

SEARCHING FOR BEST PRACTICE

For mentoring leaders of curriculum learning to strengthen their leadership capabilities to lead their teams towards sustained raising of student achievement.

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SECONDARY SENIOR MANAGERS' SABBATICAL REPORT TERM 2 2014

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Schools have a focus on raising student achievement, and increasingly emphasis is being placed on teams of teachers working collectively towards this goal, and the effective leadership of these teams. Vivienne Robinson, Margie Hohepa and Claire Lloyd outline four main challenges for educational leaders –

- to raise achievement and reduce disparity in ways that prepare all of our students for the future:
- improve the educational provision and realise the potential of Maori students.
- strengthen valued social outcomes, and
- *adjust our self-managing school system to ensure we have sufficient effective leaders with the time and support they need to meet the first three challenges*. *

A significant portion of my work as deputy principal has focused on developing curriculum leadership of the middle leaders at my school. The aim of this sabbatical was to search for best practice, both through research and in schools, on how we can best support and mentor middle leaders, to be effective team leaders so that raised student achievement is sustained.

**School Leadership and Student Outcomes: What works and Why. BES. (2009, pp. 35).*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful and thank the Ministry of Education for providing the sabbatical leave and allowing me time out to think and refresh.

I am indebted to my Principal and the Kelston Girls' College Board for supporting my application and their on-going support. My thanks also go to our senior leadership team, who took on new roles and challenges to give me this opportunity.

The Principals and staff at the schools I visited were very generous with their time and help – the conversations were robust and enlightening, and showed their passion about education.

A final thanks goes to my husband, family and friends for their encouragement and support.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE – A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

I am the Deputy Principal at Kelston Girls' College, which is a multi-cultural, decile-3 school in West Auckland, with a high proportion of Pasifika and Maori students. One of the school's strategic goals is that 'every student will remain at school to Year 13 and leave with a minimum of NCEA Level 2 and a Career pathway.' To be able to achieve this goal, all of the school's teachers need to focus on raising student achievement and be good advisors to individual students.

The middle leaders have an important role to play in ensuring that all of their team is encouraged and working towards this. Whilst these leaders of learning are experienced in their subject or pastoral area, they receive little training or professional learning on leadership skills. Yet research shows that good leadership at this level is essential for ensuring a shift in teacher capabilities for raising student achievement and sustaining this.

At Kelston Girls' College, we have found that –

- Education and raising achievement are the keys to young women avoiding the poverty trap that a number of our families are experiencing. Raising achievement, and planning ahead for vocational pathways and further tertiary education is crucial, especially for our Maori and Pasifika students.
- All teachers need to be actively involved in professional learning and collaboratively working towards raising student achievement.
- The faculty and pastoral teams are an important vehicle in working towards raising student achievement, and that the effective leadership of these teams is extremely important.

The school has been involved in a number of initiatives to ensure raised achievement – in literacy, numeracy, information technology, te kotahitanga, malaga pasifika, starpath and academic counselling. These programmes have successfully helped to raise achievement, as is shown in the school's NCEA results from 2007 to 2011, and other MOE documentation. There was a steady increase in the NCEA pass-rate especially at NCEA Level One, which was attributed to the introduction of student-teacher-parent conferencing, the use of 'traffic lights' to highlight student progress through the year, and teachers focusing on a small group of mostly Maori or Pasifika girls in their classroom planning with walk-throughs undertaken to show this, all planned as part of our Starpath and te kotahitanga initiatives. However, the results for 2012 showed a decline in momentum for improved achievement, raising a concern that there may be a waning of effectiveness of these initiatives. In 2013 we made a tremendous effort to focus as a school on making teachers more aware of what is required in terms of pedagogy and were very successful at regaining lost ground at all levels of NCEA Levels 1, 2 and 3.

However the dip in results in 2012 showed us all that we must continue to be vigilant in our efforts and that we need to work together to ensure continuing raised achievement. The pastoral and faculty leaders of learning play a pivotal role in regaining that feeling of importance and re-energising their teams in their professional learning and efforts to continue and sustain raised student achievement.

The opportunity to reflect and strengthen personal leadership skills needed to mentor these middle leaders of learning to address this key challenge was very beneficial. The sabbatical allowed me time away from school that is not usually available to Deputy Principals, to explore and reflect on current practices with a view to improving teacher professional learning for our middle leaders in line with current pedagogy.

PURPOSE

“One of the most important changes in education in the last 20 years has been the increasing recognition of the contribution education research can make to policy and practice”.

(School Leadership and Student Outcomes: What works and Why. BES. 2009, pp. 35).

My aim was to research the relevant literature and undertake a range of discussions with other educational professionals with a view to deepening my understanding of the dynamics of team work and find best practice examples to help the leaders of learning work with their teams at my school.

The purpose of my sabbatical was to –

1. Review literature both from New Zealand and elsewhere. References to these are interwoven in with the reflections made throughout the report.
2. Attend the course on The Transformative Power of Teacher Teams at the Principals' Institute at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in Boston, USA.
3. Gather information from a range of schools both in Auckland and in the United States on the dynamics of team work and professional learning initiatives for team leaders.

METHODOLOGY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Before and during my sabbatical I reviewed relevant literature and discussed my chosen study with many professional colleagues from a range of secondary schools, such as Massey High School and Kelston Boys High School. Massey High School was one of the first schools to introduce academic counselling, Starpath and a Trade Academy, and Kelston Boys High School had a remarkable improvement in raised achievement in 2012, especially for Pasifika students, and it was informative to discuss the pathways the schools had taken to achieve raised student achievement.

