

# **‘Leadership: An Evolving Vision’**

## **Harvard University Graduate School of Education**

### **Sabbatical Report**

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#### **Acknowledgements**

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#### **Executive Summary**

Leadership in schools is about quality relationships and interactions with all stake holders, but most importantly your students, parents, staff and your wider school community. As a primary school principal, leader and manager, I am on a continuous learning journey, and the Harvard course was an opportunity to experience an international perspective of school leadership, at one of the leading tertiary institutes in the world. The seven day institute focused on several areas of school leadership, with particular focus on:

1. Challenging the underlying beliefs and assumptions of our leadership – Immunity to Change
2. The importance of effective leadership of school culture
3. Leading strategy
4. Leading change
5. Leading assessment and student learning
6. Future Focus Learning – personalised, ubiquitous Learning - Universal Design for Learning

In this report, I have chosen to summarise the main themes from the institute, and comment on some outcomes for my learning and school context. I hope that this report will provide an insight into the Harvard Graduate School of Education summer institute, and present it as a relevant and powerful professional learning opportunity for New Zealand principals.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of my sabbatical was to travel to Harvard University, Boston, with eight other principals from Marlborough primary schools, and attend the 'Leadership: An Evolving Vision' institute, at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The intended outcome of attending the course was to strengthen my leadership and management knowledge and skills, and revitalize my personal vision of leadership; and to increase my knowledge of methods for improving individual, group and organizational performance.

In this report I intend to share my experience of attending the institute at Harvard University, to highlight this high quality professional learning development opportunity, and share some of the learning I gained from this experience.

Our Professional Learning group is made up of eight principals from Marlborough who meet on a regular basis for professional discussions. We attended the institute as a group. This was hugely beneficial in that we could discuss, as a group, the outcomes of the course each day including how they relate to a New Zealand context. Upon our return to our schools, we have been working collaboratively on the implementation of the leadership skills and strategies both within our own schools and across our schools. The power of the group is that we can synthesise and deepen our understandings of what effective leadership is, as well as encourage and help each other.

Our group of eight principals intend to report on our experience, and learning, to the wider education sector of Marlborough through presentations to our local Marlborough Principals' Association, and to our school communities.

## **Rationale and Background**

I have been a principal in small schools for the past ten years, and throughout this time I have undertaken a wide range of professional learning development which I believe has had a positive impact on my school leadership and management. I have participated in many Ministry of Education contracts and workshops with my staff, over the past ten years. I firmly believe in the need to be constantly improving my own capability and effectiveness, and that of the people I support and lead. With this in mind, I am looking at all PLD opportunities, including those offered outside of New Zealand.

As mentioned above, I am part of a Professional Learning Group, and collectively we pursued a new learning opportunity.

Every year, in July, the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University host a 7 day institute for school principals from around the United States, and from around the world. It is my understanding that New Zealand secondary school principals have had the opportunity to attend this institute, in the past, as recipients of the Woolf Fisher Fellowship award, and in recent years this has also included primary school principals. It is from hearing of the experience of a colleague in our Professional Learning Group, who attended the institute in 2012, that the idea was mooted to attend the 2014 institute as a group. Our PLG is made up of a range of schools, the smallest with a roll of 85, to the biggest with a roll of over 500 students, and from a range of communities, with decile 2 to decile 10 schools involved.

## **Methodology**

My sabbatical involved attending the 7 day institute described above. The 2014 Leadership: An Evolving Vision (LEV) institute hosted 197 principals, directors, district officials and other educational leaders from around the world including the US, Canada, Australia, NZ and other countries such as the UAE, Austria, Myanmar, Singapore, Brazil, Panama, Denmark, China and Grenada.

The institute covered a range of topics relating to successful leadership and the order in which these were scheduled throughout the week was intentionally designed to build on the learning and reflections of the previous sessions. The sessions were presented as a series of lectures/presentations. At the end of each day, sessions were followed by up to one and a half hours of small group discussion, to share, compare, challenge and understand. The Marlborough group were also able to continue these discussions at the end of each day, putting the concepts and ideas into a New Zealand context.

## **Findings**

Over the course of the week six key sub-themes developed for me, and these challenged me as they were very relevant to the challenges facing me as a school leader. The six themes were:

1. Challenging the underlying beliefs and assumptions of our leadership – Immunity to Change
2. The importance of effective leadership of school culture
3. Leading strategy
4. Leading change
5. Leading assessment and student learning
6. Future Focus Learning – personalised, ubiquitous Learning - Universal Design for Learning

## **1. Challenging the underlying beliefs and assumptions that influence our leadership – Immunity to Change**

### **"What are you afraid to let go of?"**

The institute began with an analysis of the thinking that influences how we lead. We were asked to select a current challenge in our school and to work through a framework that defined the challenge, the desired state, the current state and what assumptions, beliefs and thinking was preventing us as leaders from moving the challenge from the current state to the desired one. This was an extremely powerful process that required an honest look inwards. At the end of this session I was thinking quite differently about the challenges I have found difficult to move forward, and had begun to use the same process to examine other areas of my leadership and areas of development that I would like to see happening within my school. We worked with a buddy for this particular focus, and we have been able to follow through with the challenges we each set, and support each other in the process, when we returned to our schools.

