

Secondary Principal's Sabbatical Report

Rosey Mabin

Principal

Inglewood High School

Title

Roller coaster or segue?: Managing the transition from primary to secondary

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank:

- i) TeachNZ for making sabbaticals available in the first instance, along with the Ministry of Education and other key groups, for their support of them
- ii) My Board of Trustees for giving me the opportunity to have a break from school for a term.
- iii) I am also indebted to the wonderful Senior Leadership team with whom I work on a daily basis, and the Acting Assistant Principal, each of whom took on additional responsibilities in my absence; they ran the school with unquestionable professionalism and commitment, making my transition back to school seamless.
- iv) The staff and students who got on with teaching and learning, proving that our profession is in good hands
- v) The three principals whose schools I visited
- vi) My family and friends: their love and support this past term has made all the difference.

About the Author

It has been my privilege and joy to be the principal of Inglewood High School for the last seven years. My teaching career includes working in two single sex boys' schools (New Plymouth Boys High School and Wellington College), co-educational (Linwood College

and Lincoln High School) and Queen Margaret College, an independent girls school in Wellington. Teaching is in my family and from the age of five, I knew my life would be spent in the classroom. I have been the Taranaki-Whanganui-Manawatu representative on the PPTA's Secondary Principal's Council for six and a half years and also mentor First Time Principals.

Executive Summary

The transition from primary to secondary is an important event in the life of the student and for their parents (more particularly if that child is the eldest sibling or an only child). While I think it is preferable to have two rather than three school transitions, in many parts of NZ, two transitions is not an option, with intermediate schools forming the bridge between primary and secondary. Where this is not the case, a number of factors come into play: entry data – what to use and how it is used; specialist teaching (eg Science, Art, Music) in years 7 & 8; the role of Technology – where it is accessed and engaging with the community. As well, the enrolment and class placement processes are significant factors.

In addition to the above, it has been obvious to the BOT and staff that there are increasing numbers of students for whom the transition from primary to secondary poses risks and/or challenges and these challenges impact on those students' ability to learn and succeed in a secondary context. At IHS we are continually looking for ways to mitigate these risks and challenges and are hopeful that our newly established Community of Learning will help our wider school community create a seamless learning pathway for our community's young people from preschool and early childhood all the way through to those young people entering the workforce as active, ethical citizens.

Background and Rationale

This was not the sabbatical I intended to have and so what follows is a truncated version of what was originally planned. The utterly unexpected death of my husband, in the last week of Term 1, placed obvious constraints on the feasibility of my completing all my school visits once my sabbatical officially began. In spite of the circumstances and all I suddenly had to deal with, I resolved to (and then did) pursue a scaled-down version of my project. It is best read as information-gathering which served to give further perspective to things I have been mulling over in my journey of school leadership over the last seven years. Instead of visiting six schools, I went to only three, all of which are

in the South Island. The visits were informative and it was a privilege to spend time with busy colleagues who had generously allocated me a portion of their day.

Inglewood High School is a decile 7, rural, Years 9-13 state secondary school. It is the only school in our town. We have six main contributing primary schools, although students do come into Year 9 from at least three other schools. Working from this context the visits I made confirmed that the transition from primary to secondary – whether it happens at the end of Year 6 or 8 – is a critical time for both students and their parents. In fact, given the economic and social changes in New Zealand of the last thirty years, it is an area that needs rethinking. I would venture to say that both primary and secondary schools over time have become complacent about transitions.

In truth the issue is much wider than primary to secondary: the transition from early childhood to primary is equally valid and, if a holistic view of education is taken, this transition must not be sidelined.

