

# **Principal Sabbatical Report Term 4 2008**

**Chris Scott**

## **Makoura College**

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank the Ministry of Education for awarding me this sabbatical, the Commissioner of Makoura College for arranging it under somewhat difficult circumstances and the principals of small schools throughout New Zealand who took the time to talk to me and answer a survey.

### **Executive Summary.**

New Zealand has a significant number of smaller state secondary schools, generally defined in this study as schools with few then 360 students, located throughout the country. While they are extremely varied this study confirms the general research about the potential difficulties facing small schools. These include the difficulty in providing a wide enough curriculum to compete with larger schools, the increased administrative workload particularly for principals and senior managers, the difficulty in recruiting specialist staff and the general lack of economies of scale. In New Zealand some small schools also report loss of high performing students (in either academic or sport and cultural areas) to larger schools and a significant percentage of students enrolling with behavioural or social issues. These factors can lead to small schools being vulnerable. ERO reports suggest that at any time a high proportion of small schools are facing significant issues. In spite of this, academic data suggest that smaller schools perform as well as larger schools particularly at NCEA levels 1 and 2. While principals comment on problems their pride in their schools and their determination to overcome problems shows through. The solutions for small schools are as varied as the schools themselves though this report does suggest some further general support for small schools which could be investigated.

### **Background to Sabbatical: Choosing the scope of the investigation.**

I originally applied for a principal's sabbatical after ten years as principal of a small state co educational secondary school; Makoura College. The school had recently had a number of difficulties, identified in ERO reports, and a falling roll. However it appeared that we had addressed the problems satisfactorily, successfully introduced a school wide behavioural management system, improved examination results and were on the road to a positive sustainable future.

I decided this would be a good opportunity to look at small schools in New Zealand and how secondary schools in the UK that had been under special measures from OFSTED had made improvements through the application of school wide

behavioural management systems. However a number of factors made me change my mind. The improvements that we had made at Makoura proved to be less sustainable than hoped, the roll intake for the start of the 2008 school year was uncomfortably low and the demographic projections for the area suggested that the long-term viability of the school was at risk. In conjunction with the Ministry of Education the Board of Trustees commissioned an independent report into the future options for the school. The basis of the report was clearly looking at the best educational outcomes for the students and the area, rather than any attempt to preserve the status quo at all costs. This did not seem the ideal time for me to be away from the College so I postponed my initial sabbatical investigation.

By term four the long process of publishing the report into the future of the College and consulting with the community was completed. The outcome was the community clearly wanted the school to continue. However the Board of Trustees chose to resign and were replaced by a Commissioner. I also decided that it was time for a change and I worked with the Commissioner on a timeframe to have a new principal in place for the start of 2009. With the planning for 2009 well in place, new staff appointed and the Commissioner in charge of the principal appointment process I was granted sabbatical leave once the seniors had departed for their external exams.

In view of the changed timeframe and different circumstances I decided to concentrate on the particular issues facing smaller secondary schools in New Zealand.

### **The Characteristics of Small Secondary Schools**

There is no clear definition of what constitutes a small, medium sized or large secondary school in New Zealand and there is no magic figure below which a smaller school is no longer viable. Every case has to be treated on its own particular circumstances; size, location and degree of isolation nature of the area it is located, partnerships / competition with other secondary providers, and community perception are just some of the factors to be considered.

There are 246 state secondary schools in New Zealand (including both year 7 to 13 and year 9 to 13 schools) The smallest of these has a roll of just 90 while the largest has nearly 3000 pupils. Thirty seven schools have a roll of less than 360, eleven have rolls over 2000 and the average size is 990. (Ministry of Education data)

Australia with its greater area not surprisingly has a greater proportion of small schools while the most common size for a secondary school is 601 to 801 students (Office of economic and statistical research information brief schools Australia 2002.)

A large number of studies have been carried out over the years on both effect of both class size and school size on pupil academic achievement, attendance, retention and participation in school activities. As might be expected these studies have produced variable results and all authors caution on the dangers of transferring data from one country to another. There is a general agreement on one issue: larger schools are cheaper to run on per capita basis and with the demands for the

education dollar constantly outstripping the supply one can have a certain amount of sympathy with the recent pressure to combine smaller schools.