Other discussions with various Deputy and Assistant Principals through the NASDAP conference held in Queenstown in August 2013, and ASDAPA seminars in Auckland also helped to clarify my thoughts and gain a wider perspective.

As part of my role as Deputy Principal and Director of Personnel and Curriculum at Kelston Girls' College, I also worked with other organisations involved in developing programmes of professional development, or evaluation of programmes involved in empowering teachers as leaders raising achievement, and/or teachers as advisors, such as –

- The University of Auckland Starpath programme with the focus on evaluating data to inform teacher practice for raising achievement.
- The te kotahitanga initiative has also played a large role in developing an improved pedagogy for our teachers and their relationships with students.

The impending sabbatical and my work towards it gave these meetings and programmes further relevance and momentum towards my research.

As part of the literature review I focused on established research, such as the “Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration (BES) - School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why (2009), and The Education Review Office’s *Increasing educational achievement in secondary schools* (2103). This refreshed my thoughts on the qualities of good leadership and the link this had with raising student achievement.

The recent Ministry of Education's publication *Leading from the Middle – Educational Leadership for Middle and Senior Leaders* (2102) gave further perspectives and defined middle leaders as –

- *pedagogical leaders at the subject, curriculum and faculty levels*
- *team and syndicate leaders*
- *pastoral leaders involved in student services, career or guidance, and counselling*
- *teachers with specific or designated responsibility*
- *coaches and mentors who help lead professional learning.*

It was noted that the majority of senior and middle leaders are classroom teachers and interact with students as part of their roles. The case studies of both senior and middle leaders gave excellent examples of the ways they were leading their teams. The leadership model shown below gave an excellent perspective showing that relationships are at the core of school leadership within the school context.



Ministry of Education (2012). *Leading from the Middle. Educational Leadership for Middle and Senior Leaders* (pp. 12).

This model also describes the key leadership qualities that underpin a leader's ability to improve teaching and learning outcomes in their school as –

- *manaakitanga – leading with moral purpose*
- *pono – having self-belief*
- *ako – being a learner*
- *awihinatanga – guiding and supporting*

I read other sabbatical reports written by other senior managers and principals. In the last three years of senior managers' reports, most have had a theme of considering leadership, and how to help lead towards change or improvement in areas such as raising achievement, digital, curriculum or pastoral aspects. Searching for best practice was often undertaken with a number attending specific courses or conferences and visiting many schools. These provided a rich insight into the complexities involved in my chosen area or study.

The report most closely aligned to my area was Mike Fowler's "*How do senior leaders offer effective curriculum based leadership?*" He had broadened his original brief of investigating how senior managers can offer effective curriculum related leadership to teachers in charge of subjects, to considering senior leaders' curriculum leadership role across the school. In his view –

"schools have a range of middle leadership structures, such as cross-curricular team leaders. Also, all leaders envisaged their roles as working with all staff and not just those in middle leadership positions".

This I thought was a valid point (and was similar to that outlined in the Ministry of Education's *Leading from the Middle*), and helped shape the thrust of my study, ensuring that I considered not only the issues relating to those in charge of curriculum or learning, but to all middle leaders.

Two other reports included Shona Smith's NASDAP Scholarship Report (2008) where she focused on "*how can school leaders improve the quality of teaching across a whole school in order to lift achievement*", and Morag Hutchinson's Principal Sabbatical report on "*Searching for the silver bullet*".

Rachel Peak's thesis on *Middle Leadership of Teams in Large New Zealand Secondary Schools (2010)* provided more detailed information, especially showing the views of both senior leaders and middle leaders on the changing role of middle team leadership and dealing with the challenges. Her open-ended questionnaire and focus group question guide also helped shape my own questions for the school visits I undertook.

Another excellent resource was Katherine Boles and Vivian Troen's *The Power of Teacher Teams (2012)* which was the main text for the course I attended as part of my studies, which is referred to later in this report.

During my sabbatical I attended the course on The Transformative Power of Teacher Teams at the Principals' Institute at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in Boston, USA, which gave me some excellent insights into the effectiveness of teams and teamwork, and involved personnel from two schools with good practice with teams –

- Elliot K-8 Innovation School in Boston, Massachusetts, USA
- Gann Academy in Boston, Massachusetts, USA

The seminars and discussions with all people involved in the course also helped refine my thoughts for the school visits that followed.

The schools I visited in both Boston and in Auckland after the Harvard course gave further insights on effective team work and team leadership. At each school I met with either the Principal or some of the senior leadership team and middle leaders of curriculum. The discussions were focused on teams within each school, the leadership of them, and different professional learning strategies for the teams.

These schools included –

- Arlington High School in Boston, Massachusetts, USA
- Ottoson Middle School in Boston, Massachusetts, USA
- Westlake Boys High School in Auckland, NZ.

HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION PRINCIPALS' INSTITUTE: BOSTON USA “THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF TEACHER TEAMS”

The leadership courses at the Harvard Graduate School of Education have been attended by a number of New Zealand principals and deputy principals over the past few years and are particularly recommended. This course was held in May, and was thoroughly uplifting. It was great to learn and discuss a wide range of pedagogy with the education specialists and other teacher participants from around the world.

