

Primary Principals Sabbatical Report 2017

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Five Forks School

Term 2 2017

Investigating: 'How Best to Retire' from a long-term Teaching Principal position with the least disruption to the children, the school and the school community.

Through this consider - the children currently in the school educationally and emotionally, the expectations of the pre-school parent group, the hopes for the sustainability of the school for the community, the need for the BOT to select a new principal and the chance to take the school forwards successfully for my successor.

Background: I will have taught in the school for a month short of 25 years come April 2018, with 20 of them as the Principal. There have been two other teaching Principals in that time and three teachers so there has not been big staff turnover. The school community have little experience of change.

Five Forks School is a rural; two- teacher full primary school situated 23 kilometres west of Oamaru, North Otago. The School, the Church [currently the venue for an active playgroup] and the Hall is situated at the confluence of five roads hence the name. There is no village or housing there, so all of the children live within the farming community and come to school by MOE funded bus route or our school van.

The roll for 2017 began with 36 children and is now 42 [average numbers for the last 15 years]. There are 25 children in the Y4-8 senior room and 17 in the Y0- 3 junior room. The junior room is my class. There are two permanent teachers, a principal release teacher [2 days per week], an administrative person [7 hours per week], and two part time [15 hours shared per week] teacher aides for this year and a cleaner.

The parent community is mainly involved in farming, or farming related work, with some parents working off farm in nearby Oamaru. There is very low parental unemployment. Irrigation has, and increasingly will change the parent occupation as dairying is now a factor and sheep/beef farms are now employing staff. There has not been a dairy 'gypsy' effect this year [in the past there has been] - this is often dogged by little commitment to the school by these parents along with non- child friendly parent working hours and there have only been limited numbers of ESL children [these children have amazing working capabilities and academic achievement].

Half of our families are second- generation farmers and so the 'ownership' of the school is well established, and because of this, the pride in maintaining a school in the district is strong. Oddly, there are very few grandparents or senior community leaders living in the area.

The school buildings, upgraded in 2003, are comfortable and warm but not ILE status –development is continuing. The playground is well set out and has great play features, a covered heated swimming pool, tennis courts and we are able to use the Hall. Contractors are employed to keep the lawns, working bees manage the rest.

The challenges for running the school are cost/availability of services/resource people due to distance and the small size and irregularity of our needs. We have poor, at times no cell-phone reception but we do have ultra-fast broadband. Challenges I see now for staff, the children and their parents are the change in parental expectations along with the families becoming time poor, the advent of social media and a shift in the perception of personal/parental/family responsibility –no different from other school communities.

Encouraged by an appraiser to apply for this sabbatical opportunity, coupled with my opinion [increasing with age!] that young families relate well to young teachers, setting my time to retire became a reality. In our North Otago area there had been several recent changes of school leaders so the decision to find out what helped make some very successful principal transitions, and some very unsuccessful, became possible.

The notification of the sabbatical to the school community brought about some uncertainty I had not anticipated, reflecting the importance of "least disruption".

For this survey I questioned

- Recently retired principals
- Current principals who had taken over 8 local schools
- Our parent community
- The Y4-8 children in the school
- MOE staff responsible for our school
- BOT member of another school
- Facilitator of company responsible for Principal Induction
- Principal nearing own retirement

The surveys of the new principals, our parent community and the children was to enable me to forward helpful information to the school BOT to use, or not, in their process to appoint a new principal. The surveys of the retired principals had some parts valuable for the BOT but mainly I sought advice for me. I hope other rural school principals find points to think about as they progress through their own situations. One surprising outcome was how many people, not in the teaching profession but approaching retirement, were interested because transitions between differing employments have similarities. Another, perhaps not surprising but obvious, is the fact that younger people do not have the hesitations in transitioning as experienced by those who are older so the findings will have a different focus for them.

Questions and collated answers for the new principals. [Ages 35- 45, even gender balance]

1. Any prior responsibility in previous jobs?

All had – management units, Acting Principal, DP/AP in larger schools or experience of some/all of these. All were first time principals.

2. Source of advice gained about new community before acceptance of the new position.

- Previous principal
- another local teacher

- none
- after it was advertised asked friends/colleagues
- lived nearby
- actually went to a local community venue [pub]

Quote -Knew you would not please everyone who had thoughts as to qualities required for the new Principal's job.

3. Advice on staff issues/idiosyncrasies prior or at the beginning of appointment?

- Previous principal had revealed negative staff issue on appointment
- none

4. Administration staff :

- Mainly were the greatest assistance although all but 2 changed after 6 months
- Necessary to have trust in them, they need to know how and what to share.

5. Worries for new principals

- Two schools had recent statutory managers so concerns were for the longevity of the school.
- Money –the budget, Novopay, debt being carried, auditor expectations
- What you don't know about –the newness of the responsibility
- The community accepting change from previous long-time principal
- Charter and AOV responsibilities
- Regulations and knowing about them in time
- Time – to teach a multi-level class as well as carry out the Principal's job
- BOT meeting format/reporting to BOT/Policies for those who had not been staff reps

6. Timing of new appointment

- Choice would have been at the beginning of Term 2 or Term 3

Because:- everything in place, didn't have to do anything straight away, time to think and see how things could be changed, can stick with programme until awareness of locality and possibility of change, all employment contracts set up

- One experienced new principal would have preferred Term 1 -able to put on stamp on Charter and targets but had to accept budget already set, good for feeling of control from start of year.

7. Were you headhunted?

- Most- no –saw advertisement
- Yes –two advised job was to be vacant- by previous principal, by parents.

