

Futures Provocation

Navigating the Future of Secondary School Education in Aotearoa New Zealand

2026–2040

A foresight provocation for the sport
and recreation sector



How to use this paper

This is not a prediction. It is a provocation.

This paper is for anyone working at the intersection of sport, recreation and secondary education in Aotearoa New Zealand: Sport NZ staff who engage with schools; national sport organisations (NSOs), regional sports trusts (RSTs) and councils working with young people; regional providers; and sector leaders thinking about what comes next.

Its purpose is to help you think across a range of plausible futures, not to give you a single answer. The scenarios in this paper are not forecasts – they are constructed futures designed to challenge assumptions, surface risk and reveal opportunity. Some will feel unlikely. Some will feel uncomfortably close.

The most useful thing you can do with this paper is argue with it. Ask: what would this mean for our organisation? What decisions are we making today that we would regret if this scenario came true? What opportunities are we missing?

Suggested uses

Read the scenarios individually as pre-reading before a strategy session. Work through them as a team and identify your most and least preferred future. Use the questions at the end of each scenario to frame a planning conversation. Test a current decision – a programme, a partnership, a funding model – against each scenario to see how resilient it is.

Why this matters now

Secondary school education in Aotearoa New Zealand is entering a period of profound, converging change. Between now and 2040, qualification and curriculum reform, rapidly expanding AI and digital learning, demographic shifts and intensifying equity challenges will reshape how rangatahi learn – and how much time, space and value schools give to physical activity.

The stakes are real. If the sport and recreation sector continues to engage with schools primarily through traditional PE timetables and after-school competition, physical activity risks being progressively squeezed by credential pressure, screen-based learning and widening resource gaps. By 2040, it could become increasingly optional, dependent on a school's Equity Index (EI) score and whānau resources. Girls, Asian and disabled rangatahi, and students in high-deprivation communities would face growing barriers.

At the same time, evidence is strengthening that physical activity supports exactly what education now prioritises: attendance, mental health, engagement and life-ready capabilities. The window for repositioning is now. The decisions made in the next 3 to 5 years will shape whether physical activity sits at the centre or the margins of secondary education across the coming decade.

The central question

How does the sport and recreation sector secure and strengthen its place in secondary education across a range of futures we cannot fully predict? The scenarios in this paper are designed to help you explore that question.



Four plausible futures for secondary education in 2040

The following 4 scenarios are not predictions. They are constructed from real forces already in motion – qualification and curriculum reform, AI, demographic change, equity pressures, workforce stress – pushed to plausible but distinct endpoints. Each represents a different configuration of how those forces might interact.

No single scenario will come true in its pure form. But elements of each are already visible. Reading across all 4 is more valuable than picking the ‘most likely’. The goal is to test your thinking and your strategy against multiple futures, not to find the one you prefer.

A

Credential-tight, time-poor schools

- Qualification pressure dominates.
- PE is squeezed.
- Activity becomes optional and unequal.

B

Wellbeing-centred, integrated learning

- Hauora and engagement are prioritised.
- Physical activity is central to school design.

C

Fragmented, hybrid learning ecosystems

- Diverse pathways fragment delivery.
- Outcomes depend on local context and whānau resources.

D

Wellbeing-centred, integrated learning

- Radical decentralisation.
- Activity is app-driven, community-led, globally connected.

Scenario A

Credential-tight, time-poor schools

Qualification pressure pushes physical activity to the margins

The narrative

By 2040, the new curriculum is fully embedded. Schools have narrowed their focus to ensuring students pass 4 of their 5 subjects, and AI-driven platforms dominate delivery in core subjects. Sophisticated analytics continuously track progress toward certificate requirements. Physical activity is present, but it is not protected.

PE and Health subjects survive in the timetable, but they are narrowly allocated and under continual pressure from academic subjects and 'future skills' options. Physical activity increasingly encroaches on co-curricular slots, lunchtimes and after-school periods, where participation is strongly shaped by school EI score, whānau resources and transport access.

Activity levels are higher in well-resourced schools with strong sport cultures and supportive families. In less-resourced schools, compulsory PE and a small number of funded programmes carry nearly all the load. Sport NZ's influence is limited unless it can demonstrate direct contribution to qualification and curriculum outcomes.

A day in the life – 2040

Tama, 16, attends a large high-EI secondary school in South Auckland. He has 2 PE periods a week, both in a hall shared with the drama class. Interschool sport was cut 2 years ago when the transport budget ran out. Tama plays rugby at his local club on Saturdays, but only because his uncle drives him. Most of his friends have stopped. "There's just no time," he says. "And no one makes it easy."

