



Engage Empower Enrich

Freemans Bay School in New Zealand is leading the way in implementing the government's 'innovative spaces' learning strategy.

Terry White shows us how an effective, learner-led curriculum strategy can be fully supported using imaginative architecture.

Freemans Bay School is situated in the heart of Auckland, New Zealand. With a transient, multi-cultural population of 400-500 students aged between 5 years and 11 years, the school has successfully worked to overcome some major challenges relating to managing the most diverse range of cultures and socio-economic groups in the city.

The head teacher, Sandra Jenkins, has been instrumental in transforming the school into a leading institution that has been recognised for its development of innovative learning environments that support and enrich the lives of all the students in the school and that connect with the community as a whole.

The vision of Freemans Bay School of 'Engage, Enrich, Empower' has been the design driver that has helped to align school design and collaborative ways of teaching and learning. The school wants students to experience learning spaces like the modern, activity-



Photographs Courtesy of Simon Devitt, RTA Studio and Sara Jenkins, Freemans Bay School.

based designed office spaces that many parents experience in their work spaces today, rather than the factory style or hierarchical and silo offices of the past.

At Freemans Bay School, the staff and leaders have taken a literal, physical approach to the belief that learning spaces need to be conducive to the actual needs of the students. The ideology that places the needs of the learner at the heart of the process of education is evidenced in the day-to-day learning experiences and relationships between all members of the learning community.



Learner-Centred Thinking

Before the school was redesigned, it already had a strong, learner-centred approach to teaching that made learning personal. Students were enabled to pursue their interests and strengths through a curriculum experience that was inquiry-based and focused on the development of skills and competencies for life, as a means of experiencing relevant and rigorous, academic programmes.

All of the cultures and diversity within the school and its learning community were valued, accepted and celebrated as part of the learning organisation. The ethos and values were explicit within a welcoming, caring and creative learning environment that treated everyone with respect and dignity.

“Learning to learn is at the heart of our school culture. We have an expectation that at Freemans Bay School, priority is given to developing the capacity to learn as well as content. We believe in creating learning environments that inspire and support our students to develop positive dispositions towards learning.”

Sandra Jenkins Principal, Freemans Bay School



Sandra and the school’s Board of Trustees moved forward with this vision of education to design a physical space that would support this, creating a stimulating, inclusive learning environment which truly engaged, enriched and empowered learners in preparation for their future world. Through intensive collaboration with the Board of Trustees,

Ministry of Education property managers, school leaders, experts in learning environments and RTA Studio, the architecture firm responsible for the final design, Freemans Bay School has managed to imagine and create a space in which a learner-centred, thinking skills-based curriculum can be realised to its fullest potential.



Creative and Integrated Architecture

The end result is dynamic and exciting. The overall structure of the school is very different from the traditional ‘factory’ or ‘hierarchical’ models, and demonstrates from first glance that a creative and inclusive learning environment is central to the ethos of the school.

The diversity of the school population is acknowledged in the design of the school entrance. When arriving at the school, visitors are welcomed with a street edge canopy that links the community-facing buildings of the hall and administration with the street. The large, covered canopy creates a sheltered space for both parents and children to meet and interact. This community space allows interaction between families, which is especially important for the many people who are new to the country and therefore may not have many friends and/or family, and who speak English as a second language.

Collaborative Learning Spaces

The collaborative approach of the school is also modelled in open and connected reception areas that welcome and engage visitors and parents, as well as in the open and shared leadership spaces

that are located near the front of the school.

The innovative teaching practices of the school become evident inside the school, where the classrooms have been conspicuously replaced with dynamic learning zones.

The school is organised into four teams that are called Whānau, referring to the Māori concept of ‘family’. These teams do not work in a traditional classroom, but rather in a learning area with up to 90 students, three teachers and other support staff, working together as a team. The teams are roughly divided into New Entrants to Year 2 (Whānau Rau), Years 3 and 4 (Whānau Puna), Years 5 and 6 (Whānau Wai) and the Māori Immersion Unit for Years 1 to 6 (Whānau Ata). This structure allows the learners to work with the same teachers for two years, building effective learning relationships and improving teachers’ knowledge of each learner. Regardless of a student’s year level or age, learning is personalised for each student, depending on what stage they are at.

Teachers provide a personal learning agenda and this is reinforced by the vertical and horizontal connections of the physical space, which allow students to move easily into the next area when they are ready. These two-year student groupings





also enable the school to provide support and extension to children all within in a family-group setting.

Whānau Ata was the first Māori language unit established in Central Auckland. Learners in Whānau Ata are delivered their curriculum through the context of Māori culture, history and the Māori language, Te Reo Māori. Their building is distinctive and stands separate from the other buildings, but its location is significant within the heart and central area of the campus, reflecting the unique but important status of its students within the school.

