

Critical School-wide Self-Review: Everything Starts with School Vision

The focus of the sabbatical

Our school has an enduring vision statement and a personalized mission statement that have been in place since early 2000. These were later reviewed in 2006. The focus of my study was aligned to a strategic intention to review our school vision statement with the Board of Trustees in 2017. In doing so, the expected outcome was to see if we would reaffirm or change the vision statement. (Refer to Appendix)

Considering the rate of change and the development of educational practices, such as the pedagogical investment with 21st Century learning and future-focussed learners, I wanted to see if our school vision was achieving two things;

1. Was it still relevant for the needs of our learners?
2. Were our teaching and learning programmes reflecting our school vision?

Indeed it became apparent during my study that effective schools have such a high regard for their school vision that all decision-making should start and end with the school vision intentions.

Finally, as a result of reviewing school vision, I wanted to understand the process school leaders should consider when engaging with all stakeholders.

So what should we expect from all of this? A better understanding and insight into whether or not we have relevant, high quality teaching and learning programmes in place; that we are making a significant difference with improving student outcomes for learning, engagement, presence, and well being; devoting more time to strengthening the relational trust between school leaders and staff; nurturing strong and enduring home-school partnerships with our school community; and reaffirming clear expectations what our school hopes to achieve for every student when they start with us and when they leave.

Author, school, period of time sabbatical covers

Nicky Brell, Principal of Malfroy School, Rotorua, since Term 2 2007.

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Acknowledgements

I visited four schools to interview school leaders;

1. Colin Tarr, Principal of Titahi Bay North School, Wellington.
2. Garry de Thierry, Principal of Rotorua Intermediate, Rotorua.
3. Dave Bell, Principal of Bellevue School, Tauranga.
4. Marion Heron, Principal of Mangere Central, Auckland.

I also visited a local Iwi Authority who have been involved with educational initiatives and partnerships. Here I interviewed Roana Bennett, CEO of Te Taumata o Ngati Whakaue and Renee Gillies, Education Manager for Te Taumata o Ngati Whakaue.

Executive summary

The importance of having a vision statement cannot be underestimated. Neither can the fact that everyone associated with a school community and/or organization has to have a clear idea of its purpose. For any leader it can be overwhelming when things become busy that we can easily lose sight of what we are trying to achieve over time. As one school leader commented, “focus on the school vision alongside the strategic plan and not get ‘drawn-down’ too much.” Decision-making is important and must relate to our vision. What is evident for effective schools and organizations is recognizing the importance of engaging and collaborating with all stakeholders. Our focus should be on developing relationships and creating respectful partnerships. When there is a high trust model in place we are more likely to succeed in enacting our vision. It also means we all have a “shared responsibility” to contribute to the learning process in preparing students for the future.

Schools see the “Graduate Profile” as a pathway for students to work towards their potential and achieve their goals. For one school “the kete is added to over time by student’s, so by the time they are ready to leave they have a ‘full kete’ to take with them on their exciting, challenging and successful journey.” Another school recognized their graduate profile as “supporting learners for life.”

If we are undertaking a review of our vision, it is important to have an understanding of our past and how it connects with the present and the future. This involves wide consultation with stakeholders so that everyone has the opportunity to share their thoughts and views. “Student voice” is seen by one school leader as providing valuable feedback to staff to see what is working well and what isn’t.

We can learn from other organizations. An Iwi Authority has a vision statement that is “enduring” and linked with their past through its mission statement. “The vision statement guides the leadership in making decisions for the benefit of the tribe, and upholding the values.”

Having an enduring vision makes a lot of sense, but it means we also have to revisit it regularly in order for everyone to understand what we are about and where we are heading.

Purpose (as in your proposal)

“In a fast-changing world, if you can’t learn, unlearn and relearn, you’re lost. Sustainable and continuous learning is a given of the twenty-first century”. (Stoll, Fink & Earl 2005). This implies in the context of this century that we need to provide opportunities and experiences for better learning and learning in new ways.

Hedley Beare (2001) points to three types of futures;

Possible futures - things which could happen, although many of them are unlikely.

