

# **SABBATICAL REPORT**

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**HOW DO SCHOOLS IN NEW ZEALAND  
AND OVERSEAS MOST EFFECTIVELY  
USE LEARNING SUPPORT STAFF (LSS) TO  
RAISE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT?**

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:**

My special thanks to the LSS (teacher aides) and Principals who talked with me, and responded to my questionnaires.

I found the Support Staff Workforce Strategy Reports of great value in providing a wider view of the background research I was doing, as well as reinforcing for me the critical issues and suggested efficiencies for schools to act upon.

I sincerely thank my Board of Trustees for the opportunity.

## **PURPOSE:**

The purpose of this research is to clarify how schools are utilising their teacher aide staffing, to explore ways that this valuable staffing resource can be improved, and to propose future directions for improving opportunities for the learning support work force in New Zealand.

## **BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE:**

My Board spends **over 20%** of its operations grant on the employment of support staff. Is this money being used to the greatest benefit to the students?

The role of teacher aides has shifted with changing needs of schools and students. As the workload of teachers becomes increasingly pressured the expectations of, and the need for teacher aides increases. Use of ICT in learning and administration, the growing emphasis on inclusive and personalised learning, higher levels of students with behavioural and learning needs have contributed to this. As a result, teacher aide numbers have grown by 33% in the ten years from 1999 – 2009. Teacher aides work with some of our most vulnerable and at-risk students and yet are one of the lowest paid employment groups in New Zealand.

There is limited quality professional development opportunity available or considered for most teacher aides. Principals identify complex issues around appointment, tenure, hours and conditions that impact on effective use of teacher aides in our schools.

In many New Zealand schools there is a “them and us” mindset between teachers and teacher aides. A worrying outcome of this mindset is a feeling by many of our learning support staff that their work is under-valued. I believe there are relatively simple ways that schools can address this.

The NZSTA, NZEI, MOE shared working group reports that in 2009 29.4% of the school workforce are support staff at a cost of \$400 million. Largely, this cost is carried by schools through their operations grants.

## **METHODOLOGY:**

I chose to look in 3 areas: - at what is happening in schools in our local Marlborough region, a wider spread of schools across New Zealand, and a study of the UK system. In these regions I have gained feedback from Principals and Learning support staff through either face to face discussions or emailed questionnaires.

I examined the NZEI/MOE/NZSTA research and the conclusions drawn in the report on School Support Staff – “Collectively Making Resources Count”, and drew ideas from “Supporting Success In New Zealand Schools – A Guide to Managing Support Staff”, Yvonne Preece.

Given that some of the information I intended to gather was already available and uncovered during my fact-finding phase, I shifted the emphasis of my inquiry to the actual work of teacher aides and what schools could do to ensure the highest level of productivity from this valuable resource.

### **Questionnaire for NZ Principals**

School grade \_\_\_\_\_ Decile \_\_\_\_\_

Number of LSSs \_\_\_\_\_

Number of full time classroom teachers. \_\_\_\_\_

Key qualities you look for in LSS?

\_\_\_\_\_

Qualifications you prefer when appointing:

\_\_\_\_\_

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What %age of Ops budget is spent on LSSs

How much SEG \_\_\_\_\_ TFEA \_\_\_\_\_ funding do you receive?  
%age of locally raised funding spent on LSS?

Who is responsible for LSS supervision and organization?

What training does the school provide?

What are the major administrative/employment problems for you re LLS?-

Other comments and views:

\_\_\_\_\_

**EFFECTIVELY USING LEARNING SUPPORT STAFF IN NZ SCHOOLS**

**LSS QUESTIONNAIRE.**

FIRST NAME. \_\_\_\_\_  
 SCHOOL \_\_\_\_\_ DECILE \_\_\_\_\_  
 How long have you been a LSS? \_\_\_\_\_  
 What are your key tasks:

Reading       Writing       Spelling       Maths   
 Oral language       Inc       OTHER \_\_\_\_\_

Qualifications on appointment:  
 Experience before appointment  
 Qualifications gained since appointment:

Skills developed since appointment	Where were skills developed

Sources of support:  
 Barriers and difficulties:  
 Rewarding aspects:  
 Career path:

## FINDINGS

### 1. MARLBOROUGH REGION.

**Learning Support staff:** The majority of LSS interviewed had less than 6 years experience, yet over 25% had over 10 years experience often at the same school.

