FOCUS:

**The identification of secondary school manifestations of 'student voice'
that give effect to the New Zealand Curriculum.**

Sabbatical Leave Project
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PURPOSE

To investigate secondary school manifestations of 'student voice' in giving effect to the New Zealand Curriculum, with a view to incorporating relevant strategies into pedagogical development at Ruawai College, in order to raise achievement for all by better engaging students in learning.

PROGRAMME OUTLINE

1. It was always intended that the focus of the investigation would be placed on the broad sweep of 'student voice' and the furnishing of a workable definition. This definition would embrace the obvious pedagogical applications such as 'student voice' in personalising learning, in 'next step' learning, in inquiry learning, assessment for learning and in student leadership roles. This was not thought of as a definitive list.

2. The proposal involved visits to schools identified (by the writer) as having made significant strides in personalising learning and student voice in New Zealand and in a school district in northern California.

3. Meetings were arranged with schools' principals, other educators and students (where feasible), to discuss 'student voice' matters identified in the profile.

4. The New Zealand school visits were to take place in the latter half of Term 2 2012 and the Californian visits in the latter half of Term 3 2012.

5. The intention was to consider areas of commonality and divergence and to draw up a range of strategies and ideas that would potentially benefit the teaching and learning culture of Ruawai College through their adoption or adaptation for use.

6. By the sabbatical leave commencement date, the schedule of visits consisted of eight New Zealand schools - two area schools, two composite secondary schools, four secondary schools and one integrated composite secondary school. In addition, various meetings with leading educators in the Konocti Unified School District, Lake County, California. All schools visited are listed in the Acknowledgements.

STUDY BACKGROUND

In 2006, the Ministry of Education published a booklet entitled *Let's Talk About: Personalising Learning*.* Slight though the booklet was, its content was both disarmingly simple and potentially profound. Education Minister Steve Maharey wrote in the introduction:

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*UK educator David Hargreaves appears to have heavily influenced the material in this booklet. He has a preference for the term 'personalising learning' over 'personalised learning', arguing that the latter sounds too much like a finished product.

> *. . .Personalising learning involves thinking about knowledge as an active process.*
> *Students get to be informed, active participants in their own learning, they contribute*
> *to decisions about how learning works best for them, and they have a much better*
> *understanding of how they are progressing.*

A year later, upon launching the Revised New Zealand Curriculum [NZC] (October 2007), Steve Maharey stated:

> *This curriculum places learners at the centre of the learning process. . . . This*
> *curriculum gives schools the flexibility to actively involve students in what they learn,*
> *how it is taught, and how the learning is assessed, and it invites schools to embrace*
> *the challenge of designing relevant and meaningful learning programmes that will*
> *motivate and engage all students.*

Since the learner has had the right to be at the "centre of the learning process" for half a decade now, it seemed a reasonable assumption that students are being encouraged to voice their views and preferences in relation to their learning. For the personalising of learning to be taking place, 'student voice' must be an established component of a school's culture.

ADOPTING A DEFINITION OF 'STUDENT VOICE'

'Student voice' can be defined in many ways. The *SoundOut* website, dedicated to 'promoting student voice in school', has used the following definition since 2006:

> *Student voice is the individual and collective perspectives and actions of young people*
> *within the context of learning and education. This can include, but isn't limited to,*
> *active or passive participation, knowledge, voting, wisdom, activism, beliefs, service,*
> *opinions, leadership, and ideas.*

Such a definition succeeds in including an array of ways in which students are encouraged to be active in and voice their views on their learning.

Adam Fletcher, in his *Meaningful Student Involvement: Guide to Students as Partners in School Change*, states that:

> *Meaningful student involvement is the process of engaging students as partners in*
> *every facet of school change for the purpose of strengthening their commitment to*
> *education, community and democracy.*

Fletcher makes more explicit the <u>shared</u> nature of school change than that contained in the foremost definition.

