Primary Principal Sabbatical
Leave Scheme Report

Noelene Pullar
Principal
Tarras School Central Otago

Term 2 2008

Contents

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the
- Ministry of Education for giving me the opportunity for a sabbatical leave
- Tarras School Board of Trustees for allowing for my absence during the leave.
- Schools of the Gore District, the South Otago and the Omakau District who allowed me to visit their schools and to interview their Principals and teachers.
- To all who completed my questionnaire when it wasn't possible to interview them.

Purpose of the study was to investigate

How collaborative leadership among school clusters make a positive difference to the achievement and well being of students in small rural schools?
What are some effective methods that principals, and teachers, from neighbouring schools use, to strengthen their teaching practices, for the overall benefit of students in each school? School clusters can be any group of schools geographically close together, where the individual schools in the group interact or would like to interact with one another.

Background Information

A major consideration for teachers and principals and BOT is the contact with neighbouring schools, which are similar to their own school, both for reasons of comparison of overall school and student achievement, and for purposes of strengthening the quality of school and student achievement.

My own experience (consisting of 35 years in the Otago and Central Otago district.) including 20 years as a Principal, suggested that schools who have staff who 'get along' with staff from neighbouring schools provide a culture of collaborativeness. This benefits the public perception of the schools involved, the job satisfaction of the school staff and ultimately the self esteem and achievement of the individual students within the schools.

The rationale being that everyone can benefit, particularly small and sometimes isolated rural schools, by enlarging the pool of teaching expertise available from the surrounding schools, in the area.

An exert from the Education Review Office (ERO) (1999) on the subject of small schools' effectiveness, concluded that almost all small schools performed well on indicators of school climate, and of relationships within the school (i.e., between the board. principal, and staff, and between the staff and students) and of relationships between the school and the community. These findings are broadly consistent with those of the recent United States studies which found that smaller schools promote positive interrelations among students and staff. The logical outcome would suggest that the findings, about positive school climate and relationships within the school, would be consistent with promotion of positive interrelations among students and staff of neighbouring schools. (Note - The selection of the clusters was mainly on a geographical basis i.e. neighbouring schools of a district. The decile ratings tended to be similar. Sometimes the arrangement of the cluster schools was on a more formal basis by way of Ministry Contracts e.g. ICT Clustering)

The following aspects were investigated

- ways to incorporate peer interactions between other schools, using Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) to minimise the sometimes negative impact of school isolation. (Both social and learning aspects to be investigated.)
- methods of planning and sharing of resources across schools to help reduce workload, and expense.
- how to share teacher, Board of Trustees (BOT) and community strengths amongst neighbouring schools?
- ways to assess students with their peers from other schools whereby widening the cohort of students, to gain a broader picture of achievement at each level.
- what innovative ways do schools find to combine for sporting, cultural and social events to benefit their students?
- can school supports their 'special needs students' more effectively through clustering?

Links for school wide improvement
The leaning outcomes for the students will be improved across a variety of curriculum areas by the introduction of good practice activities shared amongst schools.

A questionnaire was developed to conduct the interviews with or in some case for the Principals and Teachers to complete on their own and return by email.

Questionnaire

Purpose of Questionnaire

Does collaborative leadership among school clusters make a positive difference to the achievement and well being of Teachers and Students in small rural schools?

What are some effective methods that Principals and Teachers use to strengthen teaching practices, to benefit the overall achievement of students, in their schools.

Do you provide opportunities for peer (student) interactions between your schools?

Social?

Academic?

Do you use technology for peer interaction?

Do you plan together? If so how do you manage this?

Do you share resources amongst your schools? If so how do you manage this?

Do you combine for any class or school-wide assessments across your schools? If so how do you manage it?

Do your schools participate in combined school cultural and/or sporting events? If so please state what activities and explain how this is managed.

Do your schools combine for teacher/principal professional development? What are the advantages?

Please list any events/activities that your Board of Trustees and parent groups share. What advantages are there for your schools?

Other. Please explain any other opportunities that you take advantage of to enhance your collaborative work for the benefit of the education you provide for your students.

