SABBATICAL REPORT

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STUDY FOCUS:

The terms of reference for study focussed on the learning pathways on offer through the curriculum and the different learning models utilized to effectively engage students in a Secondary setting. The opportunity to explore and examine effective leadership practices to drive school improvement to a sustainable level in order to ensure student outcomes improve was a second focus.

RATIONALE: Student achievement results have been well below the National average with less than 50% of students gaining NCEA Level 1 in the last ten years in my current school setting, except for 2007/2010 where more than 50% or more students achieved NCEA Level 1. The school improvement model to raise results has been developing since 2007 following my appointment and while focussed around student engagement through a more student centred curriculum the shift to improving results has been slower than anticipated. A focus on the school culture was initiated in the scoping and development stage of school improvement during 2007 and identified that social competence was the overarching culture driving the teaching and learning across the school.

The experience of driving school improvement processes as a school leader had been challenging due to the systemic issues evident.

This report outlines the successful models or practice observed and discussed during my sabbatical leave.

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and for the subsequent invitation to attend the International Leaders Conference in Brisbane in May 2011.

METHODOLOGY: In consultation with two Principal network groups that I belong to I began to define the focus for the study. After reading the findings from the recently published research-Te Kotahitanga; the professional readings written by John Edwards-'Thinking, Education and Human Potential'; 'Sustainable Leadership' by Hargreaves and Fink (2005); 'Leadership for the 21st Century' by J.C Rost; the professional books, "Breakthrough"-Michael Fullan, Peter Hill, Carmel Crevola, "Redefining Leadership"-Sergiovanni, "Curriculum 21"-Heidi Jacobs, "Leading and Managing"-Vol.16. No.2 2010 ACEL, "Visible Learning"-John Hattie, "BES Teacher Professional Development and Learning", and "Building Learning Power"-Guy Claxton I developed a set of twelve focus questions. From the answers to these questions I have summarised the ideas/findings below.

LEARNING PATHWAYS ON OFFER THROUGH THE CURRICULUM AND ENGAGING LEARNERS EFFECTIVELY:

1) Learning through Farnet: The increasing demands on resourcing challenge schools to maintain broad curriculum frameworks to meet student/community need. The use of Farnet allows for students in small numbers to undertake learning through video-conferencing. The cost is minimal with a video bridge needed and 0.1 of a staff member to oversee the programme. This model of learning is proving popular with both students and parents. Students can access an actual class in action with a trained specialist and involve themselves in the teaching and learning happening at the time.

2) School wide rubrics for teaching and learning: A number of schools have now developed and implemented their own teaching and learning rubrics. Each rubric clearly identifies what the expectations are on a continuum in terms of effective teaching practice to effect quality learning outcomes for students. Teaching staff are given support through professional learning sessions-both school wide and in smaller learning communities-to progress through the rubric in order to increase their capacity as quality practitioners. Some school models have now linked the rubric to appraisal and to the implementation of operating at least "ten walk-throughs" per year. There is a record kept of the walk-through to ascertain where a practitioner is sitting on the rubric. The Senior Leadership Teams and Heads of Faculties are responsible for this implementation. The rubrics are then discussed with the practitioner soon after the walk through. One school has taken the next step of organising their own school planners for their teachers to ensure the planner reflects the teaching and learning

rubric. The alignment between what the students experienced in their classrooms and what their teachers were delivering utilizing the rubric was evident across one school observed demonstrating a sustainable model was in place.