The course was facilitated and run by Katherine Boyles and Vivian Troen, well known for their work on teacher teams and included input from Richard Elmore and others. The sessions included –

- *The Transformative Power of Teacher Teams*: Vivien Troen & Katherine Boles, Harvard Graduate School of Education
- *The Case for Teacher Teams*: Richard Elmore, Harvard Graduate School of Education
- *Teacher Teams: The Locus for Improving Teaching and Learning*: Katherine Boles & Vivien Troen
- *Mount Everest Case* (focus on levels of teamwork, and good versus bad teamwork): Monica Higgins, Harvard Business School
- *Creating and Sustaining Collaborative Committed Teacher Teams*: Traci Walker Griffith, Holly McPartlin, Jodi Doyle from Elliot K-8 Innovation School
- *Adaptive Leadership and Cultural Change*: Marc Baker, Gann Academy
- *Faculty Rounds at Gann Academy*: Jacob Pinnolis & Aviva Scheur
- *Protocols as Structures for Supporting Collegial Conversation*: Tina Blythe, Harvard Graduate School of Education
- *The Secret of the Universe & Conclusion*: Katherine Boles & Vivien Troen



Part of the team I worked with during the Harvard course.

MY REFLECTIONS

The course was excellent. As one previous participant said – “*This was the most proficient and diverse professional development program that I have attended*” – and I agree! It was a true learning experience. The course facilitators and programme leaders comprehensively delivered the programme objectives which were –

- *Understand what it means for teachers to be leaders in a team context*
- *Highlight the role of the principal as instructional leader in working with teams*
- *Learn concrete steps for creating the structures and processes necessary for developing and sustaining effective teacher teams*
- *Gain strategies for establishing team-meeting norms that facilitate rich dialogue about instruction*
- *Prepare team members to facilitate collaboration, task focus and personal accountability*
- *Recognise the importance of goal setting and ongoing assessment for team members themselves.*

The facilitators, Katherine Boles and Vivian Troen are very experienced in working with teacher teams and providing professional learning support. They are renowned for their combined work in this field, and their textbook *The Power of Teacher Teams: with Cases, analyses, and Strategies for Success* (2012) was used as a text, as required reading both before and during the course.

The sessions were concise and augmented with rich dialogue and data from principals, curriculum leaders and teachers in local schools. There were 98 participants from around the world, so the discussions were rich and varied.



Vivian Troen



Katherine Boles

Katherine and Vivian focused on teams as *‘the new cultural norm’* - and that teacher teams were *‘a response to the evolution of schools and school culture’*, and that they are used as *‘a strategy for schools to improve students achievement by supporting collaborations among teachers’*.

They took us through an understanding of the five conditions that support team success – task focus, leadership, establishing structures and processes, collaborative climate and personal accountability. They made the point that -

“a team cannot function well if its goals are poorly defined, or if articulated goals are arrived at merely to satisfy low expectations of the team’s abilities to affect student learning”.

They were adept at finding quotes from a wide variety of people –

- Casey Stengel - *“It’s easy to get the players. It’s getting them to play together that’s the tough part”.*
- Bill Gates – *“If you give people the right tools, and they use their abilities, they will develop things in ways that will support you beyond what you expect”.*
- Henry Ford – *“Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success”.*

They had their own wisdom to impart –

“Your team is working well when

- *Teachers talk about teaching*
- *Teachers observe each other teach*
- *Teachers plan, design, research, and evaluate together*
- *Teachers help each other improve their teaching”.*

Their views on the role of the Principal were –

“The Principal invests in team development by -

- *Providing adequate time*
- *Providing support structure*
- *Providing teaming skill development*
- *Connecting teacher teams to curriculum & instruction”.*

Richard Elsmore spoke about the need for effective teacher teams, quoting Richard Hackman's five conditions that enable team effectiveness as –

- *The team is a real team*
- *The team has a compelling direction*
- *The team has an enabling structure*
- *The team has a supportive organisational context*
- *There is access to expert coaching.*

He also spoke of his experiences in observing teaching and team practices and his disappointment about how little teachers believe what students can do. In his view, teacher teams can only contribute to school effectiveness if they are –

- *real teams*
- *able to make binding commitments and act on them*
- *exercising lateral accountability*
- *developing relational trust, and*
- *experiencing collective efficacy*

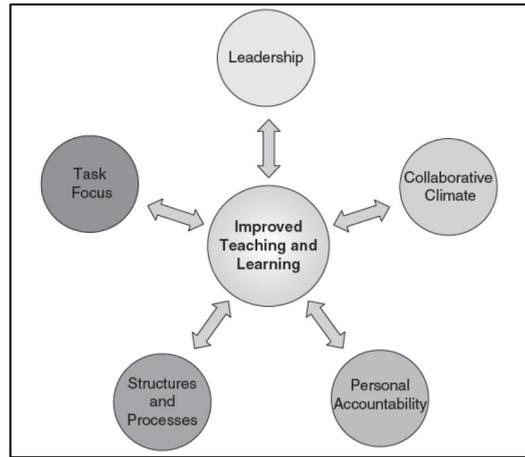
Monica Higgins gave us an in-depth study of the Mount Everest disaster in 1996, where we discussed what went wrong from a leadership, team and organisational perspective up on the mountain. We considered the complexities on an individual level (cognitive bias), the team effectiveness or ineffectiveness, and the complex interactions at an organisational level, all of which contributed to the disaster, in which five people died, including New Zealander Rob Hall.

We later discussed the implications that this has for team work in educational organisations today. I found this enlightening, as all teams have similar dynamics, and it reinforced Katherine Boles and Vivian Troen's observation earlier in the course that "*teams are the new cultural norm*".

