



A STRATEGIC FOCUS ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Wellington Girls' College

A case study of support staff at Wellington Girls' College, an inner-city, State secondary school. It focuses particularly on the library and IT staff, and the business manager



Summary

What's this document for?

This is a case study of support staff at Wellington Girls' College, an inner-city, State secondary school. It focuses particularly on the library and IT staff, and the business manager. This case study is part of the Support Staff Working Group final report.

What are the key themes of this case study?

- Designing support roles that directly link to the teaching and learning goals of the school.
- Taking a strategic approach to change.

Why did the school change its approach to support staff?

The college was 'pushed' into doing this by recognising the wasted potential of these roles, but also 'pulled' by the massive technological changes occurring in and out of the classroom.

What did they do?

The college is working to define and position support roles so that they support the learning and teaching goals of the school.

The school has taken a deliberate and strategic approach to looking at the role of library and IT staff. They reviewed their current situation, developed strategic plans in each of the areas and are now in the process of implementing them. With the business manager, they are taking the same strategic intent and utilising opportunities as they arise.

What was the result?

The result has been a strategic shift to recognise support staff as parallel and contributing professionals. This has enabled support staff to much more proactively assist teachers, to better use their expertise and to make their jobs more satisfying.

What the support staff said

- "We're no longer 'just techies' called to fix things."
- "The benefits of gaining a wider view of the school and an understanding of the strategic direction have been immense."
- "We are not just reactive, we are expected to have ideas, research possibilities and take ideas to our IT colleagues."

Discussion questions

1. How do our support staff contribute to teaching and learning goals of our school? Do teachers and support staff see this the same way?
2. Does our school fully recognise, value and use the potential contribution of our support staff? What do we do that helps us do this? What do we do that hinders us?
3. Do we involve support staff appropriately in our planning?
4. What are the stages of developing and implementing our learning programmes in which we could usefully involve support staff? Do we make full use of these opportunities?

A strategic focus on student achievement

Wellington Girls' College has clear teaching and learning goals. They are not just looking to their teachers to help deliver these, but also to their support staff. To support student achievement they are rethinking the way they design work and involve non-teaching staff. This is particularly evident in the work of the librarians, ICT staff and their business manager.

In part they were 'pushed' into doing this by recognising the wasted potential of these roles, but also 'pulled' by the massive technological changes occurring in and out of the classroom. The result has been a strategic shift to recognise support staff as parallel and contributing professionals. They are expected to work in partnership with teaching staff to meet the school's goals, in particular:

- to be at the forefront of quality teaching and learning
- to ensure the infrastructure is responsive to changing learning needs.

An example is that the deputy principal has a fortnightly meeting with the support staff managers as a group. It is a place both for ideas and responses to other initiatives.

No-one in the school would claim that they have yet achieved the optimum integration and use of support roles—in fact new challenges continue to emerge—but in many areas of the school the changes and benefits are already evident. It is a change that is led from the top.

Repositioning the librarians

Four years ago, the desire to reposition the library in the forefront of teaching and learning in the school led to an independent review of the library service. The result was a plan to radically redesign the layout and philosophy of the library. The outcome of implementing this plan has been radical. The old library environment was dull, quiet and often rather empty. School bags had to be left at the library door. Library staff were 'back room' and reactive.

The new environment is brightly coloured, scattered with beanbags and full of students (with their bags) talking, discussing, eating their lunch and using the netbooks available for loan. It is a 'high trust' environment. The staff are visible and available.

More important, however, has been the shift in perception of how the library and the library staff contribute to teaching and learning. The change is being described as the development of the 'embedded librarian'—working directly with teaching staff and students to enhance the learning experience. In practice it will mean that library research resources inform the initial development of teaching plans and project design. The librarians become an integral teaching and classroom resource. The librarians are coming out of the library.

The changed nature of the librarian role is helping to drive the change. Information is mainly now digital and librarians are at the front line of contemporary search and research techniques. The college is exploring possible collaborations between teachers and librarians for targeted research. The potential use of e-books as a study resource is being investigated.

How are they making these changes happen? Having a concrete plan has been important.

Also critical was the appointment of a library manager, a position equivalent to a head of department. Library staff comment, "This has lifted the status of library staff within the school ... it is a visible commitment of school resources to the library function." The library manager, who attends head of department meetings, is part of middle manager decision-making forums and she has input into the full range of school strategies.

Library staff have also been proactive in building relationships with teaching staff. One of the teachers commented that as well as appreciating the assistance with developing her teaching programme, she has also enjoyed the end of year gathering in the library where library staff suggest holiday reading and DVDs accompanied by Christmas mince pies.

What happens next? This transition is a work in progress. The new manager is finalising the development of the next library strategic plan which explicitly supports the overall school plan. It will include more education of teachers about how to use librarians and the library, and joint planning between teachers and librarians about how they will collaborate.

Repositioning the ICT staff

Wellington Girls' College has been deliberately well resourced in the area of technology and professional support for that technology. It has been an 'early adopter' and is now seasoned and sophisticated in its approach to technology in teaching. Early years were focused on infrastructure and technology. Over time the emphasis has moved to the meaningful integration of ICT in teaching and learning and how teaching staff need to be supported to take advantage of the ICT opportunities.