3) Subjects on offer: Every school visited offered a minimum of two pathways for students in the senior school. The Guidance teams, Senior Academic Deans or Pathways Director's in each school were accountable for ensuring all students from Year 9 through to 13 were interviewed about their learning pathway. These teams were therefore focussed on learning outcomes for students and less on being there to assist students in solving problems. A number of Guidance team members had returned to study to undertake Psychology degrees and some were teaching this as a subject. Most schools no longer offered "tasters", instead offering six monthly semesters in the junior school. Apart from the usual subjects on offer, others on offer in the junior school were the following: Financial literacy from Year 9, Environmental studies, Electronics, Humanities, Hospitality and Service, Hairdressing, Fashion and Design (different from the Fabric/Textiles programmes). In a few schools the focus on engaging students in the learning has been a strong focus and a long term trial of giving Year 9 and 10 students the opportunity to complete half yearly semesters in the subjects of English, Maths, Science and Social Studies rather than a full year has not been to the detriment of those students achieving their National qualifications. It has, however, ensured those students have remained engaged in their learning. On offer in senior programmes was Marketing, Psychology, Society and the Environment, Hospitality and Service, Retailing, Philosophy. A number of schools provided a linked University programme at the senior level in a variety of subjects.

In order to provide opportunities for deep learning and for a wider subject range to be offered, the structure of the school day and the timetable were under review in some schools. Block-scheduling was implemented in a few schools with others considering this as an option. In this model there are three blocks for learning in a school day providing increased opportunities for students to engage in work experience placements as part of their learning journey.

4) Junior Diploma of Learning/Graduate from Junior School: Most schools operate a set of established criteria across their junior school subjects- which Deans monitor as part of their responsibility for student leaning

outcomes-to ensure students attain appropriate levels in the curriculum to progress and to ensure student attendance and work habits are ready for senior school learning. Some schools also have a citizenship component and a co-curricular requirement to their graduation from junior school. Some schools are working on the idea that Year 11 is still part of their junior learning programme and have decided to set up a senior college as part of their campus. Students who do not attain Level 1 NCEA-or equivalent-are required to return for Summer school. There is also a set senior uniform for the senior college so this encourages learners to attain their first formal year level qualification to ensure that they can wear the senior uniform for Year's 12 and 13. In this model students are held back and given support to attain at the curriculum level required before they move on. The mantra for this junior qualification is not so much about "How am I going?" but on "Where am I going?"

5) Academic Counselling/Tracking Student Achievement: Most schools are undertaking a model of checking where student achievement is at during regular checks throughout the year so that feed forward and goal setting can take place to ensure students are motivated to stay on track. In most cases the model has been developed with the Senior Leadership team undertaking this task and then utilising a distributive leadership model the responsibility has become that of the Heads of Faculty and the Deans. In some cases a school had two Academic Deans who are accountable for this work. A further extension of this work is now being developed by some schools to ensure the form teacher/tutor has this responsibility. It is then the form teacher who leads the parent teacher interview and co-leads this with the students about their learning. The interviews are 20 minutes duration. Parents may also choose to seek an interview from their child's specialist teachers should there be further issues which need attention. In practice the form teacher is responsible for carrying out the liaison with each child's teacher from the report prepared to ensure that they have a thorough understanding of each child in their form class. Parents and students find this model effective. An extension of this work is to ensure each school has a Student Achievement Manager who oversees the model and also carries out predictor checks on how a student should be performing based on their Year 9 entry statistics. Each student is given a predictor from these results and also from their teachers after a term's work to ascertain expected achievement. This gives each student a motivator to strive for. To extend those students who are striving for excellence levels "Scholarship Breakfasts" are commonplace in many schools as are weekend study retreats.

6) Student Engagement: An opportunity to strengthen the engagement of students and teachers in effective teaching and learning practices is being implemented gradually at one school through a 'Student and Teacher Growth Initiative'. This initiative is being described as 'an information driven model for sustainable student and teacher performance'. Student performance data is collected over several years and synthesised into easy-to-read information illustrated by graphs/charts to show comparative growth students have achieved year by year. The Apache system is utilised to provide the robust database. Through the introduction of a teacher-reflection process-Edreflect-the information establishes a direct link to student performance so that early in the year teachers can review where their student's performance is at and determine how they will help each student lift their performance. Box and whisker diagrams compare how a teacher's class performs against another class of the same subject. Teachers are required to provide written comments on student performance across a range of good to poor and then provide some strategies they will utilise to improve/enhance the teaching and learning in their current classes. These become the teacher's goals for each term. Teachers meet in small groups to discuss their reflection and confirm their goals. The reflection process is further enhanced by two surveys which are carried out with a cross-section of students in each teacher's classes where students comment on their teacher's performance. Students are also asked to reflect on their own performance in each subject that they take and these comments will be read by their teacher. Students will also be able to access their own performance information so that they can use this in student-led parent conferences and to motivate them to set specific learning goals. Their own performance information will be compared to other learners in the class using a scatter graph system. Eventually parents will be provided access to the target scatter graphs. A teaching and learning team within the school provides ongoing professional development for all staff. This initiative ensures both teachers and students become persistent at working out 'ways and means' to grow.

