Focus: The role of the board of trustees vis a vis the role of the principal in self-governing secondary schools

Examination, as part of thesis preparation for a Masters of Educational Leadership and Management degree, of the roles of the Board of Trustees and Principal at the Interface of Governance and Management in New Zealand Secondary Schools.

Sabbatical Leave Report for Term 2, 2007
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Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

The objective of my ten week sabbatical was to progress my study towards my Masters in Educational Leadership and Management degree by moving from part time study into a concentrated period of focus on my topic of interest. The title of my thesis proposal is "the role of the board of trustees vis a vis the role of the principal in self-governing secondary schools".

Professional development for Principal's can take many forms, with varying degrees of long-term impact, and I had committed myself some time ago to completion of a Masters in School Leadership and Management, following on from completion of a Post Graduate Diploma in the same field.

My particular interest is in the impact of education legislation since 1989 on the roles of Boards of Trustees and Principals in governing and managing our secondary schools. The recent changes to strategic planning, charter preparation and reporting, combined with the implementation of governance models that owe much to the work of John Carver have been some moves to establish clarity at the governance and management interface.

Comparing and contrasting this New Zealand evolution from the original Tomorrows' Schools legislation with what happens in America, Canada England and Australia led to many valuable insights.

Rationale:

My thesis is still very much a work in progress and therefore not available for publication but I am including in this report some of the material from my proposal that backgrounds the context for my research topic.

During the course of my sabbatical the TV programme "Dancing with the Stars" was running on TV One. Seeking to explain my research topic to a colleague I found the dancing partnerships that programme involves useful in portraying the challenges in the partnership of roles between boards and principals.

Continuing to play with the metaphor resulted in the brief exploratory piece of writing, entitled "Dancing with the STAs". To add a further illustration of the context of my work I am also including that piece in the conclusions section of this report.

Background:

The aims of my research are:
1. To examine the role of self-governing boards of trustees in secondary schools vis a vis the role of the principal.
2. To review trustee and principal perceptions of this role.
3. To investigate the functioning of the interwoven roles related to secondary schools' governance and management in order to identify challenges.
4. To identify trustee and principal perceptions of solutions to challenges in self-governing secondary schools.

Activities undertaken

The main activities during the ten week period revolved around information gathering and analysis, writing and synthesis of ideas, meetings with my supervisor and other students on the same journey as me. My sabbatical created a very small carbon footprint in the ten weeks that I was able to devote to study for my Masters qualification. Networking with the education systems of America, Australia, Canada and England was pursued via the internet, providing me with rich and in-depth information to support my study without needing to go further than my computer.

Being able to pursue one focus and to explore in depth the background to the evolution of our current governance and management systems in schools since 1989 was an incredibly refreshing contrast to the multi tasking of the principal's role.

Outcomes:

Establishing the background to my research has been challenging. There are parallels outside New Zealand to our self managing system for schools but we have the greatest degree of not only administrative decentralisation but also political decentralisation created by the Education Act 1989 (Smelt, 1998). In setting out to create flexibility, effectiveness and accountability for boards of trustees in their role in school leadership, the language of the act in fact created ambiguities arising from global definitions of roles (Wylie 2002).

The intent is for boards of trustees, representing parents in a community-school partnership, to influence the school's character and exercise control over every aspect of school operation (Education Review Office, 1999). Within the board of trustees enacting this governance role are two other unique trustee positions, that of the board chair, and that of the principal as a member of the board of trustees as well as its chief executive officer (Education Review Office, 1999).

There is ambiguity and continuing tension over how the influence and control should take place, by direct leadership or by monitoring of the CEO leadership role (Earley, 2003). It is the sources and solutions to such ambiguities and tensions that interest me.

The first phase of my research uses an analytical approach of documentary analysis to create and confirm role definitions for trustees and principals. This data analysis is designed to achieve a contextual understanding of the roles of trustees and principals as well as to provide a historical perspective (Wellington, 2000). It provides the basic information for discussion and questions in a series of interviews, both one-to-one and focus groups.

Themes and key issues that emerge are based on a framework established through literature review and documentary analysis (Merriam, 1998; Tolich & Davidson, 1999) and include the expected, challenges and solutions, as well as serendipitous information and unanticipated responses.

A detailed examination of the current situation in a group of New Zealand secondary school boards is one mechanism to provide a platform for suggested changes to, or provision of, training for both boards and principals. Training to include addressing sources of underlying tensions to ensure that the partnership that is so desirable in leadership of our schools is effective as boards and principals work together in New Zealand's self-governing schools.

Conclusions:

(a) General

Despite the more than fifteen years that boards of trustees for New Zealand schools have been operating since the *Tomorrow's Schools* reforms (1998) there is an on-going concern that tensions still exist that have the potential to undermine the work of boards (Wylie, 2007). These tensions are most evident in relation to the role of the principal vis a vis the role of the board chair and trustee boards in general, the area of focus for this research project.

The interface of these roles is identified as the area where establishment of trust and a good working relationship are critical to effective board function (Education Review Office, 1999).I look forward to completing and sharing the outcomes of this research identifying the challenges, and possible solutions to those challenges, in the roles of boards and principals of New Zealand Secondary Schools. It is my intention that this in-depth information will be shared with boards of trustees and principals of secondary schools, through their respective associations, NZSTA and SPANZ to inform current practice.

