

## **A. SUSTAINABILITY OF SCHOOL CULTURE (during change)**

**B. AUTHOR:** Mark Shanahan  
Principal  
Waitakere College  
Auckland

**SABBATICAL PERIOD:** 13 March 2017 to 2 June 2017

## **C. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:**

I would like to thank firstly; the Principals/Headmasters of the schools that I visited during my sabbatical. These schools ranged in size from approximately 1,000 students to over 3,000 students and were on extensive campuses, sometimes over two sites. These school leaders set aside time to discuss the issues with me, show me their school and introduced me to their teams for further discussion on the issues on which I was focused.

Thanks to; Antoine Shelton, Principal Santa Monica High School California; Oryla Wiedoeft, Principal Venice High School, Los Angeles; Matt Jones, Principal Ark Globe Academy, London; Simon Cox, Principal Woodlands School Takely Education Trust, Essex; Mohsen Ojja, Principal The Crest Academy, Neasden London; and David Goodhew, Headmaster Latymer Upper School, London.

Secondly; to my Board of Trustees at Waitakere College for supporting my application and helping to fund the professional development role of these visits. I endeavour to pay them back in kind by continual improvement in the College as a result of my findings.

Thirdly; Teacher Study Awards TeachNZ, who awarded this Principal's Sabbatical to me after 10 years in the position of Principal, allowing me time away to clear the fog that sometimes engulfs the role of leading 140 staff and 1,300 students. I have returned with vigour to continue in this role. It was very timely. I can only encourage other principals to take the time. It recognises the value you add in a very valuable job.

## **D. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Principals in general have a vision and support this with values to build a positive culture in their college. They use their vision and values to determine strategic goals in the short and long term and to measure success and progress towards their goals.

What I discovered on my sabbatical was that there are four aspects of school operations that are needed to ensure that school culture is sustainable. These aspects ensure that the culture, expectations and standards within the school can be maintained despite changes to key personnel in the school.

These areas of successful school operation supported by best practice are:

- **Vision & Values**
- **Leadership of Culture including the Senior Leadership Team (SLT)**
- **Voice** including that of student, community, and staff

- **Regular Reviews** within the Quality Assurance Systems (QAS), that use data including voice and involve early intervention to make changes.

The **Vision & Values** of the school need to be relevant, coherent, simple, explicit and must become a reference as to why an activity occurs in the school. Students and staff supporting the vision and values of the school are acknowledged and rewarded in ways that reflect these values and vision.

The importance of the **Principal and Senior Leadership Team (SLT)** enhancing **school culture** is paramount. What really makes a school have a better culture than others, for the staff, students and community, is how the culture – its vision and values, are woven through all school operations to reach their goals. The SLT bring the school culture to life. They influence all staff professional development, curriculum areas and the implementation of student wellbeing initiatives so as leaders they must reference the vision and values in all operational aspects of the school. The key is also ensuring teaching staff - the frontline, know who has responsibility for these key operational areas. This transparency allows easy open discourse in incorporating the school culture – vision and values, into classroom, playground and sportsfield interactions between the three pillars of schools – students, staff, and parents/whanau.

Leadership helps determine the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ culture develops within a school. Seeking opportunities to include student **voice** in as many aspects of the college as practicable, empowers student ownership of culture that then becomes pervasive. Students then contribute to building a stronger school and stronger community. ‘Strong school, strong community’; ‘Strong community, strong school’; is the outcome.

**A coherent school review process** based around a general Quality Assurance System model (QAS) must evaluate what happens in light of the school values and vision so that they are reflected in what happens within the college. Use of student voice must also be used in review cycles to help evaluation. Relevant data must be used to help inform reviews and justify new actions for improvement.

## **E. PURPOSE:**

The purpose of my sabbatical was to support the successful implementation of our College Strategic Goals which are:

- a. Raising academic achievement for all students through differentiated learning in order to provide successful future pathways.
  - a) To improve the levels of literacy and numeracy of students from the beginning of Year 9 to the end of Year 10.
  - b) To increase the levels of achievement in NCEA.
  - c) To offer enhanced provision and guidance towards worthwhile vocational pathways.
  - d) To enhance provisions for gifted and talented students.
  - e) To accelerate success for Maori students.
  - f) To accelerate success for Pasifika students.
  - g) To continue to support refugee students’ successful integration into Waitakere College and into New Zealand.
  - h) To continue to support students with special needs through inclusive education and successful transition into the community.

