

Principal Sabbatical Report

Title " Middle Schooling in NZ"

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School Feilding Intermediate School.

Period of time sabbatical covered

Term three and week one of term four 2013.

Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank the Feilding Intermediate School Board of Trustees, the Ministry of Education and Teach NZ for enabling me to research an educational topic in a quality manner without the pressures and constraints usually associated with regular principalship responsibilities.

It was also invaluable to be able to read and research the topic from historical articles provided by a past president of the New Zealand Intermediate and Middle Schooling Association Inc. , Mr Doug Thwait. I thank him for allowing me to have access to these articles.

The senior management team who all filled higher management roles while I was on this leave. I thank and acknowledge their true professional approach to education at Feilding Intermediate School.

Finally it was great speaking to representatives at the various middle schools visited and noting their official and personal views on the situations relevant to their particular Middle School experiences and to those more general and appropriate NZ wide.

Purpose

To seek knowledge about the Middle Schooling system operating in NZ at present with a view to possibly adapting our present Feilding Intermediate School "Centres of Interest" approach into a Middle School if the research clearly showed improved positive pupil achievement and success.

Background and Rational

Feilding Intermediate has operated a "Centre of Interest" enrolment system for the past ten years. It has five specific centres of interest that parents/caregivers and pupils can select from when enrolling. The pupils are able to change centres if they are not suited to their first selection. The learning areas are delivered to the pupils using the identified characteristics of each centre. The result of using this approach has been the marked improvement in pupil engagement in their learning and their attendance at school.

As a result of this approach, the pupils in year eight especially have commented about their willingness to stay at FIS for another year and in some instances, with the approval of the pupil, their parents and staff, the pupil has stayed. It has also happened that younger year six pupils have started at the intermediate and thrived.

With these points in mind, it was natural to think about the possibility of creating a middle school based system to compliment the "Centre of Interest" approach.

Methodology

School visits arranged with the following considerations in mind.

- A local example within close proximity to our school .
- A rural traditional community example similar to that of Feilding.
- Two acknowledged successful examples who had operated for more than ten years and would have experienced a prolonged operation as a middle school.

Rational for School Visits

Direct observation and personal experiences of Middle School principals, teachers, administrators and BOT's can put written research findings into a clearer perspective.

Create summary observations for each school visited and use these to create an overall summary and conclusion section for the BOT and staff

Related Readings were gained from Mr Thwait, Australian Journal of Middle Schooling and internet sites.

Guide Questions.

These were established to ensure a standardized focus at each school and to have a well rounded research frame work.

-What is Middle Schooling?

-What existing NZ examples are there to view and their special characteristics?

-What evidence is there to support their existence in NZ?

-What physical arrangements would be required to operate a middle school in Feilding?

How would a change influence staffing and their responsibilities?

-What procedures are required from the MOE to allow any such change?

-What views would the contributing schools and the local high school have towards such a change?

-How would our local Feilding community react to a possible change?

-How would the administration aspects of an intermediate be changed if a middle school approach was adopted?

What special adaptations to the learning programme would be required?

-What age and levels would suit a possible Feilding Middle school?

-What financial issues are important to be aware of when considering a possible change?

-What staffing factors are important if a change was to be considered?

-How would it be best to inform the present BOT's and staff of the above findings?

Findings

Ministry of Education.

The school allocated MOE liaison officer met with me and we discussed the situation relating to Middle Schooling . It was quickly established that the information requested was best explained by using the “ Background Notes on Change of Class” for Board of Trustees

Valuable information and answers to the guide questions were obtained from the following sections from this document.

- Educational Viability
- Financial Viability
- Costs of the Change of Class
- The application
- Parental Consultation
- Staff consultation
- Implications for Education Provisions in the Wider community
- implications for School Organization
- Property/Resource implications
- Processing the application and Consultation as required by the Act.

School Visit Summaries

School One

The school had changed its name to that of a Junior High School. It was this only in name and not actually enrolling year nine and above pupils as originally intended.

It had experienced many difficulties with community consultation and more recently with the four local high schools fiercely competitive approach towards enrolments.

They were opposed to the future development of a middle school system.

The school roll had dropped and there was often confusion for prospective parents and caregivers about the overall operation of the school.

School 2

This was a traditional rural school similar to the physical setting of Feilding.

A real positive reaction to the theories relating to the middle schooling system. The school had thrived if the local high schools reputation was not that high. It alternatively struggled to retain year nines if the high school was operating well. It was the norm to retain only a small number of year nine and ten pupils each year. They were often viewed as pupils being kept back and not as the ideal learning environment for pupils of the "Tween" years.