David Hargreaves, in his pamphlet *Student Voice and Assessment for Learning*, argues that 'student voice' can be defined in many ways and, in its widest sense, will include "every way in which students are allowed or encouraged to voice their views or preferences." When pushed for a definition, he states:
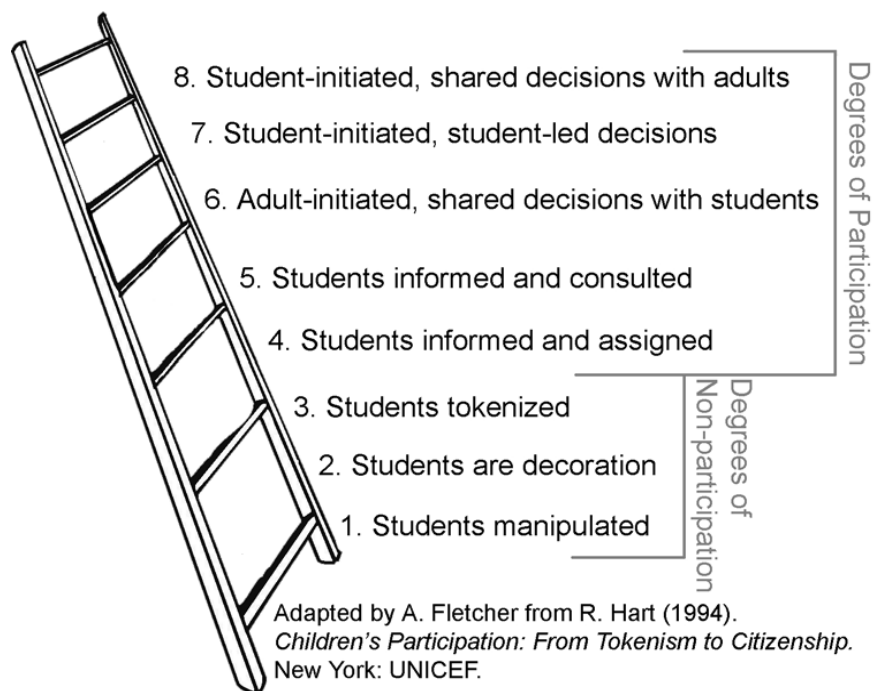
> *'Student voice' is mainly about how students come to play a more active role in their*
> *education and schooling as a direct result of teachers becoming more attentive, in*

sustained or routine ways, to what students say about their experience of learning and of school life.

Hargreaves' definition is the most persuasive in a NZC context because it recognises the importance of each teacher's pivotal task of being alert and sensitive to what students articulate about their own exposure to learning and the culture of the school in which that learning takes place. This is the definition that permeated the investigation and this subsequent report.

THE LADDER OF STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL

Principals from the majority of schools visited were provided with a copy of the diagram below and invited to assess their schools' levels of 'student voice' and meaningful involvement from the descriptors. The intent of the ladder is to encourage schools to reach higher rungs and thereby increase the level of students' participation in their learning and improve the quality of their learning.

8. Student-initiated, shared decisions with adults
7. Student-initiated, student-led decisions
6. Adult-initiated, shared decisions with students
5. Students informed and consulted
4. Students informed and assigned
3. Students tokenized
2. Students are decoration
1. Students manipulated

Degrees of Participation

Degrees of Non-participation

Adapted by A. Fletcher from R. Hart (1994).
Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship.
New York: UNICEF.

As with any diagrammatic representation of reality, the developmental process is unlikely to operate through neat incremental steps. Student participation could, for example, be operating at both the second rung and the sixth rung in the same institution.

Anecdotal evidence from discussions with New Zealand school leaders indicated that a mix of levels is the norm in most of their schools. Since the principals in question had a known proclivity towards 'student voice' in its various guises, this came as no surprise. Most assessed their schools as working flexibly within the levels 5 to 8 (inclusive). Several

expressed disquiet with level 7 because, on the surface at least, it appeared to diminish the importance of student-teacher partnership. Teachers are occupied only in supportive roles.

Almost all principals endorsed level 8 as being the acme where decision-making about projects and programmes is genuinely shared between students and teachers. These activities are essentially inquiry based and empower young people and expose them to the expertise and experience of adults. One school visited had amongst its foundation 'Ten Tenets' the maxims that students are 'central in directing their own learning' and that they 'follow their individual interests and enthusiasm.' Another school, opened in 2004, was founded on the 'independent learning model'. As a consequence, independent learners develop a 'zest for learning' which enables them to select, manage and evaluate their own attainments, knowledge and culture to become learners 'who no longer need the support of the school.'

The NZC endorses the teaching of explicit values in our schools whether they are secular state schools or not. There is a growing claim by state schools that the epithet 'special character' should not be the exclusive domain of integrated or independent schools. As a consequence, state schools also find themselves engaging in deep discussions about their cultural mores, acquiescence to identified values and the degree to which students can be allowed to embrace unrestrained 'student voice' and exhibit anti-social interpretations of personalising learning. While for schools that have adopted, for example, John Heenan's *Cornerstone Values*, there is an easy fit between the value of *Kindness* or *Compassion* and 'student voice', but it is far more problematic when there is a need to lessen the tension between some manifestations of 'student voice' and *Duty* or *Obedience*.

In one particular school where the *Cornerstone Values* have been operating for a number of years under the present principal's stewardship, the leader likened his role to that of an English Premier League (EPL) manager. The analogy is a striking one. In the EPL, the term 'manager' means 'coach' but the coach's responsibilities are far greater than those one would normally associate with any sporting team. The EPL manager is responsible for building the culture within the team while, at the same time, allowing the players to express themselves through their individual skills and styles, as contributors to the squad as a whole. The success of the group becomes a shared vision between the coaching team and the playing team.