Day two continued to focus on overcoming challenges and the thinking we allow to hold us back as leaders. However, there was an active, physical and mental approach to the day as we engaged in team building activities, including high ropes activities within small groups. This gave a physical metaphor to the challenges to our assumptions and beliefs. Group members were challenged to apply the 'physical metaphor' to their leadership, with one instructor asking a group member who was 30 metres up in the air; *What are you afraid to let go of?* The message here is that ultimately 'fear' in some shape or form is what causes us to hold on to beliefs and behaviours, even when we know they are not working or meeting the challenge. When we let go, or are courageous enough to move out of our comfort zones, we may be surprised at what we can accomplish?

These two days were very powerful and transformational on both professional and personal levels. During the week we heard the word "disruptor" being used to describe something that stops you where you are, and forces you to view and respond to, and deal with, an issue in a different way. These first two days were an excellent lead in for the remainder of the week, 'disrupting' me, and getting my head out of the term I had just left back at school.

**Outcomes:** I will be addressing the areas of my leadership that were highlighted, or 'flagged', during this process and believe both myself, my school as a whole, and ultimately the individual learners in the school will benefit as a result. The sharing of strategies for moving forward with other Principals and receiving their feedback was also very helpful in this regard. As I mentioned above, the opportunity to share happened in two settings for the Marlborough Principals, first with their mixed group made up of institute participants, and second with our own Marlborough group, at the end of each day.

I will continue to meet regularly with my PLG to support each other in achieving our goals, give feedback, and share strategies for overcoming our challenges. I also intend to share the Immunity to Change process with my staff so they can identify a personal goal to improve their teaching and learning. This would be an appropriate and useful aspect of our appraisal system.

## **2. The importance of effective leadership of school culture**

***"Everybody is influencing culture in the school all of the time... but it is the Principal and senior leadership team that have the greatest impact on school culture."***

Another key theme of the institute was organisational culture and how crucial this is to successful growth and change, and how critical the principal is to establishing, maintaining and developing culture. During this time we examined the 'power of influence'. These were the hidden cultures that can undermine a school culture. We also discussed the influence of individual teachers and groups of teachers, who are not committed to the culture, and how to include these people into the school culture. This reinforced how important the appointment process is when selecting new influences on the team culture. This is a key area to be working on at my school at present with changes to staff and the challenge of strengthening the 'leadership team'.

There was depth in the analysis of culture and how school leaders impact it. This process was extremely useful for identifying the cultural pulse of a school, and this enabled me to identify areas where our organizational culture is strong and where it requires further attention, and to begin to plan ways in which we can advance the

culture of the school. As we went through this process, having discussions with principals from around the world, and being away from my school context, I was able to look at 'school culture' from a different perspective. It challenged my understanding and perception of what I do to establish and maintain school culture, and how other members of the school community contribute in general in this regard.

**Outcomes:** This session revealed some areas for me to refocus on, and I intend to address these by scheduling specific actions and behaviours in my weekly routines, and supporting the staff and the board in doing this also.

I will use the framework with the staff and board to clarify the culture we want in our school based on our school vision, and to analyse the fundamental beliefs and assumptions, shared values, norms, behaviours, and artefacts related to our school culture.

### 3. Leading strategy

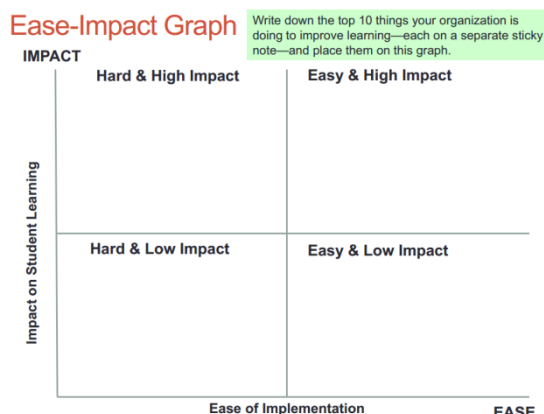
#### What good strategy is:

- A few, key carefully considered things to focus the system's work on that, when put together, create a powerful engine for systemic improvement
- A series of well-informed, well-educated bets
- It addresses the instructional core
- It balances problem solving with pursuing a vision
- It is developed in partnership; many people feel a sense of ownership of it
- It evolves based on progress made, results, and learning

