

FOCUS: Attendance at the American National Association of Secondary School Principals 90th Annual Convention and Exposition

SABBATICAL LEAVE REPORT

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(Sabbatical Leave split over terms 1 and 2 2006)

Firstly and most importantly, my sincere thanks to the New Zealand Ministry of Education and to the Cashmere High School Board of Trustees, enabling the school to temporarily appoint current staff members to acting-up positions during my 10 weeks absence from the school, and to financially support my attendance at an international education conference in the U.S.A. and to undertake school visits in the states of Nevada and California. The costs associated with my trip to the U.S.A. were within the budget/allowance provided by the Cashmere High School Board of Trustees. The absence of the principal from a school for more than a brief period of time provides valuable professional learning opportunities for staff appointed to acting-up positions during the Principal's absence. It may also enhance the career goals of the people in these acting positions. On my return to school, it is my intention to get these people to provide some form of evaluation of their roles undertaken, the purpose of which will be to gain feedback on the structure and roles of the school's senior management team.

The major purpose of my sabbatical leave was to enable me to attend the **American National Association of Secondary School Principals 90th Annual Convention and Exposition**, held during mid March in Reno, Nevada. Additionally, school visits were also planned. This conference was originally planned for New Orleans, however following the cyclone in New Orleans, the venue was shifted to Reno, Nevada. Approximately 3000 people attended the conference and although most attendees were from the U.S.A., I estimate around 100 people were international delegates. In addition to myself, two other New Zealanders attended the conference, both of whom were from an Auckland secondary school.

A further point of interest is that attendees at the conference, included not only principals, but also vice principals and assistant principals. Membership of the American National Association of Principals is open to all people who have the word 'principal' in their job title. Hence membership of the association includes vice principals and assistant principals. This seems to me to be eminently sensible and works well, probably because the association doesn't appear to have any industrial function – it is a professional association of senior managers in American secondary schools. I have, as a consequence, reflected a little on the somewhat fragmented structure of organisations in New Zealand representing senior managers in secondary schools – the Principals' Council, Spanz and the DP/AP association. The single structure seems to work well in America probably because of the focus on professional matters. Industrial matters, including salaries and conditions of work appear to be regulated and determined in local education districts.

American principals accept this knowing for example, that there can be wide variations in salaries for principals across the country. If salary becomes a major factor a principal will simply look for a job in another education district.

There was a Careers Centre attached to the conference, with a large number of education districts advertising for senior school administrators. Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent positions were also advertised at the Careers Centre. These people manage the education districts, and appear to have a considerable influence when it comes to the management of individual schools. The system seems much more hierarchical than what we are used to in New Zealand. American principals spoke of the bureaucracy they face, with seemingly small matters requiring decisions at the education district level. They were particularly interested in the level and extent of self management in New Zealand schools. American principals also spoke of a positive outcome of their system. Because a number of aspects of school management occur at the education district level, American principals spoke of their focus on educational leadership in their schools. I have the impression that American principals and senior administrators spend more time in their roles as educational leaders than is typically the case for senior managers in New Zealand secondary schools.

In addition to attending the NASSP Convention, I also spent time in two secondary schools in America, one in Reno, Nevada and the other in Pleasanton, California. In both schools I spoke with a number of teachers and students and I visited a number of classes covering the full range of curriculum areas. In one of the schools I was asked to assist with the evaluation / appraisal of an Information Technology teacher. This involved a lesson observation, student evaluations and informal feedback to the teacher. This was very similar to the sort of teacher appraisal we commonly do in New Zealand schools.

The format of the NASSP Convention followed a fairly conventional pattern – general sessions (keynote addresses) and education sessions (workshops). The general sessions which concluded each day were very general and were, I think, designed to be not only inspirational and motivational, but also to be entertainment. Speakers were well known American academics, educators, authors, sports people and political commentators. In addition to the informal talking with American school administrators, most of my learning occurred at the conference education sessions. Over 120 different sessions/topics were available to choose from. Obviously selections had to be made, however a number of themes ran across the various sessions, including

- Relationships between people in a school community, and particularly between teachers and principals and students
- An increasing and strong emphasis in many American schools on promoting values.
- Concerns about President Bush's 2003 NCLB (No Child Left Behind) legislation.