The buildings are double height, which is to reflect a city landscape. They have open upper floor decks to ensure the connections between indoor and outdoor learning are always a part of the students' learning experience. The most recent building, which currently houses the Whānau Puna (Y3-4) and Whānau Wai (Y5-6) learning zones, has two floors, which have two areas that are mirrored in layout. Each side includes a large and medium

group learning area, two quiet rooms, an outdoor learning space, a 'maker' space that includes a 'wet' and 'cook' area, a cave or treehouse and a staircase that connects the two floors.

Although the school has long had a belief in a learner-centred, project and inquiry-based curriculum, organising learning through collaborative inquiry for groups of 90 learners needs more sophisticated attention to planning. These large spaces struggle in all sorts of ways if the only way of creating different learning zones is achieved just through furniture and equipment. At the edges of the main large learning spaces that facilitate the more fixed learning experiences that are required for this approach, the smaller areas or quiet rooms offer harbour spaces for the students. The quiet spaces, 'maker space' areas, wet and creative spaces, food technology or family domestic spaces have a variety of uses. The larger spaces allow for reconfigurable learning areas that should, and must, be adapted through the school day for adaptable and flexible activity.



The approach in these learning zones provides a variety of spaces for learners to have appropriate choices of where and when to learn. Teaching teams support and facilitate the organisation and pattern of learning. A range of teacher-led and learner-led inquiries is in evidence as one moves through these new spaces. In addition, throughout the area, ICT is fully integrated as part of the learning and teaching strategy. There are many ways and places that students can connect and engage with technology, ensuring that the learning is personal and can take place in the spaces that students choose.

In addition to the practicalities associated with curriculum-based learning, the design of these learning zones encourages the learners to move around the building in different ways. It allows them to climb, crawl and connect across areas. The thinking behind the strong vision of the links between pedagogy and space is the relationship between play, physical movement and learning. The school believes that the opportunities for physical exercise and the way that the learners will be able to use the spaces will encourage increased motivation, engagement, creativity and collaboration around their learning.

Every space is a learning space and the central internal stairs that connect the learning zones creates spaces for learners to choose where to learn. Learners can have fun while learning by choosing to use the slide from the first to the ground floor as an alternative to the stairs!



Times are changing

In addition to the positive feedback Principal Jenkins and Freemans Bay School received from their Board, the parents, students and community at large, the radical redesign of the school reflects a profound change that is occurring at the national level. The New Zealand Government has been at the forefront of this approach to learning and teaching over recent years through its policy strategy on Innovative Learning Environments.

“We ultimately wanted to achieve a school that encourages the learner’s exploration, enquiry and creativity as much as we could through an architecture that inspires learning.”

Richard Naish, Executive Director, RTA Studio







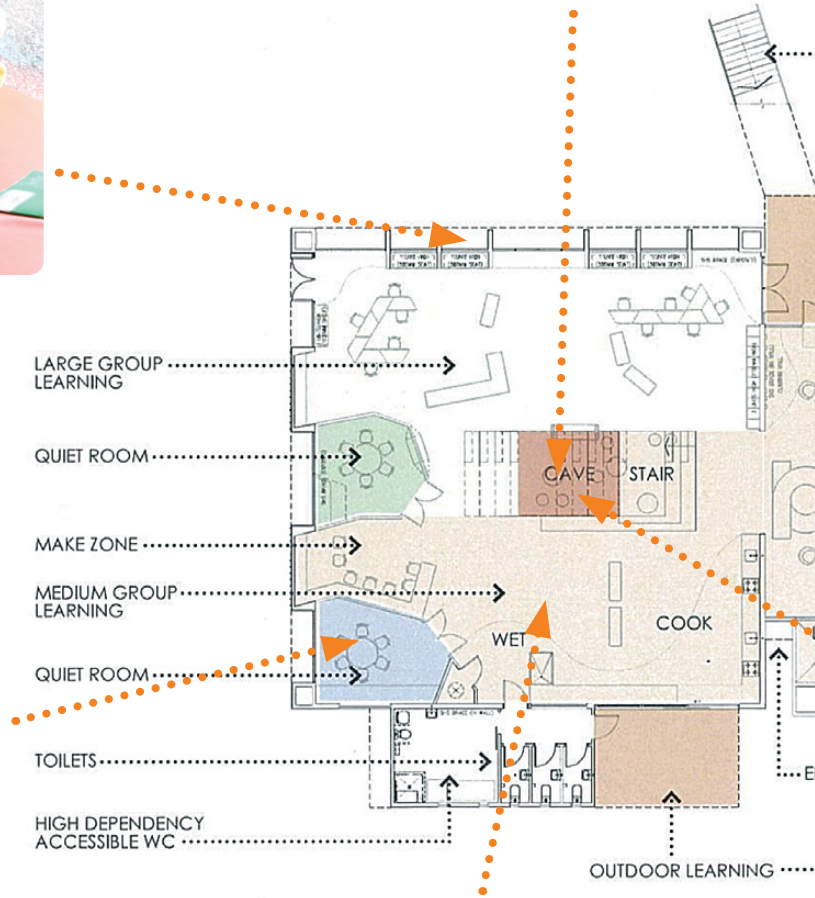
Beginning in 2010, the government began talking about bringing in ‘the learning revolution’. As part of this strategy, it has focused on the important role that flexible learning spaces need to play within mainstream education and has examined how the design of spaces can influence student achievement. It has produced a number of reports and fact sheets that can be found on the Ministry’s web site: www.education.govt.nz/flexible-learning-spaces.

