

# School reform reality vs possibility

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## Executive summary

Literature review and commentary on this topic is varied and my summary is based on

- Observations made in schools ranging from mid-sized, urban to low decile, small, rural. Large urban schools were avoided
- Literature and research

Devising timetables that meet needs of more students was the main goal and further divided into smaller investigative units;

1. senior timetabling
2. vocational pathways
3. junior curriculum
4. mentoring and student support

## Background

We are faced by seemingly impossible odds when school viability and competitiveness is pitched against choice and 'good school - poor school' publicity.

Touting of high performing schools leaves us both vulnerable to further criticism and exposed to further ongoing review. Inevitably, comparisons are made between the two norms

Financially, as a decile 1 secondary school, we manage and are in general well resourced. The public therefore expect *bang for their buck* and want the best education<sup>1</sup>n for their children. The question of course, how well do students do compared to other schools

Socially and from community perspective, we are easily identifiable as a community and yet we struggle with identity issues. Many parents seek better for their children and choose alternative schools. Huntly is and remains a proud semi urban small NZ town sandwiched between large metropolitan centres which is an ideal opportunity for future employment. Similarities are obvious when "The truth is that along with whanau, education plays the major role in sustaining, understanding, changing and renewing our communities and lives" (Tomorrows Schools 20 years on)

Much has been made elsewhere about the gulf between equity and quality of our education system. In the context of my school "...our secondary schools are hierarchal and competitive. They are designed to weed out those who don't have what it takes for higher education" (Catching the Knowledge Wave) yet there is evidence that despite the odds that may be stacked against us, success is evident. Journalist Michael Lewis' cited example of a 15 year old self-taught legal adviser. "*in the digital world, he could be on the same level as people who , out in the real world, would be unlikely to speak to him*" (Catching the Knowledge Wave). Akin to Lewis, opportunities do exist within our context.

The model of education reform has been discussed and debated ad nauseam. References to failed policy and initiatives, interventions and support mechanisms. Countered by modern theory based on research. The concept that knowledge matters I concur with. The challenge, how to embrace and what does this look like in my school.

Post modernism, knowledge wave, national homogenisation, common assessment tasks, innovative curriculum, globalisation and third wave typify some of the proposals and debates to which I refer to but make no specific mention of the authors or researchers.

Summarising key issues<sup>2</sup> that lead to drop out / under achievement in my school:

- Academic failure and lack of any success compounded by low expectations
- Behavioural issues that in many cases are influenced by external factors
- Life events including socio economic factors
- Lack of interest or context

Lastly, this report is designed not to be an attack on our system but an opinion with the object to embrace the change required to ensure more students gain equity. Described as a hybrid based on ideas of others, available literature, of which there is an abundance. My intention to provide purposeful thought provoking commentary for improvements in the context of Huntly College / Te Kura tuarua o Rāhui Pōkeka.

## Senior curriculum

Innovative timetabling, creative thinking and always with students foremost.

This was observed in every school I visited. I applaud the thinking and vision of leaders in these schools. In almost every school, assessment however was the driving force. NCEA still determines what learning looks like and courses are designed around assessments. (Other assessment methods are not included here)

Huntly College, similar to others, leans towards assessment driven senior curriculum. The enjoyment of teaching and learning evident in year 9 and 10 pales by comparison. Where is the joy of teaching, the fun of being involved with students as they 'get it' when it is inextricably linked to assessment. Piaget for example, discovery learning is the only way students will learn problem solving skills. Little evidence of teachers facilitating learning simply because of the unrelenting constraints imposed by assessments.

The inevitable push towards '*all students to achieve NCEA level 2*' leaves little room for teachers and students alike to do other stuff. Conversely, where focus is on learning and not only assessment, the enjoyment is obvious. Examples include Gateway, YES and work experience.

What is the purpose of assessment and should teaching and learning look like a list of assessments?

What purpose does NCEA Level 1 have?

- Would students be more engaged if they could be freed from the pressure of Level 1? Would teachers feel more empowered and in charge of learning if assessment pressures were lessened? What would happen to relationships between students and teachers?
- Students who have selected with the necessary support are already tracking towards level 2. Students who are for example working in a selected Vocational Pathway are

likely to be working on Level 1 and 2 standards. The goal therefore, achieve level 2 NCEA before end of year 12.

**Recommendation:**

Move towards the demise of NCEA level 1 as a qualification and place more emphasis on a 2-year progression towards attainment of level 2 NCEA.

### Vocational Pathways

The intention of Vocational Pathways is both honourable and welcoming. In the context of Huntly College:

- The rapid introduction of what is an alternative to traditional '*aim to gain NCEA Level 3 and UE and then proceed to University*' is not the future for my school. Gaining employment, preparedness for work or further training or transitioning to a specialised course are the expected outcomes for 95% of leavers (2013 data).
- Teachers equipped to deliver the outcomes, teach in context and allow learning to become more real world very demanding and possible utopia. The example I highlight in this case, Primary Industries. Where do we expect teachers who have the necessary skills and attributes to come from? Another example could be Construction and Trades based learning. Schools are keen to embrace this learning, communities likewise. The opportunity to seek and gain employment more likely.