At the same time, the buck largely stops with the manager/ principal on behalf of the board of directors/trustees. Thus the directors/trustees have endorsed the manager/principal's advice to change the 'nondescript' (in his words) mufti uniform for the senior team/year 13s to a more conservative style echoing back to the 1930s. 'Player power'/ 'student voice' demands that consultation should take place with those who will wear the new uniform. While the players/students may have significant voice in what uniform is finally worn, the decision to reject the mufti uniform was not theirs to make. The Ladder of Student Involvement would rate such a scenario at level 6: *Adult-led decision-making shared with students*. While this might not be the best example, given that uniform is often amongst the first to be used to illustrate 'student voice' impacting on school decision making, it does provide a cautionary note that even in the most ebullient of student-led school cultures, a partnership needs to exist.

Is it too disquieting to suggest that even in the schools where student-adult partnerships flourish, there remains an area where adults 'manipulate' students in decision making? Naturally, 'student voice' should neither impede a board of trustees' right to govern nor the principal's obligation to head management decisions. At stake is the manner in which

proposed changes are made. Relationships must be handled honourably and diplomatically if the adults want something more than students merely decorating their decisions.

'STUDENT VOICE' IMPLEMENTATION: SUCCESS CRITERIA

The following criteria take the form of conclusions drawn from this 'Student Voice' sabbatical experience, educational reading in the specific and wider subject area of personalising learning and through having been a secondary school principal for eleven years.

The applications of 'Student Voice' listed in the final section of this report will not be at their most effective unless they are allowed to flourish in a school that exists as a community of learners.

- The NZC is the footing upon which all teaching and learning is based (with the obvious exception of religious education). The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) should not be allowed to dominate what happens in secondary schools.

- The school exists as a learning community for all who 'live and work' within it and thereby reflecting a culture in which 'student voice' is an integral component. Everybody is a learner and everybody is a teacher.

- A teacher can be a lone initiator of 'student led learning' but such learning needs to be school-wide if it is to have sustainable impact.

- All teachers embrace teaching as inquiry – "effective pedagogy requires that teachers inquire into the impact of their teaching on their students." (NZC) Student response to such inquiry is a powerful device for both individual and collective 'student voice'.

- Trustees and teachers are committed to the principle of personalising learning for each student. 'Student voice' is the major component in personalising learning.

- Inquiry learning and cooperative learning are pre-eminent teaching strategies used across all year and ability levels. 'Student voice' is integral to both of these learning strategies.

- Individual and collaborative projects should be 'co-constructed' between students and teachers and inquiries should involve 'authentic' investigations.

- Student voices are many and varied and vigilance is crucial in ensuring that individual voices are heard alongside the more strident volume of the student collective, so frequently denoted by a school council or the student representative on the board of trustees.

MANIFESTATIONS OF 'STUDENT VOICE'

The following listing is composed largely of practical, effective, tested and sustainable applications of 'student voice' observed and noted during the course of school visits in New Zealand as well as a couple of initiatives already existing at Ruawai College. There is no hierarchical significance to the order. The applications have integrity in themselves but would be clearly ripe for adaptation to meet the learning needs of students in a variety of schools.

Student Appraisal of Teachers: Regular 'student voice' surveys conducted by subject teachers following blocks of learning should include opportunities to comment on teacher performance, particularly in relation to all round teacher delivery e.g. clarity of purpose, inquiry process, pace of lessons, assessment criteria, etc..

On a broader scale, a general student appraisal survey should be conducted annually by the principal of the performance of form teachers or learning advisers and subject teachers against such evaluation rubrics as:
- *The teacher explains things in a way that I can understand.*
- *The teacher encourages me to work hard and to succeed.*
- *The teacher has fair and clear rules.*

It is essential that the administration of the surveys and the analysis should be conducted by members of the senior management team, not by teachers themselves. The use of senior leaders helps to emphasise the importance of this practice and ensures that students can complete the survey with anonymity.

While some teachers feel nervous and even hostile toward the surveys, experience indicates that the vast majority welcome the insights provided. It may be useful to ask students to complete an 'Evaluation of You!' survey to coincide with their appraisal of teachers. This seems to provide a balancing or palliative effect on the process. The student self-evaluation survey should carry the name of the student and be returned to the relevant subject or form teacher. Examples of self-evaluation aspects are:

- *I am able to manage myself and be organised for learning.*
- *I complete my work to the highest standard.*
- *In class I am able to relate to others in a positive manner.*

It is worth noting that, in the context of a Californian school district, such a device would not be an acceptable form of teacher appraisal.

Individual Student-Initiated Inquiry Projects: Regular weekly timetabled sessions are devoted to individual student-initiated inquiry projects. All students across the junior school can be engaged in these sessions and the subject matter may be as varied as there are voices. A useful beginning point can be to have students identify a particular 'passion' or interest for their first involvement. (Of course, an increasing number of students transitioning from primary into secondary schools are already imbued with inquiry learning skills and strategies. The use of the inquiry approach from an early age is exceedingly helpful.)