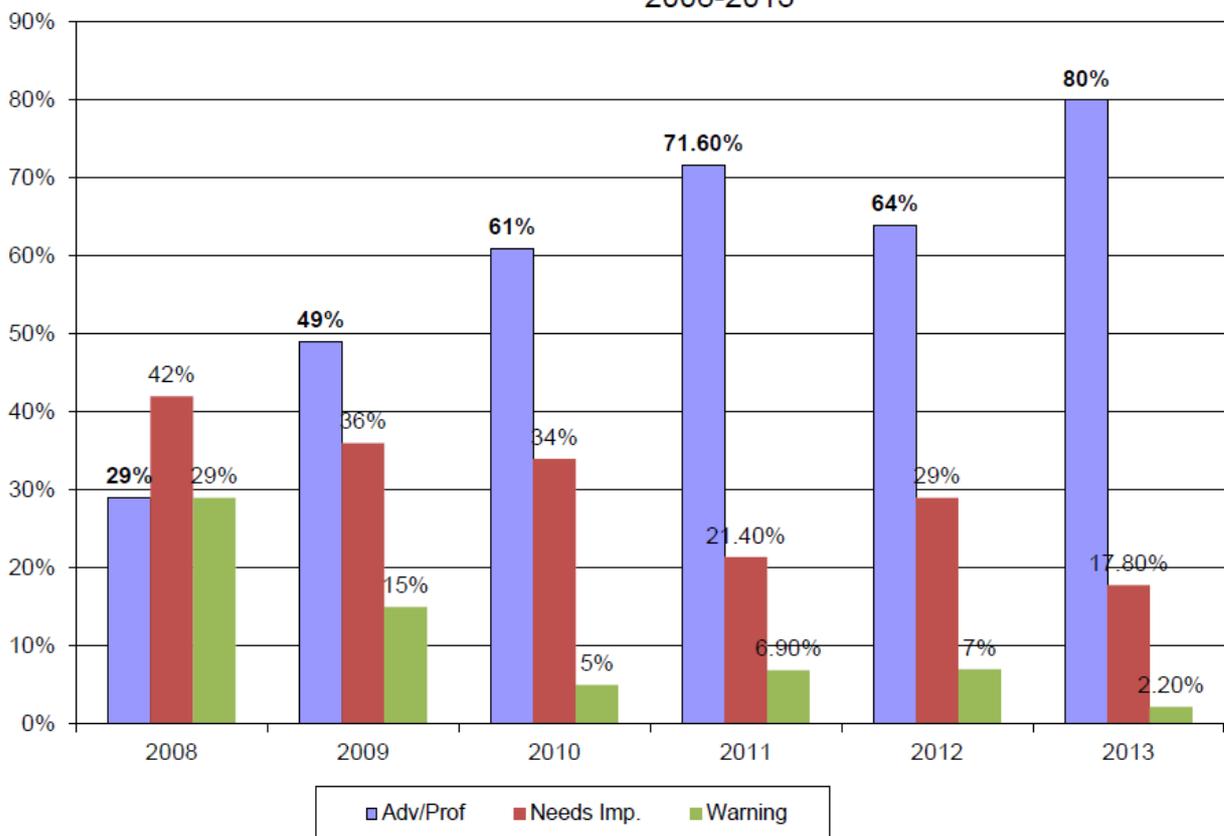
We had sessions with teachers from two schools which had developed good team work.

ELIOT K-8 INNOVATION SCHOOL, BOSTON, USA

At the Eliot K-8 Innovation School in Boston, the teachers linked their raised student achievement directly with creating a culture of collaboration with effective teamwork. They felt that there were five keys - leadership, structures and processes, collaborative climate, task focus and personal accountability. All five keys contributed towards effective team work, leading to improved teaching and learning.



Eliot K-8 Innovation School
ELA MCAS Data
2008-2013



Over the six years they were developing their teams, their students showed steady gains in learning. The table shows the change in English Language MCAS data, and there were similar results for their Maths data. They have gone from being an underperforming school in 2007 (a 'Commonwealth Priority School') that was in danger of closing to a top performing school, and their roll has tripled. Since 2010 the school has been named by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education as a Commendation school, and recently as a Boston Public Innovation School.

How did they do this? The new principal in 2007, Traci Walker Griffiths, started with a holistic approach, by creating a culture of collaboration – regular meetings, defining formal roles within meetings, clear agendas for every meeting, keeping ‘housekeeping’ to a minimum to allow for discussions, using evidence to inform the discussions, and quality planning to consider improvements.

The group norms were developed by each team and members were held accountable to them. Typical norms were – on time to meetings, all engaged, respectful dialogue, data-driven evidence and student work, buy-in from all members, watching others teach (either in person or by video) and giving feedback and feedforward.

Teachers created action plans which were evidence-driven and specific to students, with constant evaluation and amendments. This reminded me of the similar methods we have developed for co-construction meetings at Kelston Girls’ College – where we have teams of teachers working together, using evidence to discuss student progress and for making plans to help the students towards raised achievement.

The teachers from Eliot that I spoke with were very enthusiastic about their progress. Holly MacPartlin and Jodi Doyle acknowledged that the meetings involved a regular time commitment (45 minute weekly meetings which is being increased to 90-minute meetings in the next school year). The school had originally gained some initial funding from the ‘Commonwealth Priority School’ funding, which mainly went into relief staffing to allow teachers time to meet.

