

# Sharpening the Saw

## INTRODUCTION

There are two objectives in writing this paper. Firstly it is a requirement of the Ministry of Education that at the end of a sabbatical, a report is written about the better and more valuable findings made over the course of the sabbatical break. Secondly, the purpose of this paper is to share my observations with our staff and boards and to act as a conversation starter to help us move forward and to better inform me in writing the Annual Plan for 2016.

“Sharpening the Saw” was a term promoted by the late Stephen Covey, (whose books included “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People”, and “Principle Centred Leadership” amongst others) and his phrase is the underlying theme of this paper. Fundamentally, it means taking something that is good, and making it better, sharper, and more effective.

## SABBATICALS FOR PRINCIPALS

The MOE have offered every Principal a full term’s sabbatical (fully paid) every five years, to refresh and rest themselves and therefore renew themselves. The sabbatical term I have completed has achieved all three of these objectives, and particularly has refreshed my thinking. I have had the opportunity to visit a good number of NZ high schools and at the end of the term, along with our D.P. Andrew Langley, I have begun visiting our local primary feeder schools.

## SABBATICAL FOCUS

At each of the high school visits, I had “sharpening the saw” in mind; how can we (at St Bede’s) improve, and in which key areas? I was endeavouring to test by observation the programmes we have been involved in over the last three years to better meet the needs of the boys. I came across some excellent ideas that other schools were using but I was also comforted that the programmes and initiatives we already have in place could be shared with others as good (or “best”) practice.

Literacy programmes, BYOD programmes, and transitioning boys from primary to secondary school, were the aspects of each school visit, and will continue to be in the fourth term of this year. Teacher as Inquiry, the issue of appropriate levels of assessment, engaging Maori students, special character initiatives, boarding school, and building programmes were other topics for discussion I have had in some of the schools.

At the beginning of the sabbatical I also had an opportunity to visit the city of Durham, in England. To visit and pray at the tomb of St Bede in the impressive Durham Cathedral, and then to visit the remains of the Jarrow and Wearmouth monasteries where Bede lived and worked was not only most enjoyable but helped give some insights about why our College has this great Saint as its patron. A visit to St Peter’s school in York in the same week was also most interesting. This school was established in 627AD, and as the Headmaster

proudly stated, it is the oldest operating school in Europe! Its facilities are to be envied, no doubt paid for, at least in part, by their frighteningly high fees.

### **PERSONAL REFRESHMENT AND STUDY**

I am very grateful for the opportunity to have this time away from the daily responsibility of running a school, to refresh, and to reflect about some key Educational issues, in different settings and contexts. With more time to read, I enjoyed a good range of resources, some of which made a very positive impression. Two books, one publication by a retiring catholic principal, and a piece on YouTube stand out.

- 1) "Play it Again" by Alan Rusbridge
- 2) "Pope Francis-why he leads the way he leads" by Chris Lowney
- 3) "Ten things we might expect to see in a Catholic school" by Kieran Fouhy, long serving and recently retired principal of St Peter's, Auckland
- 4) "Not ashamed of the Gospel". Speech on YouTube by Robert P George at the national RC prayer breakfast 2014.

These publications are some of the reading highlights that will be very useful in shaping programmes and directions for St Bede's community.

### **SECONDARY COLLEGES VISITED**

- St Peter's, York
- Rongotai College
- Wellington College
- St Patrick's College, Kilbirnie
- St Patrick's College, Silverstream
- Francis Douglas Memorial College
- Matamata College
- Aquinas College

At some schools, I spoke only with the Principal. At most I also talked with the Principal and the head of teaching and learning, and in three of the schools, I was lucky enough to spend some time observing classes.

### **PRIMARY SCHOOLS VISITED SO FAR**

- Christ the King School, Burnside
- St Patrick's School, Kaiapoi
- St Joseph's School, Papanui

### **TEACHING & LEARNING**

As stated above, I asked all the secondary schools about literacy programmes, about BYOD and transitioning students from primary to secondary schools

Rather than recounting the details of every visit, I have instead recorded my impressions about Teaching & Learning best practice in the following paragraphs, as gleaned from these visits, and how these topic areas might be applied to “sharpen the saw” at St Bede’s College.

### **BYOD (Bring Your Own Device)**

Nearly all the schools I visited had established some form of BYOD, or were about to. Mostly, their BYOD programme was instituted at year 9. Schools are endeavouring to make this easier by using one device, and the common one was the chrome book.

