

# PRIMARY PRINCIPALS' SABBATICAL

Pat Conrad

Mansell Senior School, Papakura, Auckland

1 March – 21 May, 2010

What makes for successful transition?

## Acknowledgements

My thanks to:

NZEI and the Ministry of Education for this valuable initiative enabling Principals a respite from their daily grind, and the opportunity for a period of reflection and big picture thinking.

Mansell Senior School Board of Trustees for granting my leave and the staff for their support.

Finally, to David Dawson, who so ably stepped in to my shoes, my sincere thanks.

## Purpose

To identify the transition practices we currently do well.

To identify successful transition practices adopted in other schools.

To identify transition practices we need to implement to ensure successful transition as students enter and exit our school.

## Background Information

I have had concerns for some time that transition practices between our feeder schools and ourselves and onwards to the local secondary schools, have not been providing students with the best possible start to their new school.

*“...The difficulties of transition have probably always been an issue for students....This puts a responsibility on all adults in the wider educational world to do all they can to build the bridges that will help children continue through their educational journey without serious interruption.” (Hawk & Hill, 2001, p.9.)*

Too often practice has been haphazard and too dependent on the priorities of the senior management of the schools at that particular time. There has been a lack of consistency across the board.

In 2007, as part of a schooling improvement initiative across Papakura, a group of teachers and representatives of Group Special Education formed a Transition Committee to look at procedures across the cluster.

Our aim was to standardize practice. We have met regularly and discussed our proposals with the local Principals' Association and a wider group of school staff.

An agreed Student Profile Card and Learning Support Record is now being used across the cluster. This provides a consistency in the transfer of academic and pastoral information about our students.

Not all is complete – I believe that we need to focus on promoting education per se rather than the promotion of individual schools. The intermediate schools in the cluster need to promote the appeal of intermediate schooling as opposed to advertising their individual schools, and so too do the secondary schools.

In past years we have used the same procedures for transition. Are there more successful practices that we should implement?

### Activities undertaken

Surveys carried out with 30 Year 7 students in two Decile 1 South Auckland Intermediate Schools and 15 students in one Decile 10 East Auckland Junior College.

Informal discussions with members of senior management of these schools.

My original intention was to research successful practice from Year 6 to Year 7 and from Year 8 to Year 9. On reflection I felt my greatest opportunity to make change was from Year 6 to Year 7 where, as an Intermediate School Principal, I could take a more active lead in making change.

*“...Principals set the scene for their schools through their own attitudes and actions. If staff know these leaders are committed to making links and building bridges, they are more likely to see it as important and put effort into the liaison...”*  
(Hawk & Hill, 2001, p.11)

### Findings

#### Survey Data

1. Thinking about when you first started at your new school, in what ways would you say it was hard for you to settle in?	
Decile 1 No friends in class/having to make new friends – <b>26%</b> New teacher – <b>19%</b> Further to walk Didn't know the ways of the school	Decile 10 Not difficult to settle – <b>60%</b> Carry heavy bags - <b>.07%</b> Having more than one teacher - <b>.07%</b> Not having one classroom How open the school is

2. In what ways did your primary school help prepare you better to move to intermediate school?	
Decile 1 Gave us more difficult work – <b>31%</b> Told us what it would be like at intermediate school – <b>48%</b> Told us teachers won't hold our hand I asked an ex intermediate teacher Told us it would be harder at intermediate than at primary	Decile 10 They streamed our Maths classes to make us get used to moving to a different class and teacher – <b>27%</b> Teacher told us it's a fresh start We need to start being more organized and independent They could have told us more about the differences
3. How did your new school help prepare you better to make the move?	
Decile 1 We had an orientation tour – <b>16%</b> No other responses	Decile 10 We had an orientation tour – <b>60%</b> Meeting with our new Learning Leaders – <b>15%</b> No other responses
4, List the differences you have found between primary and intermediate school.	
Decile 1 Technology – <b>58%</b> More sport – <b>23%</b> More students/hard to know everyone – <b>23%</b> Different start and finish times – <b>23%</b> ICT/Computers – <b>20%</b> People your age - <b>.06%</b> Less students - <b>.06%</b>	Decile 10 Computer based programmes – <b>54%</b> Specialist teaching – <b>47%</b> No bell – <b>34%</b> Personal school e-mail address – <b>20%</b> ID cards – <b>14%</b> More choices – <b>14%</b> Start and finish times are different - <b>.07%</b> Being with older kids - <b>.07%</b>

Students in low decile schools indicate the importance placed on their social and emotional needs – the need for friends to be in the same class, the anxiety over a new teacher and being able to cope with the different expectations of the new school and the more difficult level of work

Students in the high decile school highlighted the school structure – specialist teaching and a greater degree of the use of independent learning facilitated through the use of computer-based programmes, the secondary model. They had little difficulty making new friends and found the teachers helpful.

