PRINCIPAL'S SABBATICAL REPORT
Marion Carter
Corstorphine School
Term 1 2009

'Growing Great Learners' - the journey to raise learning, social and achievement outcomes for pupils in a small, low decile, suburban school. We look at the successes, issues and challenges involved in this project.

Purpose of Research:

My main aim is to look at the successes, issues and challenges that low decile schools face especially in the wider educational sector and in particular how we can sustain successful learning outcomes for students.

The findings of this project will be discussed and reported on in three sections:

1) The Pupils: 'Yearning to Learn'. This will look at how we are developing successful learners from a low decile school who can participate and engage positively in society. School wide learning objectives are evaluated through linking these to the school's Annual Plan and assessing the effectiveness of pupil learning outcomes.

2) School Choice: I have collected data from a variety of pre school parents on how they will choose a school for their child and what criteria they will use to do so. This information will be explored in relation to the 'Vision' statement in the School's Strategic plan.

3) Issues which May be Important to Low Decile Schools: This area involves investigating issues which may impact on schools and include factors such as: roll size, stability in terms of roll and staffing, composition of classes, school capability in terms of learning and social programmes, community expectations and involvement in the life of the school.

Background:

When I was appointed Principal of Corstorphine School we identified a strong need to lift social and learning outcomes for our pupils. We used the following to analyse where we were at and where we wanted to go.

- A self review process titled 'This is How We Do Things Around Here'…This included looking at our 'Vision' Statement and aspects of our 'Charter'.
- Community Consultation focussing on how the community saw the school and identifying what was important to them
- School Wide Professional Development
- Curriculum: Previous data indicated we needed to focus on and lift student achievement in Literacy. This has been a target area over the last three years.

Section 1 – How We have Developed Successful Learners

(A) The Self Review Process: We undertook this review by discussing, analysing and evaluating the following areas:

What We Think We do Well:
- We cover curriculum requirements with a strong focus on Literacy and Numeracy.
- We manage difficult pupils well.
- We provide a variety of learning, cultural and sporting activities for pupils, often after school.
- We identify learning or social difficulties pupils may present and seek appropriate assistance quickly.
- We offer a secure learning environment.
- We cater for 'able' pupils through the 'Gifted and Talented' programme with three other schools.
- We involve our parent community in many aspects of school life.
- We are welcoming towards 'professionals' who work in our school.
- We have good 'reporting' systems for parents.
- We support each other as professionals. This also includes the 'support' and 'caretaking' staff at our school.

What We Think We Do Not Do as Well as We Could:
- We need to refine and improve some assessment practices.
- We need to keep up to date with current teaching research practices in spite of 'time' constraints.
- We need to cater for 'all' cultures in our school as well as we can with the limited resources available.

What Do We Know about our Pupils?

Firstly we read a paper adapted from Ken Howell titled 'Behaviour Recovery' 2nd Edition Rogers, Inset (1999). It highlights the following variables which do influence student achievement.

Within the Student (Alterable)
- Desire to learn
- Strategies for learning and learning style
- Academic and social coping
- Prior content knowledge
- Self – Efficacy / helplessness

External to the Student
- Quality of the curriculum
- Quality of instruction / motivation
- Pedagogical and content knowledge
- Quality and type of evaluation
- Quality of the learning environment
- Quality of time

Within the Student (Hard to change)
- Genetic potential
- Race and perception of race by others
- Birth Order
- Health and diet
- Physical differences
- I.Q.
- Disability category
- Personal History

External to the Student
- Family Income and resources
- Family housing
- Parent years of schooling
- Long – term unemployment
- Mobility of family
- Family values
- Family history
- Peer socio – economic status

It was felt after much robust discussion that we were in a position in a small school to make significant changes to our pupil's learning achievements and social skills. The next item for consideration was:

How Can We Make a Difference?
- By catering for individual learning styles
- 'Knowing' our pupils well
- Bringing our parents 'onboard' to share their children's successes and support the challenges their children might face
- By continually updating our own professional knowledge
- Sharing our information on pupil progress

