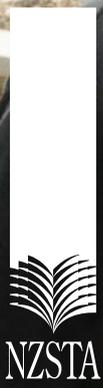




GETTING THE BEST FROM EVERYONE

Windley School

*A case study of support staff at Windley School,
a multicultural, full primary school in Porirua*



Summary

What's this document for?

This document is a case study of support staff at Windley School, a multicultural, full primary school in Porirua. It shows what one school is doing to ensure they get the best from all staff in their school, including their support staff. Windley is not a 'big bang' story but rather one of a parcel of initiatives that together contribute to a big impact. This case study is part of the Support Staff Working Group final report.

What are the key themes of this case study?

- Fostering a culture of respect.
- Maximising the contribution of support staff.

Why did the school change its approach to support staff?

'Giving their best' means that all staff can focus on the key aspects of their role and can work cooperatively. The principal believes that supporting all staff to give their best and insisting on a school culture of respect is ultimately for the benefit of the students.

What did they do?

The school has used a multi-stranded approach which includes:

- being clear about what is expected of staff
- designing roles to capitalise on people's strengths
- increasing the skill base through professional development
- developing an inclusive culture
- using technology to work more efficiently and to assist in student learning.

What was the result?

There have been benefits for the support staff in making it easier to do their job well, making their jobs more interesting, building their confidence, and making them feel respected and valued. There have also been benefits for the operation of the school and student learning.

What the support staff said

- "Now I have a voice alongside other staff."
- "I'm not just told things, I'm there when the decisions are made."

Discussion questions

1. How does your school check and then ensure that the roles of support staff reflect the changing needs of your school?
2. Are teacher aides being used to their full potential in your school to support teaching and learning? Are there ways they could be used better?
3. What are the things that make it most difficult for the administration staff in your school to do their job well? Are there systems or technology your school could use to make it easier?

Getting the best from everyone

Windley School knows that if they want to do the best for their students, they need to get the best from their staff, both teachers and support staff. To achieve this, they have implemented a raft of initiatives designed to support staff to give of their best and to foster a culture of respect. Windley is not a 'big bang' story but rather one of a parcel of initiatives that together contribute to a big impact.

Being clear about what is expected

The principal states, "The use of support staff has evolved to meet the needs of the school—we realised that there were better ways to use their skills." To do this, there has to be a clear agreement on what is expected of support staff in their jobs. Windley reinforces this with job descriptions and a performance appraisal process. This has been supported by technology, better systems and educating staff.

Having up-to-date job descriptions has meant that staff can prioritise their time around their key tasks and it has allowed for conversations about how to manage the 'extraneous' tasks or requests that take up a lot of time. Systems have streamlined work, for example the introduction of a dedicated phone for parents to report absences which is handled by one staff member has made mornings at the front desk less fragmented.

Focusing teacher aides on learning

One of the changes being made at Windley is to make sure that the teacher aide role is more focused on teaching and learning. They have moved from a place where teachers would be wondering what to do with a teacher aide—of 'finding them jobs'—to an expectation from school management that teacher aides will be actively involved in classroom planning and providing feedback on student progress. The intended role of the teacher aide is expected to be documented in teachers' plans. Teacher aides are paid to attend teacher only days so they can be involved in programme development and new initiatives. "I'm not just told things, I'm there when the decisions are made." (TEACHER AIDE)

The aim is for the teacher aide and teacher relationship to be collegial and cooperative. "The changes in the last four years are dramatic. It has moved from a place where

teacher aides in the classroom were an extra pair of hands to do things like make the glue, to now being part of the discussions around IEP for specific children. Our opinion about progress is now actively sought." (TEACHER AIDE)

Playing to strengths

The principal and deputy principal see their staff as a talented bunch. Many of the support staff have qualifications and experience that are very valuable to the school. These talents range from IT aptitude, experience with at risk youth, making grant applications, managing the school website and working with children with multiple needs. These strengths have been incorporated into the design of the roles of support staff, especially the teacher aides.

Windley is not a rich school. It has moved away from seeking fundraising dollars from its parents. Now one teacher aide does grant applications as part of her job. Another who has IT skills is about to have IT responsibilities incorporated into her role and will be given development support to expand her expertise.

Increasing the skill base

Support staff are provided with the training and development opportunities they need. Teacher aides are trained to deliver specific programmes such as Talk to Learn, Perceptual Motor Programme and Phonetic Awareness. Some training is in-house and other training is off site. Teacher aides with responsibility for children with specific needs receive one-to-one or group development sessions with specialist teachers. Some teacher aides are actively being encouraged to train as teachers. "I used to say, 'I am just a teacher aide'—not now. I know I have skills."

Including everyone

Windley has worked to include support staff in the broader life of the school. Inclusion means taking their turn at playground duties at lunchtime and providing morning tea in the staff room. It also involves being well informed about what is happening at the school. One administration staff member spoke of the huge benefits that have come from support staff attending the weekly staff meeting that focuses on operational issues. "In the past we might

be invited to a staff meeting once a year to discuss the stationery. Now I have a voice alongside other staff.”

Harnessing technology

Developments in the school’s management system, along with the introduction of the IT system, Smartnet, have made staff more independent in terms of accessing the material they need. This has resulted in front line support staff having a greater ability to get on with their jobs. The principal comments, “Better and more user-friendly technology supports the changes we want to make for support staff—teachers are less reliant on our office staff and our office staff can get on with the more interesting and essential parts of their job.”

Communication between staff and from school management to staff has been improved by the decision to place all meeting minutes, notices, and the like on the intranet and to make it everyone’s responsibility to know what is going on.

There is also a change in the way technology is regarded. It used to be locked away and used only by teachers. Now the students use it themselves; they even borrow it, and it always comes back. The teacher aides have been deliberately coached to be able to understand and use the classroom computer and other technology (such as videos, microphones and cameras). They are often the ones who need to help the teacher, especially relieving teachers; they are the constant in the classroom. Teachers have had to get used to teacher aides knowing more than they do in some of these areas.

In a school with a high proportion of special needs children, the e-learning teacher believes that technology has a particular role to play. For example the teacher aide now regularly videos a child’s activity in order to show the

parents or others at an IEP meeting. The teacher aides help children use the camera and videos on school trips to capture the experience (many of them have few such experiences in the rest of their lives) in order to integrate it into their classroom learning.

What has been the result?

Support staff have benefited. They report that they feel respected and valued. There have been opportunities to extend their roles and to learn new skills.

The school has benefited. Support staff comment that they know more about what is happening around the school and are being more useful, and feeling more credible, when dealing with parents.

Greater clarity about roles means that all staff know who to go to now when they need assistance. One person commented that it seems that staff are more willing to help each other out.

Students’ learning has benefited. The deputy principal reports that based on his observation of classroom interactions, teachers are typically using teacher aides in the classroom differently and that as a result children with particular needs are getting the extra help they need. The help comes either from the teacher while the teacher aide guides the rest of the class or from the teacher aide themselves.

Windley is clear that these changes take time. There are plans to do more to upskill all staff in technology and to maximise the potential contribution of teacher aides in the classroom. Further management systems are planned. The benefits to date, however, provide ample impetus for going further.

Discussion questions

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Windley School is a multicultural, full primary, decile 1 school. Forty-three per cent of the 376 students are Māori and 30% are Samoan, reflecting the local community.

www.windley.school.nz