Probable futures - things which probably will happen, unless something is done to turn events around.

Preferable futures - things that you prefer to have happen and/or what you would like to plan happen.

In reviewing school vision it is important to include all stakeholders such as staff, students, Board of Trustees, parents, caregivers, and the wider school community.

This was my starting point, which helped me clarify the purpose of my study. A series of questions became the framework for my interviews with educational leaders and with our school community. (Wilson, Education Review NZ)

Rationale and background information (as necessary)

The following interview questions were used to establish and understand the scope of initiatives and developments that schools undertook to meet the intentions of their school vision:

How do you see the current vision of your school relevant and meaningful to the students, staff and community?

How does it clearly outline what you are trying to achieve?

In what ways does it guide and determine decision-making?

In what ways does it guide and determine the professional learning programme?

In what ways does it guide and determine resourcing?

Is it explicit and evident in what you say and do?

In what ways does school vision signal that you are preparing students for their future?

Based on your own experiences what advice would you give to schools reviewing their vision?

While there were commonalities for each school I visited, there were also unique differences that highlighted the rich diversity in school communities.

Activities undertaken (methodology)

In addition to interviewing school leaders, I also designed a simple on-line questionnaire for stakeholders at my own school. These included a cross-section of staff, Board of Trustees, parents and caregivers.

The questions were similar to those used in the interviews with school leaders, but in addition provided specific choices related to the purpose of each question:

Is our current school vision relevant, meaningful, clear and widely shared?

Does it clearly outline what we are trying to achieve? For example, confident learners, connected learners, actively involved learners, and lifelong learners.

How does our school vision reflect the aspirations and identities of the different groups in our community? For example, Inclusive Practices, Special Character programmes, Learning Support, Values, Student Wellbeing, a meaningful and relevant curriculum, caring and capable staff.

Does it guide and determine the decisions we make? For example, professional learning choices, curriculum, resourcing, and community engagement.

Is it clear and evident in what we say and do?

Does this signal that we are preparing students for their future? For example, possible future, probable future, and preferable future.

Findings

School Interviews (key statements from school leaders)

How do you see the current vision of your school relevant and meaningful to the students, staff and community?

- It represents the importance our community places on relationships and whanau connections.
- Through collaboration about our future we have a “common language” that helps everyone understand what our school is about. Being connected is important for teachers and students, particularly outside of school.
- Our school vision and values are reviewed every 3 years. The vision statement underpins the values. It is an enduring vision. All stakeholders have a shared understanding of what we expect our graduate students to achieve by the time they leave.
- Spreading the vision with everyone was a focus. The use of a metaphor in the form of a “Godwit” showed how the school encouraged and supported students learning to “to take flight in our local and global community”.

How does it clearly outline what you are trying to achieve?

- Relationships are at the core to early learning and development. The school places a strong emphasis on multi-age classrooms that provides learning opportunities and experiences in both Maori medium and English medium. There are expected outcomes for all students that over their time at school they will graduate with key competencies, an understanding of community belonging and diversity, and the ability to continue lifelong learning within the context of a bicultural setting as it relates to the Treaty of Waitangi.
- School signage promotes the values expected at the school; Respect for Self, Respect for Others, Responsibility for your Actions. Everyone is able to articulate these values in relation to their roles and responsibilities as teachers, as students, and as the parent community. The essence of the school vision is tied to the school motto of “Courage and Commitment”. Staff identify the potential of every student and then develop teaching and learning programmes to ensure students achieve at or beyond their potential.
- We achieve a lot more when we are working together. Key values such as being responsible, resourceful, respectful and resilient align to a “spaceship” as a metaphor that represents the intention of the school vision, “Creating a passport for future journeys so that dreams, hopes and talents can be realized”. It is important to acknowledge the past with the present and future, as it is the essence of the vision.

Personalized inquiry is the foundation of our teaching and learning approach, which realizes the importance of having a shared understanding of the school vision.

- The school vision supports programmes and initiatives identified by management and staff. Encouraging all students to learn other languages resulted in establishing leadership links with Asia. The school values and recognizes the cultural heritage of all ethnic groups. The community took awhile to understand the school vision, but there is an appreciation of the school in how it has supported the economic well being of the community. Innovative learning practices have been readily accepted as part of underpinning the school vision.

