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PRINCIPAL'S SABBATICAL

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An investigation to determine best practice
of a selective group of mid-decile schools in
curriculum delivery and pastoral care

Executive Summary

All of the six mid-decile schools visited and surveyed had a similar educational context and characteristics. These included:

- Students from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds
- Significant cohorts of students from socio-economic disadvantage and advantage
- Wide variation (by score and number) of student academic ability on entry to the school
- Culturally diverse, including significant cohorts from Maori, Pasifika or Asian backgrounds, although Pakeha were the predominant group
- Supplementary income from foreign fee paying students
- Positive Education Review Office reports in the three or four to five year review cycle
- Pass rates in NCEA at or above national averages
- All employed additional staffing (FTTE) above entitlement
- All principals conceded difficulty in meeting the curriculum and pastoral needs of students within their current resource base

The response by principals to their educational context including the characteristics of their mid-decile schools was varied. There were however, a number of common themes and practices supported by BES which gave the schools a high measure of academic and pastoral success. These include:

1. Strong pedagogical leadership by the principals. This included a commitment to their own ongoing professional development and direct interest and involvement in the teaching and learning processes within their schools.

   Staff and students clearly saw them as pedagogical leaders with a focus on raising achievement levels for all students.

2. A strong focus on the collection, analysis and discussion of achievement data at all levels of the school, including Board of Trustees, senior management, faculty heads, teachers, parents and students.

3. A significant investment in student support services, including careers and course advice, teacher aides, tutor groups, software programmes, specialist staff in literacy, numeracy, special needs, scholarship classes, enrichment programmes.
4. Extensive use of STAR, Gateway, ITO's and outside providers, including Trade Academies and Adventure Based Learning to meet the learning needs and career aspirations of students.
5. Heavy reliance on deans to provide strong pastoral and academic guidance to students.
6. Fostering a strong culture of achievement through goal setting, learning conferencing, monitoring staff support and celebration of success.
7. A commitment to innovation, risk taking and seeking out best practice in other schools.

This investigation has revealed that in this small sample of mid-decile schools, that despite the challenging educational context they find themselves in, including resourcing, that principals have developed a rich and varied range of practices to successfully meet the needs of their students.

Purpose
I had worked prior to my appointment to the principalship at John Paul College (decile 7) in a decile 9 school for seven years and a decile one school for ten years. My subsequent years as principal of John Paul College led me to the following observations:
- Higher and lower decile schools have more homogenous groups of students to work with.

  A mid-decile school has to provide a greater diversity of curriculum options for its students and cope with a wide range of pastoral issues.

- The resourcing available to a mid-decile school to meet the diverse learning and pastoral needs of students is restrictive. It does not receive the same level of funding of low decile schools (1-2) nor does it have the capacity to request large donations (school fees) often set by higher decile schools (9-10).

The educational context and diversity of students in a mid-decile school led me to believe that schools in this category would have to be highly resourceful, creative and prudent to meet the needs of its students.

The purpose of this investigation was therefore to carry out a qualitative review of a small sample (six schools) to determined whether indeed the context was similar to my own and how they managed to meet the needs of their students.

Limitations Of Investigation
This investigation has a number of limitations which are noted here.

- The sample size is very small, consisting of six schools within a fairly confined geographical region which does not include any of the major urban centres or the South Island.
- The investigation did not include research into low and high decile schools by way of comparison.
- There is little quantitative data of any statistical importance.

Methodology

I identified six mid-decile schools (5-8) with the following characteristics:

Positive Education Review Office Reports. The criteria for this included differentiated review cycles between 3-5 years, NCEA results at or above the national average, positive comments about the principal leadership of the school, positive comments about the learning culture within the schools, including meeting the needs of a wide range of students.

- School rolls similar to my own, between 1000 and 1600 approximately.
- Schools with a diverse ethnic makeup who draw their students from a wide geographical area and from different socio-economic backgrounds.
- Principals who were known to me personally and would be cooperative in the research.

Following identification and selection of the schools, I developed a short survey tool for principals to complete pre-visit. The survey tool was intended to illicit some basis background information and to facilitate discussion.

