

FOCUS:

**The identification of “best practice” strategies integral to successful
small rural secondary schools.**

Sabbatical Leave Project August-October 2008

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PURPOSE

To identify ‘best practice’ strategies integral to successful small rural secondary schools in New Zealand, California, USA and England, with a view to incorporating those strategies, where appropriate, into Ruawai College culture in the future, in support of our vision, namely:

To become an outstanding rural Year 7-13 school, resulting in Ruawai College being the first choice for secondary education in the community.

STUDY BACKGROUND AND OUTLINE

1. In the initial proposal a profile was created which embodied issues commonly faced by rural secondary schools. The profile, sent in advance to principals of schools who agreed to support this initiative, took the following form:
 - evaluating the impact of relative isolation
 - negating the magnet of larger neighbouring schools
 - combating the lure of boarding schools
 - thwarting the sleepy hollow syndrome
 - raising of community expectations
 - responding to endemic low literacy levels
 - publicising the positives of rural life and of a small school
 - strategising for differentiated classrooms and learning
 - maximising the effectiveness of transition programmes
 - maintaining standards in teacher and principal appraisal and mentoring
 - accessing high quality corporate professional development.
2. The intention, outlined in the proposal, was to visit schools, largely in New Zealand, but also in northern California and England (Devon, Cornwall, Suffolk, Essex) to visit and discuss issues identified in the profile. At that juncture, the aim was to engage with five or six schools in New Zealand, one or two in northern California and two or three in England.
3. The broad intention was to consider areas of commonality and divergence and to identify a range of strategies that would potentially benefit teaching and learning at Ruawai College through their introduction.
4. More detailed investigation, following confirmation of the sabbatical award, revealed that small state secondary rural schools were largely a thing of the past in England. As a consequence, dispensation was sought from the awarding authority to visit private schools in lieu where such visits were considered useful. This adjustment was granted.
5. By the sabbatical leave commencement date, the schedule of visits consisted of seven New Zealand state schools, an unspecified number of state schools within the Konocti School District, Lake County, California and five

institutions (made up of state and privately run schools) in rural areas and provincial towns in England's eastern and south-western counties.

6. Midway through the New Zealand portion of the study, visits to four additional schools were negotiated when it became apparent that they offered further examples of initiatives likely to be of relevance to Ruawai College. Needless-to-say, all schools visited are listed in the Acknowledgements.
7. The New Zealand schools were all visited before departure, in mid-August, for the United States of America and the United Kingdom. The Californian schools were visited in the first week of the new school year and those in England in weeks two and three of their new school year.

SCHOOL VISITS IN PRACTICE

1. What soon became apparent, from the earliest New Zealand school visits, was that few of the issues identified, in the proffered profile, sat easily with what their principals saw as 'best practice' initiatives which they identified as having been significant in promoting school stability or in enhancing student learning and achievement. As a consequence, the opening gambit, in all but the first couple of interviews, was to offer the principal the opportunity to talk about those strategies and initiatives he or she would identify as contributing to 'best practice'. The scope of the resulting interviews was wide-ranging and varied.
2. Logic dictated that not all of the so-called 'best practice' examples provided by principals were of immediate relevance to this principal or to his school; nonetheless, they have been included here so as to be representative and potentially useful to some readers. As one would expect, numerous 'best practice' strategies were common to several schools.
3. One unexpected aspect of the interviews was that many principals talked about issues that were seen, not as 'best practice' initiatives, but more as critical responses to situations imposed from outside the school and which, if not managed successfully, had the potential to de-stabilise their particular institutions. Most notable of these, in a New Zealand context, was the ongoing turmoil surrounding transport entitlement zones and provision for school transport networks. All principals who had found themselves, at one time or another, embroiled in 'negotiations' with other schools over transport issues found the exercise debilitating and not always conducive to sound collegial relations. In defence of his self-assertive transport position, one principal stated: "If my school was not active on this front, the roll would be cut by at least a quarter and possibly as much as a third."
4. All contacted principals/head teachers/headmasters/directors went out of their way to support this enterprise despite the fact that, in the majority of schools abroad, the first contact was by letter from a person previously unknown to them. Visits with principals lasted from anything between two hours and a full day. In almost every case, a tour of the school was provided by the host

principal, including 'live' classrooms, but on a couple of occasions this task was carried out by a deputy or assistant principal. The most memorable school tour was hosted by a Year 9 girl, who, when asked why she thought she had been selected, as against students much older than herself, replied: "I imagine that's because I've been told I'm seldom lost for words." (The headmaster at this particular school revealed that tours were invariably conducted by students. He liked the perspective that this gave visitors to such peregrinations.)

