

Focus: - The Home School Partnership

SABBATICAL REPORT

TERM THREE 2009

Dave Robinson; Principal Dunsandel School

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the Dunsandel School Board of Trustees for their support in allowing me to take this Sabbatical opportunity. I am thankful for the work of Tracey Harrold and Anna Robinson who ensured the school ran smoothly in my absence.

I acknowledge the discussion time given by the Principals of the schools I visited – your openness and discussion points are appreciated

“When love and skill work together, expect a masterpiece.”

John Ruskin British Social Thinker 19th Century

Purpose

The purpose for my application for the Sabbatical Leave for Principals Scheme 2009 is as follows:-

Investigate practices of Home School Partnership at our school and local schools

Home School Partnership

What do schools believe to be the purpose of the Home School Partnership?

Role of Parents and Caregivers

What do schools (Principal and teaching staff) see as the role of parents and caregivers in their schools and their child/children's learning?

What do parents and caregivers believe their role to be in their child/children's learning and the school?

Practice and Reality

What importance does each school place on the Home School Partnership (Principal, staff, children, parents)? Are Home School Partnership activities well organised and goal linked?

What do our schools do to promote a positive Home School Partnership? Each school will have examples of what they believe to be good home-school partnership practice – what makes it good practice and how did they achieve this?

Improving the Home School Partnership

What can schools do better to encourage a home school partnership that promotes improving student achievement and the culture of the school?

What resources are available for schools use to nurture the home school partnership?

Rationale and Background Information

I am in my tenth year as a Primary School Principal. I had three years at Albury School which is a two teacher school in South Canterbury. I have been at Dunsandel School for the rest of this time. Dunsandel School is a six teacher Decile 9 school 20 minutes south of Christchurch.

My interest in Home School Partnership has become more involved in recent times for the following reasons

- a) My son starting school has made the Home School Partnership more personal. How do I as a parent support my child at school?
- b) I have been taking an interest in how our school operates in terms of who is involved in what and at which level. I had been developing thoughts on the levels of engagement. The research I read about Home School Partnerships showed there was a benefit to the child having their parent/s involved in their schooling. Before I started this study it was my belief that having involvement and engagement

from parents/caregivers comes in different levels and has to be promoted by the school. I also thought parents and caregivers choose what level they want to be part of. (Incidentally while talking to a Principal as part of this study about Parental levels of engagement in schools he introduced me to the 1989 Levels of Consultation/Parental Involvement table which is mentioned in my findings)

- c) The Team-Up publicity campaign involving Tana Umaga has thrust the Home School Partnership into the spotlight

Methodology

I visited five schools and spoke to the Principals of these schools about their opinions and thoughts about Home School Partnership. I had a series of questions I asked to promote discussion.

Findings

In response to my questions and discussions with the 5 Principals I was able to make the following statements that reflected their answers and points regarding Home School Partnership

1. What does the term Home School Partnership mean to you?

School A Principal	"Both parties working for the benefit of the child to help learning and the next steps academically and socially"
School B Principal	Harnessing all resources to the learning of the child and making connections with the community"
School C Principal	"Two way communication about the welfare and learning of the children"
School D Principal	"Working closely with parents so we can achieve social and educational outcomes for children"
School E Principal	"Working together for the optimum learning for the child"

All Principals spoke about working together to benefit the child

2. All Principals believe parents must provide support to their child/ren – teachers take all care and responsibility for 6 hours a day and need the support of the parents. It is important for the parent to be interested in their child's learning and life at school. Most Principals discussed the need for the child to be supported with any homework that was issued

The following table was shared by a Principal – this came from a Department of Education publication in 1989

Levels of Consultation/Parental Involvement

1	Being Informed Parents are informed about the school and its programme, and they are encouraged to give the school information. They are not asked for their views or opinions
2	Taking Part in Activities Parents are involved in activities, but in a limited way; they may listen to speakers, attend social or sporting functions, or respond to questionnaires
3	Being Involved through Dialogue and exchange of Views Parents are asked to consider needs and goals, and to discuss these with teachers
4	Helping to make Decisions Parents are asked for their views when decisions affecting their sons and daughters are being made. They help to decide on the content and emphasis of school programmes.
5	Having Responsibility to Act Parents making decisions in partnership with the school; they are involved in both planning and evaluating programmes

The table shows a way to analyse the contributions and levels of involvement from parents and caregivers. Also by knowing these levels it allows schools to recognise that parents need to feel they can contribute at a range of levels according to their willingness, knowledge and availability.