8. Most effective source of support now they were Principals

- Other local principals in North Otago in like small rural schools
- Waitaki Rural Schools Network [WRSN] – active local rural principal group.
- North Otago Primary Principals Association –including rural colleagues
- Principal of their previous school

- e. First -Time Principals Mentor- nice people but few similarities, effectiveness aligned with personalities, some did not visit the school so it was felt there was little connection , some away from small rural school jobs too long –affected realisation of need. Others did feel the contact was valuable.
- f. First –Time Principals –two conference attendances would have been valuable as one would be intro to job, and next one later as then new principals would know what they wanted to find out.

9. What contact with retiring Principal?

- Retiring principals had offered help but more than one appointee thought the person had retired so perhaps it was better not to bother them.
- Some had returned to relieve but most stayed away for more than a term at first
- Some had had nothing to do with the school other than the offer of ongoing help.
- Some had nothing to do with the school –no knowledge exchange or help given

10. Helpfulness from retiring Principals:

- Availability –kept phone contact/email offer going
- Arranged for appointee to be in for a week before end of term shadowing retiring Principal [own BOT paid]. Some days in office and classroom.
- Although it was an in-school promotion great support shown in school and then on-going contact from Principal who went on to another job.
- One retiring Principal shifted her office to another part of school in holidays so worked alongside appointee for a week in holidays –was great for information exchange before term started
- Encouraged appointee to attend at least 2 BOT meetings prior to start
- Got records/templates all onto computer along with paper copy in folders
- Cupboards cleaned out!
- Policies/ procedures well set up. Procedures important
- Playground tidy
- Encouraged/facilitated a good relationship with BOT chair

11. Advice for BOT in appointing a new principal:

- Don't appoint a person on one strength or specific attribute
- Keep everything **confidential to appointment committee**- appoint one person to set up and manage application packs. Do not include previous principal but consider existing teaching staff, as they will be working with the new person. When decision is unanimous, inform rest of BOT in committee.
- Do not accept power-point presentations be prepared to face to face. Allow for travel costs/skype for short listed candidates.
- Have an outside advisor on the appointment committee – consider a local educationalist.
- Do rigorous referee checks –talk to/ question the referees carefully to form questions the BOT need to ask of the applicant. Hear what is not being said! Ask –Why would this applicant be good for our children? Staff? Parents? Community? Five Forks School?
- If no one is suitable, or committee is not unanimous in selection, re advertise and do it again.
- Timeline: Term 4 2017 - set up selection committee
prepare application pack and advertise the position

- January 2018 - form short list
 - Early Feb 2018 - make appointment decision or
 - Re advertise [allow appointee 2 months to resign]
- [Contact MOE re relieving Principal]

Quote: Look after them well –they are likely to be a first time principal so BOT communication needs to be supportive. Monitor the hours spent on the job to ensure there is work/life balance.

Attributes in a Principal important to children Y4-8 currently at Five Forks School:

- kindness/friendliness
- active/fit/healthy
- helpful, good teacher/push you to your potential
- sense of humour
- plays with kids

Attributes important to parents both current and prospective:

- experienced, successful classroom teacher
- good people skills –communication, organised, displays leadership with a sense humour
- good curriculum knowledge with awareness of changes [digital curriculum], multi- level experience
- forward thinking, vibrant with the ability to make positive connections to the children
- rural understanding

My experiences during the sabbatical to note:

- Relieving staff with different routines- adapting to change difficult for some, others relished the opportunity
- Unfortunate timing of release of unfavourable ERO report –not confidently dealt with so pressure on Staff and BOT
- Wonderful welcoming experience being in interviewees schools
- Chance to re- establish connections with retired colleagues over nice lunches
- Relaxed starts to the day, and a great week offshore on holiday!
- Participated in PD with Principal colleagues with no need to organise a reliever or keep contact with school
- Warm welcome back to my class and school
- An awareness of things that need to happen before I do retire to make it as good as I can for the children, the staff, the BOT and the new appointee.
- My decision made and school community advised of end of term 1 2018 retirement.

I have really appreciated the 10 weeks paid time thanks to the sabbatical opportunities offered to Principals. The time to do the investigations, talk with people and read current information about

programmes assisting aspiring leaders and to have time to relax and research. Some programmes are no longer operating-First- Time Principal Conferences are now available only once to young leaders as a funded development, the Ministry has passed the responsibility to mentor new leaders to outside providers. Principals' needs are learning in the now, and those in rural settings have travel, the availability of relieving staff, the need to be with our children in the class while they are learning, the individuality and special character of our schools to consider. More personalised learning needs to be happening so the first time Principal of a rural school, of any school, can develop with least disruption, a good realisation of the realities of the position and more reassurance in the timing and making of good decisions for their school and its children. Articles in magazines such as Education Review, NZ Principal and Principals Today are on the tables in every staffroom for all to read, consider and gain ideas. Mentoring and opportunities for the development for new principals often feature. On- line information is increasingly available, and that often offers examples of how it might be and how others are managing their progression up the career pathway of the profession.

The young leaders I had contact with appreciated the efforts made by recognised providers, but by far the best, useful, immediate advice comes from those around them doing a similar job –their colleagues. Good relationships within the teaching arena has established an outstanding support system to these Principals in our district and I believe that to be a powerful, sustainable system of developing people we admire leading the children and staff in our schools. To think experienced, sharing practitioners are supporting the new leaders of our schools is reassuring both for those of us who have gone before and for those parents of the children coming through the education system.

I hope my BOT are highly successful in attracting and selecting the right person to take our small school forward and I would be pleased if this study made a little difference to their journey. I thank them for releasing me for the 10 weeks. The opportunity to research would not have been possible without the participation of the staff who had their working lives altered for those 10 weeks so my gratitude goes to them too, and the children –the welcome back was good but the time away enabled me to know I will be happy doing something else, or nothing!

*Progress is impossible without change,
and those who cannot change their minds
cannot change anything.*

George Bernard Shaw