## 2. Improving Attendance:

- To improve the levels of attendance as a vital prerequisite for raising student achievement.

## 3. Enhancing Teaching:

Building staff capacity to enhance lifelong learning and implement the key competencies.

- a) To carry out Year 3 of a 3-year plan to embed the use of restorative practice for all to enhance the relationships in the learning environment and within the College community.
- b) To carry out Year 2 of our second 3 year plan, implementing the effective use of best practice e-learning to enhance student achievement, with the main focus on implementing BYOD (Bring your own device) at Year 10 and 11, continuing and enhancing the Y9 BYOD programme.
- c) To support all teachers to achieve the standards set in the Waitakere College effective teacher profile, underpinned by the Poutama professional development model.
- d) To continually reflect on programmes in order to ensure they are engaging, relevant, challenging and differentiated in accordance with NZ Curriculum, NCEA and Vocational Pathways.

## 4. Connecting with community in order to enhance achievement:

- a) To enhance dialogue with parents and whanau focused on student achievement.
- b) To participate in the Waitakere Community of Learners (a cluster of local primary, intermediate and secondary schools) in order to raise achievement for priority learners .
- c) To participate in the Waitakere Secondary Schools Sport Plan, using sport to advance student well-being.

My focus was on the aspects that contribute to SG 1 Raising Academic Achievement for All Students through differentiated learning in order to provide successful future pathways and connecting with our community to enhance achievement.

Our challenge for Waitakere College, and mine as Principal, is to maintain and sustain the very real improvement in Academic Achievement over the last 3/4 years. Particularly with Maori and Pasifika results being at or above the National Average for Level 1, 2 NCEA and UE.

The focus to maintain these results and our college culture of academic success and wellbeing, while adjusting for the retirement of three senior long serving DP's over a two-year period, was crucial. I looked at how the schools visited have maintained their momentum while absorbing management change within their schools.

Sustainability of strategic goals and stability are key aspects for students and staff in a diverse community like ours to ensure success in its many forms is achieved.

We have been fortunate that our community, Board of Trustees, staff, and students all value the vision, values and goals to achieve academic and social success.

I identified schools in challenging parts of London and California that continue to achieve well and have faced similar changes that could have disrupted their schools.

I wanted to confirm first-hand the strategic review cycles, systems and structures that the schools I visited have in place to maintain positive learning cultures.

## **F. BACKGROUND & RATIONALE:**

We have a new challenge of the development of a Community of Learning (CoL) that includes 12 schools two of which are other secondary schools. As we embark on this journey of shared pedagogy and strategies that support all our strategic goals, it was ~~is~~ important to ascertain what experience schools I will visit may have in this area.

To support good pedagogy but also maintain or sustain good Vision Values and Goals that fit our particular school. Do the Vision Values and Goals stay intact or become homogenised with those of the wider community so the uniqueness that schools believe they all have is lost, do they remain intact or are they blended.

This uniqueness of schools in the ultra-competitive climate of Auckland secondary schools, and that of West Auckland, is seen as the major factor in the retention of students in the local community and local school.

Part of this challenge is the encouragement/inclusion of student voice to enable, enhance, and more importantly, have student ownership of the Vision Values and Goals of our College so that the culture of the school is maintained by the student body as well as the teachers and leadership of the school.

Over the last decade my observations are that when new school leaders are appointed to secondary schools, particularly external appointments, there is a corresponding/ accompanying change of culture in these schools. While this may be appropriate in some instances, my interest is with the stable schools who have made appointments of a new school leader, particularly external ones, and how the culture of the college/school has remained consistent, i.e. how has the apparent good culture remained.

