Higher Education for Disengagers.

New Zealand’s Tertiary High School

At a Glance

- New Zealand faces the challenge of large numbers of youth who disengage from schooling and do not enter post-secondary education (PSE), training, or employment.

- The national government’s Youth Guarantee strategy is creating opportunities to increase achievement through initiatives such as the Manukau Institute of Technology’s Tertiary High School.

- This integrated secondary-tertiary institution places disengaged secondary students in a PSE environment, where they work toward completing their secondary school credentials along with a technical or vocational credential.
Executive Summary

New Zealand struggles with large numbers of youth who disengage from education during their secondary school years. These include students who drop out of school altogether, or persist through secondary education but fail to connect with the learning and subsequently do not transition to employment or further education. Disengagement from secondary education threatens these youth with the real possibility of future joblessness and poverty. This is particularly true for the island country’s indigenous Maori youth and Pacific Island migrants.

The national government's Youth Guarantee strategy is a response to this problem. It aims to keep more students in school and boost their levels of achievement through initiatives such as the Manukau Institute of Technology's Tertiary High School. This one-of-a-kind institution places disengaged secondary students in a PSE environment where secondary education is fully integrated with career and technical training. Here, students receive individualized attention as they work toward completing their secondary school credentials while at the same earning a post-secondary technical or vocational credential.

Since it opened in 2010, more than 500 students have completed a program of study at the Tertiary High School. Employment prospects for those completing the Tertiary High School program are strong. The program offers a model that can inform Canadian secondary schools, colleges, and institutes interested in reducing the number of secondary education dropouts and increasing PSE participation for students otherwise unlikely to pursue higher education.

This Spotlight Study was prepared with financial support from the The Conference Board of Canada’s Centre for Skills and Post-Secondary Education.
Overview

New Zealand struggles with large numbers of youth who disengage from education during their secondary school years. Although state-provided education is available to all New Zealanders aged 5 to 19, about 10 percent of 15-to-19-year-olds are not in education, employment, or training.¹ Many of these young people are the island country’s native Maori peoples and Pacific Island migrants, whose roots trace to small Pacific island nations, including Samoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands, and Tuvalu.² These youth often come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and lack the social contacts and family resources that contribute to educational attainment and job market success.³ Leaving education early makes them vulnerable to future joblessness and poverty.

The Manukau Institute of Technology’s (MIT) Tertiary High School (THS) is one response to this situation.⁴ (See box “New Zealand’s Youth Guarantee and Trades Academies.”) Launched in February 2010, THS is the only institution in New Zealand that offers a high school education integrated with technical and career training at the PSE level. In a seamless, supportive environment, students enrolled in THS work toward their high school diploma while also working to attain a PSE vocational credential that will prepare them for a career or further education. This spotlight study examines THS in light of the lessons it offers to Canada.

² Ministry of Education, Pasifika in New Zealand.
⁴ Middleton, Background to the Tertiary High School at Manukau Institute of Technology.
New Zealand’s Youth Guarantee and Trades Academies

The Tertiary High School aligns with other New Zealand government initiatives that address disparity in educational achievement and support young people in acquiring the education and qualifications needed for employment. The state’s initiatives under the Youth Guarantee banner have focused on improving access to vocational and technical education and creating “high quality coherent vocational pathways that can be offered by both secondary schools and tertiary organisations.” The key ingredient of the Youth Guarantee’s success is its funded partnerships between secondary and post-secondary education providers. The funded partnerships offer 16-to-18-year-olds access to PSE at no cost to the learner. The Youth Guarantee funds a variety of programs, including “trades academies,” which allow secondary school students to undertake part of their learning at a trades-focused PSE institution while remaining at their secondary school for the major part of the school week.

New Zealand’s Youth Guarantee, Trades Academies, and MIT’s Tertiary High School are New Zealand’s response to youth disengagement, a problem that has been identified elsewhere, including in the United States, Australia, and Canada. Similar initiatives in the United States include Early College High Schools, Career Academies, Talent Development High Schools, Dual Enrolment, and Linked Learning, while Australia offers Senior Colleges, and Vocational Education and Training in Schools. In Canada, initiatives to address this issue are more nascent, but one of them is Ontario’s School Within a College program. The Edge Foundation in the United Kingdom also delivers programming targeted to students who struggle in traditional school settings.