#### What good strategy is not:

- Everything the system does
- Everything everyone wants the system to do
- A sure thing
- Something static

Another key area of learning was around strategy – strategic planning and action. One activity involved completing an Ease-Impact Graphic Organiser (see below). This process highlighted that we often spread ourselves too thin, inevitably developing an abundance of 'strategic goals' that we then struggle to implement effectively. As I worked through this process and reflected on initiatives currently on the go at my school, I realised that we have come to the point, after implementing and maintaining necessary change and development initiatives over recent years, where we now need to reduce our focus, be more specific and do less better, focusing on high impact-high return programmes of staff development and school improvement. We need to further refine our strategic plan and narrow our improvement goals to areas of high impact in a manner that is sustainable for the organisation as a whole and for the individual staff working within it. The selection of what matters needs to be based on our mission and vision for powerful learning.



**Outcomes:** I need to lead a shift in strategy from covering a broad range of initiatives to reducing strategic goals to more carefully selected and fewer in number so that whatever we choose to do, we do thoroughly and well. We need to target our strategy at the core of what makes a difference to learning in our school, and I need to communicate those goals more effectively and frequently to key players to ensure the goals are achieved. Outcomes will include effective teacher pedagogy and practice, and effective use of evidence (data) to inform our development and next steps, and effective behaviour management. We will simplify things for greater impact, and to improve our chances of success.

#### 4. Leading change

**“You will never change what you are willing to tolerate.”**

**“And one should bear in mind that there is nothing more difficult to execute, nor more dubious of success, nor more dangerous to administer, than to introduce a new order of things; for he who introduces it has all those who profit from the old order as his enemies, and he has only lukewarm allies in all those who might profit from the new...” *Machiavelli, The Prince, 1513***

The theme of leading change was woven throughout the institute. “To lead change in schools, principals need knowledge and insight into the complex processes of change and the key drivers that make for successful change” (Fullan, 2005). Our ability to establish relational trust among all members our school community contributes greatly to building a collaborative, positive learning culture, and effecting positive change. Change and continuous improvement is a hallmark of a progressive school and something we must value highly. Kay Merseth presented a case study around how to support beginning teachers in schools. Kay talked about the dangers of not having the right support in place for beginning teachers, and the part school

culture, and particularly staff culture, play in this. This is also significant to newly appointed, experienced, teachers at some schools, where they find some elements of teaching at the school are a whole new ball game, when compared to what they may have experienced before. These experienced teachers can also be influenced by 'staff culture'. Kay also addressed the issues of how culture impacts upon change and we examined Kotter's change model:

1. Establish a Sense of Urgency
2. Form a Powerful Guiding Coalition
3. Create a Vision
4. Communicate the Vision
5. Empower Others to Act
6. Plan for and Celebrate Short Term Wins
7. Consolidate Improvements and Produce More Change
8. Institutionalize New Approaches

John Kotter,

Harvard Business School

**Outcomes:** This sub-theme reinforced how important it was to be maintaining an effective and positive culture within the school. I saw direct links to the 'Immunity to Change' sub-theme, where school culture cannot be advanced and improved if we do not acknowledge the things that are hard to change, and make plans to change them! It provided me with a framework through which I could view an effective change process. I will use the 8 step model to lead change after analysing our school culture.

## **5. Leading assessment and learning**

**"The worst scenario is one in which some pupils who get low marks this time also got low marks last time and come to expect to get low marks next time. This cycle of repeated failure becomes part of a shared belief between such students and their teacher." *Black and William, 1998***



Another theme of the week was leading assessment and the measurement of student progress. The focus on measurement and outcomes was a little more extreme than in NZ as this is what drives education and, in some instances, salaries in the US. This is terribly detrimental as we heard many stories of local educators developing a 'teaching to the test' mentality, and the lack of collaboration between teachers, schools and districts, and the delivery of a very narrow curriculum. This is made more frightening when we consider the 'education' ideas of the powers that be in New Zealand. I believe that, in New Zealand schools, we are constantly thinking about how we can better use assessment and data in order to measure the value of interventions and initiatives, and ensure we continue to refine systems and processes in this regard.

**Outcomes:** Continue to maintain a focus on improving collection, analysis and use of data to inform actions across all spheres of the school. It is not that we do not already do this and do so well in many instances; it is that there is still room to do these things much better and in doing so, have hugely beneficial outcomes for our students. A complex task but one all schools need to strive towards.