7) NZ Curriculum development: All NZ schools were well established with their implementation of this with many utilising the front end of the document to further develop teacher practice and ownership of the school direction. A number of curriculum learning areas were continuing to grapple with the notion of 'concept versus knowledge' approach to teaching and learning. Those schools who were embedding the inquiry approach to learning across the learning areas were finding that student engagement levels had improved dramatically.

8) A Student Engagement Tool: Many schools in NZ utilise the "Me and My Schools" survey from the NZ Council of Educational Research to undertake an analysis on the before and after picture of school improvement programmes to check how the programme has affected the school learning culture.

9) Middle Schooling: The value of this model, common in Australia, was clearly evident in being able to track student achievement across their learning from Year 1-13. School leaders in Australia are able to have a clear evidential picture of student progress without the interruption of transitioning to another place of learning. Students had developed a real sense of strong pride and belonging through learning at one school. Opportunities for students to engage along a differentiated learning pathway rather than the traditional chronological approach to learning increased student engagement levels particularly in the middle years of schooling. This model of schooling is supported by the research work of James Nottingham on differentiated learning approaches for success.

EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP MODELS:

1) Distributive leadership: Many school principals utilised this model in their practice. Reference to leaders in this field of research were discussed- Michael Fullan, David Hood, Stephen Covey, Lester Levy, Andy Hargreaves, Dr Viviane Robinson and Dr John Edwards. Finding and positively growing leadership expertise across the school was vital to the success of this model. Being able to access the potential for growth was a challenge for some schools in developing a strong learning culture.

2) Developing a learning culture as core school business and integrating this with an established model of social competence: Effective school principals focused on the learning culture using student performance data as one measure of school improvement. Developing the key competencies was woven into the core fabric of the school's main business-achievement. All principals stated that the learning culture was paramount to the success of their students and their school. The mental models of each staff member could either act as contributors to the school learning culture or act as detractors from the culture of learning. A number of Principals therefore spent significant time strengthening staff alliances to ensure the culture of learning was maintained. A reading and survey by Christopher Wagner and Penelope Masden-Copas –"An audit of the culture starts with

two handy tools" provides a structure to check where the learning organisations culture sits. A quote from the reading which resonated with many Principals interviewed is "Culture is the bracing for the bridge from previous to future achievement. If the braces are strong, the chances of improving are high." A model of professional development should therefore include professional learning on developing the mental models amongst teachers to ensure a philosophy of continuous improvement is a focus for all. Finding middle and senior leaders who can lead in the strengthening of the 'bridge braces' through improvement interventions is paramount to raising student achievement.

Leadership work in this area nearly always requires an examination of teacher practice/beliefs and therefore understanding where teachers' mental models sit through the behaviour /actions they exhibit is critical. Understanding teachers through a general grouping in terms of their behaviour can be helpful as a learning culture is developed/enhanced. In one group, mastery teachers aim to move progressively along a continuum from good to great. These teachers are self-reliant, innovative and driven by student outcomes. Based on feedback given to them they will continue to grow, thrive and be at the top of their game. They are also the champions of causes and therefore will support school improvement and change acting as agents of change. Teachers in this group will model distributive leadership at its best. In a second grouping, teachers who operate as detractors to change have a particular style of teaching often using deficit theorizing to explain the poorer performance of their students. Often these teachers will claim that results are important but do not 'walk the talk' in terms of changing their actions to enable learners to gain successful outcomes.