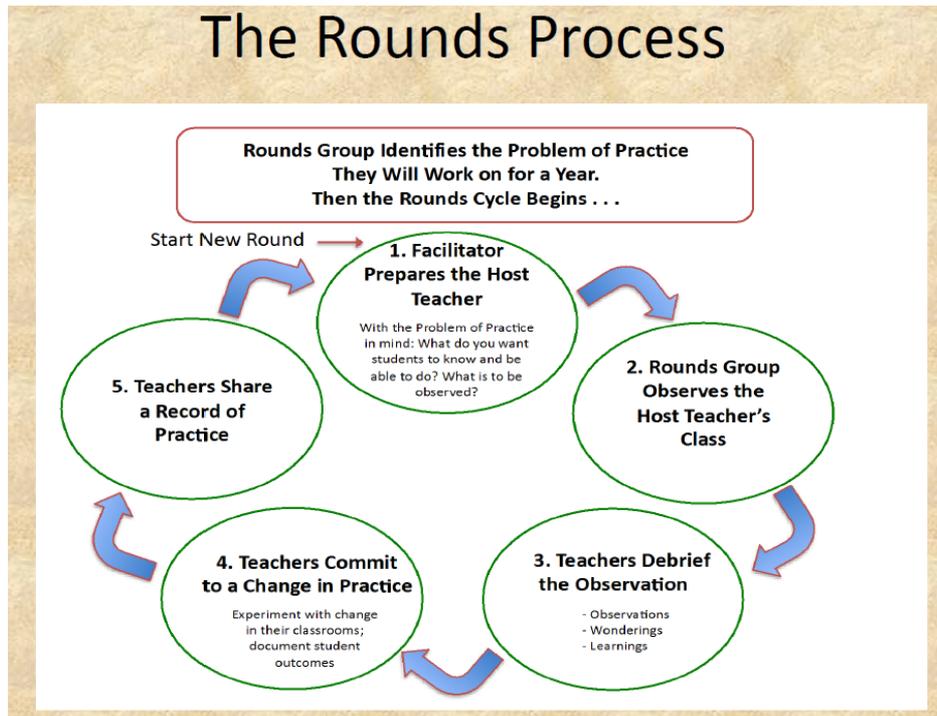
However, they no longer have that funding and teachers are prepared, indeed eager, to give their own time for these meetings (including over the summer break) because of the benefits they have found in the common planning time. They have become more student-focused – which also reminded me of the progress we have made in this regard at Kelston Girls’ College.

GANN ACADEMY, BOSTON, USA

The Gann Academy teachers took this a step further, with senior teacher leaders Jacob Pinnolis and Aviva Scheur describing ‘Faculty Rounds’ which involves –

- *Teachers observing other teachers’ classes around a shared problem of practice*
- *Debriefing through a structured protocol of what they observed and wondered during the lesson*
- *Reflecting on what they learned from the observation and debriefing*
- *Committing to a specific change in their teaching practice*
- *Bringing records of practice of those changes to the next group meeting.*

The Rounds Process



The Rounds Process at Gann Academy

They worked to a set process as shown in the diagram, and protocols to go with this, such as sharing the observations with evidence, using honest and open questions, and questions that are brief and to the point. They have found that using faculty rounds has improved their teaching and improved student learning.

Gann Academy is a private Jewish school, but operates as a pluralistic house of learning and embraces students and staff from all religious, unidentified or atheist backgrounds, as can be seen on their website.

The Head of School, Marc Baker, also spoke of the importance of adaptive leadership and change and the impact this has had at Gann Academy in their development of teamwork. He described adaptive leadership as -

“the practice of mobilising people to tackle tough challenges and thrive”.

Some get bogged down in technical problems rather than focusing on adaptive change, and he used money as an analogy – lack of money is a technical problem, but how we use that money is an adaptive challenge. Building teacher teams has a technical side, but to really build a culture of teacher teams has an adaptive challenge to it.

Another analogy he used was the idea of being ‘*on the balcony versus the dance floor*’- that leaders need to periodically get up on the balcony away from the action and get an overview. As leaders we need to step back from practice to reflect, and need to find the time and space to do this. This mirrored my sentiments exactly, and I am grateful to the Ministry of Education and my school for supporting and funding my sabbatical to allow me to do just that.

FURTHER REFLECTION FROM THE HARVARD COURSE

Tina Blythe from the Harvard Graduate School of Education focused on protocols for learning from student work which can be used when undertaking faculty rounds or teamwork. There were protocols for –

- *evaluating and improving curriculum instruction*
- *developing a deeper understanding of student learning and thinking*
- *developing a deeper understanding of dilemmas or problems*
- *guiding group discussion of a shared text, experience or issue.*

These provided useful tools for curriculum teams to use, such as the collaborative assessment conference protocol. These again mirrored the processes we have using in co-construction meetings at Kelston Girls' College.

The Harvard course allowed us time to reflect and discuss with other teachers and senior leaders from schools around the world. It was invaluable and affirmed for me that at my own school, we are on the right pathway in developing an effective team ethos for working together towards improved teaching and learning, especially through our co-construction team meetings.

A quote given by Katherine Boles and Vivian Troen, this time from Roland Barth encapsulated the essence of transformative and effective teamwork for me –

“The most powerful form of learning, the most sophisticated form of staff development, comes not from listening to the good works of others but from sharing what we know with others..... By reflecting on what we do, by giving it coherence, and by sharing and articulating our craft knowledge, we make meaning. We learn”.

