

Working from the inside – some comments to help prepare you and your secondary school for your next ERO visit

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Introduction

I spent my sabbatical with the Wellington ERO office, travelling to five schools over five weeks; two full primary, an area school, a Year 7-13 and a school catering for special needs students. In that time I worked with 9 different review officers, and each team had a different coordinator.

The quick overview - things you could do to make your life easier next time ERO visits:

1. Go onto the ERO website now, download the BAS, the review indicators and the review time frame indicators and start thinking about what you need to do before your next visit. Also get out your last review and check you've made progress on the recommendations.
2. Document all self review work and keep it so you can bring it out to show them. It doesn't matter if some of it is a couple of years old, it's the process that is important and what you have done with the information.
3. Have all the paper work available from day one.
4. Keep your diary free and be at the synthesis meetings.
5. Expect daily feedback from the coordinator so you know of any issues as they arise. Keep your BOT Chair informed - they don't like surprises either and they are almost as anxious as you are!
6. Work with them. It's meant to be a collaborative process and the five reviews I was part of were just that. The best synthesis meetings I went to are those where the school just kept saying the comments ERO made simply affirmed their own ideas and the path they were already on.
7. Be realistic. Every school is working on things. There is no such thing as a perfect school. Focus on strengths as much as areas for review and development!

Methodology

If you haven't been reviewed for a while, you should notice a significant difference in methodology when your next review comes around. People used to think that ERO's role was to find faults in schools. If that ever was their role, it is no longer. The emphasis now is on asking what the school knows about itself and what it's doing with that information. It's also really helpful if the school has identified what their next steps are. They no longer have a school focus question and it is highly unlikely that every teacher will be seen.

They still have NETs to investigate (National Evaluation Topics) and these will often determine which teachers will be seen. This information will inform the review but it will also inform the national report on the NET which is written by staff at ERO's National Office. There are a number of topics each term but a topic about Maori success is likely to be ongoing.

As is always the case they will investigate Legal Obligations - previously known as Compliance issues - but a lot of that is done through the Board Assurance Statement (BAS) in the initial stages. It is important you do this accurately and that your BOT Chair is involved with that process. If you are unsure of anything, or if you have any concerns or questions, use the space provided to make notes. These are really helpful. They will also investigate health & safety issues on site as they relate to student safety so they will be looking at processes for things like hazards, giving medications, recording accidents & attendance.

The team is likely to be 2-4 reviewers depending on the size of the school and they may only spend one or two days in classes depending on the size of the school. The rest of the time they will be focussed on reading and analysing your paperwork and meeting the specific staff – this can depend on the NETs to some extent.

The basics

There are a few things which make the life of the reviewer much easier and if you can do most/all of these, it is incredibly helpful -and of course your school is seen to be highly organised and well prepared!

1. Have the pre-review documentation in on time and provide everything you've been asked for. If you aren't sure what they mean just ask - they are very good at checking emails and getting back to you while they are on another review. If you can't get it in on time, talk to the Coordinator well in advance and negotiate the date. They are incredibly busy, doing a review a week in most cases, so they might be fine with a later date but it must be negotiated.
2. They need space to work. Ideally they should have access to a whiteboard; data outlet; it should have space for all their papers and for them each to work. If it's able to be near toilet and kitchen facilities so much the better - that just means the staff can be relatively private as well. Quiet space is a real bonus- they spend so much of their time reading and analysing your paperwork and then talking to each other about findings.
3. Have all the paper work they have asked for in the room, labelled clearly so they don't have to keep coming back to you to ask for things. Of course there may be other things they ask for during the review as they hear things from people but having the basic information there to start with is really important.
4. It's incredibly helpful for paperwork to be dated and to have the name of the person who wrote the paper on it - and for minutes or similar to identify the group meeting to talk about the issue that is documented. Basically the more information that is self-explanatory the better.
5. Keep your diary free for the time they are in the school and any other staff they need to see should be easily available. Senior staff in particular need to be available. In most cases the reviewers will make a time to see them and that can be planned for but there are often odd questions that come up and having someone free to talk is really appreciated.
6. If all your school documentation is only available digitally, make sure they have easy access to a computer and they can access your intranet and tell/show them where to find things. This isn't the problem it used to be, but they need easy access and they need to be able to find things independently. They also might need to photocopy documents or print things -again just tell them your procedures for this

Friend of the school

I have used a friend of the school in each of the three reviews I've had as a Principal. I won't in the future if the current methodology is retained. The new approach includes the Principal (and senior staff if you choose to include them) to such an extent that there are rarely surprises. You will be kept fully informed – each day in most cases – so you will get a good idea from day one of emerging findings.

