

City charter school woos Amazon, Facebook

ELTON RIKIHANA SMALLMAN

One of Hamilton's newest schools is attracting the attention of tech giants Amazon and Facebook.

The city's first charter school, Te Kopuku High, opened in February and is making headway with industry reps, said chief executive Cath Rau.

"We've been in discussions with Facebook," Rau said. "We're discovering there is a lot of goodwill out there in the community and also in the tech community."

"What they are telling us is schools aren't changing fast enough in the ways we deliver the curriculum or even what we are delivering to cater for their needs."

Te Kopuku High has a Maori focus and puts Maori identity at the core of its teaching. It targets students from low-decile mainstream schools, although 30 per cent have come from Maori immersion schools.

The school has a roll of 110 students from Year 9 to Year 11. It has a waiting list of 35 and 15 staff.

"Our maximum roll can go to 300 and we are looking to do that by 2021."

"This group of Maori kids grow up in our system and don't get a lot of opportunity to explore, have acknowledged or even valued their own culture and identity. It's just so important for our Maori kids."

Rau aims to develop students' self belief through "STEAMD" education – science, technology, engineering, arts and maths, underpinned by design principles.

Seven of its staff are qualified teachers or "learning facilitators" and six are mentors or "coaches". Seven of the staff who interact with students are men.

Located at the old Waikato Times building in the Te Rapa industrial zone – across the road from a warehouse and next to Modern Transport Engineers – students are exposed to industry.

"It makes good sense to locate it in an area where you want students to be surrounded by the types of industries they might consider as a career option when they leave," Rau said.

Schools in residential areas don't allow students to "connect" with the workplaces in the community.

"It brings the curriculum a lot closer to the industries that will be able to open



Te Kopuku school, one of Hamilton's newest, is located in an industrial zone and is IT-focused.

pathways for our students. When they come to school every day, they are passing a whole lot of businesses and industries."

The old Waikato Times building is now owned by Modern Transport Engineers owner Robin Ratcliffe.

He turned down two commercial offers to lease the building to the school because he believes in education.

"There was a guy who wanted to put go-karts in, but we said no. We think young education is a good thing and the building suited it," Ratcliffe said. "We need to look at good Maori education..."

Ratcliffe scrapped the printing press and put in a full-size basketball court. The mezzanine floor of the old press room is lined with stationary bikes and cardio gear.

The roof has been fixed, the building rewired, ultrafast fibre has been installed throughout and new carpet laid.

He's cagey about how much he has spent to get the run-down building up to scratch for the students, but it's in the millions.

"It was in seven figures and we spent the seven figures on it but the thing was we couldn't do it any different," Ratcliffe said.

Rau has 35 years' experience in education – indigenous education is her "absolute passion".

At the start of the year, Rau tested her students and found more than 70 per cent of them were behind in their education.

After 20 weeks, the indications are "really good" for future assessments.

"We can see some really positive shifts from the beginning of the year to now for our students."