Solutions must be local including

- increased autonomy (staffing, funding, employment conditions) ,
- community based initiatives (agriculture in my area for example provides significant, yet to be exploited opportunities)
- improved pathways enabling non trained teachers to pursue a career within teaching. In my community, expertise exists however lack of any career development, progression and remuneration makes recruitment difficult.

Bulk staffing or even an element of, for example could allow non-trained teachers to be gainfully employed on contracts to deliver a service and in context learning experiences. The opportunity exists for this to occur however this is a difficult and expensive exercise if operational funding remains the only solution.

Vocational Pathways, minus the old school stigma, will support improvement and realise potential. Many vision statements allude to something similar. "*To keep students in school and engaged as productive learners through to graduation, schools must provide experiences in which all students do some of their leaning outside school as formal part of their programs of study*" (Washor and Mojowski).

In the context of Huntly College / Te Kura tuarua ō Rāhui Pōkeka, experiences outside the classroom must take on more significance. Further, building on what has become apparent recently in regards Vocational Pathways.

**Recommendation:**

- Continue to seek innovative funded methods to offer more real-life experiences
- Seek expertise utilising legal employment conditions to further benefit learning

## Junior Curriculum

The relentless drive to improve literacy and numeracy is undeniably complete! We are obsessed and I am left bewildered. Are we any less numerate or literate than students of the 50's or 60's?

All leaders / teachers seek to offer an engaging curriculum. Students will be on task, attending and achieving satisfactory test results. Yet, could our parents multitask for example by competing online with overseas competitors where language is no barrier, purchase anything anytime anywhere and all while listening to music? No mention of social media required. And yet we are still required to organise their learning? Perhaps cynically, is this about job security or learning. Or quoting Lewis, "*... took place in his bedroom in an ordinary suburban house, using an ordinary computer and an ordinary e mail account, and the fact that he used his earnings to buy a Mercedes SUV violated the SEC (Stock Exchanges Commission's) rules*" in reference to a 14-year old self taught, stock trader boy

Students engaged socially, sport and cultural activities for example, it would appear produce higher levels of engagement. Engagement measured by;

- Commitment to give it a go and be the best I / we can be. Strive to improve, learn about limits and capacity. In a team environment, communication and collaboration is desired to effect the outcome. Individual tasks require high levels of commitment concentration and deep understanding.
- Engaging supporters, families, friends and any interested spectators. Assessment is ongoing and poor performance will result rapidly in declining interest i.e. critical analysis. Likewise anti-social behaviours
- Feeling of elation and satisfaction versus disappointment when the objective was averted.

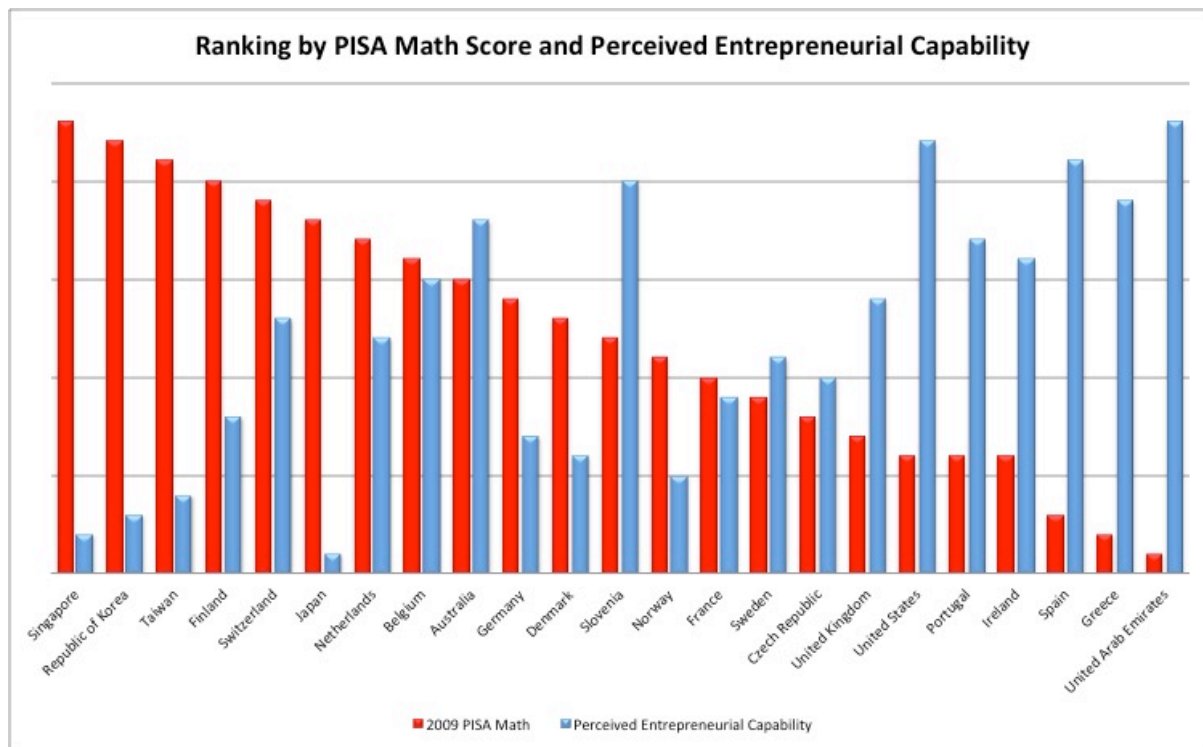
Engagement is not attendance in class, punctuality and responsiveness.

