

SEARCHING FOR THE SILVER BULLET:
HOW TO LIFT STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN THE SECOND PHASE OF
PRINCIPALSHIP

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INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

By July 2010 I had been Principal of Green Bay High School for just over 5 years. At the time of my appointment the school was under Statutory Management and community confidence in the school needed to be restored. I welcomed the leadership challenge that presented, as I worked alongside a team of dedicated and thoroughly professional colleagues, supported by an excellent Board. We have been pleased to see our school roll growing strongly in response to an increasingly positive set of indicators about our school's performance.

So, after some hard but rewarding years of leading the school I believed that the first phase of my principalship was over. I now needed look to the next 5 years – the second phase. The new Board vision statement for Green Bay High School is – **‘innovative, individualized and connected’** – and it is my task to make meaning of this. It is a broad vision statement but the focus is very much on student achievement. While student achievement levels in our school have risen in the last few years, they remain frustratingly below the standard of similar schools in New Zealand.

The purpose of my sabbatical was two-fold:

1. To revitalize my personal vision of leadership for the next phase of my principalship. I wanted to do this by attending the Principals' Institute at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The particular course that appealed to me, and was strongly recommended by principal colleagues, was "Leadership: An Evolving Vision".
2. To gather information about some secondary school initiatives overseas that seemed to make a positive difference to student achievement. In particular I wanted to visit the 'School without Walls' in Washington DC, and spend time at the Youth Sport Trust in England.

I am grateful to the Ministry of Education for granting me this sabbatical leave. It is an opportunity that all principals should take; our role is very challenging and we are better leaders for taking time out to reflect and refresh. I am especially indebted to my Board. It supported my application and funded my study and travel very generously. Finally, my colleagues in the senior management team at Green Bay High School, led and managed the school in my absence professionally and very effectively. It was clear that I am not indispensable, and in fact it has become apparent who really does all the work now!

**HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
PRINCIPALS' INSTITUTE: "LEADERSHIP: AN EVOLVING VISION"
BOSTON, USA.**

This was held in the first two weeks of July, when Boston is in the middle of summer. The Harvard campus is grand and elegant and steeped in a tradition that was simultaneously familiar and foreign – a sensation that remained with me for the duration of the institute. The programme was thoroughly engrossing and I was impressed with the quality of the research itself, and the standard of teaching and presentations. The sessions included:

- *Emerging Technologies and Transformative Education*: Chris Dede
- *Adaptive Leadership* – Irma Tyler Wood
- *Improving the Technical Core* – Richard Elmore
- *Brain Scams* – Kurt Fischer
- *Inclusive Education* – Norman Kunc
- *Implementing Inclusivity* – Thomas Hehir
- *Case Discussion: Aravind Eye Hospital* – V. Kasturi Rangan
- *Case Discussion: Boston Symphony Orchestra* – James Honan
- *Case Discussion: Supporting Beginning Teacher Instruction* – Katherine Merseth
- *Parental Involvement in Schooling* – Nancy Hill
- *Rethinking Teacher Supervision and Evaluation* – Kim Marshall
- *Engaging Our Own Immunity to Change* – Robert Kegan

My Reflections:

I am aware that several other sabbatical reports provide some details about these presentations, so I won't repeat that information. However, I do strongly recommend this Institute to other principals, for a number of reasons.

1. The Institute delivered on the promise of its own promotion. The course prospectus stated that those who participated in the programme would experience learning in the following areas:

- Manage schools and districts entrepreneurially, expanding public and private partnerships and networks
- Discover new techniques and technologies for implementing sustainable change
- Learn strategies for leading instruction through an era of public accountability
- Examine effective leadership styles and practices in the context of organizational change
- Use interim assessments to improve teaching and learning
- Respond to the expectations of a wide variety of stakeholders
- Explore learning approaches based on the latest mind, brain and education research

It sounds like a tall order but the rhetoric matched the reality and I did some powerful learning that connected very strongly with the strategic priorities for Green Bay High School.

2. The learning during this Institute had particular impact because each day ended with a one hour session with our tutorial groups. Working more closely with other principals who operate in very different educational contexts provided us all with opportunities to reflect 'at a distance' and gain some perspectives about our own situations. These tutorial groups had been well prepared with a day of 'off-course' team building – about which I had felt some cynicism but which evaporated almost immediately.



My Institute tutorial group

3. I came away from the Institute with lots of valuable 'take aways', but I was looking for that 'silver bullet' idea that would link to my concerns about student

achievement at our school. For me, Richard Elmore's presentation and research continues to echo through my thinking, months later. He challenged us with the statement that "teaching is an occupation looking for a profession". His work on developing the professional practice of teachers is challenging to me as a principal, but it is also compelling because this seems like the 'silver bullet'. Teachers do make a difference, as we have had confirmed by John Hattie's work. Principals do make a difference, as we know from Viviane Robinson's work. The work of Elmore and his colleagues, in developing the notion of 'Instructional Rounds', goes straight to how to make sense of this. It provides me with some strategies that link my role as principal to the role of teachers, in a way that makes a difference to student achievement.

