

Sabbatical Report

Investigate how, after 2 years, Kāhui Ako have made a difference to achievement for priority and all students across schools where Kāhui Ako have been established; and how Kāhui Ako have planned for sustainability for the future.



Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and thank –

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Executive summary

The Government has invested significant funds into the 'Investing in Education' initiative, over the past 5 years. After this significant investment, have we started to see the benefits and overall lift in achievement, for our students? Furthermore, how have Communities of Learning / Kahui Ako, planned for sustainability as key players in the structures, change?

Background and Rationale

The Government introduced its Investing in Educational Success policy in 2014 with the aim of raising student achievement by promoting effective collaboration between schools and strengthening the alignment of education pathways. This new policy was aimed to provide more employment opportunities within the education sector for teachers and principals, and try and reduce the competition that may have existed between schools.

New leadership and teaching roles in and across schools was seen as a way of providing staff in schools new avenues to share their skills and professional practices through a variety of roles. In the context of the Communities of Learning/ Kahui Ako initiative, the primary purpose of collaboration is to raise and improve student achievement. For some clusters, this would be a continuation of current good practice – collaborating and sharing expertise. For other clusters, this would be a challenge in itself. All clusters, it would be fair to say, have experienced varying levels of challenge, and are all at differing stages of development – even 5 years on.

To add to the complexities of Communities of Learning / Kahui Ako, leadership roles are required to change after a set number of years. It does seem that in all Kahui Ako, this too has been a challenge and will be elaborated on further in findings.

One of the most critical stages in the development of the Kahui Ako was the starting point. Some 'clusters' have well-functioning systems in place already, where principals and teachers meet often and the rapport already exists. For these groups, the required shift in thinking is well-embedded in the area. These areas seem to have started well. They often lacked the competition that does exist in some areas, between schools. This is predominant in areas where schools need to work hard to maintain student numbers and therefore, sustain or grow staffing levels.

Collaboration is the one constant theme has been pushed with the formation of any Kahui Ako, and is still in a state of forming. This is particularly so when there has been a change in key school personnel, which can redirect the focus at times!

The demands that the new roles place a new level of responsibility on those who undertake the positions. All lead Principals spoken to, detailed the shift in their thinking from a focus on 'my employing school' to a more collective view that all the children and to some extent, staff, became their responsibility. A huge task for any Principal to manage. In the day to day business and management of our own schools, this is a large responsibility. To broaden this wider into a collective of schools, is a mammoth ask. Many skills are required to achieve this ... trust being the greatest, if any Kahui Ako is to gain any traction.

Methodology

A variety of approaches have been taken in order to gather information to support the investigation. I have spoken face to face with staff, further afield schools have completed an online survey with a follow-up phone call, and I have visited schools. Thanks to the Principals who arranged release time for the staff.

Summarising the Findings

A number of clusters were visited. They ranged in size, from small (approx. 800 students) to a large size (4000+ students). They were all in the South Island – some geographically remote, some in large towns.

The staff spoken to had varying depths of experience within the Kahui Ako that they worked within. Some had lead roles (Across School Teachers / Within School Teachers), one Lead Principal, and others were classroom teachers. All offered a very good insight as to how the Kahui Ako had impacted on them personally, their class/syndicate and achievement for the whole school. Further to this was how had the Kahui Ako impacted – positively or negatively – on their own personal/professional development.

Without fail, all those interviewed commented that the role of the Lead Principal was a major influence on the success of the Kahui Ako. A noted difference was whether the lead was from the primary or secondary sector. The primary sector was seen to be harder done by due to the lower staffing structure that supports the principal and their school as opposed to the secondary sector. Those in the primary sector also felt that there was an element of hierarchy when secondary school staff held some of the more senior roles, in the Kahui Ako. This created, at times, a tension due to both sectors not fully understanding or appreciating the roles that they all play.

What was working well ..

- Schools starting to talk about PLD and at times, joining together to share the same focus.
- In clusters where there are only a few primary schools (3-5), it was easier to get to know the staff from other schools. Relationships may already exist.
- Parent perceptions of the schools working together was good for overall community conversations about the schools as a whole, and education.
- A better pathway for learners – from ECE- primary – intermediate – secondary – tertiary. The shared pedagogy is having a positive effect and the language that is now being used across all schools is more similar (one cluster only).
- Collaboration – within schools and across the schools meant a better approach to problem solving and seeking support from each other. As a result, discussions, when staff did get together, were more focussed on how students learn, sharing resources and strategies, and varying approaches to addressing common barriers to learning.
- Secondary school staff developed a greater appreciation of the skills and teaching knowledge that primary school staff possess.

