

Sabbatical Report

Courage Under Fire

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the MOE for the sabbatical award. It is a great initiative and I'd encourage principals to apply to be able to take a break from the whirlwind of the job, to partake in some research and to refresh for their own sakes and their schools. I would like to thank my Board of Trustees for supporting my application for this sabbatical project.

My thanks to the management team of Awapuni School and in particular Lola Zander and Raina Te Ture who stepped up as principal and deputy principal respectively. The school didn't miss a beat, which speaks volumes for the systems in place and the capabilities of the aforementioned.

I would like to acknowledge the principals for spending time talking with me when I know just how busy they are.

And finally congratulations to the mighty All Blacks who finally won the world cup after 24 long years during my sabbatical leave.

Executive summary

"In matters of style swim with the current. In matters of principle stand like a rock."

I liken the quote above to choices we as principals make, sometimes on a daily basis. Should we choose to stand our ground or is it wiser to compromise or even to let the other person have a rant and thank them for their time. There are times however, where we must for principle's sake and for the safety of the staff and students at the school draw a line in the sand and take a stand against inappropriate behaviour.

This report endeavours to provide a summary of some of the research findings with regards to principals dealing with irate parents using intimidation and or abuse when dealing with issues.

Through discussions with principals, I have tried to provide an insight into the sometimes unsafe, unacceptable situations and challenges that principals deal with in their roles within schools. In conclusion, I have also tried to identify strategies that principals can reflect on to help them when they may find themselves in their own conflicts that inevitably come when dealing with people.

Purpose

To investigate best practice to deal with and manage irate parents who use intimidation and or abuse, directed at staff or students, when dealing with issues and to determine whether this type of behaviour is more prevalent in a particular type of school e.g. decile rating, rural or urban or with schools who have male or female principals.

Part 1- The first part of the research is to find other schools that have dealt with situations where adults have acted inappropriately by abusing, threatening or intimidating students or staff. From informal conversations with principal colleagues I know my experiences are not isolated to my school. Once I have identified the schools I may be able to identify if there are particular factors that contribute to the inappropriate behaviour such as: decile, rural/urban setting, the gender of the principal, the experience of the principal or any other factors that may become apparent.

Part 2- The second part of the research is to collate effective strategies used to deal with the inappropriate behaviour. This is the most important part to provide a variety of tried strategies used to calm situations and help repair and enhance relationships between the community and the school. There seems to be a lot of literature on building stronger relationships with the community and this coupled with tried strategies used by principals in real life experiences can only benefit my colleagues.

Rationale and Background information

I chose this topic because over the past five years there have been at least 16 incidents where parents have used intimidation, abuse or threats of violence towards children or staff at Awapuni School. It is the first time I have encountered behaviour of this kind at any school I have been principal of, over a 14 year career in five different schools. In 2008 the Education Review team recommended the board take measures to ensure a safe and emotional environment for staff and students at the school.

I am pleased to report that the tide turned in 2010 with the support, commitment and hard work of the board, staff and the wider community. Everyone now enjoys a safe, supportive, happy school and work environment at Awapuni, the way things are supposed to be!

Activities undertaken

Initially, I had decided to interview principals from a range of schools. The schools were selected from all over the country.

I asked the following two questions:

1. *Have you ever encountered a situation where an irate parent/caregiver has used intimidation or abuse, directed at staff or students, when dealing with issues? If so please share the worst incident and your successful method for dealing with it.*
2. *In hindsight would you have dealt with the situation differently?*

Findings

The following stories are confidential. They are a collection of the worst experience principals have had in a school. The stories contain some explicit language. I considered deleting these from the text but I thought it would not paint a true reflection of the situation. It is not my intention to cause any offence rather that the reader is aware of the true situations principal's faced.

[NOTE: Individual stories have been removed from the online version of this report. Readers can email Stephen Soutar to receive a complete copy of the report: <mailto:principal@awapuni-primary.school.nz>]

Implications

As the title of this report suggests, 'Courage Under Fire', sometimes in our schools we are dealing with a warzone. We need to be courageous, for the staff and the pupils to ensure all are kept safe, but none of us need to be receiving the Victoria Cross posthumously after the fact.

I recall initially when I first dealt with some of my own issues I thought the problem might be because of my lack of experience, my gender or the type of community I was in. However, the more I talked with other principals I realised nearly every principal can relate stories where situations have gone awry usually with no hint of provocation. The stories I have shared come from principals who range from inexperienced to highly experienced, both genders, from a range of ethnicities, and low or high decile schools. It is apparent no school or principal is immune to dealing with abusive, unsafe situations.

Some reoccurring patterns that principals shared were their suspicions that parents were under the influence of alcohol or drugs. At least with alcohol you can smell it, but with drugs you can only hazard a guess as to what the parent may have taken and the erratic, unpredictable behaviour that may follow.

Many of the stories relayed to me were that the offending parties had arrived from another school or area and after causing the angst and heartache in the community were quickly moving on again, most likely taking their unresolved issues to the next unsuspecting school community.

One interesting finding was of the five kura kaupapa Māori I interviewed none had experienced situations that mainstream schools had. Parents had not turned up and been abusive. Maybe this was due to the fact most kura insist on Māori being spoken and therefore parents articulating themselves differently in the Māori language.

