

Sabbatical Report

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Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge the support of the Ministry of Education in making this scheme available to Principals. In addition, I wish to thank the Dunstan High School Board of Trustees for supporting and assisting my Sabbatical Leave.

Purpose

1. To take part in a study tour to Australia.
2. To investigate best practice strategies for improving student motivation, engagement and achievement.

‘The Australian Experience’

Study Tour to Australia (Gold Coast)

The focus of the week-long Study Tour was ‘Leading and Managing Schools, and Curriculum Leadership’. The tour was organized by Jeremy Kedian, Manager of the Education Leadership Research Centre of the School of Education, University of Waikato. Other tour participants included Primary School senior leaders from New Zealand.

Schools visited:

Pimpama State Secondary College
Palm Beach Currumbin High School
Varsity College
Southport State High School
Helensvale State High School

All the schools were very welcoming and I acknowledge the time and effort given to me by the five Principals and their respective leadership teams/staff.

Context

All the Queensland schools visited were State Co-Educational Secondary Schools. In general, the schools were large by New Zealand standards, with the exception of Pimpama, which is a new school with only 500 Year 8 and 9 students at present, but forecast to grow to 2000+. Varsity College is a P to Year 12 school and is the largest in Queensland with a roll of 3150.

Focus

My specific focus during the school visits was:

“What specific strategies/initiatives/programmes do you employ to improve student motivation/engagement/achievement?”

Findings

Many of the following strategies were commonplace in all the schools while some were specific to a particular school.

1. Personal Learning Goals

All students set personal learning goals at the beginning of each term. These are shared with parents through E diaries and homework books.

2. Academic Checkpoints

Academic performance is tracked for senior students and learning conversations with students take place with various staff including:

Subject teachers
HOD's
Senior Management

3. Student Pathways

Students are counselled into one of three possible curriculum pathways – Industrial, Personal or University.

4. Excellence Programme

Most of the schools visited had at least one Excellence Programme running. Examples included academic, sport and creative arts.

5. Literacy Programmes

Tactical Teaching of Reading – a programme especially designed with a focus on comprehension.

Catch up classes operating for some students.

Parent Education programmes hosted at school.

Teacher appointed with specific responsibility for literacy to ensure consistency across school.

6. Lesson Structures

Aimed at consistency of practice across the school – What does good teaching look like?

Common examples

- Learning Intention, Today I will, Success Criteria, Now I can
- I do it. We do it. You do it together. You do it alone
- WALT – We are learning today...
WILF – What I'm looking for...
WILT – what I've learnt today...

The underlying philosophy was that structured teaching leads to better learning.

7. Modern Learning Environment

Learning commons, Breakout spaces, particularly in new builds. Different furniture types available in classroom to cater for a variety of teaching/learning styles e.g. high chairs/stools, chairs, ottomans, tiered seating etc

8. Technology

One to one computer programmes. Tablets and laptops most common

9. Learning Values

e.g. School-wide Positive Behaviour Programme

10. Homework Club

Available 2-3 days after school. Run by staff volunteers or University students or Tutors.

11. School Culture
All Principals stressed the importance of a positive school culture as being a critical factor in school success. All schools worked very hard to promote that it is “cool to succeed”.
e.g. High expectations – behave well – perform well – contribute to school.
12. Numeracy
A leader of numeracy in the school.
Parent programmes offered
A school-wide approach to numeracy was common.
Intervention programmes – classes much smaller than core.
13. Indigenous Students
‘Closing the Gap’
Teacher appointed with the specific responsibility for monitoring academic performance.
Cultural enrichment also stressed for indigenous students.
Focus on attendance and effort.
e.g. Award ceremonies at term breakfasts.
14. Boost Programme
A targeted programme for the best and brightest in the school (approximately 15 students)
Achievement analysed – targeted support from a mentor/coach
Aim – to achieve Excellence grades.
15. Foundation Structure
A blend of Primary and Secondary approaches at Years 6, 7 and 8
One teacher of Maths/Sci and one of English/Social Studies
Close relationships with ‘feeder’ schools
Common examples
 - Reading programme where Y9’s read to Y4’s at local primary school.
 - Science programme offered by secondary teacher in primary school.
 - Professional Development for Secondary/Primary staff working together.
 - On-line transition programme for students coming to secondary school.
16. Department Reviews
All HODs/HOFs review achievement data for all students/classes at end of each semester.
Interview with Principal to report on progress
17. Professional Learning
All staff expected to be learners
Provided with a Kindle for professional reading
e.g. How to teach like a pirate?
Teachers encouraged to take a “License to Thrill” approach.
18. Study Leave
During school exams, students do not get study leave unless they are up-to-date with their work.