FINDINGS

The findings are divided into two parts. The first part details the best practice strategies garnered from the school visits. The second part takes the form of a personal comment on the health of rural state secondary schooling in England and offers a warning as to its implications for New Zealand schools. It also provides an example of alternative learning advocacy operating in northern California.

Best Practice Strategies

The following 'best practice' strategies were observed in one or more schools visited during this study. It goes almost without saying that the selection is unscientific and idiosyncratic and is not the result of profound research. Any inference drawn that the order in which the strategies appear is hierarchical would be incorrect.

- *The virtue of values education.* The New Zealand curriculum (2007) prescribes a set of values that are required to be given expression in all schools. The chosen values are those "that the New Zealand community supports because they enable us to live together and thrive in a diverse, democratic society in the 21st century." The curriculum is committed to developing the ethical as well as the intellectual potential of children and adolescents. "Special character" schools have invariably had specific values as their *raison d'être*; now state schools have been given legitimacy to explicitly teach values. There are excellent programmes in existence e.g. the Virtues Project, Cornerstone Values. A values-affirming culture provides more than a theoretical basis for promoting and maintaining an inclusive school climate. A value/virtue can be the focus for a period of time –promoted through VFTs and at assemblies. Dedicated values committee/team makes selection and provides follow-up activities. A 'values competition' can be incorporated into the inter-house competition through, for example, each vertical form dramatising a randomly selected value. The selected value can be promoted through the school newsletter. In smaller schools and communities each value can be widely publicised.
- *Negating the lure of larger neighbouring schools and boarding institutions.* The principal of each New Zealand school involved in this study expressed an awareness of these perennial threats. Even when all the key success indicators are in the affirmative there can still exist a modicum of student movement to other schools. By and large, principals are resigned to the departure of potential students from the local

community to boarding schools in that they are often the result of generational connections. For composite schools, such losses, after two years (Years 7 & 8), as is often the case, are particularly galling. Self-promotion by a neighbouring school that purports to elevate it above its neighbours should not be met by 'tit-for-tat' retaliation. Rather, they should be 'confronted' by reasoned and factual promotional publicity that enable the school's community to feel a jealous regard for its own school's integrity and worth.

- *Publicising the positives of rural life and of a small school.* In the best examples, there exists evidence, within those schools, of their histories and of their districts' histories. Local history can be used to create collective beliefs. (This was apparent in some schools [but by no means all] in New Zealand, California and England.) Talk about the concepts of identity and belonging was evident. A school's newsletter and the local newspaper can be vehicles for promoting a community's uniqueness and history and charm. Having a visiting school group from overseas can be as much an education for the hosts as for the visitors. A foreigner's perspective on the mundane can be an eye-opener. Even in districts where several different communities are served, they may unite under the umbrella of a single school. Area and composite schools often find themselves in such a situation. As one principal put it: "You don't lose your specific identity by coming to this school but you grow into this new one as well."
- *Looking after Years 7 & 8 students.* In composite schools (Years 7 to 13) the debate continues as to the degree to which these year groups are integrated into 'the wider secondary school.' For example, should subject heads determine courses and programmes at these year levels or should a HOD Junior Studies (for want of a better title) have autonomy in this regard? Should Years 7 & 8 students have homerooms and dedicated homeroom teachers? Should they have a designated area of the school campus identified as belonging to them? Several New Zealand principals noted the particular emphasis they placed on attracting and retaining high quality teachers at these year levels. Not only does the reputation of a school's Years 7 & 8 programme impact on the intake but that programme needs to reflect accurately the school's charter and strategic plans to ensure the benefits of the earlier exposure to a secondary school's culture. While best practice is very much a matter of opinion (in relation to this question, at least), providing spacious, well furnished and resourced homerooms, in a dedicated portion of the school promotes the notion of security critical to a student's sense of well-being and to having a personal stake in the school. Some composite schools have deliberately invested in modern adventure playgrounds for the exclusive use of Years 7 & 8 students. As well as the physical challenge such devices offer, they would seem to be symbols of intent, not so much in indicating that the school's most junior students will be treated differently but, rather, an intent to meet their needs 'now' and throughout their time at this place of learning.
- *Thwarting the sleepy hollow syndrome.* The syndrome's existence was not denied by New Zealand principals although it was not viewed as all