This is a relevant journey for me at Waitakere College as our senior leadership will have had three key leaders depart within a short period of time. While I have no intention of leaving, I want to ensure that despite departures and turnover, the leadership continues to reflect the Vision, Values and Goals of the College as we have worked so hard to get the school to the enviable position it is in. While I can have no bearing on my replacement when that may occur, I want to endeavour that changes in leadership enhance the culture of the College when it is in such a solid strategic position.

So the focus of my study remains on sustainability of culture, Vision, Values and Goals, and what supports that in the schools I visited.

## **G. METHODOLOGY:**

Several schools were identified in Los Angeles, London, and New Jersey and New Orleans.

For logistics of transport and costs Los Angeles and London became most practical.

Two schools in Los Angeles were similar but different. Both had a long history in their area with significant change in the demographics in their respective communities, both becoming more multicultural, leading to challenges that needed to be addressed to gain or regain the confidence of the communities.

Three of the London colleges identified were schools that had moved from special measures to positions of success and stability. Their major challenge was the changing value the community places on education either as a result of massive recent immigration to the suburbs of the school – and therefore exodus of traditional British working class students or the displacement of inner city British working class students to new areas. Each of these schools had therefore a very high percentage representation of new immigrants and cultures to London or a very high percentage of former working class students formally of London. In all these schools the positive success was all- pervading.

The fourth school visited was a public school with a 400 year history but it had moved from being a boys-only school to a co-educational school while maintaining great culture and values and implementing equity, and systems that would value females within the college.

Each of the schools was sent a series of focus questions based around their Strategic Plans (SP), Quality Assurance Systems (QAS), Vision and Values, and the structure of their Senior Leadership Team (SLT) (Appendix A).

All school leaders were promised anonymity regarding their responses to the focus questions, which would allow them to gather information within their school without prejudice. This would then allow open discussion with members of the staff I met at the visit. I found that in reality, Principals/Headmasters used the questionnaire as a discussion document rather than answer the questions. It allowed them to know the scope of my visit and tailor it accordingly.

In general, each visit involved a morning or afternoon visit for approximately three or four hours. Very generous. On most occasions, I met the school in operation and with at least 2-3 members of the school Key Leadership team. I visited active teaching classrooms with the Principal or member of the key leadership team.

While the number of schools visited was limited I identified schools that had had recent external recognition, such as statewide ranking system improvements or acknowledgement from Government by Prime Minister's visits, or continued successful stability within communities. Comparative decile ratings to NZ systems would have three schools at Decile 3 level (similar to Waitakere College) two at Decile 5-6 and one, the public school, at 10+.

## H. FINDINGS:

The key feature in common of the school leaders, as Principals/Headmasters, was the fit, relevance and authenticity of the **Vision and Values** of the school. The visions and values reflected the students and communities present expectations of themselves but also encouraged students and families to aspire for more. The Vision and Values are, as Simon Sinek refers, the 'reason' they are what you start with. They are why we do what we do.

The more visible the vision of the college around the campus, and the repetition or placement of the values to support the vision, the more evidence there was of school ownership.

The successful vision statement tended to be a one sentence statement with a focus on education achievement and a social justice theme. Two examples were, "Every student ready for university, every student a leader" and "Pursue excellence and seize opportunities". The statement being succinct allowed the schools to have their Vision everywhere, on brochures, classroom walls, stairwells, badges, answering machines, exam books, reception. Being

succinct also allowed many opportunities for school leaders to elaborate on what the Vision statement meant on particular occasions.

Clarity around the values of each school to support the vision enabled consistent use and placement of these themes in some of these schools. Everywhere, anytime, anyplace and as many opportunities as possible for students, staff, visitors to view them or have reference to them.

Schools that took every opportunity to positively reward and promote students and staff or activity that reinforced the values or vision, displayed strong ownership of their school Vision and Values. Examples of position promotion were; lunch with the Principal or significant SLT member with responsibility in that area, badges, ties, photo walls, photos on the website.

The second key finding was the **leadership by the Principal and Senior Leadership Team (SLT)** of the **school culture** were significant points of Best Practice that strengthen the Vision and Values to make culture sustainable.

It is hard to separate the importance of these two aspects of the Colleges' success. Once the vision and values are anchored in the school, it is crucial that the SLT enhance them so that there is a strong ownership by the three 'pillars' of a school, staff, students and whanau.