There is a gap in the literature in this area and this study will also be of interest to researchers into the area of governance and leadership of self-governing schools.

I believe that I am able to offer a unique practitioner perspective on the roles of board, board chair and principal, and that my networking and data gathering will offer some possible solutions to identified problems that will benefit self-governing schools., This work should also be of interest to the Ministry of Education, and the organisers of the First Time Principals programme in planning professional development support for boards and principals.

(b) A metaphor for relationships

Dancing with the STA's

In seeking to explain how the board and principal should work together an analogy used by the New Zealand School Trustees Association is that the partnership between board and principal is like a doubles tennis game. (Hines, 2006). It is unclear what the ball represents, or the racquets and suggests an interaction with opponents that are difficult to identify. It also suggests that in working together there is only one game to be played and that the rules are clearly understood and defined.

I believe that another useful portrayal of the complexities and tensions involved in school governance, management and leadership would be to liken the partnership to participating in the television programme "Dancing with the Stars".

Analysing the actual partnerships in "Dancing with the Stars" we see that two people are brought together, one an amateur at dancing but well recognised for some other qualities, teamed with a dance professional who is both experienced and qualified to lead and communicate the dance. The actual partners in the STA world are of course the board chair and the principal. The motivation for the amateur is altruistic (a charity to benefit) just as is the motivation of most trustees (to serve their school and community). The motive for the professional the opportunity to do what they do well, support, educate, and inspire their partner – and the thrill for both is the outcome of success

It takes two to tango, waltz, quickstep or attempt any number of other dances and all require mastery of complex steps in time to different music and moods. The variety and complexity of dances reflects the responsiveness needed by different schools to their widely varied communities, decile ratings, resourcing needs, ethnic mixes and so on. To every set of basic steps it is possible to add a polished and perfected set of embellishments that make the dance the couple's own. Every board chair and principal, in partnership can create something in their school that is unique in meeting their community's needs, wants and expectations.

Watching "Dancing with the Stars" the focus is on the outcomes but much acknowledgement is made of the way that the dance (and dancers) become polished and perfected. An enormous amount of practice time is needed, together, not apart, to create a polished performance. While no tools are required, just the ability to understand both your own and your partner's roles, the tune must be clear if you are to be able to follow the music.

Even when the music is clear and the steps identified there must still be the willingness to repeat and repeat, evaluate, discard and develop until mastery is achieved. For the board chair and principal partnership the music (the external messages on which they act) may well skip beats or change rhythm, complicating the task of mastery.

As the preparation for competition begins these two people need to get to know each other and develop mutual trust. They need a complete understanding of the role and contribution of the professional and the amateur in the partnership, being clear who leads and who follows. In the dance itself this is decided along gender lines, in the rehearsals it will be the skill base that decides. As boards and their chairs and principals begin to work together, just as in rehearsing the dance, the strengths and weaknesses in either partner need to be explored in order to ensure the smoothest possible outcome.

Much of the hard work done in this exploration is in contexts that are much less glamorous and appealing than the final dance floor. Some fragments of the dance require more work than others   but it is the goal and vision of what can be achieved when all is put together that keeps the partners going.

The journey for boards, board chairs and principals also parallels the rehearsal time of variable focus and competing priorities that distort the time spent and depth of focus on different areas of their roles. It is clear strategic goals and vision that ensure all time will be time well spent on track to the final outcome.

Both partners know that it is critical to acknowledge that once they are in front of the judges and the audience their individual strengths are irrelevant and that it is the skills of both dancers and their trust in each other that will be essential to achieving success and to scoring a perfect 10. They need to be resilient in facing criticism and feedback on how their performance must improve and hear the feedback they receive as suggestions for growth and refinement of the next performance.

The dancers also need to know that every time they have perfected their routine there will be immediately be others to be mastered and other partnerships snapping at their heels and in direct competition for the same awards / rewards that they are seeking.

And when they are finally on the dance floor how do these last two paragraphs map on to the partnership between board chair and principal? It could be tempting to overwork the metaphor and label Jason Gunn as the Minister for Education, providing the continuity and explaining the rules. However he is probably functioning more as a consultant that a politician.

The music, now playing out in one continuous stream, includes the community make-up that contributes to the work of the board as well as the already mentioned societal pressures. Gone is the practice time and the mix of training and experiential learning that occurs within and outside of the boardroom.

They are in the moments in front of the judges – who in the board chair and principal context are to be found in the Ministry of Education, ERO and NZQA. Another

parallel - despite all the long hours of practice what the judges can measure is only a snapshot (an annual report, a review, some assessment outcomes) against predetermined standards for all performers. The judges' feedback affects audience (local community, staff and students) perceptions and is based on the partnership they observe, not the individual dancers.

In "Dancing with the STA's" there is everything to be gained in ensuring that, as the partners move on to the dance floor, they know they have spent time to ensure complete understanding of the music, the steps, and how bring out the best in each other. When trust, understanding and ability combine then the result is something that is effective, enjoyable for all concerned, a dance that is beautiful to watch, a school that is successful, effective and going places.

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