



Principalship in 40 Hours a Week

Denise Torrey

Denise Torrey is the principal of Somerfield School in Christchurch and current president of the Canterbury Primary Principals Association. In her project report Denise writes about achieving principalship that focuses on coaching staff rather than administration and management.

I graduated from the First-time Principals Programme in 2003. What I didn't learn on the programme was how I could lead learning, coach my staff, carry out the huge number of management and administration tasks that are part of being a principal AND have a life at the same time!

Throughout my first year I had a strong self-belief that I could do this job...and, it turns out, everyone else's job too! Looking back, I don't even think I really knew what my job was then, nor what the jobs of my administration staff were. This lack of clarity about roles meant I found myself doing everything. Doing everything is what I thought being a principal meant.

After the first year I began to learn how to manage the complexity of being the principal of a U5 school. This was just as well because my professional life got even more complex. In 2004 I helped set up Ka Mahuri, a support centre for students with severe behaviour problems. The year after that I was elected to the Canterbury Primary Principals Association (CPPA).

Over this time I certainly wasn't working every weekend as some of my colleagues seemed to do, and I put that down to good time management. But I felt I could get even better at it.

This story is about how I've attempted to be a principal in 40 hours a week, give or take a few hours here and there!

Having effective systems

Being a good systems leader is a key area of practice that enables principals to focus on leading learning. When principals have effective administration and management systems they create the time they need to lead learning and solve problems. This was the area in which I felt I needed to review my practice. I wanted to spend more time coaching my staff so that they could enhance learning for our students.

As the leader of learning at my school I believed that the way to lift achievement in our students was by building the teaching capacity of staff. To do this I wanted to spend more time in classrooms and on co-constructing feedback with my staff on our targeted goals for improving teaching effectiveness.

I had been doing walkthroughs in classes for two or three years, but found that while I could set a day aside in some weeks to do this, at other times it wasn't possible even if I timetabled it in my diary. I needed a way to manage my administrative and management tasks as well as carry out the role of head "coach".

This is how I became interested in the ideas of Malachai Pancoast.

Work less and play more – the teachings of Malachai Pancoast

Peter Simpson, a fellow Canterbury Primary Principals Association (CPPA) executive member, attended the Principals' Centre at Harvard University in 2007. On his return he shared with us what he had learnt from Malachai Pancoast on managing time and administration. Known as the "breakthrough coach" Pancoast runs workshops on management development for leaders. We were impressed with what Peter told us.

In 2008 we invited Malachai Pancoast to be our keynote speaker at the New Zealand Principals Federation (NZPF) Conference in Christchurch. His address was entitled "How to work less, play more and still get the job done in a normal school week." He followed his conference visit in 2009 by workshops around the country.

Following his simple seven-point plan can lead to "office days" for management and



administration tasks and “coaching days” where the principal is in class observing and giving feedback to teachers. This is all carried out all within the working week.

Hearing his ideas, primary principals all over New Zealand spent days in the holidays on cleaning out their offices, and then spent weeks on changing the ways they worked. The impact of Malachai Pancoast’s ideas was significant for me too. I joined with two colleagues, Peter Simpson and Phil Harding, and we formed the Pancake Group, a breakfast club that met regularly and gave honest and at times hard-hitting feedback on our progress towards being “Malachaied”.

Below are the steps I used, following the seven-point plan, to manage my own time more effectively.

Steps to achieve the breakthrough

1. Carried out an administrative review

I completed an administration review that was generated by a joint project between NZPF, CPPA and the Ministry of Education (the Primary Schools Administrative Efficiency Review). The review was about enhancing efficiencies in schools’ administration systems. An outcome of the review was a set of tools that principals could use to audit their administration systems. The review gave me the impetus to change the job descriptions of the principal’s secretary, administration officer and bursar.

The board treasurer and I also undertook a review of the school’s financial services to see if our bursar’s role needed to be changed, and if we needed to buy in other services. The outcome of this was that our bursar was more than adequately capable of achieving her current job description.

The administration review and my attendance at Malachai Pancoast’s keynote gave me a greater understanding of everyone’s roles, especially my secretary’s.