The reasons for choosing chrome book are:

- financially accessible to more students
- Staff less adept at using technology were able to master chrome book; its simple
- Chrome book seemed to be a common device used in many primary schools.

Interestingly, Wellington East College who introduced all their school to BYOD 5 or 6 years ago, were moving back to using one device only, after trying many devices. Two other Wellington high schools were moving toward introducing BYOD to their year 9s and were also following Wellington East’s lead.

Some schools were experimenting in using technology for assessment tasks in preparation for that imminent change by NZQA.

### **LITERACY**

All schools, and particularly St Peter’s in York, stated that the boys’ literacy levels were inferior to girls and all the reasons why this might be so. It was postulated that boys are less likely to read, that there are fewer male role models in primary schools or at home, (who set a good example of reading), that books at primary school are not ‘boy friendly’, and that boys are more slap dash in their writing and indeed their learning overall.

*An impression I had formed before the sabbatical, over a number of years, but wanted to test, is that skilful use of technology at both the primary and secondary school, engages boys in written tasks that previously they may have been less willing to undertake. I have seen some excellent work in the primary schools in this area and a potential “work on” for us is to find out more about these programmes, why boys are more engaged, and therefore why their literacy skills and writing improve as a result. I believe this will help considerably in transitioning our boys from primary to secondary school and assist in seamlessly progressing their learning. For schools like St. Andrew’s College, who can integrate their primary and secondary programmes, there are obvious advantages, and benefits for the children.*

Francis Douglas College, a Catholic boys school of similar size as St Bede’s, (with a boarding school of 125) have the best NCEA results in Taranaki of any school, which is quite rare, and against the trends nationally. There are no BYOD programmes although they may be in a better position to do so when they are “snapped.” (School Network Upgrade Programme). They have an excellent learning support programme for those learners who are most

challenged, they have high expectations, and the boys are accountable for their own learning even if they are learning collaboratively. Their principal profiles excellence in learning and academic achievement regularly on a number of different levels and in a variety of forums, e.g. newsletters, Form assemblies with academic focus, gold pockets for exceptional academic achievement.

## **TEACHER AS INQUIRY**

Teacher as Inquiry slipped into many conversations at several schools, and an observation is that school initiatives and goals have to be incorporated into teacher PD and appraisal programmes if they are to get traction, and truly help students learning and development. So any literacy, (PB4L) special character initiatives we implement should be part of the school PD programmes and teacher development as a practitioner. School and staff development must be aligned and must have at its centre the student and his/or her overall development. Any teacher development initiatives of this type, must be aligned with the strategic direction of the school.

## **MAORI ACHIEVEMENT**

Maori achievement is a government priority. At Matamata College a school with a higher percentage of Maori than St Bede's, I sat in on a professional development session centred round a programme Waikato University instigated called "Culturally Responsive and Relational Pedagogy Growth Tool". I have examples of observations sheets used that target greater engagement of Maori students.

## **MODERN LEARNING ENVIRONMENT (MLE)**

There were many passing conversations with other Principals about what constitutes a modern learning environment. While I didn't visit what the MOE would consider a modern learning environment, my observation is that no MLE or BYOD programme is ever going to replace the leadership and the influence of a good teacher and their ability to motivate children to learn.

## **ASSESSMENT**

I also had a number of side bar conversations about how schools assess, or "over-assess" and therefore the adverse effect on students, particularly busy students. They are being burnt out by needless assessment and pointless credit farming, which doesn't necessarily do them any good in the long run. My feeling is that because of the silo mentality that exists across the curriculum, that schools felt somewhat trapped in their thinking, and reluctant to make change. As a result, the student suffers. I think we need to take an holistic approach that is centred on the welfare and overall development of the student.

## TIMETABLE

In some schools there had been some work in gaining flexibility in their timetables, especially to cater for seniors. The age-old argument about how schools manage those students on a flexible timetable, was seen as a stumbling block to change.

