

The use of School Management Systems to deliver National Standards  
data to inform school self-review.

Jeremy Edwards

Northand School

Term 3, 2012

## **Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank the Northland School Board of Trustees for their support in approving this research opportunity, and for granting me the time and opportunity to recharge my batteries. I also want to acknowledge the staff of Northland School who took on many leadership roles in my absence that ensured the continued success of the school. I also wish to thank the principals of the sixteen schools I visited, and to past and present employees of the Ministry of Education for their time given so generously for discussion of background and historical information.

## **Executive Summary**

### **Purpose**

My intention was to investigate the way schools are using Student Management Systems (SMS) to make informed decisions about student learning specifically with respect to National Standards data.

School Management Systems (SMS) have developed over a number of years from a simple register of student enrolment details to a complex database that now includes many different types of assessment information, attendance details and other student information.

SMS are now required to meet stringent Ministry of Education guidelines to meet certification. This ensures that Ministry enrolment, attendance and National Standards data follow a prescribed format to allow the New Zealand collation and monitoring of statistics and student enrolment information.

Over recent years discussions with fellow principals has led me to believe that the rapid expansion of the uses for SMS has created a knowledge gap for school leaders. This has been accentuated by the requirement to submit National Standards data to the Ministry of Education as part of each school's annual report. Providers of SMS services have adapted their systems to meet the new Ministry requirements. It appears that the ever-growing demands on professional time and the ever-changing nature of their work has seen many school leaders not using the potential of SMS to assist their work when reviewing school programmes to meet student needs.

It was on this basis that I set out to discover what was the actual state of principal expertise in the use of SMS. There was a particular emphasis on how principals were using their SMS to gather National Standards data that could then be used to inform self review.

### **School Involvement**

Schools were randomly selected from the contact list of schools published by in the Wellington Regional Primary Principals' Association. Every seventh school was contacted. If the principal was unavailable or was not interested in participating the next seventh school was approached. A total of 16 schools were visited and the

principals interviewed. Each interview followed the same questions and format and interviews generally lasted between 60 – 90 minutes. In some instances another member of the Senior Management Team was present (eg Deputy Principal, Assessment Leader).

### **Background School Information**

#### **Decile Ranking of Schools Involved**

<b>Decile</b>	<b>Number of Schools</b>
2	1
3	1
4	3
7	1
8	2
9	3
10	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>

#### **Schools and SMS Type**

<b>SMS</b>	<b>Number of Schools</b>
Assembly	8
e-Tap	4
MUSAC	4

#### **Number of Staff Using SMS for Student Achievement Data**

*(includes part-time staff, teacher aides, Reading Recovery teachers)*

<b>Number of Staff</b>	<b>Number of Schools</b>
1 – 5	1
6 -10	6
11 – 15	4
16 – 20	2
21 – 25	2
More than 25	1

#### **School Use of SMS Functions**

*(Enrolment information, attendance, student achievement information, collation of National Standards data, finance)*

<b>SMS Function</b>	<b>Number of Schools</b>
Enrolment	16
Attendance	13
Student Achievement	14
National Standards	11
Finance	5

#### **Questionnaire - (See Appendix)**

The start of each interview provided background information on

- School use of SMS features (eg: enrolment information, attendance, achievement information, National Standards data)

- Whether the school had changed its SMS and, if so, the reasons for this
- Who used the SMS to input data (eg Principal, teachers, support staff)
- Annual costs for licences and professional support and development
- How new SMS features were promoted to schools

The interview then focused on

- Student achievement information – the processes schools used to determine what information to record; how this was set up in the SMS; and what uses were made of the data once it was entered
- National Standards data – the time of reporting, who entered the data, what use was made of it
- Any issues with the SMS either in its day-to-day use or with National Standards data

## **Findings**

The discussions with principals were honest and many principals took the opportunity to express their feelings about SMS in general. There was a wide gap in principal expertise in the use of SMS. A couple of principals were very skilled in both using SMS to help guide decision-making on student achievement and what information was needed to help with the decision-making. Half the principals delegated this responsibility to others and some acknowledged that they knew very little about the SMS, how it worked, what was needed to make it useful for decision-making and rarely used it for data gathering in their schools.