I attended several sessions on relationships between students and teachers, particularly between students and principals. Much international research, including New Zealand research, has been done over the last few years confirming the importance for student

achievement, of strong and positive relationships between students and teachers. I attended a couple of sessions at the convention which highlighted ways in which relationships in a school can be enhanced. A group of students talked about the signals principals give, can give and should give in terms of how they relate to students. Another session detailed personalisation in a school, outlining the way in which every student in the school has an adult who knows them well and is willing and able to advocate for them. There was an interesting relationships thing occurring at Proctor Hug High School, the school I visited in Reno, Nevada. Going back several years, fights occurred relatively frequently in the corridors of this school during change-over time between periods. As a result the principal required all staff to move from their classroom into the corridors, by their doors, at period changeover times. The presence of teachers in corridors eliminated fighting amongst students in the corridors, in a short period of time. However these teachers continue to go into the corridors at changeover times, now simply to greet students, individually and by name, as they arrive for the next period. I spoke to a number of students about this and they all confirmed they enjoy being individually greeted by teachers several times a day. A principal of an inner city New York school told me that at her school, one morning each week the entire staff spends 15 minutes at the school gates greeting students as they arrive at the school. In both schools the principals were very enthusiastic about the improvement in student/teacher relationships following the greeting of students at the classroom doors and the school gates.

Values education has gained momentum in recent years in America and in some education districts this includes specific classroom teaching programmes. I was however more interested in the ways in which schools are more generally promoting values within their school communities. At Amador Valley High School, the school I visited in Pleasanton, California, each month has a particular values focus. When I visited the school in March the focus was 'respect'. There were numerous 'respect' posters and banners around the school and all teachers were encouraged / required to constantly highlight respect in their classrooms, in their teaching and in their interactions with students. The students I spoke with at this school reported they enjoyed the monthly focus at their school and felt they were learning something important.

The No Child Left Behind legislation of 2003 is a very significant current national education issue in America. A number of the education sessions at the convention touched on or dealt with the NCLB legislation. This legislation aims to narrow the gap or close the gap between the achievement levels of minority groups in schools (blacks, Hispanics) and the school population as a whole. This of course was of considerable interest to me as it very closely mirrors the achievement levels of different groups of students in New Zealand schools. NCLB was a major issue at the convention, largely due to funding issues associated with it. American educators are claiming insufficient federal funding has been provided to implement NCLB and that the richest education districts are likely to be those having the smallest numbers of minority students. It appears that NCLB is very political and is likely to be at the forefront of educational issues in America for some time to come.

I have made reference to the two schools I spent time in, in America – Proctor Hug High School in Reno, Nevada, and Amador Valley High School in Pleasanton, California (about an hour north of San Francisco). Hug High School appeared to be typical of a school serving an area which was neither affluent nor characterised by poverty. This is a school of around 1200 students divided into four sub-schools, each managed by a Vice Principal and a Dean of Students. The physical layout of the school was such that students remained in their sub-school building for most of their subjects. There was a very positive feel about this school. Most students I spoke with felt a strong sense of being a part of the Hug school community.

Amador Valley High School is in a very affluent area within daily commuting distance of San Francisco. I doubt if there would be a school in New Zealand, state or private, which would match Amador in terms of resourcing. Interestingly, Amador is a locked school meaning that it is surrounded by a high fence with locked gates, the purpose of which is not to stop students getting out, but rather to prevent unwanted visitors from getting into the school. This school also employs an armed security guard / police officer, full-time on the site. Amador is described as a national school of excellence and not surprisingly attracts very good teachers.

Conclusion

- As a result of attending the NASSP conference my interest in the positive outcomes for students, from a focus on values and on relationships between students and teachers/ principals has been heightened.
- Whilst there are many differences between schools and school systems in America and New Zealand, many of the issues we face are similar as are our approaches to dealing with these issues.
- A small, but very obvious thing I want to do on my return to school, is to get the Cashmere High School Vision and Values painted on the two main driveways into the school. Both schools I visited in America had relevant stuff painted on their driveways – the students knew every sign-written word well.
- A side issue which I have not commented on, but which interests me, is a change in the role of school counsellors in many American high schools in recent times. There is a move in American schools away from the therapeutic counselling model to counsellors working with students in a visible way and counsellors teaching a specially developed curriculum. Apparently the American Association of Counsellors is playing an active role in this change and has also developed the counselling curriculum. I intend to find out more. My interest in this stems from the fact that 20 years ago I was a school counsellor.

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