

**What Kāhui Ako
taught us:
Evidence to inform
the future**

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**Part one:
Executive
summary and
introduction**

Headline insights

Kāhui Ako (or Communities of Learning) were established in 2014 through the *Investing in Educational Success* initiative to lift student achievement by fostering collaboration across schools and early learning services. Each Kāhui Ako brought together schools and, in some cases, early childhood centres and tertiary providers within a local pathway to pursue shared “achievement challenges” based on their students’ needs. By 2025, 220 Kāhui Ako included 3500 schools or most schools in the country.

The initiative marked a significant policy shift from self-managing schools towards system-wide collaboration. It was foregrounded by Wylie’s (2012) research, which identified a fragmented system and argued for networked responsibility for student success. Kāhui Ako aimed to operationalise that vision by building professional trust, shared leadership, and collective accountability across schools.

No formal evaluation of Kāhui Ako was undertaken before its disestablishment in 2025, following advice from the Education Review Office (ERO). This report does not attempt to fill that evaluation gap. Instead, it draws together evidence from national surveys, research studies, and practitioner accounts to identify what Kāhui Ako achieved, the quality and limits of the evidence, and lessons to inform future collaborative initiatives.

The evidence provides a consistent and well-substantiated picture of what supported effective collaboration and what limited its impact. Collectively these findings produce 15 key lessons for the design and implementation of future collaborative initiatives.

1. When collaboration changes practice, it improves outcomes

Kāhui Ako strengthened collegial culture and reduced teacher isolation, but improvement occurred only when collaboration directly influenced classroom practice. Kāhui Ako that used structured inquiry to address specific learning needs (e.g. shared writing progressions or transitions in mathematics) saw measurable gains in teaching quality and student progress.

2. Local leadership and trust determine effectiveness

Variation across Kāhui Ako was driven by the quality of local leadership. Leaders who fostered open communication and distributed decision-making created conditions for authentic professional inquiry and collective purpose, while procedural or top-down leadership limited engagement.

3. Distributed leadership and system stewardship sustain improvement

Effective Kāhui Ako leaders acted as system stewards rather than individual managers. They co-mentored, co-designed professional learning and aligned shared goals. Distributed leadership built resilience so that collaborative culture endured beyond any one person or role.

4. Leadership roles can offer new career pathways but need support

Across-School and Within-School Leader positions expanded opportunities for teachers to lead learning, model practice, and develop professionally. These roles strengthened capability but required clear expectations, equitable recognition, mentoring, and time release to succeed.

5. Trust and inquiry are inseparable foundations of improvement

Collaboration flourished where teachers trusted each other enough to share data and reflect openly. Joint analysis of student work and structured inquiry cycles deepened professional learning, linking teacher practice directly to student outcomes.

6. Serving learning requires capability in monitoring and data use

Kāhui Ako that used data for shared inquiry strengthened collective decision-making and outcomes. Where data were used for compliance or performance ranking, collaboration weakened; developmental evaluation and agreed indicators were vital.

7. National evaluation must be integral, not an afterthought

The absence of a coherent, national evaluation framework left Kāhui Ako vulnerable to policy change and missed opportunities to grow capability and share what worked. System-level evaluation, embedded from the outset, is critical to guide improvement and sustain progress across communities.

8. Teacher-led inquiry strengthens agency and capability

When teachers led cross-school inquiry clusters, professional confidence and collective efficacy grew. Teacher-led collaboration made improvement authentic and locally owned.

9. Workload, recognition, and clarity shape participation

Collaboration thrived where teachers had time, resources, and fair recognition for their contributions. Inconsistent resourcing and role confusion undermined goodwill and equity between schools.

10. Cultural responsiveness and partnership with mana whenua are foundational

Kāhui Ako that worked with iwi and hapū on co-designed curricula, marae-based learning, or bilingual pathways built deeper engagement and belonging. Genuine partnership strengthened cultural integrity and student wellbeing across communities.

11. Time, flexibility, and trust enable collaboration

Sabbatical reports consistently showed that collaboration required time for reflection and flexibility to adapt to context. When meetings shifted from administrative updates to shared inquiry, momentum increased; rigid structures or compliance demands slowed progress.

12. Collective aspirations can be constrained by school autonomy

Tensions between individual school priorities and Kāhui Ako goals sometimes limited impact. Balancing local autonomy with shared accountability proved vital for sustained improvement.

13. System-level design, support, and continuity determine sustainability

Kāhui Ako succeeded where system design and national support aligned: clear roles, stable funding, and developmental facilitation sustained inquiry cycles even through leadership change. Without this infrastructure, networks fragmented easily when policy or funding shifted.

14. The conditions for collaboration matter as much as collaboration itself

Success depended on distributed leadership, disciplined inquiry, meaningful data use, and authentic cultural partnership. Trust, time, and coherent design were not peripheral supports but the mechanisms that turned collaboration into lasting improvement.

15. System improvement requires system architecture

Kāhui Ako marked a shift from isolated self-management to collective improvement. Its successes and struggles show that enduring progress depends on a coherent, resourced, and politically stable system of support that values collaboration as core educational infrastructure rather than a temporary initiative.

Introduction

Establishment of Kāhui Ako

Kāhui Ako or Communities of Learning (CoL) are groups of schools that use research and school data to collaboratively set and pursue “achievement challenges” (or goals) specific to their students’ needs. Kāhui Ako are generally organised around a geographical area and in terms of student pathways. So any one Kāhui Ako might have one secondary school or wharekura and a number of “feeder” early childhood centres and kohanga reo and primary schools and kura kaupapa Māori. A very small number also include a tertiary education provider.

Kāhui Ako were established through the Investing in Educational Success (IES) fund in early 2014. Funding of \$359 million was allocated over four years to lift student achievement in all schools. Early on, most of this funding went to salaries for leadership roles. In 2017, the Ministry of Education added Expert Partner support and resources to help Kāhui Ako develop mandatory achievement challenges and plans. By 2019, most schools were Kāhui Ako members and early childhood services were now included. As of 2025, there are 220 Kāhui Ako covering around 3500 schools or the majority of schools in the country (Ministry of Education, 2025).

As Wylie (2016) has argued, Kāhui Ako marked a considerable policy shift away from the long-standing focus on school self-management towards a focus on school collaboration. The reference to “communities” in the name was an important signal about taking a system-wide perspective. So too was that most of the available funding was earmarked for new teaching and leadership roles, and that these were included in collective employment agreements.

In earlier research, Wylie (2012) highlighted the way that the policy of self-managing schools fragmented the entire system and undermined improvement in teaching and learning. Her main recommendation – to create non-competitive school networks with *collective* responsibility for improving educational outcomes for *all* students – provided an evidenced rationale and early roadmap for Kāhui Ako.¹

In 2025 Kāhui Ako were disestablished under the Government’s Budget, following advice from the Education Review Office (ERO) to the Ministry of Education.²

Purposes and aim for this report

It is notable that there has never been a formal evaluation of Kāhui Ako. Indeed Wilson (2025) takes on this issue directly in his paper on ERO’s advice for disestablishment to the Ministry of Education. Wilson counters each piece of research cited in ERO’s advice and argues that the

¹ Wylie later became a foundation member of the IES Advisory Group in 2014 and provided guidance on what makes for effective collaboration between schools.

² “Update on Disestablishing Kahui Ako (Budget Sensitive)” was leaked to Radio New Zealand in May 2025.

disestablishment decision is made in the absence of credible or relevant evidence, and particularly so given the lack of a formal evaluation.

This report cannot fill the evaluation gap. What it can do is use the modest amount of existing data and research on Kāhui Ako to identify lessons that might inform future initiatives and advocacy.

In particular, the report will address these questions:

1. What do we know about what Kāhui Ako have achieved?
2. What is the quality of evidence, and what are the limitations?
3. What lessons can be learned from Kāhui Ako that might inform future initiatives?

The analysis in this report is not intended as advocacy, though it may be valuable for this in future. It is solely an analysis of the available evidence.

How to read this report

This first section of the report (Part One) contains an executive summary and an introduction.

Existing published research is discussed in the following section (Part Two). This includes research from the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER); the New Appointments National Panel (NANP); the Post-Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA); the Education Review Office (ERO); Kāhui Ako leaders and research published in peer-reviewed journals – called “academic research” for the purposes of this report.

In Part Three, the report deals with data collected by Kāhuinga Arataki, the national association that supports and represents Kāhui Ako. It will be analysed for what it can contribute to the existing picture we have about Kāhui Ako from other research. This evidence comes directly from Kāhui Ako leaders.

Each segment of evidence discussed in Parts Two and Three has its own concluding section on what can be learned from that subset of the evidence.

Part Four discusses lessons we can take from all of the evidence in this report.

Part two: What we know from existing research

This section summarises what existing research tells us about Kāhui Ako. It draws on academic research published in peer-reviewed journals; research by national research, union and government bodies; and practitioner research reports. This material was produced for different purposes, and it varies in depth and quality. Taken together, however, it provides a strong evidence base on how Kāhui Ako operated, what supported collaboration, and where challenges commonly arose.

NZCER's National Surveys

Since 2003, the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) has conducted a series of *National Surveys of Schools* to track trends in teaching, learning, governance, and educational reform across the country's schooling sectors.

NZCER's National Survey series provides one of the most consistent longitudinal sources for understanding how this policy evolved in practice, capturing stakeholder perspectives across time, sectors, and leadership levels via four NZCER National Survey reports. They are particularly valuable as a national snapshot of principals, teachers and board of trustee perspectives about Kāhui Ako, and chart its trajectory over its first six years.

Early Implementation and Perceptions (2016)

The 2016 NZCER National Survey of Primary and Intermediate Schools began to investigate Kāhui Ako as a policy in practice via a national sample of principals, teachers, and trustees (Wylie, 2016). Conducted approximately two years after the initiative's introduction, the survey reflected the "emergent stage" of Kāhui Ako formation.

Findings indicated widespread early interest among schools in joining Kāhui Ako, driven by perceived opportunities for collaboration and professional support. Approximately two-thirds of primary and intermediate principals reported that their school either belonged to or was considering joining a Kāhui Ako. Participants expressed optimism about the potential for shared practice, collective professional learning, and smoother learner transitions between schooling stages.

However, there were concerns that tempered the initial enthusiasm. Respondents identified uncertainty regarding the purpose and roles of within-school and across-school teacher positions, and many questioned whether the Kāhui Ako model would lead to measurable improvements in classroom practice or student outcomes. Workload implications and the administrative demands of collaboration were also cited as significant challenges. Overall, the 2016 survey portrayed Kāhui Ako as emerging but unproven and lacking some clarity.

Expansion and early outcomes in secondary schools (2019)

By the time of the 2018 NZCER National Survey of Secondary Schools, published in 2019 (Bonne & McDonald, 2019), Kāhui Ako was more well-established. The survey, conducted with secondary principals, teachers, and trustees, explored how collaboration was functioning in secondary school settings. Kāhui Ako participation had markedly increased since 2016, with 82% of secondary schools now in a Kāhui Ako.

The report highlighted several positive outcomes associated with Kāhui Ako membership. Principals valued the increased collegiality and professional support among peers and noted new opportunities for cross-school collaboration, particularly among leaders. However, the survey also revealed that improvements in teaching practice and student learning outcomes were less evident.

Many respondents felt that the initiative had succeeded in building networks and relationships but had yet to translate these connections into deep instructional change. The perceived benefits appeared to vary substantially between Kāhui Ako, depending on leadership quality, internal alignment, and the level of engagement among participating schools. So, while there was more collaboration, evidence of its effectiveness remained limited.

Embedding in the primary sector (2020)

The 2019 NZCER National Survey of English-medium Primary Schools included responses from principals, teachers, and trustees, providing a comprehensive picture of school-level participation (Wylie & McDonald, 2020). By 2019, Kāhui Ako involvement was the norm, with a substantial majority of primary schools either members or in the process of joining a community.

Findings indicated that trustees and school leaders generally viewed Kāhui Ako positively, particularly in relation to enhanced professional learning, collegial relationships, and shared strategies for student wellbeing. Over half of the trustees surveyed agreed that their school was benefiting from its Kāhui Ako participation.

Nonetheless, concerns echoed those found in earlier reports: participants often struggled to identify direct links between Kāhui Ako activity and classroom-level change. Role clarity, time constraints, and sustaining momentum were ongoing challenges. While collaboration was perceived as beneficial, evidence of measurable improvements in teaching quality or learner outcomes remained modest. The 2019 report thus reinforced an earlier observation: Kāhui Ako were valued for their collaborative relationships, but pedagogical impact was uneven or unclear.

Business as usual (2023)

The most recent findings on Kāhui Ako come from the 2022 NZCER National Survey of Secondary Schools, which gathered perspectives from secondary principals (Alansari et al., 2023). It revealed

that Kāhui Ako had become business-as-usual within the schooling sector. A large majority (86%) of secondary principals reported that their school now belonged to a Kāhui Ako.

The report found that Kāhui Ako continued to provide valuable professional and leadership networks. Sixty-eight percent of principals agreed that they received greater collegial support through their Kāhui Ako, nearly half identified shared professional development as a benefit, and around two-fifths reported greater collective responsibility for student learning within their community. However, similar to earlier surveys, respondents indicated that evidence of direct classroom or achievement effects remained limited. Some Kāhui Ako were described as vibrant and collaborative, while others were relatively inactive, highlighting variation in implementation and effectiveness across contexts. The 2022 data suggest that while the structural integration of Kāhui Ako is complete, its pedagogical impact continues to depend heavily on local leadership and sustained commitment among participating schools.

