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Does positive school spirit allow students to engage more positively in learning and achieve greater success?

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**A Research Investigation Undertaken
As Part of Principals' Sabbatical Leave**

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Why this study?

It has seemed to me for some time that activities related to school spirit, e.g. school interchanges, cultural competitions, assemblies, student leadership, take up a significant amount of teachers' and students' time. These are the sorts of activities that make each school special and different, that build the school's community and as such they are seen as important. Yet when it comes to a school being reviewed what is considered on the whole is quantifiable achievement such as NCEA results and their analysis, monitoring of curriculum levels attained, ASTTLE findings and the like. It is, of course, easier to deal with totally objective data, but the question then remains: does time put into the promotion of school spirit have validity? If academic achievement is the raison d'etre for schools, should we be continuing to put this energy into activities which realistically can only be evaluated subjectively? Moreover the time that is devoted to school spirit related activities could, if not of significant benefit, be applied to activities which could enhance the quantifiable results and hence the school's reputation with the government's audit agency for educational institutions. This is the model followed by German secondary schools and while it seems foreign to our schools with systems and structures derivative of the British and US schooling models, could be worth our consideration if in fact removing all sports and cultural activities, all community building activities, all competition between institutions e.g. sports interchanges etc would improve academic results.

With these questions in mind, I visited schools in Canterbury, Otago and Southland and interviewed principals and students. I visited only secondary and Year 7-13 schools and accordingly the findings of this investigation are limited to these schools. I asked them about
  * Their understanding of what school spirit meant
  * How school spirit was promoted in their school
  * What role they saw students, staff, and the principal playing in promoting school spirit
  * Whether they considered the goals of their secondary school to be solely academic and if not what other goals they might have for their departing students
  * What part they saw "school spirit" type activities playing in the achievement of these goals, including the goal of academic achievement.
(See Appendix 1 for questionnaires used)

I also undertook some reading around the topic.

What follows is the outcome of my research. It is limited by time, the size of the sample and the depth of study possible. However within these constraints it does, I believe, have some validity and raises some useful questions for further consideration.

What constitutes "School Spirit"?

What a web search revealed: A web search looking for definitions of school spirit made me aware that there is both a novel and a movie entitled "School Spirit" and that it is possible to create a "school spirit" patchwork quilt! One elementary school in USA claims to have "school spirit" for sale! It also became clear that some church schools in USA see themselves as being the sole preserve of "spirit". (I did not however gain this impression from church schools visited in New Zealand.) One rather cynical definition came from www.everything2.com which read, "A sense of devotion or affection for one's school. Often expressed at the expense of other rival schools. May be inflamed by sporting events or other competitions where the outcome has little bearing on the relative worth of an institution. Probably related to patriotism, nationalism and various other sub-human 'loves of the familiar' as CS Lewis would put it". Worsley Elementary School in USA defines school spirit as "what makes a school an interesting place to be. …Students (who show true school spirit) are people who know there's more to school than classes, lessons and homework and are determined to make their school into something more than four walls and some blackboards."

How the students interviewed defined school spirit: Students saw school spirit to exist primarily in **positive relationships**. They talked about school spirit being apparent when people in a school worked positively together. Two or three schools likened a school with positive spirit to a family. Evidence of positive school spirit cited was when peers encourage you to do well, when senior students look out for and are good role models for juniors, when students are friendly and outgoing to new arrivals in the school and when students work to keep the school environment safe for everyone. They also spoke of relationships between students and teachers which when positive generated mutual respect. (The staff member who earned second place in the school wide "Stone, Scissors, Paper contest was mentioned by one group as were staff involved in extracurricular activities). This positive spirit impacted on classroom behaviour and also on students' capacity to deem these staff as "trustworthy" and to feel that they in turn were "trusted".
Other facets of school spirit which were on the whole by-products of the mechanisms used to build relationships were participation and competition. Students generally recognised that while the competition was often heated and winning was sweet, the overall picture was a larger one.
Other dimensions of school spirit were identified by students**. Pride** in the school was generated by individual and collective school successes, as well as the environment in which the students worked and played. Students identified that this pride generated in them a desire to present themselves well and to respect their environment.

In some schools and most noticeably single sex boys' schools **tradition** was an essential and very important part of school spirit. One boy talked about "feeling responsibility to the Old Boys and the younger students". However in other schools the focus was on the present and the immediate past.

The other significant component of school spirit identified by students was **a sense of belonging**. This made students feel part of the school and feel a sense of ownership. It made them feel that school was a place where they wanted to be.

Positive school spirit resulted in a **sense of well being**, both for individuals and the school community as a whole.