Once the survey tool was completed, I visited each school and spent approximately two hours in each school, mainly in discussion with the principal, other senior staff and visiting facilities of interest. Notes were taken at each school, these and the surveys formed the basis of this report.

Findings

The table below summarises the key data relevant to this investigation, including averages across the schools.

Summary of Data From Six Participating High Schools

• Average school roll • Average decile • Number of FTTE's employed over staffing entitlement	1285 students 7 2.6 FTTE
• Average number of ORRs funded students	18
• Average number of students on Special Needs register	28
• Average number of students requiring some form of learning support/ intervention	Year 9 = 64 Year 10 = 70
• Average number of students reading below chronological age	Year 9 = 75 Year 10 = 70
• Average number of students who would be scholarship candidates	Year 12 = 40 Year 13 = 35
• Average number of students in STAR funded courses	Year 12 = 320 Year 13 = 210
• Average number of students in Gateway	110
• Average class sizes in Year 9	28

• FTTE devoted to enrichment programmes	3
• FTTE devoted to scholarship classes	None
• Do you rely on secondary income sources to provide: i. A greater range of subject choices ii. Learning support iii. Reduction in class size iv. Enrichment / extension or scholarship classes	i. 4 Yes 2 No ii. 3 Yes 3 No iii. 0 Yes 6 No iv. 3 Yes 3 No
• Do you think the cohort of your students: i. Increases the complexity of the work for Deans / Guidance Department ii. Requires you to provide a wide range of subjects/ courses iii. Requires you to deploy more staffing and resourcing to meet the learning and pastoral needs of students	i. 5 Yes 1 No ii. 6 Yes 0 No iii. 6 Yes 0 No
• Can you describe the range of pastoral issues your staff have to contend with: a. Truancy b. Substance Abuse c. Physical Violence d. Verbal Abuse e. Bullying f. Cyberbullying g. Disruptive Behaviour	a. Very often b. Seldom c. Seldom d. Regularly e. Regularly f. Regularly g. Very often

Discussion of Data

The data collected from the questionnaire and further probing while on site has led to the following synthesis.

- All the schools used secondary income sources to support curriculum delivery and pastoral care in their schools. With the exception of one, foreign fee paying students were the main source.
- Additional staffing in the form of teacher or teacher aides was most common.
- All schools were catering for significant cohorts of students with special needs and / or deficits in learning i.e below their chronological age in reading, writing and numeracy.
- In addition to this, they were meeting the needs of scholarship candidates and those undertaking courses on STAR and Gateway.
- No additional staffing was deployed to support scholarship candidates, relying instead on the voluntary efforts of staff.
- Likewise, no additional staffing was used to reduce class sizes which were at a tolerable level of 28 in Year 9.
- Pastoral issues of greatest concern were truancy, verbal abuse, bullying and disruptive behaviour. The more serious disciplinary issues, such as physical violence and substance abuse happened infrequently.

School Practices and Culture

As the above data indicates principals of these schools face challenging educational contexts, including resourcing. Despite this, their schools are high performing, as evidenced by ERO reports and NCEA results.

I have identified below aspects of the school's culture and management practices which have allowed these principals to achieve high levels of success with their students.

Pedagogical Leadership By The Principal

1. All principals give primacy to the quality of teaching and learning as the core activity of the school and their prime responsibility. It was manifested in the following ways:

    *   Presentations to staff, parents and students on aspects of quality teaching and learning. This included analysis of results, current research on effective pedagogy, motivational talks and sharing resources.
    *   Participation in learning and curriculum forums by the principal, including professional learning communities, faculty meetings, NCEA information evenings for parents, self-review meetings of the curriculum, parent teacher meetings.
    *   Visibility of the principal in the learning context including visiting classrooms, taking relief lessons, checking school reports and examination papers. Giving feedback on curriculum plans, discussing results with faculty heads and individual teachers.
    *   Principals commitment to their own professional development as a leader of learning. This included attending regional and national principal's conferences, visiting other schools, online learning courses, action-research in their own schools and professional reading.

