

Schools, Families and Communities

Where to for school leaders in the age of the super city?

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12/17/2010

A report on the findings of a survey of NZ school principals, undertaken during a 10 week Ministry of Education paid study sabbatical. The survey sought to understand the current relationships between New Zealand schools, families and communities, and the beliefs of NZ school principals regarding this relationship and its importance for the future of NZ children.

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Schools, Families and Communities

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“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has.” Margaret Mead

Abstract

A report on the findings of a survey of NZ school principals, undertaken during a 10 week Ministry of Education paid study sabbatical. The survey sought to understand the current relationships between New Zealand schools, families and communities, and the beliefs of NZ school principals regarding this relationship and its importance for the future of NZ children.

Introduction

I started as principal of North East Valley (NEV) Normal School, Dunedin in Term 2 2007. The school is the second oldest state school in Otago, established by Scottish settlers in 1851. It is a normal school: the term normal coming from the French ‘l’ecole normale’ used to describe a training ground for teachers.

The school is a mid-decile contributing primary school. The decile rating conflicts with the deprivation index which places North East Valley as a 7 out of 10, 10 being the highest deprivation level.

The school serves a diverse community made up of large numbers of university students, middle class families and pockets of low income families. North Road, which runs the length of the Valley and which was once the main highway out of Dunedin, links the Valley and provides a safe and visible means for the young and vulnerable to get about their neighbourhood. At the town end of the Valley, there is a supermarket and some shops as well as the entrance to the Botanical Gardens and the University quarter.

All of the usual indicators – reading ages, numeracy data, comparison against the exemplars, results of graduands post primary school, ERO reviews – show that NEV Normal School is a high achieving school. In this modern world, achievement has become the catchphrase. If all children achieve they will all get jobs and be fine upstanding citizens.

Of course we know that achievement is not just how well a child can read, write and do arithmetic. Most of us would agree that we want children to have a well rounded and full education; that they be allowed to be children and be able to make mistakes and have fun. We also know that school time accounts for only 1/6th of a school aged child’s life and that the other influences in that 5/6th period are dominant factors in how children develop.

Background – NEV Project

One of the things that struck me when I arrived to work at NEV Normal School was that many of the children came through the gate in the morning looking unhappy. I found out early on in my tenure that we had a high level of lateness and absence. So whilst the school enjoyed a high level of academic achievement, there were some unresolved issues which impacted on some children’s lives which the school could address.

The senior staff decided to work with a local helping agency, Otago Youth Wellness Trust, to address lateness, non-attendance and the general well-being of children. We found that most absences were due to illness and most illnesses were chronic respiratory illnesses.

We also verified our suspicion that a number of families in the Valley were suffering from various forms of poverty. Some families were living in uninsulated and cold homes, especially those on the cold side of the Valley where there are a lot of older wooden villas, big enough to host a family but too big to easily heat.

Concurrent to this investigation was the establishment of a local interagency team with a view to develop a team approach to dealing with health issues impacting on our school children. This brought together some of the main community players – the Public Health Nurse, the Community Constable, local clergy, the principals of the three schools and the head teachers of the early childhood centres within the Valley, RTLBs and others – to look for creative and collective approaches to making the Valley a better place for kids and their families.

The Otago Youth Wellness Trust, the interagency group and Strengthening Families teamed up to undertake a small research project to look at the issue of poverty in North East Valley. This project became known as the North East Valley Development Project (The Project).

The research undertaken by the Project saw more questions arise than answers appear, so a broader study was commissioned with the help of the Ministry of Social Development. This study used the education sites in the Valley – the three schools and the three early childhood centres – as the base for an in-depth look at how people lived in this area.

The results of this work provided a clear way forward. It was obvious that the community needed a voice, a place to focus on community development, strategies to better connect with others and better access to specialist services, especially health.

