

**A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION ON
“KAHUI AKO”
FROM A LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVE**



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The author would like to take this opportunity to thank the principals who contributed to this investigation and report. I certainly appreciated that they are extremely busy practitioners, not only leading their own schools, but also a Kahui Ako.

The six principals gave a full, frank and balanced assessment of their Kahui Ako. On this basis I have kept their names and the Kahui Ako confidential in order to facilitate the free flow of information and opinions.

The investigation involved a qualitative investigation of six principal leaders of Kahui Ako. It consisted of an 'in depth' one to one interview with each principal, sometimes two interviews centred on three open ended focus questions.

1. What is working well in your Kahui Ako ?
2. What is not working well?
3. What improvements would you like to Kahui Ako?

In addition to the above, the principals gave very useful feedback on their experience as leaders of their Kahui Ako. Although not directly related to the three questions above, I have summarised their feedback in diagrammatic form, as I believe it contains considerable wisdom and practical advice useful to the wider Kahui Ako communities.

Context

The Kahui Ako leaders had an average time in the position of 2.5 years. Four were from Auckland, one from Wellington and one from Palmerston North.

They were a mix of faith-based Kahui Ako and State schools. Two were primary school principals and four were secondary school principals.

The interview style was conversational with the author providing prompts and secondary questions to gain more insight. The author took detailed notes which formed the basis of this report.

Executive Summary

There was universal agreement that the fundamental principle underpinning Kahui Ako, namely that groups of local schools collaborating to share best practice and expertise for the benefit of all students in the rohe, is a good idea and has merit. The most significant benefit appeared to be the breaking down of the "silo culture" that existed in each school allowing for a better understanding and empathy of students' progress through the schooling system from early childhood to secondary school and the part each could contribute to ensure the student's success.

The leaders were also emphatic that the wealth of talent, expertise and experience within the Kahui Ako, particularly Across School and Within School teachers, had lifted the professional practice of teachers and educational outcomes for students.

The last major positive outcome was the benefit of "collaboration" from multiple perspectives, including sharing achievement data, joint professional development and problem solving.

All principals had varying degrees of frustration with the structure of Kahui Ako, including the industrial context. They believed this impeded the "potential" of the Kahui Ako ultimately limiting student outcomes.

In terms of what they would like improved, it included more flexibility in the leadership structure i.e. a 'Distributive Leadership' model of more than one principal or trusted "friend" of the Kahui Ako.

They suggested this be extended to the remuneration of those leading the Kahui Ako. The underlying principles of the Kahui Ako were discussed. On reflection most thought it needed to be more 'student oriented' rather than 'teacher focused' with respect to teacher appointments. This sentiment was best summed up by the comment that it should be decided on "the best person for the job" irrespective of what management position held or teaching load.

The concluding comment was that the formation and leadership of these Kahui Ako was far more difficult and complex than they anticipated. The principals believed that the gestation period for a high performing Kahui Ako was at least five years since it took that time to form relationships of high trust, appropriate structures, streamlining the collection and analysis of achievement data over time and to create a shared vision.

Despite the obstacles and challenges, all believed the Kahui Ako was making a significant and meaningful difference to student achievement and they wanted Kahui Ako to remain but with significant changes.

Purpose Of The Research

The views of the school sector have been equivocal on the success of the Kahui Ako and whether they should remain a part of the New Zealand educational landscape. On this basis I wanted to conduct a limited qualitative investigation to test those perceptions. The three key questions as outlined above were put to six Kahui Ako leaders. Their feedback provided useful insights into what they saw as clear progress and benefits, what is not working well and importantly what changes they would like to see to improve delivery.

I hope the research will be of benefit to a wider audience of Kahui Ako leaders, policy makers and those along the various stages of the Kahui Ako journey.

Research Methodology

The research method was relatively straight forward in that it involved identifying a small cross section of Kahui Ako leaders from a diverse range of Communities of Learning. In order to obtain high quality and in depth data and views I spent quality time with each leader one to one through an interview process. The three research questions were notified to them in advance so they had time to consider them before we met.

At the interview the method used was a Socratic approach with "open ended" and supplementary questions to probe deeper into their views and experience. Due to their busy schedule it was necessary to have a further follow up interviews with a number of them.

I am well satisfied that the research method achieved its objectives, yielding constructive information and opinion that would be useful to a wider audience with an interest in Kahui Ako.