What we can learn from the NZCER surveys

The four NZCER National Surveys present a developmental narrative about Kāhui Ako from early formation to business-as-usual. Participation levels increased steadily across both primary and secondary sectors and participants reported high levels of satisfaction with the collegial aspects of Kāhui Ako membership, especially leadership support, shared professional development, and strengthened inter-school connections.

However the surveys consistently found that the initiative's greatest strength lay in fostering collaboration rather than producing measurable improvements in teaching practice or student outcomes. Each survey identified a persistent implementation gap between system-level collaboration and classroom-level change. Challenges such as workload, unclear role boundaries, and uneven participation remained recurring themes. Moreover, there was variation among Kāhui Ako: while some communities demonstrated strong internal coherence and active engagement, others operated with minimal interaction. These patterns suggest that Kāhui Ako effectiveness is highly contingent upon local leadership capacity, relational trust, and shared vision rather than structural membership alone.

Across seven years of NZCER National Survey evidence, Kāhui Ako have evolved from a promising innovation into a normalized element of New Zealand's educational infrastructure. The surveys collectively show that the initiative has succeeded in creating enduring networks of collaboration and shared leadership across schools. Yet they also reveal that translating these relationships into consistent gains in teaching quality and student learning has remained an unresolved challenge. While the structural presence of Kāhui Ako is now stable and broadly accepted, their educational impact continues to depend on the depth of engagement and coherence within each community. The NZCER evidence base thus portrays Kāhui Ako as a sustained reform that has reshaped the social fabric of schooling but not yet fully realised its pedagogical ambitions.

Peer-reviewed research

academic

This evidence in this section consists of peer-reviewed papers published in academic journals. Nearly all of these papers are directly about Kāhui Ako. However the last three papers about effective school leadership (Wylie, 2022; and Robinson and Gray, 2019) and collaboration to impact student learning (Hattie, 2015) are also included. Their papers speak directly to concepts at the heart of the Kāhui Ako model, and the authors are acknowledged experts.

Across-school collaboration policy in practice

This study examines how one Kāhui Ako functioned in practice, analysing why collaboration across schools often fell short of policy expectations (Sinnema et al., 2022). The researchers used social network analysis and a *theory of action* framework to map how teachers actually interacted compared to how the initiative was designed to work. Although the policy aimed to foster inquiry and learning across school boundaries, the study found that most teachers continued to collaborate primarily within their own schools. Cross-school relationships were weaker, and collaboration tended to remain superficial—more about coordination and compliance than shared professional learning. The policy’s vision for system-wide improvement was therefore undermined by entrenched patterns of insularity and competition.

The authors interpret these findings through the lens of Argyris and Schön’s models of organisational learning. They observed that most interactions reflected *Model I* behaviour: focused on maintaining harmony rather than engaging in open, critical inquiry. So teachers avoided difficult conversations about practice or performance, even when it could inform improvement. This contrasted with the *Model II* behaviours needed for genuine collaborative learning: mutual respect, openness to feedback, and collective problem-solving. In essence, while the Kāhui Ako model established *structures* for collaboration, the cultural and interpersonal dynamics required to make them work was not addressed.

Collaborative conditions for teacher professional growth

This study investigates what organisational and personal factors enable teachers in Kāhui Ako to experience meaningful professional growth (Liou et al., 2024). Drawing on survey data from 12 schools across two Kāhui Ako, the authors used modelling to explore how collaborative conditions, such as shared goals, supportive leadership, and time for joint inquiry, interacted with teachers’ own dispositions. They found that while supportive conditions were important, they were not

enough on their own. Teachers' deliberate efforts to form and sustain professional relationships and their confidence in influencing peers and curriculum learning were critical mediating factors. In other words, collaboration became powerful only when teachers *actively* sought connection and *believed* they could make a difference.

The study highlights the reciprocal relationship between structure and agency in collaborative settings. Schools that intentionally cultivated a culture of learning, provided structured time for inquiry, and modelled distributed leadership saw greater teacher engagement and innovation. Conversely, in Kāhui Ako where collaboration was treated as a requirement rather than a professional opportunity, teachers were less likely to experience growth. The research also points to the importance of aligning collaboration with clear curriculum goals, so that professional learning is purposeful rather than generic. The combination of trust, clarity, and confidence emerged as a strong predictor of both teacher satisfaction and pedagogical improvement.

The role of leadership in Kāhui Ako

This literature review synthesises existing research on leadership across Kāhui Ako and related collaborative education networks (Constantinides & Eleftheriadou, 2023). It examines how leadership practices, organisational processes, and relational dynamics influence the effectiveness of cross-school collaboration. The review identifies leadership as a system-wide function rather than a single-person role, arguing that Kāhui Ako success depends on distributed leadership that connects people, builds shared understanding, and sustains coherent improvement across diverse schools and early learning centres.

The review highlights several key leadership processes: fostering relational trust, enabling joint inquiry, facilitating communication across hierarchical and institutional boundaries, and balancing accountability with autonomy. It notes that effective leaders in Kāhui Ako act as “connectors” and “sense-makers,” creating alignment between local school priorities and shared achievement challenges. Leadership is portrayed as a social and cultural practice embedded in relationships, not simply a positional or administrative function. The review also emphasises the importance of formal structures (e.g. ASL and WSL roles) but cautions that these must be underpinned by shared purpose and ongoing professional learning to have lasting impact. They conclude that while Kāhui Ako offered potential to model such leadership, the system often failed to provide sufficient time, clarity, or developmental support for leaders to enact it.

Teacher coaching

This multiple case study explores how a Kāhui Ako of eight schools implemented teacher coaching as a professional learning approach (Bennett, 2022). Using interviews, surveys, rubrics, and reflective tracking documents, the research analyses the “how” and “why” of coaching, the perceived outcomes for teachers and students, and the challenges of implementation. Schools adopted coaching as a strategy to deepen professional inquiry and support classroom practice. In several schools, regular one-to-one coaching led to improved teacher confidence, stronger

pedagogy, and observable gains in student engagement and achievement. Teachers valued the sustained, individualised learning and opportunities for reflection. Coaches reported increased professional competence and trust-based relationships that strengthened staff culture.

Yet the outcomes varied widely. While some schools embedded coaching as a structured, school-wide improvement process, others treated it as an optional or peripheral activity. Time constraints, staffing instability, and inconsistent training limited the effectiveness of the model. Teachers often noted disparities in the quality of coaching they received and questioned whether all coaches were adequately skilled. Only around half of the participants perceived clear improvements in student outcomes. The study concludes that coaching's success depended less on the model itself than on each school's leadership commitment, evaluative follow-up, and relational culture.

Māori student connection, belonging and engagement

This mixed-methods study, funded through the TLRI, examines how one Kāhui Ako of 12 schools enhanced Māori student engagement through culturally responsive practices (Highfield & Webber, 2021). Grounded in Kaupapa Māori and conducted in partnership with iwi, the research collected surveys and interviews from over 2,000 Māori students, 700 whānau, and more than 200 teachers. It found that interventions rooted in cultural identity (e.g. localised curricula, strong use of te reo Māori, and active partnerships with mana whenua) had the most positive impact on engagement and belonging. Across-School and Within-School Leaders, particularly Māori educators connected to local iwi, played a key role in driving culturally sustaining practices and bridging homeschool relationships. These leaders facilitated collaboration focused on wellbeing, whanaungatanga, and student voice, reinforcing that engagement stems from relational and cultural inclusion as much as from pedagogy.

Despite these successes, the study identified ongoing barriers to full collaboration. Competition between schools for enrolments and inconsistencies in leadership commitment limited collective progress. While some schools embraced localised, iwi-informed practice, others remained tentative or tokenistic. Principals recognised that cultural responsiveness required not just goodwill but sustained system alignment and resource investment. The findings reaffirm that Māori student success relies on both high expectations and the embedding of Māori values across all levels of schooling.

Distributed leadership

This study examines how school leaders in Kāhui Ako enact distributed leadership through what the authors call “mosaics of leading” (Charteris et al., 2024). Based on interviews with five principals and two teachers, the research explores how leadership practices are shared, aligned, or fragmented across schools. The authors identify patterns of “planful alignment,” where collaboration is purposeful and guided by trust; “spontaneous alignment,” where shared goals arise organically; and “misalignment,” where lack of clarity or communication disrupts collective

progress. These patterns reveal that leadership distribution is not uniform or automatic. Rather, it requires active cultivation through dialogue, trust, and shared decision-making.

The findings show that in well-functioning Kāhui Ako, leaders engage in relational work that links people, ideas, and practices across schools. Collective achievement follows when these connections are intentionally maintained and supported. However, the study also reveals how uneven participation, unclear expectations, and competing school priorities limit the depth of collaboration. Teachers often felt peripheral to cross-school initiatives, suggesting that the rhetoric of distributed leadership sometimes outpaced the reality of practice.

Supporting factors for collaboration across sectors

This case study investigates what enables effective cross-sector collaboration within one Kāhui Ako, drawing on social learning theory and the concept of Communities of Practice (Williams, 2024). Nine teachers from early childhood, primary, and secondary schools participated through in-depth interviews. The study identifies Kāhui Ako as a community of practice in which members worked to bridge metaphorical “borders” between education sectors with differences in curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional culture. Participants demonstrated that collaboration thrives when teachers recognise each other’s expertise and work across boundaries with a shared purpose.

Williams identifies five “supporting factors” that strengthen collaboration: a clearly communicated shared purpose; a culture of relational trust; recognition of diverse expertise; facilitative positional leadership; and leaders who model learning-focused mindsets. Together, these factors describe the conditions that turn structural collaboration into genuine professional learning. They argue that “systems conveners” are crucial. These are leaders who bring people together across boundaries to address complex challenges and value the different forms of expertise that people bring. This kind of leadership is particularly important for overcoming any marginalised early childhood educators in the Kāhui Ako.

Robust data analysis

This report presents a practitioner-developed framework for improving the robustness of data analysis within a Kāhui Ako (Fawcett, 2019). As Head of Science and Across-School Teacher in a Gisborne Kāhui Ako, Fawcett sought to help teachers find out whether their interventions genuinely improved student learning. He introduced statistical techniques to help them construct “data stories” that accurately describe learning progress and effect size. This approach aimed to bring research-level rigour to everyday school inquiry.

Fawcett observed that when teachers learned to interpret p-values and effect sizes, their professional conversations became more analytical and focused on student outcomes rather than assumptions or anecdotes. The process deepened teachers’ confidence in using data to inform pedagogy and fostered collaboration across departments and schools.

Understanding leadership by roles

This article explores the leadership complexities that arise when principals and teachers operate simultaneously in different leadership contexts, both within and across schools (Ramsey & Poskitt, 2019). Drawing on Barry Oshry's systems theory, the authors conceptualise principals as holding dual roles: as "tops" within their individual schools and "middles" within Kāhui Ako networks. This dual positioning produces unique tensions concerning authority, decision-making, and collaboration.

The article argues that successful Kāhui Ako leadership demands systems thinking, in which leaders move beyond hierarchical control and engage collaboratively across school boundaries. Effective leaders are those who consciously balance their commitment to their own school community with their responsibility to the wider Kāhui Ako network. Relational trust needs to be built among leaders. Small, cohesive collaborative groups should be formed deliberately. Meaningful shared goals that align with local community priorities (not funding priorities) should be established. And there should be recognition of the leader's responsibility to educate upward, helping government-level "tops" understand local realities.

Ultimately, the article promotes a *system* leadership, defined as leadership across organisational boundaries, where collaboration, influence, and shared accountability replace authority and control. Principals who can fluidly move between their "top" and "middle" roles are most effective in sustaining the health of both their school and the Kāhui Ako system as a whole.

Promises and challenges for effective school and system leadership

This article critically analyses how New Zealand's self-managing school system continues to constrain leadership effectiveness (Wylie, 2022). It argues that while the system aspires to collaborative, equity-focused leadership, persistent fragmentation, high workload, and weak central coordination have limited progress. Leadership development remains patchy and overly reliant on goodwill rather than sustained investment.

It notes that frameworks such as Te Whakangungo Ngaio (the Leadership Strategy for the Teaching Profession) and the Educational Leadership Capability Framework show conceptual promise, yet lack coherent implementation and adequate resourcing. Wylie highlights the mismatch between rhetoric and reality: principals remain isolated, succession planning is underdeveloped, and system-level learning is ad hoc.

Wylie concludes that any future collaborative reform, such as Kāhui Ako or its successors, must treat leadership as a shared, system responsibility. Building leadership capability requires stable national infrastructure, ongoing mentoring, and clarity of purpose. Without such system

alignment, even well-intentioned collaboration risks reproducing the fragmentation of the Tomorrow's Schools era.

What difference does school leadership make to student outcomes?