pervasive. One principal observed: “I’ve noticed that most of my kids have been on holiday to Australia to stay with relatives but have not been to Wellington or the South Island.” There exists a fine line between extolling the less stressful features of the bucolic life as against those of the fast-paced urban existence and being so laid back that high expectations and competition are foreign concepts associated with the ‘real but distant world’. A precursor to best practice is an acknowledgement of the potentially negative impact of isolation. A range of weapons need to be used to thwart this. School-owned or leased mini-vans are an essential link between rural school and EOTC experiences. A rich and coherent diet of EOTC experiences, across all year levels, should be a given in rural schools e.g. camps, theatre visits, career and workplace based seminars, regional council environmental workshops, field-days, field studies, school sporting and cultural exchanges, participation in provincial and national sports tournaments, local history field research, museum visits, city visits, etc..

- *The pastoral benefits of stable vertical forms.* The vertical form administrative structure can serve as a powerful pastoral tool in smaller schools, where no full-time (or even part-time) guidance counsellor is employed. Regular daily contact during the school year between vertical form teacher (VFT) and student can be used for more than organisational matters. The VFT may be the first point of contact for a student and his/her parents in most matters pertaining to welfare. Early phone contact between VFT and a new student’s home can have a lasting impact. The linking of a school’s most junior students, i.e. those in Year 7, with the most senior students, through a peer support programme, can help to lessen transitional concerns for the youngest group. Furthermore, the potential, in composite Years 7-13 secondary schools, to have the same VFT over several years, should not be overlooked. Where vertical forms are coupled with a vibrant house system, the assistance can be extended to embrace several staff with whom a student may identify during these formative years.
- *Vibrant house systems make for inclusion.* Healthy house systems can exist even in relatively small schools. Students will have a strong and positive sense of belonging where the house system recognises a wide range of pursuits, talents and disciplines. Sport should not dominate inter-house competition to the exclusion of other enterprises. Annual review of what makes up the inter-house calendar is recommended and student input, along with that of the wider staff, will increase the chance of a broad-spectrum programme. The dovetailing of vertical forms into the various houses can add to the sense of ownership one wishes (presumably) to engender. Although the traditional system allows for four houses, three groupings work perfectly well in schools with fewer than 200 students. It is important that participation does not become onerous, which may happen when the roll is spread too thinly. House membership can be a source of pride for former students that impacts in a positive manner on their children when it is the latter’s turn to attend the same school. In rural

districts, such things add to the fabric of the community and the sense of belonging.

- *Maximising the use of transition programmes.* Those New Zealand schools visited that are fortunate enough to be running Gateway programmes acknowledge the positive impact of this Tertiary Education Commission-funded initiative. While the range of placements is necessarily restricted in ‘deeply rural’ districts, the resource provision enables the needs and/or interests of individual students to be met, often at considerable distances from their homes. This is a particular boon to rural schools. The now annual *Workchoice Day* is viewed as a significant opportunity for Year 12 students from rural areas to receive career exposure and help to make informed decisions about where they are headed. Specific career seminars with agricultural themes, such as those run by Fonterra and the NZ Sheep & Beef Council, are important and increasingly popular. Annual visits to ‘open days’ staged by universities and polytechnics, while costly and time-consuming, are critical in exposing more academic-leaning students to the range of tertiary programmes available. Furthermore, best practice requires schools to make a clear timetabled commitment to career education from the earliest years. Learning and Career Plans (LCPs), commencing in Year 10, are increasingly seen as integral to subject choices and NCEA continuity. Transitional programmes, such as trade academies, horticulture academies, building construction classes, forestry units, and sports academies, are means of meeting student need, with the additional benefit of retention of senior students, many of whom are in the ‘at risk’ category in relation to meaningful employment.
- *The junior diploma – every school should have one!* Three-quarters of the New Zealand schools visited had either implemented junior diploma programmes or were in the process of doing so. The credit-based junior diploma (with its associated graduation ceremony) has been a fixture in American schools for decades but the concept has come into prominence in New Zealand probably because of its affinity to the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) assessment mechanism employed by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). Benefits of this credit-based strategy are numerous: motivates students (both boys and girls), encourages excellence, improves academic results; consciously develops personal and social skills; continuous tracking provides early warning signals; and boosts participation in school activities. Where diploma programmes exist, they may run across the junior school, Years 9 & 10, or even Years 7 to 10 in composite schools, or be confined to Year 10 only. In the case of the latter, Year 10 is seen as a transitional year between junior school and senior ranks with a more specific focus on NCEA-style assessment processes and personal accountability. No evidence was cited of the strategy being used to determine non-promotion. No school was currently using the summer school concept as a means of ‘making good’ the failure to graduate. Associated graduation ceremonies provide opportunities to publicise and celebrate the best in junior school achievement. The best model of a junior diploma would embrace the following: practical renderings of the key competencies; identification of