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7 Ibid., 4.
8 Youth Guarantee, *Trades Academies for Educators*.
9 See Young, “New Zealand’s First Tertiary High School” and Centre for Studies in Multiple Pathways, *Transitions from Secondary School into Postsecondary Education and Training* for summaries of these initiatives.
11 See edgefoundation.org.
Objectives

THS aims to improve the educational outcomes of youth who have been identified during their secondary schooling as likely to disengage from secondary education and therefore not reach PSE. THS operates on the premise that traditional pathways to PSE and conventional secondary school environments do not meet the needs of some struggling students. Programs of study, pedagogical methods, and school culture alienate certain sub-groups of students, leaving them disinterested and unsupported.

To overcome these problems, THS’s founders envisioned a fully integrated secondary and post-secondary institution where students would complete both their secondary school qualifications and a diploma-level qualification at the end of four years. THS is distinct from traditional secondary schooling in New Zealand in three major ways:

1. The final years of secondary education are integrated with the first years of post-secondary education and training at no cost to the student, providing a seamless pathway between secondary and PSE. THS combines years 11 to 13 of secondary education with years 1 and 2 of PSE into a four-to-five-year program. (See box “National Certificates of Educational Achievement.”) This integration avoids the formal divide between secondary and PSE, when students traditionally leave one institution to attend another.

2. The programming offers significant one-on-one support that focuses on developing the entire person and allows students to learn at an individual pace.

3. The curriculum integrates academic and vocational learning to reinforce the real-world applicability and career practicality of the subject matter. The curriculum has been described as “challenging, rigorous, and relevant,” aiming to keep students engaged and motivated throughout the entire program.

12 Young, New Zealand’s First Tertiary High School, 263.
13 Middleton, Background to the Tertiary High School, 7–8.
14 Young, “New Zealand’s First Tertiary High School,” 263.
The National Certificates of Educational Achievement

The National Certificates of Educational Achievement (NCEA) is the standard national qualification for secondary school graduates in New Zealand. The standard is recognized by employers and used for admissions to universities and technical or vocational training. Students must earn a certain number of credits at each level in order to pass, completing school-based and national assessments at each level. NCEA Level 2 is a minimum admission requirement for many technical and vocational programs. The system is sophisticated and flexible, catering to "students with a wide range of knowledge, skills, and interests." For example, students who leave school before obtaining their NCEA Level 2 can achieve their Level 2 through a combination of post-secondary study and workplace learning.

Eligibility and Recruitment

Potential candidates for THS are underperformers or those considered likely to fail at their secondary school. They should also be students who are interested in a career path that is based on courses from an institute of technology. The THS program requires students to select from the vocational programs available at MIT, a technical and vocational institute offering a mix of theory and applied learning to over 20,000 students.

Students are recruited to THS primarily through its connections with 25 secondary schools in Manukau, a suburban area with a population of 375,000, south of Auckland, New Zealand’s most populous city. THS works with area secondary schools to identify suitable students in Year 10 or 11 of their secondary program. THS draws chiefly from neighbourhoods and schools with large Maori and Pacific Islander

15  Ibid., 264.
16  New Zealand Qualifications Authority, Awarding of NCEA Level 2 After Leaving School.
17  Middleton, Background to the Tertiary High School, 6.
populations, low-income families, and families with no history of PSE attainment. As the program has gained traction, self-referrals (by students who have learned about the program from family and peers) have risen.

**Programming**

THS students study the same core subjects they would study at a traditional secondary school (e.g., English, math, technology) and gain credits toward their secondary qualifications. The secondary curriculum places an emphasis on essential skills for employment and future study (literacy, numeracy, and digital proficiency). Students complete their secondary school requirements as part of a cohort at THS, all of whom are working toward the same NCEA level, but receive individualized support and attention to address their highest-deficit areas.

