

Addington Primary School

Christchurch

**PRINCIPALS' SABBATICAL
REPORT**

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Addington School Board of Trustees for supporting my application for sabbatical leave. I would also like to acknowledge and thank the Addington School Leadership Team for their support and for the incredibly professional way they have managed the school in my absence. It continues to be my privilege to work with such a skilled and caring team. To the staff and community of Addington School, a great big thank you for your support and for the support you have all given to the Leadership Team during the term.

During the course of my sabbatical I have also had the privilege to spend time in a number of schools and time talking with a number of outstanding principals. I would like to thank you all for giving so freely of your time, for supporting me in my work and for the amazing way in which you all care for both your students and your communities.

Purpose

To investigate achievement in low decile schools and to use my findings to assist Addington School to continue to lift student achievement and to address poverty issues as they relate to our school.

This will enable

- Improved strategic decision making about student achievement
- Empowerment of students
- Highly engaging practices to be implemented.

Key Inquiry Question

Some low decile schools are negating the effects of poverty and significantly raising student's achievement levels.

What are they doing and what can be done to make the most impact on this?

Overview

Addington School prides itself on the work it is doing in relation to raising student achievement. Student Achievement is acknowledged as our core business and something that we can never lose sight of. We have always managed to keep this in the forefront of our minds even when dealing with issues of poverty and welfare that can have a major impact on this.

When questioned by our board about areas of concern, we have found ourselves finding excuses for those not making the progress that we would hope for. It has been easy to fall back on the fact that we struggle to engage many of our parents in their children's learning and to use this lack of partnership as one of our major excuses for any lack of progress being made.

After being held to account and churning out the same old excuses I decided it was time to examine this issue more closely. The revelation that we were in fact '*just finding excuses*' came as no surprise and the time was right to visit other similar schools to Addington and to take the time to read what some of the experts say on this issue.

Schools Visited

- 4 Schools in Christchurch
- 2 School in Wellington
- 1 School in Auckland

Key Questions

1. What does poverty look like and what impact does this have in your school?

In all the schools I visited and all the reading I have done there are many commonalities about what poverty looks like both here in New Zealand and globally. The parent communities of these schools are a mix of few professional, many beneficiaries and what is coming to be known as '*the new poor*' (those that are working and earning minimum wage which does not cover basic living costs).

In today's economic climate this translates to a lack of income to provide the necessities of life.

- Food is a common issue with there either being no food, not enough or inadequate food.
- Housing is also proving to be an ever-increasing concern for families especially in Christchurch. There are stories of families living in their cars, being charged exorbitant rents for what can only be described as, a cabin, in a motor camp or dealing with the uncertainty of trying to find affordable rental accommodation.
- Health concerns are all too common. Families are unable to access the full range of health supports they or their children may require due to cost constraints.
- Unfortunately clothing continues to be an area that is common to all schools I visited. Children present with inadequate clothing for the weather conditions they face on a daily basis.
- Truancy and attendance become issues as these families resort to keeping their children at home because they cannot provide lunch etc. In an effort to maintain their pride these families sacrifice their children's education.

- This lack of income means that there is never anything left for the extras. These families struggle to pay for stationery, school trips etc and there certainly is not enough to provide the experiences our children need to learn. Holidays are just a dream.

It is not rocket science to see what the impact of these issues would be on any human being no matter their age. For our students however, the impact is huge and there is a certain amount of risk attached to these children:

- Emotional and Social Challenges
- Acute and Chronic Stress
- Learning delays and or issues
- Health and possibly Safety issues

When all of the above are in place they present a great challenge to both social and academic success.

Emotional and Social Challenges; this is all about attachment and for children living in poverty these attachments may be weakened and there is often a lack of healthy learning exploration. The 'soft' or social side of children runs the brain, their feelings and their behaviour and these three combined run cognition or learning.

Acute stress is severe and is usually the result of exposure to trauma that could be in the form of abuse or violence. Chronic stress is elevated anxiety that is sustained over time. Children living in poverty experience more chronic stress. (Almeida, Neupert, Bank and Serido, 2005) This can have a massive effect on brain development and therefore academic success and social competence. One can only imagine what it must be like to come to school and be expected to engage in the learning when all you can do is worry about what you will eat at lunchtime, if there will actually be a meal on the table that night and to wonder if you will be warm that night and be able to sleep. What we do know is that little or no learning will take place unless some or all of those issues are addressed.

It is a known fact that the very students we are talking about start school a step behind the others. For them there has been a lot less cognitive stimulation provided by their parents.

Health issues often lead to absence from school, which we know these students can ill afford. Absences and lateness begin to form a pattern of truancy that will become entrenched if we do not change things.

2. How do schools engage with whanau in particular Maori and Pasifika?

This has probably been the most interesting part of my inquiry. Lack of parental engagement has been touted by many, including myself, as the reason for low achievement levels. For years we as educators have focussed on the need to develop positive relationships with our student's parents. As a result of school visits and reading I have come to the conclusion that this idea is not wrong but should not be the only focus of our efforts. Nor should it be the excuse we continue to use. Our students are our core business and our focus must be 100% on developing positive relationships with them. The relationship with their parents will come as a result of the safe and secure relationships we form with their children.

3. How can schools go about negating the effects of poverty on achievement?

First and foremost schools need to understand where our students come from, what they bring to class each day and what it is we at schools can do to make a positive impact on all of that.

Every child in school has 7 days a week x 24 hours a day = 168 hours per week. Take away the time spent sleeping, eating, grooming, medical, transporting, moving, looking after siblings, dealing with whanau and other disruptions = 12 – 13 hours per day x 7 days per week = 84 – 91 hours.