It was a continual "sell" situation every year to inform parents and caregivers of the benefits of middle schooling as compared with the traditional high school alternative.

School Three

This is a well established Middle School that is often the example stated as a model middle school in NZ. Again it was readily acknowledged that the ideals of Middle Schooling were positively embraced by the staff and BOT's.

The fact that an enrolment schemes operated for all secondary schools in the area, helped establish pupil numbers in the year nine and ten areas at the end of each year so staffing could be confidently completed.

The school regularly had to “sell” the ideas of Middle Schooling and its benefits to the pupils and their families. They were advertising and informing parents and caregivers about the benefits to their children of the stability of staffing of three years as compared with a transition and change to high school as a year nine. They stressed the fact that teachers at the middle school knew their pupils better and could support and work with parents in a more meaningful direct manner throughout the year.

It was seen as a negative situation if pupils remained at the Middle School. They were viewed as being kept back.

The local high schools were all very competitive for enrolments and used financial and sporting team incentives to entice enrolments. This was also done by the Middle School to try and combat and retain their year eight pupils.

The school year nines are not viewed as a special needs group and were in many cases academic accelerant pupils. The group were acknowledged as the pupil leaders and pupil voice of the school.

School Four

This Middle school operated in a similar manner to the Feilding Intermediate Centre of Interest arrangement. They used four “whanau’ type groups across the middle school. It had operated in excess of ten years and so a proven model to compare Feilding with. The difference was that the entire school operated using a school wide timetable similar to a secondary school model.

Again there was the annual need to inform parents and caregivers of the positive benefits of continuing their children’s middle year education at such a school. After many years operating as a middle school, it was not a natural process to stay and complete middle school education at the same school as year seven and eight.

Use of these Observations.

As part of the weekly staff professional development meeting schedule, the four school web sites were viewed by Feilding Intermediate staff and they were able to ask questions about the visits. The written summaries and observations in full were available for the staff to read and ask relevant searching questions. This procedure really opened up the whole Middle Schooling topic and the implications that it could have on our present "Centres of Interest" programmes.

It also gave a valuable lead into the general staff feeling towards such a move that could be included in the report to the BOT and help with the overall final recommendation.

Implications and Recommendations

All schools visited totally agree that Middle Schooling is the best style of education for pupils between the ages of ten through to fourteen. They also agreed that until the government positively supported the system and ideals, nothing would happen to really get middle schooling operating as a option to the existing full primary and intermediate schooling.

To change to a Middle Schooling system requires very carefully consultation with the immediate school community. It is important that all community parties are given the opportunity to be informed accurately and with the opportunity to question all parties as to the positives and negatives of such a system.

If a middle school structure is in place, the major part of a senior management and all staff is to continually inform parents and caregivers of the positive advantages of staying at the Middle School to complete their year nine and ten education. This would regularly distract from the important role of developing learning programmes and leading educational processes.

Even the acknowledged succeeding Middle Schools have not been able to establish that natural culture within their school and their local communities where the majority of year eights transition onto the year nine and ten education in the middle school area.

Where their friends go is where the pupils want to go. The "Tween Years" have this strong characteristic and it influences the enrolment patterns of so many pupils.

Secondary schools are very competitive and enrolment number conscious as it influences strongly their staffing and available subject options. High schools, in many instances, seem to direct contributing schools in the direction and focus that they see as important for the year nine pupils that are to attend their school.

The present highly successful "Centres of Interest" would not necessarily help attract our year nines to stay at Feilding Intermediate School. They would always see the traditional rural high school as their natural secondary school pathway as did most of the schools visited.

I recommended to the BOT's that we not pursue the possible development of a Middle School in Feilding.

Benefits

This sabbatical leave has enabled me to spend quality time reading and researching a topic that has for a number of years interested me and appeared to me to be a natural progression for the "Centre of Interest" approach .

A focus on further refinement and enhancement of intermediate programmes and characteristics will be the immediate priority for 2014 seeking to include more academic achievement using the "Centre of Interest" as the driving vehicle.

It also enabled me to reflect on my direct involvement in education and what the future may hold.

I appreciate now the need to self reflect and recognise signs and symptoms of educational fatigue and tiredness that previously were not acknowledged or recognised.

As an educational leader I will be encouraging colleagues and staff to apply for a similar sabbatical leave as it certainly adds enthusiasm and quality to their professional careers.