Principals Sabbatical Report

Neil Robinson
Principal of Blockhouse Bay School
Auckland
New Zealand

Term 2 2015

Purpose - To research evidence that underpins IES policy and investigate the goals of its implementation in New Zealand.

Note - Investing in Educational Success was made up of three initiatives which were to become known as;
- *Principal Recruitment Allowance*
- *Teacher-led Innovation Fund*
- *Communities of Schools*

For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to look into the Community of Schools aspect of the initiative.

Introduction
At the beginning of 2014, Prime Minister John Key (Key 2014) spoke to a business audience and announced a new initiative that would have the goal of raising student achievement in New Zealand. Initial reaction to the concept from educationalists was mixed, but across the country, there was a feeling of unrest that would grow as the year unfolded. Whilst some expressed an openness to the idea, others saw a more sinister intent behind it. The system seemed to be based on the concept that a small group of people would receive a significant amount of money for taking part in the initiative and whilst this might have appealed to the audience of business people to whom it was being announced, it would soon become apparent that most educators would prefer to distribute the money closer to the areas where children would benefit more directly.

Months of turmoil were to follow with educators e.g. Martin Thrupp (2014) and notably, the membership of the New Zealand Educational Institute, disagreeing to most if not all of the details of the idea. People asked too why the education sector had not even been included in any consultation about the programme? They saw a parallel between this and other aspects of educational policy (e.g. National Standards, increased class sizes, EDUCANZ) that had been adopted without any pause to ask educational experts or professionals for their opinions or advice. [This non-consultative attitude continues to drive a significant wedge between the Government and Ministry of Education on one side and the profession on the other and even recently was described as 'paternalistic' by NZPF President Denise Torrey (2015)].

Following a series of meetings, the NZEI reported that 93% of their members had voted against the IES initiative. Many had made this decision because of the details inherent in the plan including an absence of evidence that showed that the idea would work or that we even need it at all in New Zealand. A large number also thought that there were many better ways to spend all the money that would have a greater effect on educational outcomes or that would help solve more important problems within education.

At the same time, there were also objections to what would make up the detail of the plan including:
- Is it good for children to have their teachers out of classrooms for 2 days per week and what will parents think of this?
- Are there enough teachers available to fill these gaps?
- Who will appoint the Executive Principals, Lead Teachers and In-school Teachers and what criteria will they use?
- What implications will this have for the Collective Agreement and for the autonomy of schools and rights of Boards to appoint staff?
- How will projects be approved? Will they have to be measured using National Standards?
- How will success be measured? Will they have to be measured using National Standards?

While the NZEI were collecting this information from its members, the Ministry of Education was attempting to provide more details to the policy. A Working Party that was formed to carry out some of this work subsequently reported back to the government. Critics of this process stated that almost all of the details had been "*hard-wired without consultation*" and that changes made following the meetings were "*cosmetic and largely superficial*". (NZEI 2014i). These included changes to the names of the roles to 'Community of Schools Leader', 'Community of Schools Teacher' and Community of Schools In-School Teacher'. Perhaps the key difference achieved however was that people appointed to the roles would be paid for having greater responsibility, rather than on the basis of performance. (NZ Teacher February 2015 p.4).

By the end of 2014, the secondary teachers and principals had negotiated to be part of IES and the primary sector union NZEI had reached an agreement to research a more flexible model of collaboration known currently as the 'Joint Initiative'. At the time of writing it is unclear what impact this will have on IES or indeed how much in the way of resourcing the Ministry of Education will provide to the findings of this review. NZEI President Louise Green has stated that at this stage they are "*not closed to anything*" (NZ Teacher February 2015 p.4) and there is clearly a long way to go with this process.

So are Community of Schools a Good Idea or Not?

During the negotiation phase in mid-2014, the main question that NZEI (and others) had was "What was the evidence behind this idea and was their proof that it would have a direct and positive benefit to children's learning.

"*Although it is described in the (Working) report as 'a system change' (in a favourable sense), this requires much faith in this form of collaboration and incentivising having a positive impact on school culture*". (Thrupp 2014).

This paper then will take a look at some of the research data from around the world and will attempt to draw some conclusions about the advantages and disadvantages of New Zealand schools collaborating to increase student achievement and to build professional capability amongst its teachers.