and measurement against the appropriate New Zealand Curriculum Levels; an assessment framework not too dissimilar to that of NCEA; and guidelines for consistent benchmarking, leading to valid reporting across all disciplines.

- *Participating and contributing through service.* The ‘giving of service’ has long been a feature of the curriculum in English private secondary schools and it is one that is still evident today e.g. coaching or training junior sports teams (often in associated preparatory schools), voluntary work in such places as rest-homes, hospitals, parks and gardens, public swimming baths and libraries, environmental and ecological projects. The concept of ‘community volunteerism’ is familiar in the programmes of many US schools too. While high-profile examples of civic-minded school enterprises exist in this country, the New Zealand Curriculum’s explicit commitment to conscious teaching of personal and social capabilities might encourage exploration of the ‘giving of service’ as a tangible component of a school’s programme. Such service should be kept distinct from career-based and transitional school-work placements.

Two Bad Practice Strategies from the United Kingdom

- *The demise of the community-based rural state secondary school in the England.* A month spent in England was long enough to conclude that such schools are things of the past. Even in the most agrarian of counties, longstanding smaller secondary schools, with rolls of between 200 and 600 students, have been abolished and their former students forced to travel miles to new economically efficient super-schools of 1500 students or more. These new institutions are considered by many critics to be soulless places without a sense of identity. The consequence is that small private schools are mushrooming all over the countryside as parents vote for smaller community schools with class sizes of fewer than twenty students. This despite the sacrifice parents are making to pay the hefty day-student fees.

Tellingly, it is anticipated that the number of students in private secondary schools will double from the current 8 per cent in less than a decade. In the more affluent south-east, the figure is already at 20 per cent. Some observers believe that the British Government is content to see this rapid growth of the private school system, since it reduces the state’s fiscal burden.

Our concern should be that there is a long tradition in this country of importing educational strategies from the United Kingdom (and elsewhere) and introducing them here. Since only 14 per cent of New Zealanders now live in rural areas, our capacity to lobby volubly to preserve this way of life is under threat. Taxpayers who choose to live outside urban centres have a right to expect the same standard of educational provision for their children as their city counterparts. The British model should remind us that we have been given a clear and present warning.

- *The rise of the executive principal.* The appointment of executive head teachers is a growing phenomenon in the state secondary school system in the United Kingdom. The concept has been a discussion topic in educational circles in New Zealand in recent months. In essence, the head teacher of a successful school is appointed to oversee the rehabilitation of a failing or underperforming school (as determined by the Department for Education & Skills using a range of indicators) while continuing to lead his or her own school.

An executive head teacher interviewed during this study was responsible for three educational institutions simultaneously, with roles of 1000 (School A), 773 (B) and 559 (C) respectively. School A had been transformed by him from a failing school to a pre-eminent position within the district in the space of four or five years. Given this success, he was invited to take first School B and then School C under his wing as each faced a falling roll and faltering leadership. He agreed to be interviewed at his ‘most recent acquisition’ – the smallest school by roll – in the third week of the school year and only a matter of months after being placed in charge. He admitted that the governors of School A had asked searching questions about the likely impact on their school as a result of his expanded role. The close proximity of the three schools enabled him to maximise the nearly two days he spent in each without wasting time on travel.

