

Creating Inclusive Sporting Experiences for Neurodiverse Learners

St Columba's Catholic School, Hamilton

St Columba's Catholic School is a vibrant, multicultural primary school located in Hamilton, New Zealand. With a roll of approximately 500 students, the school serves a diverse community and places a strong emphasis on holistic development through its Catholic values. Sport Waikato has worked with St Columba's Catholic School for many years, both individually and through the Catholic Kāhui Ako and as a result a strong relationship has been formed.

In recent years, St Columba's has strengthened its physical activity programme by making sport a compulsory part of the school week, aiming to support student wellbeing, engagement, and hauora. The question was raised by Sport Waikato around the children who might not fit into the typical physical activity or traditional sport setting, and what could be done to engage these children.

A challenge emerged - the compulsory nature of the sport programme highlighted a gap in provision for neurodiverse (ND) students—those with autism, ADHD, sensory processing differences, and other learning or behavioural needs. For some of these learners, traditional sports settings felt overwhelming, unpredictable, or socially demanding, often leading to anxiety, withdrawal, or disengagement.

Case Study



Creating Neurodiverse Sports Afternoons

A key feature of the programme was the use of a Hungerball Arena - a portable, inflatable sports structure that supports small group participation in a circular format. The arena naturally lends itself to inclusive play, allowing students to engage at their own pace, with clear boundaries and minimal sensory overload.

This initiative provided a structured yet flexible alternative sporting experience for ND students

The change was immediate and powerful. Where some ND students had previously opted out or felt isolated during sports sessions, they were now engaging enthusiastically, initiating play, and expressing enjoyment.





To extend the impact, St Columba's also invited ND students from nearby schools to join the sessions, turning the afternoon into a shared, inter-school opportunity for connection, confidence-building, and fun. Staff ensured that activities were low-pressure, choice-based, and attuned to the sensory and social needs of the participants.

Attendance and participation in sport improved among identified ND students, with some asking when the next session was happening - a shift from initial reluctance or refusal. Teachers noted improvements in student mood, confidence, and peer relationships.

“ We’re seeing kids lead and encourage others when before they’d hide on the sidelines. ”

What's Next?

- Expand the model into other curriculum areas where ND students may need adapted environments to thrive.
- Share the model with other Catholic schools and the wider Hamilton Kaahui Ako.
- Train staff and student leaders in neuroinclusive practice, so that inclusive sport becomes a whole-school norm, not a special event.

By listening to student voice and designing for inclusion from the outset, St Columba's has demonstrated how small, strategic interventions can drive meaningful change for learners who are often underserved in mainstream settings.



IMPACT

Around 60% of ND students were disengaged during regular PE lessons.

Post-intervention reflections suggest that at least 80% were now actively participating and enjoying the sessions.



“ It’s the first time I’ve played a game without worrying about getting it wrong. It’s just fun. I like that we can play how we want, and it’s not too loud. ”

Parents reported that their children were coming home talking positively about sport for the first time. Some families of visiting students expressed interest in replicating similar opportunities in their own schools.