The SLT is the 'how' of sustaining the vision and values of the school. The key is not just the visible presence of the Principal on leading key areas of the values of the school but that the SLT purpose and voice is clear and promotes this in their key areas of curriculum, wellbeing, professional development, teaching and learning, human resourcing. The vision and values need to be the basis for action.

The emphasis on "investment in the frontline" (the teachers), to grow them through coherent programmes and to grow their leadership opportunities by them delivering to other staff, also enhances the culture of vision and values of the school. The SLT directly supports the Principal who together then influence the teachers and students in their actions. This leadership consistency and transparency creates a great feedback loop to maintain the values and reinforce expectations across the whole school.

All the schools were practicing this with degrees of success but it was most successful where their SLT action supported the school culture, vision and values. Examples of best practice were specific PD sessions on vision and values among staff but lead by SLT members not just the Principal, each teacher having a coach or coaching sessions with SLT members on good pedagogy that fitted the expectations/systems of the school, Regular random or timetabled visits/observations by a SLT member with a focus on effective pedagogy. Importantly in these schools there is time spent with the teacher after observations for feedback or coaching. This is a powerful link to improved pedagogy.

The focus on 'what is done' being based on 'why it is done', gives relevance to the teachers and students in the school, as described by Simon Sinek.

Transparency of the SLT roles within each college helps them take leadership roles with confidence to enhance culture. Staff and students know who leads what to strengthen the school so the SLT are seen as key leaders in the school. The clearer this is in the school the more noticeable school best practice.

While I did not discover examples of 'shadow SLT' members, where aspirational staff are mentored in the role to be able to take over the leadership responsibilities of a key person if they left, it was discussed as an option. The limitations were financial rather than ideological.

My last two findings as to what leads to the maintenance of good practice and the success of the college is the gathering of **voice** of the students and community. This gathering of voice also seemed to pair up with operational **review** or Quality Assurance Systems (QAS) at a student level and staff level.

Student leadership was the key example of **voice** but it was displayed in varying degrees with noticeable programmes being introduced or in place. Effective models I saw in action which the students really appreciated were those where they had power and could contribute to the decisions that reinforced values, vision and culture. In short their voice was valued and mattered.

Schools included students on interview panels for every member of staff, asking questions around the vision and values of the school. Students were either members of the interview panel or on a prescreen student interview panel which the Principal would consult prior to appointment of anyone to the school.

Regular student council meetings were held with the Principal/SLT to discuss positive aspects about the college and aspects they might want to see improved. These meetings were carried out as lunch with the Principal, morning tea with the Principal. Students saw value in their voice. These were seen as powerful examples of partnership with prefects and student council. Schools also gave recognition of students' support of the relevant school values by celebrating, with rewards such as students of the week, these being promoted around the school.

This resulted in a culture where staff and students made promotion of the values of the school paramount in their minds on a continual basis.

Another school had 'coffee with the Principal' for parents opportunities on a regular basis. This gave the community a chance to discuss issues of concern/praise in a familiar unthreatening atmosphere with the outcome of also building relationships.

Systems of **Review** coincided with student/community **voice**. Schools using regular data from assessments or progress checks had evidence on which the leaders could act. All the more so where this included the voice of students and parents. Again, these progress checks and interventions were supported by and encouraged a positive recognition culture within schools. This valued the work of staff, students and whanau.

## **I. IMPLICATIONS:**

For Waitakere College complacency is not our friend. To rely on our systems that created a stable growing academic platform was fine. But with changes of legacy staff within the College we have had to ensure that more is in place so that the review systems are maintained and rigorous.

To see in my visits that the importance of promoting vision values and goals was paramount in maintaining the success of school culture was very affirming. Again it is the basis of Simon Sinek's "Why we do what we do". It is important that staff and students believe we can make a difference for them, the school and our community.

We have a great value system around our Waitakere Way – based on the tenets of Respect, Caring and Learning. As a college we are developing the strength of clearly defining what these tenets look like. The findings here confirm that, with the SLT as a base, extra energy is needed by all leaders in the College to promote our tenets of the Waitakere Way and our school vision statement.