Key characteristics

- PE is reduced to measurable individual skills and narrowly timetabled
- Activity concentrates in co-curricular and after-school slots dependent on school and family resources
- Technology is efficiency-focused, tracking academic progress, not movement or wellbeing
- Girls, Asian and disabled rangatahi, and students at high-EI schools face growing barriers to participation
- Sector influence diminishes unless physical activity can be expressed in new curriculum terms

Questions for your organisation

- What would it mean for your organisation if this scenario became the dominant reality by 2040?
- What evidence do you currently have – or need – to make the case for physical activity in new curriculum terms?
- Which schools or communities would be most at risk, and how would you reach them?
- What decisions are you making today that assume the timetable will protect PE? What if it doesn't?

Scenario B

Wellbeing-centred, integrated learning

Hauora and connection become the organising logic of schooling

The narrative

Persistent concerns about attendance, youth mental health, and student disengagement force a fundamental shift. By 2040, school boards and policy settings give schools explicit permission – and incentives – to prioritise hauora, connection and life-ready capabilities alongside academic achievement.

Physical activity is recognised as a primary engine for engagement and attendance, particularly for boys and priority groups. Schools intentionally design ‘active days’, active transport programmes, and community-linked sport into timetables. AI and data tools personalise learning and identify at-risk students, but teachers reinvest the time saved in mentoring, coaching and facilitating active, experiential learning.

Equity is addressed through targeted investment in high-IE schools and high-deprivation communities. School-community sport hubs offer low-cost, low-barrier options. Partnerships between schools, NSOs and community provider’s flourish.

A day in the life – 2040

Aroha, 15, starts most Tuesdays with a 30-minute orienteering circuit through the school reserve – part of her geography and PE cross-credit module. Her school tracks her ‘active engagement score’ alongside her attendance, and both feed into her Foundational Award portfolio. When she joined the school’s junior coaching programme last term, her mentor told her it would count toward her transferable skills assessment. She hadn’t thought of coaching as learning. Now she does.

Key characteristics

- Physical activity is integrated into cross-curricular projects, flexible scheduling, and off-site learning
- Schools recognise PE and sport as enablers of attendance and engagement – especially for priority groups
- School-community hubs offer low-cost, culturally relevant activity options across the week
- Wellbeing programmes co-designed with students link activity to measurable attendance and mental health outcomes
- Leadership, officiating and coaching count toward recognised learning

Questions for your organisation

- What would your organisation need to do differently to be a genuine partner in this kind of integrated model?
- What measurement frameworks, shared with schools, would you need to demonstrate the link between activity, attendance and hauora?
- Are there schools already moving in this direction where you could pilot a deeper partnership?
- What would a school-community hub look like in your region?

Scenario C

Fragmented, hybrid learning ecosystems

Delivery diversifies – outcomes depend on where you live and who you know

The narrative

By 2040, a patchwork of educational delivery has emerged. Some students remain in conventional schools, while growing numbers learn through charter schools, kura kaupapa, online providers, micro-schools, workplace learning and community programmes. Schools increasingly operate as coordination hubs, but much learning happens across networks spanning tertiary institutions, industry, iwi and community organisations.

For some rangatahi, especially those in regional or high-deprivation areas, hybrid models reduce access to school-based sport and PE. This shifts responsibility to clubs, whānau and informal activity opportunities. For others, flexible timetables and work-based learning create new spaces to integrate activity into the day.

Quality and quantity of physical activity become highly variable, dependent less on curriculum and more on local partnerships, infrastructure and whānau capacity. Sport-related micro-credentials and community-based achievements begin to count toward recognised learning in some pathways.

A day in the life – 2040

Mei, 14, splits her week between her local school (3 days) and Te Kura online (2 days). There's no PE during online days. Her mum tries to take her to the community pool on Wednesdays, but shift work gets in the way. Mei is part of a youth leadership programme run by her iwi that counts toward her Foundational Award, and she loves it. But nobody's mapped the physical component of that programme to any recognised activity metric. It's invisible in the data.

Key characteristics

- Educational delivery is highly diverse – traditional schools sit alongside hybrid, online and community models
- Physical activity outcomes are highly variable, driven by local context rather than curriculum requirements
- Equity depends heavily on whānau capacity, local partnerships and proximity to infrastructure
- Sport-related micro-credentials and community achievements begin to count toward qualifications in some pathways
- Sector engagement must extend beyond traditional schools to reach all rangatahi

Questions for your organisation

- Does your current engagement model reach rangatahi who are not in conventional schools? If not, what would it take to change that?
- What informal or community-based activity is happening in your region that is currently invisible in the data?
- How would you design a micro-credential or recognition pathway for sport participation that could work across fragmented delivery models?
- Which partners – iwi, providers, community organisations – would you need to work with that you don't currently engage?