All principals said that they needed to find out more about the SMS and its potential. Reasons why they had not done this included:

- The high cost of bringing in a facilitator (\$100 - \$150 an hour) and a stretched school operating budget
- Other more pressing demands on their time
- A recent change to a new SMS and the feeling of being left alone once the changeover was complete
- Slow turnaround of requests to the SMS for support
- Feelings of inadequacy
- Communication with the SMS only by email – a difficult task when you are trying to explain to someone who is not from a teaching background

## **Changing SMS Providers**

Over the last 8 years all but one school had changed their SMS. This was partly as a result of the Ministry's accreditation process but 6 schools had changed as a result of one SMS no longer being available. Not all of these 6 schools had changed to the online version of the original program. Other reasons cited for switching to a completely new SMS included principals trying to find a system that was easier to use and more intuitive, being persuaded by a salesman, wanting to have the same system as neighbouring schools so they could share expertise and training costs, and looking for ways to save money.

Follow up discussion revealed that changing the SMS had not resolved many of the frustrations some principals were feeling. All were happy that the administrative and enrolment functions were working well. These were always delegated to office and administrative staff. A large time commitment was necessary to understand how the SMS worked in relation to student achievement data. The initial set up appeared to be confusing or took a long time to action.

### **How easy is it to get assessment data from the SMS?**

“The trick is,” one principal commented, “once you know what data you need to collect it is easy to get the data out. However you do need to know what sort of data is useful and if and how it can be recorded”.

Just over half of the principals found this aspect difficult or delegated it to others eg Deputy Principal or Unit Holder with Assessment Responsibility. Some did not use the SMS at all to record assessment data but relied on classlists or spreadsheets with graphing facilities. One principal commented that the school totally relied on a Board member to set this up as no one on the staff had the time nor ability to understand how the SMS worked.

Several schools had changed their SMS within the last year and had only just worked out how to get the basic administrative functions working properly. All these schools had long term plans to develop their SMS skills. In the meantime schools were using other databases and spreadsheets to gather and report student achievement information.

### **Professional Development in Use of SMS**

The provision of professional development in the use of SMS is solely between the school and the SMS provider. Some schools had clustered together to share expertise and reduce training costs. The potential cost of using the trainer precluded most schools from seeking one-on-one support and the standard of on-line or help desk support varied with each SMS. The school budget often determined how much support was provided rather than meeting the needs of the school.

Much of the success of the professional development related to the expertise of the trainer provided by the SMS. One group of schools complained so vociferously about a trainer that the person was replaced by someone with a knowledge of how schools worked and their data needs beyond the usual administrative and enrolment requirements. A common feeling amongst principals was that new features were being released by all SMS providers and that somehow principals were expected to know what these features were for and how they could be used.

Two SMS providers send regular email newsletters to schools. These outline new and updated features including additional Ministry of Education requirements. Half the principals read the newsletters and for others it was sent to the office manager or teacher with responsibility for assessment. One principal commented, “I always read the SMS newsletter but unless I have a need to use that information at that moment I forget it. They are often full of information for secondary schools and that’s no use to me.”

A couple of principals noted that if the office manager or person with responsibility for the SMS left, the school would be in real difficulty.

### **Student Achievement Information**

In fourteen schools the Senior Management Team (Principal, Assistant and Deputy Principals) made decisions about the type of schoolwide assessment information that was gathered and recorded. In four schools teachers were able to make their own decisions about using the SMS to record class data in their own way as well as meeting schoolwide data requirements.

Several principals felt that their staff recorded too much data, little of which was used to make decisions about next steps for student achievement. All of these principals were keen to review their assessment schedules in the near future.

Feedback was sought from principals on how easy it was to set up new assessment recording systems in their SMS. This was able to be set up by school personnel in one SMS, though no school had done this and relied on a trainer for this process. The setup had to be done by the other two SMS. One of these had a very quick turnaround, usually overnight. The other took several weeks and in some cases months for school requests to be actioned. These delays led to feelings of frustration and negativity towards the SMS.

### **How is the achievement data used?**

Most schools use the data from their SMS to report to the Board on student achievement. Several of the principals commented that the data was also used to show progress over time. These principals noted that the SMS was not set up to show progress over time and that they usually had to put the data into another spreadsheet. They all commented on the double-handling of data and the amount of time it was taking. All principals believed that the SMS should be able to show progress over time but they personally did not have the expertise to work out how to do this. They also felt that the SMS provider did not understand the importance of this or how this could be done. One principal commented, “you do need to know what data to record and how this could be compared over time, then you can get some idea of progress.” Nearly half the schools used data from the SMS as a basis for discussion on student achievement at the classroom and syndicate level. In the other schools teachers were rarely using either the SMS or data from it to make decisions about next steps. Teachers in all of these schools were using achievement data but this was not accessed from the SMS.

