



## **Area Schools Principal's Sabbatical Report**

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**Developing the partnership between home and school to enhance the  
learning opportunities for students**

## **Acknowledgements:**

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## **Executive Summary:**

There are diverse and exciting things happening within education in New Zealand which challenge the way we have been schooling in NZ for the last century.

New Zealand has a high proportion of small schools and this can cause issues regarding the provision of a wide range of subjects and learning opportunities. Schools are looking for innovative ways to overcome these difficulties.

The internet and video instructional courses are changing the way students are learning and accessing learning resources. It allows them to learn at their own pace and gives the opportunity to try new material without looking foolish in front of their tutor or peers.

Learning Communities Online (LCO) describe a group of schools that collaborate to provide enhanced teaching and learning opportunities for staff and students across electronic networks.

Students can now be located in a place different to that place where teaching is provided.

Programs such as Google Hangouts and Skype make the programme affordable and available in multiple platforms.

Virtual classes are a blend of online and offline resources; synchronous and asynchronous. They provide multi-channel learning for students that is more flexible than classical classrooms and timetables.

Retention rates for students has improved, rural schools are becoming more integral to mainstream education and savings are being made by using video conferencing.

Students in Video Learning Network classes are doing at least as well as those in regular classes at school.

In Distance Education it is the school that prescribes the programme for students and monitors student progress.

The reasons for choosing to home educate are many and varied.

DE students are doing at least as well as day school students.

The good progress of students is largely attributed to the one on one attention that students get from their supervising parent working in conjunction with the school who set and oversee the programme.

Establishing and maintaining relationship with families is seen as vital for student success.

## **Purpose:**

Area schools tend to be located within smaller communities or cater for special interest groups within the wider community. Our school is within the latter category, looking to cater for the needs of students within the Christian community of the Lake Taupo area. Frequently small class sizes and distances incurring long travel times limit opportunities for students of area schools. This study considers alternative school structures and models that may offer the means to overcoming these barriers to learning for individual students and families.

The hypothesis is that recent educational and technological changes enable the classroom to be decentralised and small school size and distance need not be barriers to learning and success.

## **Methodology:**

An initial literature review of the topic looked at how the NZ pre-school, school and tertiary sectors are dealing with decentralised learning and teaching and how overseas school systems deal with distance education.

This would be followed with visits to institutions to see how they deal with the issues of distance and small class size and still provide a rich learning environment. It was anticipated that this would involve two weeks visiting in the Otago, Southland and West Coast regions followed by a week visiting Seventh Day Adventist schools in the Manawatu, Waikato and Auckland areas. Three weeks were set aside to visit Distance Education providers in Australia.

A major health issue for one of my daughters curtailed these plans. Travel back and forwards to hospitals and specialists, waiting for appointments and two weeks away from home due to an operation and recovery forced me to become an active participant in the distance education industry as a student. This forced reliance upon internet learning led to a much more serendipitous approach to this study and an exciting educational journey. As I chased down threads of learning, my study broadened considerably, often sparked by viral threads that piqued my interest. While much of this reading and viewing falls outside of this course of study or has only tentative links, I am sure that it will have a huge influence on my leading of the school in the coming years. Having first hand experience as a “distance learner” has provided greater empathy and understanding of the benefits and frustrations of distance education. In the end I had only two weeks to visit schools and home educators in NZ and Distance Education providers in Australia. These visits verified what I had been learning online and “fleshed out” my understanding of the requirements and practices. Observation and informal questioning were the primary sources of data collection.

## **Findings:**

There are diverse and exciting things happening within education worldwide and within New Zealand which challenge the way we have been schooling in NZ for the last century. The government, through the Ministry of Education and other Crown agencies has invested heavily in providing an infrastructure and resources that will allow NZ schools to take advantage of the opportunities offered by fibre connections, personal computers, smartphones, wifi and other technologies. NZ teachers have been challenged to carefully consider the pedagogy behind their teaching and to focus on teaching strategies that enhance learning. Many of these changes negate or at least seriously limit the constraints of distance or small scale enterprises. The experience of home schoolers in New Zealand, distance education students in Australia and students in small, remote schools in New Zealand is that they are able to achieve at least as well as their peers in larger schools around the country.

