KA PAI KAI ROTORUA

Nourishing
Healthy Minds

healthy families
Rotorua
He oranga whānau

KARAKIA

Takoto au iho
Au ki raro ki tō matua
Ki a Papa
Ko Papanui
Ko Paparoa
Ko Papa-i-tukia
Ko Papa-i-mātoe
Ko Papa-i-wāwāhia
Wāwāhia e tau
Wāwāhia e Rongo
Te ua, te kano
Ko Rua ka eke
Koi waho
Koi te hapū nui!
Haumi ē, hui ē. Tāiki e!

MIHI

Tēnei ka mihi ki ngā ringawera i whai wāhi mai ki ngā mahi kua ranua ki te pūrongo nei.
Nā te mahi tahi i tutuki i a tātau te whakataukī a ngā tūpuna e mea ana: Mā tō rourou, mā taku rourou, ka ora te iwi!

Ka mutu: Ko te kai a te rangatira, ko te kōrero!
Nō reira kia kai wō koutou mata pīkoko i ngā kōrero makue kai roto i tēnei pūrongo.

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WHAT IS HEALTHY FAMILIES?

Healthy Families NZ is a large scale prevention initiative that brings community leadership together in a united effort for better health in the places we live, learn, work and play.

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Our goal is for all New Zealanders to enjoy health promoting social and physical environments that enable healthy food and physical activity choices, being smokefree, drinking alcohol only in moderation and increasing mental health, resilience and wellbeing.

The Healthy Families NZ approach focuses on addressing the underlying conditions that impact our health and wellbeing, in order to reduce the risk of preventable chronic disease. All of the Healthy Families NZ localities are connected through this common approach and principles, which creates our prevention movement.

We seek to uncover the journey that leads to chronic disease, understanding the lived experience of whānau and communities so that we can determine together how best to address the conditions that lead to experiencing preventable chronic disease.

HEALTHY FAMILIES NZ PRINCIPLES

Implementation at Scale
Strategies are delivered at a scale that impacts the health and wellbeing of a large number of the population, in the places where they spend their time - in schools, workplaces and communities.

Adaption
Strengthening the prevention system requires constant reflection, learning, and adaptation to ensure strategies are timely, relevant and sustainable.

Collaboration for Collective Impact
Long term commitment is required by multiple partners, from different sectors, at multiple levels, to generate greater collective impact on the health of New Zealanders. Knowledge is co-created and interventions co-produced, supported by a shared measurement system, mutually reinforcing activities, ongoing communication and a 'backbone' support organisation.

Experimentation
Small scale experiments provide insight into the most effective interventions to address chronic disease. These experiments are underpinned by evidence and experience, and are monitored and designed to then be amplified across the system - if they prove effective.

Leadership
Leadership is supported at all levels of the prevention effort, including senior management, elected officials, and health champions in our schools, businesses, workplaces, marae, sporting clubs, and other settings in the community

Workforce
A dedicated prevention workforce who are embedded within their local community, driving and supporting systems change. Healthy Families NZ kaimahi are skilled in systems thinking, creating adaptive responses to complex issues in local and cultural settings, and are able to identify prevention activity with potential for sustainable outcomes.

Equity
Health equity is the attainment of the highest level of health for all people. Equity recognises that different people with different levels of advantage require different approaches and resources to achieve equitable health outcomes. Healthy Families NZ will have an explicit focus on reducing inequities for groups at increased risk of chronic diseases

Line of Sight
The line of sight provides a transparent view on how investment in policy is translated into measured impacts in communities, ensuring best value from every dollar spent on prevention.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi
Healthy Families NZ is committed to fulfilling the special relationship between Māori and the Crown under Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Te Tiriti).

Healthy Families NZ prioritises the inclusion and protection of mātauranga Māori as an important enabler of Māori health and wellbeing. We collaborate with partners across our communities to improve Māori health outcomes and active pae ora. Māori participation and decision-making at all levels of planning and implementation is critical.

