

Primary School Cross Country Events

Physical Education New Zealand (PENZ) believes that:

being creative with how we engage ākonga (students) in a cross-country context can allow them to develop a broad range of physical skills, character qualities (including perseverance and resilience), and social skills while positively impacting self-worth.

Reasons for change

School cross-country events prompt a range of reactions (both good and bad) from ākonga, their whānau, and teachers.

Schools give several reasons why their cross-country typically involves running laps around a field:

1. We've always done cross-country like this.
2. Cross-country aims to teach resilience, perseverance, and goal setting (i.e., it's supposed to be tough, not fun).
3. We want to foster excellence at our school, and we have some fast runners.
4. Our school physical education (PE) programme is shaped by the primary inter-school calendar. We run these events this way so we can pick the best runners for the inter-school competition.

In its traditional form, the cross-country event doesn't engage a large proportion of our ākonga; they don't enjoy it, and it's failing to get many of them excited about any kind of physical activity. According to research by Sport New Zealand, one in four tamariki (children) aged 6–13 years don't like cross-country, and by the time tamariki are 13 years old, only 52% of them actually enjoy participating in it. [1]

Schools often experience a spike in non-attendance on cross-country day. Principal of Queenstown's Remarkables Primary School Debbie Dickson has seen a "noticeable increase in absences on cross-country days".[2] Deputy Principal of Awapuni School, Gisborne, Stu Barclay agrees, observing ākonga "trying all sorts of methods to get out of doing cross-country, like hiding in the toilets".[3]

Some schools have been examining how they are currently delivering their cross-country. They've been looking at whether such events satisfy the desired learning objectives for their ākongā; and they've been finding that the traditional-style events are coming up short.

Stu Barclay believes the traditional cross-country offers limited positive learning experiences, saying "when you have a job to cater to 280 students and want to instill healthy minds and bodies for all [of them], there are better ways to connect their physical, thinking and social skills".

Many schools across Aotearoa New Zealand are reshaping their cross-country events to find these "better ways" and create opportunities for more ākongā to be engaged and excited about physical activity. Marcia Ferguson of Ascot Community School, Invercargill, describes their afternoon fun-run obstacle course as being "... about having fun; it's about teamwork, it's about getting involved, it's about participating, it's about the kids supporting each other and actually having a go".[4]

This is confirmed by Catherine Roberts, a teacher at Gisborne's Te Wharau School, who had this to say after their inaugural mud run in 2018: "The best thing for me was the enthusiasm from the tamariki the following day - 'we want to do it again!' You don't usually hear that after an ordinary cross-country event. They loved it! Also, they went HARD."

Things to think about

So, to reflect on the four reasons for the typical school cross-country events listed above, consider these questions:

1. Are school traditions worth upholding if they don't contribute to a positive learning environment for all ākongā?
2. Is making ākongā do activities they actively dislike the best way for them to learn perseverance, resilience, or goal setting?
3. What is the best way for fast runners to achieve their personal best? Is it through a school event where they race against ākongā they already know they can beat, or might it be better to create a lunchtime or after-school running club for them to participate in, facilitated by a knowledgeable/passionate parent?
4. Should the sole purpose of a school's cross-country event be to select ākongā representatives for the inter-school event? If a qualification element is required, schools may need to include a competitive component, but this shouldn't shape the school event. According to Sport Southland's 'Made to Move' school facilitator Ricky Bakker, "To have schools like Ascot Community School thinking about ways they can engage their whole school rather than a select group on activities such as cross-country days is absolutely fantastic. Taking a slightly different approach, particularly one that is led or at least fed into by the kids, means you can potentially have a much larger group engaged, having fun, and realising that being physically active is a great thing".[4]

Does our current cross-country event meet the requirements of our Health and PE (HPE) curriculum? A school's cross-country event ought to reflect and celebrate the learning that the ākongā have been achieving through HPE. Relevant achievement objectives need to be taught explicitly through the preparation for, reflection upon, and experience of the event itself. Encouraging ākongā to be involved in creating a cross-country event and inviting them into the process of deciding how best to prepare for such an event allows for a rich learning environment. It places the event itself in a context of a range of learning opportunities rather than that of a one-off event in which the ākongā are expected to absorb the learning by competing only.