## MLE, ASSESSMENT, and TIMETABLE; OBSERVATIONS

*It is important for us to keep foremost in our minds that our key role as educators is **the development and formation of good young adults**. Part of this responsibility is to teach them to become independent learners. A modern learning environment should therefore reflect this, and so should its timetable. A popular misconception in many schools' thought processes, is that a MLE is something physical and structural that includes wide-open spaces for 80-100 students, with plenty of (for example) bean bags and glass. I think a productive and responsible MLE should have as its goal, the successful graduation of 17 -18 year adults, who are well prepared to enter the world, and be good citizens. A good robust debate might centre around what truly constitutes the foundations and environment of a successful MLE.*

*As a starter, my thinking is that a successful MLE environment provides a high degree of one on one time with a good teacher, who is at once mentor, tutor, and counsellor. Many teachers attest to the benefit of our 'target forward' meetings that occur 2-3 times per year. An extension of that thinking could see seniors on timetabled classes which may occur 3-4 times per week but the other two allotted hours could be for conferencing either on line or in a tutorial environment that is needs based. Today's learners don't necessarily learn with 25 others in a class, nor do they learn seated at a desk in their bedroom at night. As we know there are plenty of other opportunities to learn and schools should think about this in their daily operations and structures. There is a notion that schools interrupt student learning 6-7 times a day with the present timetable structure. Some time ago we looked at a flexitime table to cater better for the senior students. As our learning environments, student needs and technology are changing rapidly, my view is we should also adapt our timetables to suit.*

*Many schools encumber their staff and their students by over assessment. If we have as a priority the overall development of students, and if we want them to become well rounded, principled adults as well as strong achievers, then shouldn't we be giving some more thought to our health, pastoral and retreat programmes to help them become better adults? If we freed up some time that was not formally timetabled could we be in a better position to allow development of those "softer" skills that we know are so important for the challenges of today's world.*

After this time of reflection could I suggest we gather a group to explore these and other issues.

## **SUMMARY, AND LEARNINGS GOING FORWARD**

The Sabbatical was much appreciated; a refresher for me and I am most grateful to the Boards and the Ministry of Education for granting it to me. I sincerely wish to thank the senior team led by Gerry Davidson who carried on with the running of the school, seamlessly. I was confident that St Bede's was in good hands in my absence, and am pleased that others on the staff were able to experience different roles as well. That is also one of the positives of a Principals sabbatical; the chance for other team members to broaden professionally.

The sabbatical has given me the opportunity to reflect a lot about St Bede's and in concluding this paper I want to encapsulate and reinforce some key thoughts:

### **SPECIAL CHARACTER**

- 1.1 The visit to the tomb of St Bede's in Durham, to St Bede's World, and to the remains of Jarrow and Wearmouth monasteries helped in gaining a better understanding of our patron. It is my intention to write and share some sort of presentation in the near future.
- 1.2 The retiring principal of St Peter's Auckland wrote as a parting shot an excellent publication, "The 10 things we expect in a Catholic College", which I attach for your reading. It is an excellent paper which highlights a Catholic schools' point of difference.
- 1.3 This publication reinforced for me the importance of allowing all staff to participate in the forums we began in the first half of the year, which looked at how we might respond to the challenges as outlined by the NZ bishops in their letter about catholic education, published in January 2014.
- 1.4 The purpose of these forums was to more particularly investigate the reasons why catholic schools were established and to revisit the integration act and how we as a College honour that agreement with the state.
- 1.5 Our point of difference to state and independent schools, (and which we must be mindful of, in making any decisions) is that our College was founded to develop Catholic leaders for society. Our forefathers led by Archbishop Redwood and Bishop Grimes chose the schools they founded as the vehicle to do this. Forming young catholic men to lead is the first focus.
- 1.6 Therefore, at St Bede's, we must not be seduced into a market driven mentality where we compete for placing on the league tables, where we compete and pay for the best, and where the brightest students in the classroom and are overcome by the values of the largely secular society we live in.
- 1.7 High achievement scholastically is still important, but every boy, no matter his ability levels, should utilise ALL his God given gifts to the BEST of his ability, and should therefore be presented with ample opportunities to develop and be formed in a catholic and integrated way, by St Bede's. That is our point of difference. The type of man that walks out of St Bede's, and the contribution he makes in leading his family, his church, his vocation or profession is also the core business of St Bede's.