We then asked ourselves: 'What are the important factors for us to consider and implement to raise achievement levels in Literacy and why are some pupils at our school least successful in terms of outcomes?
Important factors in raising achievement:
- To present, focussed interesting lessons
- To engage pupils 'actively' in learning
- To use 'evidenced based' assessment practices
- To set realistic learning intentions for pupils so they know what the learning involves
- Giving specific feedback to pupils which can be negative as well as positive. Criticism should be constructive and manageable for the pupil
- Feed forward should be used for the next learning steps
- We need to consider how we pre and post test pupils to assess learning
- We need to recognise preconceived ideas of what pupils know
- We must acknowledge that some pupils are poor listeners and need support to follow instructions and work on learning tasks
- We must use a range of effective teaching strategies if pupils are to learn successfully
- Most importantly, we must have high expectations for all pupils

Why do we think some pupils are not successful learners:
- They do not learn effectively in class groups but achieve well in small groups or in one to one situations
- They find it difficult to listen, remember or concentrate in the classroom
- They need less 'structure' and function better in a 'developmental' type of learning environment
- They have social difficulties with other pupils or teachers
- Parent expectations are poor or non existent
- Some pupils have learning 'blocks' or have special learning needs in a number of curriculum areas
- Learning support resources are limited

<u>What do We Want Our Pupils to Achieve?</u>
- Our priority is that our pupils develop strong Literacy and Numeracy skills
- To be 'deeper' thinkers ie our pupils have the ability to make good observations, devise useful questions but cannot always link these skills to the next learning stage
- To learn by taking more responsibility for their learning when using the 'Inquiry' approach
- To show a positive approach to learning and become a motivated learner
- To develop appropriate social and behavioural skills
- To use 'initiative' in problem solving tasks
- To be happy and keen to be at school
- To develop independent work habits
- To be able to comply with instructions and school rules

During the past three years we have been able to offer our pupils specific, targeted learning programmes to meet their needs.
- Individualised Reading Programmes (Reading Recovery and 'Catch Up Reading'). This programme was developed by staff for pupils from Years 4 – 6 and focuses on skills, strategies, oral reading practices and getting 'meaning' from reading.
- Writer's Club: This is a group programme which assists pupils from Years 4 – 6 to grasp and develop basic writing skills with emphasis on being able to 'think and write in sentences', write for a purpose and use surface features correctly.
- Jolly Phonics in the Junior school.
- Specialist Music programme. A 'specialist' Music teacher is employed to teach the Music programme across the school. This music programme has an integrated curriculum approach which has been most successful for many of our learners.

<u>Professional Development and Professional Learning Conversations</u>

We discussed the importance of 'quality' professional development and how PLCs could help us to become better classroom teachers by:

- Developing up to date, robust professional practice
- To be able to focus 'in depth' on pupil's learning
- Take collective responsibility for learning and behaviour
- Demonstrate a collaborative focus to teaching and learning
- We as a group would accept that sometimes we may have to change our beliefs and be receptive, open and willing to accept challenges and continued change.

<u>Integrating the Charter</u>

Our School Charter forms the basis for planning and implementing everything which happens at school. The 'Vision' Statement and 'Nag 1' in the Annual Plan are key areas we consider when planning learning and teaching programmes.

The 'Vision' statement in the School Charter states: We want to:

- Be a school which values it's community and provides a range of quality learning experiences for it's students.
- Be recognised for promoting an education that meets the needs of the individual.
- Be seen as a school that focuses on sensible and innovative educational practice.

The 'Annual Plan' is the basis for achieving our 'Vision' statement objectives. All Nags are reviewed and evaluated each year by our staff and a new plan is developed for the coming year which will cater for the range of student learning and social needs. The staff and community have identified the following teaching and learning programmes for our pupils: Reading Recovery, Perceptual Motor Programme, ESOL, Gifted and Talented Programme, Writer's Club, 'Catch Up' Reading Programme, Duffy Books in Schools, the Kapa Haka Programme, Quality Learning Circles and the Healthy School's Programme.There is a heavy emphasis on 'Literacy', especially in 'Reading' where there is a continued need for individual and small group support. This will be discussed in detail under 'Curriculum'.