Scenario D

Learning without walls

Secondary education is radically decentralised, digitised and individualised

The narrative

By 2040, secondary education has been fundamentally restructured. Students exercise high agency, choosing among virtual, hybrid and experiential pathways that are often located outside traditional school buildings. Schools have evolved into learning hubs, and most academic content is delivered via AI-powered, platform-based, increasingly globalised sources.

Assessment, credentialing and participation in sport and activities are managed through networks, apps and community partnerships rather than school-based structures. Physical activity provision becomes primarily app-based, platform-driven and community-delivered. Virtual and experiential formats are redefining what participation looks like.

Global cyber schools operated by large platforms challenge national engagement approaches. New inequities emerge based on access to technology and resources. The human, relational dimensions of sport – belonging, identity, community – risk being overlooked in a system optimised for personalisation and efficiency.

A day in the life – 2040

Jess, 15, hasn't been to school in 6 months. She completes her NZCE coursework through a global online platform, submits her portfolio assessments to an AI tutor, and earns movement credits with a gamified fitness app that tracks her daily activity against a personalised challenge set by an algorithm. She hasn't played team sport in 2 years. She is physically active. She is also quietly lonely.

Key characteristics

- Learning is highly personalised, platform-driven and increasingly globalised
- Physical activity is app-based and community-delivered – disconnected from school structures
- New inequities emerge based on technology access and digital literacy
- The social and community dimensions of sport risk being diminished or commodified
- Traditional sector engagement models are largely irrelevant – new digital and community-based models are needed

Questions for your organisation

- If young people's sport and activity participation became primarily app-based and community-driven, what role would your organisation play?
- How would you protect and advocate for the relational, social dimensions of sport in a highly individualised system?
- What digital platforms or partnerships would you need to develop to remain relevant?
- What would equity look like in this scenario – and what would your responsibility be?

What is consistent across all 4 futures

While these scenarios diverge significantly, several patterns appear. These are not optional considerations – they are near-certainties that strategy needs to account for, regardless of which future unfolds.

Opportunities that appear in every scenario

Physical activity as a core enabler, not optional enrichment

Evidence linking physical activity to attendance, mental health and learning is strengthening in all 4 futures. The window to reframe sport and active recreation as central – not supplementary – to what education is trying to achieve is open now. Waiting weakens the case.

Technology and data as allies

AI and digital platforms create opportunities in every scenario – for active learning via mixed-reality formats, gamified movement and personalised challenges, and for richer participation and wellbeing data to inform strategy and demonstrate impact. The question is, who shapes those tools and for what purpose?

School–community ecosystems as the delivery infrastructure

As qualifications and pathways evolve, community-based sport – coaching, officiating, volunteering, leadership – can increasingly count toward recognised learning. Strengthening links between schools, clubs, NSOs and community providers builds resilience across all 4 futures.

Risks that appear in every scenario

Curriculum and timetable squeeze

With only 5 subjects required for qualification and strong pressure on academic learning, PE and outdoor education risk marginalisation at Years 12 and 13 unless their value is articulated in qualification terms. This is not a risk in Scenario A only – it is structural.

Deepening inequities

Existing gaps in physical activity and sport participation by gender, ability, ethnicity, school EI score and neighbourhood deprivation could widen in every scenario if activity shifts further into optional co-curricular spaces and fee-based organised sport. Equity is not a dimension to add later – it needs to be integrated into design from the start.

Sedentary, screen-based learning

AI-driven and online models risk increasing sedentary time in every scenario. Movement, outdoor learning, and active pedagogy will not happen by default. They must be intentionally designed into learning environments and actively advocated for.

The forces driving change 2026–2040

The 4 scenarios are built from 8 major forces already in motion. Understanding these helps you assess which elements of each scenario are more or less likely, and where your organisation’s early signals of change might come from.

