

Sabbatical report

April 2015

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Sabbatical covered all of term 2, 2015

Acknowledgements

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To the Headmasters (and their staff) of the five London Secondary Schools, along with the two experienced classroom teachers (from separate schools) - who so willingly provided me with all the information I requested, and who were so generous with their time.

Executive Summary

New Zealand Secondary Schools have a national goal to improve the academic achievement of marginalized learners – specifically Maori and Pasifika learners.

After my wife was successful in being selected in the *Gallipoli 100* ballot, we decided that after 15 years of Headship it would be a perfect opportunity to apply for a second sabbatical (my first was in 2006) and visit a number schools in London to see initiatives they are undertaking to address improving achievement of marginalized learners in the UK.

This would have to have been one of the better professional development experiences a Principal can have.

I selected 5 London secondary schools - one of which was Private (and a top 20 performer academically), one all boys (with 20 girls in the 'upper 6th'), and 3 co-ed schools that are not classed as 'Outstanding' but who are focused on getting that title. I also interviewed two teachers (one (a relative) who is an experienced teacher, teaching Information Technology in a co-ed school in Dundee, Scotland; the other - a very experienced teacher, (and ex teacher of WBHS), who teaches Technology in a co-ed Comprehensive school in Shropshire).

To be able to have the time to travel around London and visit these schools, and to be made to feel so welcome, was fantastic. I had emailed out a two sided A4 questionnaire for the Heads to complete before my arrival (which hadn't been done by any of them by the way) - so we sat and worked through them together upon my arrival.

In all cases, I was in each school for over three hours, was taken on a tour; and in all but one, I spoke with a variety of key staff and senior managers.

In summary, there are no nationally targeted ethnic groups like we have in NZ. The key group all schools target is the '**Pupil Premium Students**' (PPS) - those who are (or who have been, in the last 6 years) on Free School Meals (or whose parent(s) are in the Military and who could be disadvantaged by the transient nature of their parent(s) job(s)). There does not appear to be any nationally led/driven programmes like we have in NZ to support raising the achievement of these students - each school 'does their own thing' - sometimes working (at their own initiative) with other schools in their Borough.

All schools emphasized the critical importance of active tracking of students, and the importance of analyzing the students' data and following up - not only with students, but also with parents. As we all know, tracking for tracking's sake is a waste of everyone's time. It is critical all teachers understand the data for each student they teach, and work with them to make their academic targets realistically challenging.

UK schools have been tracking students progress for a number of years, and are much further ahead than a number of NZ secondary schools.

The schools also use the students' achievement data (and the objective measure of 'value added') in staff appraisal - to see if a teacher qualifies for the next step on their salary scale. I must make it clear that data is a key component, but not the only component - and the opportunity to 'make a case' if results do not meet targets, is most certainly available.

Purpose

In New Zealand we are all aware we have national targets for Maori and Pasifika - and every school is focused on meeting their targets.

I was interested in seeing if UK schools have similar targets for underperforming ethnic groups.

The basic purpose of the sabbatical was to find 'best practice' ideas and bring that best practice back to WBHS - if it could hasten the sustained improvement of our academic results (for Maori/Pasifika) and, as a consequential flow on - all of our students.

Rationale and Background information:

In the 2 sided questionnaire I sent around, I asked a variety of questions - from the purely administrative (how many students on Free School Meals (FSM), roll, number of teachers, composition of Senior Leadership Team etc) to details of their senior academic results, to how their meeting cycles work, whether they started late for PD sessions, how they handled student

leadership in their school – how the student leaders were selected, and what training they got; how many assemblies a week (and when); how the day/week was structured; what literacy initiatives they were pursuing, similarly numeracy initiatives. How they were handling differentiated learning; how they handled detentions, and also litter; how they dealt with drug issues; Most importantly - how the school catered for under achievement; and how they tracked their students – so, as you can see it was reasonably full.

Activities undertaken (Methodology)

As mentioned, I emailed, prior, a two page questionnaire to all schools and went through it in detail with the Principal and selected staff. The whole visit to each school took between three and four hours. The interviews with the two individual teachers took the same duration, but there were some questions they were unable to answer (as their lack of seniority meant they were not privy to the information I was requesting).

Findings

All schools were wrestling with the same problems, and what I found as I went from one to another, was that the Principal's were particularly keen to hear of the ideas and methods that we were using to solve the same problem that they had - particularly in relation to our Literacy initiatives (*FLaNs* (Foundation Literacy and Numeracy support) classes, book reviews, *Blokes Can Read* posters, word of the week etc, student leadership, our Colours programme; involving Dad's etc).

As with my 2006 sabbatical, it is very clear there are no *magic bullet*, and some of the initiatives **we** had introduced at WBHS were of real interest to some of the schools I visited.

- 5 schools visited - one of which was Private (and a top 20 performer academically), one all boys (with 20 girls in the 'upper 6th'), and 3 co-ed schools that are not classed as 'Outstanding'.
- Rolls varied from 960 to 1300

Some good ideas – these are in no particular order, but hopefully are chunked together to make it easy to read.

1. Professional Development (PD) budgets varied according to roll, but all schools but 1 had a committee of staff and senior managers who were responsible for allocating staff to particular courses. In one school, staff involved in teaching subjects that utilized specialist equipment, had to undergo mandatory PD every 4 years, so they were as up to date as possible. This was a requirement of the area (and all schools had to comply). This is an excellent suggestion and was accepted (and appreciated) by the staff. All were covered by the school. (Very similar to what a number of NZ schools do with 1st Aid Certificates, for example).