How school principals interviewed defined school spirit: Principals and students overall had common understandings of how school spirit could be described.

They talked of school spirit arising out of **relationships.** They saw this including relationships between students and staff, and relationships between senior and junior students. One principal talked of developing a sense of "mateship". Overall they saw the positive relationships building a sense of community. One school talked regularly about their school as a "family". Participation was recognised as an important part of building up these relationships. "School spirit exists when the student body is alive and active". One principal talked of the importance of students realising that being in relationship with their peers and teachers made them part of a larger entity and helped them develop a sense of social and community responsibility.

Having **pride in the school** (or feeling good about the school) was an aspect of school spirit identified by all principals. They recognised that schools exist in communities and that it is important for positive school spirit that not only students and staff but also parents and the wider community have pride in the school if school spirit is to be at an optimum level. Conveying accurate and regular information to parents and promoting students achievement in the community was an important dimension of this. Principals felt this pride in the school incorporated having pride in each other's achievements and enjoying success together. One principal described school spirit as being "when students feel good about the school and that good feeling manifests itself in improved behaviour, involvement, and presentation".

Tradition was identified across a range of schools as being an essential dimension of school spirit. It was stressed that it was important to build on the school's heritage and to look forward. One principal warned of the danger of being too bound by tradition which could counter positive school spirit.

What principals identified much more clearly than students was that they saw school spirit as being a vehicle for conveying the **values and the ethos of the school**. School spirit was "the way we do things round here". "School spirit is when school represents a set of values that enriches students giving them security and purpose". In addition to the collective values which are part of the school identity, school spirit played a role in reinforcing individual worth. "School spirit says this school is a place where I am valued and wanted".

The dilemma

In the course of my discussion with school principals and students I became aware that the definitions emerging for "school spirit" were very close to and in some instances identical with definitions given in current literature for "school culture". The question that needs then to be asked is "Are 'school spirit' and 'school culture' one and the same thing?" Is it just that the term "school spirit" has become too closely identified with the US college basketball circuit that a more politically correct

term has been sought? Or is perhaps "school spirit" an aspect of "school culture", the dimension that takes place outside the classroom?

School culture has been identified as
- "the web of significance in which we are all suspended" (Geertz 1973)
- "the way we do things round here" (Bower 1966)
- "the shared beliefs and values that closely knit a community together" (Deal and Kennedy 1982)
- "complex webs of traditions and rituals that have been built up over time as teachers, students, parents and administrators work together and deal with crises and accomplishments" (Schein 1985, Deal and Peterson 1990)
- "School cultures – no matter whom they serve – become like tribes and clans, with deep ties among people and with values and traditions that give meaning to everyday life." (Deal and Peterson 1999)

These definitions seem to reflect the definitions given by the principals and students interviewed. Here we find the references to relationships, traditions, pride, shared ethos and sense of identity that emerged from these discussions. So perhaps "school culture" and "school spirit" are one and the same.

Yet the term "culture" used in this context seems to have its origins in the business world. Hedley Beare, Brian Caldwell and Ross Milliken discuss the meaning of this term for schools in their book, *Creating An Excellent School: Some new management techniques.* They define "culture" as the "social and phenomenological uniqueness of a particular organisational community". Culture is in their view made up of the operation's mission, the underlying philosophy of the leaders and members, the value sets of leaders and others, the quality of personal and interpersonal actions and interactions, the metaphors, sagas, myths, folk heroes and celebrations. They sum up by saying, "Every school, then, small as well as large, new as well as old has a particular culture, determined by the individual values and experiences which each person brings to it, the ways in which its people act and interact and the footprints they leave behind them".

Beare, Caldwell and Milliken see "culture" as part and parcel of the business model for operating schools. The culture is in place to support the school's role of helping people to learn. The efficacy of that culture and its validity are evaluated in terms of students' achievement in formal quantifiable assessment.

(Footnote: It is interesting to note that one aspect of this model has brought a new dimension to school spirit related activities. This model puts schools in competition with each other having to market their strengths and achievements. In some instances activities which in the past were intended to build up the spirit of the school community have become marketable assets. Whether or not this diminishes their value to the school community is open to question.)