This leaves each child with a maximum of 84 hours per week or 4368 per year. Out of that we have 25 school hours per week for 40 weeks per year to change students' lives = 1000 hours per year.

1000 out of a possible 4368 = 22% of students waking time.

Our 1000 hours have to be so incredibly spectacular that they make up for the other hours in a student's life. Yes, we have to be that good! Schools need to ask the question, Are we that good?

It is then clear that we cannot afford to waste any time during a school day. We cannot allow a child to be bored or disengaged. Schools therefore need to be nonstop, full of activity, challenge, correction, support and enrichment.

Our new mantra must be, **HIGH EXPECTATIONS! NO EXCUSES!**

To make this change we must acknowledge that things will stay the same if we (the people) stay the same! If we truly are committed to wanting things to change then we must change!

If we want change for our students then we must look to change not only ourselves but also the environment they spend a lot of time in each day.

Critical to schools achieving this is the quality of the people and the relationships in the organisation. All staff must accept his or her share of the responsibility for this and feel collectively accountable for the results.

It is time to stop thinking that stuffing content in will achieve the desired results. We need more than content. In fact we need capacity as well. Brains can change so we need to switch to enrichment programmes especially in the area of Early Childhood Education. If we design enough high quality experiences over time we will get positive change.

We need to invest in our staff and take care of them. After all it is they who take care of our students. We must support ongoing collaboration and strong staff relationships through quality team building. We should encourage staff dialogue and share success stories and remember to collect quality data that can inform practice. We now know that because of the lack of time to work with and observe one another, teachers receive less feedback from their peers even though research tells us that this is most useful for improving practice. It is also clear that in countries where teachers believe their profession is valued show higher levels of achievement. As Pasi Sahlberg put it in his response to TALIS 2013, "We should stop thinking that teaching is easy and therefore anyone can be a teacher."

Instead we should think that teaching is not rocket science, it is much more complicated than that”.

Summary:

Highly successful Schools need to have a focus on the following;

- Supporting the Whole Child
- Collecting Hard Data
- Collective Accountability
- Relationship Building
- Developing an Enrichment Mind Set

Supporting the whole child directly relates to Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Needs. We cannot expect our students to achieve at high levels without their basic needs, food, shelter, medical care, safety, social (family and friends) being met. We as educators must refuse to let students fail!

Critical to the collection of quality data is to include Student Voice. Schools should begin to survey student needs. To allow our students to focus on academic excellence we must remove their real world concerns as they sit higher on their mental and emotional priority lists.

We all would agree that data is crucial to support school inquiry and drive achievement gains. We know we must use multiple sources of data that focus on what matters most. Formative assessment practices must be ongoing, purposeful and customised for each school. Then and only then can it improve the teaching and learning, classroom climate, professional development of teachers and overall school performance. When schools create and embrace a culture of continuous data collection and use, the teaching is smarter.

Collective Accountability implies that we are all in this together and therefore we have equal responsibility for the teaching and learning and the results we achieve.

Unfortunately, responsibility is a quality that teachers have to choose for themselves while accountability is clearly written in all our job descriptions. The most productive way to achieve accountability is to develop a meaningful, collaborative goal and then use formative assessments to provide useful specific data that clearly shows progress towards this goal.

You cannot underplay the importance of Relationship Building. Key relationships in our schools include:

- Students’ relationships with their peers.
- Caregivers’ relationships with their children.
- School staff members’ relationships with each other.
- Teachers’ relationships with students.

Our students are quick to see whether staff members get along with one another or not. If they see a staff divided, this will hugely impact on how they view the value of relationships as a whole. Staff collaboration and collegiality are key to making a school work.

Co-operative learning is a powerful tool as it enables students to play different roles. It is also clear that students who know, trust and can co-operate with one another do better academically. What we do know is that for students to be able to achieve this they must feel safe, important and well supported.

Key to building positive staff – student relationships is to treat students with respect and you will receive respect in return. It is a proven fact that people will do more, and do it

willingly for those they respect and enjoy being around. Most students care more than anything about who cares about them.

We all know that doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result is a recipe for failure. A school can expect results when leaders and staff shift their collective mindset from one of 'those poor kids' to 'our gifted kids' or 'our kids with potential'. We need to shift from a mindset of remediation to one of enrichment for all. To do this we must develop an enriched learning environment and place the most highly qualified teachers in front of our students and provide the students with the support they need to reach our high expectations. It matters not whether our students decide to venture into the world of tertiary education, enrichment programmes prepare them to succeed in life. Schools that are making it happen rely on the attitude of, "because our kids have less, we must provide more". Enrichment schoolwide reflects a positive commitment to the schools Vision and Mission and will have a dramatic effect on student performance.

The process to develop a staffwide enrichment mindset should begin in the professional development meetings and end in the classroom. The bar needs to be set high with the firm belief that we need to 'enrich like crazy'.

Finally – Notes for Addington School

We must accept that teachers can make a real difference in the lives of our students and acknowledge that our students need loving, caring role models not prison guards.

As a school we have made a commitment to raising student achievement – if we want high performing students then must put high performing teachers in front of them – No Excuses!!! We must set high expectations of ourselves and have a schoolwide goal of reaching more students in more engaging ways.

The academic records of children living in poverty in countries like the United States is not good nor is it in New Zealand. If you are a priority learner (Māori or Pasifika) the odds drop even further. We know that there are no failing students only schools failing their students.

There are no unmotivated students just boring, uncaring and irrelevant classrooms. We must keep in the forefront of our minds the fact that engagement is a key factor in lack of achievement and that students actually enjoy being engaged.

Addington School needs to be the best part of their students day!!!!