WHAKARĀPOPOTOTANGA

Executive Summary

Ka Pai Kai Rotorua was a community-led social enterprise established in 2017 through Healthy Families Rotorua to confront food insecurity, inequitable access to nutrition, and childhood obesity. What began with 100 lunches a week grew into a regionally significant kaupapa delivering over 8,500 healthy meals daily by 2024 across Rotorua, Whakatāne, and rural Bay of Plenty.

Unlike conventional food provision models, Ka Pai Kai Rotorua was designed from the outset as a systems-level intervention. It disrupted the education system by embedding good kai into kura; it redirected government investment into the local economy; it strengthened community resilience through employment pathways; and it restored mana and dignity to tamariki by ensuring no child went hungry at school.

At its peak, Ka Pai Kai employed 120 staff, channelled $12 million annually back into the local economy, and demonstrated the power of community-led solutions to transform intergenerational outcomes. Its kaupapa embodied food sovereignty, sustainability, and health equity.

In 2021, the kaupapa transitioned into Ka Pai Kai Aotearoa through a joint venture with a local iwi trust. This partnership brought new investment and governance capacity while maintaining the kaupapa's original intent and values. It enabled scaling at a regional level and strengthened the operational backbone needed to meet increasing demand.

Although government contracts reduced the scale of operations by 2025, the lessons of Ka Pai Kai Rotorua, and its evolution into Ka Pai Kai Aotearoa, corroborate that authentic, community-owned initiatives not only alleviate immediate needs but also reshape systems, strengthen communities, and lay foundations for intergenerational change.

KUPU WHAKATAKI

Introduction

Ka Pai Kai Rotorua emerged from the understanding that while whānau food choices were heavily constrained by poverty and rising living costs, lunch at kura was the one meal the system could directly influence.

For too many tamariki in Rotorua, this meal was either missing altogether or replaced by cheap, processed food with little nutritional value. Teachers were reporting that children were arriving hungry, tired, and unable to focus, and in some cases, not attending school at all due to whakamā.

In response, staff from Healthy Families Rotorua, including a systems innovator and a nutritionist, began exploring what a school food intervention could look like if it was grounded in nutrition, equity, and dignity. Their early research revealed that around 80% of lunchboxes lacked nutritional value, and 10% contained no food at all. These stark findings demanded urgent action.

The team looked outward for inspiration, drawing on the example of Ka Pai Kai Tokoroa. This hospital-based lunch service had pioneered an affordable, nutritious alternative to unhealthy lunch options. With permission to adopt the name and branding, they began shaping a model uniquely tailored to Rotorua.

Critical to this early development was the support of local organisations. One local enterprise, which had already been exploring how to provide lunches to kura but had found the costs prohibitive, became one of the first to join forces. Their sponsorship of 20 lunches a day for Hurunga Te Rangi, a local decile 1 kura, demonstrated the power of partnership in making the kaupapa a viable option.

Another organisation also came on board through a payroll giving scheme, where staff contributed $1 a week (matched by the organisation) to subsidise lunches at Rotorua Primary. These early alliances not only provided resources but also signalled a collective commitment to tamariki wellbeing.

With some early seed funding, a part-time kitchen manager, and a growing team of volunteers, Ka Pai Kai Rotorua was officially launched in 2017. Its mission was to nourish the minds of the future generation.

From the outset, the kaupapa was anchored in the values of Healthy Families NZ – equity, systems change, and community-led solutions. It recognised that kai is more than physical nourishment: it is central to the holistic wellbeing of tamariki and their whānau. By ensuring every child had access to good food, Ka Pai Kai was nurturing all dimensions of wellbeing as expressed through Te Whare Tapa Whā – taha tinana (physical health), taha hinengaro (mental health), taha whānau (social and family connections), and taha wairua (spiritual wellbeing). In this way, the kaupapa was designed not only to fill lunchboxes but to strengthen the foundations of collective wellbeing.

