

EDUCATING OUR YEAR 7 AND 8 STUDENTS

***A DISCUSSION AROUND FULL PRIMARY
SCHOOLS and INTERMEDIATE SCHOOLS***

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I would like to acknowledge the support of the Pukenui School Board of Trustees in allowing me to accept this term away from school. I would also like to mention Debra Sheeran who acted as Principal in my absence.

A number of people have answered a survey so I could gather data to support findings. Many thanks to these people for their honest and open support.

Thanks also to Teach NZ for supporting the Primary Principal's Sabbatical Scheme.

PURPOSE

BIG QUESTION

“What significant factors influence a parent/carers’ decision regarding the education of their Year 7 and 8 children? (Full Primary Year 1-8 vs Intermediate School.)

RATIONALE - As Principal of a small rural school (Yr 1-8) for the past 8 years, I have puzzled over the reasons some families decide to pull their child/ren out of our school at Year 6 and enrol them at an Intermediate School 45 kms away. Some years, this has had a significant impact on our roll numbers, and therefore staffing. I have been told of other similar sized schools to ours where the removal of one or two Year 6 students has had a domino effect on other families who have then followed suit, with disastrous consequences for the school numbers.

Therefore, if we are to keep our senior students, we need to know what it is that attracts parents to Intermediate Schools, or conversely, what it is that detracts from the Year 1-8 School. Are parents/carers making informed choices? What can the Primary School do to mitigate the fallout from decreasing numbers in the senior class?

In past years, parents have come to me when planning to move a child to the Intermediate School with reasons such as -

- Her best friend is going there so she wants to go too.
- Bigger classes will prepare her for High School.
- The teachers are better at teaching this age.
- The school is better resourced.
- There is more chance of her being extended.
- I’m working in town now so it fits in with my schedule.
- There are not enough children here of that age.
- Intermediate offers a wider range of curriculum areas, especially technology.

SURVEY

A group of current Year 6, 7 and 8 students was surveyed regarding their decisions or intentions around their schooling for the Intermediate years. A number of ex-students were also contacted but few returned any significant data. Families were asked to rate the following factors according to how they made decisions about where the child would attend Year 7 and 8.

PROXIMITY

TEACHERS/STAFF

CURRICULUM

SCHOOL SUCCESS

YOUR CHILD'S SOCIAL NEEDS

FINDINGS -

***Proximity** was overwhelmingly the most important factor in determining where the child would go to school. 52% of respondents indicated that the fact that our school was the closest to their home was the primary reason for their Year 7 and 8 children coming here.*

This is not surprising, when you consider that the Intermediate School is situated 45 kilometres away. Children are allowed to travel on one of the College buses that run each morning and afternoon, but that is at the discretion of the bus company. If the bus became overcrowded, primary children who were not attending the closest school to their home would be the first off. Using this service means an early start and late end to the day, as well as a long and difficult bus journey each way, coupled with college students to cope with, which has been an issue for some. These buses only run along the highway, so children living elsewhere have to make their own way to the nearest stop.

Travelling to and from our school however is a much simpler task. The bus collects the children at their door, and delivers them to and from school. They only travel with our children, and the longest anyone is on the bus is 25 minutes. A number of children also walk, bike and get a ride to school.

Curriculum was interestingly the least important factor when determining which school their Year 7 and 8 child would attend, according to respondents. 34% of parents rated this number 5 (on a scale of 1-5, 5 being the least important).

Due mostly to size, and therefore funding, Intermediate schools are able to offer a more diverse range of curriculum areas than a small school can. The technology subjects are the obvious examples of this, where the Intermediate school is equipped with specialist classrooms. Our children attend the Intermediate school once a fortnight for a rotation of technology subjects, and parents commented on how important this visit was.

Sporting facilities and clubs are also more on offer at a larger school than what we can afford, but parents did not see this as significant. Cultural groups, such as Kapa Haka, and specialised music instruction are also more available. This did not feature prominently in the answers I received.

The survey also threw up some random answers that would not normally have occurred to us as significant reasons for relocating a child...

“Needed to learn to cope with students that were not always “nice” - for example bullying which is not always an issue at our small school.

“Needed to learn to operate in a large school before moving to a larger school - college.”

“ Needed to meet new friends.”

“Older siblings had moved at Year 6 so (child) followed suit.”

“Intermediate school prepared him socially for college.”

IMPLICATIONS AND BENEFITS -

SURVEY COMMENTS -

Parents/carers were asked to comment on the following statement -

“Parents/carers tell me that an Intermediate School can offer more in the way of curriculum and also prepare the child for High School better than a small school can.”

Some of the less expected comments were -

“Extension programmes for children working ABOVE the National Std.”

“Academic challenges suit some children.”

“Can be a big shock going to a bigger school at this age, wait till they are older and can cope (with College.)

“The influence of the technological world has changed the way our children think.”

“More opportunities in regard to tech subjects.”

“My Year 6 child was not promoted to the composite Year 7 & 8 class so I am moving her away.”

Parents/carers were also asked to comment on this statement -

“Parents/carers tell me that the smaller, more familiar school environment offered at a full primary school is more suitable to nurture their child through the pre-teen years.”

Some interesting responses were -

“Teachers know their students better and are able to keep behaviour in check.”

“Definitely more suitable for overall social development. Children are more empathetic with a wider age group. They learn to cope with a range of situations. They mature as leaders having learnt to be positive and proactive.”

“We like the closeness of a small school where teachers understand the individual child.”

“Staying here prepares the child socially for High School.”

“Good academic grounding, as well as the chance to grow in self confidence.”

“Knowing the kid’s peer group, as well as their parents and families is important to us.”

“The children learn together at school, and socialise together outside of school so form strong friendships. They look out for one another later at college.”

“Mixing with younger children, and being role models - all important.”

“Our children love the smaller school.”

SUMMARY -

Having analysed all the data gathered, and talked to other Principals in a similar situation, I am able to write the following summary...

As with any dealings with children, we have to remember that they are all different, and one size DOES NOT fit all.

Often in education, the policy makers forget this and try to make all students fit into a “standard.”

Not all children are suited to undertaking their Year 7 & 8 years at a full primary and not all children are suited to undertaking their Year 7 & 8 years at an Intermediate School.

Comments from parents varied enough to show that this is definitely the case with our students. As educators, we need to see every child as an individual with their own needs and successes.

Parents can be misinformed about various deciding factors around their Year 7 and 8 children, and can then make decisions that are not based on fact. Teachers need to be alert to this, and to talk to parents that might be making a decision based on the wrong information.

Strong parent/teacher relationships are vital to ensure that the parents are able to ask questions and receive unbiased answers.

Parents have come to me already having decided to move a child, and I always ask why. The reasons are many and varied, and mostly covered in the survey responses above. I always try to “sell” our school, and will continue to do so having read the survey responses. However, once a parent has made up their mind, it is very hard to change it!

CONCLUSION -

To conclude, I am happy that I conducted this work, although it did not throw up any real issues that I hadn't already experienced.

Further to this, I would like to investigate the history and future of the Intermediate School in NZ. I would like to see any relevant research that might compare results of children from various Year 7 and 8 educational systems - full primary, intermediate, Area schools and Year 7-13 schools may all offer different benefits for our students.

REFERENCES -

Durling, Ng, and Bishop, 2012 Education of Years 7 to 10 students: A Focus on their Teaching and Learning Needs.