What was not going so well

- Sustainability. Kahui Ako were struggling to develop sustainability plans as there was a reluctance to undertake the roles. Many saw lead role holders working long hours – often with a sacrifice being made at their own schools / class, and this was not an attraction.
- Staff changes – especially in areas where staff turnover is high, contributed to broken or stilted achievement.
- Poorly designed PLD. The one-style fits all approach was not always appreciated or suited to a cluster of schools. One school commented that, “some schools in our cluster were miles behind whereas we were well ahead on the focus. This just led to frustration and no impact for us. Therefore, future PLD for us was a waste of time.”
- Across School Teachers attached to the secondary system were not often seen in the primary schools, and when they did, they were so busy and lacked an understanding of the system, that it made for strained relationships.
- Not all schools in a cluster joining the Kahui Ako made for sub-groups that appeared to break away – becoming a ‘them and us’. It was then perceived that schools weren’t moving along collectively, creating a divide, not a unity.
- One Kahui Ako had struggled to get a Lead Principal, so the Kahui Ako could not start. Continual changes in staffing, poor trust and no lead meant that the everything was slow to start. No support was available for this, despite the desire for some momentum. The lack of flexibility around how a Kahui Ako could be led was a hindrance for one cluster.
- Another cluster commented that they use to all get on very well. Once people started getting paid to do the collaboration that once existed on goodwill, relationships changed and there was less willingness to oblige.
- The great number of outside ‘professionals’ who had access to large chunks of the funding, and didn’t really have too much of an influence.
- Ministry of Education officials who were attached in liaison roles, tended to hinder development more than see ways of making a Kahui Ako work.
- The unrelenting focus on an academic achievement outcome prevented Kahui Ako making initial progress.

Implications and Benefits

What was the most interesting finding from the whole exercise was that the academic achievement of students never really featured at all. Very rarely was it mentioned, and when asked, not one school could state that the Kahui Ako had had any positive impact on student achievement. When teaching staff were directly answered, they all stated ‘no’. The whole conversation revolved around the relationships that existed within and between schools. Only one cluster, that had been in existence since the start, made comment on a growing shared belief and understanding around pedagogy. This same cluster also expressed concern that they had no sustainability plan, nor idea of who would step up into the role. Workload was a major influence and the cost to personal well-being and in another clusters case, health.

Successes from any Kahui Ako seemed to be built on the existing relationships that did exist between the schools. In one cluster, they believed that the next best step for them would be to start to get involved in teacher to teacher mentoring, growth coaching and observations. All

clusters felt that a removal of the academic focus would enhance the ability of the cluster and make things more manageable.

A glaringly obvious barrier for many clusters is the formula that is used to generate both the funding and staffing. Smaller clusters are disadvantaged and this did impact on the growth, momentum and potential that the cluster could have had. The workload and challenges remained the same. With fewer people to share the load and to collaborate with meant that some of the roles were conducted in isolation.

The relationships that exist between schools seem to be the main barrier that determine whether a Kahui Ako is a success or not. A wise Lead Principal would invest time in building relationships and trust as well as developing their leadership in a wider arena. The ground work spent on this means that when the specific interventions need to be developed and implemented, there is more 'buy-in'.

Conclusion

As we know, leadership is critical to any situation. The right person in the right place knows how to take the time to work with the people and over time, get the best out of them so that a collective growth occurs. It does seem that the model of a Kahui Ako was being built as it developed, with little flexibility and a very locked in and narrow focus – academic. While this is an obvious intention for any school – or groups of – a large amount of ground work needed to happen first, to ensure that the environments were right to allow this to happen. For many Kahui Ako, this was not the case, leading to frustrations, resentment and reluctance to take up the roles that were offered. This was the case more so as time went on. The other intention of a Kahui Ako was to provide new career pathways for staff in our schools. Again, this seems to be a plan that hasn't evolved as it should, with smaller Kahui Ako unable to fill roles. Teachers and Principals simply filled roles because no one else would.

The Ministry of Education has invested significant amounts of funding to this model, which has not always been as successful as intended. We could argue that the funds would have been better utilised. Moving forward, if the removal of an academic focus happened, and clusters were able to submit a plan/ challenge that was far more relevant to their cluster, the buy in and success may be greater. Investment in building relationships is vital.

Flexibility is the key here – in a world where we endeavour to teach our students to be flexible in their thinking, and respond to needs through inquiry, it is ironical that such a significant revolution for schools could not do the same.