

Supporting successful whole school change

This is a real example of Accent Learning helping a school through all three stages of the self review cycle – assess, plan and implement - 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.

Hillside school¹ is a large suburban intermediate school in the mid- to high-decile range. Several years ago the school needed a new principal. The Board of Trustees appointed a new leader who knew he would need to lead the implementation of the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) and that some big changes might be implicated as this happened. Coming into a new role to be a change-manager is challenging for any school leader, and even more so for a first-time principal. The Accent Advisory service provided invaluable support and back up as the change process unfolded.

The nature of the school’s change journey

For some years prior to the principal’s arrival the Hillside timetable had been run on a secondary school model. School days were divided into separate episodes of learning, each less than an hour long. Students moved from teacher to teacher through the day and each teacher taught only a small number of types of lessons, so they could specialise. The principal was aware that a majority of teachers, and many parents, greatly valued this model and saw it as excellent preparation for the move to secondary school. He had his doubts that the model was allowing teachers to build strong learning relationships with students but decided to make no changes until he had become well immersed in his new role, and had personally spoken with every member of staff. He did, however begin discussing the issues, as he was beginning to understand them, and the challenges he could see in the school’s existing achievement patterns, with the adviser who supported the first-time principals. Together with another highly experienced adviser they began planning for whole school change.

Some of the existing staff left soon after the principal’s appointment, seemingly anticipating changes they did not want to be part of. There was a period of staff turnover to cope with, including settling new teachers into the school. The principal wanted to work alongside the teachers, sending a powerful message that they were all learning together. He used the advisers in strategic ways that left him free to be a creative problem solver alongside his team, once the problems had been surfaced by the advisers and framed in critical ways they could all debate. He could see that the structure of the learning day was giving students a somewhat disconnected experience of school, and it was his view that learning relationships between the teachers and students could be made stronger if a different timetable model was put in place. To help get the teachers thinking along the same lines the advisers interviewed a number of students, separately and in

¹ A pseudonym

focus groups, then prepared a summary of key messages to report back to the staff. Their voices had a very powerful effect in convincing teachers of the need for change and together they worked out what to do next.

After 18 months the school moved to a “home room” model of organisation. Teachers now spend the whole morning with their own class, teaching them the core literacy and numeracy components of the curriculum. This was very challenging initially for some teachers because they had been teaching mainly in other areas and needed support to develop new pedagogical approaches and knowledge. Another Accent adviser joined the team working in the school at this point. She was a literacy specialist and helped with the professional learning that was needed right then. Looking to sustain change beyond the life of the advisory support, the principal found ways to free up the two deputy principals – one with literacy and one with numeracy expertise – to work alongside the classroom teachers. Every morning they can be found in one class or another, working with students to model effective pedagogy themselves, observing and coaching the teacher, and generally making sure everyone is up to speed. The lift in achievement records testifies to the success of this change.

Afternoons are a little more diverse in their organisation. As is common in many primary schools in response to NZC there is some curriculum integration across subjects other than literacy and numeracy (Cowie *et al.*, 2009). Vestiges of the former specialist timetable remain in place too. However, whatever the learning context, the NZC focus is firmly on the Effective Pedagogy section of NZC (pages 34-35), especially being aware of students’ *learning* gains and needs. This year the school is experimenting with the “classroom walk through”² as a means of monitoring whether good intentions are matched by the actual pedagogical strategies in use. The principal is reserving judgment about this innovation until he sees for himself how well it works.

With the successful timetable change behind them, staff are now engaged in the challenge of learning how best to support students to take appropriate opportunities to become more independent in their learning. Remodeling of learning spaces is underway. The intention is to make classrooms bigger and to provide for shared learning areas with good IT access. This time around the principal is leading the challenges for staff learning himself. In this school, the work of the advisers is over for now because the learning community model of ongoing professional change is so well embedded and accepted.

Change that counts

Asked how he knew the changes had been successful, the principal was able to outline multiple sources of evidence:

- By the second year of the new structure the school was seeing a marked upward shift in asTTle results. In both literacy and numeracy, overall achievement patterns are well above the national norms for students of this age. This applies to all the students in the school, including Māori and Pasifika students who tend to be over-represented nationally in under achievement statistics.

² See <http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Curriculum-resources/NZC-resource-bank/Leading-change/Digital-stories/EDtalk-Cheryl-Doig-Learning-walks>

- The school had now used NZCER's Me and My School student survey tool for three consecutive years. Across this time they can track a sharp lift in overall student engagement with school. This is not to say that there are no challenges. One disturbing trend in the 2010 patterns is the trend to disengagement of some Māori students who are actually achieving very well. The teachers are currently exploring why this might be so.
- Telling a similar story to Me and My School, suspensions and stand-downs are trending down, and where they do happen they tend to be for different types of misdemeanours. The principal keeps an episode log that shows there are fewer incidences of violent behaviour. He attributes lifts in engagement and positive behaviours to closer relationships between teachers and students than was the case in the past.

What the advisers contributed to the change process

The principal commented on how fortunate the school had been to work through such big changes with knowledgeable and wise support. The advisers had given a lot of time to the school. They had supported ten whole school professional sessions in one year and eight more sessions in the following year. On top of this they had met with him and his leadership team regularly. He listed several ways the advisers worked as key to supporting him to succeed in the demanding change context he had come into:

- They were good listeners who supported him with his agenda rather than coming in with one of their own. They understood his goals and they guided him in the pursuit of these but they were also willing to challenge him where they thought there was more to be considered.
- When he was ready they were happy to extend these leadership conversations to include all of the senior management team. The advisers helped the leadership team plan next steps strategically.
- The advisers had a thorough knowledge of the NZC, as the principal also did. They helped him to use NZC effectively as a tool for school self review.
- The advisers were very good at reading the mood of the staff during shared professional learning meetings and responding accordingly. They were also very good communicators and could deliver tough messages without alienating people. When the going got tough - as it did when the advisers reached the point of introducing the formative assessment idea of "success criteria" for learning - the advisers persisted until the issues had been worked through.
- The skillful way in which the advisers collated and reported back the conversations with students really helped highlight the issues students were facing with their learning. One example was the need to make learning purposes more visible for students. Another was the need to make better contextual links between their school learning and wider lives. The principal said that hearing these critical challenges was less personal for staff than it would have been if he had been making them.
- With the advisers in the role of posing the challenges, the principal was able to work alongside staff to work out how to solve these. He said he could model his own professional learning in a way that would not have been possible if he had also had to be thinking about leading the conversation. He notes that one of the Best Evidence Syntheses had highlighted such modeling by school leaders as an important component of effective professional learning (Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd, 2009).

- The advisers gave very useful help for devising observation, data gathering and feedback protocols that could be used to appraisal and mentoring purposes. They supported the school's literacy and numeracy leaders (the deputy principals) in this classroom-based professional learning work.
- One adviser had been a principal himself and was responsible for maintaining a learning network of first-time principals. In this role he acted as a key link for the principal to networks of support *outside* the school community. The principal noted that the school had been somewhat insular in the past and he really valued the wider links he had been supported to establish.