

CASE STUDY

SUPPORTING RANGATAHI WITH COMMON-SENSE SOLUTIONS

It's seven o'clock on a mild autumn night in Wellington's northern suburbs. School's been over for hours and it's dark outside. Yet, here at Newlands College, a minor flurry of activity erupts in the carpark as several cars arrive.

A small group gathers. Each member warmly embraces the other. "Kia ora, kei te pēhea koe?" says one. "Tino pai," says another, gesturing everyone inside the college's new student whare.

The scene described here depicts the first few moments of a typical whānau advisory group hui at Newlands College, a decile nine school with around 120 Māori students.

Every month the eight-member group (of three parents, two senior students and three school staff) gets together to figure out ways to improve Māori student achievement.

On this particular night, the meeting agenda starts with the topic: Māori student mentoring programme.



“We're all learning together...”

Representatives from the Newlands College, Wellington whānau advisory group.

“ WE’RE ALL LEARNING TOGETHER. IT’S BEEN LIKE A CLASS IN ITSELF, JUST PRESENTING AND EXPLAINING THE DATA. OUR JOB IS TO MAKE SURE THE DATA ENABLES THE GROUP TO BOTH ASK AND ANSWER QUESTIONS. BUT WE REALISE IT’S A STEEP LEARNING CURVE – FOR US AND OTHERS INVOLVED IN THIS PILOT. ”

It’s one of the group’s ideas for helping Year nine Māori students who are struggling. Members don’t know it yet, but their idea has hit a stumbling block.

Advisory group leader and deputy principal John Murdoch explains: “The senior management team really liked the mentoring programme, they just wanted it offered to all students. And to get any further we really needed their buy-in.”

That night the advisory group decides to stick to its guns and meet senior management face-to-face to discuss why.

Sure enough, the meeting with senior management resolves the issue. The advisory group will pilot the programme with Māori students outside school hours and possibly – depending on its success – roll it out to all students over time.

In many ways, says John, this minor hitch is a good example of what’s involved in much of the group’s work.

“You really have to be up for the challenges this work brings. Newlands College set up the advisory group because we wanted our parents to be represented at this school and we wanted them to lead us in finding the answers to better supporting our Māori students.

“We recognised we could do it the school’s way or we could take a broader view and involve parents. But it’s hard work. One issue often leads to another series of issues. It can be like peeling back the layers of an onion,” he says.

In 2006 Newlands College was one of a handful of secondary schools invited by the Ministry of Education to set up and trial a whānau advisory group for two years.

National data shows the education system is underperforming for many Māori students, particularly Māori boys.⁷

Meanwhile, research findings suggest getting parents involved in the education of their children is a good way to improve student achievement.⁸ Research also finds that Māori parents are in a better position to support their children when they

themselves have access to good whānau support and when they have a good understanding of the education system.

In 2006, with the advisory group tentatively under way, Newland’s Education Review Office (ERO) report noted the advisory group’s potential to help lift the achievement of Māori learners. It also commended the school overall for improving its use and analysis of student achievement data, particularly for Māori in Years nine and 10.⁹

Craig Fransen, the college’s Māori dean and advisory group member, says Newlands’ whānau advisory group is progressing well on most fronts. “Our group has a good rapport among members. It also enjoys strong support from other whānau – we’re starting to see faces we haven’t seen at the college before, simply because they’ve heard about the advisory group and they’re keen to support our kaupapa.”

He says group members are quickly getting their heads around the education system too, using that knowledge to come up with sensible, common-sense solutions.

For example, the college’s Year nine student achievement data reveals a good spread of high, middle and low achieving students, who are Māori. With this in mind, the group’s mentoring scheme and homework club have been tailor-made for the core group of students identified as needing extra help.

Meanwhile, the advisory group’s broader goal of having 80 per cent of Māori Year eleven students pass their NCEA level one is based on a thorough understanding of where each student is at now and where he or she needs to be further down the track.

The challenge, says Craig, has been to present the data to the group in a way members find meaningful and useful.

⁹ Education Review Office Report: *Newlands College*. Education Review Office, (2006).

⁷ *State of Education in New Zealand*. Ministry of Education, (2007). *Student Achievement in New Zealand*. Ministry of Education, (2007).

⁸ *The Complexity of Community and Family Influences on Children’s Achievement in New Zealand: Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration (BES)*. F Biddulph, J Biddulph and C Biddulph. Ministry of Education, (2003).

Ethnicity and School Achievement in New Zealand: Some Data to Supplement the Biddulph et al (2003) Best Evidence Synthesis. Massey University Report to the Ministry of Education, (2006).



“We’re all learning together. It’s been like a class in itself, just presenting and explaining the data. Our job is to make sure the data enables the group to both ask and answer questions. But we realise it’s a steep learning curve – for us and others involved in this pilot.”

John and Craig agree it’s early days for their group and there’s still a lot to be done before their at-risk Māori students are achieving at the levels they’d like. Still, looking back over the past year or so, the pair say the whānau advisory group has achieved a huge amount.

They’ve surveyed Māori students for their thoughts and ideas about the school, fast-tracked the building of a student whareniui and introduced whānau-led te reo Māori and tikanga lessons for staff. Now they are in the throes of setting up the student mentoring programme and homework club.

In the future Craig would like to see the group help the college build up its ability to lead and be comfortable expressing its Māori culture. He’d also like whānau advisory group members to work alongside teachers, giving them tips on how to develop good relationships with Māori kids.

Helping parents better support their kids’ education is another goal.

Craig reckons it’s not too early to see the huge potential the whānau advisory group has for the school’s Māori students.

“It’s different to other ways I’ve worked with and interacted with whānau – through kapa haka or on the sports field. And therein lies the power of the group, I think. The group gives us a new, more structured way of working with whānau. At the same time it gives whānau the recognition they need and deserve.”

“ It’s different to other ways I’ve worked with and interacted with whānau – through kapa haka or on the sports field. And therein lies the power of the group... ”