



**Primary Principal's Sabbatical Report – Term 2, 2019**

## ***School Transition***

***Investigate effectiveness in preparing and transitioning students from a small full primary school to a large secondary school.***

Martin Hookham

Principal

Korokoro School

## Acknowledgements

- The Korokoro School Board of Trustees for supporting my application.
- The Ministry of Education for providing the Sabbatical opportunity.
- The Korokoro School staff who kept the school running smoothly. In particular Melissa and Georgina who assumed Principal duties in my absence.
- The students, parents and secondary school staff I spoke to about transition.

## Purpose

Korokoro School is a relatively small full primary school. Most of our Year 8 leavers enrol in the large, local state college nearby. It is a natural question in our setting to ask how effective our context is in preparing our graduates for the rigours and demands of secondary school.

In essence I have inquired into:

***What do we do in our context that supports and enables students to succeed at secondary school.***

## Background

Other school leaders have investigated and published generalised findings and their own experiences regarding effective transition before me. The Ministry has also published project findings in 2012 (see *Transitions from Primary to Secondary Schools*) and concludes:

*“The middle school years (Years 7 to 10) can be a particularly challenging time. Students face having to move between and through schools while also dealing with the increased social, emotional and physiological changes of adolescence.*

*Effective transitions into and through secondary schools are important to a student’s future achievement and wellbeing.”*

These findings conclude that there are better outcomes for students when they enjoy strong connections with families, a focus on pastoral care and when there is effective communication across schools.

The Ministry 2012 report finds that when a transition is successful, students feel that:

- *they belong in their new school, and are well included in school activities and programmes*
- *they are positively connected to their peers, other students in the school, and to their teachers*

- *their teachers know them, including their strengths, interests and learning needs, and show they are interested in them*
- *their teachers understand the importance of their language, culture and identity*
- *they have a sense of purpose in being at school*
- *they have an understanding and commitment to their learning pathway through their schooling and beyond*
- *they are making progress*
- *their current learning follows on from their previous learning (the curriculum is connected and continuous) and is appropriately challenging*
- *learning is interesting, relevant and fun*
- *their families have been included in decisions they are physically and emotionally safe*
- *they have opportunities to try new, exciting things and/or extend their particular skills/interests (e.g. through extra-curricular activities).*

### Transition Experience

The transition process for our Year 8 students moving to Year 9 can be quite different depending on which college the student is enrolled into. The process itself is driven primarily by the secondary schools and we tend to play a support role to their requirements. Sometimes a one page sheet with some very basic questions on academic performance and behaviours is the only information a college seeks from us. In other cases there are Year 9 Dean visits alongside counsellors, former student visits, extracurricular exchanges and individual family consultations.

There are practicalities that need to be accounted for when colleges engage with a school with Year 8 students. These include; the number of students enrolling from the feeder school, the level of trust in the data provided, staff availability and to what extent various information streams are prioritised. When there are only one or two students enrolling, it is not realistic to expect secondary school staff to personalise visits.

It would be a fair assessment to say that a student following the “normal” or “typical” transition pathway in our context is likely to benefit from a more holistic transition. This is because the secondary school will be able to justify the deployment of Deans and support staff as well as build a level of confidence in the range of data that we provide.

Relationships between students and staff during transition is important, as is the communication with the families. For many students, transition from primary to secondary school is a journey into the unknown. The more the unknown can be demystified the better the transition will be.

Prior social connections play a role in how smooth a transition process is. Students look forward to meeting old friends, making new friends, being with siblings, knowing of (or ideally having already met) some teachers.

## Pathways

Successive governments have acknowledged the power of connections between schools particularly with transition pathways. Some schools are part of a CoL (Community of Learning). CoLs are formal relationships between schools underpinned by a common goal or target. The level to which these formal relationships have tangible and sustained benefits is still to be determined. It should not, however, require a Ministry driven, formal procedure in order for schools to work together to share information in order to improve student outcomes.

The secondary school leaders I visited are keen to further build positive collaborative relationships with our school. There are opportunities for our team to visit secondary schools more often and for us to invite their representatives into our setting.

## Values

The more I spoke with secondary school leaders about their programmes and concerns the more clear it became that our general values and philosophies here at Korokoro School **are** preparing students with the necessary skills and dispositions that will benefit them as adults. Our T.R.I.B.E values and newly introduced C.H.I.E.F values put a significant lens on the development of key competencies in our learners. Our relatively small school size and strong community links help us to foster powerful learning connections between teachers, students and families. Our context provides children with a strong sense of purpose, connectivity and belonging. By observing the holistic development of children aged 5 – 13, we have confidence, that our programmes and the opportunities provided are enabling students to develop increased self-confidence, self-worth, independence, care, empathy and resilience. With these components in place, our students are ready to maximise their academic potential.

