Powering collaboration and education records in New Zealand

Unison and Edsby are the core of the New Zealand Ministry of Education's national data repository and social learning system

The country of New Zealand is remarkable for many reasons. Among them: the unique structure of its education system.

New Zealand has more than 2,500 schools in its 13-year primary, intermediate and secondary systems. And while they're a mix of state (public), integrated (faith-based or specialist education, e.g. Montessori) and private schools, each school operates autonomously. There are few regional governing bodies. Each school chooses its own technology infrastructure, including its databases and learning applications.

While empowering local educators, this independence creates challenges.

Far-flung data wasn't available when needed

It's been difficult for the New Zealand Ministry of Education to support consistent data sharing between schools to enable the best learning outcomes across the country when they're all using different systems. But a bigger problem was even more pronounced.

Educators found it hard to access valuable information about learners when they moved between schools. Information stayed locked in their previous school's systems or took a long time to obtain. Sometimes children didn't get the right support when they needed it.

"We heard needless stories of kids missing out on learning support like reading recovery, because by the time it was identified that they'd already been assessed for it, they were too old," said Lisa Cheney, Business Design Lead in a Ministry of Education Te Rito video.
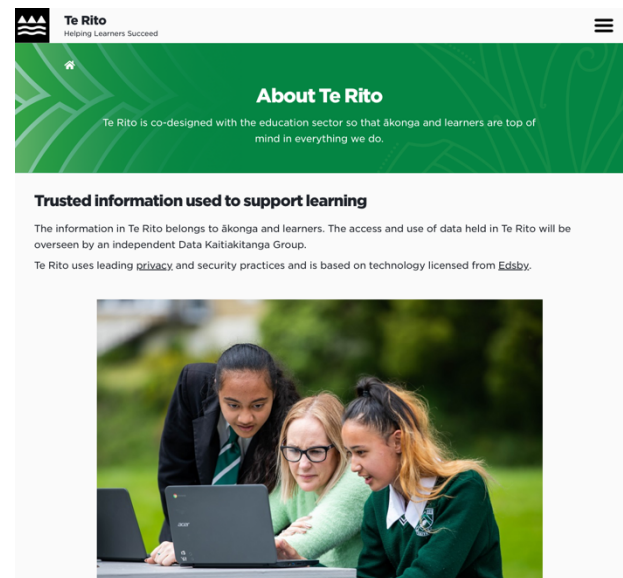
"We also surveyed a number of teachers across New Zealand to find out what was going wrong with learner information, and were horrified to find that on average people were spending about 25 minutes a day on what I would call no value-add stuff."

If relevant information could be made available, safely and securely and at the right times, children could receive the support they needed to achieve better learning and well-being outcomes, the Ministry believed. It began exploring how to enable richer information flows so learners could be supported to succeed at every stage of their education journey.

The New Zealand Ministry of Education's Te Rito electronic student record project is also now enabling social learning and collaboration features across New Zealand's schools

Massive ambition and project scope

The Ministry embarked on a three-year procurement process to determine if commercial technology existed that could allow it to obtain latest information from each of its schools nationwide, centralize it and make it available safely to stakeholders across the country. The project's scope was vast: synchronize information on more than 800,000 learners across thousands of schools and their unique systems every day, using open standards if possible, and other secure connections if not.

In 2018, the Ministry selected Edsby and its Unison™ education data platform and managed service, and began to work with the company to customize the solution to its needs. Edsby's social learning system and underlying Unison data platform had been proven at scale, safely managing the data of K-12 users around the world since 2010.

"Me tiaki te mana o te tamaiti me tana whānau - Te Rito protects the mana of the child and their family, and connects the data of the child to the owners of that data: the child and their parents. This is done over the entirety of their primary and secondary education and is to eventually include their early childhood and tertiary education, providing a seamless system for parents and students to track their education journey over time."*

- Myles Ferris, Chair - Ngā Rau Whakatupu Māori (Māori medium)

Safeguarding student data the overriding objective

The Ministry's high profile project was renamed Te Rito, after the inner leaves of the indigenous harakeke (flax) plant. With the underlying purpose of the project being to enhance student information sharing for the well-being and educational success of the learner, the name references project's guiding principle, which is to protect and uphold the mana, or integrity and respect, of the child and their whanau, or families. It also evokes the national data storage facility in which all the learner's information is stored, where it requires input and protection from vendors, schools, the Ministry and other stakeholders.

