

Growing girls' participation in sport

How Taranaki Secondary Schools Sports Association (TSSSA) used data, student voice and school partnerships to increase girls' participation.





Overview

Taranaki Secondary Schools Sports Association (TSSSA) works with secondary schools across Taranaki to provide quality sport and physical activity opportunities for all young people. This includes competitive sporting events, modified events, all-ability opportunities and student leadership programmes.

Over 3 years

TSSSA used data and student feedback to better understand what was helping or limiting girls' participation.

TSSSA used these insights to design opportunities and experiences that better matched the needs and interests of girls. This helped more girls take part in sport and physical activity across the region.



Key learnings at a glance



Listen to
young people



Track who is
participating



Work closely
with schools



Offer different
ways to
participate



Keep learning
and adapting

Understand participation

TSSSA's first step was building a clearer picture of participation across its network of schools.

What they did:

- tracked participation by event, school and term
- compared girls' and boys' participation
- reviewed census data to identify trends and patterns across schools
- shared insights with schools at the end of each term.

What they learnt:

- who was participating and who wasn't
- which events were most popular with girls
- barriers at individual schools.

The Sport NZ voice of rangatahi survey provided insights from more than 2,800 students across most of the schools TSSSA works with. Data was collected twice a year to understand who was participating, who was missing out and why.





Turn insights into action with schools

During terms 1 and 2, TSSSA used participation and survey data to guide conversations with principals, senior leaders and sport staff about what was working and what could be improved.

What they did:

- provided participation data to each school to start meaningful conversations
- helped schools understand participation trends and challenges
- developed actions tailored for each school's needs
- worked together to remove barriers and support more girls to participate.

“ When schools, students and sporting partners are all contributing to the conversation, our events come alive and become more meaningful for rangatahi. ”

Karla Ralph
Regional Sports Director, TSSSA

What they learnt:

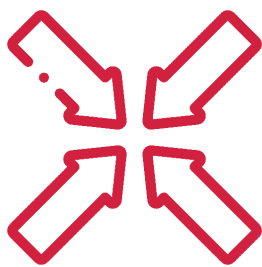
- students' needs varied across schools
- working together helped schools and TSSSA identify ways to increase girls' participation
- lasting change happened when participation became a shared focus across schools, not just a focus on events and competitions.

Participation
data

School
conversations

Shared
solutions

Increased
participation



Put student voice at the centre

A key shift in TSSSA's approach was making sure young people had a say in how activities were planned and delivered.

“ Participation growth does not come from simply delivering more events. It comes from understanding our young people and listening to their voices. ”

Karla Ralph
Regional Sports Director, TSSSA

How young people were involved

Student Sports Leadership Programme

- 2 professional development days
- Creation of a leader's group
- Supported by regular school visits

Student leaders at events

- Work experience students helped to design, plan and deliver the activities and events

Student-led promotion and feedback

- Produced social media content to reach non-participants
- Captured feedback from students on activities across 17 schools

This ensured opportunities were shaped by the experiences of young people rather than assumptions from adults.

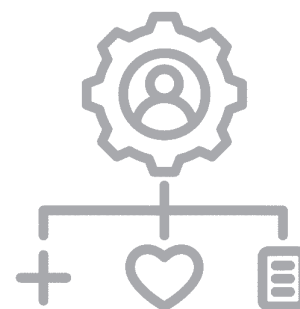
“ I am very grateful for the opportunities to get behind the scenes and help out TSSSA events over the past year. I have thoroughly enjoyed learning how to capture student feedback and promote student involvement through fast five netball reels we made with the other student leaders. I hope my involvement as a TSSSA student leader encourages others to participate and enjoy being active. ”

Student leader
Sacred Heart Girls College

Design opportunities around what young people want

TSSSA recognised that a single model of competition did not meet the needs of all students.

Using participation data and student voice, opportunities were intentionally designed across 3 domains within the Sport Pathways Framework.



Foundation

Entry-level opportunities

Opportunities included:

- rotational golf
- hockey 7s
- beach activities
- cricket 6s
- kayaking.

Social

Fun and friendship based

Opportunities included:

- 3x3 basketball
- cricket 6s
- Fast5 netball
- touch
- beach activities
- Tapu ae and poi toa.

Competitive

Traditional competition

Opportunities included:

- existing traditional competitions.

Tracking participation across the foundation, social and competitive domains enabled TSSSA to:

- understand which opportunities were most popular with girls
- provide more options beyond traditional competition
- create opportunities that appealed to a wider range of interests and experience levels.

As a result, more foundation and social opportunities were delivered throughout the year, rather than being limited to a single period.

These opportunities gave young people more ways to get involved in sport and physical activity. They helped students build confidence, make friends, develop leadership skills and feel part of a team in a supportive environment.

For many young people, particularly those less interested in traditional competition, foundation and social opportunities offered a welcoming way to get involved. Activities such as 3x3 basketball, social volleyball and Fast5 netball were particularly popular with girls, with many choosing to take part because they could be in a team with their friends. These opportunities provided another way to engage in sport and physical activity and helped strengthen young people's connection to being active.



Results and impact

This approach changed both what TSSSA offered and how schools worked with students. The results below show how those changes supported stronger participation by girls.

3,039 girls participated in TSSSA activities in 2025

57% of participants were girls

Girls exceeded boys' participation in multiple terms during 2025.

178% growth of participation in foundation and social activities between 2023 and 2025.

Participation outcomes:

- girls' participation was higher than boys' participation in multiple terms during 2025
- overall participation across events increased
- greater engagement in foundation and social formats
- more students who had not previously taken part became involved.

Insights also highlighted the importance of:

- fun and inclusive environments
- low barriers to entry, with no prior skills required
- opportunities to participate alongside friends.



Continuous improvement

How TSSSA reviews and refines their approach

TSSSA built regular review and learning into this approach.

Data

Insight

Action

Review

Refinement

This included:

- capturing and reviewing event-level data each term
- holding post-event reviews involving TSSSA and regional sport organisation staff
- holding reviews with school sport staff each term
- introducing a way to gather students' feedback at events.

What the sector can learn

1.

Data is most powerful when it drives conversation

Data alone does not create change. Regular conversations with school leaders, sport staff and student leaders help turn insights into action.

2.

Context matters – school-by-school insight is critical

Participation looks different in every school. Responses are more effective when they are tailored to the needs of each school, rather than using the same approach everywhere.

3.

Student voice strengthens relevance and engagement

When students help shape opportunities, those opportunities are more likely to feel relevant, welcoming and worth coming back to.

4.

Offer multiple pathways into sport

Offering social and entry-level opportunities alongside competition can open the door for more young people, especially girls, to take part in ways that suit their needs and motivations.

5.

Continuous improvement drives sustained growth

Regular feedback and review help organisations keep improving their approach over time.

6.

Find the hook that gets young people involved

Factors such as fun, friendship, choice and a welcoming environment can encourage participation. Understanding what motivates young people helps create opportunities they want to be part of.



Final reflection

For organisations looking to grow girls' participation, the message is clear: start with the voices and experiences of young people.

Understanding who is participating, who is missing out and why can help turn data into meaningful action. Combined with strong relationships and a willingness to adapt, this creates opportunities that are more relevant, inclusive and engaging.

TSSSA's approach shows that when young people help shape sport, more young people can see a place for themselves in it.

“ By working together and using evidence to guide our decisions, we have been able to create a more responsive system that is engaging more young people in sport and physical activity and helping them build positive connections that extend beyond the playing field. ”

Karla Ralph
Regional Sports Director, TSSSA



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