We monitor pupil progress and achievement in the following ways: school wide targets for achievement are set, students set their own learning goals and learning and teaching programmes and outcomes are set for each curriculum area during 'Planning' Days. This is an effective use of 'Classroom Release Time' and gives time for staff to reflect, share information on pupil achievement, give feedback and plan the next learning steps. Parents are involved in setting learning and social goals for their children at the 'beginning of the year interviews' and these are reviewed at the interviews held at the end of term two. Parents also receive a 'summary' report at mid year and a 'full report' at the end of the year. Learning portfolios are available for students to share with parents at interview time as we feel it is a positive experience for students, parents and teachers to share, evaluate and give feedback on student achievement. New learning goals may also be set during this time.

Another area of our Annual Plan we review each term is 'Students at Risk'. We identify students who are at risk emotionally, socially and academically and programmes are set up to address needs. This involves setting up a register of students with special needs, using Support Agencies such as the Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour, the School Social Worker Service, Child and Family Services, Health Care Workers and Special Education Services. IEPs are developed for students, goals are set, monitored and reviewed on a regular basis.

(B) The Community and the School (How We Started the Journey)

The school community is rather fragmented, diverse and demographically old. Many state houses have been privately sold over the years and the primary school aged population is in decline.

We have 10% - 20% of our pupils who are constantly mobile in terms of housing and staying at one school for longer than a year.

Student absence without a genuine reason is generally not a problem.

However for all staff at our school getting our parents 'on board' and building a strong community partnership was and still is an ongoing priority.

Staff feel that some parents do not have a huge interest in education so what we chose to do needs to involve their children and be of high interest value.

We considered many ways of how we could do this and came with the following ideas:

Parent Survey on 'what parents saw as important for them and their children at the school'
Curriculum Presentations
Sports and Cultural Events
School Programmes

During the last two years we have focussed on these ideas and at the end of 2008 we evaluated what had been successful and what had not.

Parent Survey: Approximately 75% of parents responded to this 'yes' / 'no' survey with a section for written comments if the parent wished to do so.The most important aspects of schooling parents saw for their child were: (in order) school swimming programme, homework, school social services ie social worker, dental therapist, the school discipline plan and the school 'values' programme. Ranked at the bottom of the survey were things such as parents being active on the BOT or PTA, being involved in coaching a sport or choosing email or cell phones as a means of communication with the school. The teaching and learning of curriculum did not hold a high priority as after discussion with parents at interview time we were informed that 'that's what schools do anyway!'

It was felt that parents did value the 'social' aspects of school, in that it had a welcoming, open approach. Physed was seen as important as were discipline and values. However we still felt that parents were quite happy in a 'passive' role in the school setting.

Curriculum Presentations: Over the past two years we have focussed on having a 'curriculum' presentation to the school each term. This has been in 'high interest' curriculum areas such as: parents viewing their children using a range of technology, often related to aspects of Inquiry Learning, Physed events, the Arts, Literacy as in 'Book Weeks' and in

Science Topics. Presentations have been held either in the afternoon or early evening and have been a great success in getting parents along to school. During 2008, 80% - 90% took the opportunity to come along and share in their child's learning. This has been a gradual increase from 60% - 70% of parents attending over the past two years.

It is important we feel that the 'high interest / involving all pupil's approach' certainly works for the school in terms of parents being actively involved in their children's learning.

Sports and Cultural Events: The school focuses strongly in providing pupils with the opportunity to take part in 'out of school' sports. Teaching staff often coach and transport pupils to venues in their own time to give pupils the sporting experiences they would otherwise not get. The school also applies to Sporting Agencies to help pay pupil's fees and this has been most successful in allowing pupils to participate in a range of sports.

Parents are very interested in coming to watch their children and usually 90% of parents would turn up to any sport their children are involved in. This again is a good measure of success of involving parents in their children's education.

The school takes part in a wide range of theatrical and cultural activities and 90% - 95% of the parent community are extremely supportive of these events.

