

Sabbatical Report from Jeff Hayward, Principal, Waimata Valley School, Gisborne

Purpose of my Study

In setting up this report I have to first acknowledge the support from the Waimata Valley School community. As a sole-charge Principal it is always difficult to find staff willing and capable to undertake relief teaching- Principal duties. Having overcome this problem I was able to focus on the main purpose of my study to look at and compare the rural teaching scene in Queensland, Australia with my home zone, the East Coast, North Island New Zealand.

Background

I have been a registered teacher both in Queensland and New Zealand for many years. My experience thus far in Queensland has only been several days relief work whereas in New Zealand my teaching career spans 30 years including 12 years of rural Principalship in 3 different small schools on the East Coast.

Activities Undertaken

In Term 3 2008 I left Gisborne to spend 8 weeks on the Gold Coast, Australia. Initially a lot of my time was spent analysing the data already available online via Education Queensland. Queensland has a centrally controlled education system that means operational policies are forwarded to each school and means that a consistency prevails and there are few issues of confusion.

The focus of my study was on the management and governance issues of small schools on the East Coast in comparison to small schools in Queensland. Focus questions were drawn up to interview the Principal's of the schools visited in Australia.

During my visit to Queensland rural schools I set up some focus questions that were used when interviewing the rural Principal's in Australia.

1. What are the parent roles/duties attached to the school?
2. What percentage of time is spent in management/teaching?
3. Professional development - how much are you entitled to and how readily available is it?
4. Curriculum - is curriculum dictated to the school or do you have flexibility to create your own?
5. Standardised testing - what are the requirements to do so and how is it reported?
6. What specialist teachers are attached to the school?

7. How are the school's finances/property controlled?
8. Pre-schoolers - how are they catered for in the school environment?
9. Staffing issues - can teacher aides/relief and teachers/administration positions be filled easily?
10. How much release time was available to principal's per week - What was the main focus of work completed in this time?

Findings

In response to these questions I was able to formulate answers that reflected the majority of Principal's views. The questions were put to 6 rural Principals from the Gold Coast and Roma areas of Queensland, Australia.

- Responses

1. The P&C (Parent and Community) Committee is a focal point of all schools and is especially a large feature of rural schools. There are usually 5 members on each committee and they operate in a similar way to the School Committee in NZ pre-Board of Trustees days. They all specialise in fund raising and organising school gala days, sports days and what would be referred to as "celebration" activities.
2. The 6 Principal's interviewed had very similar statistics on the percentage of time spent on management compared to teaching duties. The figures averaged 30% time spent on management/administration duties and 70% spent in contact with pupils in a teaching and non-teaching role.
3. Professional development opportunities were readily available to rural Principals and funding for these was through Queensland education. All interviewed stated that they had to be wary of over attendance as their communities were very conscientious that a teaching Principal's first priority was to the day to day management of their school. In this respect they had similar issues to what is a common concern here on the East Coast of NZ i.e. finding suitable courses near to their rural school, having a relief teacher available for the length of the course and having adequate budget money to cover the course costs.
4. Curriculum was an area that I was very interested in. Each Australian State has its own set of curriculum. The Queensland schools do have set guidelines for each area of the curriculum and they use these as they are presented. The big push by Queensland is to develop phonic skills. In all schools the title "Phonics" appears daily in their junior timetables. Resources are provided to each school to implement these programmes; including networked computers provided on a per head basis. Whereas schools in NZ have to allocate large amounts of money to purchasing, repairing and replacing computers the Queensland rural schools are allocated computers and have access to fulltime technicians funded by Education Queensland to maintain them. Curriculum in Queensland is very structured and largely governed by the year level of the pupils. For example all Yr 4 pupils work on the same level in Mathematics - individual differences