In what ways does it guide and determine decision-making?

- The holistic development of the learner is central to making critical decisions. It can also assist school leaders evaluate school practices in terms of promoting whakawhangaatanga, relationships and overall development. The “Whare Tapa Wha” model (Mason Durie 1998) is widely used to better understand the health and wellbeing needs of the learner.
- Everyone is encouraged to own his or her behaviour. To this end, respect for self and others is a common message which encourages people to do their best, enhance their teaching practice, mentoring by senior staff and pursue professional learning goals.
- It helps us identify professional learning development (PLD), particularly inquiry and personalized learning. This process also influences budget decisions. More is spent on PLD than curriculum. New staff complete an induction programme, which helps them understand and adopt the teaching/learning practices and culture of the school. A review of the Health and Safety requirements and Property, such as Modern Learning Environments has been guided by best practice in teaching and learning pedagogy.
- Going back to the mission statement is good practice and can help make important decisions. Having “curriculum drivers” is another example of starting with school vision to make decisions. Students and staff developed the school mural. It shows the community the New Zealand Curriculum Principles, as the foundation of curriculum decision-making, are the “cornerstones” for the mural. The result is a school vision, which is enduring and will last the test of time.

In what ways does it guide and determine the professional learning programme?

- Staff respond well to PLD that relates to the school context and “our kids”. When facilitators get to know the context of the school and make the connections, staff respond accordingly. A wide coverage of the curriculum includes the arts, physical and healthy activity, conservation and ecology, social studies, literacies and numeracy.
- While there is a positive commitment to attending PLD, staff are also supported to show commitment to family time and personal time. School structures have been established to support Ako (learner) and Whanau with the overarching goal of promoting learning. The “Tight-Loose” approach (Tom Peters “In Search of Excellence”) is used to assess the reality, influence and quality of what occurs in the classroom.
- Having a commitment to personalized learning and the inquiry approach is important. Working through best practice around Cultural Responsiveness, Inclusive Practices and

Ka Hikitia were invaluable for staff. Central to this undertaking were two requirements; developing relationships and collaborating with a mentor school.

- The focus of the school leader is to follow the school vision alongside the strategic plan and not get “drawn-down” too much. PLD has a strong focus and is never-ending. There are examples of innovative practices such as the Total Quality Management cycle, partnerships with several national and local groups. Achievement goals are aspirational for every student as a result of challenging the status quo. To this end staff identify target students and look at ways of accelerating their progress.

In what ways does it guide and determine resourcing?

- Our first priority is people. For example we invest a lot in support staff. This promotes togetherness, interactions, caring and relationships, as opposed to material resources.
- A lot of emphasis is placed on growing people in a personalized way. Networking is important to support this. Funding is captured for PLD for known and unknown opportunities. Strategically, leaders think through about what can be done, but there is flexibility to do other things.
- PLD, curriculum and property are the main areas that are focussed on.
- Two main examples are property (Innovative Learning Environment) and Curriculum (Organic Inquiry). An organic inquiry is described as a process that relates to the individual teacher and what they will do. The principal who believes in sharing power fostered distributed leadership. The senior leadership team shares in the teaching workload when required. Their decisions are made with the focus on what’s best for the students.

Is it explicit and evident in what you say and do?

- We are whanau at school and whanau look out for each other, look after each other and care for each other. Everyone knows your name, “just like a country school in town.”
- It’s explicit in the way I “walk the talk” (particularly for the leadership group). Respect for the history of the school is important, as this helps understand where people were at and how to redirect them over time using a strong values process. A principal cannot do this on their own. Less talk by the principal, more from others is the tipping point. Working with the Board of Trustees, the principal encourages a “growth mindset” (Carol Dweck 2008).
- “Share responsibility” has been a key factor. There has been a strong commitment to the cultural responsiveness and inclusive practices, which meets the needs of a diverse school community. A lot of what happens reflects the vision through the mission statement and values. In preparing our students, we are a part of their learning journey.
- There is clear evidence ‘enacting the school vision’ is seen in the people, the relationships, and the trust they have in each other. There is a strong willingness of students to learn and work. The school community is both humble and forgiving. What underpins all of this is that everyone has to be on board. A good example of this a

reading home-school partnership programme, called “Mutukaroa.” Students and parents became more aware and motivated to succeed as a result of understanding the progress and achievement data. Rich learning conversations between staff, students and parents have also occurred.