Teachers assigned to support students should operate as 'guides on the side' (rather than as 'sages on the stage') since it is probable that some of the subject matter of these projects will be outside their 'ken'. At the same time, teachers should ensure that appropriate inquiry steps are followed and that plausible 'outcomes' provide a compass bearing. Students should not be left to 'construct' on their own; rather, 'co-construction' should be employed, where teachers work together as learners with students and negotiate the context, methods and possible outcomes. Teachers should not shy away from 'future focused' themes since these are encouraged openly in the NZC, notably sustainability, enterprise, citizenship and globalisation.

Inquiries may run for as long as is required to reach completion. Inevitably, some projects will be concluded before others but weekly sessions (year-long) provide the flexibility to meet all learning needs and some students will engage in several projects during the year whilst others will be content with one project of considerable detail and depth.

Group-Intensive Inquiry Projects: In contrast to the individual student-initiated inquiries, the group-intensives are better suited to sequential steps leading to a week-long suspension of the timetable to allow for sustained and intensive investigations. 'Student voice' should loom large in the first phase where brainstorming of ideas takes place. Experience suggests that a broad theme should be adopted to act as an umbrella for a variety of enterprises.

Necessity dictates that not all suggestions will be taken up but some plausible and sustainable inquiries should emerge from the student brainstorming session and following discussion with the teaching staff. The second phase is likely to provide students with the opportunity to make their preferred choice of inquiry from the approved list. It is likely that some projects will not be offered following this phase, if student interest fails to make the numbers viable.

Once students have been assigned to projects (hopefully reflecting their first choices) and the groups established, teacher teams can be formed. All phases of inquiry learning should be entered into and students identify the purpose of the inquiry. On the final day of the enterprise, all groups present their findings to the school supported, where applicable, by artifacts.

Surveying students and teachers following the suspension of the timetable in this manner can be a highly constructive exercise. Experience at Ruawai College reveals that the student satisfaction rate is of a very high order and teachers endorse the learning outcomes despite the energy-sapping nature of the week. Our most recent venture along these lines, Operation Te Papa, awarded those involved with an insight into the richly rewarding co-constructed learning opportunities the NZC allows.

One of the schools visited has run 'Three-Day Learning Episodes' once a term, over several years, and has created a set of design principles for these episodes. The planned learning should:

- provide opportunities to strengthen learners' capabilities, including 'learning to learn' dimensions, and engaging, interactive learning experiences. (*Nature of Learning*)
- foster autonomy by offering learners with choice and flexibility within a supportive framework. (*Ownership*)

- help learners make authentic and relevant connections between their learning experiences and the world they live in, in ways that expand their horizons. (*Connectedness, Authenticity, Relevance*)
- help learners to further develop their independent learning qualities. *(Independent Learning)*
- conclude with an evaluation of the anticipated goals, so that achievements can be celebrated. *(Outcomes)*

Such design principles apply to both individual and group-orientated inquiries.

'Safe School' Student Surveys: While it is common for secondary schools to engage with 'safe school' student surveys, either commercially prepared and administered or 'in house' versions, it may be overlooked that this can be an important component of 'student voice'. Some providers will commit to running workshops for staff on the basis of the survey findings but nothing can equal the gains made from engaging the students themselves in discussion around the results, whether affirming ones or otherwise.

Where students can testify to the fact that they are safe and can affirm that school is "a good place to be", such testimonials reveal much about the culture of the institution. When concerns arise, it is imperative that those who make up the 'student body' have an opportunity to talk freely about the nature of the school's culture and threats to its existence.

Me and My School is used by many schools in New Zealand and can be obtained from: nzcer.org.nz/tests/me-and-my-school.   Another related site is: wellbeing@school.org.nz which is part of PB4L.

The Forging of a School Community: The sense of community and culture within a school does not exist by accident. It reflects the habitual interactions between those who attend the institution as students, teachers and support staff, as well as the extent to which parents and supporters are engaged meaningfully in the school.

Several of the rural schools visited for this study served a number of distinct communities within their catchment areas. In these schools a majority of the students travelled to and from school by bus. The potential for unhealthy parochial rivalries and distorted insular perceptions are very real within many rural schools where students attend from other distinct localities.

There are obvious dangers too in attempting to grow a rural school by busing in students from afar. However, where a neighbouring school loses students due to a public change of perception, the recipient of resulting roll growth may find the increase difficult to manage and a threat to the school's existing sense of community and culture.

Whether or not a school serves several communities, it is crucial that students and staff unite in the school community. As one principal put it, "You don't lose your specific identity but you grow this unique school identity as well." It is not an imposed identity but one that is forged by acknowledging the school's past within the district's history and is nourished by student awareness of the school's values and working philosophy. Students should be able to articulate what the school stands for and their individual input into its community and culture.