Schooling in New Zealand, as we would recognise it, began soon after the arrival of the early missionaries in 1814. Often missionary wives ran the schools catering for their own children and Maori eager to learn the ways of the new migrants and to read. It is worth noting that the missionaries put in a great deal of time and resource into learning te reo Maori, translating and printing the Bible and other resources into te reo Maori, and teaching many Maori to read. This in a society only just being introduced to the written word. The first schools in New Zealand were very innovative.

Planned settlement after 1840 soon saw the establishment of schools for settler children. The system of schooling was based upon an industrial model for education that mined the skills and attributes required for the industrial revolution and industrial society that followed (Robinson; 2013). It established an heirachy of subjects that largely continues to this day and is common in all educational systems of the world. This may not be the most appropriate subject set for the future. The mode of instruction established has continued into the twenty first century.

Today, New Zealand has a compulsory schooling sector for children aged from six years old until their sixteenth birthday. Most children, however, start school on their fifth birthday and an increasing number remain at school after their sixteenth birthday. Provision is made for children to be exempted from attending school for the purpose of being educated at home. Less than 1% of school aged children are homeschooled (MoE, 2015). A similar number are enrolled with Te Aho o te Kura Pounamu (the Correspondence School).

Of the 98%, the vast majority attend state schools. As at 1 July 2014 (<https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/schooling/student-numbers/6028>), 644,596 (84%) students were enrolled at 2106 State non-Integrated schools out of a total of 767,189 school students.

Half of all schools have less than 200 pupils and cater for 115,075 ((15%) students. There are 162 Composite schools, with pupils from new entrants to year 15, and 138 of them have fewer than 500 pupils. In the secondary sector there are 257 schools and 124 of them have fewer than 500 pupils. In addition there are 22 Teen Parent units in the country with an average number of 22 students in each. New Zealand has a high proportion of small schools and this can cause issues for providing a wide range of subjects and learning opportunities. Schools are looking for innovative ways to overcome these difficulties.

## **Home Schooling**

While Home Schooling or Home Education is technically outside the scope of this study it shares many attributes with Distance Education. The key difference being who is responsible for setting the curriculum or programme of study for the student. In the case of Home Education the parent is responsible for the programme while in Distance Education the school sets and monitors the programme, generally with the parent overseeing the student. Home Education provides an opportunity to consider the benefits or otherwise of parents being very involved with their children's education. Additionally, there are some very innovative things happening within the NZ Home Education sector.

In New Zealand Section 21 of the Education Act allows parents and caregivers who wish to Home Educate their children to apply to the local Ministry of Education Office for an exemption from schooling. The Education Review Office monitors home schooling programmes if requested to by the Ministry of Education following a complaint. Home Educators do not need to follow the New Zealand Curriculum. At 1 July 2014, there were 5,838 home educated children in New Zealand, representing 0.76% of the whole schooling population, and nearly 3,000 families. On average, students spend three and a half years in home education and almost 20% of students are home educated for less than a year before they return to a school. Nearly 90% of homeschooled students identify as European. The South Island has the largest proportion of home educated students. Approximately 35% of homeschooled students are at secondary school level (MoE, 2015).

There is a great diversity of what actually happens in Home Education from the use of very set and formal curricula to unschooling. In addition there are just under 2000 year 1 – 13 students enrolled full time with Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu (New Zealand Correspondence School) (MoE, 2014). Generally, these students are being educated at home and supervised by a parent or caregiver. This can be considered Distance Education.