Keeping information safe and maintaining privacy of this national data repository was paramount from the start of the project. The Ministry invested heavily in the underlying security of Unison's communication with its systems. The internationally adopted Schools Interoperability Framework (SIF) was adopted and localized, and now powers many of the integrations. Provisions were made for rigorous, ongoing penetration testing of the many ways Unison receives and transmits information to and from schools, Ministry of Education and other government systems.

Following a high-profile breach of data in 2022 in an unrelated New Zealand government application, the Ministry paused the Te Rito program out of an abundance of caution. Satisfied with Te Rito's security, it re-started the program in March, 2023, with a strong sector-led model to ensure the project delivers what stakeholders need. The relaunched project has an even broader scope and vision and a renewed multi-year commitment to Edsby and Unison as enabling technology.

> **"Te Rito has the ability to support whānau / families to better engage in their child's education and build better relationships with their teachers."**
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> *- Myles Ferris, Chair - Ngā Rau Whakatupu Māori (Māori medium)*
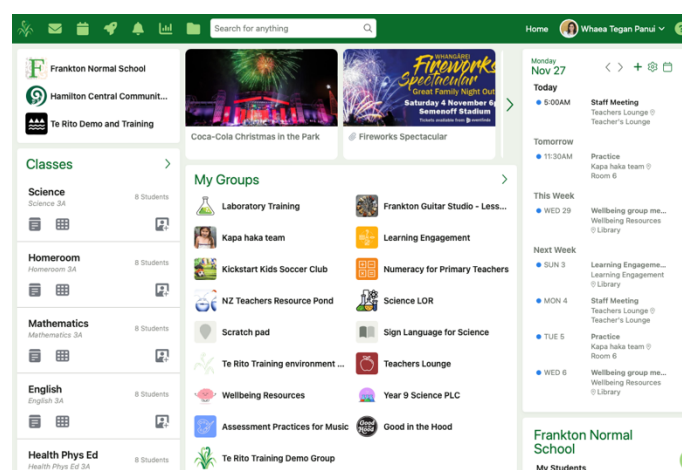
Enabling country-wide collaboration

Te Rito's original scope was a national electronic student records system with a lifelong record of learning encompassing pre-school, compulsory, tertiary and on-going adult learning. Now, Te Rito is expanding to provide additional capabilities to the country's schools.

Every school now has no-cost access to a modern, feature-rich system for teachers, students and parents to interact via browser or mobile device, with accounts automatically set up for all the school's users. It enables local school community engagement, learning management, assessment, student well-being features and more. It is being expanded with features to enable country-wide educator sharing and collaboration.

Te Rito is receiving stakeholder feedback and buy-in. Since being made available to New Zealand schools in September, 2023, more than 200 schools have opted in, with their data synchronized to the Ministry's secure repository. New schools are being added every week.

The Pūtauaki ki Rangitaiki Kāhui Ako in New Zealand's Eastern Bay of Plenty were the first schools and kura (Māori-language immersion schools) in the country to have access to Te Rito in an early-stage rollout of the platform. The pilot helped the Ministry investigate shared concerns and trends and give local principals and school leaders the ability to help shape the service.

Rachel Chater, Principal at Kawerau Pūtauaki School, highlighted the transformative impact of Te Rito. "Te Rito has provided our Kāhui Ako with the means to quantify the level of learning support required and identify specific needs across the cluster. This has allowed us to strategically allocate resources, leading to improved outcomes for our ākonga. It has also enabled us to collaboratively engage with a range of agencies, fostering creative access to additional support."

Te Rito, via a web browser or mobile app, enables a modern social learning, assessment and community engagement environment for educators, students and parents at every school

Positive impact

Te Rito is being welcomed by educators as way to better support students when they transfer. "With the secure data set stored in Te Rito, educators will 'know their learners before they teach them' which will greatly support strength-based teaching and learning and a success focused learning journey for ākonga / students," said Graeme Barber, Chair - Ngā Rau Whakatupu Auraki (English medium).

Information as key

The Ministry is co-designing and delivering Te Rito working closely with two sector working groups: Te Rau Whakatupu Māori for Māori medium and Te Rau Whakatupu Auraki for English medium. An independent Te Rito Kaitiakitanga Group is being established to provide stewardship of information held in Te Rito and make recommendations on the access and use of learner and ākonga data.

"We don't know exactly what the future will look like. But we know that making information available to those who need it is key," the Ministry acknowledges. With Te Rito, "the education environment becomes richer and educators and government agencies can start to shape investment and decisions, including about policy and practice, based on information that's accurately, timely and trusted."