While there are high performing and underperforming schools of various sizes a secondary school of between 400 and 1000 pupils is seen as optimum in several research papers.

Perhaps the best summary of the difficulties facing small (and large schools) that I read was in an article published by Richard Harker's of Massey University:

If a school is too small:

- There are subject choice restrictions
- It will be constrained to recruit generalist teachers with scope for specialisation of both teachers and students
- There will be fewer grouping options
- Teachers will have to do more administration
- There will be fewer resources available

If a school is too large

- There will be reduced or little contact between the students and teachers outside the school
- They will be difficult to manage with increased bureaucracy
- The dangers of students and teacher alienation rise dramatically.

For the purposes of this study I decided to look at:

Schools with a year 7 to 15 roll of 360 or less. This was simple pragmatism. Most schools of 360 or fewer pupils would describe themselves as small or smaller and choosing this number gave a sufficiently wide variety of schools to look at. I chose state schools only i.e. I excluded private or state integrated schools from my study. Again this was pragmatism. As a very general rule private or state integrated schools cater for particular sections of the community, (in the case of state integrated most of the schools have a strong religious affinity) while state schools are open to a wider group and none of the schools in my investigation had enrolment zones. I also did not look at schools with a significant number of boarders.. This gave me a group of thirty three schools throughout New Zealand.

### **Small Secondary Schools and Academic Achievement.**

In general the variation between schools with a particular size band tends to be greater than the variation between size bands. My investigations confirmed this conclusion.

I looked at academic achievement for 2007, as listed on the NZQA web site, for small secondary schools and compared each school's performance with the average for schools of a similar decile. I defined above average results as schools that were achieving 8 points above the national average for their deciles, and the corresponding definition for below average achievement. The data is shown in the table below. It is important to remember that small schools are more subject to

fluctuations from year to year and that this was a snap shot in time. Never the less the results were interesting.

	Percentage of Year 11 students gaining NCEA Level 1 by end of year 11	Percentage of Year 12 students gaining NCEA Level 2 by end of year 12	Percentage of Year 13 students gaining NCEA Level 3 by end of year 13
Number of schools Below Average	6	8	16
Number of Schools at Average	20	15	11
Number of Schools Above Average	7	10	6

Most schools were performing close to the National Average for their decile. Significantly however smaller schools academic performance (as defined by year 13 students gaining NCEA level 3) tailed off in the final year of secondary education.

There could be a number of reasons for this:

- The already noted need for schools to appoint generalist rather than specialist staff
- Many year 13 students have academic goals that do not include gaining level 3 NCEA
- Year 13 students wanting a perceived more specialist and competitive academic education could be tempted to transfer to a larger school.

Below average performance at any level can however become a viscous circle, schools loose students choosing certain specialist subjects which in term means the school can no longer appoint specialists in that subject.

### **ERO perceptions of Smaller Secondary schools.**

The second piece of public information I looked at was the ERO reports of the schools in the group. Comparing ERO reports is again an art rather than a science and like academic data ERO reports reflect a snapshot in time. As ERO visits on average every three years the time of the reports was different for the various schools. I examined reports over the last five years, which meant multiple reports for some schools. The ERO reports showed some surprising trends.

In the last five years, at eighteen out of the thirty three schools in the study ERO had been sufficiently concerned about developments to schedule visits more regularly than the 3 year cycle. Five schools had had a commissioner at some stage and a further seven had had either a Limited Statutory Managers or other external assistance had been suggested by ERO.

The very general concerns that ERO had expressed about smaller schools included:

- Effective staff performance appraisal processes
- Effective use of student achievement data and the need for consistency in teaching and behavioural management of students.

Outside assistance is not a bad thing, however this data suggest that in a small school it is relatively easy to develop problems which make that outside assistance necessary. Unfortunately a recommendation from ERO that outside support is needed can erode community support.

It must also be noted that the ERO reports tend to indicate that outside assistance results in the issues raised by ERO being satisfactorily addressed.

### Principal's survey.

In order to find out more about small schools and their issues I survey principals. I received a total of fourteen replies, either written or verbal. A further two principals were unable to comment because of their recent appointment or they were on leave. I gave assurances that no individual school would be identified. For this reason I did not leave a space for a name on the survey and as by either accident or design some forms were return un-named by post it is in fact not possible to identify all of the schools that replied.