4. I was refreshed! This was a great way to commence my sabbatical and I genuinely felt that my personal vision of leadership was revitalized, and I still feel that way. It was important to me that I find a framework for my next 5 years of principalship in terms of the Board's vision for our school, but with a clear sense of what that might look like on a practical level. The rest of the sabbatical leave was informed by this sense and became even more worthwhile.

SCHOOL WITHOUT WALLS WASHINGTON D.C., USA

*School Without Walls is a student-centred environment that maximizes integrative, interactive, experiential learning within the framework of a Humanities approach. The programme is achieved by using the city, and sometimes the world, as a classroom. The school is a model of collaboration among staff, students and parents.
(SWW prospectus)*

School Without Walls (SWW) is a non-traditional high school, with around 460 students in Grades 9 – 12. Originally established in 1971 as part of the 'alternative schools' movement, in 1988 SWW adopted a Humanities based programme that provides an interdisciplinary core curriculum. The Humanities approach requires that students find personal meaning from their studies; it provides the framework for academic rigor by requiring the study of primary sources and their contexts, and by exploring the interrelationships of ideas, events and persons across academic disciplines.

While the school has changed somewhat from its original mission, it has maintained its core vision to remain an exemplary model of academic excellence in the District of Columbia Public School System. Student achievement levels are very high and this is a school of first choice for many families in Washington, competing strongly with both private and other public schools. The District of Columbia Public Schools describes the SWW as "...a demanding alternative college preparatory program that seeks to foster independence and creativity."



The history of utilizing community and international resources to enrich and excel beyond textbook learning is a tradition at SWW, and remains a central feature. The instructional programme encourages and emphasizes teaching approaches in which learning activities are carried on throughout the community and internationally. This is achieved through strong partnerships within the intellectually and culturally rich environment of Washington DC. Partners include:

Amerquest Mortgage Company
 Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver & Jacobson LLP
 George Washington University
 Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History
 Lockheed Martin
 Marriott International, Inc.
 National Association of Neighborhoods
 National Capital YCMA
 Office of Civil Rights
 PEPCO
 Securities & Exchange Commission
 The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts
 The National Cathedral
 The Washington Post
 United States Information Agency
 University of the District of Columbia
 Women's National Democratic Club
 Young Playwright's Theatre Company

These partnerships enrich teaching and learning, but have the additional benefit of attracting resources into the school as well.

The academic programme includes *Humanities, Science, Math, Social Studies, Advanced Placement and elective courses*. Additionally, juniors and seniors have

the opportunity to enroll in college level courses at The George Washington University and other local universities.

Graduation requirements are strict. To obtain a diploma from School Without Walls, a student must meet a *high academic standard*. *Additionally, students must complete 100 hours of community service, satisfy an internship requirement, and complete a senior project.*

Admission to SWW is open to all students in the District of Colombia but is competitive and based on admission tests, previous school records, standardized test scores, previous school recommendations and a personal interview. All students are expected to maintain a 73% average grade to remain academically eligible in any class. Students who fail to comply with the academic requirements of SWW become ineligible to continue at the school.



Principal of School Without Walls, Richard Trogisch

My reflections:

- The SWW programme is a bit like the International Baccalaureate on steroids. I was very envious of the opportunities for students and teachers to be engaged in such diverse and intense learning, and having access to such generous and abundant support from a resource-rich community. The SWW students are indeed fortunate.
- Can this kind of learning be replicated in our school? NCEA provides the framework for us to do a wide range of experiential learning and gain high stakes qualifications in the process. We are still a long way from exploiting the real strengths designed into the framework of NCEA...it is in place at SWW and it is very successful.

- Can these kinds of partnerships be replicated with our community? We don't all live in Washington DC, so maybe not in the same way exactly; but SWW reminded me of the importance of partnering with our community for real learning. Yes we do this, but it is a bit haphazard, with maybe the exception of Gateway programmes.
- The selective and very competitive admission into SWW, and the strict criteria for maintaining eligibility to attend, guarantees very successful levels of student achievement. What started as an 'alternative' school is now very much more elitist, with the best of Washington DC students being 'cherry-picked'. This is so far away from our own public education system that in some ways I was a little disappointed – what was there for me to learn from this? However, the bigger lesson was that on the macro level the public education system in DC, and in many other states of the USA, could learn a great deal from New Zealand. SWW is a really wonderful school, but it is certainly not typical.

The Principal of SWW, Richard Trogisch, and his team were very welcoming and generous of their time. I was impressed with their passion and dedication, and the school is testimony to some creative and lateral thinking about what matters in learning. The sense that learning is best when it contains elements that are experiential and applied, and linked to the world beyond the classroom, is exceptionally well demonstrated in this school.

SPORT AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT : SPECIALIST SPORTS COLLEGES & THE YOUTH SPORTS TRUST ENGLAND

As a principal of a New Zealand secondary school I suspect that I take for granted the value of sport in our school programmes. I was keen, therefore, to find out more about the Specialist Sports Colleges in England where there was evidence of sport impacting positively on student achievement.

