



HELPING BUILD THE BRIDGE BETWEEN
THE SCHOOL AND THE COMMUNITY

Porirua College

A case study of support staff at Porirua College, a State secondary school that has predominantly Māori and Pasifika students



Summary

What's this document for?

This is a case study of support staff at Porirua College, a State secondary school that has predominantly Māori and Pasifika students. This case study is part of the Support Staff Working Group final report.

What are the key themes of this case study?

- How support staff can assist the school connect to its community in both formal and informal ways.

Why did the school change its approach to support staff?

The college recognised that the involvement of parents was critical to the success of the school and its students. The teachers could not do this on their own. They needed the help of the wider staff.

What did they do?

The college is using a three-pronged approach. They appointed Community Liaison Officers. They are deliberately appointing support staff who come from their local community, and they are utilising the wider skills and experience that support staff have.

What was the result?

The level of engagement and trust with the local community has risen markedly. This has made the teachers' jobs easier, it has made the support staff jobs more interesting and it has helped students succeed.

What the support staff said

- "It's good. It gives us more development in different areas. It gives us variety."
- "Being involved is about being acknowledged."
- "We get to seek out our passions and find opportunities to share them."

Discussion questions

1. How well do we provide opportunities for support staff to contribute in ways that benefit the school and allow them to develop or use their particular skills?
2. How well do we recognise and value the contributions our support staff do make?
3. How well do we link with our community? Could our support staff help us do this better?

Helping build the bridge between the school and the community

Porirua College is clear that success in helping students learn and achieve needs the active engagement of the community in which the school is based.

Support staff at the college have a crucial role in helping to build the bridge between the school and community that is needed to do this. The contribution of support staff comes through:

- formal roles of Community Liaison Officers
- recruiting support staff from the community
- utilising the specialist skills and knowledge of support staff.

Early beginnings

Much of what is happening today in the college has its roots in Tu Tangata, a programme run in the 1990s designed to bring parents into the classroom to be role models for learning. Although it was not always as successful as hoped in helping learning, the presence of parents had a marked impact on students' behaviours. Students were acutely aware that their mum or dad, or someone who knew their mum or dad, was at school. "Tu Tangata was like a retaining wall—it pegged back the intensity of violence that was in the school then—it lifted the whole school. It gave us the guts to expect better of our students."

Changes of funding meant the original programme could not continue, but it confirmed a key strategic concept for the college: parents are important to the school and the success of the students. Since then, the school has looked for opportunities to support that concept.

Community Liaison Officers

One of the opportunities the school has taken was to appoint two Community Liaison Officers. These are full-time positions paid for from the operations grant. They work closely with the senior management team, the rest of the pastoral care network and teachers to help them link with parents and whānau.

In describing their contribution, the principal states, "They are incredibly important... they literally interpret formal school speak and school practice and make it

understandable to the community. They make the school accessible for the community, and the community accessible for the school."

To carry out this role, the Community Liaison Officers work directly with students. One teacher described it, "They smooth the path for the kids. Get them out of potholes in the road and get them back on track."

This is done through specific programmes they initiate and implement, and working with individual students. Another teacher comments, "They have got an ear to the ground—they know where kids are likely to blow. They connect with kids in a way that kids are really upfront."

They also work with teachers. The principal explains, "If there is a cultural mismatch between the principal or teacher and the student and their family, you need help with your ears, your eyes and your mindset." The Community Liaison Officers provide that help. When asked what the impact is on teachers, the response is, "They help support us as well as the students. They also keep us honest."

The Community Liaison Officers run the restorative justice conferencing system that is used to great effect in the school, working with students and teachers. They also assist in the disciplinary meetings.

It requires special people to undertake these roles successfully. It is about attributes rather than qualifications. To start with, they must be respected, recognised members of the community, which in this community means they must be Māori or Pasifika. They must be smart with people—a wide range of people—and good at reading situations. Combine this with great aroha, integrity, patience and humour.

Both Community Liaison Officers are also emphatic about needing to have more than one person in this role, even if it means both of them working part-time. This enables them to reach into a wider part of the community, to provide greater continuity and to provide each other with support in what can be a challenging role.