This article re-examines the evidence base linking school leadership to student outcomes, challenging simplistic causal claims and highlighting the complexity of the leadership–learning relationship (Robinson & Gray, 2019). They argue that while leadership clearly matters, the mechanisms through which it influences student outcomes are indirect, contingent, and deeply contextual. Drawing on both meta-analytic and qualitative evidence, they distinguish between leadership that improves conditions for teaching and learning and leadership that focuses narrowly on administrative or policy compliance. The authors stress that improving outcomes depends not on generic leadership behaviours but on contextually appropriate problem-solving that addresses specific learning needs.

The article advances a nuanced conceptual model of leadership influence. Robinson and Gray identify three interrelated mechanisms: building trust and relational agency among teachers; creating organisational conditions for professional learning; and engaging with evidence to evaluate the impact of change. They emphasise the moral and epistemic dimensions of leadership—moral, in that it requires a commitment to equity and student wellbeing; epistemic, in that it depends on leaders' ability to make reasoned judgments amid uncertainty. The paper critiques policy approaches that reduce leadership to measurable competencies, arguing instead for a view of leadership as inquiry in action.

The study reinforces that leadership's impact on student outcomes cannot be separated from context, relationships, and professional learning. Future collaborative initiatives—like any successor to Kāhui Ako—should treat leadership not as a role to be filled but as a *collective capability* built through evidence-informed dialogue and shared problem-solving. Robinson and Gray's findings highlight that systems must enable leaders to exercise judgment, learn from evidence, and adapt collaboratively rather than conforming to top-down expectations. The key takeaway: leadership matters most when it is both relationally grounded and intellectually disciplined.

Kāhui Ako and the collaborative turn in education

This article examines Kāhui Ako within the global shift toward “collaborative governance,” where governments promote partnership models to address complex, cross-sector challenges such as educational inequity (Kamp, 2019). She argues that while collaboration is now a policy orthodoxy, it remains deeply paradoxical: it promises shared responsibility and innovation but is often constrained by the very systems that mandate it. In New Zealand, Kāhui Ako were designed to

break down school isolation and build collective capability, yet they operate in a competitive, neoliberal policy environment that still rewards individual school performance.

Kamp highlights leadership as the pivotal factor in turning policy into authentic collaboration. Effective Kāhui Ako leaders build trust, negotiate ambiguity, and foster “learning at the boundaries” consisting of informal exchanges between schools where new ideas take shape. Drawing on social capital and Actor-Network theory, she argues that successful collaboration depends on the relationships, norms, and reciprocal trust that leaders and teachers cultivate over time. Real progress, she notes, emerges from relationships, not rules.

Kamp concludes that Kāhui Ako’s value lies less in structure and more in process — in the everyday relational work that sustains trust and shared purpose. Collaboration cannot be imposed through compliance; it must be nurtured through openness, dialogue, and tolerance of uncertainty. For future system reforms, the key lesson is to design policies that enable professional agency and social capital, rather than constraining collaboration within bureaucratic or competitive frameworks.

The politics of collaborative expertise

This widely cited report argues that the key to improving education systems is building collaborative expertise: a culture in which teachers and leaders work together to evaluate the impact of their teaching on student learning (Hattie, 2015). It critiques the persistent focus on structural reforms, testing regimes, and accountability mechanisms, contending that such efforts rarely raise achievement because they overlook what matters most: the quality of professional practice within classrooms. Hattie calls for systems to shift from talking about what teachers do to examining what learners learn, using evidence to judge teaching impact collectively and continuously.

Hattie outlines several components of collaborative expertise. Schools should develop a shared language of learning, use data to inform practice rather than compliance, and engage in ongoing, transparent discussions about effectiveness. Leaders must create conditions for “evaluative thinking” across the system—supporting teachers to interpret evidence, question assumptions, and adapt practice accordingly. Collaboration, in this model, is not collegial comfort but rigorous joint inquiry into what works best for learners. Hattie contrasts this with what he terms the “politics of distraction,” where reforms focus on structure and accountability instead of building capability and trust.

Though not specifically about Kāhui Ako, the central message aligns closely with the intent of it: meaningful improvement occurs when educators work as a collective to understand and increase their impact. The lesson for future collaborative initiatives is that collaboration must be disciplined, evidence-informed, and relentlessly learner-focused. Systems should prioritise trust, evaluative expertise, and professional dialogue over compliance and competition. As Hattie concludes, “the greatest influence on student learning is the collective efficacy of teachers”—a

principle that continues to frame contemporary thinking about educational collaboration and system improvement.

What we can learn from the academic research

The academic research paints a coherent and complex picture of Kāhui Ako as both a promising and precarious model of system-wide collaboration. Together, the studies show that collaboration can enrich teacher learning, strengthen leadership capability, and enhance student belonging when it is built on trust, shared purpose, and disciplined inquiry. Yet they also make clear that structure alone cannot deliver improvement. Kāhui Ako flourishes where relationships, professional learning, and evaluative capability align, but struggles where compliance, competition, unclear strategic priorities or policy ambiguity undermine those conditions.

Leadership remains the pivotal factor. Constantinides and Eleftheriadou (2023) describe leadership as an organisational process and network of relationships and meaning-making, rather than a single role. Robinson and Gray (2019) similarly emphasise that leadership affects outcomes indirectly, through the conditions it creates for professional learning, moral purpose, and collective judgment. Ramsey and Poskitt (2019) extend this insight, showing that Kāhui Ako leaders operate in dual roles, as both “tops” in their own schools and “middles” in the wider system. Leaders must balance loyalty to the local with commitment to the collective.

Studies such as Sinnema et al. (2022) and Charteris et al. (2023) show how leadership shapes the micro-conditions of collaboration. Bennett’s (2022) article on coaching, Williams’ (2024) article on border-crossing across sectors, and Liou et al.’s (2025) article on network intentionality all reinforce that leadership influence is most powerful when distributed through well-supported roles and shared inquiry rather than simply vested in individuals. Together, these studies reveal that the essence of Kāhui Ako leadership lies in weaving connections, not directing from the top.

Kamp (2019) situates this challenge within a broader international context, warning that collaboration risks becoming performative when constrained by competitive or bureaucratic systems. Wylie (2022) similarly argues that without coherent system support and investment in leadership capability, collaboration will continue to depend on individual goodwill rather than systemic design. Together, these studies reposition Kāhui Ako leadership as a form of system stewardship. It is a stewardship that is distributed, relational, and reliant on trust, capability, and sustained infrastructure.

Across these accounts, trust and inquiry emerge as the twin engine of effective collaboration. Research by Fawcett (2019) and Sinnema et al. (2022) demonstrates that when data are used for learning rather than accountability, they deepen collective understanding and sharpen professional practice. Hattie (2015) calls this “collaborative expertise”: disciplined joint inquiry into teaching impact, supported by evaluative thinking and professional dialogue. Highfield and Webber (2021) illustrate how culturally grounded relationships that affirm Māori students’ belonging and identity can be a vehicle for engagement and for equity. These studies confirm that meaningful collaboration depends on the quality of relationships, the authenticity of inquiry, and the system’s willingness to learn from evidence.

So the first lesson is that collaborative leadership must be relational, distributed, and system-aware. And it must be cultivated, not assumed. Leadership for system-wide improvement requires

distributed authority, role clarity, and developmental support, rather than reliance on “heroic” individuals. It also requires more than formal roles. As Robinson and Gray (2019), Ramsey and Poskitt (2019), and Wylie (2022) all show, it depends on judgment, trust, and an ability to work across boundaries.

Secondly, trust and inquiry are inseparable. Without relational trust, inquiry lacks openness. Without inquiry, trust lacks focus. Trust creates the openness for collective problem-solving, while disciplined inquiry gives trust focus and direction (Fawcett, Sinnema et al., Hattie).

Thirdly, data and evaluation must serve learning, not compliance. Collaborative expertise grows when data use builds shared understanding, not performance management. Robust analysis, as demonstrated in Fawcett’s work, strengthens professional judgment and collective problem-solving. Context and culture matter, too. As Highfield and Webber (2021) and Williams (2024) remind us, collaboration must reflect local histories, relationships, and identities.

Finally, it is system design that determines sustainability. Wylie (2022) and Kamp (2019) both highlight that collaboration thrives only when policy and infrastructure provide coherence, time, and developmental support rather than competition and short-term compliance.

Kāhui Ako stands as both valuable prototype and cautionary tale. Its promise lay in showing that collaboration can be a driver of professional growth and student success. Its shortfall may be in underestimating the depth of leadership, trust, and systemic alignment required to make that collaboration endure. The challenge for future initiatives would not simply be to replicate the structure of Kāhui Ako. It would also be to build the conditions of trust, capability, evaluative expertise, and time that enable collaboration to make a lasting difference for learners.

ERO reports 2016-2017

The following sections summarise the key findings and lessons from four reports that describe the very early development of Kāhui Ako and a related approach to cross-school collaboration. Two Education Review Office (ERO) reports and one Ministry of Education (MOE) report together form what can be seen as a formative evaluation of early implementation, even though none are described as being evaluations. They draw on evidence to show how schools engaged with the new structures, what forms of collaboration emerged, and what challenges limited progress. Collectively, they reveal the enthusiasm that drove collaboration and the uneven capability that constrained it.

A fourth report by ERO examines a locally led network of Christchurch schools that, although not a Kāhui Ako, shared many of its principles of inquiry, shared leadership, and collective responsibility for learners.

Collaboration to improve learner outcomes (2016)

This report sets out a framework for collaboration that is not an end in itself but a means to raise teaching quality and learner achievement, particularly for underserved learners (Education Review Office, 2016a). It is important to note that this is neither research nor evaluative; it is designed as a tool for Kāhui Ako to use for its own evaluation processes.

The report specifies that Kāhui Ako need a clear and shared purpose grounded in robust data analysis, leadership oriented toward equity and excellence, and relationships built on trust and effective communication. ERO emphasised that genuine improvement would depend on educators engaging in disciplined inquiry focused on changing practice, supported by strong evaluation capability and adequate time and resources. The report also cautioned that these demanding conditions would not emerge automatically.

Kāhui Ako to improve learner outcomes (2016)

Later that year, ERO examined how newly formed Kāhui Ako were beginning to put vision into practice (Education Review Office, 2016b). Like the 2016 NZCER National Survey, it found that most Kāhui Ako were still establishing their structures, appointing leaders, and building relationships. Leaders showed strong commitment to the policy's intent and a willingness to engage in new kinds of professional dialogue across schools. Early signs of promise included the sharing of data and the first examples of joint professional learning. Yet many Kāhui Ako were still moving from getting an achievement challenge approved to a deeper understanding of their learners' needs. The report highlighted that evaluation capability remained limited, and some communities struggled to use data rigorously or to align actions with clear evidence of need.

ERO also observed uncertainty about how new leadership roles should influence classroom practice. The emerging picture is uneven but with genuine progress, too: Kāhui Ako were beginning to build the collaborative and evaluative habits that could lead to improvement, so long as they received sustained support and developed stronger instructional leadership.

Kāhui Ako: In action so far (ERO, 2017)

By 2017, ERO reported that some Kāhui Ako had gained greater clarity about their shared goals and were using the Across-School and Within-School roles more deliberately to support professional learning (Education Review Office, 2017). In several communities, leaders had invested time in building trust, which was beginning to translate into more coherent collaboration. However, many Kāhui Ako were still focused on activity rather than impact. Much of their work centred on sharing ideas rather than conducting disciplined inquiry into what worked for which learners. ERO continued to see wide variation in the quality of evidence use, leadership strength, and engagement with whānau and communities. It concluded that collaboration alone would not raise achievement; only when Kāhui Ako developed the evaluative capability and leadership necessary to challenge and improve teaching practice would they fulfil their promise.

Uptake and early implementation of communities of learning (Ministry of Education, 2017)

In addition to ERO's reports, the Ministry of Education produced a report to provide an early system-level account of how the Kāhui Ako initiative was adopted and implemented across New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2017). Drawing on data from applications, school profiles, and interviews with key stakeholders, it examines patterns of participation and the emerging dynamics of collaboration. The report finds that uptake was widespread but uneven: while many schools joined Kāhui Ako with enthusiasm, levels of readiness and shared understanding varied significantly. Motivations for joining included the opportunity to access additional resources, build professional networks, and address persistent achievement challenges.

The analysis highlights that early implementation was dominated by structural and procedural work—establishing governance arrangements, appointing leaders, and developing achievement challenges—rather than deep pedagogical collaboration. Schools often struggled to balance autonomy with collective purpose, and many found it difficult to translate the policy vision of collaborative inquiry into practical routines. Nevertheless, early adopters reported increased trust between schools, stronger cross-sector connections, and early signs of shared professional learning.

The report concludes that successful implementation depended less on formal structures than on relational trust, leadership capability, and clarity of shared purpose. It cautions that building genuine collaborative culture takes sustained time, support, and evaluative capability. Early

evidence suggested that where leaders invested in these conditions, Kāhui Ako began to function as platforms for professional growth rather than administrative compliance.

Exploring collaboration in action: The Kahukura community of practice (ERO, 2021)

This ERO evaluation investigates the Kahukura Community of Practice—a network of seven Christchurch primary and intermediate schools that chose to collaborate *outside* of the official Kāhui Ako framework (Education Review Office, 2021). Findings from interviews, surveys, and social network analysis show how this network operated through shared, distributed leadership and strong relational trust among principals. The network prioritised teacher learning, student wellbeing, and cultural responsiveness rather than externally imposed achievement targets. Lead teachers drove collaborative inquiry in five focus areas—deep learning, cultural responsiveness, creativity, leadership, and inclusiveness—while boards contributed funding and strategic support. Over time, the network built coherent professional learning structures, shared resources, and created visible improvements in teacher confidence and collegiality.

