



+ Education special

# QUAKE SCHOOL SURVIVORS

The Canterbury earthquakes severely damaged 10 per cent of Christchurch schools, forcing more than half of the city's secondary students to attend classes in shifts. Amanda Cropp reports on lessons learned from educating kids in a quake-zone and one principal's determined battle to save his shattered school.

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Shirley Boys' High School students, displaced by the earthquake, in a rousing performance of the haka at host school Papanui High.



Senior students perform the Shirley Boys' High School haka at a farewell ceremony at Papanui High, where a plaque recording their thanks was presented to the head prefects of their host school after seven months of sharing the campus.

**T**aranga whakarongo kia mau! The opening words of the Shirley Boys' High School haka ring out across the car park at The Palms shopping mall on a chilly September morning and 1366 young men roar back in unison, celebrating their return home after seven months of quake-induced exile across town at Papanui High.

Accustomed to a school day beginning just after lunch and ending at 5.45 pm, some look a little bleary-eyed. I'm a little teary-eyed because somewhere in this heaving forest of calves clad in distinctive pale-blue socks are my two sons.

The haka is always stirring but, like the parents around me, what I feel more than anything is overwhelming relief that shift schooling is finally over, allowing family life to return to normal.

Afterwards, the boys march down North Parade, past a sign saying "Our Spirit Is Our Strength" and into a battered school that has cost \$2.4 million to patch up. The February 22 earthquake left it awash with sewage-contaminated silt and, just as repairs were gathering momentum, it was hit again on June 13.

The grey ooze of liquefaction ruined freshly laid carpets and newly fixed underground services, delaying the students' return by more than a month.

Shirley Boys' principal John Laurenson couldn't be happier to see his boys back on their home turf. With his bald head and pointed beard, he cuts a vaguely Shakespearean figure and his habit of wearing a Shirley uniform vest and scarf reflects his commitment to a school and a community which he refers to as "family".

Sitting in his new office, formerly a literacy room, Laurenson looks exhausted and admits he hasn't slept since Wednesday (it's now Friday). No surprise for a man who is in the office by 4.30am, allowing himself just an extra hour in bed on weekends.

In February, with both Laurenson family cars wrecked on quake-ravaged roads, he ran the 4km from home to school each day, appearing on the television news wearing his jogging gear as he escorted Education Minister Anne Tolley around the damaged school.

A staff member loaned him a mountain bike and he broke two ribs after catapulting over the handlebars when an apparently shallow puddle turned out to be a deep sink-

hole. But busted ribs were the least of Laurenson's problems as he faced the challenge of temporarily relocating the largest boys' school in the South Island and fixing its "munted" buildings.

"The first meeting with senior staff would have been on the Thursday [after the quake] and we did a site walk. It was awful. I came back that night and sat by myself in the quad, where there's a wee memorial for a boy who died of cancer, and shed a few tears. To be honest, I felt a bit sorry for myself and for the school.

"At that stage, I still didn't know whether anybody [from the school] had been killed." (He later discovered the mother of a student had died in the CTV building and a teacher's wife was badly injured in the city mall.)

But wallowing in self-pity isn't Laurenson's style and a deal was soon brokered to site-share at Papanui High, a co-ed school 7km from Shirley.

"Co-location" in Ministry of Education-speak was an inspired solution which led to 23 primary, intermediate and secondary schools sharing facilities so students could largely remain in the same classes with the same teachers.

Shift-schooling was restricted to 10 sec-

ondary schools and four are continuing shifts until the end of the school year. At the peak of the crisis, 11,000 students were involved, with host schools attending morning classes and guest schools filling the afternoon sessions. Lessons were squashed into four and a half hours, with a single break of about 25 minutes. The shorter 45-minute periods were popular with students, and some schools, such as Shirley, have opted to retain them. But, for families, the shift system was a logistical nightmare that wreaked havoc on daily routines.

Childcare was an issue for teachers starting earlier or finishing later.

Practices for sports teams with players on different shifts got shunted later into the evening and Shirley Boys lost some of its top sportsmen who changed schools so they could continue with afternoon coaching.

Students lost after-school jobs, a major blow for households where one or both parents ended up unemployed as a result of the quakes, and at least 100 families from Shirley Boys were in that category.

Simply getting to school was a major exercise because the Shirley school zone takes in part of the inner city which has few secondary-age students, so 60 per cent of its

roll is made up of out-of-zoners, some travelling from as far afield as Sumner, Rangiora and Woodend.

The Ministry of Education organised free transport for 7000 co-located students but services were at times a shambles. For several months, the round trip from Sumner to Papanui took three hours on six different buses, and drivers unfamiliar with routes repeatedly got lost or left students behind.

