

## FOCUS:

**Through Principal and Leadership Team leadership, what current practices at Vardon School enhance teacher performance and impact on raising student achievement?**

**What further practices may we introduce that are likely to improve the quality of learning and teaching?**

OR

**If You Don't Feed School Leaders They Will Eat The Staff!**

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### Sabbatical Report

**Richard Clarke  
Vardon School Hamilton**

With the support of my Board of Trustees and School Leadership Team, I applied and was successful in being awarded a principal's sabbatical for Term 3, 2005. In the following report, I will outline both the purpose for my sabbatical and the 'leadership-focused' inquiry brief which formed the investigative framework for my sabbatical. This will be followed by my discussion around the key areas that I explored within this framework; the report will conclude with the implications for leadership at Vardon School.

#### **Introduction**

There are many ways in which teachers may support the development of their students' learning. What interests me are the principal's leadership practices that support and enhance teacher performance, and identifying and removing those that hinder. Our current key focus at Vardon School is on developing students' **Learning Power** through raising **teacher capabilities** and promoting **self-regulated student learners**.

As the professional leader of a vibrant, progressive U5 city school, the focus of my 2005 sabbatical was to **reflect** on the practices we use or are currently implementing, and further **study** other practices that may provide opportunities for 'next steps' in our journey.

#### **Inquiry Brief**

An inquiry brief was developed in consultation with the leadership team and BoT to ensure that, as a key leader of our school, I would achieve maximum benefit from this opportunity to reflect on Vardon School's current practices and proposed plans for the future for enhancing student achievement. My main inquiry questions were:

Through Principal and Leadership Team leadership, what current practices at Vardon School enhance teacher performance and impact on raising student achievement?

What further practices may we introduce that are likely to improve the quality of learning and teaching?

The key areas I wanted to explore within these two questions were:

- developing and sustaining a school-wide learning culture as an integral part of the wider learning community
- promoting reflective practitioners; this included implementing a 'peer coaching' model
- growing school-wide leadership depth; this included a model of distributed leadership
- focus on the systematic use of student achievement data to continuously improve school-wide performance
- improve and increase the level of 'learning conversations' between and amongst staff, staff with students and within groups of students
- explore and implement productive teaching and learning pedagogies; What are the teaching strategies and how would this look in terms of learning practices?
- ways of helping students to learn better, rather than helping them to become better learners
- promoting a community of learners; engaging families

### **Exploration of Inquiry Brief**

On a number of occasions I have been asked to provide my perspective on; 'What is leadership?' My view is that principal leadership is about growing capacity and capabilities in others. Principal leadership is about instructional improvement. Every individual has the potential to be a leader; indeed, in many schools we see classroom teachers taking on real leadership roles that lead to improved student learning outcomes across a team of teachers, across the school. Therefore, principals are 'appointed leaders' or positional leaders who are selected for their position. Other staff taking leadership roles in schools may also be positional leaders because of the 'authority' of their respective position. But now, we often see others taking on leadership roles because of the educational value they can contribute because of their ideas, passion and enthusiasm, and the reasonableness of their proposal. In this way, the notion of leadership takes on a whole new meaning.

Most leadership appears to be intuitive. Therefore as positional leaders we need to know how to think. This is important if we want our learning communities to strive for excellence and excel in a forward thinking educational environment; every interaction must be thought about in terms of can we do this better? Be the best we can be! Most theories about leadership appear to be bound up in concepts about 'leadership style' and how leaders treat others; democratic, autocratic, systematic, plutocratic, collaborative or laissez-faire; the list is endless! There appears to be too little emphasis on leadership practices and the crafts of leadership. What impact does principal leadership have on improving student learning outcomes? What is principal leadership?

During the time of my sabbatical I took the opportunity to meet with a number of principals within New Zealand, Australia and the United Kingdom. On the question of what direct actions do we take in our schools that contribute to improving student learning, as a group of principals we were challenged. Many principals shared views around property, finance, staffing, meetings and dealings with

bureaucracy. Some principals brought the focus back to establishing environmental conditions that may lead to improved student achievement while only a few talked about a school culture where critical reflection on learning and teaching practice was prevalent, encouraged and valued by staff.

It is therefore imperative that we promote principal's learning conversations through the links between leadership and student learning. We seem to currently exist in a competitive, market driven society. This may mean that principals consider that they need to be the fountain of knowledge and hold the power as the positional leader in their learning organisation. In this way, school leadership is about 'the principal' rather than the development of capability in others. In New Zealand, we operate in a self-managing schools environment. If things are going to happen in our schools, they are going to happen because of principal leadership, and of course, conversely. We must practice power *with* not *over* those we work with and are responsible for. We must care as much about the *question* as we do about the *answer*. It is important to devote as much energy to *listening* as to *speaking* and strive to *be* as much as to *do*.