While the report notes limited formal evaluation of student outcomes, it concludes that the Kahukura model demonstrates how locally driven collaboration can sustain innovation and professional growth. Its success stemmed from relational trust, consistent leadership, and deliberate investment in teacher capability.

What we can learn from the ERO and MOE reports

Taken together, the ERO and MOE studies provide a picture of Kāhui Ako in their formative phase—a national reform built on strong collaborative vision but still translating that vision into practice. Schools are eager to engage, leaders are experimenting with new structures, and educators are beginning to explore collective responsibility for learner outcomes. There was enthusiasm and early relationship-building but also uneven capability, limited evaluative skill, and uncertainty about how collaboration would lead to measurable improvement.

Several consistent lessons emerge. Collaboration is necessary but not sufficient. All three reports stress that networks of schools improve outcomes only when collaboration changes teaching practice and is anchored in clear evidence about learners' needs. Leadership quality determines progress. Where leaders built trust, modelled inquiry, and aligned purpose across schools, Kāhui Ako began to grow professional coherence; where leadership was procedural or fragmented, collaboration remained superficial. Evaluative capability is the system's weakest link. Both ERO and the Ministry found that many Kāhui Ako lacked the capacity to analyse data deeply, test impact, or adapt strategy—limiting their ability to learn from experience. Trust and time are essential conditions. Early progress depended on leaders investing time in relationships that could sustain openness, risk-taking, and shared responsibility.

Although ERO's evaluation of Kahukura is not about a Kāhui Ako, it enriches the broader picture by showing what locally driven collaboration can achieve outside the formal framework. The Kahukura experience demonstrates that when schools voluntarily build trust, share leadership, and focus inquiry on culturally responsive teaching and learner wellbeing, they can achieve many of the same benefits envisioned for Kāhui Ako. This suggests that the principles of collaborative professionalism—trust, inquiry, and shared moral purpose—can thrive through a grassroots initiative as effectively as through centrally designed structures.

Overall, these early studies portray Kāhui Ako as promising but fragile, and only likely to be successful when trust, instructional leadership, and evaluative inquiry work in concert. They underline that system change is not achieved through structure alone: authentic collaboration takes time, deliberate leadership, and capability to use evidence for collective learning.

Practice insights from the New Appointments National Panel

The New Appointments National Panel (NANP) was established under the 2015 Accord between the Ministry of Education, NZEI Te Riu Roa, and PPTA Te Wehengarua to support and assess appointments to Kāhui Ako leadership and teaching roles. In the absence of any large scale, formal evaluation of Kāhui Ako, the NANP produced three reports designed to capture and potentially leverage any system learning and improvement taking place.

The early research by ERO and the Ministry of Education depicted Kāhui Ako as a reform still taking shape—driven by goodwill and promise but constrained by uneven capability and limited evaluative depth. Over the following years, many of the conditions those studies identified as critical—trust, instructional leadership, and disciplined inquiry—were gradually strengthened across the system. By the time of the NANP reports, the focus had shifted from establishing structures to refining professional practice and documenting impact. The later evidence reveals how Kāhui Ako matured from emerging collaborative networks into sustained communities of professional learning that increasingly used inquiry, cultural partnerships, and evidence to drive improvement.

Collaborative practice emerging: Ten trends (2021)

This 2021 report synthesises insights from over 3,000 interviews with Kāhui Ako Leaders and Across School Teachers (ASTs) since 2015 (New Appointments National Panel, 2021). It identifies key trends shaping collaborative educational practice across Kāhui Ako as a maturing system for professional growth and educational improvement based on trust, inquiry and shared purpose. It also cites three themes underpinning the trends: trust with shared moral purpose for deep collaboration; teacher agency and professional inquiry to drive improvement; and system structures with Ministry of Education support that enables rather than constrains the work.

Importantly the report distinguishes collaboration (shared purpose and mutual transformation) from cooperation (coordinated but independent effort), pointing out that successful Kāhui Ako take collective responsibility for outcomes. It concludes that Kāhui Ako have seeded a cultural shift toward a self-improving education system. It recommends continued Ministry commitment, systematic sharing of resources, and sustained investment in collaborative leadership to deepen progress.

Accomplishment, challenges and reflections (2022)

This 2022 report draws on open-ended survey responses (early 2021) to understand what experienced practitioners see as the strengths, shifts, and barriers in Kāhui Ako practice (New Appointments National Panel, 2022).

It found that Kāhui Ako are valued as powerful enablers of collaboration and coherence. Most leaders and ASTs said that Kāhui Ako add significant value by breaking down school isolation, encouraging trust-based professional relationships, and building a shared vision for learner success. Many noted that competition between schools had been replaced by cooperation, and that collaboration is now “deeper, deliberate, and purposeful.” Respondents highlighted how structures such as cross-sector networks and shared PLD create coherence in teaching practice and learning pathways from early childhood to secondary school.

The report also found that teachers engaged in cycles of inquiry, using classroom and school-level data to guide and monitor change. ASTs reported that inquiry, once viewed sceptically, is now seen as valuable and embedded in practice. Respondents described this as “mana-enhancing” data use. Learning for those in Kāhui Ako roles (Leaders, ASTs, and WSTs) has been sustained through structured time. In turn, teacher openness and professionalism has been built as they became more willing to share practice, engage in feedback, and “deprivatise” what they do.

Many Kāhui Ako were developing authentic partnerships with mana whenua and incorporating te reo Māori, tikanga, and local histories into their curriculum design. About one in six reported formal agreements (MOUs) or co-designed projects with iwi, signalling progress toward culturally responsive, locally grounded education.

Several systemic and cultural challenges persisted. Some staff saw Kāhui Ako work as “extra” rather than integral to their core teaching, requiring ongoing effort to sustain engagement. Roles (particularly for WSTs) and consistent expectations across schools were not always clear. Buy-in from school leaders was uneven and this limited progress (typically this was when a secondary school disengaged). And time pressures and other initiatives competed with Kāhui Ako priorities.

Overall the report provides practitioner evidence that professionalism, anchored in inquiry and local partnership, can produce meaningful shifts in teaching and learning.

Transforming education: The impact of 110 Kāhui Ako (2025)

This 2025 report documents the impact of Kāhui Ako, drawing on evidence from 110 Kāhui Ako involving 1,024 schools and ECE services and over 374,000 students (New Appointments National Panel, 2024). It was produced in the wake of the disestablishment announcement.

Based on their knowledge from advisory and appointments work with Kāhui Ako since its inception, NANP members identified a range of themes they considered most important to Kāhui Ako impact or success. They invited contributions from Kāhui Ako targeted for their ability to

illuminate what Kāhui Ako are actually doing, identify areas of impact, and offer recommendations that might strengthen the model.

The strength of this report lies in its descriptions of what positive impacts look like in practice. It showcases contains a wealth of good practice measures and inventive programmes set up by different Kāhui Ako. These have improved student learning, attendance, transition experiences and wellbeing, as well as created the conditions for sustainable collaboration.

The report cannot tell us about challenges or unsuccessful Kāhui Ako because the Kāhui Ako sample was explicitly selected to showcase success. This is a deliberate and valid choice, however. While the descriptions are fairly brief rather than rich or deep but they not shallow and they cover a wide range of areas. The entire report provides credible evidence that Kāhui Ako are delivering meaningful benefits to their communities.

The patterns of positive impact described were:

1. Improved attendance through shared data, targeted interventions, and coordinated work with whānau.
2. Stronger transitions and pathways from ECE through to secondary and beyond, including shared curriculum approaches and graduate profiles.
3. More effective use of data to track progress, moderate achievement, identify target learners, and inform collective action.
4. Stronger community and iwi partnerships, enabling locally grounded curriculum, wrap-around support, and shared responsibility for learners.
5. High-quality professional learning and leadership development, particularly for teacher leaders, first-time principals, and rural schools.
6. Culturally sustaining practices, including authentic partnerships with mana whenua, iwi-led PLD, local curriculum development, and co-governance models.
7. Improved wellbeing supports for students and staff, especially in response to post-Covid mental health and learning needs.
8. Shared resources and efficiencies, allowing schools to access expertise, digital platforms, and specialist support they could not provide alone.

Overall the report shows Kāhui Ako reducing isolation between teachers and between schools, building leadership capacity, and enabling coordinated responses to cross-school challenges. Their recommendations include committing to Kāhui Ako long term; establishing robust evaluation and feedback loops; having stronger national and regional support; supporting iwi partnerships; and systematically sharing of effective practice and data use.

What we can learn from the NANP reports

The three NANP reports trace progress from inquiry-led, teacher-driven leadership in 2021, to growing coherence and culturally grounded partnerships in 2022, to system-wide evidence of stronger outcomes and professional capability across in 2025.

Several overarching lessons stand out. First, collaboration works when it is relational, structured, and supported. Kāhui Ako that built relational trust, allocated time for joint inquiry, and had clear shared goals demonstrated tangible impacts with better student transitions, stronger attendance, learning progress and improved wellbeing. Collaboration became meaningful not because schools cooperated but because they cultivated shared responsibility for student success.

Second, teacher-led inquiry and leadership development have been transformative. The ASL and WSL teacher roles created pathways for pedagogical leadership and professional learning previously unavailable in the system. These roles nurtured teacher agency, strengthened evidence-informed decision making, and expanded collective efficacy (i.e. teachers' belief that they could make a difference together).

Third, Kāhui Ako deepened cultural responsiveness and community connection. Genuine partnerships with iwi and local organisations supported local curriculum design, bilingual learning, and place-based education. These relationships shifted schooling from being school-centred to being community-centred. They demonstrated the potential of co-designed approaches.

Finally, the reports highlight that system conditions matter. Collaboration requires sustained Ministry of Education commitment and infrastructure. When those supports are in place, Kāhui Ako demonstrate the capacity of the education sector to become a self-improving system. However the reports also show that these gains are fragile. They depend on continuity, trust, and supportive structures. The main lesson is that when teachers are empowered to lead learning together across schools, with cultural grounding and system backing, the benefits reach beyond individual classrooms.

PPTA surveys and papers

2017 survey: The slippage between planning and implementation

Written early in Kāhui Ako's lifespan, this conference paper draws on findings from PPTA's 2017 randomised national survey of over 1,400 members, covering approximately 91% of Kāhui Ako (Post-Primary Teachers Association, 2017).

Respondents' views highlights the gap between Kāhui Ako's design and its classroom realities. While teachers supported the goal of collaboration, respondents reported the rollout as rushed, poorly communicated and overly top-down. Principals were often consulted, but most teachers felt excluded from shaping achievement challenges or planning. Many reported unclear roles, uneven appointment processes, and little evidence of vertical collaboration or improved teaching practice. Structural issues, such as inequities in workload and pay between Kāhui Ako roles and middle leadership positions, were seen to undermine trust. Many schools joined primarily for funding rather than shared pedagogical purpose.

The paper attributes many problems to Ministry of Education implementation pressures, such as rushed timelines and inflexible leadership structures. It calls for better consultation, professional learning, and local adaptability. It concludes that while the intent of Kāhui Ako was sound, implementation failures limited its potential to change practice.

2025 survey: Perceptions in light of disestablishment

This report is based on a 2025 PPTA membership survey conducted soon after the government announced the disestablishment of Kāhui Ako (Post-Primary Teachers Association, 2025). The survey, distributed via Collective News, received 678 self-selected responses, representing strong views both for and against the decision. Most respondents worked in schools that had been part of a Kāhui Ako, and two-thirds had held Kāhui Ako-related roles.

Responses revealed divisions. Slightly more members supported disestablishment, especially if they had never held a Kāhui Ako role, and argued that Kāhui Ako offered poor value for money, created inequities in pay and time, and failed to deliver visible improvements. Those who opposed disestablishment, particularly current or former role-holders, emphasised the benefits of collaboration, professional learning, and improved student outcomes.

Both groups expressed frustration at the lack of formal evaluation and consultation preceding the decision. The report concludes that the episode highlights the risks of policy decisions made without evidence and underscores the need for robust evaluation and engagement with the teaching profession before major system changes.

2025 report on Kāhui Ako disestablishment

This report synthesises findings from the two earlier PPTA surveys (*Kāhui Ako Disestablishment: The Lessons Not Learnt*, 2025). It notes that many of the implementation problems identified in 2017 – e.g. limited consultation, uneven leadership quality, inequitable workload distribution, and insufficient Ministry support – remained unresolved by 2025. Despite these systemic flaws, it recognises that many Kāhui Ako achieved significant local successes in improving literacy, numeracy, and culturally responsive practice. The report argues that the initiative’s uneven performance was due less to its design and more to inconsistent support, poor communication, and the early abandonment of a promised evaluation programme.

It concludes that the Ministry of Education’s failure to sustain systematic evaluation left policymakers without clear evidence of what worked and why. The paper calls for future reforms to embed evaluation from the outset and to engage teachers meaningfully in design and implementation, ensuring that future collaborative initiatives build on the lessons of Kāhui Ako rather than repeat its mistakes.