2. All of the schools in this investigation had a strong commitment to the collection, analysis and discussion of achievement data. Practices included administering assessment tools, such as Asstle, PAT's, STAR and Burt Word. These results were cross referenced with national standards data from contributing schools.

    Likewise, NCEA data was carefully and systematically analysed. The data analysis became a source of discussion by the Board of Trustees, senior leadership teams, faculty heads and teachers. In three of the schools, the NCEA data was presented and discussed by the principal with students at full and year level assemblies.

    I saw evidence that the discussions informed decisions about timetabling, course design, professional development, learning support and further areas of evaluation.

    In some instances, it also formed part of the school's self-review processes and linked to the school's charter and annual plan.

    The overall impression was that the principals were evidence driven and that this evidence helped determine decisions about student need, teacher capacity building and goal setting.

3. All schools recognised they had a significant number of students with special needs or learning deficits and as a consequence, have deployed considerable resources to meeting their needs. Measures taken include:

    *   Employing additional teacher aides with expertise in assessment, literacy, numeracy and developing IEPs.

- Professional development for staff with a focus on differentiated learning, ability groups, subject literacy, conferencing and individualised learning.
- Construction of a specific careers or learning resources.

4.   In the upper school the schools recognised the need for a variety of pathways to meet student needs, particularly the non-academic students.

Extensive use was made of STAR funding and Gateway. In most schools students entering Year 12 and 13 were carefully screened and assessed by deans or the Careers Department. IEPs were developed for them and their progress carefully monitored.

In one school, a Trade Academy was viewed as a positive pathway for the students and school. In another considerable time and effort went into selecting ITO standards. Another school had an extensive Adventure Based Learning programme, while another ran a successful auto-engineering and small motors course.

Student Data
1. All the principals interviewed became professionally aware that given the wider spectrum of ability in their mid decile schools, the collection, analysis and use of achievement data was going to be of critical importance.

   Practices developed by the principals included:
   a. The use of standardised tests sold by various universities and other providers.
   b. Three schools developed their own entrance tests which were a mixture of PAT, Asttle and STAR.
   c. Tests in some schools were administered in the main contributing schools in December prior to enrolment or on their first day of school.

2. One school did an outstanding job in analysing the data, producing a booklet for all teachers, which contained information identifying students with special needs, their learning barriers, special abilities, stanines, curriculum levels and suggested ability grouping.

3. Four of the schools surveyed took a 'team approach' to data analysis and sharing, bringing together the Deputy Principal Curriculum, Dean, SENCO, RTLB and counsellor (or equivalent). My observation of one of these meetings is that it allowed participants to take a 'whole school approach' as well as identify the various programmes within the school which might be called upon to assist the students including academic counselling, homework centre, a computerised programme called Successmaker, teacher aid support and special abilities (GATE) classes.

4. In two of the schools there was considerable transparency in sharing this data (with names deleted) and recommendations to senior managers, trustees and faculty heads. In three of the schools, the information became the basis for the first parent teacher interview. In one of the schools, part of their academic counselling programme, the data was discussed over a forty minute period with the caregivers, student and academic mentor. It then became part of their goal setting for the year.

Investment In Student Support Services

1. I was struck by the diversity and depth of services provided by all the schools. It captured the important theme of 'individualised learning' which scaffolded on the rich and detailed achievement data schools had collected on their students.

2. There was considerable variety in services offered but I did identify key services and the rationale for them. These include:

• Careers and Course Advise	-	highly significant for goal setting, particularly boys, providing motivation and achievable milestones. Increasing complexity of NCEA, multiplicity of pathways and pre-requisites for tertiary programmes.
• Teacher Aids	-	highly effective in and outside of class for some students who need one-to-one tuition, tailored programmes and continuous assessment. Took the pressure off classroom teachers.
• I.C.T	-	software programmes that developed student ownership of learning, suited tactile students, self-marking, learn at your own pace. Allowed the teacher to become a facilitator of learning.
• Voluntary tutor groups, Scholarship classes, homework club	-	Delivered by highly passionate and committed teachers to meet the specific learning needs of students, including remedial and scholarship candidates. Resulted in enhanced learning outcomes and positive relationships between students and teachers.

