WHĀNAU (HOUSE) STRUCTURES BEING USED IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS TO ENHANCE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Principal's Sabbatical Report

Term 2, 2015

INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have been Principal of One Tree Hill College for just over five years, having previously been Deputy Principal, Dean and an HOD at the school since 2000. Over the course of these years, the college has undergone significant positive change.

Between 2005 and 2009 major property redevelopments took place at the college. In the strategic planning phase of this process, it was decided that the college would be redeveloped based upon a 'Whanau' model. This is a model which built upon the traditional 'house' system which originated in English boarding schools. It was especially relevant for One Tree Hill College as it was the site of the first purposed built 'house' classroom building in a New Zealand school in 1971.

The Whanau model which has been developed at One Tree Hill College has been a major component of the positive change which has occurred at the college in recent years. The Maori concept of Whanau emphasises the family values which are used to underpin the model and the importance of positive relationships.

In 2014, One Tree Hill College implemented an enrolment scheme in response to the likelihood of overcrowding. The college's roll has increased by approximately 15% per year over the last 4 years, to grow from 700 students to 1,050.

In 2015, the college celebrated provided 60 years of quality education to its community and this was highlighted by an Education Review Office Report which was outstanding and placed the college on a 4-5 year review cycle.

This sabbatical allowed me to visit various schools who use the 'house' system and reflect on the next stages of development for One Tree Hill College's Whanau model. It also allowed me the opportunity to reflect on the college's strategic direction, as well as my growth as an educational leader.

I would like to acknowledge the Ministry of Education for granting me this sabbatical. The role of a Principal continues to expand and the demands placed on Principals across various facets of educational and community leadership continues to grow, hence I believe it is essential for all Principals to have the opportunity to regularly reflect and refresh.

The ability of a Principal to effect positive change within a school is influenced by strong governance. One Tree Hill College is very fortunate to have a highly effective Board of Trustees and I thank them for their hard work and for their support of my sabbatical.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the One Tree Hill College Senior Leadership Team who led the school so well in my absence.

KEY FINDINGS

My findings are based on schools which utilise the house system to varying extents. Many of my references are based upon those schools that still use the house system to a significant extent in the organisation of their school.

After visiting a number of schools throughout the United Kingdom I have summarised my findings under the following headings:

History:

The house system in schools originates from traditional boarding schools in the United Kingdom where houses were used as an organisational mechanism for boarders. The houses were often accommodation blocks or 'wings' in these college's traditionally named after famous former pupils or headmasters. Such a structure allowed the schools to easily divide themselves up for day to day processes such as serving meals, doing chores and activities.

As the house structure became increasingly common, many were developed to be more than a simple organisational tool. They became increasingly competitive and awards for the best house were introduced, and in most schools, such an award still exists today. The development of such a competitive edge also developed a natural comradery between students. This occurred very naturally as the original composition of a house was of students that were of a variety of ages, hence mimicking a natural family environment of support.

As boarding became less popular and societal changes meant more families were attending their local schools, the house system in schools diminished significantly. In most schools the history of the house system still exists, but they are often in association and identification only.

Relationships:

The underlining reason for the house system in all schools, which try to integrate such a structure fully across the school, is to try and replicate the family unit. This organisation of support is structured vertically like a traditional family and all schools report an increased sense of belonging and self-belief in their students.

The house structure and the wrap around blanket that it creates helps to catch those who are emotionally and socially vulnerable. The vertical integration, with horizontal tutor levels leads to a united happy school. As I noted on one schools newsletter, "Happy children make happy teachers, and happy parents, which makes happy communities. The house system regenerates the community".

A key benefit of the house system is the transition of new students into the secondary school environment. All schools report the added support from senior students is a major advantage to creating fast effective relationships. It was also very apparent that such relationships were made quicker and easier in a school which fully incorporated a house model and hence broke the school population into smaller units (ie. schools within a school). Students were very complimentary and easily recalled their experiences of beginning at a new school yet settling very quickly.

Schools deliberately ensure all year levels are represented in each house as evenly as possible. Schools also report that they try and maintain as even a balance as possible in terms of the personal qualities of students, including their levels of learning. A number of schools report experiences when the house system has not worked very well and these often have originated when houses become unbalanced (too much difference between houses).

All schools report that the house system increases inter and full school pride, student involvement, and student participation across all facets of the school. Staff at these schools also comment on them being more involved than in schools which they have taught in that do not incorporate a strong house model.

Schools with house structures report less higher level disciplinary issues although this is very difficult to accurately quantify in such a small study. One school had reintroduced a house system in the last 5 years and reports direct benefits in terms of student behaviour. Their data shows greater attendance, improved academic results and fewer disciplinary issues.

Leadership:

All schools report that leadership is one of the key factors in a successful house system. Leadership is referred to at a variety of levels by most schools. The Head Teacher (Principal) is critical. Schools with highly successful models, had a Head Teacher who fully supported the system and could clearly articulate its structure and strengths. This support set the tone for the importance students and teachers placed on the house structure. One school I visited had experienced a change of leadership in recent years. This had had dramatic effect on the school, especially the house model. The school and community had become very confused, with students and staff experiencing very different levels of engagement in the house system. One House Leader in this particular school was continuing to do an excellent job and trying to maintain the structure within his house, but other House Leaders felt disenfranchised and unsupported. It became very clear that the house model to be successful has to be fully school-wide across all functions and systems, or used by name only. There are no successful levels in between.

The House Leaders carry a significant role in the success of the house system. The Head Teacher is key to setting the vision and tone of the house system, but the House Leaders are key to its implementation. I met several highly effective House Leaders and some who were less effective. The highly effective House Leaders had varying styles and strengths – there was no one common personality type – most were very relational and extremely organised. All believed completely in the house model and were very vocal in their belief to others, especially sceptics. They were completely engaged in the 'ownership' of their house – wearing house colours, buying house memorabilia, house coloured stationery, etc (although this was a characteristic of most House Leaders, even those who were much less effective).

