to think carefully about how they consistently promote and communicate the strategic drivers of the school and how they shape the actual practices and structures in the school in an attempt to relieve concerns that emerge when non-traditional approaches are adopted.

5. Conclusion

The findings suggest that while the school has faced challenges in implementing its new curriculum structure, it has been responsive to concerns. The planned introduction of a 5-subject option demonstrates this responsiveness. Enrolment and retention data show some fluctuation, which is not uncommon for a new school, but recent trends suggest stabilization.

The “team-building activities”, while aligned with modern educational practices, require better communication of their purpose and value to the school community. The perception that parent concerns were not taken seriously highlights a need for improved communication strategies.

Te Paepae o Aotea has shown a commitment to innovative educational practices while facing the challenges of establishing a new school. The planned curriculum changes and the school's willingness to engage in this review demonstrate responsiveness to community concerns. By implementing the recommendations in this report, the school can address the identified issues and strengthen its relationship with the community while continuing to provide quality education aligned with its strategic goals.