Firstly we need to define exactly what we mean when we talk about a Community of Schools. In its 'Guide for schools and kura', (August 2014 p.1) the Ministry of Education defined them as "… *groups of schools and/or kura that will come together to raise achievement for all children and young people by sharing expertise in teaching and learning: supporting each other; and reflecting the educational pathway from primary through secondary*." In different countries, the definition and resourcing levels are somewhat different from each other, but the goals of improving student outcomes are understandably very similar. (although the English version does seem to emphasise developing Leadership capability more than the NZ model).

Those in Favour …

The New Zealand government has been criticized for providing little in the way of credible evidence that Communities of Schools will achieve what it has been designed to do. However, an internet scan of available information provides several well regarded educationalists who are prepared to support the idea. '*Lateral Leadership*' is one way of reducing the isolation of schools that have '*restricted their opportunities for continuous improvement and professional learnin*g' (Hargreaves et al 2007). They claim that school networks "*create improvement gains by schools helping schools through sharing best practices and 'next practices*'".

His Canadian colleague Michael Fullan agrees and said that "*Learning networks focus on learning of pupils, all staff, leaders and other stakeholders, as well as building capacity for learning and sharing knowledge between schools*". (Fullan 2011)
He added that "*The research has been clear and consistent for over 30 years—collaborative cultures in which teachers focus on improving their teaching practice, learn from each other, and are well led and supported by school principals result in better learning for students*".

English schools too have adopted the idea. Louise Stoll (2007) believes that networking between schools "*creates the potential to enhance learning within schools. It also creates the potential for everyone involved in educating children and young people to feel a collective sense of responsibility for ensuring that all pupils in the network can progress and achieve, and that one school's improvement isn't at the expense of other schools*".

Others see additional benefits to the idea such as increased teacher motivation, professional thinking and practice (Earl et al, 2006) as well as developing leadership skills that can subsequently be shared further (Halbert and Kaser, 2006).

Those Against …

However, other recognised organisations have an alternative view of school partnerships. In England, the National Audit Office (2009) found little actual evidence of school-to-school support having an positive impact on student achievement. The National Foundation for Educational Research (2013) submission to the Education Select Committee inquiry into School Partnerships and Collaboration similarly highlighted the fact that: "*there is as yet no rigorous empirical longitudinal evidence that partnering has a positive impact on educational outcomes*". They did however find that there were some advantages such as raising teacher motivation, assisting schools to solve problems and the sharing of resources.

Well known New Zealand educational commentator and 'independent voice' Kelvin Smyth has had much to say about IES and warned; "*Be cautious of this togetherness emphasis; don't accept it as an unmitigated good. Though a school might be part of a group, it should be an accepted principle that it is the school that is the key unit of education system not the group*". He went on to say "*Working together with other schools should not be seen as central to education but a useful resort in some matters and some circumstances*". (networkonet 2014)

In its 'Investigation of the Evidence Base' (Dec 2014), researchers from Massey University cautioned too about adopting single elements from other educational systems as it is often the "*interaction between aspects*" such as teacher education, pedagogy and leadership that collectively influence student achievement. They also commented upon the dangers of "*narrowing student learning to quantifiable measures*" but noted that the government's Working Group appeared to be aware of the negative impacts of this.

Perhaps then, some learning networks are successful and others are not. This begs the question, what conditions will need to be in place to make Community of Schools effective within a New Zealand context? The MOE explained that IES was "*not a replica of existing models*" (MOE 2014ii) and although it had been based on overseas research, had been designed for our unique educational environment. "*The Ministry has taken the best of what these and other countries are doing and included New Zealand evidence to design IES in a way that will work for New Zealand sch*ools." (MOE April 2015)

How then can we create the conditions whereby teachers with mana and expertise in certain aspects of their work, can provide well-resourced support for their colleagues in ways that will build their capacity to improve student achievement?

If we ignore all of the political objections to the idea for the moment and assume that the motives behind Communities of Schools are pure, the government agrees with Richard Elmore (2004 p.127) in that "*The problem [is that] there is almost no opportunity for teachers to engage in continuous and substantial learning about their practice…observing and being observed by their colleagues in their own classrooms and classrooms of other teachers in schools confronting similar problems of practice*".