What we can learn from the PPTA documents

Across the two PPTA surveys, teachers and leaders consistently supported the *principle* of collaboration but expressed deep concern about how it was implemented and sustained. The 2017 survey revealed early optimism tempered by frustration: members valued the *intent* to build professional networks and shared inquiry, yet felt sidelined in decision-making, unclear about roles, and burdened by inequitable workloads.

Eight years later, the 2025 survey highlighted these divisions again. Those directly involved in a Kāhui Ako described gains in professional learning and student engagement. Others saw limited impact and questioned the initiative’s cost and purpose. Respondents in both surveys voiced disappointment at the absence of formal evaluation, and that major policy decisions had been made without meaningful consultation.

The 2025 conference paper synthesised these perspectives and reinforced a central message: educational reform cannot succeed without teachers’ ownership, equitable recognition of their work, and rigorous evaluation to guide learning and improvement.

The profession’s experience offers enduring lessons for any future collaborative initiative. First, reform should be built *with* teachers, not for them. It should draw on their expertise from design to review. Second, structural innovation must be matched with sustained support for leadership, time for professional inquiry, and mechanisms that recognise and share effective practice. Finally, evaluation must be integral, not an afterthought, so that policy evolves through evidence (not political cycles). Taken together, the PPTA’s surveys and analyses provide a clear message that collaborative reform works when educators are trusted partners.

Kāhui Ako leaders' sabbatical reports

This section is an analysis of 12 sabbatical reports by Kāhui Ako leaders, available from the Ministry of Education's curriculum website (and also provided directly by Kāhuinga Arataki as background literature). Since these document practitioner-led research projects, they are treated as evidence. Some offer particularly rich first-hand accounts of Kāhui Ako. Note that their reports are based on earlier experiences of Kāhui Ako, and prior to some of the policy changes that occurred.

Each sabbatical report has a different focus or set of questions at its heart, and each uses a different methodology. The diversity makes these challenging to analyse for patterns. For example, reports variously focus on the experience of Kāhui Ako leadership, student outcomes, specific types of partnerships, models of governance, the value of professional learning and the impact of inter-school collaboration.

To account for the variability, reports were analysed with a hybrid approach. That is, initial themes and emergent patterns were identified, and themes were also coded for alignment with existing research on collaboration for system improvement – e.g. insights and issues related to leadership, relationships, student outcomes, and cultural responsiveness.

Despite the analysis challenges, the practitioner-led approach offer the advantage of grounded and practice-based insights about the Kāhui Ako experience. This provides a valuable contrast to the 'good news' angle from some other sources and rounds out a 'warts and all' picture of Kāhui Ako.

Leadership capacity

This study (Hoetawa, 2018) explores how leading a Kāhui Ako developed principals' leadership capability and system awareness. Based on interviews with seven experienced lead principals, it finds that a Kāhui Ako role deepened leaders' strategic thinking, strengthened their ability to build trust, and encouraged a broader perspective on education as a shared enterprise. Many principals described moving from a "my school" mindset to a collective one. They learned to balance diplomacy, empathy, and persistence in bringing diverse schools together under a common purpose.

However, the role's demands were intense. They juggled leadership across multiple schools while managing their own institutions and it often stretched principals thin. Across School Teachers emerged as powerful drivers of pedagogical change, yet their contributions were not consistently recognised or embedded within school structures. It was also challenging to engaging ECE partners and iwi, particularly in urban contexts. Hoetawa concludes that future networks must distribute leadership more evenly and institutionalise collaboration as part of everyday practice rather than relying on individual goodwill.

Secondary-tertiary partnerships

This sabbatical report examines how Kāhui Ako connected with tertiary institutions to expand learning opportunities for students through Secondary-Tertiary Partnerships and Trades Academies (England, 2018). Drawing on interviews with 18 leaders from seven Kāhui Ako as well as some Ministry of Education and tertiary institution representatives, the study found that STPs re-engaged many students who were previously disengaged from mainstream schooling.

However, schools faced major barriers: rigid timetabling limited flexibility, fragmented funding streams restricted resource pooling, and insufficient Ministry of Education support hindered access to placements. Teachers also lacked time to collaborate with tertiary staff and industry mentors, which made partnerships fragile. Leaders strongly supported the principle of collaboration but were frustrated by Kāhui Ako's bureaucratic design, short funding cycles, and over-reliance on a single lead principal. Many described improvising solutions in the absence of clear guidance.

England concludes that while some successes (e.g. Canterbury's Grow Waitaha initiative) show what's possible, effective secondary-tertiary collaboration requires long-term planning, consistent Ministry of Education backing, and freedom from compliance-driven constraints.

Governance models

This research investigates how Kāhui Ako stewardship governance models functioned in practice across five Wellington Kāhui Ako (Henderson, 2019). Some were well-established and active, others tokenistic, and some entirely absent. Decision-making often remained dominated by principals and Boards of Trustees, with little input from iwi or community voices. This imbalance undermined the inclusive intent of stewardship. Interviewees also reported fluctuating Ministry of Education support and inconsistent advice. In some areas, strong local advisors and clear expectations fostered collaboration; elsewhere, confusion and turnover hindered progress. Henderson concludes that while the stewardship model was well-intentioned, it lacked the resourcing, clarity, and cultural grounding needed to succeed.

Leadership in a complex world

This reflective inquiry connects a Kāhui Ako leadership experience with theories of complexity and system change (Whiting, 2017). She argues that genuine educational transformation begins not with structural reform but with shared moral purpose and an agreed understanding of why change is needed.

Drawing on her work in the Porirua East Kāhui Ako, Whiting describes efforts to create a shared graduate profile focused on voice, agency, and identity, aiming to move beyond incremental improvement toward transformative learning. However, she found that rigid bureaucracy and compliance requirements constraining innovation and demoralising leaders. She frames Kāhui

Ako leadership as a test of moral courage: the willingness to see the system's failures as everyone's responsibility, from government through to individual educators.

Driving and restraining forces

This inquiry examines what helped or hindered one Thames Kāhui Ako as it sought to improve outcomes for Māori learners (Nikora, 2019). Using leadership reflections, minutes, and action plans, she identifies trust, relationships, and moral purpose as the key driving forces of progress. Early involvement of iwi partners and educators' willingness to engage in culturally sustaining practices fostered collective energy and alignment. Some schools made strides in embedding te ao Māori perspectives and decolonising classroom practice, while others struggled to move beyond surface-level engagement.

Limiting factors included competition between schools, limited resources, and inconsistent leadership commitment, which slowed progress and sometimes caused collaboration to falter. Nikora concludes that authentic partnership with iwi and a shared cultural framework create the conditions for lasting change, but these require system-level backing, time, and relational stability. Her study highlights that meaningful collaboration grows from trust and shared values, not mandates.

Professional learning to support leaders

This investigation explores what support new Kāhui Ako leaders needed to lead effective collaboration (Taylor, 2017). Drawing on research and interviews with principals, she found that most leaders entered their roles with strong school-based experience but lacked preparation for the challenges of cross-school leadership. Leading within a network required skills in facilitation, negotiation, and building professional trust. But these competencies are rarely developed in traditional leadership.

Structural constraints, limited release time, and inconsistent communication from the Ministry of Education and other agencies compounded the difficulty. Many leaders described administrative overload and a lack of mentoring or feedback. Yet most saw potential for personal and professional growth, and recognised that collaboration could transform how schools worked if properly supported.

Professional development and professional growth

This reports on an examination of how a continuous improvement initiative begun at Rangitoto College expanded into the Mid-Bays Kāhui Ako to accelerate progress for priority learners (Hunt, 2016). The project built on an established culture of professional reflection and "Growth Mindset," using peer observation and data-informed inquiry to drive improvement.

Teachers grew more confident in analysing evidence and discussing practice openly, which helped foster a trusting environment for collaboration. However, extending this model across eight diverse schools proved difficult. Differences in school size, context, and leadership styles diluted coherence. Balancing school autonomy with Kāhui Ako-wide accountability was an ongoing tension.

Hunt concludes that collaboration flourishes in contexts with pre-existing cultures of professional growth and leadership investment, but scaling those practices across schools demands clear structures, trust, and shared purpose. It is not just about adopting new tools but about embedding collective learning as a cultural norm.

Making a difference in student achievement

This study investigated what influenced effectiveness in improving student outcomes across several different Kāhui Ako (Bascand, 2019). It found that the most effective Kāhui Ako were led by inclusive, responsive principals who built trust and collaboration.

Leaders who were disengaged or overstretched, however, struggled to mobilise teams and maintain momentum. Frequent turnover and uneven administrative support, especially between primary and secondary sectors, created instability. Many participants highlighted the paradox that collaboration improved relationships and professional dialogue but produced few measurable academic gains. This was partly because the push for quick results overshadowed the slower work of building relationships. Smaller and rural Kāhui Ako were further disadvantaged by funding formulas tied to student numbers. Ministry of Education support was seen as variable and sometimes intrusive. Bascand concludes that meaningful system change requires patience, equity, and leadership continuity: collaboration must mature before it can deliver sustained gains in achievement.

Structures that support synergies

This project investigated how organisational structures supported Kāhui Ako collaboration through a review of 26 approved Achievement Challenges and interviews with 20 leaders (White, 2017). The project found that Memoranda of Agreement, shared calendars, and clear communication channels were crucial for building trust and coherence. Decision-making matrices and cross-school roles allowed leaders to coordinate action more efficiently.

However, Kāhui Ako were hampered by delayed resourcing and inconsistent Ministry of Education guidance. There was uneven engagement with ECE providers and iwi except where there were strong pre-existing relationships. White highlights some promising innovations, including shared student profiles and collaborative data systems, but that the absence of a unified evaluation framework left each Kāhui Ako measuring success differently.

What effective collaboration looks like

This project explored how collaboration functioned across Kāhui Ako through surveys of 20 Lead Principals and their staff and 16 follow-up interviews (Cunningham, 2019). The study found that ineffective communication and inconsistent leadership were major barriers. Nearly half the principals reported unclear messaging, and 80% said they had little or no engagement with Kāhui Ako leaders. Teachers often saw meetings as time-consuming with limited practical benefit, and few felt their teaching had improved because of the initiative.

Despite the Ministry of Education's investment, only 6% of respondents reported noticeable student achievement gains, particularly for Māori and Pasifika learners. Participants called for distributed leadership models, clearer communication strategies, and a stronger focus on local context and authentic collaboration.

What is, and is not, working well

This study interviewed six Kāhui Ako leaders to explore both successes and barriers to progress (Walsh, 2019). Leaders agreed that Kāhui Ako helped break down professional isolation and fostered a shared understanding of students' learning journeys across schooling levels. By working together, teachers gained a clearer sense of continuity in student learning from ECE through to secondary.

However, early collaboration often faltered under structural and industrial constraints. Rigid staffing rules and limited authority left many leaders reliant on goodwill rather than formal power. Participants described frustration with bureaucratic barriers that slowed innovation. Despite these challenges, they valued the cultural shift toward shared accountability for all learners.

Walsh concludes that Kāhui Ako's greatest achievement was in changing mindsets. However sustaining that requires governance, flexibility, and consistent Ministry of Education commitment to resourcing and time for teachers to collaborate meaningfully.

A collaboration journey

Joblin's narrative of a faith-based Kāhui Ako across Hamilton and the Bay of Plenty examines how shared values and trust supported improvement in Year One literacy (Joblin, 2018). Leaders drew on a strong Catholic identity to build cohesion and resilience during leadership changes. Regular principal meetings and network days strengthened relationships, enabling stability despite structural challenges such as inconsistent timetabling and unclear role boundaries. Cross-curricular inquiry that linked science with literacy and mathematics boosted student engagement. In some schools, it boosted achievement (one reported a 21% increase in science results).

However, these successes were uneven across schools, and Māori learners continued to experience lower participation and outcomes. Data systems and assessment practices remained inconsistent, limiting reliable monitoring.

What we can learn from the sabbatical reports

Taken together, the Kāhui Ako leaders' projects paint a picture of collaboration, leadership, and inquiry at the frontline. They show that Kāhui Ako fostered meaningful professional growth and a new sense of shared responsibility for learners. Principals and ASLs developed stronger system awareness and relational leadership, shifting from isolated management toward collective stewardship.

Many leaders described the experience as transformative: it expanded their capacity to think strategically, to build trust, and to guide improvement across schools. These accounts demonstrate that, when educators are trusted to lead inquiry within a shared moral purpose, they can generate real professional learning and cultural change—even in the absence of formal evaluation.

At the same time, these studies highlight the brittleness of that progress. Collaboration thrived where trust already existed and where leaders had the time, flexibility, and resourcing to sustain it. It faltered where bureaucratic constraints, unclear expectations, or workload pressures undermined goodwill. Repeatedly, leaders pointed to the tension between system compliance and authentic collaboration: governance and accountability structures were often too rigid for the adaptive work required. They called for distributed leadership, longer timeframes, and professional learning specifically designed for cross-school collaboration. Several reports also underlined the importance of cultural responsiveness as a foundation for educational equity.

The reports also highlight the same important tension raised in the research discussed earlier in this report: the tension between aspirational goals and the realities of implementation, and between the high hopes about collaboration for systemic change and the structural and cultural barriers encountered.