In what ways does school vision signal that you are preparing students for their future?

- The graduate profile (kete) provides a pathway (huarahi) for all learners to achieve by the time they leave. Students add to the kete over time, so by the time they are ready to leave they have a “full kete” to take with them on their exciting, challenging and successful journey.
- Celebrate the language and actions of students, staff and parents indicates that school vision is well and alive. Similar to rowing a waka, one has to maintain the balance of the waka. Everyone is encouraged to contribute to the journey.
- This is clearly stated through the graduate profile, meeting the expectation of having a shared responsibility in learning, and supporting “learners for life”. There is an expectation and support with home-based learning, where parents support their children’s learning through the class blogs. Increasingly, student voice is an important part of inquiry learning.
- The school has developed a graduate profile. An example of how students can change when they leave to attend their local secondary school was highlighted. Eight years at primary school learning about the benefits of healthy eating started to change when students became aware of the availability of other foods in the tuck-shop. As a result, both schools intend working together to see if they can change this trend.

Based on your own experiences what advice would you give to schools reviewing their vision?

- Take your time. Learn about the history of the school. Talk with people and learn about their stories. Make connections with people who have the background knowledge about the place and gain an insight into their perspectives. Try to keep things simple.
- Student voice provides staff with valuable feedback to see what is working well and what isn’t.
- Be collaborative with everyone. Start with something is the key!
- What does the community want for a graduate student? What can the New Zealand Curriculum do for the graduate student? What path will we take to get there? Examine what the stakeholders in the community want. The School Charter and Strategic Plan were shared with local businesses and a road works project manager in order for them to have a better understanding of the needs and aspirations of the school.

Iwi Authority Interview

The kaumatua (elders) identified the values associated with the vision statement, “Ngati Whakaue, Iho-Ake”(Strong Whanau, Strong Hapu, Strong Iwi, Strong Marae). The vision statement combines with the mission statement, “Hei aha au i mate noa ake ai ka tupu aku pakarito” which means “I will not perish for my descendants will live and prosper.”

The focus of the organization therefore is to strengthen and empower whanau through leadership in education, health, welfare, identity, language and culture. This clearly shows the importance in linking with the past, present and future.

The vision statement guides the leadership in making decisions for the benefit of the tribe, and upholding the values.

“Iho-Ake” stands for the cultural values and accessing the knowledge of the world. Staff are well prepared with appropriate pedagogy. They have a caring attitude for the organization, and undertake personal development, such as enhancing their ability to communicate in Te Reo Maori.

The vision determines where and how the organization is resourced. Checks and balances are governed by the trustees, and through consultation hui (meetings) with the tribe. Their feedback is an opportunity to hear their voice. Strategic and business plans are developed from this process. Implementation of innovative programmes follows a process of investigation, planning and then consultation.

The use of traditional art and carving incorporated with a modern logo communicates the vision in a symbolic form that everyone can connect to.

The organization is active at national forums with other iwi authorities. These forums focus on Te Reo Maori, the traditions and customs, and education.

For many years the Taumata o Ngati Whakaue has focussed on an early childhood strategy. Other initiatives include supporting schools with NCEA Level 2, and Literacy and Numeracy Years 1-8.

The mission and vision statement provides a pathway for the future. The organization adopts a collaborative approach. Education is important and so is the community’s contribution. There are strong relationships with schools and these reciprocal relationships have endured over time. An effective process of sharing expertise based on a shared vision, and the process of engaging with iwi (tribe) is essential. A good example of this is the development and opportunity for schools to become involved with Te Rangihakahaka, a marae based programme that looks at the history of Ngati Whakaue.

Responses from School Survey

Is our current school vision relevant, meaningful, clear and widely shared?

