

**‘The hare and the  
tortoise and the  
ebbing tide’**

***Principal Sabbatical Report  
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## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Teach NZ for the sabbatical opportunity. This time has been very valuable, as it has provided me an opportunity to step back and reflect on my professional practice and wider issues in education in addition to the specific inquiry detailed below.

I would like to thank the Limehills School Board of Trustees for agreeing to provide me with leave to undertake the sabbatical and to my two Deputy Principals, who both stepped up to the Acting Principal role.

Finally, to the staff and students at Limehills School and Central Southland College, whose feedback forms the basis of this study, I am eternally grateful. Your responses were a timely reminder of why I chose to teach.

## **Executive summary**

- Limehills ex-students feel that they were well or very well prepared for high school and their high school teachers agreed.
- Limehills School should continue to design a curriculum based on personalized learning pathways, which focus on strengthening and developing Key Competencies and provide leadership opportunities for students
- Limehills School should continue its reluctant minimal compliance approach to National Standards. Joining a Community of Learning should be treated with caution, if it is likely to further entrench policies which potentially have a negative impact on learning outcomes
- Limehills School will conduct Science and Health curriculum reviews in 2018
- Further research is required to assess the validity of National Standards and their potential to negatively impact on student achievement
- Primary schooling should rediscover its erstwhile emphasis on 'whole child' development.
- Reading, Writing and Maths achievement data are only the *symptoms* of an ailing system. Our current obsession with measuring those symptoms is doing nothing to address the underlying *causes* of them and may even be exacerbating the problem.

Paradigm shifts in political and educational thinking are required if we are to genuinely address the underlying causes of academic underachievement.

## **Rationale and background information**

The introduction of National Standards prompted professional discussions about curriculum design across NZ. For some educators, the simplified language of teacher judgments and the attempt to move towards greater consistency of assessment and reporting nationally were welcomed. Others disputed the value of labeling students as under achieving and looked at standardization as a pathway to mediocrity for a school system that was widely regarded as high performing.<sup>1</sup>

A critique of the standards themselves is beyond the scope of this study as is the relative merits of the opposing views presented above. However, National Standards as a concept are central to the questions posed by this study. Are Limehills students disadvantaged by our reluctant minimal compliance?

It is our belief that our curriculum, and therefore our students, would be constrained by National Standards. We believe students' needs, interests and abilities should be the starting point for planning their learning. We are concerned that if a standard were to become the starting point for planning learning programmes, the students themselves would likely become increasingly passive recipients of a homogeneous curriculum done unto them. This would appear to contradict the revised New Zealand Curriculum's stated vision of 'confident, connected, actively involved lifelong learners.'

In recent years, Limehills School has been able to celebrate many successes. Among these were being Finalists in the Prime Minister's Excellence in Education Awards<sup>2</sup> and an Outstanding ERO review<sup>3</sup>. Our NEMP and NZCER Performance And Achievement data are well above the national mean and continuing to improve and our Maori learners achieve at the same levels or better than their non-Maori peers in Reading, Writing and Maths.

And yet our overall National Standards data was, curiously, about the same or more usually below other schools.<sup>4</sup>

Our ex-students were continuing to achieve outstanding results in a range of endeavors. We took these (albeit) anecdotal successes as a mandate to

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/education/6091397/NZ-near-top-in-OECD-education-figures>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.stuff.co.nz/southland-times/news/9956666/Limehills-simply-the-best>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ero.govt.nz/review-reports/limehills-school-09-09-2013/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/find-school/school/national/reading?school=3975&district=73&region=15>

further personalise our curriculum design. We looked more and more at the needs, interests and abilities of each student and worked to design engaging and relevant learning programmes that would challenge and inspire them. Opportunities for students to manage their own learning and take on leadership roles in areas of personal strength were emphasized in our Enviroschool and Student Volunteer Army programmes and through personal inquiries that would lead to Science Fair, or Social Science Fair entries.

We focused on strengthening and developing students' Key Competencies and ignored the implications of our National Standards data. School-wide Achievement Targets were set in relation to the wider curriculum needs of our school – eg spelling and SOLO taxonomy, for which there were no National Standard. Up-skilling all our teachers in these aspects of their professional practice, which were (collectively) requiring improvement, has produced significant learning gains for our students and befits our 'rising tide lifts all boats' approach to raising student achievement.