At the same time that they study their core courses, students enrol in elective courses offered as part of MIT’s certificate and diploma programs. The secondary program is fully integrated with the student’s chosen post-secondary program by their second year at THS, ensuring continual reinforcement of the practical relationships between the core and technical subjects. THS students can avail themselves of the full range of programs offered at MIT, including business, sports and recreation, pre-nursing, trades, hospitality, visual arts, and early childhood education. For their career and technical education classes, THS students are integrated into existing, regularly scheduled MIT classes.

A major component of the THS program is the personal counselling provided to each student and the development of personalized learning plans. Students receive academic advice, study and learning support, career advice, and general counselling. The personal focus of THS is in line with New Zealand’s national framework to assist youth in transitioning to PSE and careers. The framework stresses the importance of pastoral care, individualized and contextualized learning strategies and pedagogies, and culturally appropriate learning resources, assessments, and mentoring for Pacific Islander and Maori
youth. Each student spends 30 hours per week in general support and coursework. Class sizes are purposely limited—15 to 20 students—to allow more one-on-one time between staff and students. The program can accommodate 80 students in each year, for a total of 320 students across all four years.

**Program Resources**

THS is administered by the School of Secondary–Tertiary Studies within the Faculty of Education and Social Sciences at MIT. THS operates as a program within MIT and has its own facility on MIT’s Otara Campus. This is where students attend their core classes, taught by secondary instructors, and meet with their advisers. THS students can take full advantage of the larger MIT campus for the entire duration of their studies. They travel to various parts of campus to attend their career and technical education courses, which are taught by MIT instructors, and can make use of all MIT services and amenities, such as career services, disability services, and the library. This relationship with the wider MIT campus minimizes duplication of facilities and resources between THS and MIT.

The New Zealand state government provides full funding to THS. Unlike students who follow more traditional pathways to PSE in New Zealand, THS students pay no fees for the post-secondary vocational component of their education while enrolled at THS. In 2010, its first year of operation, THS received state funding of NZ$1 million for initial capital set-up costs and student funding. The government has since contributed funding on a per student basis, around NZ$11,500 per student annually. This level of funding is higher than for students enrolled in traditional secondary schooling because of the post-secondary training

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21 Ministry of Education, *Increasing Education Achievement for Young People*.
22 Minister for Tertiary Education, *Funding Confirmed for Tertiary High School*.
component and the higher level of one-on-one counselling. The THS founders lobbied for full federal funding, arguing that the dual enrolment of students in the secondary and PSE systems, the high needs of these students, and the social and economic value of supporting them, justified state support.

Innovations

Members of MIT’s Faculty of Education designed THS in a conscious effort to develop an innovative model. THS includes the following improvements and adaptations to traditional secondary schooling and post-secondary access in New Zealand:

- **Dual enrolment.** Students are simultaneously secondary and post-secondary students while at THS—a special designation that required a formal amendment to New Zealand’s education legislation. This arrangement entitles THS students full permission to partake in activities and events at their secondary school if they wish, while also having all the privileges of an MIT student. For some students, maintaining this link to their secondary school is important; for others, the break from the secondary school environment where they struggled is equally vital to their success and helps them adapt to the PSE environment.

- **A focus on disengaging students.** Efforts to improve transitions between secondary and PSE often centre on high-achieving students (e.g., international baccalaureate, advanced placement) and career-oriented students (e.g., trades and apprenticeship programs). Turning the spotlight on students under-represented in PSE is a more recent phenomenon. In New Zealand, the focus on students identified by their

23 Representative for the Ministry of Education (NZ), e-mail correspondence with The Conference Board of Canada. The OECD also reports that New Zealand’s per capita spending on education in 2014 was higher than the OECD average. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Education at a Glance 2014: New Zealand.*

24 Middleton, *Background to the Tertiary High School,* 6–7; interview with The Conference Board of Canada.

25 Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.