Creating the Conditions for Successful Communities of Schools

It is my opinion that having local teachers working with teachers from their own districts has the potential to create learning situations which can improve teaching and therefore student learning in this country. However, when taking into account all of the reservations that New Zealand teachers and principals might have about working across schools, implementing a community of schools network is likely to require significant amounts of planning, sensitivity and communication. Before work can begin, everyone will need to be assured that the privacy, autonomy and identity of each school will need to be maintained and although a small number of personnel will be assigned leadership roles, the process will require leadership with and not over each other. (Walkley, 2015)

Once a decision has been made to form a Community of Schools, clusters may well want to consider implementing certain steps before the Across Community and In-school Teachers actually begin working with their colleagues. The following synthesizes advice given from several sources including England's National College for School Leadership (Earl, Katz 2015) and The Australian Institute for School Governance. (Walkley 2015).

1. Leadership. Although a Community of Schools Leader will be appointed, all Principals will need to be involved every step of the way. It will be exceptionally difficult (if not impossible) for momentum to be initiated and maintained without the wholehearted support of every Principal from every school. Leaders will need to help guide the process throughout the life of the Community, including monitoring the project and disseminating information where required. In addition to this, there will be other staff members who will need to provide leadership in both formal and informal roles and functions.

2. Purpose and focus. Everyone must agree to the Achievement Challenge(s) and what this will mean for them (as there could be some fundamental differences in challenges between schools which will need to be made clear from the outset). An explicit statement of purpose will need to be drafted and shared beliefs and understandings will need to be arrived at through discussion across all levels of those who will be involved. The drafting of two documents, a Memorandum of Understanding and a Charter will help synthesise thinking at this stage and ensure that there are shared understandings across the cluster. The MoU will provide information around purpose, key definitions and processes to evaluate progress. The Charter will provide more detail about policies, procedures and reporting templates/systems.

3. Roles and responsibilities. Cohesion will need to be built around trust, transparency and clarity. For example, member schools will need to have joint responsibility for deciding what will happen with job descriptions, appointment processes and how the goals of the group will be achieved. Collaboration within the network will help to provide ownership of the project.

4. Strategic priorities will need to be decided and action plans constructed defining who will do what and when.

5. Accountability. The ability to provide accurate, transparent and informative information about progress made will also generate a collective responsibility for the achievement challenge. This will provide the stimulus for teachers to review their own progress and help scaffold them to achieve a deeper level of understanding and improved practice. As Fullan (2011) stated, clusters of schools need to use common assessment tasks so that results can be compared and "*openly shared in order to build individual and team capacity*". Networks of schools will need to make decisions about which methods of assessment they wish to employ and how they will be moderated so that they can establish baseline data before their work commences as this will allow their staff to measure value-added. (see note below about assessment methods)

Author's Note - At the time of writing this report, the Ministry of Education has just come out with a range of resources designed to help guide clusters through the process of setting up and running their networks. Up until now, there has certainly been a sense that people responsible for IES were 'designing the engine while the plane was taking off' and this has not been at all helpful to the credibility or implementation of the process. The forming of the Advisory Group, Sector Reference Group and Focus Groups appears at this point to be beneficial as they are putting together some helpful documents for schools to assist them in their work.

It is possible then if they are set up and run correctly, Communities of Schools have the potential to achieve the goals that have been stated "*Teaching improves when teachers discuss and work out how successful what they do is for their individual students, and plan their teaching based on that. Communities of schools provide a way to widen the pool of teachers with the skills and knowledge to do this well.*" (MOE 2015). What then might stand in the way of this success?

Which Factors Have the Potential to Impact Negatively on Communities of Schools?

As stated above, involving the profession in the design of initiatives that will affect them is not only popular but critical to their success. Massey researchers (Dec 2014) commented that "*... teachers need to be centrally involved in the planning and implementation of reform initiatives so that their classroom needs are at the heart of the design of the initiatives*".

A fair proportion of the government's research base that supports the IES initiative is based around the work of Michael Fullan who has commented that:

"Top performing systems invest in the teaching profession, but as the profession evolves they discover that the next breakthrough requires the peer culture of teachers lead the way. As the McKinsey group found, when capacity of teachers is low more direct methods of capacity building are required, but if you are going to get breakthrough results innovation must come from teachers working in collaboration. Leadership at the school, district and system levels, in other words must help develop such an interactive system." (Fullan 2011)

New Zealand teachers are very hardworking but will be mindful of new programmes or ideas that will add to this workload. Communities of Schools will need to be incorporated into the work that they do currently and not add to this. It is critical then that the 'Inquiry Time' is sufficient for this as well as any additional tasks that are related to the success of the initiative such as additional assessment tasks or meetings. Once again, having members of the profession designing the process will help alleviate these issues before they develop.

