

From an “arranged marriage” to a shared vision

Graeme Barber - Woodend School

North Canterbury’s large Katote Cluster has moved far beyond its awkward beginning as an “arranged marriage”.

Following the Christchurch earthquakes, the Ministry of Education grouped schools into compulsory Learning Community Clusters based on geography rather than by shared need or existing relationships.

Woodend School principal Graeme Barber said the schools subsequently merged two of the LCC “arranged marriages” together, and the ECE centres and several other schools joined as well.

Kaiapoi High School and the 7 primaries and 16 ECE centres that feed into it now work together closely and have even developed a shared vision for the cluster that most have included in their school charters. The four schools – including Woodend – that are involved in the Canterbury schools rebuild programme have also used the vision as a driver for their own rebuilds.

“There’s a lot of diversity [in such a large cluster]. It’s really challenging to get everyone going in the same direction together. A lot of effort needs to go into coordinating it and you can’t tell people what they’re going to do,” said Graeme.

“It needs to be a very strong collaborative process. We’ve identified three main values for our shared vision – a sense of belonging (principals of culture, community, identity and roles and responsibility), relationships (respect, integrity, empathy, citizenship, communication, collaboration, unconditional positive regard and trust) and the third one is preparing learners for success.

“The principles in that are engagement, enjoyment, life-long learning, knowledge of individual needs and empowerment. Each school has been looking at what that looks like in practice,” he said.

Transitions are a major focus of the cluster, particularly looking at minimising anxiety and stress for the students, whanau and staff involved.

“We also identify the ‘at risk’ factor. That’s all the things happening in our local context – post-quake stuff was part of that, poverty indicators and stress in the family. Then we put in place actions that support that. One of the key drivers here was success – ‘you are welcome here and you will be successful.’

“We have worked really hard to have people understand what transition looks like and be empowered to do it. Some of the tools we’ve prepared that have been used are around transition meetings and individual plans for schools. We worked with early childhood as well to spread the word,” said Graeme.

The cluster does PLD through CORE with its e-leaders and is working on developing innovative learning practices.

“Our staff are really willing and able to progress into different ways of managing, teaching and learning. Part of the inquiry process is going out to look, and keep focus by keeping a record of what

we've seen. We got a little bit of extra staffing through the Canterbury schools rebuild to support that and allow us to go visit. Everyone in the team will go visit schools, go through scanning and discussion, then come back and discuss what it means for us," said Graeme.

The cluster has teacher-only days together, including one on collaboration at the beginning of this year that included every school staff member. The principals also meet together for breakfast two or three times a term, a social occasion to nut things out.

The cluster is starting to engage with wider community groups as well and is setting up a structure around meeting with community leaders.

A teacher from St Patrick's School coordinates the cluster, using 0.2 funding from the LCC. That's useful, but Graeme says the biggest issue is finding more hours in the day to make real progress.

"Time is the big issue, and resourcing to provide that time. We've heard for a long time that we have to think smarter and do things differently, but there are so many expectations, it's really hard to fit all that in.

"To make learning clusters work requires shared leadership. It doesn't require a single leader. You need flexibility and create ownership by having a lot of people involved. People want collaboration to be the driver, not a role being the driver. They want it to be based on the best research and being clear about principles and mindsets and defining what works for their context, and take an inquiry approach to everything they do. To establish together where we go next and why, and we all need to be involved in the evaluative part of it."