The Specialist Schools Programme is an initiative launched by the UK Government in 1993 to assist schools to increase learning in specialist subjects and to use this specialism to raise whole school standards. By 2008 90% of 'maintained' or public secondary schools had achieved this designation, in one of the following specialisms: Arts, Business & Enterprise, Engineering, Humanities, Languages, Mathematics & Computing, Music, Science, Sports or Technology.

The first Sports Colleges were designated in 1997 and were expected:

- To raise standards of achievement in PE and Sport,
- To use this to drive up whole school standards
- To be a regional focal point for promoting excellence in PE and community sport.

In order to retain their specialist school status, Sports Colleges had to have evidence that their specialist subjects were strong and that the sports specialism impacted across the school and raising achievement.

The Youth Sports Trust is an independent charity established in 1994, with a mission to “build a brighter future for young people through PE and Sport”. As part of that mission it has supported the Specialist Sports Colleges across England, funded by grants from the Department of Education. YST provided resources, professional development, advocacy and research to assist this initiative

Many of the Sports Colleges also act as hub sites for a network of 450 School Sport Partnerships. These networks of local schools exist to improve the number and quality of sporting opportunities available to young people and include every state school in England. They also play an integral role in providing competitive sporting opportunities for young people and increasing levels of participation. YST has supported Sports Colleges to develop these networks.

The YST and supporters of the Sports College initiative believe that PE and school sport can make a major contribution to many agendas – educational achievement, public health, community cohesion and, of course, sporting performance at the highest level.



I met with Annette Montague, the Schools Director for YST at the office based in Loughborough University. She discussed the research results that indicated that it was the specialist Sports Colleges, of all the Specialist Schools, that were achieving the highest level of success in terms of student achievement. Other kinds of specialist schools were not able to demonstrate the same levels of improved outcomes for students. Consequently the whole specialist schools initiative was under review as the new British Government made cuts to spending in the wake of the recession.

Late in 2010, after returning from my sabbatical, it was announced that the Department of Education would be mainstreaming funding for specialist schools from April 2011 and therefore would no longer directly fund the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) and Youth Sports Trust (YST) for these purposes. At the time of writing this report it is not clear how this will impact on the work that has been done in the Sports Colleges to date.

My reflections:

- Good quality sporting experiences do make a difference to the success of our students – UK research confirms this.
- I am pleased to be working in a context where the value of sport as part of a well-rounded school programme is not a matter for debate – and we cannot afford to take it for granted. The goodwill of our teachers and parents in supporting schools to deliver on this aspect of our education system is a national treasure that we have to protect.
- It would have been good to have some of the financial incentives that were provided to schools in England to strengthen sport to build student achievement – but it is clear that reliance on the fickle hand of government funding priorities is dangerous.
- The Kiwi Sport Funding that is being used to grow school sports ‘hubs’ in our communities is a great investment, cost effective and worthy of support by all our political and bureaucratic masters.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

My concern, as I left for my sabbatical, was that unless there was greater traction on our initiatives designed to lift the achievement of our students, then the gains made in recent years could be diminished. There is nothing more important than this for our school. I needed to revitalize and reframe my personal vision of leadership, and find some way to connect more directly with the professional work of teachers in classrooms where the real business of our school is done.

In New Zealand, schools principals are both governors and managers – a unique leadership role in any organization. We are expected to be all things in our schools – CEO, CFO, HR managers, marketers, property planners...and leaders of teaching and learning. I enjoy the professional freedom I have as a principal, but to be really effective I need to keep my focus on the work in classrooms. This does not mean classrooms patrols, scooting in and out to wave the flag; that is not what the research recommends. Richard Elmore’s work provides a strategy I can use in my professional context as a school leader.

The sabbatical experiences also resonated strongly with the strategic priorities of our Board. Our strategic plan, which is shaping the changes in the next five years, identified these areas of focus:

- High Achievement – creating a culture of excellence
- Quality teachers – passionate, professional, innovative teachers make a difference
- Community focus – building and promoting strong links; neighbourhood networks

- Effective learning environment – ensuring the environment is conducive to learning
- Superior Information & Communications Technology – an essential learning tool
- Excellent Governance – informed, strategic and committed

These priorities are the right ones for our school, but they are not so different from those of any other schools in New Zealand probably. The sabbatical provided me with some insights into the strengths we already have in our school and in our system of education generally. Sometimes we need to move away to see these clearly. Over the next 5 years I want to maximize those strengths to their full potential. Self-managing schools are hard work but the rewards are intense when we get it right. The silver bullet is us...the teaching profession and those of us who have leadership roles within it.

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FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

1. Richard Elmore's most recent publication provides practical, specific and compelling evidence to encourage school principals interested in approaches to instructional leadership

Instructional Rounds in Education. Elisabeth A. City, Richard F. Elmore, Sarah E. Fiarman, and Lee Teitel. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2009.

2. Harvard Graduate School of Education, Boston, USA

www.gse.harvard.edu/ppe/programs/principals-center/portfolio/index.html

3. School Without Walls (SWW) Washington D.C., USA

www.swwhs.org

4. Youth Sports Trust, United Kingdom

www.youthsporttrust.org/page/home-welcome/index.html