dictate the standard achieved. The

5. The use of standardised testing is a major reason for the structured approach. At present in Queensland all pupils Yr 3, 5 and 7 are subject to state wide testing in numeracy and literacy. The results of these are then recorded in the annual report of each school that is presented online in every school's website. All school's have a website regardless of size. The rural schools of Queensland have a problem also common on the East Coast of NZ in that it is difficult to present statistics on a pupil's achievement while still keeping a form of anonymity. Reporting to the B.O.T on pupil achievement in a very small school causes difficulty with keeping anonymity and most of my fellow rural Principals in NZ have difficulty with this issue. Queensland schools who feel this is a problem are exempt from publishing anything that may identify individuals. Within the Queensland State testing, pupils identified as being below a certain level are entitled to state funded tuition and there are a large number of teacher tutors making a living from this funding. The funding is allocated to the pupil in question not the school they attend. In the rural schools visited the testing regime was not given as being a major issue by the Principals. Their teaching was not about teaching to the tests and they had no pressure to achieve to any standard set by the state or the community members.
6. Specialist teachers are attached to or visit all Queensland State schools. The rural schools all had specialist P.E and L.O.T.E (languages other than English) teachers visiting weekly. In the 6 small rural schools I visited all had 2-3 hours of P.E and 1 1/2 hours of L.O.T.E time allocated each week. In this time specialists in these areas come into the school and the teaching Principal's get to have non contact time. Three of the six schools had a specialist music teacher visit their schools as well but on a fortnightly basis. The schools had access to advisors and all the schools were happy with the level of service they provided. Education Queensland still uses rural advisors and this is a service that was removed from our East Coast rural schools several years ago.
7. The issue of property was interesting. Most of the rural schools on the East Coast have a lot of difficulty in getting contractors to even quote for capital or cyclic maintenance work. Under the central authority of Education Queensland cyclic maintenance is entirely their responsibility. Schools do have input however regarding paint colourings and floor coverings etc. In regards to capital works this is based on enrolment numbers and general wear and tear requirements. The amount of paperwork needed to generate property improvements was significantly less under the Queensland system. Most Principal's there said the biggest difficulty was trying to persuade Education Queensland to spend money on the small and older schools. Some of the problems I noticed were completely alien to me - keeping the school snake proof and stopping white ants from completely eating all the wood in the buildings being the main issues.
8. The major worry that affects small school rural Principals in NZ are the enrolment numbers in our schools around March and July. In regards to sole charge and 2 teacher schools the arrival of new pupils just before these dates

is highly desirable.

The Queensland system is very different once again. Unlike our schools, there is only one intake per year. In the year in which a child turns 5 years old (as long as this is before 1 July of the coming year) they are allowed to attend school. These children are known as “Preps” for that year. The year after this they begin Yr 1. A child turning 5 years old after 1 July does not enrol in school until the next intake the following year.

For each of these “Preps” in a rural school teacher aide hours are allocated to a school. One school with 8 pupils had one prep pupil and they were entitled to 10 teacher aide hours per week just for that one pupil. Resources are supplied to each prep pupil and at the end of the year the pupil has the basic skills, especially in the area of phonics, to begin their education as a Yr 1. Large urban schools have got a separate block for their prep pupils that operates as an on site nursery and utilise the facilities and staff from the whole school.

9. Staffing issues in Queensland rural schools are similar to those experienced here on the East Coast, NZ. Administrative and teaching staffs, other than the Principal are usually sourced from the local community. Sole charge and 2 teacher schools remain a stepping stone for Principals through the Queensland system. Teachers there apply for Principal positions to Education Queensland. Positions are allocated by a central authority on an experience/suitability for the position criteria. All rural Principals interviewed were in their late 20's and early 30's and were confident they could move up to Deputy Principal and Principal positions in larger schools because of the historical evidence that confirms this. The East Coast Rural Principals did not see their positions as being helpful to moving up to higher graded appointments. Several of my colleagues were fearful that being too long in rural schools risked them of being typecast in that roll, with little hope for promotion.
10. The amount of non-teaching Principal release time was similar in both countries. The sole charge and 2 teacher schools on the East Coast, NZ have from 1 ½ to 2 ½ release days per week for administrative purposes. Our Queensland counterparts had 1 or 2 days per week plus the additional non contact time available when the specialist teachers were present in their schools.
East Coast rural Principals interviewed said that they perform on average 50% administrative management functions and 50% B.O.T related duties in their non contact (release) time. The Queensland Principals are free from many governance issues and were able to devote nearly all their time to the day-to-day management. They did say that analysing the government standardised testing did take a lot of time, but this was confined to the short period that they are administered, marked and analysed.

Conclusion

Overall I was very impressed with the rural schools that I visited in Queensland and felt that they had given me a valuable insight into a different system that had many good points and then allowed me to make judgements on the benefits and shortcomings of each.

It was strange to hear of the different education systems in each state of Australia and how difficult it was for teachers when transferring from one state to another. All teachers in Australia must be registered and each state has its own registration. Principals who had taught exclusively in Queensland had little idea of the systems in other states and no knowledge of the NZ system.

I spent a lot of time explaining how my school operated and the concept of self-managing schools in NZ was the focus of many discussions. I don't see Queensland adopting a similar scheme based on the views expressed. I have significantly more administrative work to undertake than any of the rural schools visited.

One comment that came through in very school visited was the perceived lack of time available to undertake the demands of the role of professional leader in a small rural school.

My personal view based on these observations indicates that small/rural school Principals are stressed to find any definitive line between work and personal life commitments.

The pressure of doing a good job, but realising that there is always more to do, make the art of reflecting and celebrating successes not as frequent as it should be.

Our Australian counterparts definitely had more free support from advisors and other experts in the daily running of their schools. I do enjoy a lot of the freedom in curriculum and governance issues that our education system provides, although it would be good to have on a central authority to call upon when things don't go to plan.

The opportunity for rest and reflection coupled with the opportunity to share ideas with other Principals was an experience I will remember for a long time.