Thomas Sergiovanni would argue that academic achievement is not the sole role of a school. He writes, "Society places the burden for preserving and growing lifeworlds on its social organisations and institutions. Families, faith communities, mutual benefit organisations and civic associations are examples. Among social organisations schools have important roles to play". (xvii) (Perhaps this role is increasingly important in our society where family structure is often

fragile and faith communities are becoming smaller and social structures are increasingly informal). Sergiovanni talks of two worlds which are part of a school structure, the lifeworld which is about culture, meaning and significance and the systems world which relates to management systems. Both are equally valuable, he claims, but "…the strategic actions of the systems world should be determined by and should serve the expressive and normative actions of the lifeworld." (p7) He defines culture as "…the normative glue that holds a particular school together. With shared visions, values, beliefs at its heart, culture serves as a compass setting, steering people in a common direction. It provides norms that govern the way people interact with each other. It provides a framework for deciding what does or does not make sense." (p1) While Sergiovanni clearly states that this role of creating a "lifeworld" in a school is an expectation of society, he claims too that this is an essential component of students achieving well academically. "For students to become the type of world class learners that many politicians and corporate executives want them to be, students have to be connected to the school, to be academically engaged, to be part of a unique and enthusiastic learning community, to be personally motivated and to want to do well." (p15) "To be a learning community, a school must also be a community of relationships, a community of place, and community of mind and soul, a community of memory, a community of practice." (p66)

So in the light of this, where does "school spirit" stand in relation to "school culture"? Are they one and the same? The understanding of school spirit gleaned from my discussions with students and principals would line up almost exactly with the definitions of school culture outlined in both Sergiovanni's and Beare, Milliken and Caldwell's discussions, though the overall ethos would veer towards that of Sergiovanni.

However a consideration of a LeadSpace discussion around "School Culture" alerted me to an aspect of school culture that lies outside the dimensions of this discussion. While the people consulted – Louise Stoll, David Stewart et al – agreed with the definitions of "school culture" previously outlined, they saw school culture relating specifically to the "business model". Louise Stoll talked about creating a school culture where staff were open to change and improvement and where school cultures were evaluated as "moving, cruising, struggling, strolling, or sinking". David Stewart developed this concept further writing, "By developing a set of core beliefs and practices related to learning, the principal is in a position to change what teachers do by changing what they think about what they do." This is in effect changing the values of the organisation to better achieve its ends. This is a core part of any organisation or institution developing but in terms of Sergiovanni's model relates as much to the systems world as it does to the lifeworld. Therefore in order not to be caught up in this potential conflict it seems appropriate to talk in terms of "school spirit" rather than "school culture" and to avoid equating the two.

The questions that now emerge are
- How do we try to develop "school spirit" in our schools?
- Whose responsibility is it to make it happen?
And more importantly

- Why? Is it to help students learn more effectively or do schools see themselves having a wider responsibility?

How is school spirit established and maintained in schools

- *Student leadership*: Schools had a variety of structures for student leadership ranging from prefects with wide-ranging responsibilities and significant power to student councils with appropriate subcommittees. Students overall took this responsibility very seriously seeing that their decisions were heard and made a difference. (See Appendix 2) Students also led clubs and coached sports teams. The role of student representative on the Board of Trustees was recognised only in some schools as a leadership role. (This is clearly an area that would merit further investigation.) Students valued this opportunity for leadership highly and felt it made a significant contribution to building school spirit. They considered that student leaders encouraged wide student participation, gave juniors students appropriate role models, united the student body, and gave students a role in organising activities that fostered school spirit while allowing the student leaders the chance to build their confidence, become better organised and make a positive contribution to their school. Principals talked of the need to put significant effort into helping student leaders become adequately focussed so that their leadership did enhance school spirit. However they did recognise the value of doing this – "the principal cannot be the engine that drives school spirit (though they can indicate a preferred direction)"

- *Assemblies*: In most schools assembly was a weekly event and was seen by students and principals alike as a very important venue for communicating school spirit. Not all schools had the facilities available for the whole school to meet together. Where that was a possibility it was recognised by the students as very important in creating a whole school identity. "It's the only time the school is together formally". "Assembly makes you feel part of something bigger than yourself". Some of what happened in assembly varied from school to school. Students in a new school talked of the emphasis in assembly on building the school community and creating an identity. Students in a church school spoke of the religious component but pointed out that social action was always a part of the message presented. One school was the proud possessor of an Assistant Principal who told "great stories". While some assemblies were traditional in format, many were not. One principal noted, "Our assemblies are not traditional but the building in which they are held symbolises the tradition and gives status to the occasion which enhances pride". The essential aspects of all assemblies were the positive format, the recognition of achievement in the context of the full school community, the communication of school community happenings, the sharing of students' talents and experiences, the occasional speaker, and the message from the principal which was without exception highly valued by the students. For students, assemblies enhanced school spirit because achievement was recognised and pride engendered in that achievement, the principal's message provided a focus, and assemblies were almost consistently positive and encouraging. Distinguished speakers enhanced the students' pride in the school and some motivational speakers had had significant impact on students.