Some parents give up their time to coach pupils for cultural festivals which helps build a good school / community relationship.

One of the Board of Trustee's goals is keep the school 'culturally' safe and it is felt that the school certainly does provide this through a range of cultural activities for pupils.

School Welfare Programmes and Services: The quality of learning programmes and services the school can offer to it's school community is pivotal to the success of it's learners.

As learning programmes have been documented under the 'Charter' this section will identify the various social programmes available which have had a positive impact on pupil learning and attitudes towards school.

- School Social Worker Service: This valuable service allocates a social worker to work with pupils and their families to improve social and learning outcomes for pupils.
- Health Workers / Dental Services: These vital, regular services are important for the physical health and well being of all pupils and are reasonably well used by pupils and parents.
- 'Fruit in School's' Programme: This three year government funded programme provides fresh fruit for all pupils every day. We have had two years of this programme and have noticed a significant difference to some pupil's ability to be able to listen and concentrate. The pupils noted here would be those who would arrive at school without having breakfast or would not have lunch with them. Parents take ownership of preparing and distributing the fruit to classrooms each day.
- School Breakfast Programme: The Red Cross funded breakfast programme has been operating in the school for over a year and caters for approximately 30% - 50% of the school population. Parents are totally responsible for this programme and enjoy having ownership of it. It involves them in school life in a positive, non-threatening way and continues to work well. Pupils get a good

start to the day psychologically as well as physically.

- The 'Corsty Club' is run by a church youth group service and caters for the social needs of years 4 – 6 pupils after school. There is strong emphasis on co operative and problem solving skills and children having fun.
- The Homework Club: this has been held for pupils once a week and has been supervised by staff. It is used by a regular number of pupils.
- A 'Parent's' Room is available for parents to socialise, have coffee or meetings. This was very popular when it was first set up three years ago but has not been well used in the last year. Parents have told us they have not the time to use it now as many have work commitments.
- School / Community Events: Each year the staff and BOT work extremely hard to involve the community in the life of the school. In term one there is a barbecue / meet the teacher evening, in term two a BOT community dinner where BOT and staff cook for the whole school community, in term three the focus is cultural with school participation in annual festivals and in term four there is a special 'Leaver's Assembly' which is part of a school musical production.

     The community support for these events brings almost 100% attendance mainly because parents and their extended families enjoy seeing their children involved and love to be entertained.

     It is indeed a time where the school community feels comfortable and valued within the life of the school.

The Circle Time Project

   The next aspect of our journey has had a profound effect on both social and learning outcomes for our pupils.

  In 2007 we joined a cluster of schools to embark on a three year project called '**The Circle Time Project'** developed by English Educational Consultant Jenny Mosley and implemented in the cluster schools by Therese Hoyle of The 'Success Partnership'. This is a whole school behaviour modification programme where the main aim is to help pupils learn to develop appropriate attitudes and behaviour skills which will enhance their learning.

The Structure of the Model:
- This involves adult training where the focus is on the self esteem and adult morale and learning the steps of the process.
- Learning the 'Golden Rules' to promote moral values throughout the school day both in class and during intervals.
- Quality Circle Time: this is a class listening session to promote positive relationships, self discipline and empathy.
- Incentives: looking for the 'good' in everybody.
- Sanctions: setting the boundaries for all pupils.
- Lunchtimes: Operate the 'Golden' Rules, use of the reward card system or the negative card system if necessary.

Golden Time Reward: This is held at the end of the week for pupils who have not lost any 'Golden Time'.

How we implemented the model and is it working for us?

We decided to focus on three main areas: Implementing weekly class 'Circle Time', developing better choices for pupils in the playground and the 'Golden Time' reward which would be each Friday. This was considered to be an incentive for pupils to work towards during the week.

