

PRINCIPAL SABBATICAL REPORT

My Investigation: “To strengthen relationships with the community and the impact it has on learning outcomes for priority learners”.

- Undertake professional reading with a particular focus on publications from the Ministry of Education
- Meet and discuss with Principals / professionals about practices and strategies for the benefit of priority learners
- Discuss with schools, effective ways of strengthening relationships within their communities that benefit the achievement of priority students
- Synthesis key ideas and resources
- Implementation of key ideas and “where to next” for St Joseph’s School Grey Lynn

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Education is at the heart of our personal, emotional and spiritual well-being. Its mission is to enable each one of us to develop all our talents and potential to be citizens able to contribute to our society in a positive way. Schools are able to prepare our students for life by providing them every opportunity to be successful, be challenged and strive for excellence. We know that education systems designed in the last century do not meet the needs of our learners today. It is therefore important schools are creative and engage today's young people in a manner that is going to motivate and inspire them to want to learn in our modern society. The achievement of Pasifika students is a priority for the Ministry of Education and a key goal of the Pasifika plan 2013-2017 is to create successful and strong communities where parents are actively involved in their children's learning.

PURPOSE

St Joseph's Catholic School is a small inner city school in Grey Lynn. It has a rich history with the school being established in 1884. The community is diverse with 90% of students identifying with Pasifika. The largest group being Samoan. Schools are continually trying to improve the ways they engage students in their own learning. One of our goals is to increase engagement with our Pasifika families. Whilst we are doing a number of different things to engage our families it is important we take a more in depth approach to community engagement and investigate other avenues that will result in more vigorous and robust relationships with our community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The positive influence parents have in enhancing and raising student achievement is well documented. Absolum (2006) states the support from parents with student learning is immense and if this relationship focusses on supporting education then student learning will be enriched. Absolum further highlights the partnership is based on

trust and building the relationship between the teacher, student and family. This relationship mirrors the existing principles we have already established in the classroom: openness, honesty and respect. The Education Review Office (ERO) (2008) found that the better the engagement and relationship between parents, whanau and community, the more positive the impact on students' learning. ERO further state that there are many challenges to engaging whanau in a school. In a study by Berryman et al (2015) it is important we understand that Maori communities often have a complex network of interconnected relationships. Building relational trust is critical to engaging Maori and deliberate acts of engagement through whakawhanaungatanga or the making of family like connections will build the foundations for strong whanau support.

There are many different ways schools involve parents in their child's learning journey. These include parent meetings, home and school partnership, student led interviews, curriculum meetings, learning expos. However, these meetings tend to be quite broad and not specific to the child's individual needs. Research conducted by the Education Review Office implied that schools who were successful in raising Pasifika achievement had developed successful relationships with their parent community.

[*The School Leadership and Student Outcomes BES*](#) found that the most effective home-school partnerships are those in which:

- parents and teachers are involved together in children's learning
- teachers make connections to students' lives
- family and community knowledge is incorporated into the curriculum and teaching practices.

[*The Family and Community Engagement BES*](#) found that the most effective partnerships:

- treat families with dignity and respect and add to family practices, experiences, values, and competencies (rather than undermining them)
- build on the strong aspirations and motivation that most parents have for their children's development
- offer structured and specific suggestions rather than general advice
- provide group opportunities as well as opportunities for one-to-one contact (especially informal contact)
- empower those involved by fostering autonomy and self-reliance within families, schools, and communities.

The Education Review Offices June 2008 resources “Partners in Learning: Schools’ Engagement with parents, Whanau and Communities” found that effective partnerships between schools and parents, whanau and communities can result in better outcomes for students. The more successful the engagement, the greater the impact on student learning. However, there are many challenges associated with successful engagement. The most challenging group were families that were ‘hard to reach” or difficult to involve in school projects. Another challenge was around time and being able to sustain the engagement.

Home-school partnerships that are tailored to the unique needs of a particular school and community are more successful than those using a standard approach (Brooking and Roberts, 2007). However, there are some ways of working with families and communities are effective across a wide range of contexts.

METHODOLOGY

I visited a number of schools with high numbers of Pasifika students and talked to principals about the programmes they offer to build and strengthen home and school partnership. The discussions gave me an opportunity to question the various ways principals have chosen to engage their communities and how their actions have contributed to raising learning outcomes. Having read a number of articles about the topic it gave me a greater insight into how we can better engage our Pasifika community. Following is a synthesis of these discussions:

The principals used a variety of different ways to engage Pasifika families in their child’s learning. The common thread with all the schools involved parent teacher interviews, operating an open door policy, home and school partnership meetings, Reading Together programme, newsletters and open days. One school talked about sharing the Pasifika and Ka Hikitia plans with the community and how the group had developed an action plan and targets in response to the goals. The same school tracked all their priority students and how families engaged with the school. These ranged from home and school partnership meetings, Reading Together, parent interviews, Breakfast Club. They follow up with families who are not involved at school and try to include them in the learning journey of their children. All principals noted that these families were the hardest to engage.

Another school had introduced the Mutukaroa programme. Mutukaroa is a home-school learning partnership that hopes to accelerate learning progress and achievement for students in years 1, 2 and 3. It is a process that fosters the active

engagement of parents and whānau in learning partnerships and provides them with the tools and knowledge necessary to support the development of core skills in their children. The data from this school showed a marked increase in stanine levels at 6 years old and they also commented on the quality of questions from their parents regarding student achievement. Another feature of engagement at this school was around Inquiry learning in the classrooms. Each year the school has a theme which the whole school focus on. The importance of nurturing collaboration and participation from the students is a highlight. The staff are encouraged to plan topics which are authentic and will have an impact on the school and community at large. The other schools had very similar strategies to engage their communities. School surveys were used to gauge community feedback and as a self review tool. The importance of keeping abreast with technology and the ways to involve their community was another factor to consider.

Another common thread from all the schools I visited was Pasifika families enjoyed the face to face communication and believed it was an important part of personalising engagement. These parents enjoyed having their first language recognized and it was important a translator was available especially during community meetings. Some parents believed it was important to have a representative on the Board of Trustees as it gave them an opportunity to have a greater say in the direction of the school. Being involved in cultural groups and festivals in the school and wider community helped to build confidence and a sense of belonging. Being involved in a number of school initiatives developed confidence in the Pasifika families which encouraged them to be more involved in their child's learning.

CONCLUSION

The importance of developing meaningful relationships with the community is a priority for all schools. There is a large amount of literature which highlights the benefits for the child if the partnership between home, school and the wider community is strong. It is evident from The New Zealand Curriculum, Ka Hikitia Accelerating Success 2013-2017, The Pasifika Plan and Education Review Office's publication in 2013 'Well Being for Success' that the close co-operation between parents and teachers ensures quality educational outcomes for our students.

All the principals I interviewed believed that relationships which were focused on learning and building relational trust with their community is integral to their role. There were a wide range of strategies principals used to engage their community but they all

agreed working together for a common cause gave them focus and direction. The principals recognized that each community was different and unique. They needed to be aware of their context and build a relationship with their families in order to have an impact on their priority learners.

Without a doubt the importance of parental engagement in children's learning is one of the most powerful improvement tools schools can enhance. The need to enrich and strengthen these relationships will only happen when schools engage their communities and are able to connect with these groups in a way that is going to be effective for all parties concerned. Building successful relationships with parents so they are aware their contribution to the success of the learning outcomes on our priority learners is absolutely crucial.

References:

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