Parents worried about their children walking or cycling home on cold, dark winter nights and several "near misses" led Lion's clubs to donate more than 3000 high-visibility vests to site-sharing schools.

A \$500 per child Red Cross grant helped cover extra costs, such as petrol bills, because trips outside normal school hours to activities such as school council meetings and sports practices often required parents to do taxi duty. In one particularly busy week, our family did 180km of shift-related mileage and public transport certainly wasn't an option when my eldest son's Year 13 NCEA chemistry practical, normally an all-day affair, ended at 11.30pm.

Despite occasional mutterings from host-school parents who felt their darlings' education was compromised by sharing with



**Left: Shirley Boys' principal John Laurenson in the damaged library, which was left knee-deep in liquefaction. Above: A staff member in one of the carrels constructed in the Papanui High hall as temporary offices for Shirley Boys' staff.**

“interlopers” from across town, most guest schools were made to feel welcome and the Papanui/Shirley marriage was a happy one.

Papanui’s acting principal for much of the site-sharing period, Bronwyn Welsh, says her school was largely untouched by the quakes and felt it had a responsibility to help out those who had not fared so well, even if there were sacrifices.

Papanui’s school hall and six adjoining rooms became Shirley’s administration and staff offices. That meant relocating assemblies, drama classes, the school uniform shop, seating and other equipment. Three adult ESOL classes moved to a nearby primary school, and the school production was held in a local church performance centre. After-school sports practices were difficult because late-shift classes were using playing fields and gyms.

There was little on-site contact between the two schools because Papanui pupils exited out the back gate as Shirley boys entered at the front. But members of Shirley’s First XV wore a green Papanui colour strip on their rugby jerseys to acknowledge their hosts’ generosity; the two schools held cabarets together, formed a joint choir, and the prefects occasionally lunched together.

A report on the impact of co-located and relocated schools will be completed later this year following a survey of principals, parents, teachers and students. However, it’s already clear that this quake-enforced experiment had some positive and lasting consequences.

Bronwyn Welsh says the shorter lessons

and lunch break greatly reduced behavioural problems. “We have a referral room so three strikes and you’re out for a couple of periods... our stats on that are way down from perhaps 15 a day to between three and five.”

Another unexpected and very welcome outcome of the slimmed-down lunch hour was a dramatic reduction in littering.

Only three out of 111 Papanui staff wanted to return to the old school timetable so the school has introduced a permanent 8.30am to 2.30pm day with a slightly shorter lunch break, and staff meetings and professional development sessions are held before school.

When lessons end for the day, teachers now have more time to talk to students or take part in voluntary after-school activities. “The staff have been right with it; because of the experience with site-sharing they can see that the sky doesn’t fall in if you change things.”

The New Zealand Qualifications Authority implemented a range of measures to ensure Christchurch students affected by the quakes would not be unfairly disadvantaged, and the academic impact will be revealed when it analyses Christchurch NCEA results to see how they compare with other parts of the country.

Schools closed for between 18 and 78 half-days as a result of the September, February and June quakes, and Laurenson estimates that, along with snow-related closures, “the average boy is going to come into NCEA probably a month down in terms of teaching time”.



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Shirley Boys students boarding buses provided free of charge by the Education Ministry to get them to and from their late shift at Papanui High School.

Added to that, working parents often weren't at home to ensure boys got on with homework or were attending morning catch-up tutorials instead of sleeping late or sloping off to the PlayStation.

"The ones that worry me most are not the most able or the least able, but what I call the 45 per cent-ers, the ones who're perfectly capable of passing, but lack the self-discipline to get stuff done and don't turn up at tutorials," says Laurenson.

The temptation to flag school altogether was too strong for some students, and truancy rose about 10 per cent, a problem compounded by the fact that, due to technical difficulties, the school was unable to text parents about unexplained absences.

However, as at Papanui High, there have been some positives. The 45-minute class periods were such a hit that Shirley is trialling them until the end of the year with double periods to cater for practical subjects such as art and metal technology.

Head boy Jack Henry says the shorter lessons made students work smarter. "They go in focused, get work out really quickly and stay focused. It's not like an hour-long period when people get tired near the end and their attention starts to flag."

Laurenson sees the quakes as an opportunity to completely rethink education on the eastern side the city but before he can grapple with those questions he has to

know what kind of school he will end up with.

While he knows that Shirley Boys and its badly damaged sister school Avonside Girls' High (doing the late shift at Burnside High for the rest of the year) will remain on their old sites for two years, the future beyond that is unclear.

A geotechnical report done on the Marian College campus opposite Shirley Boys on North Parade concluded the top 10m of sandy soil was highly susceptible to liquefaction in the event of another earthquake of magnitude six or higher.

As a result of that report, and other factors, the Catholic Diocese decided to mothball the school for up to four years, during which time Marian will be accommodated at Catholic Cathedral College in the inner city, ending a 37-year tradition of sharing senior classes with Shirley Boys.