The programme began with all teachers introducing the main concepts to pupils. This included the following steps:
Knowing the seven playground rules set by the programme. These were quite closely allied to our school programme anyway and included the following behaviours: do be gentle (don't hurt anyone), do be kind and helpful(do not hurt people's feelings), do play well with others(do not spoil other's games), do care for your playground (do not damage anything) do listen to people (do not interrupt), do be honest (do not cover up the truth) and follow the safety rules in the playground. The rules are displayed in the classrooms and in the playground as a constant reminder.

Pupils were introduced to the concept of working towards a 'Golden Time' reward on a Friday. All pupils began each week qualifying for the award.However if behaviour is negative either in the classroom or in the playground Golden Time is lost. This is usually done in five minute blocks. In the playground a pupil will be issued with a red card for negative behaviour while in the classroom the teacher keeps a record of pupils who have lost Golden Time. However Golden Time can be won back by a pupil changing their behaviour from negative to positive. This is a particularly good incentive for a pupil to accept the negative but also be able to change their behaviour appropriately. On the positive side yellow cards are also given to pupils who show positive behaviours in the playground. They are few in number so there is much competition for them. The yellow card winners also have a 'dip' in the 'Treasure' box each Friday.

Golden Time has become very special for pupils. They are able to select what activity they wish to do during the week and activities such as: 'the café', 'make and build', 'exploring the wilderness', 'let's dance', 'nature ramble', archery, 'frisbee golf', 'making music', participating in a variety of 'sports' and 'beauty and bling' sessions make this part of the week something to look forward to. Activities are changed each term to keep the interest alive. For those pupils who do lose time the task is to sit and watch the activity they have chosen for the number of minutes they have lost time for. This negative experience has a steep learning curve for most pupils and very few want to lose their Golden Time.

In the playground we looked very carefully at the activities the pupils were offered at playtimes.

Over the last year we have developed a choice of activities which include: a 'quiet' area, a special play area with blocks, dress ups, chalk boards, water trays and other frequently changed activities, a reading bay and a different 'speciality' sport which can be played each week.

Juniors and seniors have also been allocated to different activities which means everyone has a turn at popular activities. On 'wet' days senior pupils operate a special indoor games area, table tennis is set up and videos are available.

We have observed many positive changes in playground behaviour over the last two years as pupils have a choice of activities which takes away the boredom factor and they have become much better at co operating and problem solving. The 'yellow' card system also supports good behaviour and playground duty for staff is usually very manageable and even enjoyable.

Finally, each class takes part in 'Circle Time' once a week with their classroom teacher. The purpose of this six step programme is to:
- Enhance the self – esteem and morale of adults and pupils.
- Combat bullying and aggressive behaviour using a whole school approach.
- Constantly review listening systems, rules, rewards, sanctions and playground activities.
- Develop strategies for dealing with unhappy children.
- Achieve an open and supportive learning environment.
- Boost staff energy levels.
  A 'quality' Circle Time involves five steps which teachers must follow:
- A game is usually played around the circle to relax and involve everybody.
- There will be a 'round the group' activity which is non threatening to all.
- The 'forum' is next where problems and concerns of one or two pupils maybe shared and sensible solutions offered by fellow pupils.
- The next step is about celebrating success where pupils may thank each other for a good deed or for being their friend.
- The closing ritual may involve another 'calming' game and the main emphasis is that all participants feel good about the experience.

Pupils are encouraged to develop and use the following skills to help make Circle Time meaningful for them. They are: looking, listening, concentrating, speaking and thinking which are pivotal to any child's success in learning.

After two years on this programme we feel it has been very successful for us in terms of social outcomes for pupils. Our evaluations to date show:
- Pupils have far better self management skills in being able to work out solutions to problems verbally, manage behaviour in a positive way, make compromises when necessary and respect another person's point of view and make a sensible judgement.
- Pupils and staff have a stable, manageable, behavioural programme and for pupils it is part of their everyday life at school.
- The programme is constantly evolving and new dimensions are being added.
- Pupils have the choice of introducing new activities and can take ownership for parts of the programme.