Triangulation

You hear this a lot when principals talk about ERO. Basically it means they need to be able to find evidence for anything in the report from three sources of evidence – from documents, comments or observations. If you tell them you do something but you can't actually substantiate it, it can't go in the report because it won't get through ERO's peer review process. You will be asked for pre review information and then other stuff on site and it might seem to be repetitive, but it's all part of the triangulation process so just give it to them.

The initial presentation

How you welcome ERO is your choice. I saw powhiri, mihi, a welcome by the principal at the office then met the staff at morning tea. There is no right way to do this - only what is right for your school.

It is likely that the first main point of contact with ERO will be a presentation by the school. It usually happens fairly soon after ERO arrives and it is up to the school who does it and who comes. In many cases BOT and senior staff attend and a variety of people can present the information. A few tips:

1. Keep to the 1 hour time frame that they suggest.
2. This presentation isn't a marketing spiel, nor is it a chance to tell them everything they have already read in the pre review information. It's a chance to highlight the developments in the school since the last review; to identify any self review you have undertaken; to talk about how your school promotes success for Maori as Maori; to say where things are at now as a result of that work and to identify where you are heading. Ideally if you do this well, you are helping to write your final report because you are answering their questions about what you know and what you are doing with that information.

It's totally up to you if you talk, use a PowerPoint, hand out noteswhatever you want to do is fine. Just be aware that it sets the scene for the whole review. Think about who presents - just the Principal or do you include BOT, SMT, students? It needs to reflect your school's particular culture.

3. Highlights the success stories, but make the focus on how these successes have been achieved through self review.

Classroom observations

The Principal will always be asked if there are any staff issues ERO needs to know about which would mean that a class observation was inappropriate. They also ask what you would expect the team to see and find in lessons. That's a chance for you to identify things that make your school special – for instance if your teachers have been working on co-construction or independent learning or WALTs, tell them and they'll look for them.

In every review, the team was asked when they'd be in classes, for how long, who they'd see etc...all the stuff we all want to know when reviewers are in a school. Basically they won't be able to tell you.

They might have an idea but that can change fairly quickly if meetings are needed, so they have to be flexible. Staff just have to be prepared for a visit - but ERO want to see business as usual not something special just for them. Observations will vary. If they relate to a NET investigation they might take the whole lesson, others might be quite quick (10-15 mins), just to get a flavour of the climate in the class.

Anyway they will probably come into some classes. When they get there...

1. Ask teachers to have their plan book on the teacher's desk, along with any information about the class, the unit of work, the roll, any assessment information (which may be on a laptop so keep it handy and give the reviewer access to it) and any information about at risk students. If you have a class photo that's a big help as well.
2. The reviewer will probably start by just sitting and watching the lesson so they get an idea of what's happening. They also start to pick up ideas about student engagement- both behavioural and cognitive.
3. At some stage they will want to talk to individual students - generally they wait for a lull to do this.
4. When they talk to the students they want to know what the students know about what they are learning; why they are learning it; what level they are at; how they can improve; and what their next steps are.
5. They are NOT there to appraise staff and it is unlikely they will give any feedback to the individual teacher, although having seen that I did see several examples of reviewers making really positive comments to teachers and students after they'd been in lessons - nothing detailed, just a nice word, but I know it made the teacher feel good (and that they hadn't let the school down!)
6. In my experience if there were any questions about a teacher's performance, the reviewer raised them with the Principal to see if they were on track with their findings. They also chose that teacher's appraisal to check if what they had seen was an aberration or a pattern - and if so what the school was doing about it.

Achievement information

The reviewers will want to see Achievement information in whatever form you keep it. They want to see what progress your students have made since the last review. They have access to all the NZQA data so will probably have done some initial investigation into the previous year's results.

Don't just focus on NCEA - what else have you got? Basically show them whatever you use to track achievement in your school and be able to show what you've done when there have been issues identified or interventions have been tried. What difference did these make? It's not a bad thing if you identify an intervention that didn't work - it shows you have analysed it! So don't be worried about showing them things that have gone wrong and what you are doing as a result.

Don't forget about Yr 9/10 data - in particular literacy and numeracy data.

It will be important to identify staff who can talk to ERO about this data - so if you have a SENCO or and HOD Special needs or an SMT member with responsibility for this (or a team

who do a bit each) they need to be prepared to discuss it and the story it tells over time. Separate data for Maori, Pasifika and Special needs students will need to be seen. Again what you keep is up to you - you just need to be able to tell them the story behind it.