### **Student Achievement Data and Reporting to Parents**

Principals were asked how easy it was to incorporate student achievement data from the SMS into student reports. Only five schools used web-based reports with information generated by the SMS. Three of these schools commented on how much it had cost them to set this up and wondered whether it was worth the investment. Two schools were in the process of moving to web-based systems and had recently purchased new servers to allow staff to access student achievement information from home. The rest used “Word”-type documents with the teachers manually inputting student personal and achievement information into each report. Several schools were waiting for Ultrafast Broadband in Schools and the Network for

Learning to be established before moving to web-based reporting systems. Four schools did not include assessment information in their mid or end of year reports.

### **Student Management Systems and School Difficulties**

When asked whether the school had any particular difficulties with their SMS half the schools had no issues at all – this response was spread reasonably evenly across the three SMS in use. Those who were struggling mentioned three common factors:

1. frustration with the level of service provided by SMS
2. high costs of training including travel cost
3. a recent change to a new SMS, their own inexperience in its use and the lack of time to understand how it worked

### **National Standards Data and Student Management Systems**

#### **Use of SMS to Record National Standards Data**

Seven schools used the SMS to record National Standards data at mid and end of year. Some schools just recorded information in a spreadsheet and this was then used to meet Ministry of Education reporting requirements. Few principals knew about the “comparison tables” that were part of a recent Ministry of Education SMS development. The anniversary reporting requirement for 40, 80 and 120 weeks was causing a great deal of confusion in most schools and the recording practices varied greatly. Two schools have very refined systems but these were developed at great financial cost and required personal commitment and understanding from the principals involved to make it happen.

#### **Use Made of National Standards Data**

Principals were asked on the use made of National Standards data in their school. All schools had submitted their data to the Ministry of Education as part of their 2011 Annual Report. Seven schools had used their SMS in some way to help generate their data but had then submitted it in a variety of ways. There appeared to be little consistency in how this data was presented.

Principals also used their National Standards data in the following ways:

- to report to Boards and the parent community on student progress with respect to National Standards
- to track cohorts of students from one year to the next
- to help make decisions about programme and resource provision
- to provide student achievement information for the school website for parents to view
- to provide information when working alongside a Student Achievement Practitioner (SAF)
- to set targets for raising student achievement for inclusion in their Annual Plan and Charter

Two schools were working with National Standards for the first time in 2011/2012 with support from the Ministry of Education officials.

### **Principal Concerns with SMS and Schoolwide Collation of National Standards Data**

Only three principals reported having concerns with the collation of National Standards data and their SMS. It was my personal observation that these were the three schools that were actually making the most effective use of their SMS across the school. Their concerns related to:

- The need to have an expert on the staff to resolve SMS issues and to support staff rather than talking to an anonymous helpdesk. One principal noted that teachers gave up quickly if there was a mismatch between what they want to do and what the SMS was set up to deliver.
- The difficulties SMS and schools were having over the reporting requirements at 40, 80 and 120 weeks as well as interim judgments.
- Changing to a new SMS and not being able to transfer data over from the old SMS. This precluded the school being able to use its SMS to compare one year's data with another year.
- The slow turnaround in requests to SMS to get things changed. One school had sent its requests for end of year report setup in early July to ensure it would be ready for the start of Term 4.

### **Principal Summary Comments**

The final part of the interview provided principals with the opportunity to make any additional comments about the use of the SMS in their school. The comments were many and varied and revealed some deepfelt concerns. These included:

- Our SMS is the repository of all of our student information yet some teachers still want to keep additional information in markbooks etc when they could set up the same thing in the SMS.
- I would really like to be able to talk to someone to explain what I want. It seems to take several attempts when you try to explain to someone by an email.
- We need lots of time to learn new ways of doing things with our SMS – we will use Teacher Only days to make this happen.
- I really felt that once the new SMS was installed and the initial training was done that we were on our own. I need more than that.
- How will we cope with Nga Whanakitanga? – We might have to have another system. I do not want two systems.
- We should really pool our resources in our local area, there are some very knowledgeable principals out there. We should share our expertise but I think that we are a bit scared admitting that we need some support in something like this.
- I really rely on others in my school to make the SMS happen, they have an interest in that sort of thing. I don't.
- Don't give me another webinar. I really want someone to sit alongside me but I can't afford to pay for that level of support.
- Along with other schools (including another in this survey) we helped with the development of a new SMS but I think it was launched too soon without things

being really ready and the support in place. Things, however, have improved greatly in recent months.