The Extensive Use Of External Providers

1. The principals and Boards of Trustees in the sample schools freely acknowledged the limitation on resources within their own schools to meet the specific learning needs and career aspirations of students.

2. In all of the schools the principal and at least one other senior manager had extensive knowledge of STAR funding, Gateway, Trade Academies and what was available for students through ITO's.

3. I was impressed that considerable planning and selection was deployed to ensure there was a 'best fit' between the needs of students and the outside providers. All schools had in place a comprehensive pastoral programme to monitor attendance, behaviour and achievement levels. Interventions, if needed, were made quickly by school staff to mitigate risk to the students and providers.

4. My observations of students and staff involved with these external providers was that the interest and motivation levels remained high, students perceived it as a privilege and success rates were well above expectations. A side benefit was that the students also improved their performance and behaviour in the school setting.

5. All of the principals spoke of the benefit of developing positive relationships in the community with local businesses, social agencies and other educational providers.

6. It was acknowledged by four of the sampled principals that the use of outside providers did create difficulties in timetabling, transport, completion rates of NCEA,

including literacy and numeracy. In two cases, the school and parents struggled to meet the cost of the programmes.

Reliance On Deans To Support Students

1. In three of the schools, it was clearly evident that Deans had an extensive portfolio in their support of students. It had shifted considerably from a traditional 'disciplinary function' to a pastoral role and academic guide.

2. In the three schools I visited, where Deans took on the above roles, they had responsibility for the following:
- Explaining and disseminating the academic and pastoral background of students
- Developing pastoral and academic goal setting for students
- Monitoring the academic progress of students and liaising with parents when concerns arose
- Referring students to the SENCO, RTLB, teacher In Charge of ESOL, Homework Centre

3. The Deans were provided with significant and generous professional development to ensure they could fulfil these wide-ranging functions.

Fostering A Culture Of Achievement

1. A strong culture of fostering achievement existed in all the schools sampled. Examples of specific practices included:
- Goal setting for students recorded in diaries and shared with parents
- Establishing student mentors and role models in sport, academic, co-curricular
- Recognition of achievement in the form of badges, certificates, itemised uniform, honours board
- Celebration of achievement at full school assemblies, year level assemblies and by classroom teachers
- Personal invitation to student(s) to the principal's office
- Extensive exposure in newsletters and local media, of student achievement, including placing newspaper articles on school noticeboards.

2. Learning conferencing was an embedded practice in two of the schools. Students were presented with their own achievement data, had it explained to them and were able to dialogue about it in relation to their own goal setting. Students were guided to set achievable goals that stretched them.

   The learning conference I experienced were incredibly positive, detailed and with clear learning outcomes owned by the student.

3. Four of the schools visited had a strong emphasis on 'resilience' as part of their culture of achievement. This was most often led by the counselling department and deans. It included motivational speakers, DVD presentations and counselling advice to students who failed.

A Commitment To Innovation And Risk Taking

1. All six principals surveyed were active members of their regional principals association including delivering workshops on best practice in their own schools.

2. Five of the principals had been, or were, engaged in formal tertiary programmes or working alongside a mentor on professional practice. This included action research within their school, experienced principals programme through Auckland University, a Masters in Education and giving advice to the Ministry of Education through a reference group.

3. All of the principals were 'outward looking' in their professional practice as evidenced by the fact that they had developed a culture of visiting (or their senior managers) other schools where they believed best practice was taking place or inviting practitioners into their school to conduct workshops.

4. The principals encouraged curriculum leaders, deans and senior managers to be reflective practitioners and to take calculated risks as part of problem solving. This often involved giving them funding and time. Examples included:

- Establishing a homework centre
- Boys only class
- Peer Support
- Establishing a Successmaker programme
- Introduction of software programmes for distance learning, learning support and professional development for teachers

Conclusion

Part of my sabbatical experience devoted to this investigation and report has been a professionally enriching experience and of benefit to John Paul College. It has allowed me to import into the school, best practice from my colleagues.

The overwhelmingly theme is that despite the particular economic, curriculum and pastoral challenges faced by mid-decile schools, the principals of those schools exercised their professional leadership and judgement to ensure the success of their students.