The overall lesson from these practitioner inquiries is that successful collaboration depends less on policy design and more on the *conditions* that allow people to work well together. Leaders learned that trust is slow to build but essential; that inquiry and reflection, not compliance, drive improvement; and that system change requires patience, shared vision, and stable support.

Future collaborative initiatives will need to invest in these relational and structural enablers from the outset: leadership preparation, time for genuine partnership, and flexibility to adapt to local realities. Showing that when teachers and leaders are empowered to collaborate with purpose, they build the professional culture on which genuine educational improvement rests.

Part three: What more recent system data adds

Kāhui Ako leader exit interviews

This section examines data held by Kāhuinga Arataki – the body with a national oversight and communications role with Kāhui Ako via their voluntary membership.

Data collected by Kāhuinga Arataki includes interview transcripts from Kāhui Ako leaders, brief “stories of success” and a small number of survey responses about disestablishment. None of the data was collected for formal evaluation purposes. It is uneven in detail, which limits what can be drawn from it on its own. However, when read alongside the existing research, this data adds insight into how Kāhui Ako leaders understood their priorities and achievements, and what they think most important in the wake of Kāhui Ako’s disestablishment.

Kāhuinga Arataki collected 53 interview narratives (including several in the form of resignation letters) and one report. Collectively these represent 26 different Kāhui Ako. This is by far the richest and most nuanced of the three datasets from Kāhuinga Arataki.

The interviews were produced through interviews of Kāhui Ako leaders or those in back-filled positions that were self-administered or conducted by other Kāhui Ako leaders. Kāhuinga Arataki provided instructions and prompts or questions, suggested that interviews be audio-recorded and transcribed using a free AI service.

The interview prompts or questions covered four main areas, each with questions:

1. *Your Journey*: questions about leadership and career development questions
2. *Achievement and Impact*: questions about impact; collaboration; and partnership with mana whenua
3. *Learnings and Transition*: questions about critical knowledge; things to preserve or protect; useful resources or processes; and relationships to transition after disestablishment
4. *Future Collaboration*: questions about any advice to other communities; relationships to nurture; and suggestions for redesigning Kāhui Ako

While many participants followed the instructions closely, others engaged selectively with the prompts or provided brief written responses or sometimes simply a generalised ‘resignation letter’. In one case, a professionally produced report (perhaps already shared with the wider community) was provided in lieu of interviews. This was included in the analysis. Some files were incomplete and there are some transcription errors.

Because the dataset is heterogeneous and uneven in depth, it contains both rich, detailed interview transcripts as well as sparse bullet-point notes. These features simply reflect the practitioner-led data collection process and the absence of opportunities for follow-up questions or probing that researcher-led interviews can produce. So the dataset is challenging to interpret analytically. However it does provide valuable insights into experience of Kāhui Ako and its impacts.

The main analytic approach has been to look for cross-cutting themes – i.e. to treat each interview as a whole and examine all interviews as a set for themes that recur, regardless of which question was being answered. This helps identify ideas that fit the ‘lessons learned’ focus of the report – for example, the conditions and drivers of improvement, such as trust, leadership and cultural grounding. It also gets around the issue of different interviewees raising the same topic in response to different questions. For example, some interviewees talked about leadership in the *Your Journey* segment of the interview, while others talked about it in the *Impacts and Achievements* segment. Some interviewees talked about relationships with mana whenua in terms of *Impacts and Achievements*, while others talked about it in terms of *Future Collaborations*.

A second analytic lens has a tighter focus for the more ‘bounded’ response areas – for example, interviewees’ suggestions for re-designing Kāhui Ako or their experience of the most helpful resources and processes. This lens stays true to the structure of the interview (it is what interviewees said in response to those specific questions) and true to how interviewees themselves framed things.

Leadership and career development

Interviewees described Kāhui Ako as a distinctive space for leadership learning outside of traditional hierarchies. Leadership development within Kāhui Ako emerges from lived experience, collective inquiry, and relational trust rather than from formal titles or positional authority.

Interviewees consistently portrayed leadership as a dynamic, evolving identity grounded in collaboration, service, and influence. Many reported that cross-school engagement, co-leadership, and exposure to diverse pedagogical contexts have supported transformative growth. Kāhui Ako has acted as a pathway into formal leadership, especially for teachers in small or isolated schools. It also provided a space for exploring alternative leadership models built on shared purpose and pedagogical impact.

Interviewees highlighted that confidence often arises through contribution and validation within trusted networks, not through role authority. Leadership capability was described as relational, socially constructed, and co-created through mutual support, vulnerability, and affirmation. One participant explained, “*It’s not about standing out; it’s about standing with.*” Such experiences suggest that peer networks, rather than formal structures alone, play a pivotal role in developing leadership identity.

Some, however, noted tensions between the autonomy experienced in cross-institutional roles and expectations within their home schools. A few described resistance to returning to formal hierarchical roles after experiencing collaborative leadership, suggesting that institutional structures have not always evolved alongside new understandings of leadership. Others reported difficulty reintegrating into their schools due to a lack of ongoing recognition or opportunities for further development. Interviewees stressed that sustaining leadership growth requires organisational alignment and equity of access to leadership pathways across schools.

Overall, the accounts indicate that Kāhui Ako nurtures leadership through trust, reciprocity, and shared learning. Leadership here is understood less as visibility or promotion, and more as collective responsibility for improvement. Participants viewed collaboration not only as a leadership strategy but as the foundation of leadership development itself.

Achievement and impact

Across interviews, participants emphasised that Kāhui Ako's greatest strength lies in its ability to unify schools and enhance student outcomes through shared frameworks, data-informed inquiry, and culturally responsive practices. These achievements were reported as both qualitative and, in some cases, quantifiable.

Interviewees in small or geographically isolated schools reported that collaboration reduced professional isolation and built collective capacity. Shared graduate profiles, localised curricula, and Te Ao Māori frameworks were identified as especially valuable for fostering student identity and wellbeing. Participants reported that embedding cultural identity within learning has strengthened belonging and engagement.

Some reported measurable outcomes such as improved student attendance and reduced chronic absenteeism, achieved through coordinated whānau outreach, targeted interventions, and stronger homeschool partnerships. Improved attendance was also linked with enhanced engagement and learning progress.

Reports of literacy and numeracy improvement were common. Examples included shared literacy frameworks, writing exemplars spanning Year 0-10, and aligned assessment tools that created coherence across schools. These approaches increased teachers' confidence in instructional practices and were associated with gains in reading and writing performance.

Transition also featured prominently in interviewees' accounts. They described smoother movement for students between early childhood, primary, and secondary schooling through joint professional learning and shared data systems. A Year 7-10 transitions plan, for example, fostered partnerships that helped students feel supported and confident, leading to stronger engagement.

Wellbeing-focused practices were another area of impact. Participants highlighted trauma-informed teaching, structured wellbeing check-ins, and resilience-building programs that have improved students' emotional safety and sense of connection. These initiatives were described as enhancing both academic and personal outcomes.

Interviewees cautioned, however, that sustaining these gains requires continued investment in relationships, professional development, and culturally grounded practice. The overall evidence suggests that Kāhui Ako's approach of linking wellbeing, identity, and achievement has generated tangible benefits for students and teachers alike.

Collaboration and partnership

Again, interviewees portrayed collaboration as the heart of Kāhui Ako and a means to transforming teaching relationships, curriculum design and community engagement. They emphasised that the hard work of authentic collaboration builds professional trust, cultural responsiveness, and a shared responsibility for student outcomes.

Across schools, structured professional development helped to unify curriculum, pedagogy, pathways and accountability. Interviewees described staff-only days, cross-school PLD sessions and collective data analysis as powerful drivers of consistency and professional growth. Many connected these structures with improved literacy and numeracy outcomes, attributing success to “shared focus and shared practice.”

Collaboration with mana whenua and iwi was consistently identified as central to success. Interviewees reported that moving from consultation to authentic partnership has deepened cultural legitimacy and local relevance. Examples included iwi co-designing learning frameworks, hosting hui and workshops at marae, and embedding local stories (pūrākau) and histories into curricula. One educator explained it this way: “Our local stories now live in our literacy lessons. It’s who we are, not an add-on.”

Such partnerships extend to governance and decision-making. Some Kāhui Ako have formal iwi representation on leadership groups, ensuring that mana whenua perspectives shape priorities and planning. Interviewees viewed this as essential for genuine equity in education. Others described being in earlier stages of relationship-building, noting that “it takes time and trust to get there, but every conversation matters.”

Collaborative moderation has enhanced consistency and fairness across schools. Teachers collectively reviewed student work and shared expectations, for improved assessment reliability and to build trust. Data-sharing initiatives such as *name, number, need* helped identify students requiring support and maintain continuity of learning.

Interviewees also highlight joint student events as key expressions of collaboration. Examples included cross-school kapa haka groups and literacy conferences that foster connection and belonging among ākonga. Transition projects designed with input from students, whānau, and teachers ensured that student voice remains central.

Interviewees reported that collaboration is most effective when underpinned by shared cultural values, co-designed leadership structures, and sustained communication with mana whenua. They cautioned that partnerships must remain relational, and be built on reciprocity, trust, and shared purpose.

Useful resources, tools, and processes

Interviewees identified a range of resources and processes that underpin collaborative success. The Relationship-Based Learning (RBL) framework, with teacher profiles, observation tools and reflection snapshots, is cited as central for fostering culturally responsive teaching and structured

coaching. They described RBL as supporting professional dialogue, strengthening student-teacher relationships and aligning practices across schools.

Other valuable tools cited include shared digital platforms and feedback systems that sustain inquiry and improvement. Online repositories and websites host culturally relevant materials and reduce duplication, while communication platforms such as Slack enable real-time discussion and coordination. Interviewees reported that these systems preserve institutional and cross-institutional memory, and they ease transitions when leadership changes.

Data-informed coaching and moderation processes are also frequently mentioned. These mechanisms ensure continuity of practice and equitable decision-making. Many Kāhui Ako have adopted cyclical processes for identifying student needs, implementing targeted strategies, and evaluating outcomes, creating an embedded culture of reflective improvement.

Intentional leadership structures (e.g. co-lead roles, regular hui and cross-sector planning meetings) were described as critical for sustaining momentum and preventing siloed practice. Interviewees viewed these structures as reinforcing shared ownership and accountability, linking success to routine engagement and “showing up for the work, together.”

Some interviewees noted early experiments with technology, including limited use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools for literacy resource development. These examples illustrate openness to innovation within collaborative systems, though they remain exploratory.

Overall, the evidence suggests that resources promoting reflection, accessibility, and shared responsibility have been vital in maintaining cohesion and supporting both teacher and student success.

Insights about the conditions for success

Reading across all interviews, it is possible to identify a number of conditions that enable effective and sustainable collaboration. In particular, the interviewees set out critical knowledge, relationships worth nurturing and what to preserve, and offer advice to others considering collaboration.

Foremost among these conditions is the cultivation of trusting, authentic relationships. Interviewees emphasised that genuine collaboration grows from sustained personal connections and psychological safety. These relationships allow honest dialogue and collective commitment to student success.

Adequate time and structural support are also deemed essential. Many interviewees argued that the two-days-per-term structure limited depth, noting that meaningful collaboration requires more protected time, resourcing, and continuity. Interviewees consistently link sufficient time and funding to the ability to maintain inquiry cycles and professional learning.

Integration of mana whenua partnership emerges as a non-negotiable success factor. Interviewees reported that collaboration with local iwi provides essential cultural grounding and ensures

education reflects local values. When treated as co-leadership rather than consultation, these relationships enrich learning and build shared ownership across communities.

Visible, committed leadership from principals and school leaders is another recurring theme. Interviewees reported that when leaders actively model collaborative culture and invest in shared decision-making, staff engagement and accountability increase markedly.

A shared, clearly articulated vision was identified as key to coherence and motivation. Alignment around a common purpose prevented fragmentation and sustains momentum across schools.

Several interviewees noted that smaller, focused collaborations often achieve deeper impact than larger clusters. They reported that scale affects relational quality and ownership, and that more contained networks foster stronger engagement and responsiveness.

Finally, interviewees highlighted the need for emotional resilience and moral courage. Sustaining collaboration in uncertain or changing policy environments requires principled leadership, persistence, and belief in collective purpose. Interviewees stressed that these interpersonal and ethical dimensions are as vital as structural ones.

Insights about points of fragility and failure

Again, reading the interviews in terms of critical knowledge, relationships worth nurturing, what to preserve and advice to others, shows up vulnerabilities in Kāhui Ako. These appear to have constrained Kāhui Ako's potential and threaten its sustainability.

The most consistent issue is inadequate and inequitable resourcing. Interviewees described how dependence on voluntary effort created fatigue and burnout once formal funding ceased. One educator noted, "The goodwill dries up and the momentum fades." Without structural support, collaboration became unsustainable for many.

Ambiguity of roles and accountability also undermined cohesion. Interviewees reported that unclear expectations for ASLs led to confusion and, at times, mistrust. Some teachers viewed ASLs as evaluators rather than allies. Without consistent accountability mechanisms, schools could disengage without consequence, diminishing collective impact.

Insufficient time allocation is another recurring constraint. Interviewees described limited opportunities for deep professional dialogue or follow-up, which weakened relational trust and reduced opportunities for innovation. The pressure for quick results often conflicted with the slow work of systemic change.