As the kaupapa grew, it became clear that sustainable scaling would eventually require more than goodwill and short-term funding. What started as a small community response was laying the foundation for a kaupapa that could evolve into something larger, with new partnerships and structures needed to carry it forward. This pathway later opened the door for the transition into Ka Pai Kai Aotearoa, through a joint venture with a local iwi trust that shared its values, vision, and long-term commitment to tamariki wellbeing.

TE PŪ ME NGĀ TAKE

Background & Rationale

In the mid-2010s, Rotorua's tamariki were living within some of the starkest inequities in Aotearoa. The statistics painted a sobering picture:

- Childhood obesity had reached epidemic proportions, with Aotearoa holding the second-highest rate in the OECD, second only to the United States.
- Oral health outcomes in Rotorua were among the poorest nationally, with decayed or missing teeth a common barrier to children's confidence and participation in learning.
- Deprivation was deeply entrenched, with 40% of children under nine years old living in the most deprived neighbourhoods (NZDep 9–10). Within the low decile kura, up to 75% of these tamariki were Māori, highlighting the disproportionate impact on Māori wellbeing.

These systemic inequities were manifested daily in kura. Teachers described classrooms where children arrived hungry, lethargic, withdrawn, or disengaged. Tamariki were falling asleep in class, lacking the energy to participate, and in some cases refusing to attend kura altogether out of whakamā. For others, hunger drove desperate behaviours. Some were stealing food from their peers, while others carried lunchboxes filled only with processed snacks or nothing at all.

These realities made one truth inescapable: hunger was not only a public health crisis. It was a barrier to learning, attendance, emotional regulation, and long-term wellbeing.

At the time, Healthy Families Rotorua and its leadership recognised the complexity of food environments. Poverty, busy lives, and entrenched patterns of convenience shaped household eating habits. Influencing choices in the home, while necessary in the long term, was beyond what could be achieved in the immediate. What the system could directly influence, however, was the one meal that every child had access to in the school day: lunch.

This insight gave rise to a strategic question:

> *If we can't influence what's happening in the home, could we disrupt the one meal we do have some influence over – lunch?*

Ka Pai Kai Rotorua became the prototype. It was not imagined as a quick fix or a charity handout. Rather, it was conceived as a systemic intervention. One that could address inequities at their root by providing nourishing, dignified, and affordable kai to tamariki every single day.

The rationale was that if tamariki were consistently fed nutritious meals at kura, the impacts would ripple outwards, improving learning, strengthening attendance, reducing stigma, uplifting whānau, and ultimately shifting the conditions that shape community wellbeing. Ka Pai Kai Rotorua was therefore never just about food provision. It was about restoring equity, dignity, and opportunity through kai, and about proving that local, community-led solutions could achieve what larger systems had struggled to deliver.

From the outset, it was also clear that scaling such a kaupapa would eventually require more than community goodwill and limited funding cycles. While Healthy Families Rotorua could incubate and establish the model, sustaining and growing it to a regional scale would demand long-term investment, stronger infrastructure, and new forms of partnership. This understanding later paved the way for Ka Pai Kai Rotorua's evolution into Ka Pai Kai Aotearoa, through a joint venture with a local iwi trust that shared its values and vision for tamariki wellbeing.

TE RAUTAKI WHAKAHĀNGAI ME TE PANONI PŪNAHA

Strategic Alignment & Systems Change

Rather than a conventional lunch service, Ka Pai Kai Rotorua was designed as a systems-level initiative to shift the conditions affecting child wellbeing across education, health, economic, and social domains. From the outset, its kaupapa aligned with Healthy Families NZ's systems change approach, embedding equity, food sovereignty, and sustainability into every decision.

Education System Disruption

By embedding nourishing kai into kura, Ka Pai Kai transformed the learning environment. Teachers consistently observed calmer classrooms, improved concentration, and more consistent attendance.
In one Whakatāne kura, a boy with chronic absenteeism began attending daily once lunches were introduced. This demonstrated that reliable access to good food was not just fuelling children – it was removing barriers to participation and learning.