Findings

What Has Worked Well

All principals believed that the most significant benefit of the Kahui Ako was a shared understanding of a student's journey through the schooling system from early childhood to secondary school. This shared understanding assisted principals and the wider educational community to understand the different pedagogical approaches, barriers in the transition points between early childhood primary and secondary school, and what is needed to be done to facilitate the child's progress.

Prerequisites For A Successful Kahui Ako

The principals believed that there were important prerequisites for a successful Kahui Ako which are set out below.

PRE REQUISITES FOR A SUCCESSFUL KAHUI AKO

Appointment of a leader with a passion for learning, mana, vision, competence, strong interpersonal and organizational skills



“Buy in” and Acceptance of the ‘Common Good’ from Principals / Boards of Trustees



Agreed set of values, including ethical conduct and conflict resolution



Protocols for meetings, communication, sharing data and goal setting

The majority of principals indicated that collaborative enquiry involving staff from all of their schools and focusing on a topic of common interest was of significant benefit. Further to this they also believed that the opportunity for teachers to collaborate together through combined professional development supported them in terms of being lifelong learners, problem solvers and gaining a wider perspective on the educational pathway of students within their Kahui Ako.

All principals spoke about a specific goal that their Kahui Ako had agreed on and the progress they had made towards achieving this. They were emphatic that these goals, such as raising the reading levels of Maori and Pacific students, cultural inclusiveness, literacy, numeracy and boys education were made possible only through the resources, professional development and collaboration of principals and staff within the Community of Learning. They were eager to show me spreadsheets of the achievement data and the improvements over time that the students have made under these various goals.

For smaller schools, a significant benefit was that a number of specialist teachers worked in isolation and found their roles somewhat lonely and poorly understood. The Kahui Ako gave these teachers an opportunity to collaborate with others in similar roles, including Senco's, literacy coordinators and those with specific responsibility for raising the achievement levels of Maori and Pacific students. As one principal put it, “they became a support group for each other and were able to share resources and strategies for success”.

Four principals indicated that because their schools had a stable staff, including those in management positions, but it provided younger teachers with considerable ability and ambition to advance their careers while they were waiting for a middle management position to arise. They stated that it also advanced the teacher's understanding of good pedagogy, curriculum design and delivery. It improved their management skills, data collection and analysis processes, working across a diverse range of other teachers, managing conflict and goal setting.

Four principals spoke about the benefits of having expert professional development brought in for the whole teaching staff of the Kahui Ako. It meant that all teachers got the same message at the same time providing motivation and facilitating changes and pedagogical practice a lot more quickly. They are also grateful of the opportunity to apply for funding as a Kahui Ako which was generally a smooth process, giving them autonomy over what expertise they needed within their community.