The reasons for choosing to home educate are many and varied. For Te Kura students the most common reasons for enrolling were: psychological/psycho-social (24%); alienation (19%), overseas (16%), isolation (15%) and itinerancy (10%) (Te Kura, 2014). The data for reasons for home educating is not as easy to come by but includes dissatisfaction with local schools, ideological reasons such as wanting to promote certain values, wanting to

build family relationships, protecting children from bullying as well as those mentioned for Te Kura.

Parents like the variety and flexibility of home educating. One parent told me that they initially tried homeschooling when their eldest child was about to start school at 5 years old. Their second son had serious food allergies and they wanted to ensure a safe environment for him so they started home educating the eldest. They are now convinced of the benefits of home educating. These included being able to spend more time with their children and flexibility for the family. The parents were able to be more involved with their children's education and were able to help one on one. Importantly they could be on top of motivation and make sure that their children did not 'fall through the gaps' and they had more control on the influences on their children. They were clear in wanting to pass on their faith and values to their children. They were well aware of the costs of homeschooling, such as having to rely upon a single income in the family plus having to purchase education resources but felt the benefits of home education outweighed the costs. The eldest child is now attending a school this year as a year 10 student. The family do not view this as having been an educationally worthwhile year for him and are evaluating the options for 2016.

Homeschoolers use a variety of resources and gain support from many different agencies. There are a number of support agencies and cooperatives that support homeschooling families. Increasingly the internet is being used to access resources and/or allow participation in learning communities. Organisations such as Kahn Academy and EDx are being accessed for resources or even full curriculum. One of the bigger curriculum resource providers in New Zealand for the home school market is Accelerated Christian Education (ACE) which is a paper based resource. That ACE has a recognised certification process is seen as a major benefit by families. It is this recognised certification that is causing a growing number of homeschoolers to also consider part time enrollment with local schools or with Te Kura which has 141 Fee paying year 1 – 13 students. Distance education options being offered by New Zealand Universities and Polytechs are also being accessed by the home school community. It would appear that the number and range of resource providers that the home education community can and do access is increasing.

Salman Kahn, of Kahn Academy, suggests that internet video instructional courses are changing the way students are able to learn and access learning (TED 2011). Students prefer using the video teaching rather than face to face time with the teacher. It allows them to learn at their own pace and gives the opportunity to try new material without looking foolish in front of their tutor or peers. If students don't grasp a concept they can simply rewind, rewatch and try again. The success and rapid growth of Kahn Academy worldwide suggests that there is much to his claims.

## Learning Communities Online

Learning Communities Online (LCO) was a term coined in 2002 to describe a group of schools that collaborate to provide enhanced teaching and learning opportunities for staff and students across electronic networks (Core Education, 2011). There were a range of reasons for the establishment of the clusters including: providing greater access to subject choices for students; providing access to subject matter experts for students; engaging students in collaborative projects; and providing professional learning opportunities for teachers including virtual staff meetings. Retention of students who may choose to go elsewhere and staff who could now teach their area of expertise were also seen as major benefits. It was also hoped that there would be cost benefits from the sharing of resources. During the 1990s and early 2000s clusters began to form in rural and provincial parts of New Zealand. A desire to share resources across clusters led to the establishment of the Virtual Learning Network (VLN) at the beginning of this century.

Clusters were initially connected via audio-graphic technology and later via video conferencing. Ultra-Fast Broadband allows learners and teachers to create and share video and multi-media resources in real time. Students can now be located in a place different to the place where teaching is provided. This is “Virtual Learning”. Generally this virtual learning is occurring within a school situation but this is not essential, particularly with the rapid uptake of fibre connections in homes. It would appear that some clusters are providing places in classes for students not currently enrolled in a school. Initially the capital costs of video conferencing was high but advances in technology has reduced this cost significantly. Programs such as Google Hangouts and Skype make the programme affordable and available in multiple platforms.