Adopting a theme for a term or a semester or a year can be fruitful means of consciously raising the profile and importance of the school as community, for example, 'Then and Now' would allow for an historical perspective, particularly when working towards a school's milestone reunion, or 'Less is More' might be a theme for reflecting on living rurally. Group-intensive inquiry projects can be an excellent vehicle for such investigations.

The 'Pecha Kucha' Experience: Pecha Kucha have been used in Ruawai College assemblies on regular occasions in 2012 as a means of encouraging students (and staff) to talk about a subject which interests them - aided by a series of images.* The pictorial element has a transforming effect on the most recalcitrant of public speakers, such that there exists at Ruawai College a waiting list of student presenters running into next year.

A Pecha Kucha is a method of presentation to an audience in which twenty images are projected onto a screen, each one for twenty seconds. The narrator's commentary is inevitably fast-paced and concise because each image is only shown for twenty seconds before being replaced by the next image, and so on. By deduction, a Pecha Kucha can only last for 6 minutes and 40 seconds.

The Pecha Kucha originated in Japan in 2003 and in less than a decade some five hundred cities around the world hold public Pecha Kucha Nights (PKN) in their communities. Each Pecha Kucha should have a thematic coherence but topics can be many and varied, relating to travel, research, hobbies, educational trips, personal interests, etc.. Although the concept is trademarked, schools may use Pecha Kucha freely, provided they are not for PKNs when permission should be sought (events@pecha-kucha.org).

The principle of combining public speaking with pictorial support in a tight timeframe can have applications across a range of school presentations, from outdoor educational reviews, to Virtues' performances, sports reports to group and individual inquiry project demonstrations.

The Role of the Learning Advisory: A Learning Advisory is a small community within the school headed by a teacher known as the Learning Adviser (LA).   The creation of Learning Advisories is made easier if the school is already structured around a vertical form system. Ideally, students will remain with their LA throughout their time at the school just as they would have done previously in vertical forms. A school's house system remains unaffected by the transition to Learning Advisories. The ideal number of students in a Learning Advisory is around 15-16 and certainly no more than 20 individuals.

The LA has the opportunity to move from being pre-eminently a teacher of a subject in this role to being a teacher of learning. The LA is responsible for guiding and supporting each one of his/her students through their secondary school learning experience.

The LA acts as an academic and pastoral mentor for each student. The main function is to establish learning goals with and for each student, constantly revisiting and revising them, so that they have the best opportunity to achieve their goals. These objectives may include ones

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*Thanks to Huw Turner (HOD English) for introducing Pecha Kucha to Ruawai College.

for personal management and monitoring of subject progress, extra-curricular activities, school and community service, leadership involvement and career planning. Where schools use Reflective Learning Journals (RLJ), these can be a useful adjunct to the regular meetings between the LA and each student.

At Ruawai College, all students maintain a RLJ and two-and-a-half- hours each week are devoted to Learning Advisories. It is expected that meetings between the LA and each student in the Learning Advisory occur every ten days and that records are kept of agreed decisions. Regular parental input is invited and encouraged through the RLJ and at least twice a year (usually towards the end of both Term 1 and Term 3) half-hour academic counselling conferences are held between each student, his or her parents and the LA.

The link between student and LA is arguably the most important learning relationship in the school structure. Within this system every student has an adult in the school that cares about him or her. 'Student voice' is at its most meaningful in this relationship.

One school employs the simple mantra 'One student at a time!' in relation to this mentoring/advisory role and it seems to assist teachers to focus on working alongside each student to identify appropriate and relevant learning pathways unique to that individual. At this particular school, ten minutes are reserved for students to access their mentors/advisers if they so wish before the end of the school day. "The mentor is the glue that holds the thing together."

Direct 'Student Voice' Requests to Principal: All students have direct access to the principal via a request form held at the student administration centre. A large urban co-educational school provides students with such a convenience alongside a raft of other 'student voice' opportunities. The principal explained that it is usually used by students to present 'one off' fundraising requests for school teams to run, for example, a lunch-break sausage sizzle.

The 'bottom-up' profile has a pleasing aspect to it but the onus is on the principal to deliver a rapid response, regardless of outcome. At this particular school, requests were received most weeks and the principal saw and replied to all, making the necessary contacts and advising the student of the steps to be taken.

Students Tutoring Students: Students with specific skills and strengths are able to tutor other students. Tutors may work one-on-one with other students or may assist in the general classroom environment. This is another particularly powerful use of 'student voice' and frequently leads to enhancing the self-esteem of students who have been reluctant to allow the light to shine on their abilities.

On occasions, student-tutors can assist teachers with their learning too. It is not unusual for ICT students (digital natives) to have far more expertise in digital technology than their teachers (digital immigrants), so much so that the concept of 'Tech Angels' has become commonplace. Such 'in school' service can be extended into the community with students using their skills to help the elderly grapple with their computer headaches in rest homes, etc..