Perhaps the biggest threat to the success of Communities of Schools will be what is deemed as being non-negotiable assessment strategies or data. Reliance on the use of un-moderated National Standards data for example will quickly encourage schools to 'close ranks' and destroy any gains that could be achieved through collaboration. **'***Not everything that can be counted counts. Not everything that counts can be counted. (unknown source).* As the Massey (2014) researchers pointed out "… *defining teacher effectiveness in terms of student achievement risks narrowing student learning to quantifiable measures*"**.** We have all seen or heard about what has happened in overseas educational systems when assessment scores drive the learning (eg. narrowing of curriculum, teaching to tests, high stakes assessments leading to misrepresentation of results etc.). Certainly this was apparent in my visits to schools outside New Zealand. If the Ministry of Education or government demands that Communities of Schools follow these ideas which have had such devastating effects in other countries, the opportunity for progress through mutual trust and professional growth will be lost.

Perhaps the most sensible comment on accountability comes from Fullan himself (2011)
"Finally, it is revealing how accountability plays itself out. It turns out that blatant accountability focusing on tests, standards and the like is not the best way to get results. Rather, successful systems combine strategies of capacity building and transparency of results and practice. In these ways they get deeper de facto accountability. The public is assured by the vertical accountability of transparency, and the system generates greater lateral accountability because peers working with peers in a focused deliberate way provide both support and pressure to improve in measurable ways. When this works gets underway it actually causes greater moral purpose—what we call the 'moral imperative realized' (Fullan, 2011). Realization becomes its own further force for continuous improvement. There is no greater motivator than internal accountability to oneself and one's peers. It makes for a better profession, and it makes for a better system".

Conclusion

The reasons why the NZ government chose to embark on the Investing in Educational Success journey really depends on who you are asking. Whilst John Key cited declining results in PISA assessments and a desire to raise student achievement, others saw a more sinister intent behind the initiative in terms of gaining more control of schools and Principals in particular. Comments such as "*Executive Principals will be the top principals from across the country*" (Key 2014) led some people to assume that following a selection criteria (where National Standards results were likely to be a significant factor), government appointed employees would side-step Boards of Trustees to govern the work of teachers and other principals.

Many people thought that this mistrust had been well earned by a government who historically only seem to be interested in the opinions of educational professionals if they line up with their own. This feeling was strengthened by the fact that when it was first announced, the IES policy came as a complete surprise to the profession. Even neutral observers commented that a change this significant should surely have been formulated following consultation with the sector. This lack of consultation no doubt contributed to the details of the policy being out of step with people working within schools both because of what 'extra money' could or should be spent on and whether or not the details of IES were workable.

In theory, resourcing great teachers to work collegially with other teachers to improve their practice appears to be a good idea, especially if it keeps these teachers in the classrooms and not trying to climb up the leadership ladder in order to earn more money. *"It is clear from TALIS data that teachers benefit from even minimal amounts of collaboration with colleagues. Collaborative practices, such as observing other teachers' classes and providing feedback, or teaching as a team in the same class, could – and should – be introduced at school".* (OECD 2013). Mr Key also said that the policy would provide *"extra funding to schools so teachers can take time out of their normal classroom to work with Expert Teachers and Lead Teache*rs", although current models only seem to average out to the equivalent of one day per teacher per year, which would seem to be far too little to make an appreciable difference to teaching practice.

I believe however that if correctly organised by educational practitioners (with the support of other agencies such as the Ministry of Education), the Community of Schools initiative has the potential to make a really positive difference to the teachers and subsequently the learners in our schools. Whilst there has been some hints that this might be about to happen, recent history would suggest that this government might struggle to model the collaboration that is critical to the success of Communities of Schools. People are likely to walk away from any system that removes Boards of Trustees from the employment of staff members and locks children into a standards-based environment that narrows the curriculum and test-based accountability. Is there light at the end of this tunnel? Will the profession be helped to achieve the potential that collaborative practices can achieve?