One of the teachers comments, "Without them, we could blunder on with well intentioned, but misinformed and culturally insensitive, practices."

Deliberately employing support staff from the community

The Community Liaison Officers can't be everywhere. To further assist in building the bridge to the community, the college has deliberately tried to recruit staff who are parents of students at the college or live in the community. It can be difficult to find teachers who fit this bill, but it is easier with support staff. Local networks have helped the school find the right people. The result is a diverse group of support staff, many of whom are Māori or Pasifika. These support staff contribute in many ways that go beyond their formal job descriptions.

They bring knowledge and understanding that staff from outside the community are unlikely to have. "They come with a clear picture of what students are bringing to school—they see the issues and know how to help." As such, they have become a valuable resource for teachers. A teacher comments on the change she has seen at the school over time, "I see teachers more freely walking up to support staff and asking questions, seeking their help." For support staff, this has been evidence that they are respected and valued within the school.

Support staff from the local community also subtly coach and challenge teachers. The principal explains that, "Teachers can't 'dis' the kids or the community when their parents, uncles or aunties are also sitting in the staff room." It has led to a culture of much greater understanding and respect.



Support staff also contribute practical assistance in liaising with parents who come from the same community, when there are family visits or parents' evenings. A teacher remarks, "When family members see more than one person from their particular community at meetings, it has a huge impact on what they say and how much they say."

Support staff advise the discipline committee, often having a much better understanding of what might be contributing to students' behaviour than the students' teachers.

Although these are not a formal part of their role, the principal openly and repeatedly talks about the value of these contributions at staff meetings.

Utilising the specialist skills and knowledge of support staff

For many of the support staff, the contribution goes further yet. The college has recognised and tapped into other specialist skills and knowledge that many of the support staff have, whether they are the groundsman, the caretaker, doing data entry or a teacher aide.

These staff are contributing to key groups in the school such as the Multicultural Committee; the PB4L, an initiative about setting school-wide behaviour expectations; and the Whānau Advisory Group. They help develop and drive much of the protocols and cultural processes of the school. Some contribute to extra-curricular activities, such as supporting students participating in the local PolyFest or travelling to sports events.

They contribute to the development of programmes for students. With a recent important learning initiative for boys in the school, more support staff were involved in the development and presentation of the programme than teachers.

For some support staff, they have been able to combine part-time roles with other paid duties at the school, such as being a sports coordinator or truancy officer.

When asked how they feel about taking on these different roles, teacher aides replied, "It's good. It gives us more development in different areas. It gives us variety."

"Being involved is about being acknowledged."

"We get to seek out our passions and find opportunities to share them."

Managing expectations

The school is aware of the risks it takes in using support staff in this way, particularly when some of it is a contribution some made as volunteers before they joined the staff. Care is needed to not assume support staff can and want to contribute beyond their formal roles. The school has taught and encouraged support staff to prioritise competing requests. The school is also making sure that there are clear reporting lines, so staff know who to go to if they have difficulties. One of the teacher aides commented on the importance of “knowing there is someone who will listen, follow up and support”. Professional development has included sessions on clarifying roles and how to give feedback constructively.

The school has explored and, where possible, implemented ways to extend paid opportunities by organising these roles in different ways, although this continues to be a challenge.

There is ongoing discussion and checking as to what is fair and appropriate to ask support staff to contribute.

This approach challenges traditional hierarchies that can be found in schools where the contribution of support staff is not seen to be as important as that of teachers. The deputy principal prefers the term ‘resource people’ rather than ‘support staff’. She states, “Twenty-first century learning is about taking those hats off. We have to leave behind nineteenth century hierarchies.” Porirua College is reaping the benefits of doing just that.

Documentation you might find useful:

- Job description for the Community Liaison Officers

Discussion questions

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Porirua College is a decile 1, co-educational, State secondary school. It has a roll of approximately 600 students, 35% of whom are Samoan, 19% Māori, 16% Tokelauan, 14% Cook Island Māori.

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