Similarly, in te reo Maori, it can be a humbling but gratifying experience for teachers to have students with greater fluency than they have in the language. One of the fundamental principles of *Ka Hikitia* and *Te Kotahitanga* is to support student learning through the collaborative identification and application of each student's prior experiences and knowledge.

Awareness of and use of students' prior experiences are at the core of 'student voice' and are of importance in all learning areas. This is about students taking an active role in their learning and teachers becoming more assiduously alert to their students' experiences of learning and life. Teachers should harness the existing knowledge and skills of their students.

Student Learning Council: Students from any year group can apply to the principal to join this 'learning and school culture' group. The 'think tank's' composition runs counter to the view that one serves one's time in the junior school before being given leadership and it is not democratically elected along the lines of the traditional school council. The 'think tank' should be made up of those students who demonstrate leadership potential, who are or would be articulate in a supportive atmosphere, who are able to think from a societal perspective and who have *mana* amongst their peers.

The group might be invited to respond to, for example, such questions as:
- What should a graduate from this school look like?
- How can 'student voice' become a factor in Charter design?
- What should the school do to help your learning?
- How do we define and evaluate success at this school?
- Is there room for 'student voice' in timetable and local curriculum design?
- What elements make up our 'school culture'?
- Are there negative aspects of our 'school culture' and, if so, what can we do about them?
- Are there new and innovative awards that the school could adopt, for example, 'Independent Learner of the Year'?
- Are there new and innovative responsibilities the school could recognise, for example, students as volunteers, as technology aides, as media and newsletter writers, as campus enviro-warriors, etc..

(Naturally, it would be hoped that such a talented group would be able to establish their own 'starter questions' and learning outcomes.)

Such a group might organise and encourage a school-wide 'adopt a theme' campaign making use of promotional bracelets. If the school culture is being attacked by the proliferation of abusive and profane language for example, an "Only what you say to your Nana" bracelet campaign can be run, where students commit to cleaning up their (language) act. Another campaign might centre around students encouraging others to avoid 'unjustified absences' and to aim school-wide for an increase in the percentage of attendance over a term, a year, etc..

The notion of students as school researchers might appeal to this group. One school visited had had several Year 13 students electing to 'track down' all former Year 13 students in the previous three years in order to conduct a survey. The questions revolved around reflections

on what things had worked for these former students as preparation for the next phase of their lives and where they had discovered gaps in their learning.

Student-Run Assemblies: 'Student voice' has always been an essential element in student-run assemblies and such assemblies have long been a staple in many of this country's secondary schools. The NZC has provided opportunities for student-run assemblies to go beyond the announcement of sports results and promotion of upcoming social and cultural activities associated with the school. The Key Competencies, Principles and Values of the NZC can be the source of fruitful dramatisation and performance.

Ruawai College has, for many years, run an inter-house competition based upon both the NZC Values and the Virtues adopted by the school. A Value/Virtue is randomly selected in assembly and a vertical form from each house (also randomly selected) has four-to-five weeks to present/perform its interpretation of that standard in a special assembly. The focus on a particular Value/Virtue can last for half a term or a full term.

Vertical forms or learning advisories can be given the opportunity to prepare for and run an assembly on a scheduled basis. The topic and format should be up to each group. Small groupings of students could apply to present in assembly. Pecha Kucha and film (particularly showing fellow students) have intrinsic interest for students both as creators and viewers. The momentum for student-led assemblies can build quickly and can readily prove to be a meaningful highlight of the learning process each week. Having the captain of the First XV review a book, for example Li Cunxin's *Mao's Last Dancer,* in assembly could be just the incentive needed.

Students as Enviro-Warriors: Responsibility for a particular locality on the school campus could be offered to an appropriate group of students. They could be given the financial and other resources to maintain it. In one school, the Year 13 students were provided with a sum of money to effect refurbishment of and purchase new furniture for their common room. They had to prepare a budget and oversee the project from go to whoa.

Designated areas are often identified in composite and area schools for certain year groups. The opportunity for 'student voice' and leadership could be offered to students in Years 7 and 8, for example, to maintain a garden in their own area of the campus.

Student Representative and BOT Disciplinary Meetings: The role of the student representative on the board of trustees can easily be dismissed as mere tokenism. Indeed, how could one person attempt to sum up the many and varied voices of the student body, even in a relatively small school? (Is the staff representative any more capable of summing up the views of the teaching and support staff?) Of course, it cannot be done and the best hope is that the elected student has the personality and capacity to provide a student perspective to trustees' deliberations. Experienced principals will have seen the whole gamut of student representation, including the shy dumb one (unable to speak), the totally inept one ("I will bring back pies and fizz!'), the inveterate gossip (short tenure), the insufferably earnest one, the zealot, and the mature and articulate one.

