

## Learning to lead a large curriculum team

This is a real example of Accent Learning helping a school to implement planned changes to bring about sustainable improvements. It is taken from the report [The Work of the Accent Advisers A “success case” evaluation](#), by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

Coastal College<sup>1</sup> is a large coeducational secondary school in the mid-decile range. Over the course of 2010 the assistant HOD of one large curriculum team prepared to step up into the full leadership role when the long serving HOD retired at the end of the school year. During 2010 she established a good relationship with one of the Accent advisers who had expertise in her subject area. The adviser supported her to fine tune the junior courses (years 9 and 10) for which she already had responsibility. She had initially developed these with the support of another Accent adviser and was reassured in 2010 that she was “on the right track” with her interpretation of NZC. The adviser with whom she was now working assisted in the development of a Year 10 extension program which included use of Level 1 Achievement Standards in the learning area. The adviser helped the whole curriculum team to clarify the focus and intent of extension programs so that these allowed the best and most fulfilling learning opportunities to happen for students who needed to be stretched in their learning.

When the new HOD took over full leadership of the team in 2011 she requested professional learning in the areas of mentoring and coaching. The senior leader in charge of professional learning in the school recommended that she take part in a similar leadership programme to that described by the new HOD at Seaview Girls (see Appendix Three). The HOD mentioned many of the same features we had heard from the HOD at Seaview: the focus on her role as a middle manager; the modeling of the management inquiry model; and the usefulness of the workshop on “difficult conversations”. To these learning opportunities this HOD added that she had found the Best Evidence Synthesis focus on the power of “pedagogical leadership” (Robinson *et al.*, 2009) a powerful and useful idea. She noted with some surprise that assessment for learning seemed to be new concept for some of the participating HODs because this was already a well established line of professional inquiry at Coastal College. She also mentioned that there had been a useful discussion of registered teacher criteria, which included a process of modeling the sort of reflective activities that the new HODs could introduce to teachers in their teams seeking full registration.

### Building a learning culture; leading by example

At the time of the interview this HOD had attended three leadership workshops run the Accent Advisory secondary team and was looking forward to the next school visit from her assigned mentor. In keeping with the careful matching process that Accent uses (see Appendix Three) the adviser with whom she had previously worked on the junior units became her mentor. An older more experienced HOD from a nearby

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<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym

large secondary school was assigned to be her critical friend. She mainly communicated with him by email and found this a useful source of a second opinion when she was unsure. Her relationship with the adviser was more dynamic and frequent. The HOD clearly valued her mentor's support and advice.

This HOD's goals for her own leadership inquiry were to clarify her role in the department, to put processes in place to keep curriculum implementation moving forward across her whole team, and to successfully negotiate the challenges of aligning their assessment plans and tasks to the new NCEA assessment standards (which were themselves intended to better align assessment in the senior secondary school with the new curriculum). As the assigned mentor the adviser had already visited the school once in 2011 to discuss how the leadership inquiry might unfold and was about to visit again. Together they had focused on the process for the HOD to use to carry out a self-review of their work with her team (an important new role for the HOD) and the adviser had coached her in practical approaches to actually undertaking the self-review of the team's work. The HOD said the focus was on finding leadership and communication options that would "work for me".

As well as these activities carried out in the mentor role, the adviser had also supported the HOD via a range of opportunities that strategically aligned the wider work demands and interests of both of them. Some of these were things that had happened *before* she became the full HOD but that had served to give her confidence that the adviser could offer her the grounded practical "multi-faceted" curriculum support that she was seeking:

- The HOD had attended a workshop run by the adviser that focused on assessment in the learning area. The course addressed formative assessment and also varying assessment tasks to gather achievement evidence from other than traditional sources such as tests and essays. Both of these aspects provided useful insights for her NCEA alignment goal, and they could recall examples from the workshop when working on this goal.
- The adviser had been instrumental in setting up and supporting a network of local HODs in this learning area. They had already met face-to-face after school on several occasions, each time with a practical focus on some aspect of their learning area. Examples included giving each other feedback on newly designed units of work; and the use of portfolios of work for formative assessment purposes.
- The adviser had very recently run a whole-school workshop for the staff at Coastal College with a focus on the NZC principles and what they might look like in practice (see Appendix Five). Although this was not specifically for her team, it provided a useful shared foundation on which to build subject-specific detail. The adviser had brought along a "really practical" planning template that showed staff how they could integrate the three foundational Treaty of Waitangi principles with the NZC principles in ways that simplified rather than compounded the challenges of giving effect to NZC. There was an action plan to accompany the template. The template modeled a method of self-review ("what are we doing now?") and specification of possible next steps.

Through all these interactions the HOD said that "you never feel you are asking a stupid question". She could e-mail the adviser at any time and always got a prompt and practical response. She noted that the greatest indicator of the success of the adviser's support was the shift in culture she had managed to achieve with the learning area team: "we're all in it [professional learning] together now". Her own personal up-skilling had given her confidence to model new ways of working for her whole team – and in

some cases to provide examples for a school-wide workbook of good practice. She also felt empowered to talk about the *why*, not just the *what*, of the changes they were working on.

## Strengths the advisers brought to their roles

Although the focus of this vignette is mainly on the work of one specific adviser, a number of others were mentioned during the course of the conversation. The names of four advisers cropped up repeatedly. All seemed to have worked closely with this school. They had variously: run other whole-school sessions at Coastal College; organised one-off workshops some staff had attended; and taken part in the leadership workshops in their own areas of expertise. One of these other advisers had worked with the school to develop their own model of student inquiry learning and to help them pilot an integrated studies programme where two curriculum teams work together. These related activities have led to the establishment of an Inquiry Learning Group that continues to provide active leadership in this aspect of NZC implementation.

A number of general comments were made about the advisers' manner of working and what makes this successful:

- The advisers habitually seek to clarify the school's purposes for engaging with them. They listen carefully, paraphrase to ensure they have understood, and develop a mutually agreed focus for the work.
- If a course of action is proposed but the school has reservations about some aspect, the advisers are willing to hear these reservations and to adapt their own plans. They do not get defensive about feedback, nor do they override the school's wishes with their own agenda.
- This is not to say that the advisers do not have role constraints and work specifications they also have to meet. Rather, they are skilled at strategically aligning the school's needs with their own work parameters.
- Similarly, the advisers are skilled at navigating their way through teachers' concerns and objections without getting people offside. They know how to tailor their message to keep things practical and grounded, and they model good practice themselves.
- The advisers are very good at putting teachers at ease as learners. Their support bolsters confidence and when they need to challenge they do so in ways that turn critical questions back to teachers to reflect on, rather than over-riding the situation with their own views. However, if asked a direct question a direct answer will usually be forthcoming when appropriate.