- The 'Behaviour' notebook for the playground is no longer in use.
- Parents have been informed about the programme and most have supported the 'values' and 'goals.'
- About 70% of parents took the opportunity to see a 'Circle Time' in action.
- We now have a very small percentage of 'problem' pupils. The pupils who do present difficulties often have a range of problems in their family lives or in the learning situation.
- The support from cluster schools and the programme facilitator is excellent. This keeps up the momentum and enthusiasm for the programme. All staff have had the opportunity to observe Circle Time in other schools and attend workshops to develop their skills. As it is a school wide project all staff are committed to making it a success.

   There is a growing body of knowledge arising from the work of Peter Salovey, Howard Gardner and others reported initially in Daniel Goleman's book 'Emotional Intelligence' (1996) which points towards the importance of positive self – esteem in the learning process. This work confirms the finding of Burns (1982) which demonstrated that pupils who have taken part in such programmes, raise their awareness of emotions to enhance their self – esteem.

(C) Pupil Learning and Achievement
   In this section I feel it is important to acknowledge some findings from the 'National Educational Project' Team' (NEMP)(2007). From their 'Overview' of 'Performance of Subgroups' they have found in terms of student achievement that: 'at school level, the dominant factor is clearly socio – economic status, as measured by a grouping of the decile levels of schools the children attend. Students in high and medium schools consistently outperform students from low decile schools.'

   As professionals we know we cannot alter socio – economic status but we can give our pupils the very best learning opportunities possible and work towards achieving positive learning outcomes for them.

   I have chosen Literacy and will examine the progress we have made in Reading as this was a target area over the past two years. Previous results in school – wide reading indicated that we needed to lift achievement levels so pupils were reading at their chronological ages or as close to them as possible.
The following plan was implemented:
- School Make – Up of Pupils: During 2007 - 2008 the school population has been made up of 50% Pakeha, 25% Maori and 22% Pacific Island and 3% other nationalities. There is very little difference in levels of achievement between the ethnic groups.
- We examined our reading data at the end of 2006 to find that 40% of our Years 4 – 6 pupils were reading below their chronological age. We also looked at where our six year olds were reading after one year at school and found the majority of pupils were reading at level 4
- Two targets were set: 1) To raise the standard of reading across the school so that 80% of the pupils in Years 4 – 6 would be reading at

their chronological age. The STAR standardised test and the PM Benchmark Kit would be used as assessment tools. 2) To raise the instructional level of reading of our six year old pupils using the 'Six Year Net Survey' from reading at Level 4 to reading confidently at Level 7.

- Because we do have a 10% - 20% pupil mobility at the school I have used the same cohort of pupils for the purpose of showing our achievement results.
- A strong literacy programme was put in place to strengthen reading programmes and indeed to assist pupils who had learning needs or were underachieving in reading. The BOT were very supportive in providing resources for this and the following programmes were put in place: * Reading Recovery
  * 'Catch Up Reading' (an individualised programme for senior pupils)
  * Volunteer / Reading Support programme (supported by teacher aides / parents)
  * Rejoining the Duffy Books in School's programme (this meant we were getting books into our pupil's homes)
  * Buddy Reading programme
  * Book Themes
  *Jolly Phonics programme

Reading progress would be monitored closely each term through current running records being analysed at professional meetings. Pupils not making the expected progress would receive extra individual support.

At the end of our target time we were pleased to report significant progress for many of our pupils in lifting reading levels. Our evidence showed the following results.

Of the years 4 – 6 pupils, 85% were reading at their chronological age. 20% of these pupils were reading at least two years above. 15% of pupils were still reading within two years below their age levels but had made positive progress.

The STAR results showed us: that 60% of our pupils had achieved stanine scores between 6 – 9. 10% of this cohort were at the 7 – 9 stanine range.

35% of our pupils scored in the 4 – 5 stanine range while 5% scored between stanines 1 – 3. Of these pupils 2% decreased their scores.

50% of pupils also improved their stanine scores by moving up one stanine over the target period.

The 'Six Year Net' Survey also produced pleasing results. At the end of their first year of school 70% of our pupils were reading at level 7 or above, 25% of pupils were reading at level 4 while 5% were at level 1.

What can we conclude from our results?