2. All schools had Strategic Plans - in some form or another, but none were able to show me the actual document. The focus NZ schools have on annual planning and goal setting does not tend to be mirrored in the schools that I visited, and I was not able to see the Annual Goals for example - except in one case, where they were very simply presented. In saying that, all staff (including the two individual teachers I interviewed) were all well aware of the academic expectations for not only their school, but their own classes and performance.

3. Individual teachers (and through them, their Principals) are highly accountable for the academic results of their students and the targets for each group and each student within that group/class are very clear, and well known to all.
4. Test results are published for all to see (lists on walls etc).
5. Because tracking of students is so entrenched and part of everyday life, the academic details on each student are very comprehensive. Parents are expected to be informed about upcoming assessments etc. Some schools/staff do this better than others - and emails home, texts, blogs etc are all utilized.
6. When a student begins a class at the start of their academic year, their current academic level is presented to the teacher. (This is a very objective, data driven figure, and not subjective at all). This does cause problems, however, for those students who are immigrants, for example, and who simply do not have the expertise in Mathematics and/or English background that they should, and who have not had the background testing. These students, however, still get classified with their entry level - which, in many cases is totally unrealistic. Yet, still, the teachers are expected to have these students show substantial improvement by the key test dates. It would be fair to say this provides a fair degree of angst and frustration for teaching staff, and senior managers alike.
7. Because there is so much objective data on each student, it is easier to measure 'value added' - which, again, is an objective measure - not subjective at all (although there are exceptions).
8. Staff are expected to succeed in getting all students to their required academic targets. If this does not happen, they have the opportunity to provide an explanation as to why a particular student has not made the grade. This explanation will either be accepted, or it won't. If it is not accepted, then the teacher is expected to undertake supportive PD to ensure this will not happen again.
9. Pass rates, grades etc are closely monitored by school management, as well as outside agencies such as OFSTED, and the consequences for individual teachers and for school managers who consistently are seen to underperform, are serious.
10. Class visits (of teaching staff) by senior staff are taken extremely seriously, and if students do not clearly show that they have achieved the learning outcomes for the lesson, there are consequences for the teacher concerned.
11. In the Dundee area of Scotland, (it could be all of Scotland), once the end of year external examinations have concluded, all students (except those in their final year) are expected to return to school for 3-4 weeks. They are placed in their next year level and commence the new academic year. The timetable is drawn up during the 3-4 weeks of external exams, with students having chosen their options prior (much the same as we all do here). While there is a certain amount of subject changes (as a result of examination results), they are not major, and - in the main, the classes are reasonably stable at the start of the new academic year. This initiative works because it has always been the case apparently. I challenged the teacher about truancy, and why would the students return after their exams, and not commence their holidays (as they do here in NZ). His response was simply that this is the way it's done, and it's accepted. As a result, there is an extra 3-4 weeks teaching undertaken, that would otherwise be lost. This happens at all year levels, not just seniors - and in many schools, the new enrolments (in the junior school) are released (from their contributing school) to start at their new school.

12. Student Management - while all teachers are expected to manage their own classes, (supported by initiatives within their Faculties), there is a definite appreciation (by all schools visited) that certain students will continue to push boundaries and need to be managed in a different way. All schools had detention systems (with consequential flow on programmes), and these were managed by a senior manager, and in one school, by an experienced staff member who was not part of the senior leadership team.

13. Litter - this seems to be a universal problem, and the schools visited were most interested in the initiatives we use at WBHS. They used similar methods to address the issue as we do.

Implications

Throughout my visits and through the conversations I had, I endeavoured to find smarter ways of improving the academic outcomes of both Maori and Pasifika students. As we all know, there are no magic bullets - but it is clear that the proactive and sustained tracking of students is a critical factor.

It is imperative that teachers do not simply track the data - they must know their individual students and work hard at addressing their needs. This can be as simple as contacting parents on a regular basis to keep them informed as to upcoming assessments (and giving detailed feedback on past assessments), as well as ensuring students are aware of what is needed to improve their results. The accurate tracking of students and the regular, frequent, and ongoing feedback/feed forward they (and their parents) get, is pivotal to any sustained academic improvement. The relationships that teachers have with their students and their parents are as critical here in NZ as they are in the UK - or anywhere for that matter.

To do tracking well, takes *time*. To expect teachers to track as I have indicated (above) without some time compensation is dooming the exercise from the outset. If no time is provided, staff will take short cuts – and that will simply totally jeopardize the whole programme and potential benefits.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier in this report - this sabbatical has been a highlight of my career (one of many). The initiatives the five UK schools are undertaking are similar to those most schools in NZ are undertaking. There is not one single solution that will solve the underachievement of a particular group of students - ethnic, or other; rather, there is a clear message that tracking - if done properly, will certainly support sustained academic improvement.

The whole trip was brilliant.

Nothing was a problem - every school was so very helpful, as was every staff member I spoke with and interviewed.

As I mentioned at the conclusion of my 2006 Sabbatical Report - I can only but recommend that Principals, once they qualify, should apply for such an experience. Whether they are fortunate enough to head overseas, or whether they stay local, the experience is one they will never

regret; and neither will their staff!! Chances are their staff will probably relish having the principal out of school for a term!!! and the professional development the Deputy and Senior Staff get in 'stepping up' will be invaluable.

Thank you again.

AF Kirk

Whangarei Boys' High School Headmaster.

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