

Connecting with whanau to support Maori achievement

Angela Smith – Mauku School

A damning ERO review of a Pukekohe high school six years ago was the impetus for a strategic initiative across Franklin schools to support Maori achievement and connect with whanau.

Te Nuinga Trust's Te Huarahi programme includes pre-schools, most of the primaries, and intermediate and high schools.

Mauku School Principal Angela Smith said there was recognition that in order to support Maori achievement, there was a need to engage with whanau and for smooth transitions to school and between schools.

"When children are transitioning into school now, we've got quite good liaison in the community. Getting the parents involved is the key, especially when it's their first child at school because it's quite a daunting prospect.

"We have children in Pukekohe who haven't been in school for a year, particularly if parents don't want their children going to the local school and they don't know what the other options are, so they just keep them home.

"They really stay under the radar for a long time and if they're at home for a year, they're children who also haven't had ECE. So Te Huarahi helps us out with picking up children who are not at school. Often there are pre-schoolers as well. The pre-schoolers get involved in ECE when they may not have before. So there are lots of benefits.

"We realised collectively that it's not just one person that educates a child and we had to work together all the way from early childhood up if we're going to make a real difference. It's a really good model, but hard to keep the impetus going and hard to fund it. Initially we didn't have any funding but now the JR Mackenzie Trust is supporting it, which pays for a coordinator."

Last December all the primary schools and ECE services set up displays and activities at the local marae for the Little School to Big School event.

"The kids had an opportunity to have a go at all the games and the parents got to see what schools are out there, where we are, how we look. It was a pleasant opportunity for parents and children to engage with us. It was really to try and break down barriers between Maori families and schools," said Angela.

The best way to connect with whanau is to be in the community, involved in as many different platforms as possible.

"Sometimes I even travel with the kids on the bus home so I can say hi to parents. You've got to create a personal environment to invite them into the school. For most of our low decile parents, their own school experience hasn't been a positive one. And they assume it's going to be the same for their children and they get very defensive about things that happen in the school and it's hard to break down those barriers," she said.

There are now a number of agencies working with Franklin schools and centres, around transition from pre-school, with getting kids to school and making sure they are enrolled and the parents know what their options are.

“They also help us with truancy and getting kids to school. They’re mostly through different supported trusts and government initiatives. They’ve realised that in the Pukekohe area we need more support, particularly around Maori families and getting their children to school.

“We have some home-school partnerships. Something we do at our school is frequent Meet the Teacher nights where new entrants teachers invite parents personally, and also pre-school parents.”

Parents of pre-schoolers are also invited to come to school for the Reading Together programme, helping parents support their children with their reading. Angela finds that it makes for a really comfortable transition to school.

“Support agencies also help with identifying children with special needs before they start. We’re usually aware of it and have worked together with the early intervention team prior to enrolment,” said Angela.

Thanks to Te Huarahi, primary schools have a much stronger relationship with the intermediate, which is now very aware of children and their needs before they get there.

“Previously, they only got to know them at enrolment. So if we’ve got children who would benefit from frequent transition visits, we take them to the intermediate with teachers or teacher aides, not just going for their induction night. Otherwise, they’re not going to have a smooth transition into the school and it’s going to become a problem.”

Angela says Franklin schools are fortunate to be in a geographic group with a clear boundary.

“We’re mostly small schools and work well together. We get involved in the community, in sports and cultural events. We’re quite a visible group of principals and staff, so that really helps.

“We have quite a strong collegial community, so within our teacher professional learning all the different schools are represented. We have a literacy group, maths group, junior teachers and strong principal network and a learning change network. We network across a lot of different platforms.

“It gives smaller schools an opportunity to be part of quite a strong cluster.”