So 'The Project' was born and is alive and well in our community. It is made up of a bunch of people who live or work in the area and who share a passion for a holistic approach to dealing with the needs of children, their families and the whole community. No one is in charge but there is the solid platform of the education sites to provide consistency and focus. Achievements to date include:

- Part time social workers working in the education sites
- Lobbying Council and government on issues such as oral health and warm houses
- Establishment of an education council
- Support to neighbouring suburbs and schools
- Seminars and workshops
- Community Christmas parties for three years running
- Business partnerships
- Connecting people in need with appropriate helping agencies
- Supporting families when a parent is in court
- Providing opportunities for young to engage with the Police in a healthy way
- Activity club for needy children
- Community garden establishment
- Neighbours week

Purpose

Much of my time as principal of North East Valley Normal School is spent working on big picture issues like The Project. One of the reasons I do so is that schools like ours are fast becoming the only reliable lens into a community as communities become centralised and services are pushed further away from them. Those who work in schools see what is happening inside families and inside neighbourhoods. This is important information and if shared ethically and carefully can help other agencies, local bodies and government better respond to people's need.

I am interested in how we as New Zealand school and early childhood centre leaders respond to the call to what the British call 'frontline leadership'. We are at the frontline of society and our views and actions can be as, if not more, valid than those charged with monitoring and addressing society's ills. We are, whether we like it or not, the equivalent of the local postie or grocer or vicar of old, who saw needs close up and could respond.

Country principals have known this for years – often as all other services are lost to a rural community, the school becomes the focal point.

I have also seen during my career that kindergarten teachers and new entrant teachers are aware of the privileged view they have into families. The very young are not sophisticated enough to not tell all about the latest family drama. Sometimes that drama is way more serious than the child realises when they disclose it at morning talk time.

I take great inspiration from Mark Brown, principal of Victory School in Nelson who when faced with the problems of a falling roll in a low decile school in a struggling suburb took on the whole community and was victorious! The school and the suburb are now thriving and his leadership at the frontline has driven this recovery. Visit Victory school and you will see a modern, busy, important health centre on site which sees over 2000 people through the doors each month; see the refugee ESOL classes in a couple of rough and ready prefabs out the back; wander through the community garden past the Kohanga Reo and the crèche. Mark and his team have taken up the challenge to look at children in the context of their families and their communities. The results are evident – better engaged children at school, a healthier community as well.

Mark Brown could not do what he has done if he did not allow the community into the school – not just to use the hall or the grounds on weekends but to be trusted to use all school facilities when they are available. This is true de-privatisation of a school – Victory is not a little principality but a community facility seen by the community as theirs.

The future according to the current generation is one of globalisation and super cities. Children and families, especially those at the margins of society, are in danger of being further marginalised if they are not connected to a caring and responsive community. Schools and early childhood centres can provide some of that connection.

So, I undertook this research to discover:

1. What other school leaders were doing in the area of community development
2. To ask school leaders what their beliefs are in this area
3. Whether they are ready and willing to embrace being a player in community development.

Methodology

209 school principals took part in this survey over a 4 week period in October and November 2010. Participants chose to take part via invitations sent through the New Zealand Principals' Federation Flyer.

The survey was created using Survey Monkey .

I undertook this research during a 10 week Ministry of Education paid study sabbatical. Rachel Dingle from NZCER assisted me with the design of the survey.

The Survey

Schools, Families and Communities – A survey of NZ School Principals, 2010

Tena ra koutou katoa! Thank you for completing this survey. There is a growing interest in the relationship between schools, families and communities especially in relation to the purposeful engagement of children and young people in learning. Helping agencies are beginning to realise that schools have a valuable and at times unique view into the lives of whanau and communities. The information collected in this survey will provide a snapshot of where schools are in this context. Thank you again for participating in this survey, John McKenzie, (john@nevn.school.nz), Principal, North East Valley Normal School, Dunedin, October 2010.

1. School type

Contributing primary
Full primary
Intermediate
Middle school
Form 1 - 7 college
High School
Kura
Composite/Area school

2. Locality 1

Rural - isolation allowance
Rural - not eligible for isolation allowance
Rural - small town < 5,000
Urban - large town > 5,000
Urban - city < 75,000
Urban - city > 75,000

3. Locality 2

Northland
Auckland
Waikato
BOP
Gisborne
Hawkes Bay
Taranaki
Manawatu/Wanganui
Wellington
Tasman
Nelson
Marlborough
West Coast
Canterbury
Otago
Southland

4. Decile

1 - 3
4 - 7
8 - 1

5. State or other?

State school
Integrated church school
Integrated non-church school
Private church school
Private non-church school