- *Extracurricular activities*: Extracurricular activities were valued because when successful they engendered a sense of pride in the students and the school for the level of achievement. Students felt proud to be representing their school and were highly motivated to do their best. However of equal importance was the relationship that was fostered between a teacher coach and the students in the team or between a students coach and his/her team. This building of relationships which carried through into all aspects of school activities including the classroom was an important dimension of building school spirit.
- *Mentoring roles like Peer Support, Peer Mediation*: This type of activity operated in all the schools visited. Students and principals saw that these activities when implemented effectively did much to build up the school community.
- *House competition*: In most schools the house competitions were hotly contested. One student described the house system in her school as "the ultimate example of school spirit".
- *Ex-pupils associations*: These tended to be strongest in long established single sex schools and in church schools. Students on the whole felt ex-pupils associations played minimal part in building school spirit. One student who attended a school where a reunion had recently occurred commented that "a lot of very good people were educated at our school. Their pride rubs off on us". The response from principals was mixed. In some schools the financial contribution of former students was significant. The association of ex-pupils with the traditions of the school and distinguished ex-pupils whose reputations had enhanced the school were seen by some principals as making a very positive contribution to school spirit.
- *Special one-off school events*: There is a huge range of these, some peculiar to individual schools e.g. Craighead Diocesan School's Red Girdle awards which are part of the school's tradition, and some common to many schools eg lipsync competitions. A list of all the activities discussed is listed in Appendix 3. One event which students clearly enjoyed was a whole school lunch. Students felt these activities contributed to school spirit because they were sometimes part of the school tradition, they united the school, many people contributed to making them happen and the students enjoyed them.
- *Sports and cultural exchanges*: These were usually well-established competitions and shared events with similar schools. Clearly a successful interchange does much to build pride in the school's reputation. Students identified both the competition and the fact that students compete in teams as enhancing school spirit. Particular note needs to be made of the sports exchange between Timaru Boys' High School and Waitaki Boys' High School which dates back to the 1880s. This event incorporates rituals including the singing of special songs not to mention a bottle of magic potion all intended to enhance the performance on the day!
- *School ball*: While not usually a whole school event, this does build spirit, especially among senior students who often have a significant organisational role.
- *National holidays eg ANZAC Day*: Many schools observe ANZAC Day formally, even when it occurs in the school holidays.
- *Special "weeks" eg Maths Week*: There is no doubt that the school wide activities associated with special weeks do much to enhance school spirit. McKenzie College has an annual "Spirit Week" in which the students wear a

different style of mufti each day of the week and spend the whole week engaged in fun type activities.

- *School production*: Again this is identified as building school spirit because it is a corporate activity and the outcome usually earns significant accolades from the wider community.
- *Stage Challenge*: Students recognise this event as being significant in building school spirit. This is because the event is largely student directed, it is highly competitive and it receives significant media attention.
- *Uniform*: While this could be considered a matter of compliance, both staff and students considered that positive school spirit was engendered when students wore their uniforms well.
- *Class Act/Youthmark*: This is a very visible way of recognising the achievements of leading students in the school.
- *Well developed buildings and grounds*: Everyone feels more positive if they have an attractive and functional environment in which to operate. Students at a new school with barely six months in which to build relationships and tradition spoke positively of their attractive site and the excellent facilities they enjoyed. In contrast the principal of a Year 7-13 school spoke of the difficulty of developing a positive spirit in a cramped and inadequate environment. The spirit that had emerged was almost one of determination to survive despite the adversity.
- *For church schools, special services*: For many students these were a highlight. One girl told me "Chapel is an important part of our school. It encourages life values that are worthwhile."
- *Newsletters and websites*: For principals this aspect of promoting school spirit was very important. Newsletters tended to be regular, either fortnightly or weekly and were seen as a way to inform parents and the wider school community about the achievements of students and important events in the life of the school. Some principals also saw the newsletter as a way of making parents and the community aware of educational issues. The format of newsletters was increasingly professional. Principals recognised that for the school to be well regarded in the community quality communication on a regular basis was essential. This however may not be equally true for city schools.

It is important now to look at who carries the responsibility for making school spirit related activities happen.

School Spirit: Whose responsibility is it?

While through the very nature of schools, the ultimate responsibility for generating school spirit lies with the principal, it was interesting in my discussions with students and principals to gain their perceptions of whose responsibility the promotion of school spirit actually was.