Students in the latter category can be a godsend, not only to the principal but also to the board and to the students who elected them. In one school, a student had been a trustee for four consecutive years. After only a brief conversation with her, it was easy to see why. She was eloquent and reflective about her schooling, appreciative of 'the now', and sensibly anticipatory about life at university. This student had served on the board's disciplinary committee with significant impact on a few occasions over those years. Invited to speak at a suspension meeting, she would simply ask the suspended student why he (or she) attended school. Following the embarrassingly inarticulate response, she would simply point out that "While you may not know or care why you are at school, I do know why I am here. I know my purpose and my goals. The problem is that your behaviour (continual disobedience) makes it difficult for me and other genuine students from going about our studies without interference." Although a somewhat problematic example to conclude with (both negative and uplifting), it is a pure example of socially responsible 'student voice'.

VISIT TO KONOCTI SCHOOL DISTRICT (CALIFORNIA)

Welcome to a glimpse of education in one school district in northern California; a mix of 'state wide testing' and personalising learning.

The testing comes in the form of the Academic Performance Index (API). The API is a numeric assignment given to each school based upon individual student testing scores in the areas of science, mathematics, English and history. Students are tested each year, and their scores fall into one of five categories: advanced, proficient, basic, below basic, and far below basic. The yearly STAR testing system and the high school exit examination are the tests used to assess each school's performance, and these tests are part of the California standards that allow the state to meet the requirements for the 2001 Federal law known as No Child Left Behind.

The personalising learning comes in the form of the district's extraordinary capacity (from a NZ educator's perspective) to create and re-create schools on the basis of student need, such that a significant minority of the 3000 students in the Konocti Unified School District, Lake County, California, are in alternative education.   The array of state-funded alternative learning and continuing education resources available presented a penetrating contrast to the alternative learning provision that exists for secondary school students in the Kaipara district of Northland, New Zealand.

Konocti has Lake County's lowest average parent education level, the highest percentage of free and reduced price school lunch (84%), and the highest percentage of English language learners (20% are of Hispanic or Latino ethnicity). At the alternative educational Highlands Academy (4-8), the school day starts with breakfast for all.

The district has four elementary schools, one high school, four schools offering alternative education programmes and the Konocti Adult School (18 years and older). Then there is the Court School but this is run through another authority.

Having visited the district in August-September 2008, I was interested in observing any changes and developments made in the interval, particularly since the State of California faced a debt mountain of $US17 billion and had made cuts to the education budget in each of

the last four years. Education absorbed nearly a quarter of the State's budget. In the three years prior to 1 July 2012, the Konocti School District had had to cut $US3.6 million from its budgets and for the 2012-13 year it has been forced to cut its finances by a further $US2.8 million.

Thus, it was astonishing to discover that in the academic year 2011-12, two new schools had been created to better meet the needs of the students in the Konocti School District. The schools' buildings were not new but the philosophies that underpinned their creation were. (Even the District Office is housed in the oldest school building in the district.)

The District Superintendent, Dr William MacDougall, had just been appointed in July 2008, and I first met him in September of that year. He retired at the end of June 2012 but again made himself available for interview in September 2012. His unified vision and determination to create an environment for success for all students was backed by his focus on encouraging creative and intentional strategies to support individual students and their families. Hence his strong support for the array of state-funded alternative learning and continuing education resources – "California leads the nation in terms of alternative education."

My particular interest was in the mechanism for student admission to alternative educational programmes and the extent to which 'student voice' and the wishes of families are taken into account in the decision-making process. Admission to continuation or alternative education is determined by the Student Review Team (SRT) which comprises senior representatives from all the relevant educational institutions. After consultation, the SRT decides which students go where.

During Dr MacDougall's tenure, SRT meetings took place most Wednesday afternoons throughout the school year. The regularity of these meetings allowed for out-of-district student transitions and itinerancy as well as the possibility of change of schooling for those students within the district, on the basis of better meeting their learning needs. The SRT meetings continue under new District Superintendent Donna Becnell*, who was charged with implementing the Board's new goals, one of which was "to redesign alternative education to align programs to student needs with reduced revenue resources."   In addition, the new Director of Alternative Education, Dr Jim Burger, had also been appointed the Principal of W.C.Carle High School, Highlands Academy and the Konocti Adult School. (It would be fascinating to read his job description.)

I was fortunate to be invited to the first SRT meetings for the academic year and a throng of students and their families were destined to have their designated '15 minutes' in the day-long event. Of course, those students attending on this day were those who had not finalised their courses of study prior to the long summer vacation. These individual meetings were chaired by the busily efficient Jim Burger. Despite the time constraints, individual students and their families ensured that no two conferences were alike, and the friendly and experienced leaders around the table contributed significantly to the outcomes.