- It seems very frustrating that there is no one system in New Zealand – we seem to waste a huge amount of time finding how to do things, this is a huge challenge for all of us. Personal support is critical and having a good relationship with your SMS is vital. You really do not want to feel silly asking some simple questions.
- I feel we gather too much data and we don't know what we really should be recording and then how to use it effectively.
- Some teachers are really good at data input and others, to be honest, we just have to do it for them.
- This is my first year at this school and there are some important challenges to be met, getting our SMS to work is not the top priority at the moment but it will be next year.

### **Implications**

- Many principals are feeling frustrated that, for a variety of reasons, their SMS does not deliver what they want it to deliver. As a result, some of them do not want anything to do with the SMS and have either handed this responsibility over to someone else or are not using it at all for gathering and analysing student achievement information.
- Some schools are waiting for Ultrafast Broadband and the development of the Network for Learning before moving to a web-based reporting system. Principals are hoping that many of the difficulties that they are experiencing will somehow be resolved by these developments.
- The cost of bringing in support people from the SMS provider is precluding many schools from taking important steps in developing their SMS systems that would provide quality data to help inform decision-making relating to improving student achievement. Schools currently gather this information in other ways but this is often perceived as double-handling of data and a waste of precious time.

### **Conclusions**

There is a wide variety in the effective use of Student Management Systems in the schools surveyed. Some schools make extensive use of the technology for both administrative reasons and for the analysis of student achievement. Other schools merely use the SMS for administrative purposes and to comply with ENROL requirements.

Few schools are using the potential of the SMS to deliver quality data to help inform self review based on the analysis of student achievement data. All schools use self review processes but they gather achievement data from a variety of other sources already set up in the school.

Principal competency in the use of SMS appears to be a major factor in how these are used within schools. A number of principals have delegated responsibility for assessment and/or SMS expertise to other members of staff including office managers, Unit Holders or other members of the Senior Management Team. A variety of factors appear to limit principal competency including time to understand how the programme works, the increasing demands and expectations made of

principals, the type of data that can and should be collected, how this is set up in the system, how to get the data out, the cost of professional development, delays in having changes made in the SMS to meet school needs and an advanced understanding of effective assessment practices across a school.

Student Management Systems have evolved greatly over the years and additional enhancements required by the Ministry of Education have meant that these systems are very different from those of even five years ago. Many principals are finding it very difficult to keep up to date with the changes and are feeling frustrated with the inadequacies of the SMS to deliver timely achievement information. This seems to be a result of their own lack of knowledge of what type of data to collect, how to collect it using their SMS and finally how to produce the type of information that is useful for self review purposes.

The provision of ongoing support, advice and examples of best practice from both the SMS provider and the Ministry of Education appear key to making the most effective use of this tool that would support principals and schools to make appropriate decisions related to raising student achievement.

## **Appendix**

### **School Management Systems – Sabbatical Research Project - Questionnaire**

#### **Background Information**

1. School:
2. Principal:
3. Decile:
4. Teaching Staff:
5. SMS:
6. Cost per year:
  - a. Annual Fee:
  - b. Other Costs:
7. How does the school use its SMS:
  - a. Enrol/Admin:
  - b. Attendance:
  - c. Student Achievement Info:
  - d. Collation of National Standards data:
8. Have you always used this SMS? Yes / No
  - a. If No – why did you change?
  - b. If Yes – have you ever considered changing and why?
9. What PLD is provided for your SMS? Who pays?
10. How do you find out about new features for your SMS?

#### **Student Achievement Information**

11. Who makes the decisions about the types of information to record?
12. Is it easy to set this up? Who sets it up?
13. What is your skill level with using the SMS? Who else has the skills to use the SMS at the setup or high level?
14. How is this data used? Who uses the SMS to get the data?
15. How easy is this to do?
16. How do staff use the student achievement data? What PLD is provided?
17. How easy is it to incorporate the student achievement data into your parent reporting process?
18. What issues do you have with your particular SMS?

#### **National Standards Data**

19. Do you use your SMS to record Nat Stds OTJs? Mid year and end of year
20. How easy is this to do?
  - a. Teacher
  - b. Principal
21. For what other purposes is this Nat Stds data used?
22. Do you have any issues with your SMS and the schoolwide collation of OTJs? If yes, what?
23. Is there anything else you want to add about SMS?