

Sabbatical Report

What Do Top Schools Have in Common?

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The purpose of the sabbatical was to visit a selection of high achieving schools in New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the USA. ¹ The visits were undertaken in order to:

- 1 Understand if there was any common denominator in all top schools regardless of their context.
- 2 What measures might be used to benchmark best practice internationally.
- 3 To look at best practice in the use of ICT in schools.

Summary of Key Findings:

1 Quality of the staff.

The major focus common throughout all schools is on the quality of staff (especially, but not exclusively, teaching staff). The approach to this varies according to each school/system but all schools have developed clear policies and procedures within their context to maximise performance around staff selection, terms and conditions of employment, accountability, professional development, and exit strategies.

2 Benchmarking quality

No easy answer or comprehensive system observed. The placement at University is used as a key indicator. This was true of both high and lower deciles schools. Schools also looked at both percentage and status of Universities/University courses.

The best schools are also tracking value added through a variety of means depending on the systems they have available. This was more evident in schools that had selective entry or from a higher decile.

Schools have a network of closely related schools which they use for comparison and collaboration. International (except US).

All the schools were data driven. They collected a wide variety of internal data across the full school experience.

¹ Top schools were seen as schools that were widely recognised for their achievements and a sample was selected that (with a few notable exceptions) had a similar context to Rangitoto College in terms of the prior learning and cultural capital that their student body might bring with them to the classroom.

3 ICT

Capability:

The best schools have very stable highly capable wireless networks. All staff and students have laptops. Data projectors are standard issue in all classrooms. SMART Boards are typical.

Communication:

Top performing schools have efficient and effective SMS systems. The best are tailored to meet the particular needs of the school. Schools have developed extensive use of their intranet for student resources and communications.

The extent and way ICT is used varied from subject to subject but all had put staff through extensive professional development to ensure technology is used effectively. The best training was in class support by experts in linking the technology to the curriculum. The central focus of the professional development was to ensure that technology maximises the teaching and learning relationship between staff and students.

Schools with high quality ICT integration were starting to use it to set up global learning networks.

Other common factors:

All the top schools place a great emphasis on the development of student leadership and service alongside extensive programmes in Sport and Performing Arts.

All schools understand their (student and parent) community very well and are particularly sensitive to their needs and demands.

Implications:

Quality of staff

It is universally recognised that the quality of staff is the most important factor in school performance. It was clear from my visits that New Zealand state schools are at a huge disadvantage in terms of recruitment, quality control and retention of staff in comparison to New Zealand and International private schools. The private schools that have the flexibility around contracts have an obvious method of ensuring staff meet the standards they expect. The lack of job security does not seem to affect recruitment. In place of security there was some increase in remuneration but a huge increase in expectation seemed to balance that. The fixed term nature of the contracts did not necessarily mean huge turnover of staff, indeed, it seemed that turnover was simply not an issue. As one person at a top New York City school said, "I have had an annual contract for 33 years – as long as I am good at what I do I am sure they will still want me." There was an obvious quality circle that operated. High quality staff meant that it was a really great place to teach and therefore no-one wanted to leave therefore everyone maintained the quality of their teaching therefore you had high quality staff. Staff who were in limited tenure positions tended to take more personal responsibility for their own professional development and the number with additional qualifications was quite marked. There was a far greater culture of personal professional responsibility than in schools where teachers had 'a job for life'.

All schools that were in an environment of guaranteed tenure and minimum professional standards had the quality of staffing at the top of their problem priority list. In this context the response was the development and resourcing of a range of strategies that provide

comprehensive staff professional development. Because a more defined set of working conditions existed alongside the guaranteed tenure this made professional development even more expensive as it needed to be, done – in the main – in school hours. Schools used some external providers but the scope was limited and so needed to be set up in-house. You had a reverse of the quality circle. Teachers with guaranteed tenure were less likely to take personal responsibility for keeping up the standard of their expertise. The school therefore had to provide more training, but the training was expensive and also hard to provide. When it wasn't provided standards fell.

It was clear that in our setting we need to encourage and reward teachers who take responsibility for their own professional development. We also need to make teacher professional development within school a funding priority.