Another major factor is Te Aho Matua as the guiding philosophical document. It is really clear in Te Aho Matua the type of behaviour expected. It talks about an individuals 'tapu', about mana and that each individual child comes to the kura with a spiritual connection to all of their ancestors right back to Rangi and Papa. This means there is a view amongst kura whānau including good teachers that if you mistreat another you are also mistreating their wider whānau, hāpu, iwi and all those who have gone before them. Also parents who choose this type of education for their children make a conscious decision to opt out of mainstream because they want something that mainstream cannot give their children. That level of thinking generally comes from reasonably functional

whānau, not necessarily middle-class, but a whānau who thinks deeply about the choices they make for their children.

Complaints and issues may be dealt with in a more open forum with the whole whānau encouraging an expectation that individuals conduct themselves appropriately in a public forum. Whatever the case it would suggest that kura are not dealing with as volatile situations as their mainstream counterparts.

Conclusion

Initially, I had thought I would be able to easily come up with 10 best practices for dealing with irate parents. However, most principals in sharing their worst stories said that generally the situation came out of the blue with little or no indication there was a problem. Therefore, there was little the principals could have done to minimise the situation. They were in fact trying to contain the situation after it had erupted. Regardless, I have still managed to list 12 strategies to try when dealing with irate parents. You will of course need to make a split decision in the 'heat of battle' as to the course of action that you deem appropriate for the situation you are faced with. It comes down to professional judgement but I do believe with each experience you will be better prepared for future situations. I believe, generally, my principal colleagues are fair, respectful and compassionate professionals, who endeavour to hear concerns, investigate them and try to resolve them appropriately. I hope this report in some way helps others.
Good luck!

1. Try your best to build trusting relationships with your community. Be seen to listen, act quickly, and communicate about positives as much as you can. This will ensure you have 'positive credit in the bank' so when it comes to delivering the bad news a rapport is already built and the parent may be more willing to listen.
2. Plan ahead. If you know what the concern/complaint is try and be ready for the meeting. Think about what the parent may be upset about, what they may want to question and have answers. Investigate both sides of the story to be able to be forewarned. At least this gives you an opportunity to have already thought through matters rather than having to think on your feet under duress and pressure.
3. Try not to take things personally. When parents turn up angry they have sometimes been mulling this over for a while. They may be frustrated, lack conflict resolution and communication skills or have a negative attitude to authority. You on the other hand may be hearing this issue for the first time. Listen, listen, listen, and then summarise or paraphrase what the person has said to let them know that you have 'got it' e.g. "So just let me check that I've got this right – you're feeling upset because you believe that your daughter is..." It can seem a bit trite but this sort of response is very calming for the irate one and it also lets you give a response without feeling as if you have to solve the problem or give answers. Be respectful, gauge what the problem is and you may have to say I will investigate and get back to you. Try to filter through their story and focus on the facts. See what can be worked out from there. In reality you do

hold a lot of power as the principal. Keep that in mind and it may help you to remain calm during the issue.

4. Have a robust complaints policy and procedure that is well understood by the board, staff and community. The policy itself won't save you in the situation but at least you have a reference point as to how to deal with a complaint.
5. Have a witness sit in with you when dealing with a questionable situation or parent. This is more for your safety and at least you won't have to play the he said/she said game. The witness can then take minutes that can be referred to as factual notes and the parent may also see that their concerns were taken seriously because they were recorded.
6. Try and contain the situation out of the public eye. Children and other parents do not need to see or hear inappropriate behaviour. It also deprives the irate person of an audience to perform to.
7. Be clear in your head what you are willing to tolerate and what is not acceptable. Stand your ground when you need to.
8. Weigh up whether letting the parent vent their frustrations, yell, swear is going to eventually lead to a resolution. Most times it does and then the parent will listen to reason and even go away apologetic and happy. However, you must also be able to determine when the situation is only going to get worse and you need to take evasive action. You need to respect yourself and let others know what you will and will not put up with. They will get the message. At the end of the day we do not get paid enough to be abused.
9. Do not be afraid to adjourn a meeting to let emotions be brought into check. With time parties can reflect and be more willing to compromise if they are not highly stressed.
10. Share your issues with other principals. You will be surprised how many have experienced what you are going through or something similar. It lets you know your problem is not exclusive to you and your school. More importantly you can share strategies of how you may deal with the situation.
11. Talk with other professionals such as counsellors, police, CYFS workers, people who deal with people regularly to see what strategies they employ when dealing with conflict resolution. It's not as if we one day become principals and have this knowledge down pact. We need professional development just as if we were up skilling in the area of literacy or numeracy. Don't make the mistake of keeping it all to yourself. Share incidents with those you trust and especially your board. With their backing the problem may be solved quicker than you expected.
12. As a professional rise above the drama, the insults, and the accusations and be willing to make the first move to repair the relationship. Go out of your way to make the situation better. This may mean compromising, meeting on neutral ground, showing good will, burying the hatchet first. You never know how this may work in your favour and the positive messages a parent will spread amongst the community.