OTHER SCHOOL VISITS

I had pre-arranged to visit two other schools whilst in Boston – Arlington High School and Ottoson Middle School. Both schools were part of the Arlington Public Schools group. This comprises one high school and one regional high school (Grades 9 to 12), one middle school (Grades 6 to 8), seven elementary schools (Grades K to 5 or 8) and one preschool.

Whilst each school was run separately with a principal or head teacher appointed to each, they were administered as a group, and were intrinsically linked especially for curriculum aspects. There was a central administrative staff led by the Superintendent of Schools, and a governance board. The Superintendent regularly circulated reports and updates to the community via letters, e-mails and on-line to the community, and I also saw part of one of the meetings being televised live to the community.

ARLINGTON HIGH SCHOOL, BOSTON, USA

At Arlington High School, I initially met with the Principal Matthew Janger, where we focused on the reasons for the school's academic success, his role as principal, their main educational challenges, and the school organisation structure for leaders and their teams. We met with three others involved in curriculum leadership -

- Matt Coleman – Maths Head of Department Grades K-12
- Deb Perry – English Head of Department Grades K-12
- Catherine Ritz – Foreign Languages Grades 6-12



Arlington HS: Matthew Janger, Matt Coleman, Deb Perry, Catherine Ritz with Marion Buckland

Matthew initially talked of the reasons for the school's academic success –

- *The school intake is excellent – the students have a good academic standard when they start and the growth measures are good – students build on their initial excellent standards.*
- *The teachers therefore do not need to focus on the MICAS scores – they can do other things – have a freedom to teach.*
- *Arlington is a top district – good value on education, and the schools are ranked higher than other areas. (Matthew was previously a principal in a school in Maine, which was a high achieving school in that area, but the area was not as highly ranked as the Arlington school district).*
- *These factors have helped Arlington's success. Arlington is 21st in ranking in the 343 high schools of the state of Massachusetts.*

He felt that the main education challenges they faced were –

- *How do we know students are really learning?*
- *What do they really need to know?*

As principal, he was overall in charge of Arlington High School, but also has active links with the other Arlington public schools. Whilst his school may look richly impressive from the front façade, he struggles with the usual funding shortfalls as any other principal does, and has to negotiate along with the other ten schools with the Arlington Public Schools board for funding for building renovations, etc. He commented that the state of the buildings deteriorate downwards as you move from the front to the back of the school.

As leader of the Arlington High School team, he's involved in two types of decision-making processes –

- Administrative decisions – consults, then makes leadership decisions
- Collective/collaborative decision-making – facilitates the process for decisions re curriculum planning and teaching methods etc – where it is important to have all teachers involved and a part of the decision-making process, ensuring all have 'buy-in'.

Arlington High School is the lead school of the eleven Arlington Public Schools. The Principal & major Heads of Department do not teach, as they are responsible for the curriculum planning and teaching for all the Arlington public schools, from Grades K to 12 (Kindergarten through to the final year of secondary school, which equates to Years 1 to 13 in New Zealand). Matt Coleman was in charge of all Grades of Mathematics, and Deb Perry of all Grades of English, and they needed to visit all schools in their district. Most Heads of Departments have teaching backgrounds. They are based at Arlington High School, but regularly meet and have meetings at the other schools. They plan and co-ordinate curriculum, assessments, and teacher evaluations for all grades.

Other Heads of Learning Areas mainly teach, and are released from 1 class. They are only responsible for some grades. Catherine Ritz is in charge of foreign languages for Grades 6 to 12, which covers both Arlington and Ottoson Middle School, with each grade having a different focus. Catherine was based for the 2013-2014 school year at Arlington High School, but was moving to be based at Ottoson Middle school for the start of the 2014-15 school year in order to actively encourage those students beginning with their foreign language. She is responsible for the curriculum planning and professional learning for her team, but not the teacher appraisals.

They all face some organisational challenges, such as -

- Overall co-ordination of curriculum over a range of schools and grade levels.
- Juggling commitments at each school, attending meetings at all schools – sometimes meetings are repeated at different schools, and they meet the same teachers at different meetings.
- Time restraints.

Matt and Deb felt that Heads of Departments as full-time administrators have an advantage in that they can put their entire effort & effort into programmes, evaluation etc. However, they need to be able to get round the other schools, and must ensure that all teams in each school are working together. For the other Heads of Learning areas – time is a challenge as they also have a teaching programme.

Whatever the constraints, all agreed that teamwork was essential in empowering the teachers of that team to improve teaching and learning. Catherine showed the latest professional learning that her team in Foreign Languages was working on. They had decided as a team to focus on three areas –

- *Research, develop & implement 1 or 2 reading strategies within each unit of instruction.*
- *Create a shared folder of tested differentiated activities.*
- *Focusing on 1 class, strive to reach the National Standard of teaching 90% in the target language.*

Professional Learning occurs in PLC's (PL communities) once a month (they finish school early on that day). Also they have release days during the year (the number varies from year to year).

This visit gave me a good insight into the intricacies and politics involved in the various teams.

OTTOSON MIDDLE SCHOOL, BOSTON USA

The focus of this visit was also on the reasons for the school's recent academic success, their main educational challenges, and the school organisation structure for leaders and their teams. I met with Tim Ruggere who has been principal at Ottoson Middle School for the last five and a half years, and also briefly with Matt Colman as Head of Mathematics (whom I had also met at Arlington High School).