Students generally felt they had major responsibility for generating school spirit within their respective institutions. The principal and teachers were considered to have an encouraging role, while students were responsible for interchanges, house competitions and so on. (Some staff would be surprised to hear this!) In one school students said that while the principal and staff encouraged involvement and put in place the structure for special activities, "the events were carried by tradition so that the need for staff input was not essential to make them happen". Staff were seen to engender pride in the school through encouraging students to wear their uniforms well and to look after the school grounds. Teachers in most schools were linked to houses and therefore had a role in house competitions. The involvement of staff in extracurricular activities encouraged students to get involved. In most schools students spoke very positively of the strong relationship between teachers and students based on mutual respect. Staff were recognised as having the capacity to enthuse students in and out of the classroom.

Principals' perceptions of their teachers' roles in generating school spirit varied significantly. In a new school where all teachers had been new at the start of the year, the principal was in no doubt that until positive relationships had been established between students and staff, the school had little chance of operating successfully. In one older, established school a principal felt that while senior management on the whole subscribed to the overarching ethos of the school, he/she doubted that the majority of staff did. "Many staff have difficulty seeing beyond the classroom and seeing the big picture". It was noted however that staff were involved in extracurricular activities which engendered a sense of belonging and that they would always go the extra mile for their students. One principal commented that staff whether they are aware of it or not are "carriers of the direction and values of the school". They "show what the school is about through their actions". Staff generally showed loyalty to the school. Younger staff were keen to be involved in activities that engendered school spirit. One principal was very clear that "Every time they (the staff) acknowledge the kids as individuals and value their success, they promote school spirit." For schools to operate successfully it was essential for teachers to be in relationship with students. Long serving staff played a significant role in passing on the "legends" of a school.

(Overall this area seems to me to merit more thought on the part of principals and teachers. If, as we know, an essential ingredient of school spirit is staff and students being in relationship and sharing a common goal, then consideration needs to be given to how this can happen more effectively in many of our schools. Staff need to be aware of the importance of this as part of their role and effort needs to be put into conveying the "big picture" to all teachers and helping them to see what their part is in making it happen.)

Students did recognise that the principal had an important role in generating school spirit. In one school the students said, "The principal encourages everything positive and gives it his total support." In another school the students said, "The principal is the overall leader of the school and sets the mark on how the school is feeling." However students on the whole did not see the promotion of school spirit as a significantly important part of the principal's role.

Principals on the other hand felt that the promotion of school spirit was a critically important part of their role and in fact was a factor in everything that they did. One principal noted that it included "even how we move around the school, how we talk to kids." Principals generally felt they had a responsibility to keep the school positive and happy. One principal described maintaining positive school spirit as "a huge part of the principal's role – in fact a burden" and noted how easy it was to become aware of negative perceptions and take them on one's own shoulders. For principals in long established schools carrying the legacy was an additional responsibility. Principal talked of the importance of celebrating success as a school community and also "lending their presence" to as many school activities as possible.

It does seem to me that while recognising that of course the principal does have a very significant role in establishing and maintaining school spirit, it was important that the onus should not lie with the principal alone. School spirit by its very definition is achieved by a school community working together and while the principal provides the leadership, the staff, students, parents and community need to carry the responsibility too. While a leader can inspire, the school can only be as good as the actions of its community allow it to be. The importance of having a clear vision for a school shared by all members of the school community is an essential part of allowing positive school spirit to grow.

The question now is should we worry at all? School spirit related activities take an enormous amount of time. They put pressure on staff and students. Every school principal is familiar with the often heated staffroom discussion about the relevant merits of spirit engendering activities with formal lessons. Would we be better off just ignoring all of them and focussing, as do our German counterparts, on what happens in the classroom? Would what happens in the classroom be as effective without the school spirit type activities?

School Spirit: Should it be anyone's responsibility?

If the engendering of school spirit is to be considered an essential part of a New Zealand secondary school's operation, it needs to be incorporated in the charter of that school, it needs to be allocated time within the school's programme, it needs to be recognised by all aspects of a school community as worthy of effort and attention and it needs to be part of the process by which schools are evaluated. More than anything else it has to be clear that it does make a difference, that students emerge from schools having achieved more fully the schools' goals for those students than if school spirit related activities had not been part of that school's programme. With this in mind, I

- Looked at a sample of the schools visited to see what their mission statements said about the desired outcomes for their students
- Talked to principals about what they wanted students leaving their school to have achieved
- Asked students what goals they wanted to have achieved by the time they wanted to have achieved by the time they left school.

