

## **Town-wide cluster means support, influence and results**

### **Rikki Sheterline - Turaki School**

For more than 20 years, the leaders of Taumaranui High School and 20 surrounding primaries, kura and ECE centres have been looking out for each other. A key to this is having the early childhood centres, primary schools and the local secondary school at the table together.

Turaki School Principal Rikki Sheterline said there is a strong ethic of care amongst the principals and head teachers that had developed over time.

“A key responsibility for our group is to each other, to make sure everybody is OK, or supporting them when they’re not. By doing this we make sure that whatever we do is in the best interests of our kids. If we’re not looking after ourselves, then we’re not supporting our kids either,” he said.

Transitions from ECE to primary and primary to secondary are a key and integral part of the cluster’s work.

“We’ve discussed transition from early childhood to primary and what Te Whariki looks like in an ECE centre and in a primary new entrant class. Out of there has come a sub group of ECE centres and new entrant teachers who meet at least once a term to talk about the transitions and about professional learning. That’s been really beneficial,” he said.

Rikki said that when new entrants arrive at school, the teachers already know them.

“The teachers will have visited the students in their centres, and staff from the centres would have brought the students into their classrooms. There is now a much earlier development of the student-teacher relationship than I have seen in the past, which is fabulous for the kids. Every school does it slightly differently, but they certainly build up a relationship with the student and their whanau. I think it would be fair to say that primary staff are more aware of the influence and the styles of our EC centres, so they’re a little bit more aware of how Te Whariki works and aligns with NZC.

“At the other end of the age range, our Year Seven and Eight students have technology classes at Taumaranui High School. That’s an early encounter with the secondary system. That’s a critical time, because those classes are their introduction. We’ve been able to have that discussion with the secondary principal and the Technology teachers as part of the cluster.

Leadership and facilitation of the cluster is managed by consensus, although a number of principals are reluctant to take too much of a leadership role because of time constraints and logistics – the cluster consists mainly of teaching principals. Even when release time is available, it can be extremely difficult to find enough relievers in rural areas.

Rikki said principals and teachers wanted more time and opportunity for PLD and to collaborate and share best practice. “I’d like to use a facilitator to support us in some way, but only when it is appropriate. If we could dedicate two hours a term and have that facilitated and develop our own plan for a 2-3 year period and map that out, a facilitator could help us drive it and keep us on track.”

“It would be fantastic if it was easier to release teachers during school time. Currently we use our CRT time to support new entrant teachers to visit ECE centres. Otherwise the cluster-wide meetings are all held after school. If there was flexibility for all the new entrant teachers to get together to talk transition with the ECE head teachers, that would be fabulous. Time would also help to manage one-on-one transitions during contact time so we could go and see the students in their centre and talk with their teachers while the kids are interacting in the centre, more easily than we do at present. Flexibility around time would be magnificent.”

A strength of the cluster is having all the sectors at the table, therefore being able to speak as a united sector on issues that affect local children.

“Agencies want to talk to us because we’re all together and it’s a “one hit” meeting. All of the agencies, such as the Ministry of Social Development, CYFS and the DHB will come and talk to us, or we’ll call on them and say we need to hear from you. There are some really good opportunities for us to push a shared message to support our kids,” said Rikki.