

Student Engagement

by

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I am in my fourteenth year of Principalship and two years into my second position in this role. Through research, personal beliefs, awareness of my strengths, and experience, I am more convinced than ever that the key to engaging students in their learning is the creation of an environment in a school where students enjoy being there and enjoy their classes. I am also more clear than ever that this is an environment where students know and feel that staff genuinely care about them and their learning, where relationships are positive, where students are treated with respect and do the same for staff in return, where boundaries are clear and sanctions for stepping over them are consistent and fair, where expectations are clear, where staff work tirelessly to better meet their students' needs, and where staff know that the Principal and Senior Management value them and support them in their work and are therefore happy to be lifelong learners themselves. Of greatest importance is the requirement that the Principal walks the walk and models the behaviours that he or she expects from staff and students.

As I approached my sabbatical in Term 3, 2008, I was able to reflect on my career as a Principal to date and to consider the needs of my current school. I had led a neighbouring school for over 11 years from a school of 700 students to a school of 1400 students with high levels of student achievement and an enrolment scheme to avoid overcrowding. These gains were achieved by applying the philosophy described above. I then began to look for a new challenge to apply my learning and experience to and took up my position in my current school in early May 2006. The school had been through a traumatic time and student engagement had suffered and was soon our central strategic goal. We are part of the MOE sponsored Student Engagement Initiative. On arrival I found that relationships were not positive in many instances both between staff and students and amongst students themselves, leading to poor engagement as evidenced by low attendance rates, high Stand Down and Suspension rates and declining student achievement. The school had suffered significant negative media coverage which had sent it into roll decline which did nothing for the self confidence of staff and students. We have made huge progress to date. The staff have been fantastic and so too the students. All negative statistics have turned around dramatically such as attendance, suspensions and student achievement. There is more to do and it will take time before the community

put their trust fully in us again but the change to date has been very affirming. My sabbatical presented me with the opportunity to challenge my own philosophy on what makes a successful school by looking at other schools and to learn about any other initiatives that add value to this.

I was fortunate enough to spend time in three schools during my sabbatical. Two large multi-cultural Auckland schools, one decile 5 and the other decile 3, as well as a school in Belfort, France, for two weeks. I am very grateful to the Principal's, Senior Management and staff of these schools who gave their time so willingly to me.

Both Auckland schools reinforced my own beliefs in what makes a successful school. The visits were very affirming. Both schools achieve outcomes for their students in NCEA which put them well above their decile while having low suspension and exclusion/expulsion rates and high retention rates. Both schools work very hard to keep their students at school and in school engaged in their learning. They have comprehensive support structures in place for students to assist them to re-engage with their learning as quickly as possible when they have disengaged through absence, behaviour or being well behind their peers. For attendance, this usually involves staff of the appropriate ethnicities who can engage and communicate with students and families to quickly get them back on track. There is a mindset that every student counts and they will not simply let them drift away. There are good connections with community agencies and school counselling staff usually co-ordinate the support network. For students with special learning difficulties, a comprehensive learning support programme is in place and for those whose behaviour causes concern, restorative practices play a significant role in one school in managing and changing behaviour while the other is quickly moving down that track. They see restorative practices as an effective means of changing behaviours and therefore bringing about long term solutions. One school operates a Maori and a Pasifika homework programme and both put huge emphasis on staff development aimed at upskilling staff in modern, student centred pedagogies. Te Kotahitanga features in one school and is attributed with making a significant positive difference to the quality of learning in its classrooms through engaging all students. Both schools practice open, honest communication at all levels and put students first. Both schools are led by Principals who walk the walk and are very visible instructional leaders.

Students will engage with their learning when school is a pleasant place to attend each day, when they know that they are getting a good deal in the classroom from committed quality teachers and when they are treated fairly and with respect and know that the staff genuinely care about them. This requires the resourcing to

support key programmes and a shared approach to pedagogy and student relationships.

After two weeks associated with a French Catholic School catering for students of all ages through to young adults on employment related courses (as part of an exchange for 21 of our French language students), I do not profess to be an expert on their education system or schools. Suffice to say that the pupils themselves have a strong sense of the importance of their education to them and this fosters a good level of engagement. There are little or no student support services in place. Teachers teach and students are there to learn. Extra-curricular activities are almost non-existent. The sense that it is a competitive world out there and if you want to do well in it, then you need to make the most of your opportunities and get good grades, seems to be strong. This is clearly believed by parents and students alike and is therefore inter-generational. This may tie in with the OECD statistics for student achievement which show us competing very well at the top end but also dragging our tail. Our tail is the tail of the disengaged. The two Auckland schools that I visited and the school that I have, take the challenge of breaking the cycle of disengagement very seriously. When parents value education, then their children will.

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