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Far North drinking in the water-only message in schools

The Far North is welcoming the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education's push to ban sugary drinks with a nationwide campaign starting today.

Both Ministries are joining forces to encourage schools to consider adopting a water-only (and plain fat—reduced milk) policy, in line with World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations to create healthy school environments.

The initiative is being pushed via an educational campaign involving public advertising, government publications and online social media forums.

Sugary drinks are one of the most significant causes of poor oral health and contribute significantly to childhood obesity and Type 2 diabetes. The latest NZ Health Survey data shows that 17% of Northland children drank fizzy drink regularly, with the prevalence in Maori children more than double that of non-Maori children.

Healthy Families Far North also welcomes the push, recognising that that while each school will make its own decision, the team will work collaboratively with key stakeholders to bring water-only policies in schools to fruition.

The Far North District is comprised of 67 primary, composite and secondary schools that to varying degrees have implemented internal policies to support health-promoting environments.

Kaitia-based Te Kura Kaupapa Maori o Pukemiro has in place a Healthy Choices, Healthy Lifestyles policy which aims to support both school-based and lifelong success through the provision of healthy food choices. Encouraging students to drink 'wai Maori' is one procedure inherent in the policy that aligns with the Te Aho Matua school curriculum principles.

Former Board of Trustees member and senior kaiako Hori Chapman says encouraging tamariki to drink water at the kura is "the norm".

"Drinking water is part of accelerated learning and maintaining good levels of hydration, so the policy is critically important," he adds.



He adds implementing a water-only policy is tied up with supporting whanau to make good eating choices, acknowledging there can often be a conflict between the behaviours promoted at kura and those normalised in the home.

Students agree that drinking water is the healthiest choice when presented with options. “Fizzy drink is really really bad because it makes you fat and gives you lots of calories,” says student Asher Williams.

“We’re technically only allowed to drink water or milk here anyway. It’s not as if fizzy comes out of the taps!” adds student Ty Pomare.

The government push for water-only schoolgrounds aligns with the kura’s recent movements to further promote the health of its students. Earlier this year, the kura began to offer the Real Kai service – a low-cost food delivery service that maximises locally grown, seasonal produce – and it has proven a success with whanau.

Te Taitokerau Iwi CE spokesperson and Te Runanga o Te Rarawa chief executive Kevin Robinson says the battle for sugar-free drinks is being won when mokopuna will ask for inu wai as their first alternative.

“We’ve beaten it when the day comes that we can have a can of fizzy in the fridge – and in six months’ time it’s still sitting there,” he says.

He considers a water-only policy in all schools to be a “great move” adding that Te Tai Tokerau iwi would support the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education in its implementation moving forward.