There are multiple achievement objectives at curriculum levels 1–4 that lend themselves to this process, for example:

Level One: Personal identity

Level Two: Regular physical activity

Level Three: Community resources

Level Four: Positive attitudes.⁵

School cross-country events can provide a glorious opportunity to explore physical activity outside; to get terrifically muddy; to balance, crawl, jump, climb; to encounter physical obstacles and overcome them. All it takes is a little imagination and creativity.

You can take the following ideas/guidelines and use them to reshape your school cross-country to better align with your specific learning objectives. Each school is likely to arrive at a different end point because of the different physical spaces and options for adventure that are available at different schools around the country. But there are always opportunities for fun!

- **Rename your event.** Embrace different ways of doing things and escape the preconceptions and stereotypes that accompany the word “cross-country”.
- **Take a walk** around the venue you are planning to use – for most of us, it is just our school yard. Notice anything that you might be able to incorporate in your event: a long jump pit can be transformed into a mud pit; playground equipment can be climbed over or through; consider taking a trail through a group of trees or directing the trail through a sand pit; use an open space for a slip and slide; incorporate hay bales, inner tubes, or a spiral of doom, trees to run around, planks to balance along, etc.
- **Involve the tamariki in the planning.** Take some of your older ākonga outside and see what they can imagine. They may need a bit of exposure to what is possible – if you have pictures from an inspiring mud run or obstacle race, this is the time to share them.
- **Involve whānau.** This might start when you reach out to tell them about the upcoming event and ask for help with equipment, etc. Keep connecting with them around what you are working on with the ākonga and how they might like to participate on the day. Involving whānau in the event is a win-win situation, and according to Sport New Zealand, having parents who are willing to practise with and positively support the event goes a long way to bolstering the fun factor for tamariki.¹ Ākonga love to see their teachers getting muddy, too!
- **Use laps to build confidence.** A multi-lap course will allow ākonga to tackle the obstacles a few times, improve their confidence and skills, and allow whānau to see their tamariki in action.
- **Create several start points.** As you begin to lay things out, remember you do not want to create a bottleneck at different obstacles along the way. There are a couple of ways to tackle this issue, but one of the most successful is to spread the group out and start them from several different points around the course. The starter hooter goes off, and they all run for a certain amount of time (in the same direction) rather than a certain number of laps. This is a brilliant way for all tamariki to experience success at overcoming the obstacles rather than being judged for their speed.

- **Involve your community.** Phone your community contacts – the local community running club might have flags you can borrow to mark your course. If they have organised a local mud run, they might even have a cargo net they could lend you. Old football nets work well, too – try your local football club. And who do you know who might have hay bales or rubber tyres?
- **Add fun.** Costumes, bubbles, coloured powder, and water balloons all add excitement to the event.
- **Preparation is key.** Ask ākongā how they could best prepare to take part in an event like this. For example “Do we need to practice crawling or balancing while we are breathing hard? How about running and leaping?” Let them help you design appropriate practice sessions for cross-country.
- **Learn from others.** Here are some videos of innovative cross-county events that will give you some great ideas:
[Te Wharau School Cross Country \(2.44\)](#)
[Te Hapara School Cross Country \(3.12\).](#)

References

1. Research shines light on enjoyment (or not) of school cross country. Clark P. (2018, May). Sport New Zealand, Ihi Aotearoa. Retrieved from <https://sportnz.org.nz/about/news-and-media/news-updates/research-shines-light-on-enjoyment-or-not-of-school-cross-country/>
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3. Cool runnings. Malcolm J. (30 July 2020). *Gisborne Herald*. Retrieved from www.gisborneherald.co.nz/local-news/20200730/cool-runnings/
4. Invercargill school taking proactive approach to physical activity. (May 2019). Sport Southland. Retrieved from www.sportsouthland.co.nz/newsarticle/77340newsfeedId=477512&newsfeedPageNum=5
5. *The New Zealand Curriculum*. 2015. Ministry of Education.

Resources

Cross country. Run Jump Throw, Athletics New Zealand. See: <https://sportnz.org.nz/media/1811/cross-country-update-0-1.pdf>