Other paperwork

They will ask to see a huge amount of paperwork. Give it to them ready for day One. They can glean a huge amount of information about the school from BOT minutes, Principal's report to the BOT, staff, HOD, department minutes, student reports to parents, newsletters etc. Make sure you have In committee BOT minutes available as well as ordinary minutes.

Give them the annual report and it's also helpful if you include the auditor's letter which went to the BOT after the audit was completed.

Any self review documentation is really valuable – particularly information that shows the questions you asked, the process you went through, the decisions you made and the subsequent actions taken - along with any plans for subsequent review of these actions. Policies - just a tip. As you review your policies, if you don't change anything please make sure you re-date them or else they think they haven't been reviewed and that causes problems.

At risk students

ERO will always want to know about targeted students - Maori, Pasifika and those at risk of not succeeding. They'll want to see these students identified in planning and other documents; they'll want to see the strategies in place to help them accelerate their progress and they'll want to see their results.

They'll also want to see any aggregated data you give to the BOT about these students. If you have tiny numbers that can be problematic as you are at risk of identifying individuals but you still need to show them what you do.

Appraisal

They will ask to see a number of appraisal documents. The Principal's is always one of these. They may also ask to see the work on any staff members they have concerns about - or there may just be a random selection made. In most cases the appraisals we saw were those of the people we had observed - just to see if what ERO had seen was also reflected in the appraisal. Give them everything you have – again ideally since the last review. They will want to understand your system and see that goals have been set and reviewed and that there is a link from one year to the next. It's important they see a whole appraisal cycle and how that works for the staff.

Basically they want to see the system in your school has rigour. In most cases that earns lesson observations, self appraisal, a signed off final document and something that signals the next steps for this teacher. The idea of it having a forward focus is really important – again all part of the self review process. A next step isn't going on some PD or taking on a new role – it's identifying something that will improve practice and can be reviewed so you'll know if you have been successful doing it.

Māori success as Māori

ERO is absolutely committed to reducing disparity and lifting the performance of Māori students. Each term they have a NET that focuses on some aspect of Māori achievement and I imagine this will continue until such time as Māori achievement is at the same level as NZ European achievement.

' Success for Māori as Māori' is a reasonably new area of focus and it is the one causing more problems than any other. In the reviews I worked on, I saw slightly different interpretations of this and certainly the schools all had very different understandings of it.

From what I can tell, ERO want to see what information you have gathered from your Māori whanau about what they want for their students in your school that supports them as Māori. Then what have you done with that information? How much emphasis do your staff place on te reo and tikanga?

Do you have any separate programmes for your Māori students and particularly those who are underachieving? What impact are they having? What about the use of te reo/tikanga as part of your daily programme/in classes/around the school?

It is likely they will talk to some Māori students as a group. Basically what has their experience been as Māori in your school? And what next steps could the school take to make it even better?

Staff meeting

At some stage - often quite early on, ERO will probably meet with the staff but in some cases responses have been done by email so this is flexible. This is often done without the SMT so don't be upset if they only want the staff involved - it isn't a slur on you! They just want the staff to feel they can say anything they like. And believe me you will get plenty of opportunities to have your say!

Sometimes these meetings are run as discussions, sometimes groups write notes on sheets, sometimes they do a post box activity. It depends on the school, on the questions they want answered and the Principal's advice about how the staff work best. The team will sort out the questions once they've done the initial scoping and heard from the presentation what the focus has been since the last review. For instance if you say you have focussed on differentiated teaching since the last review, they'll want to ask staff about their understanding of that... or they might ask a few questions around the big question of how your school promotes student learning. The questions will vary to suit the context of the review.

I've seen the ERO team leave the notes in the staffroom overnight in case people want to add more ideas later – and you can request this if you want it to happen. It's a fairly low key approach usually to try and get the best information possible.

Student meetings

They will sometimes ask to meet students. This is often associated with work on the NET, or issues to do with health and safety, so they are likely to ask for students who can help with those investigations.

These are really nice meetings to be in. They are very gentle with the students and they often start by asking what they like best about being at the school - so they can tell those stories straight away.

I'd have to say the students I heard were incredibly proud of their schools, and really generous about the staff and each other.

Synthesis

At various points during the visit the teams begin to synthesise their data. This involves bringing together their initial findings. The Principal and senior staff will be invited to be there and it is really important that you are. This is the time they talk about the strengths of the

school and you they document areas needing review and development or any gaps they have found.

This is usually run as an open discussion and you have the chance to challenge their findings at all stages. If they say something and you vehemently disagree, you need to be able to produce evidence - so you can go away and find it before the next meeting.

Occasionally these meetings can be difficult (usually if people really object to a finding and can't prove their point) but more often than not they are really collaborative exercises with lots of discussion and ideas. NOT all of this will go into the report but it will be an important aspect and will help identify the key areas to be highlighted.