Driver	What is changing 2026–2040	Implications for sport and physical activity
Curriculum and qualification reform	Years 9–10 curriculum refresh emphasises foundational literacy, numeracy and te reo Māori. NCEA replaced by Foundational Award (Y11), NZCE (Y12) and NZACE (Y13). Students take 5 subjects and must pass at least 4, reducing timetable flexibility.	PE and Health and PE must demonstrate contribution to qualification outcomes and core capabilities (wellbeing, engagement, transferable skills) or risk marginalisation at Y12–13.
AI, edtech, and data-driven schooling	AI-enabled personalised learning, automated tutoring and learning analytics become central school infrastructure. Screen-based, and potentially home-based, learning expands, including cyber school models.	Competition for student attention and time increases. Sedentary learning risk rises. Opportunity to integrate movement, gamified activity, and wellbeing data into digital platforms.
Wellbeing, mental health and attendance	Youth anxiety, depression, disengagement and attendance concerns push hauora and social-emotional development up the policy agenda across all school types.	Physical activity framed as a protective factor – strengthening connection, emotional regulation and life readiness – gains policy and board-level traction.
Inequality, demographics and community context	Participation gaps persist for communities served by high-IE schools, disabled, and some ethnic groups, particularly Asian rangatahi. Cost-of-living pressures, urban intensification and birth rate decline continue. Home-schooling and micro-schools grow.	Barriers to consistent participation increase. Sector must build inclusive models beyond traditional schools and invest where participation gaps are greatest.
Global skills and workforce shifts	Education shifts toward ‘life-ready learning’: collaboration, adaptability, critical thinking, digital fluency. AI and automation elevate distinctly human capabilities: communication, teamwork, emotional intelligence.	Sport and PE build exactly the capabilities future learning and work reward. Advocate for recognition and assessment of sport-related learning in capability terms, not only physical competence.
Environmental and urban pressures	Climate risks – flooding, heat stress, disruption – and urbanisation reduce outdoor space and increase facility costs. Higher energy and maintenance costs strain school budgets.	Facility trade-offs and outdoor disruption are real. Schools need covered, multi-use spaces, tighter timetabling and community venue partnerships to protect activity space.
Ethical and regulatory frameworks	Evolving regulation around device use in schools, data privacy and wearables, delivery model diversity and sport participation rules.	Proactive monitoring and guidance needed for schools and NSOs. Strong privacy and ethics stance required for data-enabled activity models.
Fragmentation of delivery models	Charter schools, kura kaupapa, hybrid models, online providers, Te Kura, micro-schools and alternative pathways continue to grow. Schools increasingly function as coordination hubs rather than sole delivery sites.	Engagement must extend well beyond traditional school structures. Recognition frameworks for informal and community-based participation become essential.

Strategic implications for the sector

Across all scenarios, 4 strategic shifts stand out as necessary. None of them are predictions about what will happen. All of them are responses to what is already underway.

- ### 1

Reframe physical activity as core to educational success

The most important strategic shift is linguistic and cultural. If physical activity is positioned as enrichment, health or recreation – separate from the ‘real’ work of schooling – it will lose ground in every scenario. The reframe must make the case, in education language, that sport and active recreation are enablers of attendance, achievement, hauora and equity.

This means translating research into school-relevant narratives aligned to qualification language. It means mapping leadership, coaching, officiating and sport participation to recognised capabilities. It means showing boards and principals the data that links activity to what they are held accountable for.
- ### 2

Engage proactively with qualification and curriculum reform

The replacement of NCEA creates both risk and opportunity. If physical activity cannot be articulated in the language of the Foundational Award, NZCE and NZACE, it loses timetable ground at Years 12 and 13. If it can be, the window is open to build micro-credential pathways, competency mapping and co-designed assessment models that make community sport count.

This requires active engagement with the Ministry of Education, Education Review Office and curriculum developers – not a watching brief.
- ### 3

Build deep, equity-focused school-community ecosystems

Transactional, programme-by-programme engagement with schools will not be sufficient in any of the 4 scenarios. What will work is sustained, co-designed partnership with clusters of schools and communities – especially in high-Equity Index schools and the communities they serve – built around shared equity outcomes.

School-community sport hubs that share facilities, providers, data and planning across the week strengthen pathways between school sport and community clubs. Co-design with rangatahi and whānau – particularly girls, disabled, and Asian rangatahi, where traditional programme design often underperforms – is not optional.
- ### 4

Leverage digital transformation; protect against its harms

AI and edtech are coming to secondary education regardless. The question is whether physical activity and wellbeing are visible in that data infrastructure or invisible. Partnering with the Ministry of Education and edtech providers so that activity, hauora and engagement measures sit alongside attendance and achievement in school dashboards is a strategic priority.

At the same time, the sector must actively address the risk of more sedentary, screen-based learning and advocate for movement to be designed into digital and hybrid models, not assumed away.

Priority actions 2026–2030

These actions are designed to be achievable within current planning cycles while building resilience across multiple scenarios. They are offered as starting points, not a complete plan. The questions throughout this paper are intended to help your organisation determine where to focus.