“Our existing structures are becoming increasingly challenged as access to knowledge becomes more ubiquitous and the traditional role of teachers and schools are questioned” (p.6). “Schools were once responsible for all aspects of learners’ learning. It is now possible to separate some of these things so that learners have access to them from the right people at the right time” (p. 10). “The differences are likely to be evident in all areas, including what is being learned, how it is being learned, as well as when and where learning takes place” (p. 5) (All are quotes from Core Education, 2011).

A typical VLN class has a teacher based in one of the cluster schools and up to 12 students. These students may be spread over five different schools and some of them may be physically present in the teacher’s class. Students take part in 4 – 5 classes per week with one or maybe two classes being video conferences. The other classes may occur in a supervised room in the student’s home school or they may be in the back of another class operating in their school. Classes are a mix of online and offline resources. There is a wide variety of classes offered at both primary and secondary level. Not all classes are ‘theoretical’, one of the first classes on offer was a physical education class. There is also an equine studies class available; language and music classes are popular. The success of the system relies upon a blend of synchronous and asynchronous



technologies creating a multi-channel learning experience for students and greater flexibility to study at times that suit students (Cisco, 2011). New pedagogies, such as Flipped Classrooms are well suited to virtual learning.

Retention rates for students (including at-risk, rural and Maori) has improved in comparison to Correspondence School, rural schools are becoming more integral to mainstream education and savings are being made by using video conferencing for meetings compared to travel costs and time (Cisco, 2011). One of the principals interviewed was keen to point to the benefits for his school, claiming that they now had no timetable clashes and that every student was able to gain access to any class they wanted. He also stated that the data showed that students in the VLN classes were doing at least as well as those in regular classes at the school. A study in 2011 found that students had varied experiences of VLN classes dependent upon the support they received from their home school (home school support being important to the success of students) but benefitted from the classes by greater choice, better preparation for the future and more independent learning (Pratt, Pullan and Trewern, 2011).

The success of the VLN and virtual learning can be seen in the student outcomes and the increasing number of larger urban schools joining the network. Virtual learning and Learning Communities Online point to a future direction for schooling in New Zealand.

### **Australian Distance Education Providers.**

The School of the Air is often the first thought when people consider distance education in Australia. This school provided a valuable service to the isolated communities spread across the vast landmass during the twentieth century. A very innovative service. Funding changes during the Howard Government have provided for an expansion in distance education by a number of independent providers. The two providers that I studied are both Queensland based and are two of the largest independent providers of Distance Education in the state. Both have previously used the ACE curriculum resources. Now each utilise a variety of curriculum resources and are actively developing their own resources for the Distance Education (DE) students. Both DE schools are attached to day schools but each is taking a different path as they continue to grow.

Australian Christian College – Moreton, the largest DE school in Australia, is based in Caboolture in the northern suburbs of Brisbane. They are part of a group of schools run by Christian Education Ministries throughout Australia. The DE department operates in collaboration with two other DE departments from CEM schools and are working together to develop their own curriculum resources online. Originally their curriculum delivery was based upon use of the ACE resources in a manner similar to the way Homeschool agencies have operated in New Zealand except that it was the school that prescribed the programme for students and monitored student progress. The three DE schools are developing their own online programme starting with years 11 and 12, and 7 – 10 and over the next 18 months expanding into years P-6. The teachers and advisory staff are all located centrally at the school site in Caboolture and are part of the school

staff, even undertaking playground duties at the day school. The school has an overall principal and the head of DE operates as a deputy principal.

The school uses a cloud based Student Management System which students at the day school and DE both use, increasingly, to access classes and resources. A very small number of DE families do not have internet access and for these students hard copies of resources are posted to students. Guidance and pastoral care of students happens using chat rooms within the SMS, as well as phone and meetings at Activity Days held throughout the year in numerous locations. Students are also encouraged to participate in collaborative tasks and social interactions through a safe chatroom in the school Learning Management System. The school serves students throughout Queensland and those students in the Brisbane area have access to the resources and facilities at the school. Overseas and Interstate students also attend DE via ACCM.