Most students commented that their primary school teachers had spoken to them about how difficult the work would be for them at their new school. Some teachers had given the students 'hard work' in preparation for their move. One of the Decile 10 feeder

schools had introduced cross grouping for Maths as an introduction to specialist teaching. The majority of students surveyed indicated that the orientation visit to their new school had provided information about the school and connected them to their new environment so that they could find their way around.

The high decile school which was surveyed, operates on a secondary model. The students surveyed in this school commented on a secondary learning model (no bells, specialist subjects and the use of the computer based programmes), as being the major differences.

## **Successful Practice**

### **Administration:**

Sharing of information about students, and establishing and maintaining strong links are considered important practices during transition phases (Cox et al., 2004). This is reinforced by Hawk and Hill (2001) who take the idea of establishing and maintaining links between schools even further by recommending that co-ordinated curriculum links need to be established on a regular basis. The Education Review Office (2002) supported the sharing of achievement data and the idea of collaborative projects across schools (also in Andrews, 2008). When cross-school links are not developed, the continuity of curriculum suffers and little use is made of feeder school standardized achievement data (McGee et al, 2003). Writers note that the sharing of pastoral care and learning support information is handled well in New Zealand (Hawk and Hill; McGee et al.).

In 2007, the Australian Government introduced a Transition Plan in New South Wales to support students moving from primary to secondary school. A key component of this strategy was to establish a Transition Co-ordinator in every secondary school to ensure that pastoral care processes, among other areas, were managed successfully.

The use of Special Education Needs Co-ordinators (SENCO), Social Workers in Schools (SWIS) and schools' own Student Support Workers to assist in the transfer of critical information and in an actual planned, graduated Transition Programme for students identified as unable to or at risk of not making a successful transition, is vital for our students in both primary and secondary schools.

The Senior Learning Team at Mission Heights Junior College interviews each incoming Year 7 student before the commencement of the new year. The purpose of this meeting is to gather information about what the student perceives are their strengths and interests in academic, cultural and sporting fields. Students indicate with whom they work well and those students with whom they don't work well. An opportunity is created for staff to begin to develop the relationship with each student, and for students to tell their new teachers about themselves (Cox et al., 2000, p6).

### **Social and Personal**

As part of their transition programmes, Avondale Intermediate and Avondale College, and Mansell Senior School and Papakura High School have established Year 8 / Year 12 camps where at risk Year 8 students participate in a camp with current Year 12 students

to form a relationship with those students and key support staff from the secondary school. The purpose of these camps is to ease the transition process, for example, summer camps in Georgia, USA, as in Andrews, (2008).

Within our Mansell Senior School community a link has been forged between our SENCO and Student Support Worker and the Year 6 students of one of our feeder schools. The incoming students then have familiar support/contact at their new school. Transition programmes introduced overseas include 'tried and true' activities such as orientation visits, taster lessons and information evenings for parents. 'Step Up Days' or 'Move Up Days' take place in Vermont, USA. The programme titles infer that the move to the next school is an upward one. However, it was also stressed that a visit to a feeder school should never be implied as 'going down...'

### **Curriculum and Pedagogy**

Much research has been undertaken with regards to the effects of transition on achievement and on the need for a greater understanding of curriculum detail and pedagogy across the school sector. Andrews mentions that 'up to 40% of all 11 year olds do not make satisfactory (expected) progress in their first year at their new school. One explanation is that too much attention is paid to social aspects of transition and too little on academic aspects'.

Smith, Feldwisch and Abell (2006) emphasise the need for schools to "collect, analyse and use data to inform decisions about the type of programmes that will reduce the expectation/reality gap.' Parker and Neuharth/Pritchard (2007) recognize teachers as the most important factor in the positive and negative nature of a child's educational experience and that "middle school teachers are uniquely positioned to play a powerful role in young adolescents' transition experiences."