Such was his enviable reputation, he had been able to attract good teachers to his two ‘problem schools’. Interviews with four recent appointees to School C confirmed that they had accepted positions only because of the esteem in which they held the executive head teacher. While this particular district and its secondary students are fortunate to have an outstanding school leader in their midst (he confessed to having declined lots of offers from private schools), it scarcely reflects well on the quality of applicants for headship and/or the attractiveness of such leadership positions. With the ageing of the profession and the dearth of aspiring head teachers, he anticipated that executive head teachers would increase in numbers in the United Kingdom. Up to a thousand schools started the new school year, in September 2008, without a permanent head, according to a report in *The Observer* (14 September 2008).

AND TO FINISH ON A POSITIVE NOTE . . .

One Excellent Strategy from California, USA

- *Alternative learning advocacy.* The Konocti Unified School District, centred at Lower Lake, California, with its array of state-funded alternative learning and continuing education resources presented a penetrating contrast to the alternative learning provision that exists for secondary school students in the Kaipara district of Northland, New Zealand. The District Superintendent, Dr William MacDougall, himself an expert in

education for those with special learning needs, expounds the view that alternative education is a critical 'drop out' prevention programme, as well as being a viable method of intervention. His reaction to the prospect of a student expelled or excluded from one state school being foisted on another neighbouring school was one of incredulity.

According to Dr MacDougall, the liberal Californian lifestyle of the late 1960s and early 1970s had a significant proportion of the population living "outside the norm". The consequence for public education was profound since many adolescents, brought up in this milieu, accepted the 'drop out' tag with equanimity. Californian educational authorities faced the need for alternative strategies to the conventional high school and its traditional curriculum before most other state educational institutions and their leaders. The Konocti district has two continuation high schools, an alternative Years 7 & 8 school, a court school, and a school dedicated to independent study, as well as the conventional high school. This somewhat remote rural district (3 hours drive from San Francisco) is far from wealthy. The workforce is largely blue collar. Drug abuse is an endemic problem. An educated guess would give Lower Lake High School a hypothetical MOE rating of Decile 3 -- or 4 at most.

Student admission to continuation or alternative education is determined by the Student Review Team (SRT) which comprises representatives from all the aforementioned educational institutions. After consultation, the SRT decides which students go where. Schools have the right to know, according to Superintendent MacDougall, when a "catalyst" is being introduced into a school and that systems are put in place to prevent the "explosion".

Some of the reasons why students might be admitted to a continuation high school, such as W.C. Carle High, are:

- ✓ behind in credits
- ✓ poor attendance
- ✓ health problems
- ✓ not comfortable in a traditional high school
- ✓ need to work while attending school
- ✓ participation in the parenting teen program(me)
- ✓ small school setting and individualised instruction
- ✓ school-to-career program(me) participation

Core subjects include English, maths, science, social studies (U.S. history, civics, economics), vocational education, adult living (career skills, work experience, job shadowing), home economics (parenting skills, graphic design, culinary, arts & crafts, media production) physical education and community volunteerism.

The R.H. Lewis School for Independent Study has some 130 students. It provides educational opportunities for:

- ✓ the pursuit of special or unique educational interests
- ✓ exceptionally gifted students to progress at an accelerated pace
- ✓ 'drop outs' and potential 'drop outs', under age 18, to change direction
- ✓ students with medical problems
- ✓ pregnant minors and teen parents
- ✓ students with an immediate need to get a job
- ✓ the 'home study family' to have professional educational services
- ✓ students with different learning styles
- ✓ students who have experienced severe conflicts at the traditional school

William MacDougall emphasised that alternative education schools must remain small since: "The larger the school the less that is known about the kids as individuals." As for the teachers, he stated: "Middle school teachers often make excellent alt. ed. teachers because they concentrate on the 'whole child'."

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In the Konocti Unified School District, Lake County, California, access to the Lewis School for Independent Study was provided by that school's director Rick Evans. Furthermore, Rick organised an invaluable appointment with the newly appointed District Superintendent, Dr William R. MacDougall. Other educational institutions visited in the district were W.C. Carle High School (Ed Zander) and Lower Lake High School.

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Stephen Fordyce