With the exception of one student, a plethora of statistical data was on hand about the

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*A student representative was involved in the selection process of the new District Superintendent.

academic performances of each. The exception was a student who had just arrived from Florida and whose credentials were verified within two days. To this observer, such data dependence suggested initially an educational landscape in which a National Standards-type virus had taken a paralysing hold. However, the preparedness of the educators to listen to the students and their supporters was evident and the compassionate and caring responses and reasoned decisions were to be applauded. The vast majority of the eighteen students interviewed had their requests for admission to alternative educational programmes granted. Most sought admission to the continuation high school (W.C. Carle High School) or to independent study (R.H. Lewis School). No decisions were deferred and even the ex-Florida student's request was accepted pending documentation and an interview at the school of her choice.

The Mission Statement of W.C. Carle High School (90-100 students) is:

> *to build student futures through a learning environment where students can enhance their self-esteem as they acquire the academic skills, work and career skills (incorporating practical work experiences), communication skills, decision-making skills, problems solving skills, and interpersonal skills needed to become productive and responsible citizens.*

Reasons why students might be admitted to a continuation high school, such as W.C. Carle High, are:

- behind in credits
- poor attendance
- health problems
- not comfortable in a traditional high school
- need to work while attending school
- participation in the parenting teen programme
- small school setting and individualised instruction
- school-to-career programme participation

Core subjects at Carle High School include English, maths, science, social studies (U.S. history, civics, economics), vocational education, adult living (career skills, work experience, job shadowing), home economics (parenting skills, graphic design, culinary, arts & crafts, media production) physical education and community volunteerism.

The School Goal of Richard H. Lewis School (roll of no more than 130) is:

> *to implement an effective educational program in which students are assisted in acquiring the academic and life skills needed to become responsible citizens.*

The independent study option provides learning opportunities for:

- the pursuit of special educational interests
- exceptionally gifted students to progress at accelerated rate
- 'dropouts and potential dropouts', under age 18, to change direction
- students with medical problems
- pregnant minors and teen parents

- students with an immediate financial need to get a job
- students who must travel
- the 'home study family' to have professional educational services
- students with different learning styles
- students obtaining job training
- students who have experienced severe conflicts at the traditional school
- students who are needing to make up credits

In the days following the SRT meetings, I was given the opportunity to attend several enrolment sessions at the Richard H. Lewis School, conducted by Director Rick Evans. Some of the one-to-one meetings (plus NZ observer) were with familiar faces from the SRT meetings and others were re-enrolments for the new academic year. The mix of students attracted to independent study provided a vividly colourful palette but they all had in common a capacity to articulate their hopes and goals. Those students who had "experienced severe conflicts" at the conventional high school were of particular interest. The vastly experienced Rick Evans employed relaxed informality, and not a little humour, to tease out the stark and ugly reality of some students' performances and what changes would need to be made to avoid a repetition this coming year. Other students were clearly high performers who were simply thriving on independent study. Many enrolments are 'experimental', where the student's ability to succeed in this educational mode is not fully known. Such students are assessed after a two-week trial and sent back to their previous school if not performing well. New students had already been enrolled with the Principal's Secretary before meeting with the Director and had been familiarised with their responsibility to ensure they met their weekly appointments (one hour) and had completed the assigned work each week with a grade of D or better.

The final meeting was with the just retired District Superintendent Dr William MacDougall. It was good to meet him again and to talk about the educational interval of four years since we had last met. It was apparent that the State of California's debt had had a truly adverse effect on educational resourcing. (Indeed, some of the cutbacks had been declared illegal by the Federal Government and ordered to be restored.)

Dr MacDougall emphasised the crucial importance of relations between teachers and students since students are potentially in control. 'Student voice' must be authentic and any school council should meet on a regular basis and have impact.

Despite fiscal retrenchment, Dr MacDougall managed to establish a new concept school in his district in 2010-11 because he and his teaching colleagues saw a desperate need to better meet the needs of behaviour-challenged children in Years 4-8 (inclusive). Lucas Madrzyk (teacher, psychologist and counsellor) was appointed on site manager of Highlands Academy and some 35 of the district's neediest youngsters attend. Staffing comprises three teachers and two teacher aides. Classes are no larger than twelve students. Most of the students have Individual Educational Plans and all have full tummies before they start the learning day. Lucas emphasised the importance of working with the families and the teaching of life skills – "There is food in the house but you don't know how to cook." Communication and critical thinking skills are high on the curriculum agendum. In each of the two years the school has been running, fifty per cent of the intake has been returned to regular school, which is the aim of the Highlands Academy intervention.

In 2008, Dr MacDougall had been kind enough to send me a copy of notes he had prepared for a talk on *Making a Model School*. What stands out for me now as then were the following points at the conclusion of his notes about the importance of teacher-student relationships:

- Meet with parents and students prior to school year to form a personal learning plan. Assess learning styles and goals at this meeting. Listen carefully.
- Make sure that each student has an adviser who looks after his or her needs and credits. Every student needs at least one adult that they trust.
- Build trust by following through with commitments, keeping your word, and caring about the students' well being.
- Focus on students at your staff meetings, go over every student if you can – briefly. Work as a team to discuss what works best with each individual student.

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