Curriculum documents were referred to only for curriculum coverage 'tracking' (*not* planning) and we took great comfort from the language in our revised NZ Curriculum document which crucially states "select" from a range of Achievement Objectives. We therefore paid less and less heed to curriculum documents and instead focused on the unique learners within our school.

The findings I present below suggest that such an approach has been highly effective in preparing students for the demands of high school. We were prepared to sacrifice an occasional stanine for our learners in order to provide deeper and more meaningful primary school learning experiences, safe in the knowledge that this 'groundwork' would pay dividends in later years.

We resisted the urge to 'accelerate' students' progress in relation to National Standards as schools are currently encouraged to do and focused instead on strengthening and developing Key Competencies. We looked particularly at the attitudinal aspects of learning - positive 'can do' attitude, sense of fun, creativity and problem solving and prioritized these things over specific content knowledge as described in the curriculum. We believed that, over time, this approach would better set students up for later academic successes.

The sabbatical study allowed me the opportunity to collect some data that would support or challenge our intuitively held beliefs about the strengths and weaknesses of our curriculum design.

What began as an investigation into students' transitions to secondary schooling became an inquiry into the successes and shortcomings of our curriculum design at Limehills School.

My guiding questions evolved:

1 - Did our unconventional approach to curriculum design set students up for success at high school as well as we believed it did?

2 - Were some students missing specific curriculum content? Did it matter?

3 - How were our students performing in High School and beyond, relative to students from other Primary Schools and did this achievement pattern correspond to the Public Achievement Information (National Standards data) from those other schools?

What unfolded was the story of the hare and the tortoise and an ebbing tide.

## Methodology

I conducted many informal discussions with students and teachers at both Primary and Secondary level. Through these conversations, I came to understand that online surveys would be the best way to capture the relevant data.

Two online surveys were prepared. One for ex-Limehills students and one for their current teachers at Central Southland College<sup>5</sup>. The questions were essentially the same, just reworded to better suit the context of the respondents.

The actual survey questions are presented in the next section with the response data. They sought to establish the following:

- How well did our ex-students feel that they were prepared for high school and did this data correlate with their teachers' responses to the same question.
- How well did our ex-students feel that they were prepared for high school, *relative to students from other primary schools* and did this data correlate with their teachers' responses to the same question.
- Which aspects of the Limehills curriculum did students acknowledge as valuable preparation for high school and did this data correlate with the beliefs held by teachers at Limehills.
- Did students feel they had any gaps in terms of content knowledge for specific High School subjects and did this data correlate with their teachers' responses to the same question.
- What could we do to better prepare Limehills students for success at High School.

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<sup>5</sup> The majority of our students attend this high school. Limehills is one of 13 'feeder' primary schools for CSC.



## **Findings**

As with all surveys of this type, the data presented here must be treated with caution. I do not consider the summary data of students' and teachers' responses to each question as infallible. However, they are presented here because they do at least paint a picture that helps to answer the questions outlined above.

More valid than the quantitative data is the qualitative comment feedback, which is also presented below<sup>6</sup>.

Taken together, the survey data and the comments make compelling reading. They are a very positive endorsement of our school's decision to design a curriculum that focused on Key Competencies, but they also identify some next steps, which we will endeavor to implement.

### **Q1: How well prepared were you for success at high school?**

	<b><u>Students:</u></b>	<b><u>CSC teachers:</u></b>
Very well prepared	28%	30%
Well prepared	56%	50%
Adequately prepared	17%	20%
Not adequately prepared	0%	0%

There is a striking correlation between the data sets here. Students generally felt well or very well prepared for the demands of high school and their teachers agreed. Comments from students included:

*We practised good work habits, worked to deadlines and also were given homework.*

*We were well prepared with our learning ability, but, what really prepared us was learning to be independent and using initiative on a daily basis, this really helps in high school life*

*I was very well prepared in terms with my learning. I went into CSC and I was in top classes and felt like I had gained really good learning techniques.*

### **Q2: Did you feel better or less well prepared than friends from other primary schools?**

	<b><u>Students:</u></b>	<b><u>CSC teachers:</u></b>
Better prepared	39%	40%
About the same	61%	60%
Less well prepared	0%	0%

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<sup>6</sup> Some comments were edited for clarity.

