



MEDIA RELEASE

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Campaign to support schools a collaboration like no other

Waikato leaders are coming together to build stronger communities around schools to assist with student attendance and pave the way for “smarter futures” in the region.

Lead by Smart Waikato Trust and industry **Smarter Futures Waikato** will see business leaders, philanthropists, government and community leaders working together so all students know about the future of work and pathways to regional growth industries.

Launching in July, Smarter Futures is a large-scale three year initiative where collectively funded facilitators will work with the community to help schools using the region’s impactful Secondary School – Employer Partnerships (SSEP), and other initiatives.

Smarter Futures Leadership Summit at the University of Waikato on July 2nd will see industry sector leads, secondary school Principals and their board chairs gather alongside funders, government leaders, philanthropists and other supporters to launch the initiative.

Smart Waikato is spearheading the effort in response to new Ministry of Education figures showing just 45 percent of the region’s 81,496 students regularly attended school in term three last year.

As well, Waikato’s young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) had increased to 8,800, 14 percent of 15 to 24 year olds, compared to the New Zealand average 12 percent.

Smart Waikato chief executive Mary Jensen is calling on leaders to work together now to prevent “serious risk” to young people and the region’s future prosperity.

“We have increasingly alarming statistics in Waikato but we do have a solution that’s evidenced and ready to go. This is a wrap-around, collaborative and community effort, and something schools are unable to achieve on their own. We need the leaders of our region to step up to ensure no young person misses out on something that’s proven to keep them engaged at school and on a pathway towards meaningful work,” Mary said.

At the heart of the Smarter Futures campaign is the regionally-developed school-employer partnerships, which received an Economic Development New Zealand Award for Best Practice in Collaboration.

Prior to Covid, SSEP positively impacted more than 10,000 young people from 42 Waikato secondary schools, 250 teachers and 250 employers, but wound down due to funding constraints. Upscaling SSEP is a priority in the Waikato Workforce Plan.

Proven to raise student aspirations and lead to jobs, SSEP connects students with industry in Years 9 and 10. Measurement shows participants aim higher, achieve more, stay at school longer, and have better transitions to work and further study. There is an even higher positive impact for Māori students.

“SSEP is a small investment per young person. That’s in part thanks to employers volunteering their time to bring real-world experiences to life. Now we just need funding for regional facilitators who make connections and give support, and we can make a huge difference for schools and our young people.”

“Quality education, skills development and training are the building blocks of a strong regional economy; they ensure our people are well-equipped to meet future job market demands.”

With encouragement from the Ministry of Education, Smarter Futures will focus on employers from Regional Economic Priority Sectors through their active participation in SSEP. It will also include other useful opportunities, organisations and community connections to support schools in engaging and guiding their students.

Waikato’s Economic Priority Sectors are Food and Farming, Advanced Manufacturing, Freight and Logistics, Technology, Energy, and High-Value Tourism, backed by vital industries supporting these sectors – Construction and Infrastructure, Health, Education, Business Services, and the Creative Sector.

“SSEP is shown to have helped answer ‘why do I need to do maths?’, for example, through employers showing them how maths is used in the ‘real’ world. It’s also heartwarming to see a student look around a business and say, ‘I could do this!’ and then go on to start a career there,” Mary said.

“We’ve heard from teachers in both Waikato and Canterbury, where the programme also operates, that students always show up to school on SSEP days because they find them more relevant than an ordinary school day.

“We know scores of young people have gone on to be employed by businesses they visited during SSEP. There are also other regions lining up to launch this Waikato-developed initiative, but we need to make sure we’re working together to look after our own first.”

For more information, or to join the collaboration:

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