Health System Disruption

Replacing processed, sugary foods with fresh, whole kai shifted tamariki's palates and expectations of what a meal should look like.
At first, feedback often requested more salt or sugar, but with positive role modelling from teachers – who ate the meals alongside their students – attitudes quickly changed. By the fourth week, feedback forms were overwhelmingly positive, reflecting the preventative health impact of consistent nutrition. Tamariki were not just eating better; they were learning healthier patterns for life.

Economic System Disruption

At its peak, Ka Pai Kai generated around $12 million annually, with the majority of the revenue deliberately reinvested in Rotorua and Bay of Plenty suppliers. The kaupapa prioritised bulk buying from local growers and small businesses, even when cheaper alternatives were available through national distributors. This deliberate choice kept government investment circulating locally, supported Māori and iwi-owned enterprises, and contributed to a stronger regional economy. In doing so, Ka Pai Kai disrupted the conventional flow of school food procurement, shifting resources from corporations and redirecting them into the hands of local producers and communities.

Social System Disruption

Equally important was the way Ka Pai Kai reshaped the social environment of kura. By providing lunches universally, the programme removed the stigma attached to hunger. No child had to explain why they had no lunch or why their food looked different. Instead, all tamariki sat together to share the same kai, reinforcing mana, dignity, and a sense of belonging. This shift reached beyond nutrition, cultivating school cultures where inclusion and equity were woven into everyday life.

Intergenerational Impact

The leaders of Ka Pai Kai understood that the kaupapa was not only about immediate outcomes but also about laying foundations for intergenerational change.
By disrupting food systems at the school level, the initiative sought to influence the wellbeing trajectory of tamariki for decades to come. Leadership often framed that this was not about the next year or even the next decade. It was about the next century. Ka Pai Kai was consciously designed with a long horizon in mind, recognising that today's nourished tamariki would grow into tomorrow's whānau leaders, decision-makers, and changemakers. In this way, the kaupapa positioned itself as a lever for a hundred years of impact, advancing collective wellbeing far beyond the school's walls.

TE TUPU ME TE MANAWAROA

Growth & Resilience

Ka Pai Kai Rotorua's journey from a small-scale volunteer effort to a regionally significant enterprise was marked by innovation, resilience, and a relentless commitment to the community. Every stage of growth reflected both the challenges of operating on limited resources and the creativity required to overcome them.

Volunteer Foundations

In the early days, Ka Pai Kai ran almost entirely on aroha. Grandparents, parents, and community champions rose before dawn to prepare meals and delivered them in their own vehicles, using their own petrol.

This volunteer base became the heartbeat of the kaupapa. They not only sustained operations when there was no money to pay staff but also set the tone for a model rooted in collective responsibility. As funding grew, many of these same volunteers transitioned into paid roles, bringing with them invaluable knowledge, loyalty, and a deep sense of ownership.

Kitchen Evolution

The journey of finding and maintaining kitchen space illustrates both the fragility and determination of the kaupapa.

The first meals were cooked at the Waikite Rugby Club and then moved to the wharekai at Tarewa Pounamu Marae. Just before the COVID-19 pandemic, Ka Pai Kai found a semi-permanent home in a former fish and chip shop in Western Heights. Though modest, it provided the first sense of stability.

Eventually, as demand skyrocketed, the kaupapa spread into multiple commercial kitchens across Rotorua and Whakatāne, including a fully equipped, once-dormant teaching kitchen at Te Wānanga o Awanuiārangi. Each move represented more than just logistics. It was a testament to the kaupapa's persistence in the face of resource scarcity and its ability to repurpose underused community assets for collective benefit.

COVID-19 Partnerships

The outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 became an unexpected catalyst for growth. In response to the pandemic, the government released a request for proposals to rapidly expand school lunch provision as part of emergency support measures. Ka Pai Kai secured one of these contracts and was given just eight weeks to scale up dramatically.