Mission Statements: While these statements do not always have a high profile in schools, they do represent a brief description, regularly reviewed by the school's community stating the school's overall objective for its young people. Typically they encourage academic achievement – "Good learning and good teaching", "to help our students gain the qualifications…and knowledge..." , "…provide a broad range of educational experiences…", "…participating in a wide based education programme..". A minority of schools talk about academic excellence while the majority aim for their students to achieve to the best of their abilities. However it would be true to say that academic achievement is almost subsidiary to the stated aims for students to be able to develop as all rounders, develop social and personal skills, and contribute positively to society. Typical are the following:
"…to help our students gain the qualifications, skills, attitudes and knowledge to help them have a happy and fulfilled life",
"to encourage all students to develop to their full potential by participating in a wide based education programme that includes social, intellectual, sporting and cultural activities"
"…each (students) is well educated, responsible, confident and capable of contributing to society",
"…enables students to strive towards excellence in achieving their individual potential in all aspects of their personal development".
Hence there is no doubt that in these institutions at least, there is a clear mandate and more than that, an accountability to provide school spirit type activities.

What principals wanted for their students: Principals generally wanted success for all their students. They talked of students leaving who would be critical, creative thinkers, and lifelong learners. They wanted academic success where this was a possibility. However they recognised that not all students were academically able and wanted these students to be able to do their best to develop as all rounders in the school environment and leave the school feeling confident in themselves. One principal noted the inherent conflict in this goal. While all round development was her goal and also the goal stated in the mission statement, to attract students for the following year, high academic achievement was essential if she was to attract the

students required for the following year. Principals considered that they had social responsibilities to send out students who would be decent citizens, able to contribute locally and possibly nationally and internationally. "I would like my students to leave here as good men and women". The development of personal skills was considered an important outcome for students. Tolerance of diversity, believing in their own abilities, being sociable, being responsible risk takers, and having a good attitude to each other were all aspects mentioned. Overall principals were concerned that students developed the abilities and skills that they had to the best level possible while developing sound personal skills, the ability to relate to others appropriately, and a sense of social responsibility. While the overriding responsibility was to their students, principals also felt some responsibility to society. At the same time they had responsibility to their school and given the current emphasis on academic achievement as opposed to other types of achievement, there was some feeling of conflict.

Students' Goals for their time at secondary school: Students were all keen to do as well as possible in their external examinations. However they wanted to balance this against trying all the possibilities that school offers. They were also aware that school friends are often lifelong friends and wanted to put time into developing these friendships. Senior students often had a real sense of responsibility to their school. They saw a need to act as role models, showing other students what it was possible to achieve. In some schools students talked of "achieving the best results possible to bring credit to the school as well as themselves". They also saw a responsibility to instigate change, to "make a difference". Students recognised that school was a good place to develop the social skills and confidence that would allow them to operate successfully in the outside world. They considered that it was very important that they enjoy school and have fun. They wanted to leave having some understanding of the choices available to them and a clear direction, either into tertiary education or a career path.

Both principals and students believed that school spirit type activities were an essential ingredient of achieving their goals. One principal said, "They are inextricably linked. If students are happy and want to be at school, they will do well. Therefore they need to enjoy the social context of their learning. This is particularly true for boarders who in fact never leave school". Another principal noted the fact that positive school spirit gave students significant confidence in where they were and where they were going. The development of social skills as an aspect of academic achievement was also raised. Students talked about the fact that a positive school spirit made their school special, brought the school together and made people feel more confident. School spirit type activities made people **want** to come to school. Students raised the fact that student involvement encouraged a more co-operative environment, in and out of the classroom. "It makes people more peaceful, less argumentative". They were sure that positive school spirit had a significant impact of achievement. "It makes people want to achieve more". "It makes you proud and if you are proud of the school you do well". "It drives you past the point where you might otherwise give up". "You feel confident to take risks in the classroom in a school that feels good".

It seems quite clear that both principals and students have no doubt whatever that school spirit and the activities that engender it play a very important part in enabling

students to achieve the goals held by the community, the school leaders and the students themselves for their time at secondary school. It is therefore important for all our schools to look at this dimension analytically to establish whether its importance is fully grasped by the school community and whether the strategies to put it in place operate effectively in terms of structure, time and levels of involvement. If we believe school spirit is as important as has been stated, then its development in schools needs to be part of a more objective and deliberate process.

Beare, Caldwell and Milliken have developed a framework and questionnaire for reviewing school culture (See Appendix 4). which incorporates the major components of such an evaluation. However it is more wide ranging than falls comfortably within our definition of school spirit and their emphasis does not incorporate the student involvement which we would perceive to be an essential ingredient of school spirit in a secondary school environment. With this in mind I have adapted it to use to evaluate the school spirit at Waitaki Girls' High School (See Appendix 5). It would seem sensible that this or something similar became a regular part of a school's self review programme.