Andrews found that in a collaborative project across schools in Nottingham, transition for students was eased by providing a link between students' current school and future school. Co-operative planning between schools was identified as a vital cog in the transition process. This view was reinforced by Whitelaw (2008) from a project implemented in Cheshire, at the end of the school year and into the first few weeks of the new year.

As well as the necessity of curriculum links, Hawk and Hill also identify regular meetings between secondary departments and feeder schools (to co-ordinate programmes) and the sharing of specialist teachers and professional development opportunities as important developments that should be encouraged between the intermediate and its feeder schools.

The importance of building those positive relationships between schools, between teachers and teachers and between teachers and students is once again emphasized here. The schooling improvement initiative in the Papakura area has seen the consistency of profile cards and transfer of information. Through the curriculum focus, there has been agreement as to the data that is passed on.

## Conclusions

Transition in one form or another is experienced by most children in New Zealand. Whether it be transitioning from preschool to primary, primary to intermediate, from (primary or) intermediate to secondary, children will experience the move in many ways. It can be said that this move can be a traumatic one as or until children become familiar with new environments, personnel and systems.

Research suggests that children cope better with the social and emotional aspects of transition than they do with the curriculum challenges of their new school. However as the results of my brief survey indicate, Decile 1 students state that their social and emotional needs are of prime importance. While it is critical that, as teachers, we do not lose sight of the fact that we need to continue to review our practice and ensure that the curriculum remains our focus, teachers in low decile schools must be aware of the need to provide a stable, caring environment and develop sincere relationships with their students at the same time.

Schools need to prioritise transition as an on-going programme as opposed to an afterthought as the end of year draws closer. A sustainable action plan co-operatively devised by key staff members of the schools involved is required to enable the seamless transition that we all desire, to occur. Why leave it to the few weeks before the end of the year? Why not take the last term of primary and focus on transitioning? To students it would be seamless – once a week the students start sharing in the cross school programmes that are being implemented in other countries.

Continued upskilling and acknowledgement of across the board teaching and learning, although a given as part of best practice, does not happen as readily as it should. A concerted effort must be made by Principals to lead professional development within clusters of schools. Those that hold the purse strings need to allow for teacher visits/observations especially between primary/intermediate schools and secondary schools, transition camps for at risk students, and the incidentals required to complete the actions of the plan.

Let it not go unsaid that parents play a pivotal role in aiding the transition process. In 34 years of teaching in low decile intermediate schools I remain dissatisfied and troubled by the lack of parental participation in this process. At all stages of transition parents have always been encouraged to support their children and work alongside the school to help students make the move. Whether it be that parents see this as the role of the school, as a process between schools which doesn't involve them, or whether they are discouraged to be a part by their children who think they are mature and independent enough to cope without that support. Only further research may find the answer.

Finally, there will be no gains made in creating the best practice for transition unless there is communication and commitment from all parties involved.

*'Principals set the scene for their schools through their own attitudes and actions. If staff know these leaders are committed to making links and building bridges, they are more likely to see it as important and put effort into the liaison.'* (Hawk and Hill, 2001, p.11.)

## **Bibliography**

- Andrews, C. (2008). *Managing Transition through Informed Practice*
- Cox, S., Kennedy, S., Bishop, F., & Porteners, S. (2004). *A study of students' transition from primary to secondary school*
- Education Review Office (2000). *Students in Years 7 and 8*
- Hawk, K., & Hill, J. (2001). *Troubled Transition. What teachers and schools can do to ensure educational transition points do not interrupt student learning.*
- McGee, C., Ward, R., Gibbons, J., & Harlow, A. (2003). *Transition to secondary school: a literature review: Report to the Ministry of Education 2003*
- Parker, A. & Newharth-Pritchard, S. (2007). *Calming Rough Waters: Teachers strategies for smoothing the transition to middle school.*
- Smith, J.S., Feldwisch, R. & Abel, A., (2006). *Similarities and differences in students' and parents' perceptions of the transition from middle school to high school.*
- Vinson, Prof. T., (2006). *Good Transitions: through the eyes of primary and secondary principals, NSW Public Education Conference, 2006.*
- Whitelaw, L. (2008). *Transition – Best Practice*