

# **Principals Sabbatical Report 2014: Scott Wilson**

## **Proposal:**

“To research how parent and whanau involvement in school can raise student achievement for students, particularly Maori.”

## ***Author, School, period of time covered.***

I am the Principal of Puhue School, a U3 decile 8 contributing school with 138 students situated 10km east of Te Awamutu. My sabbatical took place during term 2, 2014.

## ***Acknowledgements:***

- The Borad of Trustees of Puhue School, for supporting my application
- The staff of the school who continued to support students reaching for their best.
- John Cubitt – Pekerau school
- Andy Morgan – Kihikihi School
- Tony Mangan – Glenview School
- Barbara Lawson – Orini combined School
- The principals who met with me during the NZEI rural and teaching principals conference from Te Tai Tokorau and from the East Coast, who shared their personal journeys to engage parents and Whanau in their schools.

### ***Executive summary:***

This report attempts to answer the question, “How can medium/high decile schools with low Maori roll numbers successfully engage parents and whanau to raise student achievement for all students especially Maori?”

### ***Purpose:***

School leaders continually reflect on ways to improve outcomes and achievement for students through school based learning and initiatives. We are aware that when parents and whanau support and value the learning at home that the benefits to the students learning increases again.

Identifying ways to bridge the gap between school and home, then to strengthen this link is what I set out to identify both through evidence based practice and through researching literature.

### ***Background and rationale:***

As a Principal of a high decile school, I have worked to involve all parents and whanau in school events and activities within the school. Whilst parents are happy to engage with the school on social and sporting events they tend to be less inclined to engage in the learning support required to raise student achievement. Each year we have about 50% of respondent to the community survey inform us that they would prefer less homework.

However we have found that when parents and whanau are actively involved with their children’s learning success and achievement is higher for those children than those whose families have little or no involvement. Identifying things that work well to raise parent and whanau engagement to support learning should be the outcome of this report.

### ***Methodology:***

My learning activities included:

- Reviewing relevant literature, Ka Hikitia – Managing for success. The education review offices resources including, “Partners in learning: schools engagement with Parents, Whanau and Communities”, (June 2008). As well as other overseas literature.
- Interviewing principals of schools who ERO had identified as having strong home school partnerships featured in their most recent ERO reports.
- Speaking with Parents regarding their experiences engaging with schools, what has and hasn’t worked for them.
- Speaking with Principals from schools with high Maori rolls, regarding their initiatives that work for them, in their settings.

### ***Literature review:***

In reading around the topic of parent engagement there are numerous understandings shared across literature as to what constitutes parent engagement and what is actually parent involvement. Pushor, (2007) referred to parent involvement as being passive with parents involved in school driven activities such as fundraising and parent helpers on trips. On the other hand she referred to parent engagement as parents actively involved in dialogue and decisions around student learning. Christenson and Sheridan (2001) refer to parent engagement as an overarching principle and approach involving collaborative partnership between teachers, families and communities to promote learning and educational achievement of children.

### ***Findings from visits to schools, discussions with colleagues:***

During the course of my research a number of principles were identified which underpin effective home school partnerships with Parents and Whanua.

- All families and schools want the best for their children.
- Effective schools provide a safe, nurturing and supportive learning environment.
- Families and schools value “quality teaching”, and respect their teachers.
- Home school partnerships are based on shared responsibility, respect and trust.
- Leadership is critical to building, maintaining and renewing partnerships.
- Home school partnerships improve student motivation and learning for students from all cultural backgrounds.

It became evident that schools address parent engagement in many different ways depending on the community in which they are situated the following list is the key dimensions Identified to engage and strengthen the home school partnerships:

- a. Communication;
- b. Connecting home/school learning;
- c. Building community and identity;
- d. Recognise the role of the family;
- e. Consultative decision making;
- f. Participation.

The key aspects of each of these dimensions is listed below and in their own right can be explored in greater detail.

#### *A. Communication*

- Is active, frequent and culturally appropriate;
- Is when schools go out of their way to make families feel welcomed and valued;
- Is open to families' needs and attitudes;
- Is both formal and informal

#### *B. Connecting home/school learning:*

- Understanding and importance of high expectations from both teachers and parents to the child's success at school;
- Families and schools working together to create positive attitudes towards learning in each child;
- Families and schools recognising and using learning opportunities in the home environment;
- Schools supporting parental self-growth, learning and development of new skills that support student learning.

#### *C. Building community and identity*

- Schools can use activities that shape a sense of identity and culture within students while honouring the culture, traditions, values and relationships within the community.

#### *D. Recognise the role of the family*

- Understanding that families are the key educators of their children and that parents and whanau have a lasting influence on their children's attitudes and achievement at school.
- Parents and whanau can encourage learning in and out of school and are in a position to support the schools goals and direction.
- It is important for schools to communicate their goals and expectations clearly;
- Schools understand whanau and community priorities;
- Schools need to be realistic, patient and brave;
- Ensuring the school leadership is visible and available;

#### *E. Consultative decision making*

- Using an inclusive approach to school decision making and parental involvement creates a sense of shared responsibility among parents, community members, teachers and school leaders;
- Ensure that parents; values and interests are heard and respected;
- Making schools more accountable in the community.

#### *F. Participation*

- Parents and whanau expertise, energy and time can support learning and school programmes in many ways such as;
- Working with students on learning activities in classrooms;
- Participating in other school activities outside the classroom;
- Participating in activities outside the school and;
- Valuing and supporting teachers

### ***Implications:***

As a school with less than 10% of our school population identified as Maori we must continue to identify ways to strengthen relationships and engage with Whanua to support better outcomes for all students. During my research it became evident that when parents and whanau feel connected and part of the school the student achievement and success for all students improve not just for Maori students and their whanau.

### ***Benefits:***

The information that I have been able to identify as best practices across schools will not only benefit Maori but all home school partnerships to raise student achievement. As a result of the finding I will be making subtle changes to the ways in which things are done at Puahue School, to further enhance home school relationships to benefit learning for all students.

### ***Conclusion:***

Researching this topic around building and supporting home school partnerships with parents and whanau has highlighted the importance of taking a planned and deliberate approach to any school wide initiatives such as including parental engagement into the strategic and annual plans.

interesting to note that it is extremely difficult to measure in a quantifiable way the impact that home school partnerships have on lifting student achievement in any given school as all schools have similar and different focuses when building or establishing home school partnerships/relationships.

Anecdotally (in interviews), principals, teachers, parents and students reported that they felt parental engagement in learning was contributing to better outcomes for students. However, none of this is robust evidence.

Of all the information that I have read, discussed and reviewed one conversation has stuck with me. A Principal who used the term *kanohi ki te kanohi*, “face to face” to describe how he connected with and began to build links with the community around him.

All of the information points back to this concept of developing and enhancing strong personal relationships with each and every member of the school community. In theory this is a sound principle and in practice it can be a challenge to develop a shared and mutually respected understanding of what children need to achieve as future citizens.

**References:**

Ka Hikitia – Managing for success: “The Maori education Strategy. (2008)

Pushor, Debbie. (2007) Parent Engagement: Creating a shared world.

Christenson & Sheridan. (2001) Barriers for Families, Educators and the Family School Relationship.

Partners in learning: schools engagement with Parents, Whanau and Communities”, Education Review Office (June 2008).

Family – School partnerships: “A guide for schools and families”, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2008)