Predominantly, their main role was to support students in literacy (reading, writing, oral language) and mathematics. A growing number are supporting the class inquiry and ICT programmes. 26% had teacher aide qualifications, and most had previous experience working with children prior to their appointment. About 20% had gained a teacher aid certificate since being appointed although a significant number said that there was no incentive to do the study as there was small financial gain, especially if they had to pay the cost of study.

Opportunities for training were mostly provided by staff associated to the school or they had opportunity to access courses from visiting consultants to the region. Some had access to teacher training courses alongside the teachers they support. No LSS had thoughts about a better career path although some named colleagues who had gone on to teacher training.

#### **Principals:**

When making an appointment, Principals looked for candidates who showed strong empathy for children, matched their school culture and values, had good commitment, and would fit in with the team. Experience and

qualifications did not rate strongly. Schools rely heavily on external agencies to provide training and professional development, although in bigger schools, the staff, particularly SENCO has a greater role in training teacher aides. Principals express a range of administrative difficulties, mainly around hiring, pay levels, unreliable funding streams and therefore unreliable tenures. All schools that responded spent all of their targeted funding (SEG, TFEA), and 0-20% of their operations grant on support staffing. Some schools were spending 10-15% of locally raised funds on teacher aide salaries.

## **2. NZ SCHOOLS.**

**Learning Support staff:** The workforce is predominantly female with over 77% aged 40 or over. They make up 29% of the school workforce. A high percentage work part-time, most commonly from 11 to 30 hours per week. Many do extra hours sometimes paid, often unpaid, or given time in lieu. The learning support work force has become increasingly higher qualified. Generally they gain satisfaction from their work and feel they contribute to better learning outcomes for students. However there are a number of issues that could improve their working conditions. These include their relationship with staff, their involvement in wider school decision-making, pay levels, sense of value, level of direction from school leaders and teachers, level of feedback, and for some a lack of a suitable career path.

Feedback from schools I approached both locally, and in other parts of New Zealand reflected the same findings as those from the School Support Staff Working Party report "Collectively Making Resources Count" (NZEI, NZSTA, Ministry of Education, 2011).

**Principals:** Primary school Principals who responded to my questionnaire gave similar responses to those of my local colleagues. They represented schools across the decile range and from U2 to U6. Only one U3 school had a ratio of better than 1 teacher aide to 2 classrooms. One school had a ratio of 1 teacher aide to 6 classrooms. Principals were more interested in the key qualities of teacher aide applicants than they were in qualifications, requiring the correct match to a specific need. In most cases SENCOs were responsible for the training and supervision of teacher aides, with involvement from the Principal.

Principals were willing to share ways that they were using their teacher aides, and these included class support for te Reo, ESOL, learning involving ICT, ICT infrastructural management, Physiotherapy, as well as many inclusive learning approaches.

**Support staff Working Group Report:** The working group was to consider the strategies that could optimise the effective use of support staff in supporting teaching and learning under the existing model of self-managing schools and current funding arrangements. Whilst I agree that schools should look more closely at how effectively they are managing their support staff I believe there are some key improvements that can only be made with an improved funding structure.

Significant findings of the research included:

- Support staff have a high level of job satisfaction, but are less satisfied with their terms and conditions of employment (pay, status, school culture)
- Recruitment and retention are not big issues for Principals.
- There is almost no career path for teacher aides. It is a little better for administrative support staff.
- Qualifications are varied, the most common qualification level is NCEA level 1/School Certificate, but almost as many have a university degree.
- 80.3% are employed in permanent full or part time positions.
- 50% of teacher aides are employed for more than 20 hours a week. Their hours often fluctuate, and teacher aides are less likely to be paid for additional hours they do.
- Common support staff concerns include workload pressures, relationship with teachers who do not forward plan, inconsistency between teachers, lack of materials and resources, lack of time to plan for students individual needs.
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A summary of the Working Group's 22 recommendations reveals four key areas:

- The report be published and used by teachers, principals, support staff, Boards and educational agencies to develop further understanding and awareness of the issues facing support staffing in NZ schools.
- Review and implementation of a range of professional development opportunities for people in all educational roles.
- Further research in to what constitutes best practice in the working relationship of teachers and support staff.
- Further review of the views of teachers about their need for and use of support staff.