At the same time, the collapse of Rotorua's tourism sector created an unexpected opportunity: skilled hospitality staff and underutilised commercial kitchens suddenly became available. Rather than seeing this downturn as a crisis, Ka Pai Kai reframed it as a chance to build resilience. Partnerships were quickly formed with local tourism operators, enabling displaced staff to be employed and their kitchens repurposed. This innovative model not only expanded production capacity almost overnight but also kept 38 whānau in employment. This ability to turn crisis into opportunity laid the foundation for the next phase of growth.

Transition to Ka Pai Kai Aotearoa

In 2021, Ka Pai Kai Rotorua entered a new phase of development, transitioning into Ka Pai Kai Aotearoa through a joint venture partnership with a local iwi trust.

Healthy Families Rotorua had incubated and grown the kaupapa to a point where further scaling required new investment. The Ka Pai Kai leadership and board identified the iwi trust as the right partner: it had a strong social arm, a proactive community focus, and values that aligned with the kaupapa's vision.

Through a series of wānanga and discussions, both boards recognised shared goals and mutual benefits. Ka Pai Kai contributed its people, intellectual property, and established systems, while the iwi trust contributed much-needed capital to bankroll equipment and cover wage costs during holiday periods. At that stage, efficiency was low and labour-intensive – staff were still hand-slicing beef for 2,000 sandwiches a day. The partnership created the breathing space to modernise operations, improve efficiency, and build a stronger backbone for growth.

The joint venture was structured with equal governance, each board holding a 50% share. This balance ensured that while new resources flowed in, the kaupapa remained grounded in its original intent: nourishing tamariki, strengthening whānau, and embedding systems change through kai. The iwi trust partnership marked a turning point, shifting Ka Pai Kai from survival mode into a sustainable and scalable enterprise ready for its next stage of impact.

Scaling with Integrity

By 2024, Ka Pai Kai had grown into a multi-site operation producing 8,500 lunches daily, employing 120 staff, and running six kitchens across the Bay of Plenty.

Yet throughout this expansion, the kaupapa never abandoned its core values. Menus remained nutritionally robust, packaging decisions were guided by sustainability, and procurement favoured local suppliers. Staff were supported not only with employment but also with training, leadership pathways, and, eventually, 52 weeks of pay per year.

This growth story was not linear or easy. It was characterised by constant adaptation, community problem-solving, and the courage to seize opportunities even under pressure. The resilience of Ka Pai Kai Rotorua lay in its ability to expand rapidly without losing its soul: a kaupapa powered by community for the wellbeing of tamariki.

TE WHAI MAHI, TE WHĀNAU, ME TE ORANGA HAPORI

Employment, Whānau & Community Wellbeing

From the very beginning, Ka Pai Kai Rotorua was about more than filling lunchboxes. It was about creating opportunities for people, uplifting whānau, and strengthening the community. The kaupapa showed that providing good kai could go hand in hand with building confidence, employment pathways, and long-term wellbeing.

The volunteer base that carried the kaupapa in its early years became the foundation for its employment model. Volunteers who had shown commitment and reliability were always given first opportunity to step into paid roles as funding became available. This approach ensured that those who had already invested their time and aroha into the kaupapa were able to benefit from its growth. Many who began as kitchen helpers or delivery drivers went on to secure permanent employment, bringing with them the deep sense of ownership that comes from having helped build something from the ground up.

Ka Pai Kai also became a training ground for leadership. Many staff entered the organisation with little formal education or work experience, but through consistent coaching, encouragement, and responsibility, they discovered strengths they had not recognised in themselves. People who had never imagined themselves in supervisory positions were gradually supported into management and people-leader roles. This progression not only benefited the kaupapa but also created a ripple effect of confidence and aspiration for their whānau.

Financial security was another significant achievement. While many school food providers offered no income during school holidays, Ka Pai Kai took a different approach. It pioneered a model of 52 weeks of pay a year, ensuring that staff could rely on a stable income even when schools were closed. This decision was more than a retention strategy; it was an acknowledgment of the dignity of work and the need for stability in people's lives. Staff were brought in during holidays for training, kitchen deep cleans, and other tasks, ensuring they remained connected and valued as part of the team.