Please tick the box which best demonstrates your belief:

Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree

Children disengage if the teaching is of poor quality

Children engage in learning better with caring teachers

Teachers must first run their classroom like a 'tight ship' to engage children in learning

Poor parenting is the main reason children do not engage at school

Poor attendance leads to poor achievement

Truancy could be minimised if addressed in the first years of schooling

Stronger links between early childhood centres and primary schools would increase student engagement

Money spent on addressing truancy would be better spent on providing social workers in schools

Please tick the following if they apply to your school:

Helping agencies have a regular presence in the school (eg: Presbyterian Support)

Government agencies have a regular presence in the school (eg: Community constable)

We run the 'Home School Partnership' programme

We have taken part in 'Incredible Years' training

The school hosts a wharehui which the community use

Our school collaborates with other local schools to deal with community problems

The school has a part-time social worker

The school has a full-time social worker

The school encourages community use of the school facilities

The school has a dedicated space for community use (eg: community centre, wharehui)

School staff visit children's homes when necessary

School staff support parents at court

School staff support parents with food parcels or linking with food banks

School staff help parents develop parenting skills

The school has a community garden

The school supplies breakfast daily for children

The school supplies lunch for children when necessary

The school hosts a community centre on site

Our school partners with helping agencies to help school families

Please respond to the following comments

strongly agree agree disagree strongly disagree

A principal should be involved in community issues which affect children's engagement at school

Teachers can see when children are going 'off the rails'

Outside agencies should better use schools to help families

Schools benefit from being involved in the local community

Purposeful engagement by children at school is enhanced when the school gets involved in the community

My school is like a principality

Healthy community makes for high achieving schools

I don't have enough time to get too involved in community issues

Society expects schools to do too much beyond teaching children

Our school goes beyond the school gates to support needy children

I welcome involvement by helping agencies in our school

I wish I could just 'get on with my job' and not have to deal with all the family and community stuff

I use my influence to affect change in my community

Transient children are welcomed in my school

Transient children are fully supported in my school

Teachers in this school blame parents for the problems their children bring to school

Truancy is directly related to under achievement

Schools have a valuable view into the lives of families

Schools have a valuable view into the health of their local community

Closure of a school should be strongly influenced by its relationship with the local community

Do you know anything about?

Yes No

Victory School's Community Centre, Nelson NZ

'Window Schools' in the Netherlands

Community Schools in New York

Frontline Leadership, London

Other examples of school community partnerships which you know about:

And in a perfect world, would you:

Yes No *Perhaps*

Allow your school to be a community hub?

Provide space for helping agencies to operate from?

Provide space for government agencies to operate from?

Establish a health or care centre at your school?

Welcome the community to use your facilities more?

Invite the community to set up a community garden at the school?

Collaborate with local schools to work more closely with the community?

Get involved in community development?

Deal with the causes of disengagement by working more closely with families

Please list school community initiatives you sponsor which are not recorded in this survey, and feel free to make any other comment:

Findings

Beliefs

- 79.3% of respondents disagree with the statement that “poor parenting is the main reason children do not engage at school”
- 84.1% of respondents agree that stronger links between early childhood centres and primary schools would increase student engagement
- 84% of respondents believe truancy could be minimised if addressed in the first years of schooling
- 75.2% of respondents believe truancy money would be better spent on social workers in schools

Current community and engagement activities

- 33.5% of respondents stated that helping agencies have a regular presence in the school, while 34% said they have regular government agency presence
- 36% of respondents collaborate with other schools on community problems
- 17% of respondents have a part time ‘social worker’ working with their pupils
- 86.3% of respondents encourage community use of facilities
- 18.3% of respondents have dedicated a space for community use
- 51.3% of respondents say they visit homes when necessary
- 49.7% of respondents said the school staff help parents develop parenting skills
- 28.4% of respondents have community gardens on site
- 16.2% of respondents provide daily breakfast
- 65% of respondents supply lunches if need be
- 3.6% of respondents host a community centre
- 66% of respondents partner with helping agencies to help school families