Teachers who operate in this way do not teach so badly that their competence is questioned however their sometimes aggressive style can intimidate students and result in student/parent complaints. They also often need and expect constant positive feedback and will become disaffected should this not be forthcoming. This group can often encourage and persuade the third grouping, the teacher conformists, to join them as detractors of the school improvement process. The teacher conformists will take a mid-line stance on school improvement and change sometimes wavering dependent on the staff they are conversing with. These teachers are usually well-liked by students and viewed as collegial by most staff because they will generally comply rather than act confrontationally. Many principals felt that with a critical mass of teachers described as conformists and/or detractors it was difficult to shift the

culture of the school to a focussed learning culture which is student centric. Their work as leaders of change would therefore take longer as there were more mental models to shift across the school. Principals can so often be busy responding to a constant barrage of events rather than making the time to orchestrate real leadership. It is the work at the mental model and vision levels which will bring about sustainable school improvement and therefore improved student outcomes (Levels of Perspective model-Daniel Kim) Kim's Level of Perspective model aptly identifies the five stages of leverage in bringing about school improvement. There therefore needs to be a deep cohesion between personal values, behaviour and purpose. Hargreaves and Fink (2005, p 24) write of sustainable and effective leadership requiring "a strong and unswerving sense of moral purpose, inner conviction, unshakable faith and a driving, hopeful sense of purpose that stretches far beyond the self".

3) Community inclusiveness: Examples of successful models of community participation utilised were- Year level forums with parents twice termly/cross-section of parents from the year level panels to discuss key school issues/celebrations once per term/weekly newsletter/student achievement focused events/on-line news web page for queries/information sharing/prize drawers for return of surveys/running surveys at parent conference evenings/BOT available at parent conferences-can help with survey distribution. (other examples utilised were commonplace and so not included here)

4) Valuing staff: My questions around this surprised a number of Principals. Most Principals undertake to shout morning tea/drinks on a Friday, send letters of congratulations or thank you letters, have drawers with wine/chocolate, acknowledge staff both publicly and privately for the work they do. In a number of schools the social committee ensure the staff morale is well maintained and that functions are held to give that feeling of value and 'feel good' amongst staff. In one school a team has been set up to manage a bonus system. The funding pool is resourced from funds other than the Crown and the team make decisions around the allocation based on the developed criteria.

5) Coaching staff: A number of schools visited now have coaching models in place for staff to engage learners in how they teach and learn. Mastery teacher is a term used to describe these coaches in some schools and while they align to the work of the Specialist Classroom teacher, they work

at a strategic level of supporting teachers with the art of learning to better engage learners. Coaching is also available to those leading the learning across the school, for example, Faculty Heads, Deputy Principals and Principals. Training is given to students who act as Learning Councillors in some schools to ensure students are centric to the school wide learning on offer. This is in a development phase in a few schools.

IMPLICATIONS/CONCLUSION

The opportunity to reinforce the leadership practices that need to be consistently attended to in order to embed a strong culture of learning and achievement was valuable. While the role as principal has been challenging in the current environment I have confirmed through talking to other principals, leadership teams and staff that the learning journey I have undertaken is essential for a school to meet its obligations of student achievement improvement. The commitment of the staff, students and parents to the development of a learning culture has now eventuated with the school improving its results significantly. There is still a way to go to embed the change. Providing a coaching model to teachers as they grow their capacity in their work is a model I observed that was assisting with the drive of school improvement in other schools. Being mindful of Kim's Level of Perspective' model as teachers who lead learning will hopefully assist in embedding the actions of practice needed for improvement outcomes to be sustained.

Other ideas for principals to consider are identified throughout this report.

This sabbatical opportunity was timely, valuable, thought-provoking and confirming.

Julie Small