Findings

The Three Schools

	Decile	Roll	Context
School A	8	830	<p>Years 7-13. Roll is currently buoyant but a new secondary school is being built nearby and will have some impact on numbers.</p> <p>Eight contributing primary schools. Senior students visit those schools to help with reading and sports activities by way of relationship building.</p> <p>A graduate profile is used by way of collecting relevant data on students.</p> <p>The principal sees choice as a good thing. He lives in the community.</p> <p>The school is in the process of becoming part of a Community of Learning.</p>
School B	8	580	<p>Years 7-13. A rural school with the option of boarding schools as an alternative to attending the local school, a very real issue.</p> <p>Five contributing primary schools. Interestingly, there is no Catholic primary school in the town.</p> <p>The majority of year 13 students head to university.</p>

			<p>Contributing primary schools have been finding it difficult to access services for students and this has a flow-on effect once those students enter secondary school. Addressing this, as a way of facilitating a smoother transition from primary to secondary has been identified by the principal and work has already begun to rectify this.</p> <p>MLE classrooms in Years 7 & 8 has made a positive difference to learning and behavior, particularly that of boys.</p> <p>The school is part of a Community of Learning. Principal is new to the school and area.</p>
School C	5	700	<p>Years 7-13 Thirteen contributing primary schools with 5-6 of those schools being led by first time principals.</p> <p>50% of local primary school-aged students leave the community to attend secondary school in the nearby much larger town (45 minutes drive away, where there are 5 secondary schools and the option to board).</p> <p>Competition (across the whole area) is very real. Until some years ago, a 'gentleman's agreement' existed around the ethics of marketing. In recent times, this has been replaced by a written agreement, which outlines what is acceptable.</p> <p>A GATE programme is run for Year 6 students, providing opportunities in Art, Kapa haka, Music and Science, to both promote the local secondary school.</p> <p>Is part of a Community of Schools, which includes all the nearby schools, except the Steiner School.</p> <p>Principal is new to the school, and position, although already lived on the outskirts of the school community.</p>

Five themes emerged across the three schools and resonate with what we experience at Inglewood High School:

- The importance of reliable data about students
- The reality of competition and the challenge for rural secondary schools to be a viable alternative in that environment
- The pressure of having to be all things to all people
- Helping parents understand that big is not necessarily better
- A (lack of) secondary-school readiness is becoming more prevalent raising the question of how to address this....

Conclusions

Establishing strong relationships with contributing schools is vital; they minimise the roller coaster effect in terms of moving from one learning environment to another. Smooth transitions for students are dependent on effective dialogue between schools. A working knowledge (for all teachers) of the schools their students are going to, or coming from, is also required, along with an understanding, on the part of the teacher, of the community in which one works. Many teachers choose to live outside of the town in which they work and this does have ramifications over time. Having said that, it is also not difficult to address.

There is no doubt that Communities of Learning have real potential for rural communities; collaboration offers the opportunity to create strong, meaningful learning environments for our young people. It seems obvious but actually growing and sustaining a collaborative, knowledge sharing professional learning community will require tenacity, creativity and commitment as it flies in the face of the competitive model that infuses NZ's schooling system

I remain convinced that communities up and down New Zealand, both rural and urban, need to take responsibility for all of the young people within them and work towards ensuring that the journey from (early) childhood to the workforce and adulthood is one which empowers every learner. I am also convinced of the value of students attending their local school, rather than choosing to attend a school outside of their community. Growing up in one's own community allows for a sense of connectedness and groundedness that can only ever be replicated, as opposed to re-created, outside of that community.

One of the realities of societal change of the last thirty years is that school leaders must now be prepared to take key leadership roles within their respective communities and be prepared to speak out and lead positive change at a societal level, not merely within their individual school context. We need to be prepared to step outside of the competitive model and outside the concept of ownership and focus instead on providing meaningful, relevant learning contexts for all our young people. That means being prepared to think and do things differently, deliberately stepping outside of our comfort zones and rethinking our understanding of responsibility and accountability in a school and community concept. But, if we are honest when we say our young people are the key to our future, then we have no choice.

I am extremely grateful for having had the space to think and reflect professionally and re-gather my strength in the wake of the loss of my beloved husband. I am very much looking forward to going back to school next term; I've missed it, especially the students!

Rosey Mabin
July 2016