## **6. Future Focused Learning – personalised, ubiquitous learning and Universal Design for Learning (UDL)**

The personalised, ubiquitous learning session and those related to it, confirmed, for me, that New Zealand is well ahead of America in terms of integrating technology into learning and changing the way we think of teaching and learning. The presenters reaffirmed that we are on the right pathway in terms of digital classrooms that have meaningful contexts, personalised learning (e.g. goal setting, individual pathways, feedback, formative assessment, Inquiry Learning), student led conferences, and so on. The sessions highlighted how technology can assist in removing barriers to learning and make education inclusive and accessible to all. An area of particular interest to me was Universal Design for Learning.

- UDL is a framework, not a programme.
- UDL is creating learning environments that are responsive to the variability of all learners.
- UDL requires a conceptual shift, i.e., placing the onus of change on the learning environment and not on the individual student.

These were the statements that Jon Mundorf made explicitly clear to the institute members at the start of his presentation on UDL. The powerful message I got from Jon's presentation, and from the research we were given, and is a belief I have

always held, is that it is not up to the child to 'fit' the teaching environment and methods, it is up to the teacher, supported by the school leadership, to create the learning environment and use the teaching methods that 'fit' the child. We also know that this is a huge challenge when the learning needs of individual students in a classroom are so wide and varied. But it is a challenge we cannot afford to ignore, and I believe is key to the success of all learners.

The following is a description of UDL from Wikipedia, for your information.

**Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** is an educational framework based on research in the learning sciences, including cognitive neuroscience, which guides the development of flexible learning environments that can accommodate individual learning differences.

Recognizing that the way individuals learn can be unique, the UDL framework, first defined by the Center for Applied Special Technology(CAST) in the 1990s, calls for creating curriculum from the outset that provides:

- *Multiple means of representation* to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge,
- *Multiple means of expression* to provide learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know, and
- *Multiple means of engagement* to tap into learners' interests, challenge them appropriately, and motivate them to learn.

Curriculum, as defined in the UDL literature, has four parts: instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments. UDL is intended to increase access to learning by reducing physical, cognitive, intellectual, and organizational barriers to learning, as well as other obstacles. UDL principles also lend themselves to implementing inclusionary practices in the classroom.

**Outcomes:** This is an area of school development, and teaching and learning, that all schools must respond to, and many are through the development of 'effective' modern learning environments. We know that all children do not start school on an equal footing, with the life experiences, support and prior learning that is required to hit the ground running. This is an area where we need to be courageous and well planned, with a vision for what personalised, ubiquitous learning could look like in our schools. It is not a fad, but a massive commitment to changing the way teaching and learning happens in our schools. It is a long term 'action' that will require a structured and deliberate approach to changing the learning environment, starting with school leaders developing a clear understanding of what future focused, personalised, ubiquitous learning looks like, then providing high quality professional development to support teachers and support staff to gain the knowledge, capability, skill and confidence to create a 'responsive and inclusive' learning environment in their classroom. Of course, this needs to be supported by appropriate funding to get the

physical learning environment right.

There were a range of other experiences and sub-themes throughout the institute, including the use of technology. Augmented reality was something I found very interesting, combining real-world environments and digital technologies to create a unique learning experience for student scientists. This teaching and learning approach also fits well with the Universal Design for Learning framework, described above, as it would be an engaging way of working for many of our challenging students. It was affirming to once again hear some of the world's leading educationalists speaking of Authentic Learning and Personalised learning and Student-led learning and inquiry – these are in many ways the core components of our vision for powerful learning, through approaches such as EnviroSchools, and our desire to give our students real experiences, to give their learning context. It also affirms that this is indeed powerful learning and we need to continue to develop teaching and learning that is driven by our vision.

## **Conclusions**

The 'Leadership – An Evolving Vision' institute at Harvard Graduate School of Education was a powerful learning experience, and one I would recommend to any New Zealand principal. The opportunity to discuss school leadership with principals, and other school leaders, from around the world was extremely valuable. The opportunity to get an insight into education in other countries, from school leaders, was also a powerful experience. I have, once again, come to the realisation that we have a great education system in New Zealand, driven by vision, individual learner and community needs, and passionate educators. Many times throughout the institute I found myself reflecting on how good our New Zealand Curriculum is. We must strive to maintain what we have created and continue to improve it, basing those developments on best education practice, and not financial models.

For me, there was new learning, and there were also high impact 'reminders' of what is important. I need to be more effective in leading my school community in identifying the most crucial improvement goals for our children and school, so that focusing on fewer strategic goals, doing less better, allows us to achieve those goals. Our assumptions, and sometimes unacknowledged barriers, can prevent us from achieving our goals, and these need to be worked through before change can occur. I have been reminded of the huge importance of getting the school culture right. It must be a constant focus. However, I have also been reminded of what a great culture our school already has, and that it must be acknowledged and celebrated frequently, as we continue to develop it.

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