2. Cleaned my office

Pancoast puts a lot of emphasis on the clean office. He believes that the office should be empty except for a desk and a laptop. Anything else is considered a distraction.

He rightly states that the office should not be a “second home”. It is only a place in which to do work. Reviewing the purpose of our offices allows us to focus on our key role of coaching in classrooms. It was obvious to me that fully embracing this idea would be a significant challenge because I am used to having everything at my fingertips. My office held an incredible number of files, folders and papers. I did sort through these and have certainly minimised the amount of paper and files, but like many other colleagues, the problem was finding spaces to put things! To address this we are looking at the use of the administration area. We need to incorporate extra storage space for files that will come out of my office, create an extra meeting room, and make a bigger office for the bursar and secretary. In the meantime I’ve managed to ensure that the files still in my office are relevant ones!

The walls of my office have also changed considerably. I had paper pinned everywhere, but I now focus on one wall for my timetables and “need to access” information.

3. Purchased a new filing system

To find ways to manage paper I reviewed the filing system and, as a result, purchased a new one. I also worked with the company to set up a more streamlined procedure for archiving.

4. Employed a new secretary

What has made the most impact on my work was restructuring jobs and appointing a new secretary. Vicki was employed in October 2008. After her appointment she persuaded me to purchase a digital dicta-phone.

I am now using it for a variety of tasks such reports, newsletters, resources and messages. Vicki constantly encourages me to extend its use.

5. Revisiting the teachings of Malachai Pancoast

In August 2009 Vicki and I attended a workshop run by Malachai Pancoast. Principals attended the two days, with secretaries joining for the second day. Although I had begun my journey after the 2008 conference, I wanted to revisit the message and move into it in more depth. Having Vicki attend meant that we were both getting the same message. Many principals who attended the conference had moved into Malachi’s ideas in great depth very early on. I was not one of the early adopters!

6. Working together

At the workshop Vicki and I set some goals, many of which we have achieved with others still to work on.

We have daily meetings and Vicki is gaining a greater understanding of my job. She handles many tasks that I often used to do in the weekends. These can be anything from making phone calls, sending emails to relievers or organising the classroom release timetable. We now operate a digital calendar and I am researching the best phone or PDA to help manage this when I am not on site. I haven’t entirely given over the management of the calendar to her, but at least we both know what’s going on!

A further challenge is dealing with the parent who just pops in, but I am unlikely to let this one go in the majority of cases.

Vicki goes through the mail and gives me an overview and we generally deal with it on the spot. Many phone calls and emails go to her to vet, though we need to further streamline this. Vicki now has her own office away from the interruptions of the reception area. We now have full coverage in that area which allows Vicky to focus on her work.

Complications

Although I successfully got into classes in Terms 2 and 3, further coaching time has been hindered for me because I took over the presidency of CPPA. Mentoring principals is a real passion of mine and I had a clear vision of how to continue to build our association to better support its members. Although this work has been time-consuming, if I had not changed my previous way of working I would not have been able to develop this role.

Taking on the CPPA presidency has been an added challenge especially with the current educational environment. It coincided with the N1H1 swine flu scare, and the announcement of the implementation of the National Standards. These two things, coupled with the development of a new strategic plan, added to the number of distractions and workload. The impending closure of Ka Mahuri and then its actual closing in June 2009 meant another battle to contend with. Regular letter writing, meetings, and constant media exposure all take time. At times the presidency appears to be a job in itself.

Concluding thoughts

I am very definitely the leader of learning in our school. This was confirmed by ERO in our recent review (2009). I have managed to be in classes more than in the past and lead the curriculum development, even with my extra responsibilities.

I acknowledge that I have a fantastic administration staff and leadership team. They deal with my frequent absences and allow me to carry out my many roles.

The Pancake Group will continue to be my support and conscience. They can be brutally honest and I respect their feedback.

I am passing on more administration tasks to my PA and this has allowed me to visit classes and handle the CPPA presidency. We continue to set goals and work on these. I am reasonably confident that after my CPPA presidency concludes at the end of 2010, I will be able to implement two-days in classes and three office days quite easily each week, as well as coach my leadership team as we continue to refine their roles.