In conclusion
It seems clear that school spirit is a very important dimension of what makes a school a place where students can achieve to their academic potential and develop as well rounded human beings able to operate in and contribute to our society. In most schools the development of school spirit happens without being part of a plan and without any regular review process. My recommendation based on this study would be that schools develop a mechanism to review school spirit on a regular basis so that the part it plays in achieving the school's mission can be used to best effect.

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- Waitaki Boys' High School
- St Kevin's College
- Timaru Boys' High School
- Timaru Girls' High School
- Craighead Diocesan School
- Opihi College
- Southland Girls' High School
- Aurora College
- St Peter's College, Gore
- South Otago High School
- Kaikorai Valley College
- Taieri College

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Linda Cowan   23 September 2005

APPENDIX 1: Questionnaires

School:_____ Date:_____
Students:_____

**DOES POSITIVE SCHOOL SPIRIT ALLOW STUDENTS TO ENGAGE
MORE POSITIVELY IN LEARNING AND ACHIEVE GREATER SUCCESS?**

- **What do you understand by the phrase "school spirit"? Is it important? Why?**

- **What opportunities do students have for leadership in this school? How does this contribute to school spirit? Is it important for you to have leadership opportunities?**

- **Do you have school assemblies? What happens in these? Who takes part? What messages do they give about your school? In what way do they contribute to school spirit?**

- **Does your school have any special events eg interchanges, interhouse competitions, social events? Do you think they are an important part of what happens in your school? Why? Do they contribute to school spirit?**

- **What part do you think the principal and the staff play in establishing school spirit? Is this important?**

- **What are the most important things you wish to achieve during your time at secondary school? How do the sorts of school activities that foster school spirit help you to achieve these goals?**

School:_____
Principal:_____**Date:**_____

DOES POSITIVE SCHOOL SPIRIT ALLOW STUDENTS TO ENGAGE MORE POSITIVELY IN LEARNING AND ACHIEVE GREATER SUCCESS?

What do you understand by the phrase "school spirit"?
- To what extent does it incorporate the values considered important by this school?

How is school spirit promoted in this school?

How do you use the school assembly promote school spirit?
- What format does your assembly follow?
- How does your assembly give messages about school values?

How does the school use whole school events to promote school spirit eg sports exchanges, special celebrations etc?
(How many?   How often?)
What messages do these give about school values?
What role do events such as the school formal have in promoting school spirit?
(Are they worth the effort?)

What place does student leadership have in maintaining/growing school spirit?
- How is it used to best effect?
- Is the house structure of value?

Do ex-pupils' associations have a role in establishing/maintaining school spirit?

What part do you think the staff play in establishing school spirit? How seriously do they view this role?

To what extent do you see the building of school spirit as part of your role? How important do you consider it to be among your responsibilities?

What are the most important things you wish your students to achieve during their time at secondary school? How do the sorts of school activities that foster school spirit help them to achieve these goals

Appendix 2: Models of Student Leadership

- Student Council elected by the student body and staff from Year 13 students, and chaired by an elected Head Boy and Head girl (14 students) meets fortnightly; four subcommittees – cultural, sports, environment and services - which include other student representatives and a teacher meet in the alternate week; subcommittees plan whole school events eg house competitions, talent quests, mufti days.
- Prefect system – Head Girl, Deputy, Heads of houses, Sports and Cultural Captain, Head Boarder
- Head students and a School Council of 24 Year 13 students are elected by students and staff and meet weekly. They run lunchtime activities, organise the formal and student socials, and discuss issues and make recommendations.
- Head prefect and deputy are elected by students and staff. The Sports and Arts Committees and the Houses elect their own leaders. The School Council is made up of elected representatives from each level and is chaired by the Head Prefect.
- Prefects (20) are elected by staff and students and wear special blazers and socks. They carry out one 20 minute duty per day as well as provide leadership in houses, sports etc.
- In one school in addition to appointing prefects, all Year 13s receive a Student Leader badge.
- Prefects (13) carry the responsibility of leading student committees but do not include house captains. House captains are elected by the students. Prefects are chosen by students and staff.
- In some school prefects/senior leaders apply for their jobs at the end of the previous year and are interviewed by the principal who makes the final selection. Successful applicants are announced the previous year.
- In some schools student leaders are not announced until close to the start of their Year 13 year. Principals commented on the development of maturity between the end of Year 12 and the start of Year 13.
- One school in its hostel asked for volunteer leaders at the start of the year and then gave a badge to those who made the grade at mid year.