- That high quality 'focussed' teaching will produce improved achievement.
- That resources need to be in place to support teaching and learning.
- That our pupils are motivated and willing (along with their parents) to accept the challenge.
- That our targets were realistic and achievable.

Section 2 - How Do Parents Select a School for Their Five Year Old? What Criteria was Important for Them?

As the school is surrounded by three pre schools I thought it would be an interesting project to find out just how parents do go about choosing a school for their child. Two of the pre schools attract a 'mixed' clientele while the other, the local kindergarten draws mainly on the local area.

I devised the following simple Yes / No survey with optional comments. This survey produced the following results.

1) Will you send your child to your local neighbourhood school?

60% of parents replied 'yes' while 40% replied 'no'.

2) Would you visit various schools prior to your child starting school?

75% of parents stated 'yes' while '25% said 'no'.

3) If your answer to No 2 was 'Yes' would you please tick your answers to the following:

I would want to meet the teacher(s) of the New Entrant Class.

95% of parents said 'yes', 2% did not tick anything and 3% said 'no'.

I would want to know how many children were in the class.

98% said 'yes' and 2% said 'no'.

I would want to know about the school's teaching and learning programmes.

90% of parents said 'yes' while 10% said 'no'.

I would want to know about the school's behavioural management programme.

98% stated 'yes' and 2% stated 'no'.

4) School Decile Rankings: Schools are grouped into socio - economic decile rankings with 'one' being at the bottom end of the scale and 'ten being at the top.

Would the decile ranking of a school influence the choice of school for your child?

80% answered 'yes' with 20% saying 'no'.

5) Would you read a school's ERO report before choosing a school for your child?

75% stated 'yes' while 25% said 'no'.

Some interesting comments were made regarding Question 4 and whether decile ranking affected parent choice. For example:

'Graffiti free play equipment. The two local schools have gang names on equipment and things like 'I'm going to bash you'. These would terrify me if I was a child going to these schools.'

'The attitude of teachers and general feel of the school would take precedence'.

' I have heard that school fees are rarely paid by parents at the lower decile schools, therefore there would be less funding and maybe less opportunities and facilities / equipment.'

'Feedback you get from other parents who have children at the school. Impression you get from principal and continued contact after school visits.'

'Concerns about bullying and quality of food provided to my child's potential friends influencing his food choices in a bad way at less affluent schools'.

'Probably would not choose a low decile school unless it had an outstanding reputation and most don't.'

'We want our child to be with other children of similar social / educational influence'.

'My child is going to the school I went to as a child. This is how I came to my decision'.

'It would depend on the opportunities available and the child ratio to teachers'.

What can we conclude from this sample of comments? It would be fair to say that the majority of parents in this survey would be influenced by school decile and their perceived conceptions of what they think low decile schools offer. This makes it difficult for low decile schools located in areas where parents are likely to send their children out of the area to higher decile schools to prove that they too, can offer an excellent education for pupils.

Our school Vision Statement focuses strongly on valuing the school community and showing that we provide quality learning experiences for our pupils in many areas highlighted in this report.

It is indeed very difficult to change public perception of the quality of education that low decile schools can and do offer.

Section 3 – Some Issues which may be similar in low decile schools and any issues which are unique to a school

In the final section of my report I visited five low decile schools, two decile one, two decile two and one decile three to see if there were any issues which were similar to all schools and to find out whether there were issues unique to a school.

My survey involved gathering data under the following criteria:

School Rolls and Staffing
Make up of School Communities
Parental Expectations of School
Board of Trustee's Effectiveness
Wealth of the School
Learning and Social Programmes
Support Agencies

School Rolls and Staffing: All the schools had declining rolls although two schools started the year with more pupils than predicted. The reasons for decline were similar across the schools in that there were few primary aged children in the area, the school area was 'old' demographically and school location was a major factor. Parents were by passing the local school for bigger schools or for schools in higher socio economic areas.

Staffing was an interesting exercise. The decile three school had a stable, experienced staff. The remaining schools had stable teaching staffs but generally had younger staff with relatively little experience.

