

ICT trailblazing and red carpet glamour in rural Taranaki

Lorraine Williamson – Opunake School

In a rural corner of south Taranaki, four schools are doing extraordinary things in Information and Communications Technology, causing educators further afield to sit up and take notice.

The MOA Kluster - Matapu, Opunake, Auroa and Kaponga Schools – has been working on ICT only since early 2014, and Opunake School Principal Lorraine Williamson said the cluster had been a catalyst for huge professional development and uptake amongst the teachers.

“We’ve got a couple of google educators trained since the cluster started, people who can do pretty much anything with google docs, 3D printing and CAD drawing, we’re starting up coding classes, and have taken our own tech support back into our schools, so we can offer a much more integrated program,” she said.

A desire to “incentivise” teachers to use the technology resulted in arguably the most glamorous event Opunake has ever seen, and got the cluster on the front page of Taranaki’s *Daily News*.

Late last year, the cluster held their inaugural Digi Awards, with special fibreglass trophies to be awarded in categories such as best class blog, best teacher use of technology, best animation or best short film.

The children dressed up and an Americana car club ferried them from Opunake School to the events centre across the road to walk the red carpet.

“It was a big Academy Award-type thing,” said Lorraine.

“The caretaker at Auroa School pulled all the individual items onto one big proper academy show, with amazing animation and graphics. We had the deputy mayor there and he said he thought he was coming to some tin pot show but he was blown away, gobsmacked.

“That was powerful, it integrated our community. The four principals sat together. People came up at the end and commented that we were all so happy for each other and what people had won. People were watching us to see what our reaction was when the winners were announced and they just could not believe the collegiality amongst the principals. It was really awesome,” said Lorraine.

Community leaders are already asking for the date of the next awards night so they can put it in their diaries, and the cluster is confident that the sponsor who gave them \$2000 last year will increase it to \$5000 so they can hire two big screens to accommodate everyone.

“Word has spread all over the community. I’ve had parents from other areas come up and say, ‘you’re part of that cluster, we’ve heard really good things.’ It’s really interesting that parents are talking about the cluster.”

The cluster is now looking at running their own conference, bringing in an overseas presenter, and sharing their own experiences and expertise.

“Not wanting to be big-headed, but we’re at the stage now that what we’re seeing in NZ, we’re past it a little bit. It’s a bit risky, we need to get some sponsorship. But I think there isn’t any really good PD for teachers around using digital technology in the e-learning framework and we think we’ve got some really good stuff to offer,” said Lorraine.

“Our dream would also be to go an ICAS conference overseas.”

The cluster shares everything, not just digital technology.

“Our teachers all plan online. Our website has learning portals, all public. Our teachers plan and parents can go in and look at planning across all subjects. That’s a really recent development.

“One guy was developing a digital portfolio, someone else has done a digital charter, I’m doing a digital curriculum plan. All of that is shared. So if someone rings you up and asks you, we share everything.

“We thought it would be quite powerful if we got our Boards of Trustees involved, so we got our boards together with a cluster facilitator and from there we are looking at how our schools can work closely together on all PD and share everything – charters, strategic plans, any documents that anyone has developed. We share the expertise within the schools. Last week my school visited Auroa to see what they were doing in tech. Their school visited us to see what we were doing in assessment.”

This year, board members and all 45 teachers from the schools, took a trip to Auckland to visit four schools.

“We set up things like shared google docs. We mixed everyone up while we were on the visit then they were given tasks to do. Then we came back and debriefed on google docs and shared the google docs out with everyone, including the schools that we visited. That’s been quite powerful and our boards of trustees certainly enjoyed being able to look at other schools,” said Lorraine.

“We look at what fits within the culture of our cluster or our school already, then try and build relationships with those schools to share ideas. Auroa has hosted 20-25 other schools this year and I’ve hosted six or seven, plus I’m talking at the New Plymouth Principals Association conference about what we’re doing in our cluster. We’re generating quite a bit of interest.”