## **LEARNING**

- 2.1 The visits I made to secondary schools gave me some ideas that might improve what we are doing and I outline these in the body of the paper. In some cases though they affirmed what we are already doing here.
- 2.2 Visits to primary schools (which continue in term 4) have also been most helpful and I believe some of the measures they are taking to address literacy for boys would be worth capturing, and will help to prepare us, when they arrive at St Bede's.
- 2.3 I have often stated that the status quo is not an option. Learning institutions need to be open to ways to improve, in order to grow. If managed well, initiatives like BYOD, Literacy and PB4L are all ways to better and improve our learning environment. We have seen that the nature of recent cohorts have changed compared to those 5-10 years ago. If we ignore these signals, and do not respond as a school, then we do so at our own peril.
- 2.4 Consistent approaches to written tasks, consistency in expectations, and looking at ways to better engage our learners and enhance our learning environment for staff and students are some of the key reasons for embarking upon programmes like PB4L, BYOD and literacy initiatives. Allowing the time to be exposed to up-skilling, is a key challenge.
- 2.5 This week I was showing a potential applicant around the college. I walked into 3 classrooms at random and I noticed how different our classrooms looked, compared to 5 years ago. What stood out visually was the number of consistent prompts to learning and how we are therefore shaping the boys. Visual, consistent reminders to pray, reminders about expectations, visual reminders about subject vocabulary and approaches to writing, are big changes we have made over the last 5 years. Our visitors commented on this as well.
- 2.6 PB4L is building on this, and because it is a 3-5 year programme, it will be staged and shaped by us in our catholic Marist context.
- 2.7 I propose we gather a "ginger" group to look at rationalising assessment, flexitime tables for seniors and the MLE.

## **FINANCE and PROPERTY**

- 3.1 Key decisions round the rebuild need to be shaped by an ethical imperative that St Bede's is still financially accessible to any Catholic who wants to attend.
- 3.2 Significant contributions from the Society of Mary and the BOP will be a great help and access to this fund is being communicated to our catholic primary school communities recently. However everyone in our community should have opportunities to share in St Bede's re-development, and we should be encouraging families who want their son to attend St Bede's not to shut the door merely for financial reasons.
- 3.3 Buildings don't make schools. The people in them do. While it is important to have good serviceable and well built facilities we should not be worried about competing with independent schools. Looking around Christchurch, it has become clear that we can now build multi-purpose buildings & facilities at a cost far less than what was once thought. This is positive given our limited rebuild funds and borrowing capacity.
- 3.4 The Board of Proprietors' decision to approve a Master Plan is a most positive step forward, as is the move this year to have Nola Kilpatrick and Gerry Davidson on the

Project Rebuild Team. Prudent financial stewardship of the College is vital so as to provide & maintain facilities for both current and future boys.

## **LEADERSHIP**

- 4.1 The senior team serve the staff to do what they do best; teach the kids. The senior team will continue to engage with staff in shaping the future of the College. My intention is to use this paper as a conversation starter and offer any staff or group of staff to come to me either individually or in a group, to develop some of the key programmes suggested, herein. I want to hear what our staff are thinking.
- 4.2 As regards the governance of the College I am committed to continue to work with both Boards, promoting open dialogue and responding to very good suggestions made in the BDO report published 12 months ago. It is challenging to have two governing bodies but they must work together for the place to progress.

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October 2015



## 20 trends that are occurring in Catholic schools

1. **Elitist creep** (school enrolment to wealthy end of spectrum).
2. **Good school myth** (defined by academic results, rugby premiership etc).
3. **Catholicity bolted on** (what is core business – marketing exercise).
4. **Wealth seduction** (“top” = wealthy)
5. **Individualism** (competition between schools or resistance to being part of a community).
6. **A narcissistic belief** (culture of being triumphal or selfies).
7. **Being global blinkers** (no big picture).
8. **Fear** (the culture of no/unable to do things/afraid/past is better)
9. **Entitlement** at many layers (Catholic parents who expect to receive. Teachers who expect to receive and clothe entitlement with words like “justice”).
10. **Mediocrity of operation** (culture of comfort).
11. **A belief in sameness** of all Catholic schools (the culture of being centrist/disrespect for diversity).
12. **Normalising centralism** (the culture of accountants).
13. **Status quo thinking** (culture of “leave me alone”. No discernment of issues. No innovation re thinking.)
14. **Loss of mission and mission drift** (culture of school as an island).
15. **Being captured by past achievement** (“storing up treasures”/hugging the corpse).
16. **Loss of compassion in being corporate.**
17. **Loss of trust in God’s providence** (critical loss of faith).
18. **Excellence without equity** (or vice versa).
19. **Loss of presence at many layers of the school** (Remembering is forgetting. What does a school remember?)
20. **Forgetting we are called to be mystics.**

# 10 things we might expect to see in a Catholic School

1 **"I have come that you may have life and have life to the fullest."** (John 10:10)

