

# Initiatives to Build and Sustain Rural School Rolls with an Emphasis on Community Engagement.

## Primary Principals' Sabbatical Report



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## Acknowledgements

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Thank you to the school Principals who answered all of my questions via email and telephone. A particular thank you to the Principals of Ongaonga, Patoka, Raetihi, Kairanga and Norfolk Schools who welcomed me into their schools and showed off the neat things their students and staff are doing.

## Executive Summary

Just over 12 months ago, the thought of applying for a Teach NZ Sabbatical had not entered my mind as there appeared little to be gained. My Professional Development Plan seemed to be catering for my needs and there were a lot of things that needed my attention within the rural confines of Waituna West School and wider community. I also considered myself to be more than sufficiently motivated to add my support, enthusiasm and knowledge to the continued development of Waituna West School and the academic achievement of its pupils. It was following conversations with some Feilding Principals who had previously taken sabbaticals that I decided to apply.

The development of a sabbatical research foci morphed over a period of time. The reluctance to apply for a sabbatical fueled my desire to make the time away from school relevant and worthwhile for myself and the school. At Waituna West School, we have been good at engaging our school and wider community for some time. Successive BOT's have identified with the importance of this, and we are lucky to have driven and forward thinking people involved in our school.

The 2015 Rural and Teaching Principals Conference in Queenstown was a timely opportunity to further refine my topic thinking (if you have never been to a Rural and Teaching Principals conference and are able to, do so. They are without exception very well organised, great PD value for money, and full of Principals with similar needs, wants and experiences). The opportunity to spend uninterrupted time with Principals in similar sized schools from all over New Zealand is priceless.

My sabbatical research target of "Initiatives to build and sustain rural school roles with an emphasis on community engagement" was developed partially as a result of this conference. The initial focus (and one hopefully Teach NZ won't

mind me changing) was to include observations and comment on modern learning environments. After much thought, I decided to head out into some schools I hadn't visited before and see for myself what they were doing with their communities that could positively impact on their school rolls.

## Rationale

I have been at Waituna West School for almost 10 years and each day consider myself fortunate to have the support of school students, staff and community. We have a wonderfully supportive school environment, families, ex families and the wider community. Our students achieve well academically. They are offered learning experiences in realistic and relevant contexts and I believe the enthusiasm and professionalism of our teaching and support is second to none. The blunt reality is however, that parents make choices regarding where their children are schooled if a choice is available. There are more reasons for this than I care to list although school's Principal, class teacher and convenience are the most popular. Another reality is, like many rural schools, the distance to the closest town seems far closer than the distance from the town to a rural school. That is, parents in the country will travel 25 km to a school in town, but few will travel 25 km from town to a rural school.

Understanding this is important in recognizing what it is that a school can do to initially sustain and hopefully build a school roll. I remember several years ago when a family left for another school. I was asked not to take it personally. The "honest" Principals amongst the readers of this will acknowledge that we feel less sad when some students leave than others, but I always take it personally when someone leaves our school.

Soon after I started at Waituna West School, the Board of Trustees made a very deliberate decision to try to increase the amount of community involvement in the school (and visa versa). The actions and initiatives following this decision where all implemented with the aim of future proofing Waituna West School. There was, and remains, a mutual understanding amongst the key stakeholders of Waituna West School that the involvement of parents and wider school community is vital to the academic achievement of the students of the school. It was also agreed that whilst the professional development of the school staff catered for specific teaching and support staff needs, community involvement could potentially, cater for a lesser yet as important dimension of a student's learning. Within our school community there is a wealth of talent and expertise willing and able to assist whenever asked. It is this expertise that I think was the catalyst for much of what we have achieved to date within our school.

## Activities Undertaken

During my time away from school, I wanted to broaden my thinking. The role of a school Principal has developed hugely even in the short period of time I have been one.

My sabbatical focus was not academic, instead I sought opportunities that could change the way I thought about and viewed what we did at Waituna West.

1. I did a lot of reading
2. I visited some very different schools, chosen with the following criteria: rural in location, whilst allowing parents a choice of another school should they want.
3. I drove some old trucks (??)

## Readings

I spent a fair amount of time reading in my time away from school. I find in my job that I am bombarded with readings from a vast range of authors and topics. Too much I feel sometimes, to enable me to grasp and retain. The sabbatical allowed me the opportunity to select what I wanted to read. I read a lot of sabbatical reports, some were relevant to what I was trying to learn about, most were not. They were however; all very enlightening and I thank the authors for this. I have listed in the references the sabbatical reports I found particularly useful.