Land conditions can vary enormously over short distances in Christchurch, and it may be that the Shirley Boys' site is redeemable. But with 400 students living in soon-to-be-abandoned red-zone homes (along with 10 staff members Laurenson's home is "red" too), the question is whether the school can retain enough students to warrant rebuilding in its current location.

Year 9 enrolments for next year are healthy, with 60 boys on the waiting list, but the loss of 86 students since the February quake will slice \$150,000 from the school budget, and Laurenson hopes any staff cuts can be met by natural attrition.

His real fear is that the ministry's insist-

ence on leaving the school in a patched-up state – and realistically it could be at least four years before any new facilities are in place – will eventually put parents off. A plummeting roll would give the government the perfect excuse to rebuild one large co-ed school instead of replacing Avonside and Shirley. (Deputy-Secretary for Education Nick Pole, who heads the ministry's earthquake recovery effort, refused to be interviewed for this story; all questions had to be channelled through a ministry communications person via email.)

Anne Tolley says she is committed to retaining the city's two damaged single-sex schools. "I don't think Christchurch parents would be very happy if we removed that choice." But she adds it's a matter of waiting to see where people move to before deciding where to locate schools because, quite apart from population shifts associated with the red-zone exodus, 3500 of the 11,500 students who changed schools after the February quake appear to have quit the city permanently.

Laurenson favours a co-operative approach that could, for example, see Avonside and Shirley rebuilt side by side, combining classes at senior level where necessary and sharing a hall, gym or performance centre, with a public library on campus. (He abhors the current competitive environment which leads to schools scrambling for students and replicating expensive facilities, and was ropeable when a nearby school advertised its undamaged status in the annual recruitment drive for Year 9 enrolments.)

Although the worst of the seismic activity appears to be over, Laurenson predicts 2013 will be a crunch year for his school and community. "By then, the adrenaline will be gone and the cold reality will be all around [us]. That's when houses will be derelict and empty vacant sections will appear as houses are pulled down..."

"We're in a siege mentality at the moment and when that's over, and the hard yards begin, you've just got to pick yourself up and keep going day after day."

In a recent school newsletter, Laurenson quoted Friedrich Nietzsche as he described how the quakes had forced him to "stare into the abyss" and finished with lines from a Robert Frost poem: "But I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep."

Apt for a man who has set aside all thoughts of retiring to do a PhD so he can lead Shirley Boys through the next five years.

"I love this place dearly, and there's no way I could leave it in a state of extremis and toddle off to do my own thing."



The only "quake-prone" school building in the country to be declared unsafe is the main classroom block at Golden Bay High, in Takaka, vacated in July.

## How Quake Safe Are Our Schools?

Education authorities can rightly boast that no school buildings collapsed in the Christchurch earthquakes and the only reported hospitalisation was a child who sprained an ankle in a stairway.

Whether that safety record would stand if big shakes hit other parts of the country remains to be seen and some schools have qualms about ministry assurances on the safety of quake-vulnerable buildings which, by definition, have a high risk of failure in a moderate-to-large earthquake.

The ministry does not know what it will cost to seismically strengthen its building stock nationally and schools are worried they'll have to foot the bill for expensive remedial work from existing budgets.

By mid-August, local authorities had advised the ministry of 64 potentially earthquake-vulnerable buildings at 32 schools. They're based mainly in Wellington City and the central North Island because councils in those areas have done the most assessments, so they're likely just the tip of the iceberg.

The ministry's September property newsletter to schools says buildings

that do not meet more than one-third of current building-code standards are labelled "earthquake prone" and need to be strengthened, but "they are not dangerous in terms of the Building Act 2004 and can still be used."

Wellington East Girls' College principal Sally Houghton, who has two vacant school buildings requiring earthquake strengthening, describes that claim as mischievous. "In the Building Act there are definitions of dangerous buildings, but earthquake-prone buildings are not within that definition because they're dealt with separately in the Building Act. They [the ministry] need to be called to account for deliberately misleading the public and the education sector that earthquake-prone buildings are not dangerous."

Houghton speaks from experience. In 2009, she alerted the ministry to concerns about the school's main block, a three-storey unreinforced masonry building. After initially refusing to give it to her, the ministry eventually handed over an engineering report completed last summer. "I finally got it at the end



## Insurance Pays

Some private schools also took a hammering in the Christchurch earthquakes, and at St Margaret's College a gold-plated insurance policy is funding a speedy rebuild state schools can only dream of.

A 15-year redevelopment plan drawn up for the Anglican girls' school pre- quakes will be almost completed in three years with 60 per cent of the campus including the gym, library, swimming pool, chapel and several classroom blocks replaced. Senior boarders are living in motels while the Kilburn boarding house is refurbished and strengthened.