3. All schools had an Open Door policy. This means that the schools are encouraging their parent group to communicate with teachers and the Principal. One Principal said for him it meant "Open lines of Communication, open to having an opinion and expressing it appropriately and open to be in school grounds".
4. All schools have volunteer parents in their schools. In class parent help is left for the teacher to organise. Two Principals mentioned they have Parent Help guidelines notes that are given to the parent –the main point is around confidentiality. Two schools have community people in their school to listen to children read eg Angels
All schools use parent helps for EOTC trips
5. All schools have a PTA and have a staff representative attend the meetings
All have a staff rep on the Board of Trustees.
One Principal actively promotes a Parent Focus group that meets once a term and discusses a specific topic initiated by the Principal. This gives the Principal feedback on relevant issues from the school parents. There is an open invitation to attend these groups. One Principal is working on encouraging the PTA to discuss school issues – this will make them better informed.
6. All Principals believe their Home School Partnership programmes and activities were strategically planned. All parents and caregivers are invited to school events etc but no school had any specific strategies to get disengaged parents into school.
7. Parents in all schools have had some form of consultation on the New Zealand Curriculum in recent times.
8. All schools have links with the wider community through sponsorship, service clubs and local businesses. In all cases these groups are very supportive of the schools.
9. All schools have homework guidelines and programmes in place. One school has Homework as optional which is a point of tension. This is in place as research shows that homework is there for parents and the school wants the child's time to be purposeful and not to compromise other choices.
10. All Principals believed that it is the responsibility of everyone to promote a positive Home School Partnerships. In most cases the Principal believed that it needs to be led by the Principal.

Significant Programmes and Activities that Promote the Home School Partnership

School A Decile 8 Roll 200-300	Turning 5 Seminars – twice a year on how to prepare for school and school life Celebrations at the end of each term Learning Conferences involving the children Friday Assemblies which are run by a different class each fortnight Meet New Parents Dinner – twice a year run by the PTA Open Days with a follow up meeting in the evening
School B Decile 9 Roll 150-200	Junior Meetings of New Parents run by the Deputy Principal Transition to School Programme – each Wednesday Preschool visits Parent Focus Group facilitated by the Principal who puts up a topic for discussion, open invitation to all parents Classroom Angels – volunteers to the school who have no direct connection Trialling going into the home for Parent Learning Conferences Each child has a Keeping in Touch book that encourages home school communication on a daily basis The Home Learning programme is optional
School C Decile 7 Roll 300-400	Transition to School meeting three times a year Data base of parent capabilities – parents can be contacted if the school needs someone with a certain skill for a programme etc Parent Support group that organises fundraising and looks student/family

	<p>welfare eg uniforms for needy children</p> <p>3 way learning conferences</p> <p>The school has a number of community links with businesses and organisations</p> <p>The Principal expects his staff to be available after school outside their classrooms to engage with parents who are picking up children.</p> <p>Year 8 dinner which is financially supported by the Parent Support Group</p> <p>A major School Survey is given to parents every three years</p> <p>The teacher rings the family of the child getting the weekly class certificate</p>
<p>School D</p> <p>Decile 10</p> <p>Roll 70-100</p>	<p>A roster of parents to do duty during lunchtime – one per week</p> <p>Home School Notebook goes home each day to encourage communication</p> <p>End of Year Newspaper produced by Senior children</p> <p>Evening Expo – parents invited into classrooms</p> <p>Major Parent Survey every three years</p> <p>Principal is looking at developing a school radio station</p>
<p>School E</p> <p>Decile 10</p> <p>Roll 250-300</p>	<p>New Parents Morning Tea</p> <p>Thank-you to the Community Morning Tea eg sponsors</p> <p>Read On – volunteer parents who listen to reading</p> <p>New Entrant Parent Meetings which includes a Tour of the School DVD and a CD of school events.</p> <p>Promotions Officer (media liaison) is a staff member who has responsibility for getting the school into the news; is paid a unit</p> <p>3 way learning conferences</p> <p>Student reports go out in November and are followed up with a reflection interview in December</p> <p>Challenge Awards for Year 5-8 as a Homework programme which involves mini inquiries – optional for the children (they still are required to do reading)</p> <p>Principal wants to develop the PTA further into a focus group</p>

Key Findings

- All Principals believe the Home School Partnership is about working with parents to benefit the learning of the children
- The attitude of the Principal, staff and parents is key in developing an effective Home School Partnership for each individual school.
- All schools have an open door policy that generally means that parents are always welcome at their school but if there are issues it is important for them to make an appointment to see the person concerned.
- All Principals believed that the programmes and activities concerning Home School Partnership are strategically planned.
- All Schools have a form of parent help in the classroom and do rely on parent help for EOTC events
- There were no strategies to get disengaged parents involved – one Principal spoke about ringing parent to ensure that they would be at school to see his son compete in a sports event. The Principal believed it was important for the child to have their parent at school. All Principals spoke about all invitations being open to all parents and caregivers.
- All schools have different ideas and programmes that come under the Home School Partnership banner. It is my contention that each Principal I spoke to has developed a good understanding of their school and parent community and is able to develop a Home School Partnership programme that is of benefit to their particular school and children