The exclusion of ECE from the Kāhui Ako framework is seen as a significant gap, particularly for ensuring smooth student transitions. Interviewees reported that this omission disrupted continuity of learning and excluded a critical group of educators from collective planning.

Some interviewees identified the scale of Kāhui Ako networks as problematic. Larger clusters often struggled with participation consistency and meaningful engagement, whereas smaller groupings enabled closer relationships and clearer accountability.

The disestablishment of Kāhui Ako itself was widely regarded as a major systemic loss. Interviewees described disestablishment as “a missed opportunity for national reform.” One reflected, “Kāhui was a great potential tool for rolling out the refreshed curriculum, without handing it all over to external professional development providers.” Interviewees warned that its dissolution risks a return to fragmented, inequitable professional development, especially for small or rural schools.

Dependence on individual relationships rather than embedded systems also emerges as a fragility. Interviewees pointed out that turnover in leadership frequently disrupted progress because institutional mechanisms for continuity were weak. Sustainable collaboration, they argued, requires documented systems, induction processes, and shared repositories that survive personnel changes.

Finally, interviewees described the emotional toll of seeing valued collaborative structures dismantled. Many expressed a sense of loss and frustration, fearing that schools will revert to isolation and competition. As one participant put it, “We built something real together. And then the rug was pulled out.”

These insights point to relational trust and shared purpose being indispensable as well as insufficient on their own. Without coherent structures, equitable resourcing, clear accountability, and long-term policy commitment, collaboration remains fragile.

What we can learn from the exit interviews

Kāhui Ako interviewees provide some lessons about collaboration how can strengthen educational systems. Their accounts demonstrate that collective leadership and shared inquiry across schools can build professional confidence, coherence in teaching practice, and culturally responsive approaches that support both wellbeing and achievement. When collaboration is relational rather than compliance-driven, it enables educators to feel part of a larger purpose that is focused on student success rather than institutional competition.

A central lesson is that sustainable collaboration depends as much on structure as on spirit. Interviewees emphasise that relational trust must be matched by stable funding, clear accountability, and protected time. Without these conditions, even strong networks become fragile. The inclusion of mana whenua in genuine partnership also emerges as non-negotiable: it grounds education in local identity and shared responsibility, ensuring that system change honours Māori perspectives and community aspirations. It is a model for equity that blends relationships, leadership, and cultural integrity.

Finally, the disestablishment of Kāhui Ako raises fears about how quickly collaborative progress might unravel if institutional or infrastructural support is withdrawn. Interviewees’ reflections

warn against treating system-wide collaboration as a short-term policy experiment rather than a core infrastructure for improvement. The lesson is that educational reform succeeds when it invests in relationships and when educators are empowered. Leaders point to the challenge of ensuring that future frameworks preserve the conditions that made that collaboration effective.

Stories of Impact

Kāhuinga Arataki sought “stories of impact” for a 2025 conference presentation. Fifty-five Kāhui Ako responded, completing a supplied PowerPoint slide template with boxes in which to add descriptions of:

- their Kāhui Ako, its location and its achievement challenges or ‘progress aspirations’ or strategic goals
- what they are doing better as a Kāhui Ako than as a school
- positive outcomes and impact
- relevant evidence and data; and
- a desired future for the community.

While it would technically be possible to analyse the data from the PowerPoint slides, in practice it would be very difficult to do this in a meaningful or efficient way. Most of the content sits inside text boxes rather than in a structured format. And some Kāhui Ako have reinterpreted the format. This necessitated a more manual process of analysis as the data is not very compatible with qualitative analysis software.

The other issue is the nature of the data itself. The resulting data are not “stories” so much as a brief self-reported snapshot, and in many cases the information is not clear or consistent. For example, figures such as “98% of Year 6 students now attend local high school” lack context. There’s no indication of time period, cohort definition, or how the percentage was calculated. The kind of deeper analysis that might make more sense of this (perhaps by matching against Achievement Challenges) is not warranted for this project, which is not an evaluation. What we can examine are the kinds of things that participants in Kāhui Ako picked out to report as impactful and positive.

It is worth noting that there are only few overlaps of Kāhui Ako between those that provided snapshots for Kāhuinga Arataki’s presentation and those that provided material for NANP’s 2025 report, *The Impact of 110 Kāhui Ako*.

We’re better together

The advantage of a Kāhui Ako is its ability to enhance scale and sustainability, fostering a united focus on educational success for all students. Most Kāhui Ako reported being more effective than individual schools by pooling resources, expertise, and leadership to facilitate advances in student transitions and professional development. For example, resources like shared wellbeing frameworks and collaborative advocacy amplified the impact of initiatives for Māori and Pasifika learners.

Kāhui Ako reported implementing structured transition systems, emphasising a seamless journey from early childhood education to secondary schooling. These ensured continuity through shared tracking systems and student information sharing, which individual schools could not replicate in isolation. Examples included transition protocols that have led to increases in local secondary school attendance rates. Professional learning and development initiatives across schools leveraged collective strengths to enhance teaching practices. This included not only teacher training but also extending learning opportunities to leaders and support staff, ensuring that all roles contribute to educational coherence.

Furthermore, the incorporation of iwi and community relationships into educational frameworks allowed Kāhui Ako to embed local narratives and cultural practices, creating a more inclusive learning environment. For example, various Kāhui Ako co-developed local curricula that reflect Māori aspirations, such as joint mihi or pōwhiri and culturally grounded teaching methods. This cultural responsiveness extends well beyond mere collaboration; it ensures that education is authentically reflective of the community's heritage.

From goals and challenges to positive impact

Many Kāhui Ako focused on raising achievement in literacy and numeracy, especially for Māori and Pasifika learners, while also addressing attendance and wellbeing as integral to engagement. Shared strategies linked learning success with belonging and safety, using proactive whānau connections to build inclusive environments and support regular attendance.

Creating coherent pathways from early childhood through to secondary education was a common strategic goal. Kāhui Ako achieved this through structured transition protocols, shared data systems, and cross-sector professional relationships. Several framed this work as promoting both academic and cultural continuity. In one case, a formal Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO) network was established to strengthen inclusion, supported by targeted professional development from the Ministry of Education. Another Kāhui Ako prioritised staff wellbeing, recognising that teacher morale and mental health directly affect classroom climate and student outcomes.

Positive outcomes were reported across multiple areas: smoother student transitions, stronger teacher capability, deepened iwi partnerships, improved attendance and wellbeing, greater system coherence, and better use of resources. These gains were largely enabled by data-informed collaboration, distributed leadership, culturally co-created practices, and pooled resourcing. While most Kāhui Ako described qualitative progress, a few provided measurable evidence of improvement.

Improved student transitions were attributed to consistent communication, shared protocols, and relational continuity between schools. One Kāhui Ako reported that students felt more comfortable moving into college after meeting teachers and visiting the new environment in advance. Another developed transition handover protocols and pastoral systems that ensured data-informed continuity from ECE through Year 9.

Teacher capability was described as growing through collaborative inquiry, culturally grounded professional learning, and supported leadership pathways. Several Kāhui Ako provided release time and structured support for teachers to engage in shared professional development. Participants noted evidence of measurable classroom improvement through surveys and observations, as well as career progression from Kāhui Ako roles into senior leadership positions, demonstrating that these roles served as genuine pipelines for advancement. Other Kāhui Ako strengthened teachers' bicultural competence and embedded Māori perspectives across professional learning.

Partnerships with iwi and community were widely reported as deepening. Examples included co-developing resources, sharing governance responsibilities, and using marae as central meeting places. Some Kāhui Ako collaborated with local iwi to create local history resources and cultural kete used across all schools, integrating identity and place into daily teaching.

A shared focus on attendance and wellbeing also produced tangible gains. Joint data systems, cross-school leadership, and strong whānau partnerships supported early intervention and collective problem-solving. One Kāhui Ako used the NZCER Wellbeing Survey to identify needs and plan next steps; another appointed a Whānau Liaison to support attendance across its schools, ensuring direct engagement with families.

Curriculum coherence and shared vision were further signs of system maturity. One Kāhui Ako developed a vertically aligned curriculum from ECE to secondary, while another unified its schools under a shared student-centred philosophy, transforming isolated institutions into an interconnected learning community.

Resource efficiencies were achieved through joint staffing, shared professional learning, pooled funding, and co-developed digital resources. For example, one Kāhui Ako in an isolated region used combined funding to bring in external expertise as required. Another convened professional learning events for over 100 teachers, ensuring scale and cost-effectiveness. Others built collective assets such as online repositories of local stories and histories, maximising reach and avoiding duplication.

A few Kāhui Ako provided quantitative evidence of system-wide impact. One reported an increase in local secondary retention from 80% to 98% of Year 6 students following a targeted transition programme. Another Kāhui Ako embedded wellbeing in a faith-based, relationship-rich culture, positioning hauora as an outcome of connection and community rather than a separate initiative. This approach framed emotional and academic growth as inseparable. Several Kāhui Ako reported their survey data showing measurable improvements in student wellbeing, and that wellbeing work had become an enduring part of school culture.

Finally, some Kāhui Ako identified structural barriers that limited collaboration. Participants noted that traditional governance arrangements (e.g. independent school boards) sometimes conflicted with the collective aspirations of the Kāhui Ako. Leadership changes and shifting board priorities could disrupt established partnerships and continuity. This highlights the fragility of collaborative systems when underlying governance structures remain static.

What we can learn from the stories of impact

Once again, Kāhui Ako pointed to sustainable improvement in student outcomes as dependent on relationships, structures, and systems working in concert. The snapshots suggest that progress in literacy, numeracy, wellbeing, and transitions was strongest where collaboration was deliberate, data-informed, and culturally grounded. Initiatives that connected academic achievement with identity, wellbeing, and whānau engagement achieved the most coherence. The examples highlight that improvement occurs when schools act collectively on clearly defined goals rather than through isolated interventions.

A central lesson is that meaningful collaboration requires both relational trust and practical infrastructure. Shared data systems, aligned professional learning, and distributed leadership enabled consistency across schools. Equally, success depended on cultural partnerships with mana whenua and community so that learning was locally relevant and values-driven. Kāhui Ako that embedded these relationships achieved deeper and more long-lasting change. Where such conditions were absent, progress was often fragmented or dependent on individual champions.

The final lesson concerns sustainability. Kāhui Ako outcomes reveal that while goodwill and professional commitment can drive short-term success, enduring impact relies on institutional support such as resourcing, time, and governance alignment. Structural tensions, particularly between collective aspirations and individual school autonomy, remain a key constraint. The evidence suggests that the most resilient improvements occur when collaboration is recognised not as another initiative, but as an operating principle of the education system.

Disestablishment survey

Kāhuinga Arataki's survey captures 30 perspectives following the announced disestablishment of Kāhui Ako. This data consists mainly of responses to open questions though many responses are perfunctory.

All but one of the 30 respondents are currently in Kāhui Ako leadership roles. Nearly all disagreed with the decision to disestablish Kāhui Ako, citing a lack of consultation and, for many, a sense that Kāhui Ako's benefits had not been widely or well understood. Two respondents expressed support for the disestablishment Kāhui Ako on condition that its funding was redirected to pay for support staff and teacher aides.

Over two-thirds of respondents were interested in retaining Kāhui Ako with changes. When asked about *what* should be retained from Kāhui Ako, respondents singled out collaboration in particular.

Over one third of the respondents suggested reducing the salary packages for leaders, reducing the travel funding and/or having more flexibility about how ASL and WSL roles were apportioned or shared. There were six comments in favour of more monitoring of, and accountability from, Kāhui Ako and also those in leadership roles.

What we can learn from the disestablishment survey

Almost all survey respondents were in Kāhui Ako leadership roles and soon to lose a portion of their salary. Given this, it may not be surprising that most agree that Kāhui Ako should not be disestablished.

On the other hand, it is notable that two-thirds express an interest in changing Kāhui Ako and over a third have specific suggestions for change, including some about their salaries being reduced. A fifth point out a need for better accountability mechanisms.

In other words, respondents offer a fairly clear-sighted perspective. They see the value of Kāhui Ako at the same time as recognising that certain aspects need re-thinking.

**Part four: What
Kāhui Ako taught
us**

15 lessons for future initiatives

A developmental evaluation of Kāhui Ako could have provided a comprehensive, national feedback loop and guidance for communities, as well as a picture of its impact over time. Instead, though, we can look to a body of evidence spanning academic research on Kāhui Ako and on how school collaboration and leadership support students; NZCER national surveys; PPTA member surveys; and practitioner-led research through exit interviews, sabbatical research projects; and Kāhui Ako-provided descriptions of challenges, actions and impacts.

The evidence does vary in its depth, focus and methodology. However some of it is particularly rich, offering perspectives that are grounded in practice. There is also a good breadth of evidence from practitioners representing a range of Kāhui Ako. This patchwork of evidence across the Kāhui Ako landscape tells a remarkably consistent story about what matters and what makes a difference.

1. When collaboration changes practice, it strengthens professional culture and improves student outcomes

NZCER's National Surveys showed that Kāhui Ako fostered collegiality and reduced professional isolation. Teachers valued shared professional learning and the opportunity to work alongside colleagues from other schools. For example, some Kāhui Ako organised joint moderation of student writing or shared professional development on culturally responsive teaching, which built strong relationships and a sense of shared purpose.