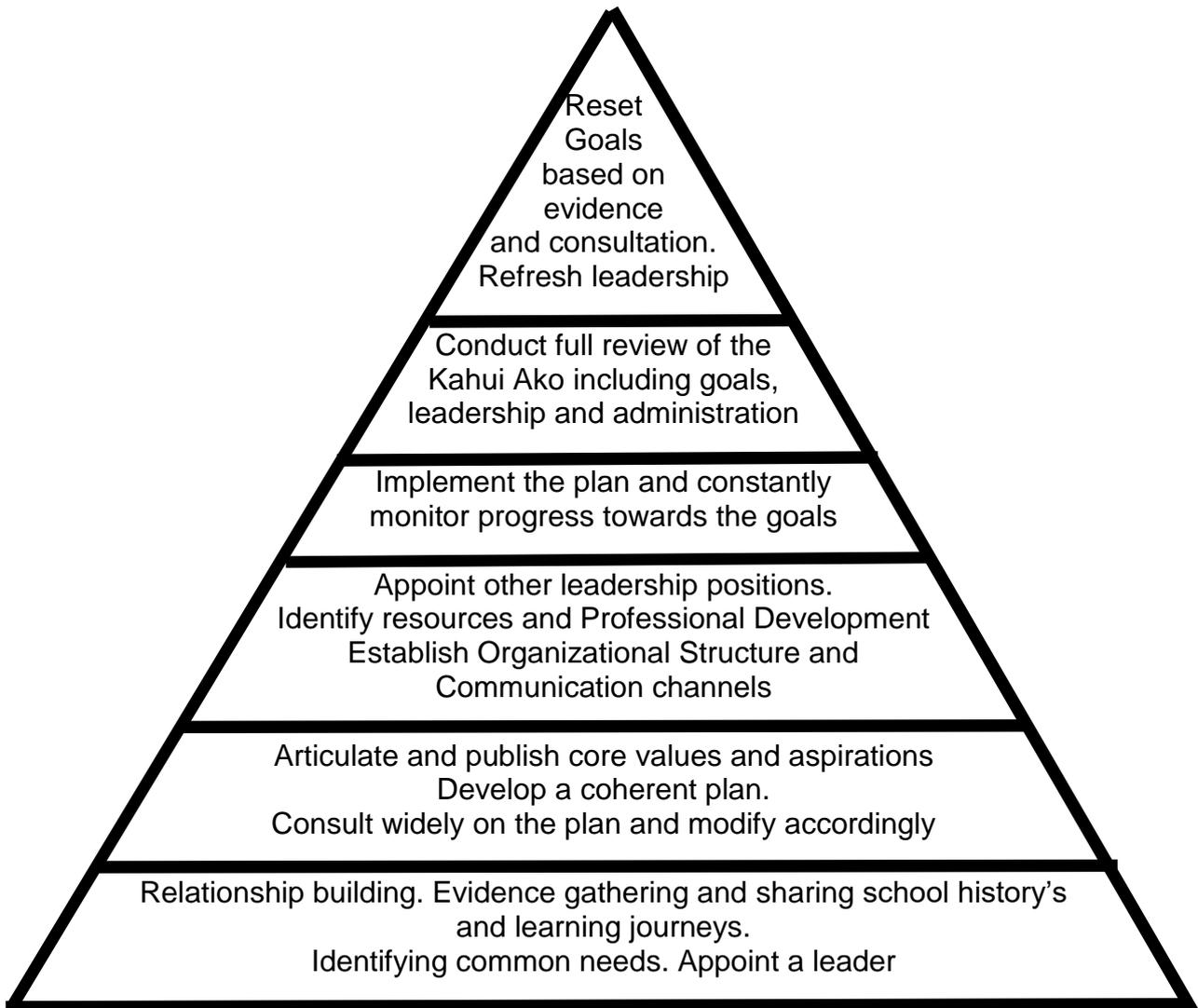
Five of the principals indicated that there was an advantage to the Kahui Ako outside the standard curriculum which they perceive to be of major benefit. This included combined kapa haka groups, homework clubs and senior students coaching and refereeing junior sports teams. It also led to three of the schools sharing resources such as school journals, posters and other learning materials.

Most of the principals spoke about the evolving benefit of working with other principals who gradually bought into the concept of the "common good". They all noted that it has taken some time to build trust and confidence and reduce the levels of competition since most did not have a history of strong collaboration with their surrounding schools. At the outset of the creation of the Kahui Ako some saw it as a "resource grab" or entered with the mind set of "what's in the best interests of my school?"

Overtime all the principal's noted a change in attitude with most coming to see 'all of the students' in the Kahui Ako as being the responsibility of 'all of the principals and teachers within it'. Having said this, it is still seen by the principals as a work in progress.

Establishment Process of Kahui Ako

All the principals had more than two years' experience leading their Kahui Ako and all were appointed as the Kahui Ako leader during the establishment phase. They shared their insights on what is needed to be put in place for the establishment of Kahui Ako and as it progressed.



What Is Not Working Well

Five of the principals indicated that what is not working well to various degrees is the Industrial structure surrounding the Kahui Ako. A major impediment seems to be the inability to appoint those that are best suited to the job irrespective of teaching load and management positions.

While the principals understand the premise of providing an alternative pathway for teachers, the shortage of applicants for "Within and Across School Positions", combined with these limitations, meant they often struggled to make suitable appointments. Their preference was the Kahui Ako to be opened up to greater flexibility in terms of staff appointments and that the premise should be high trust that principals will appoint the best person for the job. They noted that the best person for the job was often someone already in a middle management or even senior management role. They stated that these staff member have the requisite experience, qualifications and importantly Mana to do the job. Four of the principals indicated they had to devise methods to circumvent the rules which they felt they ought not have to do.

All Kahui Ako leaders wanted more flexibility in the structure, operation, and leadership of the model. This included abandoning a rigid adherence to the pipeline effect where they have to prove the flow-

on of students from primary schools to secondary schools. In some locations this was a major demographic challenge as students from primary schools went to a vast number of secondary schools in the wider region. Two of the high schools had up to 20 contributing primary schools.