Relevant 88%, Meaningful 82%, Clear 71%, Widely shared 24% *

Does it clearly outline what we are trying to achieve?

Confident Learners 77%, Connected Learners 65%, Actively involved learners 77%, Lifelong learners 88%, Other 6% *

How does our school vision reflect the aspirations and identities of the different groups in our community?

Inclusive practices 82%, Special character programmes 59%, Learning support for special needs and abilities 47%, Cornerstone values and Positive Behaviour for Learning (PB4L) 82%, Support student wellbeing 71%, Relevant, meaningful and engaging curriculum 77%, Caring and capable staff 77%, Other 6% *

Does it guide and determine the decisions we make?

Professional learning choices 77%, Curriculum 82%, Resourcing 65%, Community engagement 53%, Other 12% *

Is it clear and evident in what we say and do?

Yes 100%

Does this signal that we are preparing students for their future?

Possible future 24%, Probable future 18%, Preferable future 59%

(Please note: 17 respondents comprising 9 staff, 5 BOT, 2 Parent/Caregivers. * denotes that respondents could make more than one choice)

Implications

1. Schools consult and review their vision statement regularly in order to help all stakeholders understand the importance of preparing students for their future. Vision statements can underpin other aspects important to school communities, such as values and the graduate profile.
2. The core function of schools is “learning”. School leaders have identified the importance of embracing the specific needs of students and the community with the expectations of what their schools aim to achieve. This includes having respectful relationships at all levels, inclusive practices and cultural responsiveness, values aligned to key competencies, future-focussed and personalized curriculum, and reaching your potential and beyond.
3. Critical to all decision-making is the learner. School vision guides the process in which decisions are made to create a school environment and culture that meets the needs, goals and aspirations of everyone - students, staff and the community.
4. Specific professional learning development, innovative teaching practices, rich learning experiences, and setting aspirational learning goals are critical to enacting the school vision. There is a commitment to collaborating within the school and outside of the school to find solutions or improve current school practices and programmes.

Conclusions

All school leaders shared a common understanding that school vision connects everyone and everything. There is a common language that is widely used to explain what a school is all about. Whether a school is reviewing or changing the vision statement, it is important to provide opportunities for everyone to have a voice.

The values and expectations we set for every student in the form of the graduate profile, guide us to develop the best teaching and learning environment. Critical to this process is the importance we place on investing and fostering respectful relationships with all “stakeholders” of the school. As noted by a school leader “the strength of values is what makes our society. The academic aspects while important are not as important as the values.”

Schools have been creative and collaborative in sharing their school vision through art forms and metaphor. This has united school communities, particularly when the past is acknowledged alongside the present and the future. It has given schools their unique identity that everyone can connect to.

It is clearly evident that planning and decision-making are made on so many levels, which help school leaders and Board of Trustees identify the strategic, operational, curriculum, and professional learning goals. At the heart of this process is “what’s best for the student”. Investing in staff on a professional and personal level is seen as a priority. Teaching and learning inquiry is evolving as a core practice of schools, which are focussed on the future of their students.

Similarly, the partnerships we develop and establish with parents, caregivers and the wider school community can determine the level of involvement and support required to help students reach their goals.

The purpose for enacting school vision is to ensure we are “walking the talk”. There has to be as one school leader put it a “relentless focus on continuous improvement and innovation that is maintained”. This I believe helps us build toward the “preferable future” for our students.

Over half of the respondents to the school survey indicated they believe we are working with that in mind. The challenge for school leaders is to ensure everyone has a clear idea of school vision and a shared understanding of how, why and what they can do to contribute to the future direction of their school.

“Vision is not simply goal-setting. Vision is the overall context in which our goals are centered. If we know where we want to go and what we want to accomplish, wouldn’t this context (in which our goals are centred) help guide us in the present?” (Moe Glenner 2016).

Appendix

Malfroy School Vision: *“ To provide an inclusive learning environment building confident, self-directed life-long learners and responsible citizens.”*

Malfroy School Mission Statement: *“We strive to do our personal best and help to make a happy caring school”*

References

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