It was felt in four of the schools that teachers do not apply for positions because of the 'low decile' perception and that they do not get the selection of applicants that higher decile schools get.

Make up of School Communities: This was an interesting exercise because it showed the diversity of the school communities. The decile three school community has two distinct communities, 50% stable, nuclear families and 50% solo parents. The two groups 'fall out' with each other's social groupings and there are 'power struggles' within the groups.

Two of the schools described their communities as pathetic and lacked cohesion.Both schools have a fairly high degree of family mobility so there are difficulties with stability in the community.

The remaining two schools have fairly supportive school communities because of their locations, distance from other schools and the parents are more involved in the life of their communities.

All schools acknowledged similar problems with:

- Parent Consultation: Meetings were not well attended and surveys needed to be of the 'yes' / 'no' kind to provoke a response.
- Parent Involvement: All schools said that to get 'high parental interest' at school the children must be involved usually in entertainment type activities such as musicals, arts and sporting events.

- Four of the schools said that parents would move children to other schools if problems arose with pupil behaviour or parents were asked to be accountable over an issue. Sometimes parents moved their children around several schools 'just for a change'.

Parental Expectations of the School: All schools presented similar findings in that:

- Parents want teachers to teach their children to the best of their ability.
- Safety for children at school was paramount.
- Parents want the basics for their children 'Reading, Writing and Math'. Most parents were not interested in the 'PC' issues.
- Parents were interested in school when their children were involved in 'high interest' events as mentioned above.
- Two schools indicated that there were a number of parents who would be happy for the teachers to take on the parenting role.

Board of Trustee's Effectiveness: All schools had supportive Boards, however two of the schools had 99% of Board Members who no longer had children at the school .This was identified as a problem as it was felt that the Board Members would grow remote from the school and lack interest in school activities.

Wealth of the Schools: Four of the decile one and two schools indicated that they had no financial problems and could deliver the necessary learning and social programmes. The decile three school constantly struggled to fund learning programmes through lack of finance.

Special Needs, Learning and Social Programmes: The decile three school felt that some of their pupils were two years behind because their behaviours prevent them from learning. A lack of funding meant that appropriate resources could not be provided.

   All schools felt that at least 50% of new entrants demonstrated limited 'early' experiences and that there were not enough 'specialist' agencies available to support schools. It was also recognised that some agencies are understaffed especially in critical areas like speech therapy.

   Funding is good in the other four schools and they felt they could deliver appropriate social and learning programmes to the 50% - 80% of pupils who require support.

Support Agencies: All schools had access to similar support agencies in terms of educational services. Three schools had access to the school social worker service which was supportive and helpful to each school.

   It was interesting to note that pupil referrals to agencies usually came from the school with parent permission but were not driven initially by the parents.

All schools had some health based initiatives operating in the school to support health and well being of pupils. These initiatives were supported by Area Health Boards, Social Agencies or Corporates and include:

*Setting up school community vegetable gardens

*Daily breakfast programmes

*'Fruit in Schools' programme where pupils receive fresh fruit on a daily basis.

It was generally felt that these initiatives were very successful in terms of pupils learning to develop healthy eating habits, learn appropriate social skills at breakfast and generally have time to 'sort themselves out in a positive manner' for the school day ahead.

To summarize this part of the report it can be seen that schools do have some similar issues in the areas of: decile perception, parental involvement, learning expectations for pupils, adequate funding (except for the decile three school) and reasonable support from agencies.

To complete this journey I would like to quote from J Hattie 'Schools Like Mine Cluster Analysis of New Zealand School's Technical Report, 14, 2002' where he states: 'The pervasiveness of the decile system as an indicator of school success, of teacher quality, of student achievement, and of quality of the school is demeaning to the many teachers and students who excel in these schools. Further, continuing to build the expectation that lower decile schools are not achieving can lead to promoting the very lower achievement that many work hard to change. The stereotype threats, based on the use of deciles, as a surrogate for learning or quality needs to be further investigated in New Zealand.'

This no doubt is the ongoing challenge for all school leaders who work in our low decile schools now and in the future.