

Cakes, chooks and caring for the community

Sharren Read – Waitara Central School

When a family moves to Waitara in North Taranaki, one of their first contacts with the primary school will usually involve a cake or a cooked chook.

Waitara Central School is fortunate to have a volunteer community liaison person, who will visit newly-enrolled families - often with the chaplain - and come bearing home baking as “a bit of pastoral support”.

The liaison person is a past parent and grandparent of the school and a friendly face to welcome families to the community. Principal Sharren Read said the liaison was able to chat about how the school works, answer questions and quickly ascertain the family’s circumstances and needs.

“The person who does it is well known in our community and is discrete. If the families have concerns, coming to the board of trustees or principal can be a bit much for some families, so they will often contact her and ask her to tell me,” said Sharren.

“We often get families that are in emergency situations. They may have been moved because of violence. We’ve had a family that’s moved down here from Auckland because they thought they might find work. They’re living in a garage of an already overcrowded house.

“Poverty is a very real thing for us. We’re working with a family at the moment that doesn’t have any means of washing themselves with warm water. They have a bath, but there’s no tap. They fill it with cold water with a hose and then boil water to warm it up. There’s no incentive to keep yourself clean when you’ve got to go through all that, and that’s only the tip of the iceberg for that family. So if we need to shower them, we’ll shower them,” said Sharren.

The school works closely with local charity groups and can quickly get clothes, furniture and bedding for families that might need it, and it’s done without judging.

“We find that, by them knowing we’re supporting them and not judging them, they trust us more. Because of our community, we offer breakfast club and food for lunch. We encourage families to communicate with us through texting. They can just say, “hey, can you give my kid some morning tea today?” and it’s just done, no questions asked. I’d rather have the children at school and being fed than being at home and being hungry, because at least they’re still learning.

“I’ve been criticised for maybe giving parents the opportunity to abdicate their role and that could be true in a very small proportion of families that use our services but I’m about those kids when they come through the gate, and their needs. If those needs are not being met by the parents and we can do it, we will do it.”

Sharren would love to be able to employ a part time teacher to go into homes and work with parents and teach them how to support their children in their learning.

“We’re looking into that. We do have parents’ information evenings around those things. Any hui at school, parents are personally invited. When you’re talking to them they’re more likely say they will come because you’ve invited them. We’ve found personal invitations really effective, and it’s upped our numbers incredibly, it also gives them time to have a one-to-one chat if they need it,” she said.

When new children start at the school, integrating them into the culture of the school is a priority.

“PB4L is the thing that drives our school culture around positive behaviour. So when we have new students start, they work with our PB4L coach in learning about our school values and incentive systems and those sorts of things.

“We can assume that when a child starts they’ll just soak it all up - and they do - but it’s nice for them to have that positive introduction, sometimes one to one or in a small group. That can happen for three or four sessions. It’s unpacking what those key values look like and it makes that child feel special too,” said Sharren.

For pre-schoolers, the school has a four-year-old club that is still evolving.

“We have two kindergartens, a kohanga reo and many pre-schools close to our school. We have just started a Tapuwae Hou (New Footprints) Club. Twice a month four-year-olds visit and participate in our junior kapa haka sessions and spend time in our new entrant classes or spending half an hour in the library with me reading a book or playing games. This seems to meet some of the kindergarten’s needs too in terms of what they want to provide,” said Sharren.

At the other end of the school, Waitara Central works closely with the nearby intermediate to smooth the transition to intermediate.

Teachers and past pupils at the intermediate come and talk to the Year 6s, who will later visit the intermediate, particularly to spend some time in the technology classes.

“So when they start next year, some of the fear of the unknown has been addressed.

“The SENCO of the intermediate and the principal meet with me and the teachers of our senior students, and discuss the children so they can place them in a supportive class environment, so they get to know the kids a bit more. The tumuaki/principal spends time in each class informally chatting about the intermediate and answering questions as well. So we’ve got a lot of liaison between the schools,” said Sharren.

Local schools work closely together and Sharren says there is strong support between the principals.

“We do touch base on specific children as need be. Because we’re so open, the principal can ring me [about past students] and say this has cropped up, what do you know, how did you deal with it? We’ve got open conversation,” said Sharren.

“The whanau connections between the schools and the high school are huge, so it’s important we have that shared knowledge.”