Appendix 3: Special One-Off School Events

- General Knowledge Cup – interhouse competition
- School Christmas Dinner
- Lipsync Competition
- ANZAC service
- Fashion Affair (modelling formal dresses for the community after the event)
- Arts Week
- International Day
- Whole school lunch
- School fair (operating as a house competition)
- Interhouse choir and drama competitions
- Commissioning of student leaders
- Lunchtime activities run by the student council eg tug of war, jelly eating competition, stone, scissors, paper competition
- Special events with country schools in surrounding area
- Prizegiving
- School Open Day (organised by students)
- Mastermind
- Ironman
- Performer of the Year
- Talent Quest

Appendix 4: Reviewing School Culture – A Model (Beare, Caldwell and Milliken

- Do the official aims embody the school's values? Is the school prepared to commit to these without reservation?
- Does the academic programme build the culture ? Are teachers skilled and imaginative? Are the facilities appropriate? Does the "hidden curriculum" build the culture?
- What does the organisational language say about the culture?
- What metaphor reflects the school culture eg military, family, laissez-faire?
- Are the myths and legends being told and created?
- Who are the organisational heroes?
- Are our procedures conveying the right impression? Are they consistent with the school's aims?
- Do our facilities and equipment represent our aims and priorities?
- What messages are conveyed by our artefacts and memorabilia eg magazines, trophy cabinets?
- What does our crest/motto say about the school's philosophy?
- Does our uniform provide a sense of identity and a standard of dress?
- Do rituals serve specific functions, enhance group affiliations and build pride?
- Do our ceremonies celebrate and promote the school's activtites?
- Do teaching and learning reflect the school's culture and ethos and contribute to it?
- Do operational procedures line up with official aims? Are they rigid rather than flexible to meet the needs of individual students?
- Are rules guidelines rather than prescriptions for behaviour?
- Are there formal structures to provide psychological and social support?
- Are the interactions between parents and the community regular and of high quality eg reports, open days? Is there an open door policy?

**Appendix 5: Evaluation of School Spirit – Questionnaire for Waitaki Girls'
High School**

- What do students/staff/community say about Waitaki Girls' High School?
  What metaphors are used when talking about the school?
  What stories are told? How positive are they?

- Do students and staff know and understand the school's mission statement? Is
  it visible? Is it reflected in the activities of the school?

- Do students and staff know and understand the school motto? Is it visible? Is it
  integrated into the life of the school?

- Are students and staff familiar with the school's history and background? Do
  they understand the forces and people that shaped the school?

- What does the way in which the uniform is worn say about the students'
  respect for themselves and their school?

- Do students/staff/parents know the "way we do things round here"? Do they
  understand what constitutes the "Waitaki Way"?

- Do the buildings and grounds engender pride in the school? Do the displays
  etc reflect the achievements, traditions and values of the school?

- Are the relationships between students, staff and parents respectful and
  appropriate?

- Are the school rules appropriate and upheld in a manner that reinforces the
  "Waitaki way"?

- Is the house system operating in a way that5 build pride and collegiality?

- How is student leadership visible in the school? Are the student leadership
  systems recognised by students and staff as working effectively? Does student
  leadership build a sense of pride, a sense of belonging and a sense of
  responsibility?

- How effective are school assemblies in
  - celebrating the goals to which the school is committed by the mission
    statement?
  - making students and staff aware of the school's history and traditions?
  - recognising and enhancing students leadership?
  - giving the principal an opportunity for leadership of the whole school?
  - reinforcing the school's ethos and values?
  - allowing the school community to enjoy being together?

- What extra-curricular activities operate in the school?
    - How well does each activity achieve its goals?
    - Is the leadership appropriate and supported by the school's structure?
    - Does the activity engender pride in self, team and school?

- How do sports and cultural activities operate in the school?
    - How well does each exchange achieve its aims?
    - Is its organisation effective reflecting well on the school?
    - Does the exchange engender pride in self, team and school?

- How successfully does the ex-students' association
    - engender pride in current students?
    - enhance the reputation of the school in the wider community?
    - contribute positively to the school?

- What special events happen **each year**? What is their function (in terms of the mission statement)? How do they contribute to school spirit?

- What special one-off events have occurred in the past year? What was their function? What did they contribute to school spirit?

- How does the school celebrate its prizegiving? What aspects of achievement are seen to be valued by the school? What public image is presented by the school?

- What format does the newsletter take? How regularly is it produced? What is its function perceived to be? How well does it communicate with its intended audience? What messages does it give about school values?

- What messages does the website give about the nature and values of the school?

- Are the goals and values of the school hostel consistent with those of the school? Does the boarding establishment enhance the spirit of the school?

Appendix 6: Bibliography