The government has served up a new way of working that has the potential to deliver purposeful professional development of teachers by teachers? Can they and Ministry of Education work collaboratively with the profession to achieve the goals of IES Community of Schools? If they don't, the scheme is likely to achieve very little and will further deepen the divide that currently exists between these groups.

Perhaps the last word should go to Michael Fullan as it is on his shoulders that a lot of the Ministry of Education's 'evidence sits:
"Focused, purposeful team work, facilitated and well led produces better results. Given the moral imperative of serving all students it would seem non-negotiable that teachers should throw their commitment and energies behind developing collaborative cultures within and across schools. However it is the case that some jurisdictions are not conducive to supporting collaborative cultures. For example, governments that focus on punitive accountability, bureaucratic compliance, low-trust of the teaching profession undercut the likelihood that collaborative cultures will thrive."

One can only hope that this advice will be followed.

References

Earl, L., Katz, S. (2015) www.ncsl.org.uk. What makes a network a learning network? – National College for School Leadership - Some key messages for network leaders from phase two of the external evaluation of NCSL's Networked Learning Communities programme

Earl, L., Katz, S., Elgie, S., Ben Jaafer, S., Foster, L. with Sammons, P. and Mujtaba, T. (2006) How Networked Learning Communities Work. Stage 3 of the External Evaluation of the Networked Learning Communities initiative. Toronto: Aporia.
http:/networkedlearning.ncsl.org.uk/collections/network-research series/report/hownetworked-learning-communities-work

Elmore, R. (2004). *School reform from the inside out*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press. Sited in Learning is the Work Michael Fullan May 2011 Unpublished paper- Fullan.

Fullan, M. (2011). *The moral imperative realized*. Thousand Oaks, CA.: Corwin Press; Toronto: Ontario Principals Council.

Fullan, M. (unpublished May 2011). Learning is the Work. Retrieved from:
http://www.michaelfullan.ca/media/13435850710.html

Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons. Education Committee (2013). *School Partnerships and Cooperation: Fourth Report of Session 2013-14. Volume I: Report, together with Formal Minutes, Oral and Written Evidence* (HC 269). London: TSO [online]. Available:
http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmeduc/269/269.pdf [2 February, 2015].

Halbert, J. and Kaser, L. (2006). Deep learning: inquiring communities of practice, *Education Canada*, 46 (3): 43-45.

Hargreaves, A., Pont, R.G.H.B. (2007). School leadership for systemic improvement in Finland: A case study report for the OECD activity Improving School Leadership.

Key, J. (2014). Speech to West Auckland Business Club. January 23 2014.

Ministry of Education (2014). Guide for schools and Kura – minedu website August 2014 p.1.

Ministry of Education (2014ii). Evidence for IES. minedu website.

Ministry of Education (April 2015). For Parents page of education.govt.nz. minedu website.National Audit Office (2009). *Partnering for School Improvement* (HC 822). London: NAO [online]. Available:
http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/0809/partnering_for_school_improvem.aspx [2 February, 2015].

National Foundation for Educational Research (2013). Submission to the Education Select Committee inquiry into School Partnerships and Collaboration. (GB. Parliament. HoC. Education Committee, 2013, Ev 74).

NZEI (2014) Preparing to Vote on the IES – Youtube July 24 2014

NZ Teacher (2015) February. p.4

OECD. (2013). 2013 OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey

Rawlins, P., Ashton, K., Carusi, T., Lewis, E. (Dec 2014). Massey University. 'Investing in Educational Success: An investigation of the evidence base'.

Smyth, K. (April 2014). networkonet (online)

Stoll, L. (2007). Presented at the Twentieth Annual Conference of the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement, Portoroz, Slovenia, as part of the symposium ' Networking for Learning Improvement' Learning About Networking for Learning. Creating Capacity for Learning, and Visiting Professor, Institute of Education, University of London

Torrey D. (2015). New Zealand Principal's Federation.

Thrupp, M., (2014). Putting 'Investing in Educational Success' into context. Article June 9, 2014

Walkley, DM,. (2015). Establishing and governing a partnership of schools: some considerations.
Mr Donald M Walkley, Executive Director, Australian Institute for School Governance. AEL Magazine Term 1 2015.