A summary question by question is shown below.

For each of the questions a five point scale was used:  
Principal were given the opportunity to add comments  
Not everyone responded to all the questions.

**Question 1** To what extent is the recruitment and retention of high quality experienced teachers an issue at your school.

Reply	1 = not an issue	2	3	4	5 = a major issue
Number with that reply	1	3	0	10	0

### Summary of Principals Comments

- We are very fortunate – the last two vacancies attracted eight applicants Our staff promote the college. I have cv's of teachers who want to work here but I have no vacancies for.
- Difficult to get HoD's not quite so bad with other staff
- We have a significant number of teachers who come to the school as year ones and stay on. We have difficulty in some particular area.

**Question 2** Is the election of qualified BoT members an issue?

Reply	1 = not an issue	2	3	4	5 = a major issue
Number with that reply	4	1	3	4	2

**Summary of Principals Comments**

- We get a good mix with the skills needed and our BoT reflects the cultural mix of the college.
- We find it hard to get interested people
- What is qualifies? All BoT members are working parents and we have no Maori representative.

**Question 3** Staff appraisal and sharing of good teaching strategies is an issue highlighted in several ERO reports. In your opinion how effectively does your appraisal process identify and address concerns of under performing teachers and encourage all teachers to reflect on and improve their teaching practice?

Reply	1 = not effective	2	3	4	5 = extremely effective
Number with that reply	0	2	7	4	0

**Summary of Principals Comments**

- We use an inquiry model of Personnel Management. We set school wide goals. These are supported by supported by professional reading, quality circle discussions, class observations and student feedback and self review. But this is not a soft process we have had competency issues with two staff in last couple of years
- In theory our system is fine in practice less effective.
- The major issue is time. Our appraisal system would be effective if senior mangers had more time to spend on it.
- We know very clearly the capabilities of each teacher.

**Question 4** To what extent do students with particular academic or sporting ability who live within your schools natural enrolment area tend to travel to attend bigger or higher decile schools?

Reply	1= student flight is not an issue	2	3	4	5 = student flight is a major problem
Number with that reply	0	0	4	5	4

### Summary of Principals Comments

- We tend t have a number of able students leave the area to attend boarding school.
- There is a tradition that local students go to another area. Mum and Dad went to \*\*\* and they have expectations their kids will do the same. I am not aware of any academic leakage as we can match the achievement profile here.
- We do suffer from loss of students to schools that are bus distance away.

**Question 5** To what extent does your school enrol students with moderate learning or behavioural needs who live outside your normal enrolment area.

Reply	1 = not an issue	2	3	4	5 = a major issue
Number with that reply	1	3	5	4	1

### Summary of Principals Comments

- Some social agencies see our school as a good option for removing troubled youth from the larger urban environment. This is unfair on the student concerned and on the other students who have to deal with behavioural issues from students who are not part of their community.
- Our school has policy of meeting needs of all students from local community. The issue is one of resources.
- We tend to get an oversupply of slow learners and behavioral problems as a % of intake. Dealing with the associated social issues is always a problem.

The final question was about the workloads for senior managers. Principals were given a list of tasks and asked:

1. If these were performed by a member of the senior management team
2. If the answer to the question was yes was this a task that ideally would be delegated but because of school size it was not possible to find someone to take it on.
3. What other tasks were senior managers doing that they wanted to delegate but were unable to because of school size.

	Are these tasks performed by members of the senior management team		If yes, are these tasks carried out by the SMT because no one else is available
	Yes	No	
Year level Dean	2	8	1 ie 50%
Timetable	10	1	4 ie 40%
NZQA liaison	8	3	5 ie 62%
Property management	10	1	4 ie 40%
Publicity	10	2	3 ie 30%
School detentions	7	4	4 ie 57%
Staff development	11	1	4 ie 36%