Again, there is a striking correlation here and a statistically significant number of teachers and students felt that Limehills students were better prepared for high school than their peers from other primary schools. 0% of teachers and students felt that they were generally less well prepared than their peers from other primary schools.

#### Students commented:

*I felt that the Limehills kids were much more mature and were better at talking to adults and at social situations.*

*I think SVA, Enviro Schools and Key Competencies have helped us a lot.*

#### Teachers commented:

*Better able to organise themselves in general. Math skills tend to be higher plus better coverage of math curriculum*

*I have noticed a really strong group coming through from Limehills. They are great with interacting with their peers, they get involved and try everything and they are able to build respectful, positive relationships with teachers,*

*They are a 'natural fit' for CSC: Co-ed, rural based, competitive, sporty, keen to give things a go.*

*I feel a bit bad about this question as some other schools also prepare their students well.*

*In 12 years at CSC I have noticed Limehills students have a broader interest base, are more likely to "have a go" and often take on leadership/responsibility opportunities right from Year 9.*

*Limehills kids are generally confident and show good leadership skills.*

### **Q3: What can Limehills do to ensure our Y8s are better prepared for success at CSC?**

#### Kids Commented:

*Nothing*

*Writing essays*

*Maybe do a bit more science with all the senior students and also do more wood work projects*

*Talk about CSC more in depth and how it works and what expectations they have with the behaviour and uniforms.*

*Know more about what CSC is like, but I think I was well prepared in terms of my learning abilities.*

*I think Limehills has a fantastic year 8 programme and other than the small things I have mentioned above, there is nothing else that I think is needed.*

*Scientific and graphics calculators.*

*Telling them about how high school is run and the timetables.*

*Do more stuff with other schools to get more interaction, so you know more people than just at your own school*

*More learning about drugs and alcohol and bullying because you meet different people*

### **Teachers commented:**

*Ensure lower achieving students have received additional support and pass this info on to Dean incl any suggested RTLB referrals.*

*Continue to encourage thinking skills to extend able students and inform Dean of potential gifted students so we can target early.*

*I think generally your students are very well prepared so you must be doing things right.*

*Continue to create that ability to be independent and confident. Confident in their own abilities but also confident to ask questions of their teachers.*

*Liaise with Year 9 teachers/Deans to ensure our curriculum level assessment is consistent.*

*They are as well prepared as they need to be for high school.*

*Keep doing what you're doing.*

### **Q4: Rank these in order of importance for you to achieve success in high school:**

Students' ranking:

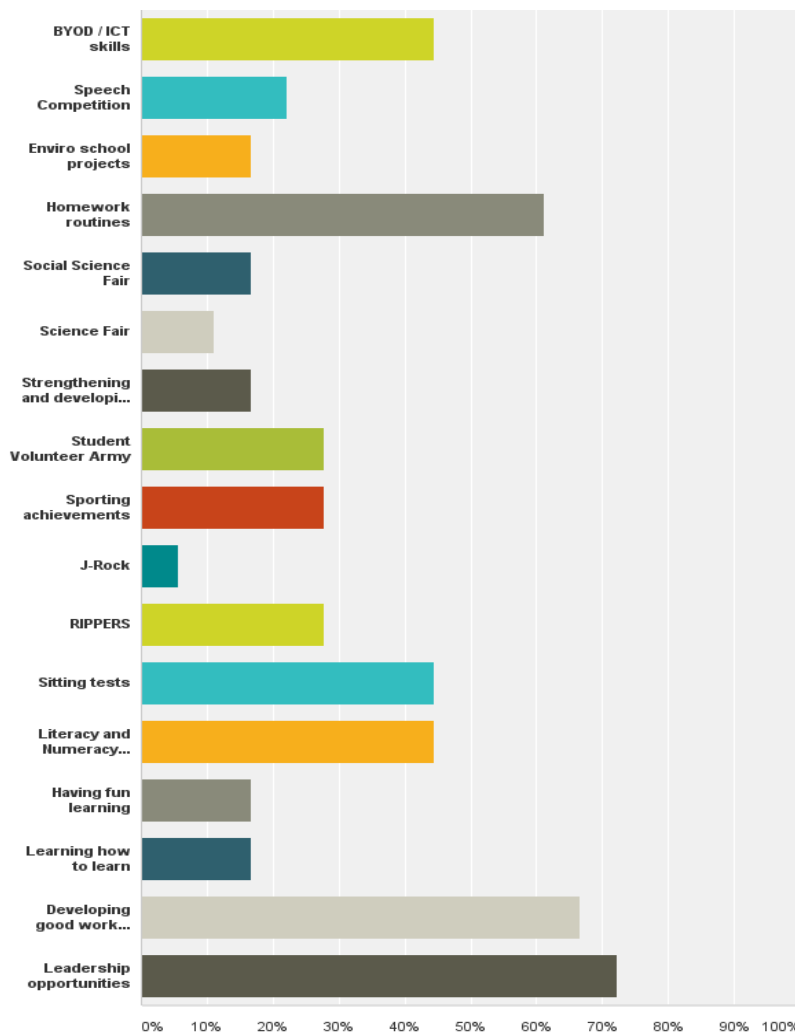
1. Positive attitude / desire to succeed
2. Ability to think critically
3. Diligence / Work habits
4. Ability to think creatively
5. Specific Content Knowledge relevant to a subject