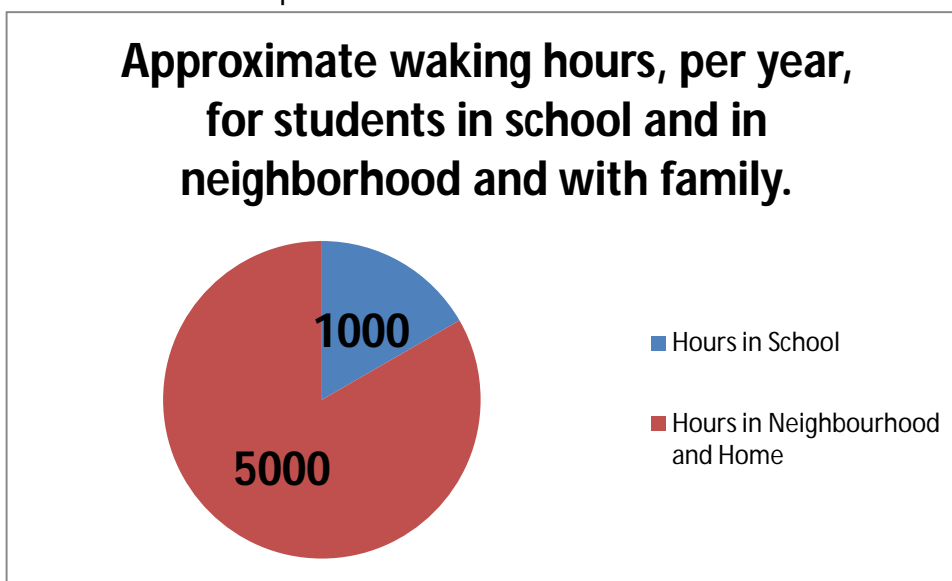
Implications

For my school I initially intend to look at what we do at our school and how this looks within the Levels of Consultation/Parental Involvement Table. The next step is to look at and share any ideas or programmes that I have seen or read about with my staff and Board and consider whether they could have a positive impact for our children. I believe the strength of the Home School partnership lies in the expectation of the school and the expectation of the family – ideally these expectations should be the same. If they are not it is my belief that the school has responsibility to try and align these expectations.

Conclusion

There is no one best way of engaging parents in your school and there is no one best way of promoting the Home School Partnership. It is my opinion that the Home School Partnership in most cases has to be driven by the Principal to be successful – obviously there are a variety of variables including the attitude of the teaching staff, the school culture that has been developed and the interest and attitude of the parent group within the school. Being 'driven by the Principal' can be interpreted in a number of ways – the schools I visited all demonstrated a commitment to promoting the value of the Home School Partnership but the systems, programmes and attitudes appeared to be driven by the Principal. The Principals had skill in utilising staff members, parents and outside groups to create a Home School Partnership that was relevant and useful to their school.

There is a wealth of material and research available regarding Home School Partnership and each school and/or Principal needs to take out the parts that are relevant and useful to their school.



There are a number of influences that can affect a child and when we consider the graph above there is only so much a school and its culture and personnel can do – therefore a positive Home School Partnership is essential to ensure we are all doing our very best for all children in our schools

The key issue is knowing your school community and putting in place initiatives and programmes that will engage the parents, staff and children in a positive way that will enhance the learning of the child. All Principals I spoke to had a number of activities and strategies that were similar but they also had programmes and ideas that were specific to their school and community as well.

Finally Vivian Gussin Paley brings home the point:

My biggest regret was that I waited so long to understand that I had it in my power to make school like a family, a place where you enjoy the casual intrusion of those who are learning to love each other. We keep the families out (of schools), and there is no reason to. Our jobs as educators are better when everyone is involved. We are on the wrong track if we feel we can educate children without the families. (Educational Leadership Vol 55 Number 8 May 1998)

References

ASCD (1998). *Educational Leadership* Vol 55 Number 8 May 1998. USA

Department of Education (1989). *Getting started on consultation. Starter ideas for schools and Board of Trustees*. Wellington: Department of Education.

University of Canterbury (2008). *2020 Vision. A case study of school-based curriculum development in a New Zealand primary school*. Christchurch: University of Canterbury

Other

I would like to acknowledge the Sabbatical programme that is part of the Primary Principals Employment Contract. Being on Sabbatical has allowed me to spend more time with my 4 year old daughter that I otherwise wouldn't have had – doing groceries, collecting cones, checking on the chickens and playing the Sponge Bob memory game ensured the days went quickly!

It has allowed me to view my school from the outside and from the perspective of a 'parent'. It has also allowed me to consider the direction our school is taking and how we can make our school better for our children.