Tim Ruggere – Principal

We discussed the reasons for the school's academic success. The school has a roll of 1056 and is the 4th largest middle school in Massachusetts, and due to be 3rd largest in 2015. He felt that the increasing roll was due to improved academic success due to recent changes in leadership and teachers. It currently ranks 51/370 of middle schools in Massachusetts

He explained the background to these changes. When he first arrived 5½ years ago, the school was in trouble. There had been a succession of interim principals who lasted less than a year each. Tim was appointed to help change the culture. Some thought he also would be temporary, but he has been there for 5½ years & introduced changes.

Initially there were no norms – for running meetings, communication with others, for teachers, parents etc. Tim knew that changes were needed but also he needed to take time to gain the teachers' trust to get buy-in for changes, collaboration & implementing of changes. In his words you need to know '*when to be a river, when to be a mountain*'.

He spent the first years working with the current set-up, until he and his leadership team could positively introduce step-by-step changes. These steps included -

- Initial focus on creating school vision, core values, STAND etc.
 - *S = Supporting & respecting our abilities and differences*
 - *T = Taking responsibilities for our actions*
 - *N = Nurturing curiosity & lifelong learning*
 - *D = Determination in the face of challenges*
- Next focus on developing better modes of communication, student government, and raising achievement.
- Teachers formed a data team to collect data on achievement, which was analysed, then the areas for improvement came from the staff
- Needed to personalise the students experiences - created advisory programme with 1 teacher with 12 students.
- Each grade had different focus developed –
 - *6th grade = being successful Ottoson MS students*
 - *7th grade = develop healthy meaningful relationships – peers & adults*
 - *8th grade = how to prepare to be a learner outside Ottoson MS at high school & tertiary levels*
- They are currently tying this into a house system – based of the 3 grades – and are introducing this in the next school year in August.
- Interventions in English Reading & Maths have been introduced – special education students need to be in an inclusive environment with differentiation.

The leadership team structure was outlined as –

- Principal plus three Assistant Principals. There was only 1 AP when Tim arrived. This increased to 2, and is now 3. Tim felt they needed more to effectively lead the school.
- The leadership team has 12 members cross-curricular – This includes the principals and leaders of learning areas.
- These teams also link with the other Arlington public schools – Arlington HS, Minute Men Regional HS, & seven Elementary schools, plus pre-school.

- The Heads of Departments /Learning Areas link with the other Arlington schools, such as Matt who works with all 11 schools.
- Others are more closely involved with Ottoson MS. For example Catherine Ritz focuses on foreign languages at both OMS & Arlington HS. She spends a lot of her time at OMS – she is great and he is looking forward to the next school year when she will be based at OMS rather than AHS.
- The teachers work on a team model, with each Grade forming a team of teachers – 6th, 7th and 8th Grade teams

The Arlington public schools are administered by the Superintendent – she is an ex-Head of Department (others come from principals). She organises resources, budgets etc. The K12 Department Heads are employed by the Superintendent, but are based in the schools.

The School Committee meetings – ACMI – has members elected by parents and they focus on contributing to the needs of the Arlington Public schools together. (One meeting that occurred while I was in Boston was televised on community TV for parents and families to see).

Tim felt his main education & management challenges were –

- *Changing the culture of the school to be a more positive high achieving school.*
- *Getting the teachers on-board – a clear message was given that they needed to change or leave. They have had a 60 – 70 % staff change since Tim started as Principal. Initially some of the veteran teachers left – those that did not want to change. There are still some teachers who are resisting some of the changes, but this is gradually diminishing.*
- *Renovations to buildings are urgent as many buildings run down.*
- *More buildings are needed due to increasing roll and a restricted building area. Tim predicts the need for a new building in 2015 to accommodate the increase. He is not sure what will be possible, as Arlington High School needed building refurbishments for their recent audit & the funds for this year from the Arlington Public Schools board were allocated there. He is hoping for more funding to be allocated to Ottoson in the next school year. Alternatively, one of the three Grades may need to be accommodated elsewhere.*

In his summing up, Tim commented it has not been easy to lead the school through these changes. Ottoson MS is now in a positive mode, with an increasing roll and increased achievement with a more positive holistic environment with family involvement. There is more open communication with families – parents are welcome and can have their say. They are happier, the school is viewed more positively, and the roll is increasing.

MY REFLECTIONS

After my course and experience of education and schools in the United States I now had more ideas on the mechanics of good team work and leadership and had been impressed by the large number of enthusiastic teachers working in teams and striving for improved teaching and learning.

It also made me realise that most of the methods recommended by the education professionals at Harvard and school personnel were already being used back at my own school in New Zealand. This also reinforced for me how far we have progressed already towards effective team work for improving teaching and learning, resulting in raised student achievement.

The course presenters and the teachers from the schools outlined specific ideas on how to run meetings, use faculty rounds, and protocols as structures for supporting collegial conversation with the view that if the procedures were adhered to, then there would be successful team work resulting in improved teaching and learning.

However, I was still puzzled by one aspect in that it all relied on all team members pulling together in tandem. Not much was said about the teachers or team leaders who were not so enthusiastic or were resistant to changes in team procedures and professional learning. Both the principals at Elliot K-8 Innovation School and Ottoson Middle School mentioned that they had a high turn-over of staff during the changes, with teachers leaving if they did not want to change their pedagogy or try new ideas.