The effective House Leaders had a presence in their house, they were highly visible and available to students. Three key roles students felt effective House Leaders did very well were:

- Know the students – who they are (names), what they do well, what they don't do well. It was often commented that knowing the student's parents was also a critical factor.

- Academic Progress – monitor how each student is progressing towards their qualification and communicate this to students
- Assemblies – inspire students, well organised, know what they are doing, students need to be proud of their leader, a high visible presence

The House Leaders report that one of their key roles is to lead their other house teachers, often referred to as tutor teachers (form teachers). The reason for many House Leaders identifying this as a key facet of their role is because they find tutor teachers can be the greatest detriment to the house model and ultimately academic achievement of students. Highly effective House Leaders work alongside tutor teachers very well and were regularly present in their classes - less effective House Leaders tended to leave tutor teachers to their own devices and rarely engaged with them.

Student House Leaders were far less important than House Leaders. Effective House Leaders developed stronger Student House Leaders, and conversely the opposite also seemed to be the case. Student leaders reported that they simply tried to replicate their adult counterpart. Students within houses reported that the teacher House Leader was far more influential than the Student House Leader, but they did play a significant role in the morale and excitement related to events.

Identity:

In many schools who state that they have a house system, it is often simply a symbolic system which may date back several decades (or in some cases centuries). Many schools have houses which are by name only. They are historic and may only be used once or twice a year for major sports events. In these schools students have little or no understanding about what the house system is, nor why they are attached to one. In some cases, students could not tell me their house, despite having a different colour sewn onto their uniform.


In schools with fully implemented house systems, identity was very important. The name of the house provided strong identity and pride. Students could clearly communicate the history of their house – often named after previous students or Headmasters. Some schools who had redeveloped the house system in more recent years, used different criteria to develop names – spaceships to have landed on the moon, famous Scientists (this was a specialist Science school). Family history, mascots, colours, plants, animals, symbols, rituals, prayers, famous people, previous students were all examples of linkages used by houses to create identity.

Documentation:

Schools using a house system effectively across the whole school also had high levels of effective documentation to support the well-being and success of students. A key element which was highly significant was the student diary. These were very well prepared and contained as many aspects of school life as possible. They were common across all students at all levels and referred to often by students and teachers alike. These diaries contained essential elements of school communication and information.

The house systems which were most effective had general school-wide expectations which were consistent across all houses. There were no blurred lines and no variation between houses. The House Leader had scope to lead in their own style, but there was absolute consistency in the application of all expectations, this included documentation such as day sheets, student tracking forms, student achievement tracking and communication with families.
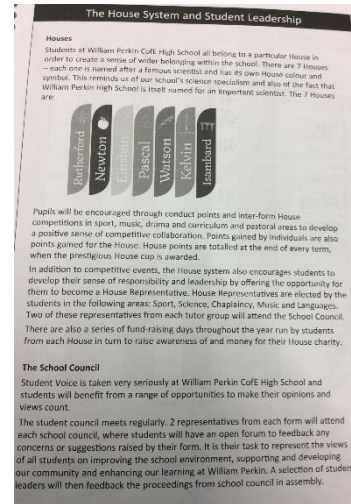
Positive Rewards:

All schools which were producing successful outcomes using the house system had very robust systems to reward positive behaviour and student success. Students placed huge emphasis on the rewards system and linked their achievement back to earning points or recognition for their house. There was a strong connection between personal reward and the achievement of the house. Reward structures that were most successful and had the greatest 'buy-in' from staff and students, were not complicated nor were they too restrictive. The philosophy to acknowledge positive behaviour outweighed the debate about at what levels of behaviour should be acknowledged. One school used a plastic coin system, which could see hundreds of coins given out each day – in this school, the students tried hard to earn coins for themselves and their house. The coins were then placed into highly visible clear tubes in the centre of the school and students could see the tubes fill up over the course of the week. The students found this model very motivating, the staff found increased engagement as the students wanted to contribute towards the inter-house competition.

Competition:

As previously mentioned this is a fundamental principle to a successful house model. The house system allows for regular competition which can be as simple as cleaning up the grounds and classrooms. The house system can allow all learners, and not just the top few, to be involved. The house system allows all students (and staff) to be involved at the level of their choice. It allows the participation to occur with others, which develops relationships. The house system develops the holistic skills of students beyond their academic studies, for example, inter-house sport, singing, debating, cooking, art, fundraising – all activities which can involve everyone. Students stress that one of the most important elements of such competition is the points system. Points must be regularly updated and the best systems seem to do this weekly. Points tables or displays must be highly visible and a major focal point of the school's culture. In one school, where the house system was less effective, the points table had not been updated for several months and students and staff knew it. The symbolism in this was very powerful and indicative as to how the staff and students were beginning to feel about the house system and the school as a whole.

Assemblies:

Schools with strong house systems met regularly as a house, at least once, sometimes twice a week. These meetings were an even mixture of administration, student celebrations (successes and achievements), and inspiration. The inspiration component of such assemblies was a powerful agent for change and improvement. These were often student or class led – one school had a roster for the year involving all classes. Students reported that their engagement in assemblies increased when items were being presented by their peers.

Physical Space:

The physical spaces for houses had less of an impact than other dimensions previously mentioned. One school had been able to fully develop its facilities based upon a house system, but others had not had this opportunity. Physical spaces did not seem to have a major influence, although all schools who did not have specific spaces felt that if they could develop them, their structures would be even stronger. Students felt that it was important that their house had a 'home' – a section of the school, certain classrooms, a noticeboard, or area in the playground.