General

- 45.9% of respondents strongly agree the principal should be involved in community issues relevant to children’s engagement at school, 51.5% agree
- 99% of respondents agree that teachers can see when children are “going off the rails”
- 94% of respondents believe outside agencies would benefit from using knowledge of schools about families
- 35% of respondents said they don’t have time to get involved in community issues
- 92.7% of respondents agree with the statement “Society expects schools to do too much beyond teaching children”
- 98% of respondents would welcome outside agencies to work in the school
- 25.5% of respondents would just like to get on with their jobs and “not have to deal with all the family and community stuff”
- 81.5% of respondents say they use their influence as school principals to affect change in their community
- 34.6% of respondents agree that teachers blame parents for the problems their children bring to school

Other initiatives

- 79.1 % of respondents do not know of the Victory school work in this area. Few knew of other such initiatives in New Zealand or other countries.

Respondents' comments

Other examples of school community partnerships which you know about:

- 'Little' Schools in Scandinavia.
- Health-Education Partnerships.
- Kura kaupapa Maori - Kohanga reo - whare kura - whare wananga (education from the womb to the tomb) Maori based. For Maori, with Maori.
- Sure Start UK.
- Extended Schools UK.
- Coalition for Community Schools USA.
- Canada Community Schools.
- Work that has been done in the Pacific to do with engaging communities.
- PREL: Pacific Resources for Education and Learning
- 'Check and Connect' Helps disengaged students re-engage with their school and helps to lift student achievement.
- We have a Young Vinnies (St Vincent de Paul Society youth arm) programme which works with the local St Vincent De Paul group to support the needy in our community.
- Home school partnerships. Whanau ora.
- Every successful small country school.
- Maybe we should teach people about community relationships/interpersonal relationships rather than hearing the leader of the emerging principal's course saying I don't know about my teachers or the families in my school as I am focussed on what happens between 9 and 3 in classrooms that improve learning.
- Recently heard about Manurewa South Community Hub School.
- Dock Yards in Nottingham..
- South Auckland programme.
- Wellness Trust – Dunedin.
- London South development.
- Tower Hamlet's in East London.
- Flaxmere cluster.
- St Leonards Road School West Auckland has a great programme (can't remember the name of it).
- I've heard that Pomaria School West Auckland does great things in this area.
- Pine Hill School – Dunedin.

And the future

- 85% of respondents would allow the school to become a community hub
- 82.9% of respondents would provide space for helping agencies compared to 62.1% for government agencies
- 71.9% of respondents would establish a health centre on site
- 73.8% of respondents would get involved in community development
- 87% of respondents would deal with causes of disengagement by working with families more.

Respondents' Comments

Please list school community initiatives you sponsor which are not recorded in this survey, and feel free to make any other comment:

- Open Assemblies.
- Open door policies.
- Every school has to engage with the community in one way or another.
- Sports club - children & parents.
- Informal discussion groups with parents - e.g. Reviewing new report, pre school parents "what is learning at school?".
- Actually your last question assumes that the cause of disengagement is not to do with the school! This is a big assumption. None of your questions relate to power or systemic barriers and the questions do not have any world view but one. How can you make these assumptions and validate your research - partnership is to do with power too! What barriers to community engagement and participation do principals put up...If there is going to be any validity to your research you need to dig deeper - Look at Ka Hikitia etc.
- Schools can do anything if they are resourced for it. On the other hand we can't do everything regardless of how much we might be expected to. Ours is a large low decile multi cultural urban school. Our achievement is very good and I think this is in large part due to the fact that we concentrate on school/learning outcomes and don't try to be responsible for the rest of society.
- Visiting sick parents.
- Helping families financially.
- Sporting events.
- Quiz nights.
- Lamb, Calf and Chicken Day.
- Visiting Clubs and Societies who use the facilities.
- Setting up permanent Kokako Display in our hall in partnership with the Kaharoa Kokako Trust.
- We released our DP/SENCO this year to take the role of Student Success Teacher (BOT funded). Rather than employ a social worker, the Student Success teacher links students and families to the local agencies they require, as and when required and follows up to ensure they engage on an ongoing basis. She also attends/initiates Strengthening Families Meetings. We now have a more seamless process for following up on IEPs, new enrolments, family crises etc. This has proved very successful and we are trying to access funding for it to continue.
- Wide Horizons.
- Hosting Strengthening Families.
- Little Learners (once a week pre-school session funded by BOT).
- School sponsored attendance at magic show/Circus Quirkus etc for disadvantaged children and families.
- Children sing and perform at the local shops and the local retirement village (particularly around Christmas time).
- Local businesses support us financially and with personnel (e.g. BNZ sent staff to read with students needing extra support).
- Pastoral Care [20 hours per week].
- SENCO is a group consisting of Principal, DP, AP, SWIS, RTLB [Maori], Pastoral Care, Nurse [Maori Health Provider], SES, and at times PHN and RTLits. This group meets at 900 every Thursday morning to look at the academic, health, emotional and/or behaviour of any child referred by their classroom teacher. At the same time all behaviour data collected over the week is reviewed and transferred to the whole school chart for easy monitoring. All cases are reviewed within 1-6 weeks. With the group assembled it is easier to work out an intervention and referrals to the various agencies are done there and then. The group also has a considerable amount of