I was mindful of Richard Elsmore's word of caution at the beginning of the Harvard course when he said that –

“teacher teams can only contribute to school effectiveness if they are –

- *real teams*
- *able to make binding commitments and act on them*
- *exercising lateral accountability*
- *developing relational trust, and*
- *experiencing collective efficacy*

How were leaders of teams expected to lead teams if some of the team were reluctant participators or they themselves were unsure of how to proceed? This I felt was a problem in a number of schools especially at middle leadership level, and warranted more thought and investigation when back in New Zealand.

WESTLAKE BOYS HIGH SCHOOL, AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND

I was alerted to the initiative being undertaken at Westlake Boys High School in Auckland because of the article "*Building leadership from the middle*" in the New Zealand Education Gazette (10 March 2014), and a thesis written by Rachel Peak "*Middle Leadership of Teams in Large New Zealand Secondary Schools*" as part of her Master of Educational Leadership and Management degree at the Unitec Institute of Technology.

In Rachel Peak's thesis conclusions, she stated that –

"A need to cultivate and develop new and existing middle leaders must be considered by principals if they hope to retain and sustain the leadership capacity in their school".
(Peak, pp. 115).

She recommended four main recommendations that need to be addressed at school and Ministry of Education levels-

- *A formalised mentoring programme run internally by senior leaders and experienced middle leaders*
- *More time allocated to middle leaders to give them time to deal effectively with paperwork but also time to reflect on their practice in leading the department*
- *Identifying the professional development and supportive needs of middle leaders within the institutions and structure their own internal professional learning and collegial support networks around these needs*
- *The MOE must consider promoting professional development for middle leaders especially in dealing with team work and working with people*

The Middle Leadership Programme at Westlake Boys was established by Associate Headmaster Alex Reed and Rachel Peak who is a middle leader at Westlake Boys as Year 9 Dean and teacher of English. Rachel's research showed that middle leaders felt that –

- *they had little training for effective collaboration*
- *they had to juggle many administrative tasks and were expected to lead departments, solve problems, and implement new curriculum changes*
- *the nature of middle leadership was changing from management to team leadership*
- *they felt underprepared and in need of support*

The leaders at Westlake Boys agreed that principals needed to cultivate middle leaders and they launched their MLP programme. They began in 2012 with a group of 16 middle leaders from a range of curriculum and pastoral areas. They were involved in a range of activities, focus group sessions, workshops, presentations (from within and outside the school), and shadowing other leaders within the school.

The programme is designed so that participants were “*exposed to new ideas in order to learn about their own leadership style*”. It has enabled more cross-department collaboration within the school. The school has helped provide time for the programme in the relief budget, but most workshops have included out-of-school time as well. They felt that the programme complemented the Government’s new initiatives to raise the profile of leaders in education, and was a success, and they intended to continue with the programme.

During my visit to Westlake Boys, I discussed with Alex and Rachel the successes of the first programme. The first group’s programme ran for two years and all 16 participants are still at the school in a range of leadership roles. They deem it successful, as evidenced by the participants’ positive feedback and still being involved at Westlake Boys, and others wanting to join the new group.

They have started a second group which has 14 participants. They had initially only wanted 10-12 members, but had 20 apply, and used criteria such as experience and commitments in order to reduce the number to 14. The participants must be prepared to commit to approximately 20 sessions over two years. Some of the workshops occur in Period 5 and after school and some in their own time.

They have modified the programme slightly after lessons learned from the first group, and the focus is on exposing good practice and reflective practice. All sessions are run with the aim of participants thinking about themselves, their leadership styles and their relationship with others.

The programme also involves shadowing middle leaders involved in the first programme or senior leaders, and involves reflection and discussion in informal small groups afterwards. They have found that the shadowing is best in blocks of time rather than a day. They aim to cover a wide range of different experiences such as meeting with a parent, running a meeting etc.

From their experience at Westlake Boys, both Alex & Rachel think that it is best to work with those who are keen and receptive to new ideas – they think it is “*a waste of time to focus on those not receptive to change – better to work with those who will improve and let them lead by example for the others*”. They also feel that the programme needs a ‘driver’ and Alex said that the school was fortunate in having Rachel to primarily drive the programme for Westlake Boys. Other schools had also shown interest in their programme.

I was impressed at the comprehensive nature of the MLP programme being run at Westlake Boys High School, and the success it was having with their middle leaders. I was mindful of their recommendations in ensuring that the programme had to be robust and have committed participants.

MY RETURN TO SCHOOL

I returned to school refreshed and inspired. I gave a seminar report-back to our teachers on the studies I had undertaken, the literature review, the Harvard course, the schools visited and data collected. This generated interest from a number of middle leaders expressing a desire to be involved in similar professional learning programmes, especially like the programme being undertaken at Westlake Boys, and I look forward to helping bring this about.

SOME OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

On reflection, the opportunity to research, read and see school teams in action has given me an in-depth appreciation of what middle leaders need. If teams are to work effectively as possible, with effective team leaders, they need effective professional learning and development – both as a group of middle leaders and across the whole staff.

Numerous interventions and initiatives are already in place at Kelston Girls' College to help middle leaders lead their teams in focusing on raising student achievement and for sustaining that effort. The seminar report I gave generated further interest in professional learning programmes specifically for middle leaders, and I look forward to working with our team at school to implement some of these initiatives.

I valued the time away from my job as it has given me time to reflect. The sabbatical provided me with some insights into the strengths we already have and where the weaknesses are that can be focused on. The strength we have is in our own staff – the teachers and leaders within.

Marion Buckland,
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Kelston Girls' College
2014

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