



Speech delivered to the Pathways Leadership Breakfast

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By Craig Taylor, Principal

Kia ora koutou katoa.

I want to share the reality for many of our students at Aurora College. They come from homes and communities shaped by challenging circumstances, often with a low socioeconomic background that limits their immediate world. Their experiences are often confined to what they see day-to-day, a narrow lens through which to view the vast possibilities of the future. For generations, their parents and grandparents have worked in vital yet often low-income processing roles, jobs that, while providing for their families, may not have offered pathways for significant career advancement or personal growth. This reality can create a powerful, almost invisible, narrative. Our students often witness this cycle, and tragically, many begin to see this as their inevitable future – a path not chosen, but predetermined by circumstance, a destiny they feel powerless to change.

However, I must emphasise that while many of our students may come from disadvantaged backgrounds, they are truly the most wonderful people. They are extremely loyal, incredibly resilient, and possess abilities, both academically and physically, that rival those of any students in any school across the motu. The challenge is that they often lack confidence in their own abilities, and many face immense pressure to earn money as soon as possible to help support their household. This immediate need to contribute financially significantly impacts their pathway beyond school, often leading them to forgo opportunities for further education or training. This ingrained belief and external pressure are profound barriers we face. Our responsibility, our absolute priority here at Aurora College, is to courageously challenge this thinking head-on. We must actively work to empower our students to make

truly informed decisions about their pathways after school, providing them with not just a good education, but the best possible education and experiences they need to break these cycles and achieve their deepest aspirations, whatever those may be.

Our students are stepping into an ever-changing world, one that's evolving at an exponential rate, especially with the advent and impact of artificial intelligence (AI). We're not talking about a distant future; AI is already transforming industries across New Zealand and globally. The jobs of tomorrow may not even exist today, and the skills needed are shifting rapidly. While recent reports in New Zealand suggest that direct job displacement by AI remains relatively low, it is profoundly changing how work is done and creating a strong demand for new, AI-focused roles. AI is augmenting human productivity, automating repetitive tasks, and allowing employees to focus on higher-value work. This means that while schools can effectively teach the fundamentals – literacy, numeracy, critical thinking – and the crucial soft skills needed for this dynamic world – adaptability, problem-solving, creativity, and collaboration – direct exposure to industry is absolutely essential for our students to see the practical application of these technologies. It's about understanding how AI is transforming design, healthcare, engineering, logistics, and countless other fields right now. It's about being future-ready, not just academically prepared.

The Kia Tū Program: A Philosophical Shift

This is precisely why we are working with Ivan to develop and implement the Kia Tū program at Aurora College. Kia Tū, meaning 'to stand tall' or 'to be ready', encapsulates the very essence of what we aim to achieve. It represents a fundamental philosophical shift within our school's approach to career and pathway guidance. We're moving beyond simply asking, "What do you want to be when you leave school?" – a question that can feel overwhelming, or even meaningless, if a student has no frame of reference for the vast opportunities that exist. Instead, we're actively providing explicit exposure to industries and possibilities that our Year 7 to 10 students may never have considered, or perhaps didn't even know existed. Imagine a student whose world has been limited to their immediate neighbourhood and what they see on screens, suddenly seeing the inner workings of a cutting-edge high-tech manufacturing plant, or a vibrant creative agency producing content for national campaigns. This isn't just a field trip; it's an opportunity to spark curiosity, ignite passion, and broaden horizons in tangible ways. Our goal is that by the end of Year 11, students can clearly articulate their post-school pathway. They'll be able to confidently identify the specific subjects they need to take, the vocational pathways they might pursue, or the tertiary institutions they aspire to attend, ensuring a smooth and intentional transition to the next stage of their learning and career journey.

Partnering with Industry

To make this program a resounding success, we absolutely need the help of industry players. We need you to open your doors and allow our students to experience the multitude of jobs within your organisations. It's not just about what a company does, but who does it and how. We're thrilled to share that we're currently in the planning phase with two large industry leaders who are incredibly enthusiastic about partnering with us to support our rangatahi. This collaboration won't just allow our junior students to visit and see industries firsthand, experiencing the diverse jobs on offer - from engineering to marketing, logistics to design. It will also provide our senior students with invaluable work experience, giving them a genuine taste of a professional environment and the chance to apply their learning in a real-world context. This kind of experiential learning is priceless.

Leveraging Tertiary Partnerships

Our vision extends beyond industry. We are also in advanced discussions with the Southern Institute of Technology (SIT) to leverage our secondary and tertiary partnerships fully. This is about creating seamless transitions and providing our students with explicit learning in fields that, as a college, we simply cannot offer on our own. Think about specialist trades, advanced technological skills, or specific creative arts - by partnering with SIT, we can unlock a broader spectrum of learning opportunities that directly align with emerging industry needs and student interests. It's about bridging the gap between secondary education and further training or higher education.

Bringing Whānau Along

Crucially, this transformative work cannot happen without bringing whānau along on this journey with their children. For too long, the school experience has sometimes felt separate from home life. We are committed to ensuring they are informed, engaged, and an integral part of the planning and development of their child's pathway. Having whānau involved in their child's pathway and seeing the possibilities out there alongside them is absolutely vital if we are going to break the cycle of generational low-income roles mentioned earlier. When whānau are there to support and encourage, our students are much more likely to take that leap and pursue a pathway that genuinely excites them, rather than settling for what's familiar or perceived as the only option. When whānau are invested, the impact on student engagement and success is magnified.

A positive by-product

A favourable trade-off, if we implement our vision correctly, is that there should be a significant increase in engagement in learning, a lift in attendance rates, and ensuring that

our students truly understand the purpose of their time at school. When learning becomes relevant, when it connects directly to a student's aspirations, engagement soars. When students see a clear pathway and understand why they are learning what they are, attendance naturally improves. Simultaneously, we are building stronger, more positive relationships with our whānau – partnerships built on shared goals and mutual respect. If we can achieve this, we will undoubtedly see a profound and positive impact on many of the issues we hear about in the media regarding student attendance and achievement. We're not just chasing statistics; we're fostering a love of learning and a belief in future possibilities.

Thank you.