Teachers' ranking:

1. Positive attitude / desire to succeed
2. Diligence / Work habits
3. Ability to think critically
4. Specific Content Knowledge relevant to a subject
5. Ability to think creatively

Both students and teachers ranked specific content knowledge below attitudinal and competency related factors. Interestingly, the high school teachers ranked 'ability to think creatively' as least important – it was much more highly regarded by their primary teaching colleagues, which probably reflects the differing approaches to learning and classroom contexts of primary and secondary education.

**Q5: Which of these was most valuable as preparation for high school (select up to 5)**



There is some interesting data here also. Homework features strongly as does BYOD / ICT skills, sitting tests and Literacy and Numeracy – all to be expected. However, all these were secondary to ‘developing good work habits’ and ‘leadership opportunities.’ The students regarded these two ‘attitudinal’ factors above all others as most valuable. These were also the things we had been looking to maximize in our recent curriculum developments.

**Q6: Was there any specific content knowledge relevant to a particular subject that you felt you were lacking after arriving at CSC?**

*No*

*Maths*

*NZ history and Geography*

*Science because we don't do much of it at Limehills and wood work*

*None*

*Just basic things like spelling that I should have taken more responsibility learning.*

*Basic Maths e.g. being quick at simple addition, subtraction, multiplication, division*

*I felt like I was behind in English with essays and speeches. I felt like I was also behind in social studies and science.*

*I struggled with some of the math part but i caught up quickly. Also the ability to listen and take notes that apply to my work.*

*No not really.*

*Nothing*

*No*

*Maybe science? Because we were not learning this level of science at primary school.*

*Essays and deadlines but one thing I'm happy I got taught was trigonometry because it is a very hard topic and gives us more of a head start.*

*Maybe a little bit more science when I was in Limehills i'm not really sure about now.*

*Overall I feel Limehills set me up amazingly. I'm so glad to have spent my primary school years at Limehills.*

*Thanks for being awesome limehills*

**CSC teachers were also asked: Is there any specific content knowledge relevant to your subject that Limehills students consistently lack that you would like us to address?**

*Generally seem to have covered math curriculum well - an area where gaps are obvious with maths is in dealing with integers, but Limehills does this well.*

*Not that I am aware*

*You do an absolutely amazing job with the ELL students. Frankly its all about skills not specific content knowledge.*

*No - I teach Social Studies and Limehills kids come well-versed and, more importantly, curious.*

*No*

*Basic maths - numeracy and calculator skills are always helpful*

## **Implications**

As previously stated, I am reluctant to put too much emphasis on any single piece of data presented above. However the following statements are a synopsis of the collective feedback received.

The statements relate to the initial guiding questions as described above.