‘The New Zealand Experience’

Visits to New Zealand Schools

The following South Island co-educational schools were chosen to visit after analysing NCEA performances. The majority of the schools had consistently high NCEA pass rates.

Schools visited:

Mt Aspiring College, Wanaka

Gore High School

St Peter’s College, Gore

Garin College, Nelson

Waimea College, Nelson

St Kevin’s College, Oamaru

Roncalli College, Timaru

Geraldine High School

I acknowledge the time and effort given to me by my New Zealand colleagues. Their generosity and openness was very much appreciated and highly valued.

Focus

As was the case with the Australian schools I visited, I simply asked the same open-ended question:

“What specific strategies/initiatives/programmes do you employ to improve student motivation/engagement/achievement?” and recorded the responses.

Findings

Many of the following strategies were commonplace in all the schools, while some were specific to a particular school.

1. Curriculum

All schools were offering a broad, balanced curriculum, which included a range of academy-type programmes where possible. In some cases, whole school timetable changes had been made to accommodate those students attending Academy/Gateway/STAR programmes.

2. Course Conferencing

Course Conferencing for Year 11-13 students was seen as a critical factor in student success. A lot of time and effort is put into ensuring that the students are following the appropriate course of study that best fits their needs and abilities.

3. Mentoring

A variety of Mentoring Programmes were operating in most of the schools that included personal goal setting. Staff volunteers and senior staff ran the programmes.

Examples:

- For Year 13s and Year 12s at risk.
- For Excellence students at Year 12.
- Mentoring class at Level 2.

4. Targeted Students

Students at risk of not achieving are identified and monitored. A variety of strategies were employed in this area, including a ‘watch list’ for staff, the use of class profiles, individual targeting, priority learners programme.

5. Programmes for Priority Learners

Examples:

- Year 11 Maths/Literacy Class.
- Pathways for Level 2 students.
- Year 9 Reading Programme for boys.

6. Academic Director

Appointment of a staff member with the specific responsibility of monitoring academic performance e.g. Academic Advisor/Director/Dean.

7. Relationships

The importance of positive relationships between the students and teachers is regarded as a critical factor that can enhance student achievement.

Many of the strategies operating in schools rely heavily on the goodwill of staff and their willingness to 'go the extra mile'.

8. School Initiatives

A variety of specific initiatives to improve achievement and support the students were evident.

Examples included Homework Clubs, Study Classes, Tutorials, Study Centre, Careers Programmes (Dreamcatcher), Peer Tutoring e.g. SWAG (Study with a Geek), assistance for students while on study leave, Junior School Graduation (Ready to Learn).

9. School Culture

All schools stressed the importance of 'school culture' as being a critical factor of student achievement.

Some of the schools had taken part in the PB4L School-wide programme and, as a result, the classes were more settled with students ready to learn.

A culture of excellence was promoted by using a language of expectations e.g. a yearly theme was adopted across the school – 'Ready to Learn'.

Some schools had included Academic School Captains in their student leadership teams who regularly spoke at assembly.

10. Technology

Some schools had introduced BYOD programmes that had helped improve student engagement.

The use of technology in teaching programmes was commonplace in many of the schools visited.

11. Student Attendance/Retention

This was targeted by some schools by way of e-texting and/or emailing parents of non-attendance of their child.

There is a direct correlation between attendance and student achievement e.g. those who achieve attend school 95% of the time.

Schools also worked very hard to retain their students at Year 12 and 13. Students who stay on at school, engaged in a meaningful programme, invariably succeed.

12. School Exams

Mock external exams were regarded as essential to allow students to practise the skills required to achieve success in external exams.

Exams were seen as part of 'core business' and provided students with immediate feedback.

13. Professional Development for staff was seen as a priority with increased expenditure being allocated in this area. There was a particular focus in Professional Development relating to priority learners.

Conclusions

After visiting a significant number of secondary schools (13) in Australia and New Zealand, observing classes in action, professional reading and discussions with colleagues, the diagram below best sums up my findings and subsequent conclusions.

Not surprisingly, there is no one strategy that leads to improved student achievement, but rather, it is a combination of a variety of strategies and initiatives that can, and does, lead to improved levels of student achievement and engagement.

A positive school culture where high expectations are consistently promoted is a critical factor in raising student achievement as is adopting the continuous improvement model through regular and rigorous self-review.