A challenge principal's face is becoming comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty. It is important that we are able to leave ourselves open to being challenged by the conversations we engage in. The demeanour of valuing the process of witnessing the thoughts of others as much as we appreciate our own self-reflection proves to be enterprising and adds value to school's learning culture. The way people think and act has a large bearing on the functionality of the school's learning culture. "In a negative operating environment, there is distrust and lack of cohesive direction for staff, to the point where staff appear to be happy, content, but in reality there is a high pretence of knowing and fulfilling roles and responsibilities." – (Bill Martin & John Edwards, 12<sup>th</sup> International Conference On Thinking). "Trust is the connective tissue that holds improving schools together." (Bryk & Schneider, 2002)

Wood, at the 12<sup>th</sup> International Conference On Thinking, Melbourne Australia 2005, said, "Strive to live in a society that respects knowledge and the individual, not the intellect of the individual; we must believe in collaboration". She continued to state, "If you take responsibility for the question, we know that we are in this together." Collaborative learning cultures have a sense of creativity, impartiality and riskiness.

We often talk about and refer to collaborative leadership, but what do we really mean by this? It has over the years become more and more apparent to me, that often those who have the greatest influence on student learning are the teachers. They often have the least voice in the organisational and administrative culture of the school so we "need to recognise this and provide the opportunity and learning culture for it to happen" (Martin, 2005). Leadership is about power, the power of expertise; the collective expertise of staff. A learning culture is about the culture of collective responsibility. It is about the notion, 'we have it within us to make a difference'. For many, this is quite a mind-shift. Recently however, the education climate has changed and what Barber (2005), calls "informed professional judgement" should be the basis of what teachers do. Simply 'delivering' the curriculum is unsatisfactory. Pedagogy, the art and science of effective learning and teaching, is back on the agenda.

The success of an organisation may be judged by the way hidden narratives are encouraged to be told and are listened to. We need to take time to listen to the dispositions of staff, even if their story provides challenges. Stories need to be respected and the integrity of the storyteller must remain intact. As Zable (2005) stated, "To be a storyteller you have to sit down and take time to engage with others." It takes time to know a person; it takes time to form a relationship.

Since our relationships are defined by the quality and content of our communications, one powerful tool schools may use to engage and work with the community is through a culture of dialogue. At its best, dialogue transforms our shared understandings and emboldening our collective will. It is through engagement in this dialogue, described by Caldwell (2005) as "new enterprise logic", between staff, parents and students that achieves school "transformation, rather than schooling improvement or school effectiveness". It would seem, therefore, that highly functioning, highly performing schools show imagination, innovation and creativity. Leadership is organised across the school as well as being distributed within the school. Networks of knowledge, skill and resourcing provide intellectual capital. Leadership in this environment becomes an exhilarating experience. As Perkins (2005) said, "Your organisation functions and grows through conversations". In a caring, thinking and developing professional school environment we listen to each other, we think interdependently and we work interdependently. Similarly Preskill, (2000) believes that "There is no surer route to community building and fulfilling the promise of democracy and lifelong learning than through the deepening of good, ongoing dialogue. Such dialogue can increase student achievement, transform teaching and learning and renew relationships that connect communities to school." Quality learning and teaching is achieved in collaboration with others; at the heart of this are school and system cultures.

The Ministry of Education (cited in Education Review Office, 2005) proposed that a "...professional learning community is one which teachers update their professional knowledge and skills within the context of an organised school-wide system for improving teacher practices. In addition, teachers' efforts, individually and collectively, are focussed on the goal of improving student learning and achievement and making the school as a whole become a high performing organisation." At Vardon School, this proposal applies to all teachers. In moving forward it is the responsibility of all teachers to continually build on their collective understanding of what effective teaching is and what effective teachers do.

### **Implications for Leadership at Vardon School**

At Vardon School, to avoid staff being eaten and to ensure leaders are being fed, we have implemented a school-wide strategy for progressing teacher practices and improving student achievement. This strategy is focused on:

- distributive leadership
- productive teaching and learning pedagogies
- coaching leadership

### **Distributive Leadership**

All schools implement some form of distributive leadership. The model we are now implementing has as a core leadership value the belief that all members of staff are educational leaders. Two challenges schools face is succession planning and sustainability. We are now implementing a model that allows classroom

teachers to be coached/mentored in areas of delegated responsibilities to senior school leaders. For example, where the Deputy Principal may hold the leadership responsibility for student assessment, a classroom teacher works with the Deputy Principal on this leadership practice, throughout the year, gaining deeper insights, and acquiring further knowledge and skills. This practice is being replicated in the leadership areas of Māori and Pacifica student achievement, planning and reporting, student assessment, special needs education, leadership coaching, and syndicate team leadership.