knowledge about each family and someone will already have built a good relationship with the family.

- Open days every term; these are very popular with parents and whanau. Last open day in excess of 200 adults. Sometimes interactive open days where parents join with students in some hands on learning.
- Family homework initiatives.
- Liaise with local marae on community initiatives, make the school available etc.
- Performances for local elderly at local care centre.
- We have an orchard; the children grow vegetables; our hall is used by a church; the hall is used by a gardening club, before and after school care and a holiday programme etc.
- Learning is the core business of a school. I am keen that children can participate and engage...let the resources flow...however if the community is a strong one and feels that the school is theirs there will be an impact on achievement. This must be funded alongside education...there will be synergy and savings in the long run...shame the electoral cycle is only 3 years!
- Duffy books in homes.
- Heart foundation.
- Public health nurse in schools.
- Sport HB.
- Te Taiwhenua.
- Health promoting schools.
- Fruit in schools.
- Sun smart.
- Enviro-schools.
- Way 2 Go.
- Health Services.
- Pre School Education Mainstream and Bilingual.
- Local Government Submissions.
- Te Reo o Taranaki Tu Kaikaha Programme.
- I don't live in our school's local area. Happy to be involved in the school's community but we need to keep in perspective that being a principal is a job, not a vocation to be taken to with 'missionary zeal'. I work hard for and in the community in which I live.
- Rotary, Lions, Sports Clubs.
- Mangakahia Area School is 30km northwest of Whangarei. 130 Yr0-13 students, 19 staff. We are a true community school (share library/gym/sports facilities & a community room & kitchen). We rock! The local Playcentre operates from its new facility built on our grounds in 2004. We host a Teen Parent School in town (He Mataariki Whangarei) roll 35. We rescued it from closure in 2006. It has just got a glowing ERO report. The PM last week turned the first sod on the site of the new building, opening early 2011. Recent graduates are now at university (2) & polytech (4). We are close to opening the Mangakahia Valley Community Health Centre onsite to bring health and welfare services out to the valley - 5 years in the making, in partnership with MSD & DoH. We have formed a community charitable trust. ASB is fast tracking funding so it can open next term. The clinic will be free to clients, managed by a heartland coordinator, and hold clinics run by all health providers including free doctor, nursing and counselling clinics. On-site hours will also be allocated to welfare agencies such as WINZ, Housing NZ, CYF and agencies such as Youth Transition, Careers Rapuara. We are leading and supporting our contributing schools on 2 Ministry contracts - ICT PD and Positive Behaviour for Learning. Both are predicated on a high level of community involvement and are ideal vehicles for closer inter-school and school-community partnerships, and seamless transitions. We have been a health promoting school for 5 years, in partnership with Manaia Health PHO. The school Wellness Team (led by seniors) hosts regular meetings of health providers and networks across them to access help

for families/whanau. Everything is student-led, eg: anti-alcohol, smokefree projects. We are a leading Northland Enviro-School about to receive its Green-Gold Award. Over the years we have cleaned streams and worked with local marae on sustainability projects. Our senior students this year designed and built our school zero waste all weather recycling station. All students Y0-13 tend and manage a newly planted food forest, raised gardens, and an older small orchard. Our 6 local marae have their own community gardens in various stages.