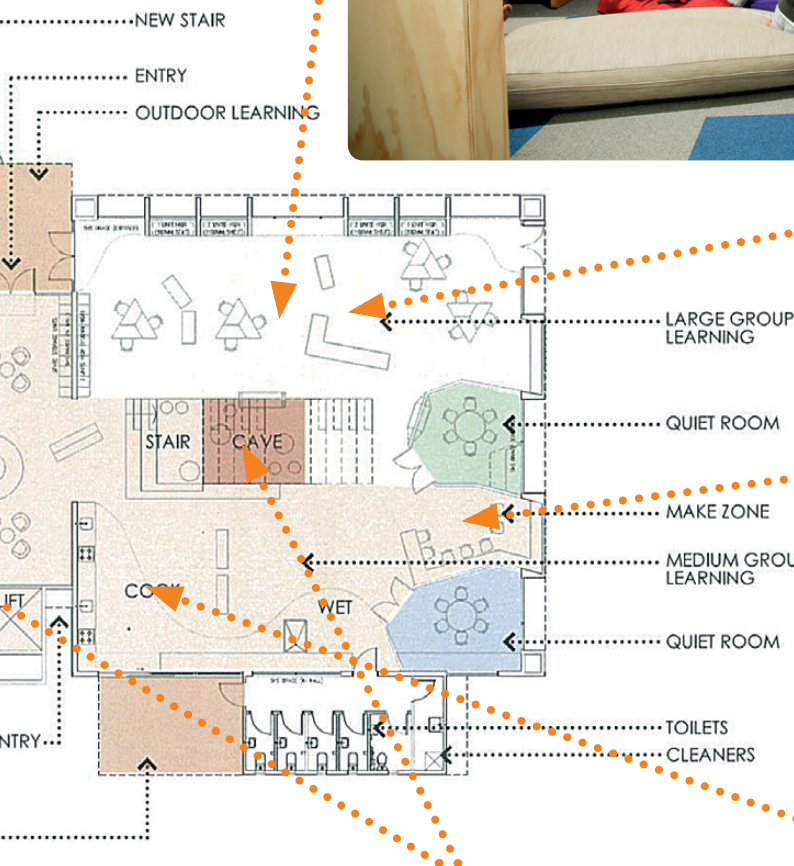
This strategy moves away from a ‘one size fits all’ approach and now looks to support schools to create learning spaces that are ready for today and can evolve for learning in years to come. They are, in fact, designing for the future, not rebuilding the past, recognising that education needs to keep pace with the world for which we are preparing young people. Their research on “How the design of spaces can help student achievement”, makes a major contribution to learning-led design in New Zealand and at an International Level.

The five-year olds who start school this year will be graduating around 2035. We need to think about what sort of spaces they will be working and studying in and join the dots between education space, curriculum design and developing attributes needed for their future world.”

Sandra Jenkins, Principal









The design of Freemans Bay School truly liberates learning for the learners, the staff and the community. The buildings and learning spaces open up possibilities and do not constrain or close down learning opportunities as so many buildings built for the past have often done. Sandra recognises that staff need to be supported to work through the change process, to be prepared to collaborate to deliver a personalised learning curriculum. This support is provided through a mixture of vision-led workshops focused on collaboration, coaching and teacher-led inquiry.

Sandra states that the school community is in the process of 'joining up the dots,' because they recognise that to meet the future learning needs for young people requires a 'wrap-around' provision. This values the individual and creates learning opportunities through an enhanced pedagogy and curriculum design that is academic, relevant and robust, but that recognises that personal attributes and personal life skills are the real passport for the future.

The staff are leading and facilitating learning with the students and developing systems to ensure effective assessments for learning are in place so that students can own, and parents can access, progress at any time. It is rewarding to see learning conversations taking place that focus on prior learning and the full knowledge of the student – it is a pleasure to see students engaged and motivated to be making positive choices about how, when and where to learn, and that they are drawing on teachers, co-educators and other students in order to deepen their knowledge and understanding.

Freemans Bay School has recognised the value of 'doing differently' and has recognised that the relationship between pedagogy, curriculum delivery and rethinking the spaces in which learning takes place, will enhance the learning of future learners.

'Learning-to-learn' requires new creative partnerships and new relationships with, and for, young people. Space is not the 'final frontier,' but without the passion and determination to cultivate and create new learning landscapes, we will not create and sustain a future that will engage, empower and enrich.



Information:

Freemans Bay School is a Microsoft Showcase School. Photographs Courtesy of Simon Devitt, RTA Studio and Sara Jenkins, Freemans Bay School.