26 Philpott-Skilton, *High School/College Transitions.*
schools as likely to fail high school and not attend PSE is regarded as an innovative aspect of this program.\(^{27}\) “Having students who are young and who are under some stress being accelerated into education that’s typically been associated with older students—that’s innovative,” says the school’s founder, Dr. Stuart Middleton.\(^{28}\)

- **Curriculum.** Two major distinctions exist between the THS curriculum and that of traditional high schools. First, THS course content is more focused on essential skills for employment, emphasizing literacy, numeracy, and digital proficiency. Second, students are enrolled in post-secondary level courses throughout their program, rather than sequentially after the completion of their high school credentials. This helps to reinforce the applicability of what they learn.\(^{29}\)

- **Personal development and progress monitoring.** Developing the student as a person is as important an outcome of the THS program as is attaining an educational qualification. Each student has a personal learning plan developed for them, emphasizing learning and development needs, which goes beyond subject areas. For example, a personal learning plan could recommend a focus on language development, athletics, or volunteering in the community. These learning plans are detailed, monitored, and revised as needed in cooperation with the student, for whom the plan is a contract.\(^{30}\)

### Challenges, Solutions, and Keys to Success

The main challenges for THS relate to significant obstacles to re-engagement that students face. Its dropout rate of around 15 per cent has been fairly consistent each year.\(^{31}\) THS staff support students

\(^{27}\) Representative for the Ministry of Education (NZ), e-mail correspondence with The Conference Board of Canada.

\(^{28}\) Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.

\(^{29}\) Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.

\(^{30}\) Middleton, *Background to the Tertiary High School*, 8; interview with The Conference Board of Canada.

\(^{31}\) Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.
who drop out or are disengaged with the program by connecting them with outside agencies that offer community-based employment and social assistance.

Keys to mitigating the continued disengagement of students include:

- Offering a more relaxed day-to-day operational environment than is found in many New Zealand schools; for example, THS students are not required to wear school uniforms.
- Placing a high priority on individual autonomy and the student’s personal responsibility for achieving their goals.
- Maintaining a strong sense of community and strong relationships among teachers, students, and families.

Benefits, Outcomes, and Impacts

THS opened in February 2010 with 46 students, all in their eleventh year (the third of five years of secondary school in New Zealand), from 14 secondary schools. Since 2010, more than 500 students have completed the program. Among those who remained enrolled in the program, 100 per cent achieved NCEA Level 1, and 93 per cent achieved NCEA Level 2, the level broadly required for admission to upper-level certificate and diploma programs. Further, 87 per cent went on to achieve NCEA Level 3, the level broadly required for admission.

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32 Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.
33 Minister for Tertiary Education, Funding Confirmed for Tertiary High School.
34 Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.
to degree programs. The majority of those who began a technical program offered at MIT completed their qualification while enrolled at THS.

Qualitative research conducted with THS’s students reveals far-reaching benefits. Students re-engage with education, learn to set meaningful short- and long-term goals, show interest in school, attend regularly and on time, and become better socialized. Interviews with the students indicate that:

• students understand their individual learning plans and how these connect with regular attendance at THS;

• students’ families become more involved in their education in a way that students perceive as positive (i.e., supporting their learning and celebrating accomplishments, rather than rectifying bad behaviour or poor achievement);

• some students find they are better able to cope with life outside of school and are communicating better with their families;

• students consider the course content and course options more interesting and appropriate to them.

Students also see clear advantages to THS over traditional secondary schools:

• ample access to computers;

• smaller class sizes;

New Zealand measures the achievement rates of each level based on the number of students who complete the level in the secondary year to which it is typically associated (e.g., Level 1 = Year 11). This excludes those students who achieve these levels at a faster or slower pace. Because students at THS work on their qualifications at varying paces, these results are difficult to compare to the national figures. See New Zealand Qualifications Authority, Annual Report on NCEA and New Zealand Scholarship Data and Statistics; and New Zealand Qualifications Authority, Managing National Assessment Report 2012: School Secondary–Tertiary Studies.

Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.


Young, “New Zealand’s First Tertiary High School.”

Ibid.
• a wider range of courses offered;
• an open-concept learning environment;
• easy access to guidance counsellors;
• hands-on coursework;
• multiple chances to pass exams;
• easy access to teachers after class for extra help.  

