

# RISING — to the — CHALLENGE

*Stories from the Covid-19 crisis*

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## MANAIAKALANI: A SEAMLESS SWITCH TO HOME LEARNING

*By Nicholas Moody*

Term two has been a crash course in home learning for many New Zealand students and parents – but a group of schools from some of our most challenged communities have made the switch with ease.

“This is so cool! I can access my reading book from Sunshine books from my computer at home,” Eziaz, a year two student at Point England School in Auckland, writes on his personal blog.



*Seven-year-old Eziaz, a year two student at Point England School in Auckland, remotely accessing his school reading books during lockdown.*

Seven-year-old Eziaz is one of 20,000 children in 90 primary and secondary schools across New Zealand that are part of the Manaiakalani programme, working in partnership with Māori, Pasifika and low-income communities to address educational inequity.

It inspires New Zealand's disadvantaged learners to better educational outcomes through improvements to teacher practice and a digital and collaborative teaching model. It means the students already work on digital devices and are familiar with online lessons.

One of the founders, Dorothy Burt, says children have been well prepared for the transition to online learning in lockdown.

“We have numerous Māori and Pasifika families who are sending delightful photos in from home that show children with smiles on their faces learning with their teachers via distance learning,” she says.

While having access to devices and internet service is important, their number one focus remains on “teachers and effective teaching practice”, regardless of whether they are in or out of lockdown.

“The digital world is the world of our young people, but the key component is not a device, it is a teacher who knows how to teach and knows how to make connections with children and young people,” says Burt.

“Teachers’ primary goal each day is making connections, so during lockdown we check in on children’s wellbeing using Google Meet from one to three times a day, making sure everyone is OK and keeping those student-teacher relationships going,” she says. Screen time is limited and physical activity is built into each day’s learning.

“The kids are enjoying home learning. We are getting surprising numbers of children turning up to class with over 50% joining the video chats, even during the school holidays. And the cool thing we are discovering is that a lot of whānau are listening in too.”

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Supporting their children's learning through the lockdown illustrates the high degree of engagement in the programme from Manaiakalani families. This is underlined by their investment in their child's learning device - families pay \$3.65 per week over three years to buy their Chromebook.

The programme has also been a vital support to school leaders managing the transition to home learning.

“We haven't experienced some mad rush to 'figure out how to do this stuff', but rather we have been able to focus on the relational issues that are so important for our young people,” says Robin Sutton, principal of Christchurch's Hornby High School which has been part of the Manaiakalani programme since 2015.

“The stress and anxiety levels for staff are far lower than they might otherwise have been, because much of what we need to do is what Manaiakalani have been evolving for the past five years. While remote learning offers its share of challenges, it is not some barren desert that we need to start terraforming before we can make it habitable,” says Sutton.

It is early days yet, but the lessons learnt by Manaiakalani could be offered to schools throughout the country.

“Our schools are now completely fit-for-purpose to operate in or out of school and we barely blink,” says Manaiakalani Education Trust chairman Pat Snedden.

“For the rest of New Zealand, this is a huge challenge. We are offering to help schools with their digital capability to get in that position. We are prepared to be of assistance and of service to the wider kaupapa because we all need to help each other contend with the Covid-19 crisis.”

Snedden is optimistic that the pandemic could present a unique opportunity to scale the programme in disadvantaged communities throughout New Zealand.

“The opportunity to break this open in a really big way right across the country might be in this moment. We are simply saying to other schools: 'If you'd like to join us on our journey, we're happy to have you on board'.

Manaiakalani educators are supported by more than 20 individual, corporate and public sector funders including NEXT Foundation and the Ministry of Education.

NEXT's kaihautū representative Frank Janssen agrees that Manaiakalani's ability to respond to the Covid-19 crisis could have much wider benefits for New Zealand.

“All the learnings the Manaiakalani programme has made over the past 15 years are now bearing fruit. This is a complex and comprehensive programme that is measurably improving education outcomes for its students. There is a deep level of understanding about what works and it is unique for an initiative to have built up such a rich body of learning and knowledge over such a long time in New Zealand,” says Janssen.

“NEXT believes in backing innovative programmes that can clearly demonstrate their impact and can help improve New Zealand's education sector and the future of our children.”