I found and read a Doctorate Thesis submitted in 2012 by Anna Wright. This work (Creating and Sustaining an Effective Rural School: The Critical Triad-leadership, Curriculum and Community) provided a theoretical base for many of my “wonderings”. Some of this research created poll results that overwhelmingly suggested rural schools provide more than academic education and that there was a positive impact by developing local curriculum (community, history and environs).

Wright (2012) suggested, “Principals interviewed expressed critical need for knowing their community well and engaging with them positively. This involved not just the usual newsletter, but different ways to attract fathers and inspired means of encouraging visits to schools. There was also discussion about the importance of links between schools and communities for rural development, a link between re-vitalizing rural communities and the importance of support for student achievement, either indirectly through fundraising or directly through local expertise.”

I enjoyed reading this work. I urge any Principals interested in learning about the theory and place of rural schooling in New Zealand (with comparison to

rural contexts in England, Scotland and Australia) to take some time to read this.

There was an interesting article on the ERO website about the implementation of Give Me 5 which is being used by Kaitao Intermediate-Rotorua.

*“As a way of increasing parent and whānau involvement in the school, staff implement a programme developed and promoted by the New Zealand Parent Teacher Association called ‘Give Me 5’. The expectation is that parents give five hours of their time annually to the school. Parents can contribute to the school in a way that suits them and at a time that works for them. The school has set up a database using information from parents as to how they want to contribute. Parents and whānau are informed about this project by flyers and through discussions with teachers. The school is broadening the programme to include whānau and families who would like to give their time as a group.”*

The needs of my school regarding a small rural roll are not unique. NZ statistics figures in 2006 state “50% of New Zealand primary schools have rolls of less than 180. 390 of the 2045 Primary school in New Zealand have rolls of less than 50. 98% of these schools are rural.”

Of more pertinent interest is the slow decline of rural school rolls and Waituna West School is probably indicative of national rural trends. 15 years ago we had a roll of 90. Now our roll is in the mid 50's. The future of our school is not great if that trend continues. We can't change the world, but surely are obligated to the improve our little bit of it?

### **Slightly off track but sort of relevant**

I also decided to spend some time driving trucks for a local firm during the refreshment portion of my sabbatical. This wasn't done with a view of a career change but gave me chance to mix with different people. I had all my licences and an “A” grade Diesel mechanic qualification from a previous life. I only mention this because, interestingly, it gave me a chance to see how truck drivers can be viewed by the public or how people can draw their own conclusions based just on what they see. If you don't believe me, spend some time as a stop/go person or put on a fluoro vest and drive an old truck. If we truly want to make the most of the community and engage them to help us, we need to use the skills they have not the ones we think they have.



## School Visits

During my time away from Waituna West, I visited Raetihi, Ongaonga, Norfolk and Patoka Schools. These schools are doing some really neat things regarding the use of community expertise and engagement. The following is an explanation of some of the initiatives I saw although I have been careful not to identify which school belongs to which idea.

There was a commonality amongst these schools to use parent expertise in sports coaching. There were Friday afternoon sports sessions organized and run by parents. Gardening and art groups were a common feature - also run by community volunteers.

I was particularly impressed with the innovative use of community expertise employed as LAT's to instruct in digital technologies and kapahaka. This enhanced opportunities for the students and made the most of incredible talents otherwise wasted.

One school used "sensational" as its catch phrase. "Everything we do is sensational - be it a production, a sports day a gala day... This increases our profile and makes people want to be enrolled or involved in our school."

School involvement in a community project also aids in the strengthening of community ties and is seen as a way of giving back. A rural school staff room is often seen as a hub of small rural communities and I witnessed some great examples of this in operation on my travels. I know from personal experience at Waituna West that many of the world's largest and smallest problems are at least discussed in our staffroom. Whether or not they are solved is actually often irrelevant but to have somewhere to talk about them is essential. A face seen is a face known.

One of the schools was creating an edible forest based on permaculture principles. This was being run by a passionate parent group with the aim of contributing to children's learning by developing an understanding of history, horticultural principles and their local environment. It was outstanding. Most of the schools had some form of trading fund where farmers would raise and sell livestock and then donate money back to the school. There is a great article on this in the Principals Federation Magazine Volume 30, Number 4.

## Waituna West

I love talking about our school and some of the cool things we do. Following is a commentary (and many of you could do the same) about some of the things that we do.

Fun(d)raising (*having fun and raising money as a result*) is something that has really developed at our school. We do not apply for many charities although could do so again in the future. There is more to be gained by having events that draw a crowd and make money at the same time - free advertising of sorts for our school. It is fun and people are much more inclined to be part of this community strengthening school and wider community ties etc.

In hindsight, I'm surprised we didn't stumble across this idea of fun-raising earlier. I seemed to spend the first 3-4 years of being a Principal cooking sausages and onions at every sports and community event and at least that long smelling like one.

