

Sabbatical report

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My Proposal

To investigate how teaching principals manage the complexities of their roles and to find out what strategies they use to ensure long term sustainability and personal well being. The Ministry of Education is grappling with the retention of principals and the information I learn during this research could help them in their quest to retain them.

There are many expectations of any principal but from my discussions with various colleagues who have been in small schools and then moved to larger ones the balancing of the roles of teacher and principal create some of the most stressful situations.

I hope that this research will help some people in this role to achieve a better life balance.

What does the literature say?

This is a topical issue and I have found that when discussing ‘What’s on top’ with my local colleagues many are feeling very overworked and unappreciated. NZEI commissioned the Australian Catholic University to look into New Zealand principals' health and wellbeing. The study has been running since 2016 and aims to shed some light on exactly how principals' work is affecting their lives. When I compare some of the findings in this I can relate to the areas of stress that they have identified, Lynda Stuart who was the president of the NZEI in 2017 stated that;

” In essence, role demands imposed by education reforms in New Zealand and overseas have increased work volume and public accountability and decreased school leaders’ decision latitude. School leaders are committed to high quality teaching and learning, but are stressed by the extent of the managerial and administrative tasks also expected of them.” (page 4 2017 Burnout report)

She also stated that;

“This report notes that the most serious stressor for New Zealand school leaders is the sheer quantity of work. Working long hours as most do is recognised as increasing cardiovascular risk and injury hazard rates, and leading to productivity declines.” (page 4 2017 Burnout report)

An article in the March 2018 STA News ‘How well are we supporting our Principals?’ highlights that the

well being of principals is becoming a real concern and issues revealed in this article provide further support for my research.

The more reading I completed the more I felt less alone and thankful that I finally have the time to do the reading as it is not possible to allocate the time when I'm working. Recommendations from all of the reference material I have read is that principals seek time with other principals for support and that we make sure that we include at least 30 minutes of exercise a day at the minimum 4 times per week.

This has given me cause to reflect on how we are doing our work and if we can find ways to improve this. I have spoken to people who are presently doing or who have done the role that I and many others work at every day. The method and results are below.

Method

Each principal will be asked the same questions to enable comparisons and strengthen the validity of the findings.

Questions to answer;

1. Are you mindful of the balance that you have in your life?
2. What practices do you have in place to address this?
3. What recommendations would you have to share with other small school teaching principals?
4. Has your Kahui Ako or cluster helped with your workload?

Case Study 1.

Small rural school U1; inexperienced principal, will have 1 year experience 2020.

Case Study 2.

Rural school principal U2; inexperienced principal will have 1.5 years experience in 2020.

Case Study 3.

Small rural school principal U1; experienced principal 12 years experience in 2020.

Case study 4.

Rural advisor for rural schools ; Experienced ex-principal 15 years experience.

Case study 5.

Small rural school U1; inexperienced principal, will have 1 year experienced in 2020.

Key Findings

It has been a real privilege for me to speak with the principals in my case study and learn their thoughts and ideas about how to manage the huge tasks that we have in our role as teaching principals of small rural schools.

When asked about being mindful of the balance that you have in your life?

The principals involved stated that they are mindful of the balance but this is not always achievable. The attention that has been brought to this issue has helped as some feel that they have been given permission to think more of their own well being. The ex principal who now works as a rural school advisor stated that it is significantly easier to maintain a healthy work/life balance in the current role.

My query concerning the 'how' of balancing the personal and professional life to achieve and maintain the best balance and well being.

The main ideas from my colleagues were

1. To take a lunch break - if you are able to go off site for a short time do so.
2. Try to do your work at work and not take it home. This can be hard as most principals I spoke monitored their emails at home. One principal stated;" If I need to complete a project over the weekend I put a time limit on it".
3. If you find that you have to work excess hours in the evening or on weekends take time off in lieu.
4. Make time for exercise and for your interests. This can be hard to manage but different people found different times to do this which suited their own circumstances e.g some made sure they did some exercise before work and others found it fitted with their lifestyle better in the evenings.
5. Take time away during term breaks. Try to spend time away from your community, being in a small community can be like 'living in a goldfish bowl' at times so to truly recharge it works to be away from it.
6. I have made a rule that unless it is an emergency the community does not ring me at home, at times this does not work but I am firm but polite and ask them to ring or email me the next school day.
7. Break your days and weeks into roles with clearly defined times attached. One of my case study candidates stated that " The work of Stephen Covey has influenced me to try to and strive for balance determined by a set of values I hold dear."

The recommendations the people questioned gave me would be to share with others who are teaching principals. Here are the ideas they shared with me;

1. Aim to diary in weekly exercise or a 'leave early' day.
2. Discuss email/technology etiquette with your staff. Agree on when and how staff can be contacted and expectations for reply.
3. Develop agreements for when and how parents can contact teachers. Share these with parents and stick to them!
4. Keep some fun in the week especially in the staffroom.

5. Remember to celebrate successes and improvements.
6. Ensure that you take a break each holiday.
7. Make time for relationships with colleagues and ask them to share resources so you don't have to start everything from scratch.
8. Set clear boundaries and guidelines right from the beginning if you do not then parents and community will not accept changes later.
9. Keep enjoying classroom teaching- it keeps you grounded and focussed on why we do this job.
10. You can still be an active part of the community even if you don't live in the community - it takes time for the opportunities for people to see you actively contributing outside of school time but it is worth it.
11. Building genuine, trusting relationships is key, especially with your board chairperson.

Finally I was keen to know how being part of a cluster or Kahui Ako helped with workload. This varied and here are the comments I received on this subject.

1. Our Principals Cluster has been so good to be able to seek support and ask questions, be vulnerable and tap into so much experience.
2. There have been some positives for our school as the across school leaders give an ear to staff when they need it.
3. The choice to attend meetings as principal is one I make depending on what other work I have to attend to.
4. One principal was in the lead principal role and here are thoughts sent to me;
“ As the lead it was a huge workload - probably I made it bigger looking at it in retrospect, we were funded an extra 0.4 and I definitely used it. However I felt like I was chasing my tail with the Workload. We were developing our own projects, such as transition data and raising achievement, The extra workload came from the extra expectation from the MOE, they continually added to the workload, I should have realised this and lessened our own load or delegated more. Currently, as a participating school to the COL, it seems to have dried up, very little contact from lead and across school person and no tasks that are ongoing, I am about to confront this issue with the lead.”

Summary

These findings will have benefits to me and I hope to others who are working in the wonderful role of Principal in a small school. The ideas and advice given by the people I have interviewed have given me insight into how others organise themselves to attain the best work balance that they can.

I think for me I need to remember that as much as I enjoy my role as principal I need to remember what is most important in my life and make sure I prioritise these roles.

A strong and supportive Board of Trustees is definitely important and when this relationship needs to be strengthened take the time to do so wherever possible.

Build good relationships with colleagues and make your net as wide as you can, principals from other districts may have some great knowledge to share.

Literature reviewed

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4. Laing, J. (2017) Why I left teaching Education: Education Central, educationcentral.co.nz, August.

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https://www.nzei.org.nz/NZEI/Media/Releases/2019/01/Quitting_teachers_explain_why_they_are_leaving.aspx , 2019.

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6. Shulman, L. (1987) Knowledge and Teaching: Foundations of the New Reform. Harvard Educational Review, 57,(1).

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