### **Productive Teaching and Learning Pedagogies**

It seems to me that the more teaching staff discuss and debate teaching and learning practices, the more highly skilled they become as practitioners. Until we have developed thoughts, we can't be expected to develop practice! Therefore, at Vardon School, we believe that systems need to be in place to provide quality time and opportunity for teachers to examine and debate current classroom practice and to arrive at positions of understanding about what needs to remain in place and what may need to change. By focussing on pedagogical practices such as providing feedback/feedforward, substantive conversations, motivating learners, deliberate action teaching, or encouragement instead of praise, teachers recognise their current level of understanding and grow through being involved in the debate with others.

Further to this, we are implementing a research based model in which a developmental continuum is developed by teachers to include a range of classroom practices from an early level of teacher performance to a high level of performance. This framework is used to share with the teaching staff who then form views how this may look for the learners in the classroom and how it may look in terms of classroom teaching practices. This documentation provides a powerful resource for teachers to self-review and reflect on their own teaching practices, while also providing a framework for discussion and development.

### **Coaching Leadership**

Vardon School's approach to developing procedures that promote leadership coaching has been influenced by Robertson's (2005) belief that "Coaching leadership is about building leadership capacity in individuals, and in institutions, through enhancing professional relationships. It is based on the importance of maximising potential, and harnessing the ongoing commitment and energy needed to meet personal and professional goals." Coaching leadership starts with our school leadership team which comprises of the principal, deputy principal, assistant principal, two associate principals and two senior teachers. Meetings of this team provide wonderful opportunities for rich dialogue and educational debate. Whenever school leaders come together there is an opportunity for leadership learning. Too often in the past our meetings were captured by talk that was often too far removed from helping students to grow and develop or teachers to improve their capabilities. Leadership at this level in the school requires open and robust debate around learning and teaching practices and how teachers may be supported in improving their practices. These discussions are centred on school-analysed student achievement data and research evidence into effective teaching practice. By airing their views and listening to the views of others, the team has now formed shared, collaborative understandings of teaching and learning and are in a stronger position to help

grow the capacity and capability of members of their respective teaching teams. There must be an expectation of consistent school-wide teaching practices.

Team leaders provide the same opportunities for open discussion and lively debate with their own team of teachers. Trust in and a respect for teachers is essential. Teachers respond well when they know they are being listened to and valued. The challenge for middle and senior school leaders is to ensure we create an environment where the “practitioner voice” is heard and valued, where open, honest and robust debate is based on evidence, and where teachers participate in developing and implementing action plans that directly impact on learning and teaching practices in the classroom. Coaching leadership is a collaborative framework for the way in which we work. Trust, honesty, integrity, humility, a sense of humour and above all, a strong work ethic, are all values expected of staff working in a professional, collaborative high-performing organisation.

There is a range of skills and techniques that need to be learnt, fostered and developed for ‘leadership coaching’ to be successfully imbedded within the school setting. In 2006 we will be implementing a model of leadership coaching within our performance management systems.

### **In Conclusion...**

As a result of the findings from a two year research project undertaken at Vardon School, (2004 – 2005), as well as professional interactions with colleagues during the time of my sabbatical, the school leadership team is committed to promoting a coaching model of professional learning as a means for teachers to investigate and continue to improve their practices. Further to this, the team understands that it’s own “rich insights into the learning-teaching process” will be needed in order to support teachers with “timely and appropriate assistance” (Stoll, Fink & Earl, 2003, p. 104) as part of their professional learning process. Consequently, the team believes that it has both a moral and ethical responsibility to ensure that it undertakes its own professional learning to ensure that collectively it has a deep understanding of teaching and learning so that not only the support it provides teachers but also organisational procedures developed will be well-considered and sufficiently resourced to enhance teacher and student learning.

In order to achieve this plan, the following leadership practices have been identified as an overall framework within which Vardon School intends to operate in 2006 and beyond. These leadership practices will form the guiding principles for all teacher practices, and procedures put in place, to continue to enhance teacher and student learning.

- Dialogue focused on goal of raising student achievement
- Building leadership capacity in individuals and teams
- Enhancing professional relationships through dialogue
- Continually updating our institutional professional knowledge
- Continually updating our professional skills base
- Opportunities for staff learning within a global context
- Promotion of home-school, school-community relationships
- Student achievement data will inform teaching practice

- Continual focus on the impact of teaching on raising student achievement
- Change in pedagogical strategies when students are not responding to current teaching practice: 'explore productive pedagogies'
- Implementing ways of helping students to learn better, rather than helping them to become better learners; "4 Rs" (Claxton, 2002, p. 13).

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