An environment scan carried out in 2008 said, "We must explore not only how ICT can supplement traditional ways of teaching but how it can also open up new and different learning, including blended learning (thoughtful and considered blending of classroom and online experiences) and e-learning environments."

A teacher comments, "Fundamental changes have happened in the classroom in the last five years—we now have to be technologically savvy. We rely heavily on IT staff for day-to-day help and more strategic advice." This has had implications for ICT staff, influencing their role, their position within the school and their professional development.

Wellington Girls' College was one of six schools that established the Wellington Loop—a collaborative project that set up a fibre optic network for shared services spanning commercial, communications, e-learning and administration services. Recent contracted management of the infrastructure releases the individual schools from some of this maintenance role and has allowed the ICT coordinator at Wellington Girls' College to take on a more strategic role within the school. He is a member of the ICT Teaching and Learning Committee along with two deputy principals and two teachers with an ICT focus.

As with librarians, the role ICT staff can play in the support of teaching and learning has changed. ICT staff comment that they are "no longer 'just techies' called to fix things". They will work alongside the teachers and the students as is reflected in the college's ICT strategic plan. As a front line IT staff member said, "We are not just reactive, we are expected to have ideas, research possibilities and give our ideas to our teaching colleagues."

Priority	High
Goal	Facilitate shared learning by enabling students to join or create communities of learners that extend well beyond the classroom Actively incorporate Web 2.0 technologies in curriculum delivery (podcasting, weblogs, wikis, 3-D modelling, animation, Web surfing, gaming, animation, social networking, avatar animation systems, and so on)
Action	Introduce desktop video conferencing, for example Skype and Evo

The ICT staff are charged with a key role in building the teachers' and students' capability and understanding of how to integrate the technologies into in-classroom and out-of-classroom learning. They play an active role in staff training and professional development, running courses and training sessions on ICT applications. If time permits, they see a huge role for themselves in working alongside students on specific projects. They believe their future will involve a lot more student-controlled learning.

In a technology-rich environment such as Wellington Girls' College there will remain the need for on-the-ground technological support when equipment or software is faulty. Two ICT staff provide this function but they can operate at a somewhat higher level because of the 'Tech Angels' role taken by senior students. Tech Angels are girls who have both high IT aptitude and interest, and who have been trained by the ICT staff to provide coaching for teachers and other students. It has been a highly successful initiative.

The Loop members (and there are plans for more schools to join soon) get more than just cheaper and better access to technological services for their schools. The ICT coordinators or managers also get the opportunity for peer support, professional development and a place where new ideas can be tested and discussed. "We can learn a lot from each other—there is no need to reinvent everything."

Repositioning the business manager

The business manager at Wellington Girls' College has many responsibilities typical of other schools. She is responsible for overseeing finances, property, support staff pay and entitlements, and facilities hire. She is part of the team that is managing a major building project. But she also contributes to the school's goals in other fundamental ways.

Over the last couple of years her role has been deliberately extended to more fully integrate her into wider school functions and to utilise her expertise more broadly. One of the results is that the business manager has also been on the strategic planning committee, the staff resourcing group and the ICT committee. She has an open invitation to the head of department meetings and attends Board of Trustees meetings.

She comments that, "The benefits of gaining a wider view of the school and an understanding of the strategic direction have been immense." It has helped her do her job better. For example, understanding the teaching and learning needs of the future has immediate implications to the current building project. It has helped other staff do their job better. Working alongside each other on these cross-organisational committees means other staff better understand her expertise and what she can contribute, and as a result are more likely to consult her on other issues and actively seek her views. Administration support is no

longer seen as purely a 'back room' function. It has also provided the opportunity for career development.

This opportunity is not just available to the business manager. The principal of Wellington Girls' College invites all interested support staff to put themselves forward to participate in school-wide projects.

Where to next?

Further work is planned for each of these areas. But the college wants to take it wider to encompass all support staff. Other strategies they are planning or considering include:

- opening the learning groups the teaching staff have been able to participate in to also include support staff
- investigating opening up roles such as 'form teacher', which have traditionally been the preserve of teaching staff, to support staff
- shifting the emphasis and terminology from 'support staff' and 'teaching staff' to just 'staff', who each contribute in different ways.

Wellington Girls' College is clear that support staff belong at the heart of the school's business of teaching and learning. The journey to making that happen continues to evolve.

Documentation you might find useful:

- 2011-15 Strategic Plan
- Wellington Girls' College Digital Strategy 2009-2011

Discussion questions

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2. Does our school fully recognise, value and use the potential contribution of our support staff? What do we do that helps us do this? What do we do that hinders us?
3. Do we involve support staff appropriately in our planning?
4. What are the stages of developing and implementing our learning programmes in which we could usefully involve support staff? Do we make full use of these opportunities?

Wellington Girls' College (WGC) is a central city, decile 10, State secondary school. Of the 1,276 students, 60% are New Zealand European/Pākehā, 9% Māori, 8% South East Asian, 6% Chinese, 6% other European, 5% Pasifika and 2% other ethnic groups. There are about 50 international students.

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