The benefits of Ka Pai Kai were not confined to tamariki and staff alone. Whānau wellbeing was strengthened through the programme's flexibility and generosity. Leftover meals were often sent home, helping to ease the pressure on families during weekends and holidays. This small but meaningful act reinforced the kaupapa's understanding that food security is not an isolated school issue but part of a wider ecosystem of whānau wellbeing.

Among the many stories of personal growth, one stands out as an example of what the kaupapa made possible. A woman who had spent years as a stay-at-home caregiver for her disabled child began working with Ka Pai Kai as a kitchen hand. Over time, she discovered a passion for cooking, gained confidence in her abilities, and eventually trained to become a qualified chef. This journey, sparked by an opportunity that might have seemed small at first, transformed not only her own future but also that of her whānau.

These stories illustrate how Ka Pai Kai nourished more than bodies. It created pathways into employment, offered stability where there had been insecurity, and unlocked potential in people who had long been overlooked. In this way, the kaupapa fed both stomachs and futures, demonstrating that a community-led approach to kai can generate lasting wellbeing far beyond the school gate.

NGĀ KAWEKAWE MATUA ME NGĀ HUA

Key Impacts & Outcomes

The true impact of Ka Pai Kai Rotorua cannot be measured by numbers alone, yet the scale of its operations illustrates the significance of what was achieved. At its peak, the kaupapa was producing **8,500 lunches every school day**, reaching **42 kura across Rotorua, Whakatāne, and surrounding districts.** It employed **120 staff across six kitchen sites** and generated an estimated **12 million dollars annually in local economic activity.**

The qualitative impacts reveal a deeper story. Teachers reported noticeable changes in the classroom as tamariki who had previously arrived hungry and disengaged became more settled and ready to learn. Concentration improved, behaviour calmed, and the overall learning environment shifted. In some schools, attendance increased dramatically. One principal described how students who had previously refused to attend were now arriving on time every day, eager to learn. These changes were not temporary; they represented a shift in how tamariki experienced their education when the barrier of hunger was removed.

Ka Pai Kai also dismantled the stigma that often accompanies food provision. Because meals were delivered universally, no child was singled out as the one in need. Tamariki shared the same kai at the same time, reinforcing inclusion and mana. For many children, this was the first time they had experienced the security of knowing lunch would always be there, without question.

The kaupapa created a workforce pathway that went far beyond employment alone. Volunteers grew into paid roles, staff with limited formal qualifications developed into leaders, and whānau members discovered skills and passions that transformed their futures. In this way, Ka Pai Kai invested in people as much as it did in food, proving that employment grounded in kaupapa Māori values could restore dignity and purpose.

Sustainability was also embedded in the model. By sourcing kai from local growers and businesses, Ka Pai Kai strengthened the regional economy while ensuring meals were fresh and culturally appropriate.

The deliberate decision to prioritise local procurement, even when it came at a higher cost, redirected public investment into the hands of the community rather than national or international corporations.

Over time, Ka Pai Kai also influenced kura policies. Schools that once allowed sugary drinks began to adopt Wai Māori-only environments, and food literacy became part of everyday classroom culture. These policy shifts, supported by the consistency of the lunch programme, helped create environments where healthy choices were normalised and celebrated.

Taken together, these outcomes demonstrate that Ka Pai Kai Rotorua was far more than a food service. It was a catalyst for systemic change, influencing what tamariki ate, how they learned, how whānau engaged with kai, and how local economies could thrive when anchored in collective wellbeing.

Quantitative

8,500
lunches daily at peak

120
staff employed across six sites

42
kura served

$12million
local economic impact annually

Qualitative

- **Improved classroom calmness and engagement**
- **Increased attendance and reduced absenteeism**
- **Removal of stigma through universal provision**
- **Workforce development and leadership growth**
- **Localised, sustainable procurement**
- **Positive policy shifts within kura, including Wai Māori-only environments**

NGĀ WHAKAWHIWHINGA

Awards & Recognition

The achievements of Ka Pai Kai Rotorua have been acknowledged through a series of awards, partnerships, and recognitions at local, regional, and national levels. These honours reflect not only the kaupapa's operational success but also its wider contribution to tamariki wellbeing, systems change, and community resilience. Recognition from government agencies, local Council, iwi, and business networks has reinforced Ka Pai Kai's credibility and highlighted its role as an exemplar of community-led innovation.