For the last few years, we have had a local helicopter (ex school parent) fly 20-30 hunters into various huts in the Ruahine Ranges for a deer shoot. A large portion of the fee for this returned via donation to the school. This draws money from a different client base, is sold out almost 12 months prior and is a sustainable and relatively easy money making event.

A few years ago we had a concert in the park (actually on the back of the local potato growers truck on the school field). We had a jazz group from the local high school play for a while followed by Midge Marsden and Bullfrog Rata. This was a really successful night, the weather was superb, something completely different to anything we had done before and easily repeated.

Last year we had a competition at school to see what gender could raise the most money (students and parents included). This was an incredible series of events that included a horse trek, auctions, a Hoe-down dinner and Ben Hurley the comedian live at Waituna West School and raised a staggering \$36,000.

A year earlier, I took part in a Charity boxing event in Feilding. I am not a boxer and never hope to be one but saw this as a chance to do something different, another reason to host an event at our school (weigh-in dinner) and raised \$13,000.

The year before that, we did a half marathon in Palmerston North. The whole school was sponsored to run some of the way with the teachers, raising \$7,000.

Several years ago (probably at the start of our fun-raising events) we built a new artificial turf. We needed to raise about a third of the \$100,000 and to celebrate the opening, flew Marina Erakovic down from Auckland. We had also just spent \$60,000 on a native planting area around our school sports field and over two years planted 5,000 native trees. This was a huge community effort which has transformed the school playground and those involved have been able to see the benefit of their efforts.

Every year, our school hosts a motorbike trail ride. This is our oldest fundraising event and requires a lot of help each year to keep it safe and successful. We rely on the farmers in our areas to provide access to their properties and without exception they are also generous in allowing this.

At our annual prize giving in the hall at the end of term 4, we acknowledge the efforts of our current and past pupils. We also use this as an opportunity to thank everyone that has helped us over the past year and our school parents provide dinner for all those that attend (normally about 150 including students).

We have an community/student writing exchange for our senior class for two terms each year. This helps to engage members of the community that may not have had anything to do with the school for some time. They write to a senior student on a weekly basis, learn a little about the school and what is happening in it as well as helping with our writing programmes.

Lunchtime activity groups have also been a fantastic way of getting our community involved as well as providing huge benefits for our students. We have a farming group that helps manage to school sheep, pigs and chickens and a bee group that produces and sells honey from our hives. We have a gardening group, a lunchtime cooking group, creative writing group and a ukulele group. In the past we also had an engineering group that did lots of really cool stuff but the **most cool** thing was to build and race around Manfield racetrack on a 50cc motorbike.

Last year we took the whole school 55 students aged 5-13 on a school Camp around the East Cape of New Zealand. This was completely funded by all of the fun-raising things we had done prior and we invited as many parents that wanted to come (fully paid for). I think this for me, summed up what it is that we are all about. The school community is completely behind our school, they know our children and visa versa. Everyone knows our behaviour expectations, no-one is afraid to step forward and offer help.



A few months ago, we had a “Post Cyclone” sleepover in the playground to help raise awareness and some money for a school in Fiji damaged by Cyclone Winston. This event really took off. We had donated supplies flown in by helicopter (Rangitikei Helicopters are amazing), emergency equipment provided by a local disaster relief group and Seven Sharp reporters spent the night with us. Our students and community were seen on National TV, raising awareness of a real life crisis and raising further awareness of a great rural school in action.

## Conclusions

To be effective as a school, home and community partnerships should be an integral part of a school's vision and culture. What I have found during the school visits, the conversations that I have had during my sabbatical with Principals outside of my normal “catchment,” and the time spent reflecting since, is there is not one initiative or model that can be adopted by all schools. Each child, teacher, Principal, school community and wider community is unique and different and should be treated as such. The relationships between the students and parents, schools and families are one of the many things critical in developing quality educational experiences and outcomes for our students. I have deliberately included more information about what we do at Waituna West than I have for the other schools I have visited because an idea without a context is just that. Although there were some wonderful things happening, I am not sure of the process any of these took in development so I urge anyone interested to contact the school direct.

I have thoroughly enjoyed the opportunities that I have had as a result of the Teach NZ Sabbatical. I have seen some amazing people doing some amazing things for the children of their schools. Even writing this report (despite it being completed long after it was due) has been enjoyable and reflective.

But mostly, the report has allowed me to (re)realise what a wonderful school I am involved in and I sincerely thank everyone that has a part in making it wonderful.

Kind regards  
Glen Richardson  
Principal  
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## References

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## Waituna West School Media Links

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