Principal Gillian Simpson says the damage was so extensive (above) it initially looked as if they might have to operate classes in split shifts, but fortunately the school bursar had upgraded their insurance policy shortly before the first big quake last year. "We had like-for-like replacement to new [building] code."

Business interruption insurance paid for \$5 million worth of repairs to infrastructure, the erection of 19 temporary classrooms and the hire of marquees housing the gym and chapel. The four-room maths block went up in 18 days, the six science labs in four weeks.

Parents with construction companies helped out and Simpson says an enormous amount of time was donated to get the temporary facilities up and running.

The new buildings are insured, but Simpson says there's still no guarantee the school will get earthquake insurance in future. "They can pull out with 30 days' notice."

Insurance is also a headache for state schools. Education Minister Anne Tolley says the excess charged on Christchurch schools has increased six-fold, while the insurance levy for the whole country has tripled.

**Above: St Margaret's College was severely damaged in the February quake. Students in front of the demolished maths and languages classroom block.**

of June when we wanted to renovate a building and take a wall out."

That report showed the main block, frequently occupied by 300 people, was strengthened to 17 per cent of the building code, while the hall was at 28 per cent.

Haughton says the ministry engineer later revised his estimate on the main block to 25 per cent but the board of trustees stuck by its decision to vacate the building, which has not been used since July.

"They had an engineer who said the building is safe to be used and we had an engineer whose advice was quite the opposite."

The hall is being strengthened so it can be used for forthcoming examinations, and remedial work this summer will lift the main block to 45 per cent of code. "We've asked an engineer to give us a view on whether that is enough."

Haughton suspects not, because she says the level of strengthening recommended by the Wellington City Council is 67 per cent and the ministry's own property handbook states that heavy unreinforced masonry buildings like theirs should be strengthened to 100 per cent.

Furthermore, a commercial property company told her that government departments leasing office space in quake-prone Wellington insist that buildings are 80 per cent of code.

Houghton Valley School on Wellington's south coast has also chosen to stop using two classrooms assessed as earthquake-vulnerable, but which the ministry says engineering

### Golden Bay High was swiftly vacated in July after an engineering inspection revealed the building had been strengthened to a mere three per cent of the building code.

reports rate as "not dangerous".

To date, the only quake-vulnerable school building in the country actually declared unsafe is the main classroom block at Golden Bay High, which was swiftly vacated in July after an engineering inspection revealed the building had been strengthened to a mere three per cent of the building code.

Acting principal Stuart Machin instigated that inspection after long-running concerns about the two-storey, reinforced-concrete building and he can't fault the ministry's initial response. "Within three weeks of that building being condemned we had eight brand-new [relocatable] classrooms on site."

(They were well travelled: Machin understands the classrooms, which were made in Matamata, were sent to Christchurch, where some



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The prefabs hurriedly installed to replace the abandoned classroom block at Golden Bay High.

geotechnical problem with foundations saw them returned to Matamata, where they got a new lick of paint before being sent to Golden Bay.)

Installation of the eight classrooms, decking, a new toilet block and ancillary services cost \$1.9 million and Machin still doesn't know if he will have to pay for some or all of this from the school's five-year agreement (5YA) money, allocated to schools for modernisation or health and safety work.

Fixing or demolishing the condemned

building will increase the total cost even further and Machin wants to move four of the relocatable classrooms plonked hurriedly on the school netball courts "so it looks more like a school and less like a prisoner of war camp".

Wellington East Girls' College has been told the \$400,000 cost of installing and removing four relocatable classrooms needed while the main block is out of commission will have to come out of its 5YA and Haughton thinks that's unfair.

She says schools with leaky building

problems do not have to pay for those repairs out of their 5YA, and schools that had seismic work done after a national survey in 2001 didn't have to either (for some inexplicable reason Wellington East's problems were not identified in that survey).

The ministry has undertaken to return and further strengthen the college's main block in three to five years' time and Haughton questions the economics of this two-step remediation process.

"There are questions about the use of public money in terms of having work done twice – of bringing in architects and engineers twice, bringing equipment back onto the site twice and relocating building occupants twice."

Haughton says the Christchurch quakes were a real wake-up call and it's not good enough for the ministry to plead poverty. "We've seen people dying in buildings. We know what it means now when a building collapses so it's not a hypothetical thing any more.

"There's been a huge shift around people's tolerance to risk because it is no longer an abstract reality. It's about having the political will to say to the Government, 'We have this issue and we need to work with these buildings and make them safe.'"

Ministry spokesman Nick Pole says a survey looking at how Christchurch schools performed in the quakes will be used to undertake more detailed assessments of school buildings identified by local authorities as quake-vulnerable and to prioritise remediation work. +

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