### **3. UK SCHOOLS.**

As in NZ, Learning Support Staff undertake a wide variety of tasks that directly assist students with their learning and ease teacher workload. In some schools there are higher numbers of learning support staff than teachers, but it is usual for classes to be assigned a full time or nearly full time teacher aide. There are three key levels for learning support workers in the UK working as teaching assistants, higher level teaching assistants, or cover supervisors. Organisations such as the Teachers' Development Agency (TDA) deliver courses to Teacher aides that prepare them for all levels of teaching support. Levels 6 and 7 allow for the attainment of a degree in Education.

#### Teaching assistant's roles.

- reading and telling stories
- helping children with number work by using counting games or learning tables
- playing games and encouraging children to play together
- talking and listening to children

- displaying art and craft work
- supervising dining and play areas
- escorting pupils between classes and on outings and sports events
- comforting and caring for children if they have a minor accident or are upset
- helping younger children with motor and co-ordination skills such as holding pencils correctly or tying shoelaces
- helping the teacher to maintain records
- liaising with other professionals, parents and carers

#### Higher Level teaching Assistant Roles.

Teaching assistants in England can achieve Higher Level Teaching Assistant Status (HLTA), on reaching a required standard in literacy and numeracy. Employers play a lead role in helping a teaching assistant achieve HLTA status.

HLTA's may sometimes be required to supervise, short term, a class of children in the absence of a teacher. ([www.coversupervisors.co.uk](http://www.coversupervisors.co.uk)). Clearly the HLTA has an increased level of responsibility and as such can also expect to receive a slightly higher income than a regular teaching assistant. With HLTA status, a foundation degree or equivalent qualifications, teaching assistants can progress on to teacher training by taking a degree leading to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS).

#### Cover Supervisor Roles.

Cover Supervisor's are non teaching staff chosen by the school management to look after a whole class of children.

They have been given the necessary training and skills to:

- Oversee the completion of set work
- Manage the behaviour of pupils.
- Maintain a constructive learning environment
- Act in accordance with school policy and procedures
- Report back to the teacher responsible on the outcomes of the lesson.

### **ACTIONS RESULTING FROM THIS INQUIRY.**

1. Clarify and specify with performance criteria teacher aide job descriptions. Discuss 1:1 with the teacher aide concerned and articulate the expectations of both parties to the teachers she will work with.
- 2 Provide a self-assessment form to assist the teacher aide to evaluate and use as a basis for discussion at appraisal meetings.
- 3 Give higher priority to discussion about terms, conditions, relationships, and resourcing at appraisal meetings.
- 4 Tailor professional development to meet the individual needs of teacher aides as well as involve them in the school-wide professional focuses.
5. Implement guidelines for teachers to use teacher aides in their classrooms to their full potential.
6. Explore other ways of allocating teacher-aide hours to provide best possible support for students, eg gifted and talented, mainstream kids leaving

teacher to work with high needs/at risk students; ICT/ inquiry learning facilitation.

7. Raise the level of appreciation and value teacher aides feel for their effort through raising the responsibility and autonomy of teacher aides in the teaching role.

8. Become more involved in the professional conversations of the teacher aide group. Involve the senior management team in working more with this group.

9. Involve teacher aides in the professional development of the teaching staff as well as professional development specific to the needs in their role.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHER AIDE SERVICES IN NEW ZEALAND SCHOOLS.**

1. The mandate to improve the effectiveness of teacher aides cannot be successful on a fiscally neutral basis.

2. The Ministry of Education needs to make it a priority to fund teacher aide entitlements to a minimum of 1 teacher aide to 2 classrooms independent of the operations grant.

3. A strong professionally driven career structure that recognises teacher aide academic qualifications and training, and rewards with significant pay increases and increments based on those increments.

4. Create easier pathways for effective and enthusiastic teacher aides to work towards teaching degrees while working in teaching aide positions.

5. Staff schools according to roll as is now done, but with qualifying hours for teacher aides.

6. Increase ORRS and other special staffing resources to properly support the learning of high learning and behavioural needs children.

7. Provide training and support networks for Principals and Senior Managers to effectively utilise a valuable teacher aide resource.

8. Use Ministry Research agencies to provide best practice guidelines to schools.