

FOCUS: What is meant by ‘best practice’? What ‘best practices’ are currently occurring in NZ schools, and what do they mean for Whangarei Boys’ High School?

Sabbatical Report

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Sabbatical covered all of term 3, 2006

Acknowledgements

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WBHS Board of Trustees for supporting my application

Mr Geoff Seletto – DP, who stepped up into the role of Acting Headmaster, and did such a superb job.

Mr Peter Ludlow for stepping up from AP to Acting DP for the term.

Mr Allister Gilbert – for remaining as AP for the term and providing excellent support to the other members of the Senior Management team.

Mr Gordon Eddie – stepping up to the vacant AP’s position for the term

Mr Phil Eady – stepping up into the role of HoD Technology

Whangarei Boys’ High School Staff – for so willingly supporting the Senior Managers in their new roles.

To all of the Headmasters, Rectors and Principals (and their staff) who so willingly allowed me into their schools, and who were so generous with their time.

Executive Summary

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

As it was not a realistic option for me to travel overseas, I decided to visit colleagues in schools throughout the country – starting at Invercargill (week1) and ending at the North Shore (week 7) – with two breaks in between.

To be able to have the time to drive all over New Zealand (over 4500km) and visit 26 schools (20 Boys’ schools, 6 co-eds (including 2 Area schools)) was fantastic. I had sent out a 2 A4 sided questionnaires for the Heads to complete before my arrival – which in the main, most had done. Those that hadn’t, filled it in when I visited.

The basic format of the visit was thus: I would arrive at the school about 8am so I could be part of the Senior Managers meeting, and then observe briefing (if there happened to be one on that day). I would then spend an hour or so with the Principal and complete the questionnaire discussion. In nearly all schools, I got a tour of the buildings and grounds – after which I departed – usually around interval. In 2 schools I had the privilege of attending assembly (and spoke at one).

Another advantage of traveling by oneself was that I could travel routes that I wanted to, stop when and where I liked, and catch up with relations, friends and colleagues that I had not seen in years.

Purpose:

The basic purpose of the sabbatical was to find ‘best practice’ and bring that best practice back to WBHS – if it was a better way of doing something.

Rationale and Background information:

In the 2 sided questionnaire I sent around, I asked a variety of questions – from the purely administrative (Decile, roll, number of teachers, number of Maori Teachers, composition of Senior Management team etc) to details of their NCEA results, to how their meeting cycles works, whether they started late for PD sessions, how they handled student leadership in their school – how the leaders were selected, and what training the leaders got; how the school catered for Maori (under) achievement; 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; how they ran their hostels (if they had one) – so, as you can see it was reasonably full.

Activities undertaken (Methodology):

As mentioned, I sent a full questionnaire out to all schools and went through it in detail with the Principal. The whole visit to each school took between 2 – 2 ½ hours.

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 others were using to solve the same problem that they had.

ERO – It became clearer and clearer as I toured the country that not all schools enjoy the ERO experience. In fact it would be fair to say that some schools were having serious issues with the Review Office and some of their reviewers – who, it appears, seem to come into schools with a pre-conceived idea of how it should operate – regardless of the performance indicators the school may have – showing it to be successful. I felt reassured that others experienced what can be frustrating visits, and quickly realized that some were far more worse off than others.

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

1. 26 schools visited from Decile 1 – 10
2. Rolls varied from 118 to 2504
3. PD budgets varied according to roll – with the maximum being in excess of \$60000
4. All full secondary schools visited but one had entry tests for yr 8s to sit prior to coming into yr 9. The school that didn’t based their class selection purely on the details they had on each student from their contributing schools.
5. Streaming – all boys schools had streaming in some shape or form – although in some cases it was not rigorously applied – eg the classes were banded, but the top band, of say 2 classes were streamed.

6. Results analysis – this causes problems all over the country – with some schools spending lots of time and effort in producing reports, and others using basic software packages to produce comparisons that their respective Boards wish to see. Everyone is frustrated with the lateness of confirmed results, and a number of schools (particularly those heavily into Cambridge examinations) are frustrated that their results that appear in ‘league’ tables do not accurately reflect the true success of their students.
7. Student leadership – Nearly all the schools had prefects of some sort or other, and almost all selected their leaders by a staff/student vote – with some schools having a staff weighting. In all but one case, the Principal/Senior Managers had the final say – especially when it came to head prefects. The training the leaders did varied hugely – from strong and detailed programmes, to more informal and flexible training.
8. Addressing Maori Achievement - A number of schools have got Maori mentor type programmes – and have adults (mainly men) come in to the schools paid via a variety of schemes - SRI, SEI etc) to assist specifically with boys at risk. Many schools have Maori Deans – and some also have PI Deans as well. There is a strong focus on providing courses for students that allow them to succeed.
9. Literacy initiatives – Some good ideas here. A number of schools have strong Literacy programmes – and their success is proportional to the support of the full staff. Some have full staff meetings dealing with literacy, others discuss individual initiatives at a specially dedicated morning briefing. There are several schools that give book reviews to the boys in assembly – by prefects, Principal, Old Boys etc. One school (twice a year) gets all the new books the Library has purchased, displayed in assembly – with the Principal reviewing several. There are ‘word of the week’ initiatives that raise boys’ interest. A number of schools use the *Paul Nation* Literacy vocabulary lists – and test students weekly. Nearly all South Island schools I visited (and a small proportion of North Island schools) timetable in sustained silent reading – one school all but shuts down for the 20 minutes – with all staff (teaching and support) undertaking the exercise as well. *Literacy evenings* with fathers and sons were a feature of several boys’ schools – as were *Blokes can read* posters (with photos of senior boys (Prefects, 1st XV etc) and also male staff with books (and a brief review of the book).
10. Numeracy initiatives – This was nowhere near as structured as Literacy. A proportion of the schools visited were involved in the numeracy contract to varying degrees of success – the most successful being those that link with contributing Intermediate schools – to learn from their successes (and mistakes) and to ensure a consistent methodology flows from one school to the next. Combined meetings of Mathematics staff (from both schools) are held several times a year, so progress can be monitored and new ideas aired.
11. Addressing *differentiated learning*. This proved to be a most enjoyable exercise for me! - as nearly all schools had a different definition of the term. By far the majority of schools used streaming (or banding) of classes, and provided different levels of academic depth to each band/class level. In the senior levels there were numerous vocational courses for students of lower academic ability – off setting the traditional NCEA academic subjects. Several schools had accelerate