However, these activities did not always translate into consistent shifts in practice or measurable improvements in student outcomes. Early reports from ERO and the Ministry of Education pointed out that collective responsibility alone was not enough: collaboration had to influence daily teaching to make a difference.

Kāhui Ako that used inquiry to address specific student needs, such as literacy transitions or mathematics engagement, reported visible changes in classroom practice. For example, several Kāhui Ako reported co-developing common progressions (e.g. in writing) across their schools, making expectations transparent for both teachers and students.

Where Kāhui Ako focused mainly on structure or coordination rather than pedagogy, progress was limited. Real improvement occurred only when collaboration became embedded in teaching and learning processes. This is also consistent with Hattie's (2015) "blueprint" for using collaboration to support student learning, where he argues that collaboration without a clear inquiry focus tends to improve morale more than learning. The evidence shows that Kāhui Ako reshaped professional relationships, and had a positive impact on students when it was connected directly to teaching and wellbeing practices, and learner progress.

2. Local leadership and trust determine effectiveness

There was wide variation across Kāhui Ako. Some communities functioned as cohesive, self-improving networks with shared purpose and active engagement, while collaboration for others was largely procedural and confined to formal meetings. The evidence points to local leadership and relational trust as among the decisive factors. For example, where lead principals fostered open communication and distributed decision-making, they created the conditions for others to engage in professional inquiry. Conversely, where leadership was transactional or role boundaries unclear, collaboration was more procedural.

Constantinides and Eleftheriadou (2023) and Robinson and Gray (2019) emphasised that leadership influences outcomes indirectly by shaping the conditions for professional learning, moral purpose, and collective judgment. In practice, Kāhui Ako leaders did this by acting as “weavers of connection” across schools. They facilitated trust, aligned purposes, and ensured that collaboration was focused on improvement. Kāhui Ako effectiveness stemmed less from structural design and more from the social conditions that leaders cultivated.

3. Distributed leadership and system stewardship are key to sustainability

Leadership research (Robinson & Gray, 2019; Liou et al., 2025) and sabbatical reports portray a marked shift among Kāhui Ako leaders from managing individual schools to acting as system stewards. This involved leading through influence rather than authority, developing others’ capacity, and aligning collective effort across diverse contexts. Practical examples from sabbatical projects describe principals co-mentoring teachers across schools, co-designing professional learning pathways, and sharing resources and data to address common challenges.

Leaders often operated in dual capacities, managing their own schools while coordinating across the Kāhui Ako. This required them to balance local priorities with system goals. Effective leaders were those who could think systemically, recognise interdependence, and nurture shared leadership among others.

These practices cultivated distributed leadership and built resilience into the network: when individual leaders moved on, collaborative culture and processes remained intact. Stewardship is therefore not only relational but systems-focused. Leaders must see themselves as part of a larger, interdependent ecosystem. Kāhui Ako that embraced this mindset became more self-improving and less dependent on positional authority, providing a model for future system-wide leadership development.

4. Leadership roles can offer new career pathways but need clear expectations and support

The creation of Across-School Leader and Within-School Leader positions expanded teachers’ opportunities for leadership and career development. NANP reports describe ASLs facilitating cross-school inquiry, while WSLs modelled classroom practice and coached peers. Leaders’ accounts in exit interviews and sabbatical reports described growing their leadership capabilities and their confidence.

However those accounts also highlighted tensions between old and new roles, often exposed in the cross-school roles or when re-integrating into a formal hierarchy. Academic research points out that while distributed leadership is most suited for collaborations, it makes being clear about authority and accountability more challenging (Charteris et al., 2024; Constantinides & Eleftheriadou, 2023; Ramsay & Poskitt, 2019). PPTA surveys also revealed inconsistent role clarity, workload pressure, and inequitable recognition. The lesson is that these leadership roles do build professional capability but they need to be adequately resourced and supported by mentoring and release time.

5. Trust and inquiry are the inseparable foundations of improvement

Trust and inquiry feed each other. Teachers inquire honestly into their practice when trust is strong, and trust deepens when inquiry is purposeful and open (see Sinnema et al., 2022; Fawcett, 2019; Timperley, Kaser & Halbert, 2014).

Some Kāhui Ako developed “inquiry hubs” where teachers from different schools jointly analysed student work or observed each other’s classrooms. These groups used data to test teaching strategies and reflected together on outcomes. Sabbatical leaders described how, over time, this built confidence and a culture of honesty about what was and was not working. As other research shows, collaborative inquiry builds teacher expertise, strengthens consistency across classrooms, and directly links professional learning to student outcomes because teachers continuously adapt their practice based on evidence, not assumptions (Timperley, Kaser, & Halbert, 2014; Wylie, 2012).

By contrast, Kāhui Ako that lacked trust, time or commitment for cycles of inquiry were stuck at the level of discussion rather than impact. Collaborative expertise grows when collective inquiry is disciplined and evidence-informed, not just collegial, and schools create an “evaluation climate” (Hattie, 2015).

6. Serving learning requires capability in monitoring and data use

Some Kāhui Ako collected extensive data but struggled to turn it into learning. Some teachers used data for reporting rather than reflection. However, Kāhui Ako that framed data as a shared learning tool saw strong engagement and outcomes. For instance, some Kāhui Ako tracked transitions between primary and secondary school or compared wellbeing indicators. One Kāhui Ako described using attendance and literacy data to identify critical points in transitions, prompting joint planning across year levels. Fawcett’s (2019) account of her Kāhui Ako’s work showed that when teachers used data collaboratively to test interventions, they refined teaching and built evaluative confidence.

That experience is backed by other education research showing that when teachers and leaders engage in evidence-informed professional dialogue and leverage their professional judgement, they generate accurate and relevant measures of learning (Robinson & Gray, 2019; Wylie, 2012). They can also attend to other factors in educational success such as belonging and well-being.

In contrast, data used to measure compliance or performance reduced openness. Embedding forms of developmental monitoring or evaluation from the outset, with shared indicators and space for joint interpretation, proved essential for student (and teacher) learning.

Both ERO and the Ministry of Education highlighted early on that many Kāhui Ako lacked the evaluative expertise needed to measure impact and adapt strategy. In practice, this meant that some Kāhui Ako were likely to be relying on anecdotal evidence of progress rather than robust analysis, and probably because they lacked agreed metrics or data-sharing protocols.

Kāhui Ako that did build evaluative capability often did it through external support or targeted professional learning. This helped them refine their classroom approaches effectively. Strengthening evaluative thinking is essential for any future system-wide collaboration.

7. National evaluation must be integral, not an afterthought

While ERO and the Ministry of Education's stressed the need for evaluative expertise at Kāhui Ako level, the lack of a coherent and comprehensive *national* evaluation, with developmental support for Kāhui Ako, is particularly striking. As PPTA's 2025 conference paper underscored, this omission left Kāhui Ako vulnerable to political shifts and policy discontinuity. Teachers expressed frustration in the PPTA and Kāhuinga Arataki surveys that significant reforms had proceeded without robust evidence of impact.

Without systematic evaluation, successful practices cannot be identified and shared, and ineffective ones will likely persist. The lack of leadership from the centre is especially puzzling for a model that funded leadership and championed knowledge-sharing, improvement and connectedness.

8. Teacher-led inquiry strengthens agency and capability

The NANP reports documented Kāhui Ako using teacher-led inquiry to transform professional culture by shaping a culture of peer-to-peer learning. The introduction of ASL and WSL roles created new pathways for teachers to lead pedagogical improvement. These teachers facilitated inquiry groups, modelled practice, and connected colleagues across schools. This distributed model increased teachers' sense of agency and confidence in using evidence for decision-making.

One Kāhui Ako established teacher-led inquiry clusters focused on improving students' writing through the transitions from primary through to secondary schools. It resulted in shared rubrics and clearer expectations for students. Others "back-mapped" student needs to plan support ahead and across schools. When teachers lead learning together, professional capability grows.

9. Workload, recognition, and role clarity affect participation

Both PPTA surveys found that workload and unclear expectations constrained participation. Teachers appreciated collaboration but struggled to balance it with existing commitments. ASL and WSL roles were seen as valuable but often under-resourced or inconsistently recognised across schools. For example, some Kāhui Ako provided release time for inquiry leaders while others did

not, creating inequity and resentment. Sabbatical reports and NZCER surveys also described workload pressure undermining goodwill. Collaboration must be supported by fair workload structures and explicit recognition of professional contribution.

10. Cultural responsiveness and partnership with mana whenua are foundational

Several sabbatical reports, along with Highfield and Webber's (2021) research, emphasised that collaboration grounded in cultural responsiveness achieved deeper engagement and equity. Leaders described how integrating Māori perspectives into shared inquiry helped teachers understand learners' identities and aspirations more fully. Across the evidence from NANP reports, exit interviews and stories of impact, Kāhui Ako achieved strong results when collaboration included genuine partnerships (beyond consultation) with iwi, hapū, and local organisations.

Examples included collaborative projects that involved marae-based learning, co-designing learning goals, embedding tikanga Māori, culturally-grounded approaches to wellbeing and partnerships with local iwi to develop bilingual pathways and align school values with community aspirations. There are also examples of Kāhui Ako working alongside iwi to shape a local curriculum that reflects historical narratives and environmental stewardship.

These partnerships not only improved engagement but also built trust between schools and communities. Cultural integrity and genuine partnerships strengthen relationships and outcomes.

11. Time, flexibility and trust are essential preconditions for effective collaboration

Sabbatical projects provide a rich picture of collaboration at the frontline. They consistently emphasised that authentic collaboration required time for reflection and flexibility to adapt. Leaders who shifted meetings from administrative reporting to shared inquiry saw faster progress. Time to build relationships and professional trust was an investment, not a luxury. Trust developed only when teachers had space to meet, reflect, and take risks together. One Kāhui Ako described progress accelerating when meetings shifted from administrative reporting to shared lesson analysis.

The progress of other Kāhui Ako slowed when rigid templates or compliance demands limited professional dialogue. Principals argued that collaboration required permission to adapt structures to local needs rather than follow uniform expectations. The consistent message is that collaboration thrives when leaders are trusted to exercise professional judgment and when the rules allow adaptation to local context.

12. Collective aspirations can be constrained by school autonomy

Even in the most committed Kāhui Ako, tensions persisted between collective goals and individual school priorities. Principals sometimes faced pressure to align with their boards' agendas rather than with the Kāhui Ako's shared achievement challenges.

This autonomy-collaboration tension limited the potential for sustained change. Examples include inconsistent implementation of agreed teaching approaches or difficulty maintaining shared

inquiry cycles. While autonomy is valuable, systems need formal mechanisms (e.g. collective agreements or shared accountability frameworks) to balance local independence with collective responsibility.

13. System-level design, support, and continuity determine sustainability

Across academic research, NANP reports and exit interviews, the sustainability of Kāhui Ako depended on system design backed by consistent national support. Research by Kamp (2019) and Wylie (2022) warned that collaboration easily becomes performative when policy settings are fragmented or short term. Kāhui Ako flourished when structural and relational conditions aligned: clear role definitions, protected release time and stable funding. For example, Kāhui Ako that had ongoing access to expert facilitation and Ministry of Education support sustained inquiry cycles across leadership changes, while others lost direction when funding or coordination ended.

The disestablishment of Kāhui Ako highlights how vulnerable networks are to policy turnover. However it might be that professional relationships and informal collaboration persist in Kāhui Ako where trust is strong. The sabbatical reports suggest continuing regardless of disestablishment is a goal for some. Sustainable collaboration requires not only good design but also an architecture that maintains knowledge, roles, and professional connections beyond the lifespan of any single initiative.

14. The conditions for collaboration matter as much as the collaboration itself

All the evidence points to an overarching insight: the success of collaboration depends on its conditions. Kāhui Ako achieved its best results where leadership was distributed; inquiry was disciplined and teacher-led; data was used for student learning, wellbeing and smooth transitions; and cultural partnerships were genuine. Kāhui Ako that combined joint professional learning, iwi partnership, shared data tools, and stable system support saw sustained improvements in student attendance, engagement, learning and wellbeing. By contrast, collaboration without these foundations often remained mostly symbolic.

The big lesson is that it takes trust, time, coherent design, and evaluative capability. These are not peripheral or optional supports. They are actually the mechanisms through which collaboration can make a lasting difference.

15. System improvement requires a system

The evidence about the school-level and Kāhui Ako-level conditions for collaboration is equally a lesson about the broader conditions for system improvement. The Kāhui Ako model marked a significant departure from a decades-long, self-managing education system and mindset. So it is not surprising that shifting to a model of collaborative communities would prove challenging, despite widespread support for the principles involved. One of the notable effects of the self-managing system was that it undermined coherent improvement in teaching and learning, and diluted the *capacity* for collective learning (Wylie, 2012).

The challenges experienced by Kāhui Ako leaders are not surprising given this broader shift in context. Further they needed to learn to collaborate without consistent support from the Ministry of Education, and without a developmental evaluation to measure and guide progress.

In spite of the challenges, many Kāhui Ako did successfully build trusting relationships across their communities and establish collaborative approaches that improved outcomes for students. No wonder so many involved with it have expressed deep disappointment at its disestablishment and concern that hard-won gains will be lost. Their experiences highlight that system-wide improvement requires a *system* of support: enduring, resourced infrastructure that is not subject to political cycles.

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