- Our school library is open to pre-enrolled children. This is now being extended to home schooled children living in our area.
- Our school backs onto the local Sports Association. We share facilities.
- We are fundraising to build a new community hall / centre which will have many of the above listed groups in our school to help our community. Pity the funding is so hard to get from a lower decile community.
- Out of school care and recreation/school holiday programme (OSACR).
- Chinese (Mandarin) language classes (out of school hours).
- School gardens.
- The community council, Police education Keeping ourselves safe, safe walking, animal care, cultural festivals community days, health promotion, kick-start breakfast, Christmas parcels, the local marae.
- Involvement with mobile counselling service.
- Staff involved in youth activities such as sport.
- Making links with city support services and bringing them into the community.
- Making links for transition between schools and student relationships.
- Liaison with Adult Literacy centre in town.
- Coffee morning once per week for mums/caregivers with crèche provided by local high school girls. Coffee sponsored by local coffee company.
- Starting a pre-school music group in Term 4 of 2010 for 5 weeks.
- Starting a walking group in Term 1 of 2011.
- We keep in close contact with our wider community through emails and newsletters. We invite the wider community to school events and celebrations.
- Our school is the hub of our small rural community and a lot of the statements in this survey are not really applicable to us. We are in a very supportive community with very stable child-oriented homes.
- We liaise with the public health nurse and our school chaplain to provide confidential support for families at risk.
- Have a school garden -most families have their own at home.
- This school is a part of a rural schools network - the Principals meet every term, and the network has a day especially for Y8s each term, and another for whole school activity, eg: gymnastics/BP Challenge/speech competition.
- Have the dental therapists in school's spare room for checking only once a year-saves lots of unnecessary travel for parents.
- English language classes for parents of students enrolled at our school.
- Kids Can - coats, shoes, kai.
- PLAK (Parents Learning Alongside Kids), tertiary funded work place literacy, men's literacy group night class, boxing academy.
- Gardens, kapahaka, sport, Seasons counselling.
- Use of school pool over holidays.
- Golf tournament fund raising.
- Local Private College's Outdoor Ed Centre - close by - we use its facilities on invitation and have senior boys come to take sports skills in our school.
- Kinloch Fishing Contest.
- Homework is a parent/teacher group's responsibility.
- Links to parish, prison visits and to food bank are very strong.
- Families encouraged in once a month for coffees. Easy to have an open door policy because we are a small school.

- Groups of children visit the old peoples homes in the area.
- This is a fantastic survey - it really strikes at the heart of student achievement. My foundation beliefs are - the school should be part of a child's quality world (Glasser), it takes a whole community to educate a child, and people are the most important resource we have therefore time should go in to building relationships and rapport with people!!! Thanks it is great to know that someone out there in principal land thinks like me!!!!

Conclusion

I set out to answer three main questions:

1. What other school leaders are doing in the area of connecting with the school's wider community?
2. To ask school leaders what their beliefs are in this area;
3. And to ascertain whether principals are ready and willing to become involved in community development as a way to better support and engage students.

It is evident from the data that:

- School leaders are working in many and varied ways with the local community. These range from the traditional community partnership like having keys for the school pool available for the community to the establishment of the school as a community centre. Further work could be done to find out what school leaders think community partnership and community development is. It would be interesting to promote a discussion about what community development means in terms of schools and other education centres.
- By far the majority of principals who responded to this survey are keen to see the school in the context of its community. They can see that the school has a valuable and increasingly rare view into the intimate lives of families and neighbourhoods. They acknowledge that this view is underused; that schools are well placed to better use the valuable lens they and their colleagues have into our society and for some they want to be part of the solution to problems they see through this lens.
- Most principals welcome involvement from community agencies and most would seriously consider being a hub for community support and development.

I am indebted to the principals who took time out to complete this survey. I noticed from the data entries that many completed the survey after work hours, sometimes well after working hours. Many left encouraging comments to this amateur researcher and some gave him a hard time for not getting all the questions right!

I am heartened to see that by far the majority of principals who did participate are well aware of the hugely privileged position schools hold in communities and are open to finding better ways to engage children and their families in learning.

The full responses to this survey can be viewed at:

<http://www.coopermckenzie.co.nz/files/109/file/SurveySummary-12172010.pdf>

John McKenzie
December 2010