Benchmarking

For high performing schools with selective intake criteria academic success was taken as a given. It was the level of that success that was important. They did not so much measure University placements as the quality of the Universities and the prestige of the programme within the University. For non selective entry schools University was still seen as the most important outcome. In one high performing school in Brooklyn which in the New Zealand context might be a Decile 1, University placement was still the defining outcome.

For the one school the writer visited in the United States which was specifically set up as a 'Trade and Tech' school, the outcome was placement into full time permanent employment (with ongoing training), not onto further tertiary study.

Schools with selective entry criteria were much more proactive in using value added testing and data. They also included a more rounded review of student achievement, thus looking at involvement in sport, service and performing arts activities alongside academic achievement.

Because of the vast array of assessment methods used and the vast array of context specific data it was impossible to see an easy method of benchmarking 'best in world'. However it was clear that 'best in New Zealand' was every bit as good as Australia, Canada and the United States.

It would seem that while schools do benchmark both nationally and internationally it is only where they can find a school that almost mirrors their context. That is problematic for a New Zealand State school.

A rigorous internal data collecting and self improvement review process is a more effective way to ensure quality outcomes. It certainly helps that the standard of our education system is world class.

ICT

To develop the capacity to fully utilise ICT is very expensive. The capital cost is considerable as is the ongoing cost of replacement. The technical and maintenance costs are significant. It was clear from the experience of schools that it is not possible to compromise in this area. If a school is going to fully integrate I.C.T. into the teaching and learning programme they need a fully capable, highly stable very well supported I.C.T. network.

The training costs for teaching staff are huge. In schools where there was a long history of the use of ICT the impact on students' ability to use ICT was obvious. However its impact on

overall learning was less defined. From the experiences of the ICT schools they placed all the emphasis on the way that staff used ICT. In short, good practice meant that the ICT allowed students to be more engaged - with the subject matter, with the learning process, with the teacher and with their fellow students. ICT could be used in a way that caused the opposite of this. It was interesting to note that the Microsoft School of the Future chose staff on their relationship skills – their ICT skills could be learned.

All schools that had successfully integrated ICT had ongoing professional development programmes. All had models where trainers were selected on the basis of their ability to teach and understand teaching pedagogy as the first and most important criteria. Professional development was 'in class' and as required. It was collaborative.

All ICT development should be fully costed in terms of implementation and maintenance. However the professional development programme around it is essential. This is a vital part of the strategy and must also be developed and costed otherwise any benefit will be lost.

A final conclusion

Top schools take a holistic approach to education. They provide outlets for students' creative talents. They provide for their sporting needs. They provide opportunities for them to provide service to others. They train leaders as well as academics. This is done through an integrated approach between curricular and co-curricular. In all top cases one could see and feel the connection between the teacher and the student that was so much more than just a perfunctory relationship. The role of teachers in contributing to the wider life of the school is very very important. It needs to be given more recognition in our system. So much of this happens in New Zealand on the basis of 'good will'. It faces huge pressure where, on the one side forces want to set clear job definitions around what is the work of a teacher, and on the other by forces that do not want to fund anything that is not core curriculum. If we lose the co-curricular aspect of our schools we will lose a key element that makes our education system so good.

Methodology:

I visited 17 schools – 5 in New Zealand, 2 in Australia, 2 in Canada and 8 in the United States.

The length of stay varied from a morning to three days. In general when overseas it was a full day or two day visit. Time was spent with the Principal, senior staff, specialist staff and students. All schools were visited in session.

I spent time researching the particular context of a school before visiting. In 10 cases I had a very good prior knowledge of the school through an association with the Principal prior to the visit.

I wrote extensive notes following each visit.

An additional impact of the visits was to bring back some small but very interesting ideas which might be adapted then adopted into Rangitoto College.

Some examples are:

Compulsory school certification professional development courses

Student self review questionnaires for senior student to gauge independent study skills and readiness for university study.

In a very very stable staffing environment, the making of all HOD positions four year fixed term in tenure.

A balanced Scorecard strategic plan format.

The use of individual learning 'labs' for senior students.

Provision of summer required and recommended reading lists for Year 9, 10 and 11 students.

The visits also resulted in one fragile exchange programme being confirmed and two others being initiated – all with schools in the United States.