It is a lengthy process and sometimes agreeing on the most appropriate wording is important. Go with it and make sure you have your say if you don't think something is right or if it could be expressed more strongly - or more gently! You know your school and you'll have a good understanding of how certain ideas will be received.

Legal obligations

Gone are the days when an ERO visit had a compliance focus. Having said that they do still check things and if they see things that aren't compliant they will want to know what you are doing about it. So they will look for things like Evacuation signs in classrooms; evidence you've had an evacuation drill and reported it to the BOT; and hazards they see need to be in your hazard register and a process for fixing them need to be identified; you must have consulted parents about Health education in the last two years and reported same to the BOT - basically check the BAS and if you are non compliant get it sorted as soon as you can. It's a good reference point every year or so regardless of ERO's timeframe for a visit.

Sharing findings with the BOT

On the last day the team is in the school, they will share findings and give feedback to your BOT. This usually happens later in the day and takes about an hour. This is still a discussion session and ERO looks to the BOT for input. Responses are recorded which feed into the evidence that is being collected.

In the past the review was quite long and at this meeting you may have even been given copies of the first draft for each section that you furiously copied. This is no longer the case. Nor will you be told the timeframe for the next review at this meeting - that happens later in the process now.

The co-ordinator will probably go through the headings of the report that you have all worked on in the synthesis meetings and give general comments about each - both things they have seen that are strengths and possibly some areas for review and development. If the school has identified areas they are moving on, this tends to get reported as the school has recognised the need to....rather than an area for review and development. They can't report on things you intend to do - they need to have seen evidence of them already happening. They will identify any areas of non compliance particularly as they relate to student safety.

They will also talk about anything that was recommended in the previous review that hasn't been worked on. This will usually come up under compliance or areas for review and development.

Final report

Once the draft report has been written by the Coordinator, it goes to the Peer reviewer. They go through all the review notes and test the judgements the team has made. Then the review

goes back to the Coordinator and then on to the Quality Assurer (1). The unconfirmed report then goes to the school. This process - from the end of the review until the school receives the report takes up to 20 working days. It is at this stage that the review timeframe is finalised. Remember a 3 year review is the norm. 1-2 or 4-5 year reviews get another layer of moderation at this stage to ensure national consistency.

The school then has up to 15 working days to review the report and get back to ERO (in writing) with any concerns. These might be errors of fact (which are easily sorted) or wording you don't like (this usually takes some negotiation).

Sometimes schools object to judgements made by ERO. To overturn a judgement at this stage is quite difficult - it has already been triangulated and the evidence has been checked by two other people who see all the notes from the review and check each judgement really carefully. If you want to object to the review timeframe you have to specify that in your letter.

Sometimes they do change - it's not common but it has happened so put your case and see what happens. You can request re-moderation about the return time.

As a tip, when you send in your concerns or questions about the report it is really helpful if you can number each separate point (as opposed to bullet pointing) and specifically refer to the page/para/line you are talking about. It just makes it quicker to check and work on.

This part of the process can be quite short or lengthy, depending on the nature of the issues raised. Once agreement is reached between ERO and the school the report goes to the Quality Assurer (2) for another set of eyes to check it. The review will also be checked by the Review Services Manager and will be signed off by the National Manager Review Services before it goes to the school.

Then the final report is sent to the school and you have it for two weeks before it goes on the ERO web site. What you do with it in that time is your call but most schools like to release it to their community themselves.

Summary

I consider myself incredibly lucky to have been able to be part of the Central office for five weeks. I know they took a risk and I'm really grateful to Graham Stoop and the managers in the Wellington office in particular for saying yes to me being there. I was also really lucky to be given a wonderful buddy who looked after me so well and pointed me in the right direction on many occasions. Thanks also to all the review coordinators and team members who put up with my questions and having the burden of an untrained extra in the team.

Several of my colleagues said I'd 'gone to the dark side' when I told them what I was doing for my sabbatical project and I did wonder what I was going to find. I can honestly say I am now able to refute the dark side comment!

I feel much more comfortable about reviews now - which is probably partly to do with the new methodology but also partly to do with the way it is implemented. I know there are good people working in the teams; I know they discuss issues at length and take a huge amount of care to make sound and positive judgements: I know why they have to have as much proof as they do - and that five other independent sets of eyes will see their report before it is finalised; I know they don't go in with preconceived ideas about a school and they go to great lengths to point out strengths.

This was a fascinating experience for me and I hope my learning helps you prepare better the next time you hear ERO is coming to see you.

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July 2012