The Principal and staff monitor student progress and achievement closely in order to modify teaching for each child and are able to show that DE students are doing at least as well as day school students at the school. For primary students especially, the progress made is frequently greater than for day students. The Principal attributes this largely to the one on one attention that students get from their supervising parent working in conjunction with their school teacher who sets and oversees the programme. The Principal also pointed out how the flexibility of DE suited some students and worked well for those students involved in training regimes associated with high performance sports. The DE program is also very successful for high performing students as well as those who have suffered bullying and disadvantage in a regular school. The college caters for these various strands with different curriculum strands being developed in 2015.

Jubilee Christian College is based in Atherton in Northern Queensland. It is one of the larger DE providers in Queensland with the majority of its students being around the greater southeast area. Jubilee Christian College operates a day school in Atherton although the majority of students are DE students. Within the DE department there are two units. Unit one utilises a variety of resources including the ACE program and curriculum. Unit two utilises a variety of curriculum resources. Unit one is the larger of the two units. The DE department employs ten administrative staff along with an appropriate number of teachers.

Teachers are decentralised and generally operate from their own homes. The goal is for students to be within one hour of their teacher as the school believes that face to face contact with the teacher is a major determinant for families choosing their school. Sometimes this face to face is via online web conferencing. Prospective secondary students are interviewed prior to enrolment and the teacher has some discretion regarding enrolment. Home visits are seen as important in establishing and maintaining relationships with the families and this is seen as vital for student success. Home visits also provide a good opportunity for the teacher to provide advice for a positive student learning environment. At least one parent is required to complete the parent training/orientation program in order to maximize the benefits for the family. This training outlines the procedures required for both the student and the parent. All new

students sit a series of diagnostic tests so the teacher is able to determine the best possible educational program for the student. All students are then provided with an Individual Learning Program. The initial order for the required resources is sent to the College in Atherton by the teacher.

The school uses Google Apps for Education (GAFE) and sets up a family account and access code for each family. The supervising parent keeps an attendance log and students sign in each day online. Families also maintain an activity log so that the school can check progress in the eight Key Learning Areas. Standardised testing of learning is carried out by the parent and marked by the parent. The distance education staff and teachers check and verify the results. The Individualised Learning Programme and assessment results are all available to parents online.

Six Activity Days a year are operated by the teachers in each region. This allows students and families an opportunity to meet together for both social and learning activities with other DE families. Activities completed during the Activity Days are logged and reported against the eight Key Learning Areas. This assists the College with the opportunity to provide and monitor a full curriculum delivery. There are also full school swimming and athletic sport days open to all students of the school. In 2016 it is planned to run a mini student convention for all students.

The school has a strong belief that a good, strong relationship between the school and family is fundamental to the success of students. Thus the College is able to show good academic progress and successful learning outcomes for students. Teachers work hard to provide individual learning programmes that provide a pathway forward for students tailored for the individual student in conjunction with the family.

## **Conclusion:**

Although DE providers are providing differing programmes their respective students are enjoying successful learning outcomes. The provision of virtual learning backed by ongoing pastoral support, either online or face to face is providing an environment able to cater for students in a variety of circumstances. In the New Zealand context we have seen that students in Home Education or as part of a Learning Community Online are also enjoying learning success. Technological advances have allowed for new ways of curriculum delivery and the development of new models for learning. Schools no longer need to be large enterprises to deliver a wide range of teaching subjects or need to be centralised institutions with a teacher delivering lessons to students face to face. Virtual Learning and Distance Education are well able to efficiently provide good learning outcomes for students. Learning Communities Online are able to provide excellent tuition to students in small schools throughout New Zealand. New funding models would allow schools in this country to cost effectively offer Distance Education of a standard that encourages success for learners such as we witness in the pre-school and tertiary sectors of education here and in the school sector overseas.

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