## Student Wellbeing

By and large our academic results see Korokoro students well placed to succeed in any college. Progress and proficiency in the core subjects is a priority for us just as it is in colleges. Schools, of course, are not just focussed on academic success. Mental health is a critically important focus for all schools and student wellbeing is essential before academic success can be fully realised.

School leaders are acutely aware and concerned with upward trends in student mental health issues and of the need to prioritise personal well-being. Even those schools which traditionally measure themselves on academic prowess are making changes/adaptations to better prepare/ empower students to effectively manage anxiety, social media pressures, and a range of other health issues. The objective for all schools is very much a hybrid of academic **and** social/emotional learning.

In our context most secondary schools make an effort to know more about student personalities, interests, social skills, behaviours, support provided or concerns that we may have. Around October each year we begin to fill out transition information to secondary

schools. We also host Year 9 Deans when they visit us to talk about enrolled students. During these dialogues we assist with the placement and support for students as they enter college.

## Community

Ultimately society wants schools to produce contributing citizens who add value to their local and wider communities. One of the aims of this research was to determine our ability to successfully prepare young people for college. Ann Allain (2017) points out some of the benefits that can occur for students who belong to small full primary school setting:

- Students at small schools develop strong relationships with their peers and their teachers;
- Small schools are able to tailor instruction to meet the needs of individual students;
- Teachers at small schools report higher levels of job satisfaction;
- Small schools foster citizenship, leadership, and social emotional skills.

Students in a smaller school context are more likely to participate in representative sports teams, performing arts activities, and other inter-school competitions. This is simply a supply and demand situation where competition for places can limit participation in a larger setting.

Korokoro students by the end of year 8 are young people who have benefitted from growing and learning in a relatively small and nurturing community. This upbringing and experience arms them with confidence, self-belief and over time provides them with many opportunities to positively and actively contribute to and represent their community. This in turn prepares our young people well for the demands of college life.

Anecdotal feedback from colleges suggest that our students adapt quickly and confidently to their respective college environments. The majority of our students go to Hutt Valley High School but the percentages change from year to year. Some years we have our Year 8 cohort splintered amongst a number of colleges across the wider Wellington region.

Deciding what college to send their child to can be a difficult and worrying time for parents. There are many varied opinions about the relative merits of different schools and parents report that it can be challenging to differentiate fact from hearsay.

## Conclusion

If successful transition was only about academic ability then it would be easy to measure how well any school was preparing students for college. We know that optimal transition is far more complex than any one indicator and we also know that the transition process can be very different depending on the schools involved.

In order to best prepare students for the many variables in place that can affect their transition experience, the lens needs to be shifted more widely. I was examining how effective we are in preparing students for college but perhaps a better question to pose is how we can best prepare students for **change**. Not just change of schools but for the many life-step changes that will be encountered over a life time.

We know that there are plenty of unknowns for new generations as they head into the future. This makes it even more important to reinforce the essential skills and aptitudes which we know will always hold true. It will, for example, always be valuable for individuals and for society as a whole if we know how to get along with others, have empathy, can apply ourselves to tasks, have resilience and are able to bounce back from disappointments. These key competencies are the backbone to any success – whether that success be academic, sporting, artistic, social, personal or otherwise.

Transition into college is just one of the many changes people face in their life. Our school places emphasis on those key competencies which help empower students to prepare for, cope with and grow through change. This is not easy to quantify or measure in the limitations of this report other than through anecdotal observation. We can, however, note that the ever increasing pace of change in our society means we have less and less certainty on what to prioritise in learning. By focussing on the key building blocks that help young people navigate through the complexities of life we are supporting them to emerge as successful, productive, caring and ultimately happy people.

## **References**

Education Review Office (2012) *Evaluation at a glance: Transition from Primary to Secondary School*

<https://www.ero.govt.nz/publications/evaluation-at-a-glance-transitions-from-primary-to-secondary-school/6-transition-from-primary-to-secondary-school/>

Ann Allain St. Andrews School Rhode Island (2017) *Why small schools do so much more than improve test scores*

<https://www.standrews-ri.org/news-detail?pk=873026>