Given the small size of THS in the national scheme of Youth Guarantee initiatives, it is difficult to say that THS has made a large impact on the overall problem of many students who are not in education, employment, or training. However, since 2009 New Zealand has recorded growing rates of students finishing their secondary education with at least NCEA Level 2, suggesting that initiatives such as THS, and others, are contributing to higher educational attainment.  

THS remains a unique model. It has not yet been adopted elsewhere in New Zealand, despite the view of a Ministry of Education representative that the initiative is replicable and makes a positive contribution to the country’s national education goals.  

**Applicability to Canada**

New Zealand’s system of state-funded primary and secondary education, followed by PSE at technical and vocational educational providers, universities, and wānanga, closely resembles the Canadian system. Canada and New Zealand also share similar concerns about the disproportionately low participation in PSE by certain groups, including indigenous peoples. Fewer than half of Canadians identifying as Aboriginal have a post-secondary credential, compared with almost two in three non-Aboriginal Canadians.  

41 Ibid.
43 Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.
44 The wānanga are a system of state-funded, Maori-run institutions of higher learning.
The specific goals and objectives of THS, as well as some of its innovations, keys to success, and responses to challenges, could be applicable at the institutional level in Canada. Working together, secondary and post-secondary partners in Canada could devise dual enrolment strategies that include the THS elements of curriculum integration and immersion of the student into the PSE environment. And partners could provide tailored supports to students who are at risk of not completing high school or transitioning to higher education or employment.46 The THS model suggests that programs that are successful in re-engaging and retaining students:

- are rigorous and challenging in terms of curriculum;
- show sensitivity to the cultural background of students;
- offer significant individual attention to overcome obstacles to engagement and to develop the whole student.

It can be challenging to garner support for strategies targeted to disengaged students. While a strong case can be made for granting public funding to such initiatives, the significant resources required invites opposition. Research indicates that key stakeholders can sometimes be reluctant to invest resources in disengaged students.47 Despite mounting evidence that disengaged students benefit from dual enrolment programs, not every student entering such a program will thrive. THS demonstrates that, with strong connections to support services in the community, such a program can still provide value to students who do not fit in either the traditional secondary school or a tailored transition program.

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46 At least one Canadian jurisdiction, Ontario, undertakes dual enrolment with a focus on disengaging students with its School Within a College program. This is the focus of a forthcoming briefing by The Conference Board of Canada.

47 Watt-Malcolm, “Dual Credit: Creating Career and Work Possibilities for Canadian Youth.”
Conclusion

New Zealand’s Tertiary High School is a nationally funded, locally delivered initiative that is responding to the high proportion of youth who do not transition to post-secondary education, training, or employment. The first and only of its kind in New Zealand, the Tertiary High School allows students who are struggling in the traditional secondary school setting to participate in a special program of studies that provides more applied learning and the integration of secondary school curriculum with post-secondary vocational training.

As at-risk student groups become a more prominent focus of secondary-to-PSE interventions, Canadian institutions may wish to take note of the high success rate of the approach at New Zealand’s Tertiary High School: dual enrolment, a focus on the disengaged, individually tailored curriculum, and personal development and progress monitoring.

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Acknowledgements

This Spotlight Study has been prepared by The Conference Board of Canada, under the direction of Dr. Michael Bloom, Vice-President, Industry and Business Strategy. The study was researched and written by Elizabeth Martin, Research Associate.

The study was reviewed internally by Alison Howard, Associate Director, Professional Development Institute and Special Events, and externally by Bonnie Watt, Associate Professor, University of Alberta; John FitzGibbon, Associate Director, Transfer and Articulation, British Columbia Council on Admissions & Transfer; and John Hoicka, Senior Research and Policy Advisor, Colleges Ontario.

This Spotlight Study was prepared with financial support from the Centre for Skills and Post-Secondary Education at The Conference Board of Canada. Our thanks to the many stakeholders of the Centre's work who read and commented on drafts of this briefing—their helpful insights and feedback greatly contributed to its value.

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APPENDIX A

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Elizabeth Martin


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