Two Kahui Ako leaders suggested that the model would also work if they could collaborate with just secondary schools in the area. They noted that in many respects the goals, aspirations and pedagogy is very different from that of a primary school and that there was a lot to be gained by bringing together practitioners from a secondary school context including those with specialist knowledge such as science and technology.

The secondary school leaders indicated that the release time for within-school teachers was problematic in that releasing a teacher for two hours a week was difficult from a timetabling point of view and not particularly useful for the "within school teacher". It was also difficult to release the Across School Teachers because both taught in Science /Mathematics subjects where the principals did not have suitable teachers to backfill their roles within the school.

Four of the principals noted that they had ongoing difficulty convincing their Boards of Trustees that the Kahui Ako was good for their school. The Boards were very much focused on their own school and did not see any particular merit in releasing high performing staff to assist other schools in the area.

Five of the principals explained that they occupied their position of leadership through "goodwill" and the agreement of other principals. They had no designated "structural" authority and could only persuade, encourage and motivate other principals. They asserted that while this worked well most of the time, they indicated that there had been occasions when principals choose to disengage, refused advice and did not follow agreed protocols or actions. They could not call upon a position of authority as a default position to remedy these contexts and simply having to let it go.

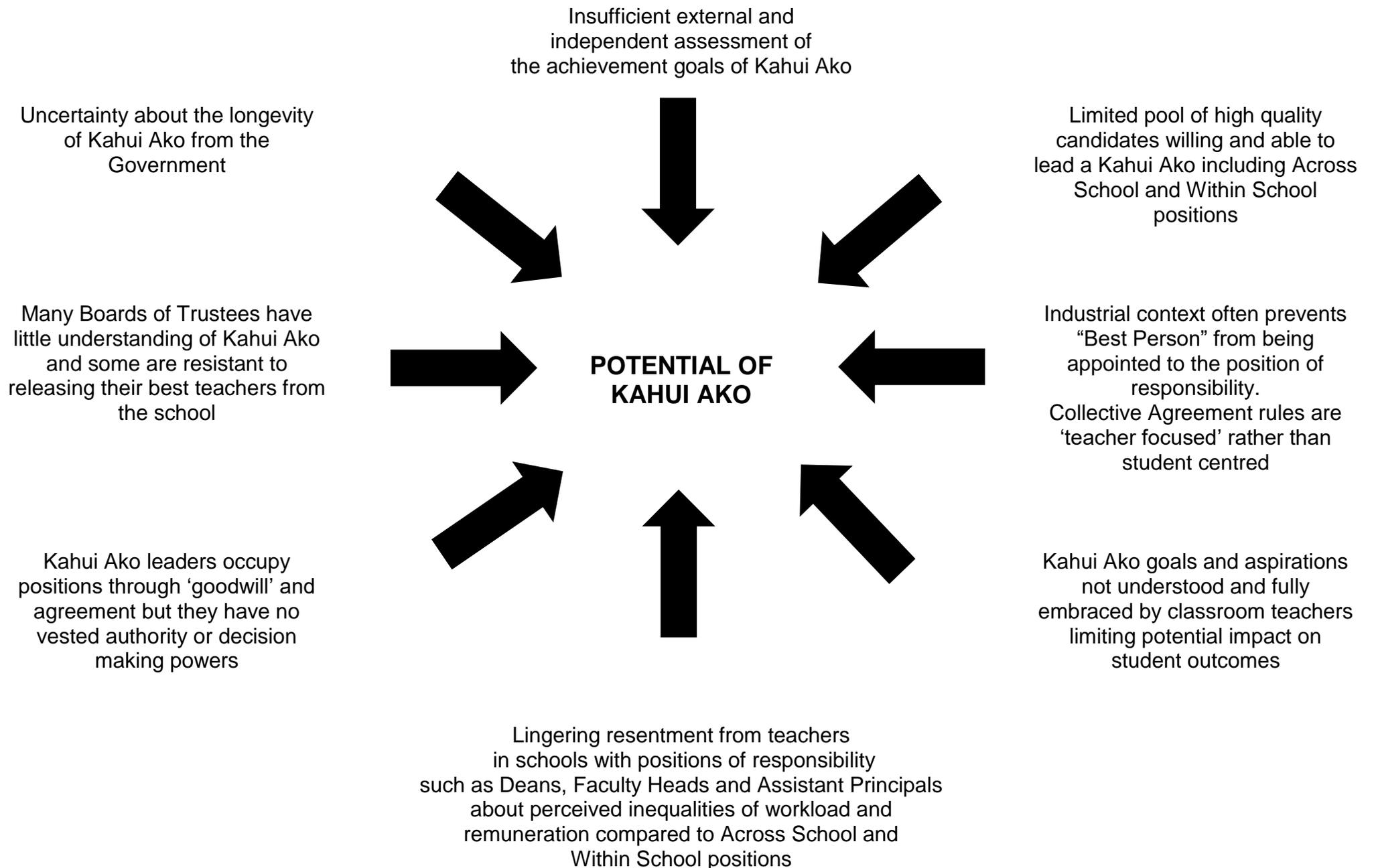
All of the principals indicated that they had some difficulty with the strict guidelines around the leadership of the Kahui Ako. Most found that the two days per week allocated to the role was inadequate. Their preference would have been to allow the Kahui Ako principals to decide at the outset what would be the most appropriate leadership model. While some were happy to be the sole leader they wanted the option to have a more "distributive leadership" model which would allow other principals to take on roles of responsibility and to be paid for them. Three principals also argued that the option of appointing someone outside as a 'critical friend' to lead the Kahui Ako should be an option as long as they had the appropriate experience, qualifications and confidence of the Kahui Ako leaders.