Areas we will work on or we will undertake are:

- Our vision is grandiose.

It is good and aspirational but needs to be simplified with the voice of student, staff and community to inform why we do what we do. In short we have to re-engage the Vision Values Goals of the school among our school community to grow ownership of the College.

- The importance of supporting the culture of the college by the growth of our front line – our teachers - to be better leaders themselves, and to grow each other as professionals using research based models.
- Building ownership and growth of our values/tenets of our Waitakere Way – respect, caring, learning by a co-ordinated programme of rewards and provision of support for behaviours that reflect them.
- The visible presence of the school leaders leading school culture (Vision Values and Goals) is key to nurturing culture and sustainability. Ensuring there is a leadership structure in our school that is transparent, effective and has people with longevity in the roles (institutional knowledge) that supports our culture will be a priority for me.
- Our QAS while being maintained, will seek opportunities to embed markers around tenets of the vision and values as well as those of Strategic Plan Goals. Seeking the opportunities to value student voice in this cycle of review will also occur.
- Using good data for cyclical interventions in academic progress based on our good practices of Restorative Behaviours will only enhance educational outcomes. We will modify and experiment with some of the models I have seen to compliment what we already do well in this area. It can be enhanced.
- Embedding the importance of the vision and values into appointments and screening processes, on my return in 2017. All interviews/appointments immediately had emphasis questions on the Vision Values Goals of the school (Assistant Principal appointments x 2, HOD x 2, and subject teachers x 14, prior to the end of 2017). This was the result of this sabbatical with the obvious desire to make explicit and enhance the expectations attached to new appointments.
- Developing opportunities to enhance community and student voice is a focus for this year 2018. Developing a plan for this will be worked through with students and I look forward to 'coffee with the Principal' which I will put in place in T2 and T3 2018.

## **J. BENEFITS and CONCLUSION:**

As outlined in the Findings and Implications I will be putting in place many aspects of my findings that I feel will make a positive difference. Some will be dramatic eg working with the school and community to confirm a new Vision and Vision Statement for the school. Having a student panel to interview applicants for school positions.

Some will be subtle but important. A more explicit presence of the values of the school – what they are and what actions support them. So staff, SLT members, students can take stronger ownership of them to enhance the culture of the school.

Our Review Systems (QAS), including the interview appointment process, will ensure opportunities to take on student (and community) voice. This will reward students and staff for promoting the Vision Values and Goals of the college and will support succession planning in key areas of the school.

The focus will be to retain good features of school culture, those which promote achievement and success, and better them. Further to this, we must be prepared, ready to cope with change – key staff moving on – by having shadow roles in place, which value the important people and their role so if the person leaves there is someone to pick up that role with a strong skill-set all ready. Culture is not lost.

In summary, schools must have a good owned Vision Statement or philosophy. They must support this vision with good values to build a strong culture and then use this base to justify why they have set their strategic goals.

## **K. REFERENCES:**

Simon Sinek – TED Talk  
Start With the Why (Sept 2009)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPYeCitXpxw>

**APPENDIX A: Questionnaire**



**School** \_\_\_\_\_ **Principal** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

My focus is on the sustainability of the culture, operations, leadership and student voice (ownership) within your school.

I am looking at how you and your organisation build in sustainability within your College and how you maintain the four areas mentioned above. So my questions are just for discussion opportunities around my focus:

1) What are the Vision, Values and Goals of your College	
2) How is your Senior Leadership Team structured in the College?	
3) Have you covered sustainability in your leadership roles if someone were to depart suddenly? How?	
4) How do you delegate roles with the Senior Leadership Team to cover Culture, Operations, Leadership and Student voice?	
5) What systems do you have in place school-wide to enhance your Vision, Values and Goals? (VVG)	
6) What is the role of students in supporting the VVG?	

Thanks again in advance for your assistance.

MARK P SHANAHAN

Principal of Waitakere College, Auckland,  
NEW ZEALAND

[mark@waitakerecollege.school.nz](mailto:mark@waitakerecollege.school.nz)