

**Karen McMurray
Randwick Park School**

Sabbatical Leave Report 2005

It is a privilege to have the opportunity to share with you the benefits of my sabbatical.

Firstly some background information about my journey in education to date. I began my teaching career some 29 years ago and had not had a break in that time. I have had twelve years as a Principal with ten of those being at my current school of which I am the foundation Principal.

Over the past year at Randwick Park I started to feel that I was being consumed with much of the day to day running of the school. This had evolved for numerous reasons, probably when the school first opened I was very hands on and as the school continued to grow I tried to maintain my knowledge of the day-to-day running. I would just do the admin out of school time. By the time “out of school time” came and the meetings were over and the individuals who had wanted to see me had it was time to go home and I was exhausted.

Upon reflection during my time away I realised that the big picture had become blurred by the daily grind. I had taken my eye off the ball! I was becoming worn down by the day-to-day events. Added to this, admin isn't my favourite part of the role.

I was starting to think what else might there be out there for me. I thought that completing my Bachelor of Education Degree could be the answer so I applied for study leave. In fact I applied twice and was declined both times. Reading the criteria, there is a section saying something along the lines of evidence of recent successful academic study was required.

After completing a day as Principal of a U7 Decile 2 full primary school in South Auckland, going home to attempt to prove “recent successful study” did not equate to anywhere close to a balanced lifestyle.

When I learned that NZEI was negotiating this Sabbatical option for Principal's I watched and waited in eager anticipation.

A requirement to complete my Otago B ED is a 6000-word research paper. 2006 is the final year that this paper is being offered. Hence my submission for Sabbatical revolved around completing the background work for this in preparation for 2006. I chose to undertake this research on the behaviour management programme we have in our school, The Responsible Thinking Process. This is the fifth year the programme has been implemented in our school. During my Sabbatical I was able to complete some background reading including the thesis by an RTLB based at Massey High School in West Auckland. I spent time at her school hearing how they have integrated The Responsible Thinking Process and Restorative Justice

Practises. I liaised with the supervisor overseeing the programme at the Dunedin College of Education and got things set up ready to be completed during 2006.

Along with this and digressing from my initial Sabbatical proposal I had decided that one of the ways I could meet the Study Award criteria of “recent successful academic study” was to go to Summer School. So I spent time researching this and naively completing the enrolment forms totally oblivious to what I was about to enter into. I enrolled at Otago Summer School. It ran from 9 January to 22 February 2006. As I have completed all the required 300 level education papers I had to take papers unrelated to education.

Again blindly, I chose two 200 level papers, a Political Studies paper where a major part of my assessment was centred around the Kyoto Protocol, and climate change. The comment was made “Karen you never read the newspaper how can you expect to do a political studies paper?” My response to this was “I never read the newspaper because I am too busy doing schoolwork!”

I also selected an Anthropology paper “Death and Dying”, one of my numerous challenging assignments was to write my own obituary; a quotation from which reads:

“She had enough happiness to make her sweet
Enough trials to make her strong,
Enough sorrow to make her human and
Enough hope to make her happy”

– Karen McMurray Educator 1959- 2030

After 26 years away from study I found this six weeks hugely challenging and way outside my comfort zone!

Speaking with my appraiser he told me he thought that I was mad taking on such a workload over the summer period. The only reason he wasn't more persuasive in his comments about this was because I had had the opportunity to have this Sabbatical. About a third of the way through Summer School I understood exactly what he meant. I definitely needed to have had such a break before embarking on something this ambitious. Fortunately I can report that I comfortably passed both papers.

I returned to Randwick Park on the 27 February five months after leaving.

When I decided to apply for the Sabbatical I had a stable Senior Management Team. I felt very confident taking the leave secure in the knowledge that the school was in good hands, as it certainly was. But as Murphy's Law would have it, life moves on, as did three of our Senior Management Team. Randwick Park had, and now with the vacancies filled, continues to have a great Senior Management Team, a factor which made my return, from my perspective, seamless.

On the final day at school prior to taking my sabbatical the staff held a surprise farewell for me. A favourite song of mine from yesteryear "Leader of the Pack" featured highly. The staff had contributed to hiring a leather clad biker with a huge Harley Davidson to provide a thirty minute tour of the rural areas of Alfriston. Fortunately he came equipped with an extra set of leathers! An experience never to be forgotten!

Over my decade at Randwick Park the roll has continued to grow, hence so has the need for learning spaces. A year hasn't gone by when there hasn't been something in the process of being built. I left to commence my Sabbatical with three building projects on the go: a hall that had been out of commission for two years because of structural defects that no-one wanted to take responsibility for, a new classroom and an administration upgrade.

Again I felt confident that these building challenges were also being left in safe hands. I was tired of having to know all about plans and buildings and remembering to ask the right questions about data outlets, heating, fans, cabling and so on and feeling as if it was my fault when I hadn't picked up that one of the above had been omitted from the plan and there was no budget left for it.

I made a deliberate decision that I would not return to the school over my Sabbatical. The Senior Management respected my desire to have a complete break and did not make demands on my time during this period.

For the first week of my Sabbatical I would wake up, as you do, in the middle of the night and think I must remember to ... and then I would think "no I don't"... someone else is being paid to remember. It took a while to get over that and have consistent full nights of sleep.

I did a lot of walking and that was great. I discovered a population of people who are not in education and seem to be able to have a coffee and a leisurely lunch. One of the things that I did quickly become aware of was that I didn't have anyone I could phone up and suggest "let's do lunch?" as all my friends were still working.

I really enjoyed having the time to myself to reflect on things.

About week three into my Sabbatical I noticed that I was often falling asleep. I would sleep during the night, get up and do something for a couple of hours, feel lethargic, go and have a lie down and fall asleep. As this continued I commented to Tim that perhaps there was something wrong with me and I should go and discuss these symptoms with my doctor. He said that when he was on study leave he had a similar period where he knew what needed

doing but just didn't have the energy. He reassured me that it appeared to be "normalish." It did pass.

Upon returning to school I feel I have renewed energy. Apart from having the Education Review Team in our school the final week of term one, I was still bouncing around motivated and full of enthusiasm. I said to Tim at the end of the first term holiday break, "I can't wait to get back to school. I love my job."

When learning that I was going to have the opportunity to share some of my reflections with you I approached members of our Senior Management Team and asked one of them to anonymously collate any feedback they might have about and since my Sabbatical.

The following are a few of their observations:

Being offered the opportunity/experience of a different role – great PD

Seeing the systems we have in place really work without Karen

More relaxed on her return - refreshed

She enjoys being back

An opportunity to work with a different leader

The time away has changed my perspective on my work. That may be a combination of the sabbatical and the successful university experience. I have returned strategically focussed. I can even do a strategic plan for my domestic arrangements! I am not allowing myself to become "bogged down" with the daily challenges of our jobs. I am trying to address issues objectively. I am looking after myself more.

Keep your eye on the ball! Don't lose sight of the big picture.

Mark Twain once said; "Plan for the future because that is where you are going to spend your time!"

This time away has been the most outstanding professional development opportunity I have had in education to date. I would like to extend my appreciation to Liz Horgan, Frances Nelson and the negotiating team for the work they have done on our behalf. I am hoping that I will not have to be in a queue for 28 years before having the opportunity again.

Karen McMurray
Principal
2005