2017

Rotorua X Pitch Night
EPIC Pitch (Overall Winner)
People's Choice Award

2018

Ministry of Health
Outstanding Achievement Award, recognising innovation and impact in tamariki wellbeing.

2019

Lakeside Waiata Mai Concert
Selected as the charitable recipient.

2020-2023

Rotorua Lakes Council
Partnership funding ($30,000 per year) in recognition of Ka Pai Kai's contribution to tamariki wellbeing and community

2021

Tompkins Wake Rotorua Business Awards
Ministry of Social Development: Not-for-Profit & Social Enterprise Award
NZME People's Choice Award.

These acknowledgements demonstrate the trust placed in Ka Pai Kai Rotorua as a proven, values-driven initiative that continues to deliver tangible benefits for tamariki, whānau, and communities.

NGĀ AKORANGA ME NGĀ HURITAO

Learnings & Reflections

The journey of Ka Pai Kai Rotorua offers valuable lessons on how communities, schools, iwi, and government can collaborate to create lasting change. While the kaupapa delivered immediate benefits for tamariki, its most significant value lies in the insights it provides for shaping future initiatives.

One of the clearest lessons is that authentic, community-led intent is essential. Ka Pai Kai succeeded because it was designed with and for the people most affected by food insecurity. It responded directly to the lived realities of kura, whānau, and tamariki, rather than imposing solutions from outside. This grounding in community intent built trust, ensured cultural resonance, and enabled the kaupapa to grow with integrity.

Another key learning is that systems change can be achieved by focusing on one critical point of influence. By zeroing in on school lunches, the kaupapa demonstrated that targeted disruption can create ripple effects across education, health, and community wellbeing. Providing one reliable, nutritious meal each day sets the conditions for learning, restores dignity, and normalises healthier food choices. This shows that change at a single leverage point can shift the wider system.

The role of volunteers also provided both inspiration and challenge. In the early years, Ka Pai Kai survived on the aroha of grandparents, parents, and community members who rose before dawn to cook and deliver meals. Their commitment was extraordinary, but reliance on unpaid labour also created vulnerability. The successful transition from a volunteer-driven model to a stable, paid workforce highlighted the importance of building structures that honour generosity while ensuring long-term sustainability.

Ka Pai Kai also demonstrated that workforce development and social change are inextricably linked. By creating pathways into employment and leadership, the kaupapa invested in both people and kai. Volunteers became employees, kitchen hands became chefs, and whānau members discovered new skills and aspirations. The lesson here is that food programmes can be designed not just to feed tamariki but to build local capability and confidence.

Another insight is the importance of embedding food sovereignty and sustainability from the outset. Ka Pai Kai refused to compromise on the quality of kai, rejecting cheap, processed foods in favour of whole, locally sourced ingredients. This approach not only nourished tamariki but also kept government investment circulating in the local economy. The lesson is that community wellbeing and economic resilience are deeply interconnected. When public funding supports local producers and suppliers, the benefits are multiplied.

Ultimately, the kaupapa emphasised the importance of adaptability and continuous feedback. Every stage of growth required quick adjustments, whether shifting kitchens, adapting menus, or scaling up under the pressure of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ka Pai Kai demonstrated that listening to kura, tamariki, and whānau, and being willing to change in response, is vital to sustaining trust and impact.

These learnings show that Ka Pai Kai Rotorua brought systems change to life through genuine community intent, focus, adaptability, and a commitment to intergenerational wellbeing. They also highlight the kaupapa's lasting impact and the opportunities ahead.