Develop a secondary school engagement framework for 2035

Create a strategic framework, mapping how sport, PE, active recreation and rangatahi leadership contribute to the emerging curriculum and core system outcomes: attendance, achievement, hauora and equity. Include:

- alignment between physical activity competencies and Foundational Award, NZCE and NZACE requirements
- evidence packages for boards and principals linking activity to school priorities
- guidance for NSOs on engaging with the new curriculum and qualification landscape
- micro-credential pathways that count community sport participation toward recognised learning.

Create active learning demonstration schools

Partner with 6 to 8 diverse secondary schools to pilot integrated active learning models and build an evidence base for scaling across all delivery contexts. Independently evaluate impacts on participation, attendance, mental health and wellbeing with a strong equity lens.

Co-design equity-focused offers with rangatahi

In high-El schools, high-deprivation and high-growth ethnic communities, particularly Asian communities, co-design low-cost, low-barrier, culturally relevant offers that fit emerging timetables and hybrid learning models. Remove cost, transport and cultural barriers. Recognise diverse forms of physical activity beyond competitive sport.

Integrate physical activity into education data systems

Work with the Ministry of Education and edtech partners so physical activity, PE participation and sport engagement are visible on school dashboards alongside attendance and achievement. Establish privacy-protected data sharing protocols. Use Active NZ and school-level data to identify and target priority groups.

Invest in school–community connectors

Fund regional ‘boundary-spanner’ roles to align school sport coordinators, NSOs, RSTs, clubs and youth providers. These roles translate policy shifts into practical local action, respond quickly to timetable and qualification changes and build the sustained relationships that make cross-sector partnerships work.

Questions for your organisation

These questions are designed for use in team discussions, planning days and governance conversations. They are not rhetorical and do not have obvious right answers. The value is in the conversation they prompt.

Positioning and strategy

- How far is your organisation prepared to go in reframing sport and physical activity as a core contributor to learning and qualifications, not only to health and community outcomes?
- What is your desired influence on national education policy settings – curriculum, qualifications, AI and edtech, wellbeing – and what alliances would you need to achieve it?
- Should the sector advocate for protected minimum PE timetable allocation in the new curriculum? With what evidence and partnerships?
- How do you balance national consistency with local flexibility as educational delivery becomes more fragmented?

Investment and delivery

- How should investment be rebalanced between traditional interschool sport and more flexible, informal and hybrid activity models that may better suit future timetables?
- What funding and accountability changes are needed to genuinely prioritise equity groups – girls, disabled, Asian rangatahi, high-deprivation communities – where evidence shows persistent participation gaps?
- What proportion of resources should go to non-traditional school settings – home-school networks, cyber schools, alternative education – to ensure equitable access?

Capability and data

- What minimum data on rangatahi physical activity and experience do you require from schools and partners to steer strategy effectively in a more AI and data-driven system?
- What future-focused skills – design thinking, co-production, digital delivery, data use – do school sport leaders, NSOs and RSTs need to thrive in likely 2040 scenarios?
- What ethical frameworks are needed to govern AI use, data collection and technology integration in youth physical activity contexts?

Partnerships and ecosystems

- Which education sector partners are most critical for your strategic influence, and how should those relationships be developed over the next 3 years?
- How can school-club-community hubs be sustainably resourced and governed to maximise local impact while maintaining quality and equity?
- How can Māori-led and Pacific-led sport and recreation initiatives be better supported to address cultural identity and participation gaps?

Where to from here?

Secondary school education in Aotearoa will change significantly between now and 2040. Curriculum reform, digital acceleration, demographic shifts, wellbeing priorities and workforce change will reshape how and where rangatahi learn – and the role of physical activity and sport in that system.

None of the scenarios in this paper should be read as inevitable. They are designed to make you ask: what would this mean for our organisation? What decisions are we making today that we would regret if this scenario came true? What opportunities are we missing?

The clearest finding from looking across all 4 futures is this: the window to reposition physical activity from optional enrichment to essential enabler is open now, but it will not stay open indefinitely. The decisions made in the next 3 to 5 years – about how the sector engages with curriculum reform, how it builds equity-focused partnerships, how it shows up in digital infrastructure and who it chooses to co-design with – will shape whether sport and active recreation sit at the centre or the margins of secondary education in 2040.

A final provocation

Across all 4 futures, rangatahi still need to move, to connect, to feel like they belong and to develop the capabilities that help them thrive. The question is not whether those needs will exist in 2040, it is whether your organisation will be positioned to meet them.





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