

2016 Area School Principals Sabbatical Report

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Background - Community of Learning

In 2014 the Prime Minister (John Key) announced a new educational initiative called Investing in Educational Success (IES) providing a large amount of money (\$359 million) over 4 years. The IES aim is to lift student achievement in schools by enhancing teaching and leadership for five out of five students.

By the end of 2014 Communities of Learning (CoL) had been approved to start working on their Achievement Challenges. These challenges were to be specific to the community and reflect the particular needs of the students. This has taken time to get these Achievement Challenges in place as schools had to build up relationships and collate data among their community.

How IES will help to raise educational achievement

Research shows that within schools, the quality of teaching has the biggest influence on whether students succeed. IES has been designed with this in mind and is intended to help raise achievement by:

- improving teaching practice across New Zealand
- enabling teachers to work together and benefit from each other's knowledge and experience
- helping all children benefit from the skills and knowledge of great teachers from across a group of schools
- helping schools work together so it's easier for children to move through the education system.

A Community of Learning | Kāhui Ako is a group of education and training providers (early learning, schools, kura, and post-secondary) working together to help students achieve their full potential.

Each Community of Learning | Kāhui Ako sets shared goals, or achievement challenges based on the particular needs of its children and young people.

Benefits of joining

Joining a Community of Learning | Kāhui Ako is voluntary for post-secondary providers. However, you are encouraged to join if you can support the achievement challenges of one or more Communities of Learning | Kāhui Ako in your area.

By joining you can:

- support the transition of students from secondary into tertiary education or training more effectively.
- proactively support students' interests and strengths, encouraging them to extend their learning pathways beyond secondary education
- support learning pathways linking to further study, training and/or employment (particularly where there are regional opportunities)

Background on the Top of the South (TOSI) Community of Learning

After working together as a cluster (Top of the South Area Schools - TOSI) for nearly two years trying to formulate an achievement plan, which was acceptable to the MOE a number of factors/concerns, arose. Our TOSI group have been working together for the last 10 years meeting up to three times per year plus at the Area School Conference – At the beginning of this 10 year journey we were funded and given professional personnel and financial support to meet (Christchurch College of Education). Over the last few years we have self funded our meetings. Applying to be part of a Community of Schools was an obvious next step for us. Many of the points on collaboration in the “Tips and Starters – working together” MOE booklet had already been well established over many years.

1. Coming together for a purpose
2. Work to common goals that are achievable and are generally agreed
3. Construct processes of working together by talking, sharing information, experience and expertise
4. Build relationships so that everyone has a sense of belonging to the group as a valued member
5. Share leadership so that participants' strengths are recognized and used

Sabbatical Inquiry

To look at how lead principals in Communities of Learning (CoL) are helping to raise the achievement of children and young people, and how the communities are working together.

Issues

- When this inquiry application was written in 2015 it was thought that by 2016 there would be many more Lead Principals appointed for me to interview – this was not the case so I spent time in three Area Schools looking at their journey so far (Lawrence, Roxburgh and Twizel) and thank their Principals for their time talking with me and showing me around their school. I also like to thank Simon Heath – CoL Leader (Marlborough) who also gave me some of his time to talk with me.

Key Findings

Three Area Schools were visited – Lawrence, Roxburgh and Twizel along with talking to a Lead Principal from Renwick. I would sincerely like to thank them for their time they gave me and tours around their lovely schools. Some key questions were put to them.

What are the gains from joining a CoL?

- Closer collegial contact with Principal/DP/Management Teams/Teachers within the CoL – while Principal's get together on occasions this will enhance closer relationships with other colleagues across the CoL
- Clarity of thought – there will be time to reflect on issues and collectively work on a solution
- Many commonalities – with reasonably similar issues – with us all being in small area schools we have similar issues eg staffing, transient students, marketing, curriculum
- Closer Communication – we need to extend this not only in the face-to-face environment but also in the on-line environment for all staff involved in the CoL
- Mutual Support
- Focused approach to learning challenges – keeping our focus on the identified achievement challenges
- Sharing knowledge within the CoL – we have many talented staff within our schools and we would all benefit hearing about their expertise and how they approach their work
- Teachers talking with other teachers about improvement in learning
- Helping with NCEA moderation – this has always been an issue for secondary staff who are the only specific subject specialist in their own school
- NCEA verification – it does not matter what size of school you have you still have to have all the procedure and paper work aligned. Work together would help share the workload issue

What have been some of the frustrations?

Lack of speed to get the plan approved – It has taken up to two years to get Achievement Plans approved and in that time the goal posts get moving. It was good though to have a MOE adviser working with us towards the end of the journey of getting the plan approved. This has been addressed by the MOE in 2016 by allowing the Lead CoL to be appointed before the Achievement Challenge has been approved.

Lack of Jumbo Days – it was felt that if all the CoL school groups got together then we would have been able to start building up a relationship before the Achievement Plan was finalised

Money for travel – this needs more clarification and answers for distant CoL groups
Who is going to replace the Effective Teacher in the school given the lack of teachers available to employ?

Not being able to include a Student Engagement (Yr 7-10) target

Student Management systems don't pull out the data being asked by the MOE
Worrying about getting staff on board

Why are other school names on the GMFS staffing schedules?

Getting the CoL Leader/across school lead teacher set up
Another meeting for the appointment process – hard to get together

What improvements do you think could be made to the process of getting the CoL's up and running?

Deliberate intervention by the MOE eg have a three day set up and running meeting with MOE personnel available to get Achievement Challenges established
Sort out the \$\$ for travel

Have the start up time to be less than a year (not the two years it has taken)

What is the CoL going to look like in practice?

Because of the large distance between schools an on-line environment has to be put in place along with some face to face meetings. Some extra funding in this area would be needed

What PD will you be using?

A combination of outside facilitators along with using in-school teachers. Expertise from within as much as possible

Some positive changes that have happened since we started on our journey

CoL's now do not have to wait until their Achievement Challenges have been approved to appoint a CoL Leader. This will allow for the CoL to work at a faster pace in getting things initially set up

CoL's are looking at collaborating together in a number of other areas eg property, IT, PB4L as time and trust together is established

Expert Partners have been made available by the MOE for CoL leaders guidance and support (40 days over 2 years)

National and Regional forums for CoL leaders being set up and held for them to attend

ERO - Communities of Learning | Kāhui Ako: Collaboration to Improve Learner Outcomes booklet written

More research papers being written on CoL journey so far

I would also like to thank Graeme Sims from the Nelson Ministry of Education Office for his work and support for our Top of the South Community of Learning group.

References

Communities of Learning | Kāhui Ako: Collaboration to Improve Learner Outcomes

<http://www.ero.govt.nz/publications/communities-of-learning-kahui-ako-collaboration-to-improve-learner-outcomes/>

Communities of Schools Guide for Schools
Role Selection and Appointment Information
Guide to writing a Memorandum of Agreement
Tips and Starters: Working Together
Guide for Schools and Kura

Wylie, C (2016). Communities of Learning | Kāhui Ako: The Emergent Stage
Wellington: NZCER Press

Other School Visits

I also visited Liscarrol Primary School in County Cork, Ireland. This school has an attached autistic unit with students from a large geographical area attending. I appreciated being shown around the school and having the opportunity to talk with the Principal and teachers. I also met with a Primary teacher who explained how teachers can take on-line PD courses in the holidays and then be given time off during term time which I found very interesting.