

New lease on life for school

Five years later and Kapi Mana School has now transformed into Mahinawa Specialist School and Resource Centre — a new name, location, and a new future for its staff and students. **Dani McDonald** takes a look through this exciting new building.

The struggle is now over for Mahinawa principal Fay Stanton as she sits in her newly built office with a proud smile on her face. “We think its absolutely fantastic and we still can’t quite believe that it has all come true,” she says.

Since 2006, Ms Stanton has fought for this moment.

Mahinawa Specialist School and Resource Centre was once Kapi Mana School situated in dilapidated buildings on Kenepuru Drive.

In 2006 staff and the building were at their limit.

While the school received outstanding ERO reports, concerns over the size and quality of the school premises surfaced after staff found maggots in one of the classrooms.

“When they looked in the roof they found dessicated rats that had been poisoned to die,” Ms Stanton says.

In March 2008, *Porirua News* reported that the four-classroom school was run-down, cramped and completely inadequate for students as old as 21 who are disabled, even violent.

The Ministry of Education looked at purchasing Capital and Coast District Health board land around Kenepuru Hospital, but grew tired of delays.

At that point, with the designs for a new school in mind, the school spoke to Mana College.

The college was able to relinquish the property, thanks to the kindness of the Mana College Board of Trustees, Ms Stanton says.

However the school is not part of Mana College.

“We changed the name to Mahinawa Specialist School and Resource Centre. . . You have got to have your own identity,” she says.

Mahinawa means working by water — an ideal name for a curved school that neighbours a nearby stream.

The specialised school, which is built for 40 students and

currently hosts 28, opened in Elsdon at the beginning of May.

Between 85 and 90 per cent of students have autism, one child has down autism, a dual diagnosis.

The school was designed for 30 students, but Education Minister Anne Tolley approved an increase.

“As she was going she said, if you had a choice, what would you want and I said 40, and I got a letter later saying the school can have up to 40 students.”

Mahinawa still has four satellite classes at Porirua, Titahi Bay Intermediate, Ngati Toa and Raumati Beach schools.

Ms Stanton says the Mahinawa

location is for secondary students only, however the other schools use resources and rooms.

She says this benefits both worlds.

“The learning they [autistic children] do is a lot of copying and they learn from the other groups.

“We believe the students have failed from the day they were born, so we put them in classes where they can win. It is important that they learn,” she says.

The building is designed by Opus. Architect Margaret Julian spoke with teachers, students and parents about their preferred design of the school.

Upon walking into the building, natural light appears to blanket every crease of the curved hall. Colours are neutral to keep the students calm.

“Children find it difficult to be around harsh colours and harsh



NEW BEGINNINGS: Mahinawa Specialist School and Resource Centre principal Fay Stanton at her new school especially designed for students with severe autistic needs. Photo: Dani McDonald / CCN8986110Mmahinawa2



FULLY EQUIPPED: The microlite ceiling hoist system carries wheelchair bound students to the bathroom, to the bath, or from one apparatus to another. The same equipment is found in Wellington Hospital.

Photo: Dani McDonald / CCN8986110Mmahinawa1

light,” Ms Stanton says.

The windows at the top of the walls open and close automatically to keep temperatures at the same level.

Each room has a card-access, which allows children to leave the classroom without leaving the building. Ms Stanton says staff had a difficult time keeping students in one room at the previous building.

Each classroom has about six students, a teacher and a therapist, and a mini-kitchen. Teachers encourage students to make their own Milo.

Each class has up-to-date technology with projectors, top-line televisions, computers and lap tops. The rooms look out to the grass field through the enormous windows. “Our classes are built deliberately so everything is safe,” Ms Stanton says.

The school boasts a soundproof

music therapy room, a sensory room with mirrors so children can learn to recognise themselves in the mirror. A specialised room is built for children in wheelchairs which includes a cot, a trampoline [to lie on], a swing and a Microlite Ceiling Hoist system — the same used in Wellington Hospital. “We try and change their positions three to four times in different apparatus. . . They can get a totally different sense of movement,” Ms Stanton says.

Growing in the school garden are olive, apple, peach and feijoa trees which will be used in lunchtime meals. Ms Stanton says the school uses sustainable methods. She sits back down in her office, the natural light gracing her face, and smiles. “We’ve been so lucky. It’s absolutely fabulous and it’s a treat for Porirua,” she says.