**Theme: An education which provides for LIFE opportunities.**

- ✓ Opportunities exist for all students
- ✓ Sporting codes for the timid to the aggressive (archery → rugby) involvement in co-curricula
- ✓ Music and production: year 7 & 8 music, musical production
- ✓ Academic and the slow – special needs
- ✓ Articulate, devotional Catholic the 'atheist' Catholic, the submarine Catholic
- ✓ Public speaking for students
- ✓ Maori, Samoan and Tongan cultural groups
- ✓ Opportunities for technology, craft, food preparation, university, poetry, music

2 **"The spirit of God hovered over the waters."** (Genesis 1:3)

**Theme: Education which provides for initiative and SERVICE to the community.**

- ✓ Debate around the issues of how to implement core business (not about entitlement or identity)
- ✓ A spirit of freedom for seniors to become – not freedom from
- ✓ A confidence in the faces when students speak. No set scripts for open day.
- ✓ A high trust model in which teachers deliver
- ✓ A minimum of compliance requests

3 **"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me."** (Matt 10:40)

**Theme: Education is a social public good which takes place in COMMUNITY.**

- ✓ An enrolment of the family – not the individual
- ✓ A sense of welcome. Students/staff who show hospitality to strangers

- ✓ An inclusive community – dissolution of student hierarchy
- ✓ Leaders chosen for service – not charisma

4 **"Courage: Don't be afraid."** (Matt 14:21)

**Theme: An education which combines tradition and the FUTURE.**

- ✓ Tackle the issues of the common good
- ✓ The presence of plans for the future (regardless of where money is coming from)
- ✓ The universal courage of restraint (absence of violence)
- ✓ A sense of controlled innovation in the curriculum, in the community – what can be done differently
- ✓ Holding truth to power from wherever it comes

5 **"The least of you are the greatest."** (Matt 18:1)

**Theme: An education which has service LEADERSHIP at its core.**

- ✓ The allocation of resources to every student in the education spectrum – not the bottom only, or the top only – ALL
- ✓ The achievement of the 3C rugby team alongside the 1<sup>st</sup> XV
- ✓ Selection of leadership based on service models (not egotist model)
- ✓ The mission is about the students (not the teachers)
- ✓ Service programmes exist at all layers of school

6 **"Like a man who is building his house, dug deep and laid the foundation on rock."** (Luke 8:48)

**Theme: An education which has substance, and reflects DEPTH of our tradition.**

- ✓ The curriculum programme has depth. Teachers expect depth in assignments, thinking etc.
- ✓ There is excellence in teaching, coaching.
- ✓ Trivia is discouraged. All subjects taught for their intrinsic worth. No such things as secular subjects.
- ✓ Character before achievement

7

**"Act justly, love tenderly, walk humbly with your God."**  
(Micah 6:8)

**Theme: Education is a JOURNEY. (The metaphor for Christ's life)**

- ✓ "A justice for all" mentality.
- ✓ Right relationships validated by surveys.
- ✓ Brotherly love is expressed and seen.
- ✓ God has a name!
- ✓ Achievements are for the community and individual acknowledges that through coach, teacher etc.
- ✓ Defeat is accepted. Victory is applauded.

8

**"Do this in memory of me."** (Luke 22:19)

**Theme: Education with a special character/TRADITION**

- ✓ There is collective worship and liturgies at many levels of the school.
- ✓ The Christian story is taught systematically, at depth, with purpose. (Theology and Philosophy)
- ✓ Structures within the school are about remembering the story of the school, the Christian story and story of the church, the story of individuals.
- ✓ Religious Studies is seen as important.
- ✓ If remembering is about forgetting – who have we left out?

9

**"... Those who have lost all sense of meaning in their life, lack any inspiring ideal ... who come from families broken and incapable of love, often living in situations of material and spiritual poverty – slaves to new idols of society which not infrequently promises them a future of unemployment and marginalisation."** (Catholic Church in 3<sup>rd</sup> Millennium)

**Theme: Education for HOPE**

- ✓ There is a sense of hope in the community – communicated by a sense of confidence in governance and leadership.
- ✓ There are provisions in the school to support those who are struggling.

**Theme: Education is about ULTIMATE LIFE**

- ✓ There is a culture of reflection and prayer throughout the school.
- ✓ The community understands the ritual of prayer at events.
- ✓ Prayer is acknowledged and normalised.