- programmes in place from year 9 to cater for their top end students - allowing them to undertake Cambridge AS levels (yr 12) and A levels (yr 13), and in two schools – University papers in yr 13. The concept of differentiated learning taking place in individual classrooms (whether streamed or not) produced lively discussion – and the professionalism of the school’s individual teaching staff in recognizing individual students needs was always raised as a key point to successful teaching. In special cases, of course, IEPs would be produced, as needed – but this was not always done in all classes.
12. Detention systems – these were varied. Many schools made it clear that individual teachers were responsible for (initially at least) dealing with their own discipline issues –and were expected to run their own detentions. Many schools made teaching staff refer misbehaving students to the Dean (on an appropriate referral form) stating the behaviour and what the teacher had done to modify the behaviour thus far. The Dean then decided if a detention would be issued. There were a different variety (and frequency) of detentions – from litter detentions at interval and lunchtime (students report to duty staff), to After School Detentions (some schools had them every night, but most had them either one night (invariably Friday 3.30 – 5pm)) or Mon, Wed, Fri. After schools were always run by either the Deans, or Senior Managers. Failure to attend the detentions shifted the student to the next level – ultimately leading, in some schools, to an ‘in school stand down’, or, as in another – a one day official stand down, or, as in several – Saturday morning call back detentions (9am – 12noon – supervised by the Principal, or a Senior Manager). To be fair, some schools did not have an issue with detentions – and students seemed to do them with a minimum of fuss, while others had a much greater focus on this issue.
 13. Litter! This was a great question, with most Principals keen to hear what whiz bang initiatives others are using! At least 4 schools actually employ workers (paid by the school/taskforce green/Trust fund/PEP etc) to go around the school after interval and lunchtime to collect the litter. One school has purchased a Golf Buggy for the senior duty staff to use to travel around the expansive grounds to monitor behaviour and also litter. Most have classes on duty, some have lunchtime/interval litter detentions (supervised by duty staff). Generally speaking, the smaller the school, the simpler the system – which makes sense I guess.
 14. Hostels – This was of particular interest to me, and it was amazing to see the standards of accommodation around the various boarding schools I visited. Of particular interest was how much each school charged in fees, and how they charged. Some gave reasonable discounts if the year was paid in full before the end of February, some had \$1000 bond that the student got when they departed; some had a property levy (in some cases paid only by new boarders, in other cases, paid by all boarders each year – to assist the building reserves). A number of Hostels had a tiered system of charging – with term’s 1 fees being the highest, and term 4 the lowest – to take into account those boys who leave early (and to also placate parents of seniors – many of whom are on study leave for most of the term).

Implications

Throughout my travels around the country I have endeavored to find better, *smarter* ways of doing things – new ideas that might work, new approaches that are different for us that may well work – even in the short term – to assist us in improving the educational opportunities of our boys. I was always particularly conscious that the staff (any staff!) will not want to be bombarded with hundreds of new initiatives – on top of all the current ones - from assessment to literacy to numeracy to coming to grips with new a student management software package to writing reports and so on – you know what it’s like!! Hopefully the ideas we can put into practice will make a positive difference, and the key people required to make the ideas become a reality will definitely see the benefits. The positive feedback from the 26 schools on *our* best practice was also great to hear, and it is really important that all staff are aware of how well some of *our* ideas were received throughout the country.

Conclusion

As I mentioned at the very beginning – this has proven to be one of the better terms in my teaching career. The amount of support and good will I picked up throughout my travels - from decile 1 to decile 10 schools – from small (and successful) Area Schools to some of the most prestigious boys’ schools in the country, was most a most humbling and extremely enjoyable experience. Nothing was too much of a problem – whatever I asked for, I was given – and the most precious commodity of all – time, was given in abundance – by the people who could probably most ill afford to do so.

It was terrific.

I know others take sabbaticals overseas and visit several schools – that too is great, and probably (for those Principals) just as rewarding – good on them. It didn’t suit me to do it that way – and I have no regrets about that whatsoever.

I can only recommend to anyone reading this, that if you have not applied for one yet, and you qualify for one – you should get your application in. You will not regret it – and neither will your staff – they will probably relish having you out of school for the term!! - and the professional development your Deputy and Senior staff get in “stepping up” is invaluable.

Thank you.

A F Kirk

12 September, 2006