

Different needs but a shared vision

Vicki Neave – Clinton School

In a huge cluster that includes area schools, high schools, large and small primaries and a kindergarten association, you can have a shared vision, but inevitably very different needs.

South Otago's Big River Cluster has found the sensible solution to this problem, allowing them to still work together, and maximise the benefits of bringing professional development to isolated areas while minimising the costs.

The cluster's current plan is loosely based around raising student achievement, creating active learners and transition between sectors. Clinton School principal Vicki Neave, who is on the cluster's 2015 management team, said training opportunities were on an "opt in" basis.

"Next term we are providing a professional development day looking at boys' writing because that was an area of need that came up when we looked at our trends at the start of the year. If it suits their needs, schools opt in, if it doesn't, they don't.

"We've worked really hard to keep it flexible and schools aren't tied into it. They just opt into what meets their needs. There's no expectation that because you're part of the cluster 'you must do this'. It's about providing as much opportunity to our staff as we can," she said.

Schools often organise training and development around identified needs then invite others to join in if they wish.

"We had a principal who decided we had a need for maths content knowledge within some of our staff, so he's organised a maths facilitator to come into the area to do a workshop once a term and we have the option to send a teacher to that if it meets our needs," said Vicki.

Each year, at a meeting of the South Otago Principals Association, members of the Big River Cluster (covering Balclutha, Milton and Lawrence) will select a management committee of six to lead the group. It involves people with a range of experience and school sizes. This year the management team includes people from two-teacher schools, the largest primary, a secondary school and a wide geographical range.

The team approach means leaders can share the load. A few key people who have been part of the management team for a long time provide stability and experience. But younger principals also get the opportunity to come in and learn some new skills as well.

"Every year we get together and identify the common threads. There's a very nice sense of trust amongst principals and schools. We're all happy to share our data and talk about the issues and we support each other to find solutions," said Vicki.

"We have a shared meeting with all the principals who are interested, and their lead teachers. We brought along the data. We looked at the needs, looked at the trends and brainstormed, then the management team looked at ways to try and meet these needs."

This year the cluster has had an internet safety expert come in and work with schools, children, parents and teachers. This also provided an opportunity for lateral learning across the schools for teachers and students.

“Most of the children in South Otago have had a session with him. We’ve also had parent sessions as well. That’s very, very worthwhile.

“As a cluster we’re going down the google app path as it is a convenient way to share information. We have a google drive for our cluster, with lots of information shared that is accessible to everyone, an open management system, nothing behind closed doors,” she said.

Once a term the cluster holds transition meetings, where all the early childhood and new entrant teachers are invited to get together to discuss the issues and movement between pre-school and primary school. They have speakers in to talk about a range of issues including the transition between Te Whariki curriculum and the school curriculum.

Travelling to Dunedin or Invercargill for professional development courses carries a large cost financially and in lost time. It makes sense to bring the presenters to the area whenever possible and it can even be a small money spinner.

“When we run a workshop in our cluster, we’ll open it up to people outside our area which helps to cover our costs. At the start of the year we decide what PD we want to do and inform schools about what is coming up so they can allocate parts of their PD budgets to do that. Because we all combine when we have presenters in, it enables us to keep the costs as low as we can. We also have teacher only days on the same day to reduce reliever costs and avoid the issue of a limited number of relievers within our area. That way we minimise the costs and maximise the benefits,” said Vicki.

“The Big River Cluster has worked together effectively for a long time to provide effective professional development in South Otago.”