TE WHAKARERENGA ME NGĀ ĀHEINGA ANAMATA

Legacy & Future Opportunities

Although by 2025, government contracts reduced the scale of Ka Pai Kai Aotearoa, the legacy of the kaupapa endures in powerful and tangible ways. It created a skilled workforce of local people who gained confidence, developed careers, and acquired leadership skills through opportunities they might never have had otherwise. It demonstrated the strength of iwi and community partnerships, proving that collective solutions could deliver outcomes on a scale once thought possible only for large national providers. And it shifted the culture of kura, embedding the expectation that healthy kai is not an occasional extra but a normal part of school life.

The transition into Ka Pai Kai Aotearoa in 2021 marked a pivotal step in the kaupapa's evolution. Through its joint venture with a local iwi trust, the kaupapa secured the resources and governance strength needed to scale with integrity. This partnership ensured that, as operations expanded, the kaupapa remained grounded in its founding values of mana, dignity, and community wellbeing. It was a model of how iwi and community leadership could work together to embed systemic change.

The lessons of Ka Pai Kai are clear indicators of future opportunities. The kaupapa had already begun exploring a circular economy model, envisioning a system where kai could be grown, prepared, consumed, and repurposed locally, with food waste returned to the soil as fertiliser. There was also growing potential for national policy influence, ensuring that iwi-led and community-based food sovereignty models could be embedded within the wider school lunch framework. Beyond kura, the kaupapa highlighted the importance of whānau-focused nutrition initiatives that could extend its impact into homes, strengthening intergenerational wellbeing.

For Healthy Families Rotorua, the kaupapa was never only about putting food on the table. It was about restoring mana, dignity, and opportunity, and about rebuilding the conditions in which tamariki could thrive. The long view was always at the centre of the work. The kaupapa was not about quick fixes but about preparing the ground for the future. Feeding children today was part of feeding the generations to come – tamariki who would grow into adults, raise whānau of their own, and become the next leaders and changemakers. The kaupapa was designed as a long game, with impacts stretching out a hundred years or more into the future.

In this way, Ka Pai Kai Rotorua, and later Ka Pai Kai Aotearoa, stand as both a legacy and a blueprint. It shows what is possible when community, iwi, and local systems align behind a shared vision. It proves that nourishing tamariki is not only about alleviating hunger in the moment but about reshaping futures, strengthening communities, and setting the conditions for intergenerational change.

KUPU WHAKAKAPI

Closing Words

Ka Pai Kai Rotorua began as a simple community response to hunger, yet it grew into a kaupapa that transformed the systems surrounding tamariki wellbeing. From its earliest days, when volunteers cooked out of borrowed kitchens, to becoming a large-scale operation that feeds thousands every day, it has proven what is possible when vision, courage, and community leadership come together.

The Healthy Families approach underpinned the way the kaupapa was activated, providing the systems thinking, facilitation, and incubation that enabled community ideas to be nurtured into sustainable solutions. By working alongside whānau, kura, iwi, and local organisations, Healthy Families Rotorua helped shape the conditions for Ka Pai Kai to emerge, grow, and demonstrate the power of collective leadership in action.

The transition into Ka Pai Kai Aotearoa in 2021 marked a new chapter, demonstrating how iwi and community partnerships could extend the kaupapa's reach and resilience while staying true to its founding intent. Even as government contracts have recently reduced the scale of operations, the kaupapa's impact remains undeniable.

Its legacy is not only in the meals served, but in the dignity restored, the futures reshaped, and the belief it has left behind: that nourishing tamariki is the foundation for learning, equity, and long-term wellbeing. Ka Pai Kai showed that when a community leads, when kai is grounded in values, and when systems are reimagined with tamariki at the centre, intergenerational change becomes possible.

The challenge now is to carry these lessons forward, ensuring that tamariki across Aotearoa continue to be nourished in body, mind, and spirit, and that communities remain at the heart of shaping the systems that sustain them. Ka Pai Kai's journey affirms that feeding tamariki is never just about food; it is about shaping futures, restoring mana, and building the conditions for thriving generations to come.

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