The key issue therefore, what should learning look like in years 9-11. Traditional approaches that make reference to graduate profiles and what we want our students to look like. One example being workers and managers with its roots entrenched in the Industrial Age. Workers were required to be punctual, conformist, task specific, respectful of authority, understand time limits and not required to understand overall process. Managers are expected to understand and supervise the organisations work, relay instructions from top-level managers to workers. As productivity outstrips demand, this system becomes cumbersome and non-sustainable. Key competencies cited within the NZ Curriculum align too closely for comfort in my opinion.

Where is entrepreneurship, the development of niche market product, the design process reacting to market need. To contribute to society, we require innovation and creativity. Fostering entrepreneurship, reacting to change and flexibility present significant challenges to schools like mine. Obstacles like "*dividing time and space, allocation of classrooms and staffing, classifying students, allocating them to classrooms, splintering of knowledge..*" (Zhao). The creation of a new paradigm is problematic. Union parameters regards staffing, parental and community expectations, traditional approaches that are well understood, choosing safe over risk, creation of individuation versus class groups and co-construction of

learning objectives engaging all stakeholders are examples of challenges faced in my school.

PISA scores, so heavily relied upon to compare us with others. Source.Zhao



This is interesting if nothing else. For my school, we can learn something perhaps. Test scores for example in NCEA level 1 are lower than National average despite significant focused resource. Many students arrive at College claiming aptitude in math. This is not transferred into national ranked data. Conversely, commitment to dancing or performing is well supported with little norm referenced data. Zhao suggests that education or "...schools are facing pressure to produce good employees..". Zhao also makes specific reference to New Zealand and our lower than expected scores in PISA yet (quote) "*perform well economically and have more entrepreneurial and creative endeavours.*". Why would I insist on following a system or designing a curriculum which is standardised and centralised, leading to improvement in PISA. Why is Policy reform in New Zealand so reliant on these types of results.

Involvement of students in their own learning is not a new concept with ample supply of literature to support. The challenge I believe is extending the conversation to trustful relationships between in particular staff and students. If high expectations exist, sharing and growing of knowledge is common practice, staff require access to quality professional learning and development. To enact and to best effect<sup>4</sup>, time and resource supported by credible facilitation mandatory. Ka Hikitea provides a guide.

**Recommendation.**

- To maintain and ensure high quality learning continues to happen in our school, clear links to a locally developed curriculum and not impart *over the top* assessment driven practices

- To pursue practices that allow learners to inquire, investigate and not suppress curiosity. Develop a risk taking learning culture supported in a safe environment with sufficient resource.
- Ensure adequate resource provision to support leaders of learning in Professional Learning and Development, more than at present.

## Mentoring and student support

In the context of my school, at present, no such program exists. From visits to schools

Key ideas noted included:

- Use of mentors both external and internal was observed in various forms.
- Tailoring programs to fit the uniqueness of the school.
- Outcomes focussed
- Division of time and students was crucial to student engagement
- Holistic approaches to student well being
- High trust relationships essential
- Community, family / whanau are more engaged

## Recommendation

The development of a program can improve student outcomes

And so to the future....

What employers want is '*...able to analyse critically, collaborate, communicate, solve problems and think creatively*'. If these were the possible parameters for lesson planning, what would teaching and learning look like?

Contribution to society, successful in the communities in which they live, improve the lives

Huntly College must embrace and accept significant changes that will affect current staffing and resourcing. There will be significant disruption and possible disharmony during periods of change

I want to acknowledge the support of the Board of Trustees who have permitted this opportunity. My quest to seek solutions leading to improvement for Huntly College has over time morphed into an inquiry, sparked renewed interest in education reform.

## Glossary and definitions

1. Education. One definition '*an organised programme of learning*'. The implication is that students cannot do this for themselves. Source: Creative Schools by Ken Robinson
2. Washor and Mjowski *Leaving to learn*

3. Gilbert, J (2005) *Catching the Knowledge Wave* NZCER Press
4. Robinson, V. et al *School Leadership and Student Outcomes* BES (2009)
5. Zhao, Y (2012) *World Class Learners* (2012)