The principals were aware that there was some resentment from staff within their school's regarding the payments to Within School Teachers and Across School Teachers. This stemmed from the fact that teachers in positions of responsibility such as Deans, Faculty Heads and Team Leaders believed that there was a disparity in workload and payment in comparison to their roles within the school. The principals acknowledged these feelings existed within some of their staff but believed it was not justified. Their considered view was that both the Within School Teachers and Across School Teachers added significant value to the Kahui Ako, worked hard and that the remuneration they received was justified.

Limitations On The Potential of Kahui Ako

The principals identified eight key areas which were common themes limiting the potential of their Kahui Ako. They believed that if these were resolved it would open up the Kahui Ako to achieve much more

LIMITATIONS ON THE POTENTIAL OF KAHUI AKO



What Improvements Would You Like To See In Kahui Ako

Following on from the above the improvements sought by the six principals fell into the following categories.

Greater flexibility in the leadership models of the Kahui Ako including remuneration for principals. The majority believed that these should be front loaded rather than a default position when a principal within the Kahui Ako is unwilling to take up the position. The majority were also of the view that this flexibility in leadership should extend to the Across School and Within School Teacher positions. That is to say that the appointment should be based on the principle of the 'best person for the job' and 'what is in the best interest of students'.

Four of the principals indicated that they would like better advice and guidance both in the establishment of a Kahui Ako and ongoing strategic advice including relationship building the collection and analysis of achievement data and formulating practical goals.

Four of the principals noted that they have concerns about the ongoing financial sustainability and commitment of government to Kahui Ako. In their view it would be helpful to have certainty on this matter. It would assist with planning and motivation of themselves and other staff directly involved in the Kahui Ako. They believe that their Kahui Ako has made substantial progress in lifting student achievement and that the relationship building has taken some time to mature. In their view it would be unfortunate that all this good work may be lost if the funding was not sustained for the Kahui Ako.

Cornerstones Of A High Performing Kahui Ako

On reflection, the principals identified four cornerstones of a high achieving Kahui Ako. They believed these were critical to success.

LEADERSHIP	ORGANISATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Strong pool of candidates to draw from for leadership positions, who have the requisite knowledge, skill and experience for all levels of leadership * A clear succession plan is in place * Capacity, building and targeted P.D for leaders is a priority * Leaders are prepared to have 'difficult conversations' and keep the Kahui Ako student focused 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Face to face meetings and digital communication is necessary, efficient and advances the objectives of the Kahui Ako * All staff with specific 'roles and responsibilities' within the Kahui Ako are known and accessible * Resources are appropriately identified and used * Secretarial support is made available to the Kahui Ako leader
COLLABORATION	GOAL SETTING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * High levels of trust, respect and confidence are established among principals and key personal * Kahui Ako goals penetrate deep into classroom practice and relationship with students * The Kahui Ako invites and permits disruption to current practice, inquiry and encourages constructive criticism at all levels of school operation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * The goals and objectives of the Kahui Ako are evidence based, student focused, SMART (<i>Specific, Measurable, Assignable, Relevant Time based</i>) * Goals are easily identified and understood by all members of the Kahui Ako, including Board of Trustees, parents and students * The goals allow all members of the Kahui Ako to contribute, from principals to classroom teachers * A bright line is drawn under success which is clearly communicated and celebrated by schools