### Comments from Principals on work load

- I would like to delegate pastoral care / second tier discipline, restorative overview attendance overview.
- All teacher appraisals are done by SMT, this is the major reason it is not as effective as it should be as we operate under extreme time and work constraints.
- I would like to delegate some aspects of financial management, International students director and bus controller.
- There are many tasks I would like to delegate (times 3)
- We have a small staff – many new and cannot pick up administration responsibilities due to inexperience.
- Always at Deans meetings, always a member of ICT committee, and curriculum committee.
- SMT do day relief. I would like to delegate fundraising, ACE, international marketing, EOTC, College of Education liaison



## **General Comments from principals**

- Community perception of the College is very fickle, easily lost but hard to regain.
- In general as a small school we are not the first choice for any students in the area, it can be very tough.
- We are a school of 170. Possible the major issue for us would be the ability to offer a wide enough range of subjects to retain seniors. We are trying to at the moment by using video conferencing
- There is a lack of depth to distribute leadership capacity but I am working on this by giving responsibility and letting people have a go.
- As a Principal I am increasingly concerned with the work load issues for myself SMT and staff. When there is not enough staff we are often called upon to teach extra classes.
- Principals in small schools have the same compliance issues as their colleagues in larger areas but have time constraints brought about by high workloads. Many small school principals teach in order to ensure that timetables can run. On top of this principal salaries tied directly to school size and decile ratings create inequalities. I am sure many of these issues are central to the reasons schools find it difficult to attract quality applicants to principalship and why small schools lose their principals to their larger counterparts.
- The biggest issue facing us is resourcing, both staffing and funding. I have long felt that both rely on outdated formula. We don't have the economies of scale that larger schools have. Very small communities have limited capacity to locally raise funds.
- Coming from a school of 1800 with five senior leaders to a school with 3 was a noticeable difference. However the smaller team gives the team a better overview and a better grounding for advancement to principalship

## **Summary and Recommendations**

The research, the public reports and the principals comments support each other about the difficulties of managing a small school. It must however be noted that my general impression from principals was the while they may be facing issues they were proud of their schools and determined to find creative solutions to the problems they faced.

The Ministry of Education already has a number of initiatives in place to support schools in general and in some cases small schools in particular. These include:

- Support for distance learning initiates particular video conferencing
- Staffing incentives for hard to staff school
- Resourcing formulas, which while many would say are unsatisfactory, do recognize the greater cost of running a small school
- School improvement initiatives
- Principal training and leadership programmes

The solutions for small schools are as varied as the schools themselves. However, recognizing the vulnerability of small schools the following further initiatives are in my opinion worth further investigation.

- Further research into creative solutions for small schools
- Support to ensure principals and BoT members kept up to date with all the support initiatives.
- Have a pool of emergency teachers who can take short term contracts in key subject areas when required
- The allocation of additional time allowances for teachers and senior managers with multiple jobs.
- The allocation of additional time allowance for teachers of hard to staff specialist subjects in small schools. This would both help teachers who are sole HoD's of a department and make it easier to recruit specialist as opposed to generalist teachers.
- Pay BoT trustees to undertake training. In small communities working BoT members may not be able to take time off work and travel out of their area for training
- Continued to support distance learning initiatives.

## References

Education Review Office Web site [www.ero.govt.nz](http://www.ero.govt.nz)

New Zealand Qualifications Authority Web site [www.nzqa.govt.nz](http://www.nzqa.govt.nz)

Ministry of Education Web site [www.minedu.govt.nz](http://www.minedu.govt.nz)

Foreman-Peck James and Foreman-Peck Lorraine *Should schools be smaller? The size-performance relationship for Welsh schools* Economics of Education Review Volume 25 Issue 2 April 2006

Newman, M.; Garrett, Z.; Elbourne, D.; Bradley, S.; Noden, P.; Taylor, J.; West, A. *Does Secondary School Size Make a Difference? A Systematic Review* Educational Research Review, v1 n1 p41-60 2006

Richard Harker *Student teacher ratio school size and the academic achievement of students*. NZ Journal of Educational Studies 2000 - Volume 35 - Numbers 1 & 2

Slate JR Jones CH *Effects of school size a review of the literature with recommendations* Essays in Education 2005 esca. edu

Smithson, A. *Secondary School Size: A Continuing Conundrum for Administrators and Planners*, Journal of Educational Administration, 15, 2, 264-78, Oct 77