

Best Advice as a New Principal

When I first became a 'REAL' principal back in the days of Tomorrow's Schools some 25 years ago – yes I had already done my time in sole, two teacher and even five teacher schools on the coast – but the real hard work was being the model for positive change in a larger more diverse school community with an even more diverse and somewhat 'staid' staff in not one but several schools.

The hard challenge was being that magical change agent and surrounding myself with similar driven senior staff, leading the charge and showing the others that the key changes are not easy to make but absolutely essential if we are going to make a REAL difference for all our kids, NOT JUST THE MAJORITY.

The 'Advice', by some guru from Australia to one of our early Principal Conferences was simply this: "Every day, shut your principal's door for 15 minutes, let the office know you do not want to be disturbed and get into a pattern of professional reading that challenges the status quo, challenges your understanding of how kids learn and encourages you to think outside the square. Think deeply about how your school can make a REAL difference to those we are failing. Think about how you can engage those disengaged families and students. Read and think about ways to convert them into being focussed, driven learners. Learn from the stories of others. Anyone can run a good school where just 80% are expected to achieve. Your New Zealand system has been doing this for generations. The real challenge is that other 20%. How many on your staff can really deliver for those who struggle? How many can inspire the parents of these children to help them to go that extra mile by assisting them on a daily basis? Study those teachers, what is it in their personality and relationship building that is the critical point of difference? Document and study it again and again because these teachers are very rare. Almost anyone can run a good class in a good school if the aim is to just have *most achieve* but what about the families who have had generational failure in your school system? How can you make a difference for them?"

At the time, I thought it a bit rich for an Aussie to highlight our failures given that apart from a small percentage of pakeha families the majority of ours happen to be Maori and Pacifika. Who is he to point out this reality given their track record but once I got over myself, he was absolutely bang on the money.

This is not a game or a competition, this is far more serious than that, it is about our future as a nation where we economically and socially cannot afford to allow this horror story of brown underachievement to continue.

"New Zealand's future prosperity is inextricably linked with the achievement of [Māori] students. In our view, it is important that the education system enables and supports all children, so they achieve as highly as they can. It is in the interests of all New Zealanders that young Māori thrive academically, socially, and culturally." Auditor General's Recent Report to the Ministry

My challenge to you, my fellow principals, is to picture yourself at your retirement function and ask yourself. Will they praise me for what I have achieved for the majority of my students or will they also acknowledge me for my leadership and the lengths I went to for those families who struggle?

As this new school year gets under way think about what time best suits you to do this special, daily professional reading and try to focus on an area that you are not strong on. Think of Einstien's definition of Stupidity, experiment, try something out of left field that may just make a real difference to those who are gaining the least from the systems we create. Think wider than the 3Rs.

Over the years I targeted my parents and now rejoice in the fact that a good number, 50 plus, have gone from being very competent teacher aides to gaining a teacher or social services degree. Many of these parents would say that they were a typical example of the Nigel Latta marginalised family and that it was the belief and inspiration of a group of teachers that gave them the strength to change their lives and that of their families. Teachers were the difference! I believe for us, Principals can also be the difference!

Go on line to start your professional reading by studying the stories of other fellow Waikato principals through their blog addressing Maori Achievement. Google **Waikato Maori Achievement** and add my name to access their inspirational journey and stories. Be a devil and make a REAL difference in education. Help the Waikato lead the way again!

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