<u>Findings from the Sabbatical Activity</u>

(Fourteen schools were visited, a further 8 provided information of behalf of their cluster region)

A

- All schools combine and work together for sporting events. This is a feature in all schools, and it is an historic part of their school culture. Most of the schools select, and host, a particular sporting activity each year. Other schools rotate the organisation of the events from one school to another, on a shared basis. Three of the small schools combine and share O.E. activities

- 30% of the schools indicated some academic interactions amongst the students in their schools.

These included.

- Technology where one school will travel usually to a larger school for instruction.

- Our cluster had a year 7 & 8 leadership work programme amongst U1 schools on a weekly basis.

- One school cluster held a combined speech competition amongst their schools for senior students.

- Some schools combine for The Life Education Trust Bus programme

- Most of the school clusters provide opportunities for a music festival, usually on an every second year basis.

- One cluster organises a yearly disco for social interaction amongst peers.

- Only two schools from one of the clusters reported that they used technology (in particular skyping) for the purpose of increased per interactions.

- One school uses an on-line Wiki space and blogs to support inter-school learning
- Other combined activities include

    - Maori Culture Group
    - Talent Assembly
    - Speech Competitions
    - Oral Reading Competitions
    - Visiting Performers
    - Productions with other schools

Planning

B
Planning together was undertaken amongst cluster schools mainly to organize school cluster events, so that they have input from a variety of staff from the cluster. One school cluster sets aside one day in the school holiday break to plan the next terms inquiry learning unit of study.
One cluster runs a two day Principal forum, at the start of the year, to plan strategically, which encompasses Enquiry Learning, ICT and Leadership.

School Resources

C
Resources were shared amongst all three School Clusters but on an informal basis. i.e. (phone and ask each other) especially for the sharing of musical and sporting equipment.

In particular, motivational speakers with strengths and expertise, were shared amongst all the clusters to share costs, for Professional Development for the school staff. Also sometimes to inform parents of new trends in education.

D
Shared School Wide Assessments.
One cluster combined to assess, bench mark, and moderate children's writing.
Two neighbouring schools shared assessments, to gain the benefit of a bigger cohort of results. Parents in particular appreciated this cross-school data, for reassurance and affirmation, that their own children compared favourably with those from a neighbouring school. 75% of the schools said that they do not share any assessments within their clusters.

Professional Developments Amongst School Clusters

All of the schools surveyed combined for professional development within their Information and Technology Clusters (funded by the MOE) Other Professional Development opportunities were shared for First Time principals. One school cluster holds regular Principals' Days to share curriculum planning, and documentation, on a once a term basis, organized with the help of REAP. All the clusters had some schools involved in a PPCC Group.

One school cluster reported that they had just started this with the EHSAS contract. 14 schools are part of this contract and have all been allocated to a cluster group. Our EHSAS focus is literacy and we have all set targets for change in our schools, in literacy, as part of the strategic process. We are currently sharing this information within our cluster groups and then deciding on how we can work together to achieve our targets.

The same school cluster reports that through their EHSAS contract they benefit from being able to buy in high quality PD and expose their staff to opportunities that they would not be able to afford otherwise. Likewise they use regional strength (such as R T Lit) to run area workshops. They are thus maximising their time and the catchment area, that the information reaches. The management team for EHSAS meet with the presenters to check that the information they present is relevant to the goals and focus the schools have set. The main problem with this, is finding relief staff to cover classes – there is a real shortage of relievers and this impacts upon the amount of staff that can be sent. For example they had an EHSAS session that afternoon, and the principal was going to cover the two classes of the staff who are attending.

Opportunities for clustering of Schools for BOT and parent Group, opportunities.
The schools reported minimal activity in this respect other that combining for STA training sessions for their BOT.

Summary

The Principals and Teachers who were interviewed said that good relationships with their neighbouring schools

- provided good opportunities for professional development experiences and wished that they could be more frequent.

- felt supported by neighbouring colleagues and collaborative work raised their job satisfaction

- gave them a clearer focus in their management of curriculum delivery

- allowed the opportunity for shared professional dialogue and discussion on relevant matters that made a difference for their own students' learning opportunities

- empowered them to provide quality learning opportunities for their students.

Conclusions

I found that school clusters that plan a programme for a year/ two year period on a formal basis, were more effective than those who cluster randomly.

Perhaps teacher-only time should be set aside early every year to review cluster effectiveness and develop innovative forward planning. This will formalize and improve school collaborative systems. This in turn will reflect in improved student achievement in the schools who participate.