- Our ex-students feel that they were well or very well prepared for high school and their high school teachers agreed.
- Our ex-students feel that they were better prepared for high school than students from other primary schools and their high school teachers agreed.
- The Limehills curriculum should continue to prioritize strengthening and developing key competencies and provide leadership opportunities for students
- No major gaps in terms of content knowledge for specific High School subjects were identified.
- The following are worthy of further investigation as a result of the feedback received:
  1. Conduct Science and Health (drugs/alcohol) curriculum reviews in 2018.
  2. Discuss the use of scientific calculators with senior Maths teachers
  3. Discuss expanding the current open evening and transition visits with CSC. (Ex students currently return to Limehills, but this is more of a sales pitch from the college, who are effectively competing for students.) More time without teachers present might allow prospective students to get a more practical insight from the older students. This could include: managing timetables, uniform, behavior etc as well as facts around exposure to drug and alcohol use and bullying.

## Conclusions

The feedback presents us with some things to improve in the transition process from our school to the local high school and these will be addressed in the near future.

The evidence is also clear that Limehills School's unconventional approach to curriculum design is justified by the ongoing academic success of our students at high school and beyond.

Our students are clearly not disadvantaged by our reluctant minimal compliance with National Standards – if anything; they appear to be advantaged by it. We look forward to achievement data from more recent Limehills cohorts further evidencing this in the future.

This research calls into question the validity of National Standards as a tool for measuring progress and attainment as they potentially have a negative impact on student achievement.

It is also apparent that the concept of 'backwards mapping'<sup>7</sup> (on which the National Standards are based) is potentially flawed in an educational context. Ultimately, learning progressions are not uniform or lineal and students do not and will not ever progress at the same rates. Accordingly, increasing pressure on schools and students to meet arbitrary standards at a certain point in time is potentially counterproductive.

Furthermore, it is difficult to reconcile former Minister of Education Hekia Parata's observations of "small but incremental increases in Reading, Writing and Mathematics results" using National Standards<sup>8</sup>, with *declining* PISA scores<sup>9</sup> and contradictory NMSSA<sup>10</sup> scores.

It seems that as National Standards data intimates improving student attainment, other international and independent assessment tools suggest the

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<sup>7</sup> Backwards mapping is a term used to describe the process of setting a series of targets in order to meet a predetermined objective. The process starts with the end goal and works backwards from that point with a series of steps that will hopefully culminate with the end goal being achieved.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1&objectid=10889744](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10889744)

<sup>9</sup> Between 2012 and 2015, New Zealand students' scores in PISA assessments declined. The biggest drop was in maths, where the average score fell from 500 to 495 – according to <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/>

<sup>10</sup> The most recent NMSSA data has 41% of Year 8 students operating at curriculum level 4 or higher in Maths- [http://nmssa.otago.ac.nz/reports/Maths\\_Ed\\_Gazette\\_2015.pdf](http://nmssa.otago.ac.nz/reports/Maths_Ed_Gazette_2015.pdf)

At the same time, National Standards data suggested that 75% of Year 8 students were at or above the Maths National Standard (which effectively equals curriculum level 4) [http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/schooling/national-standards/National\\_Standards](http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/schooling/national-standards/National_Standards)



opposite – again suggesting that the use of National Standards as a reporting and assessment tool is not only flawed, but potentially having a negative effect on student achievement.

Given this evidence, I can't imagine any school would be making use of National Standards unless they were required to do so by the government of NZ. The subject has become highly politicized, but clearly more independent research is required around the conclusions presented here.

It seems that one effective primary – secondary transition strategy is to be wary of concepts like 'accelerated progress' in Reading Writing and Maths. Instead, primary schooling should rediscover its erstwhile emphasis on 'whole child' development.

This can be achieved by prioritizing strengthening and developing Key Competencies and providing leadership opportunities for students to ensure that they are actively self-directing their learning – not mere helpless 'victims' of it. The Limehills case study suggests that Reading, Writing and Maths data will improve as a result.

I can't help but recall the age-old story of the hare and the tortoise. Such a statement is not to argue against the need to raise student achievement. However, I would argue that the only sustainable and equitable strategy to achieve this lofty goal is to lift the quality of the professional practice of all teachers – a *rising* tide to lift *all* boats.

Ultimately, Reading, Writing and Maths achievement data are only *symptoms* of an ailing system. Our current obsession with measuring those symptoms is doing nothing to address the underlying causes of them and may even be exacerbating the problem.

Paradigm shifts in political and educational thinking are required if we are to genuinely address the underlying *causes* of academic underachievement.

How we do that will be the subject of another study.