



NZPF Position Paper Principal Professional Learning Communities

Background

The Principal Professional Learning Communities (PPLC) initially began as the Mentor Project in 1999. The vision for these was to provide development for principals as school leaders. The environment at the time was one where principals were still focused to a large degree on compliance and associated management tasks. Although this was not the plan, the Mentor Group discussions tended to reflect this focus.

Since 2001, the Government focus has moved to student learning. This is the key focus for the Ministry of Education and Education Review Office and is reflected in the purpose of the Schooling Strategy (Draft),

The ultimate aim of the Schooling Strategy will be to contribute to improved education outcomes for all students.

Principals have welcomed this development to the extent that curriculum and student progress is now their key area of discussion.

The Role of Principals in Relation to Student Learning

This is the *'hard stuff'* of principalship because it requires:

- The very best leadership skills and the ability to lead from the *front, behind* and *within* as appropriate;
- The ability to change how people think about their work;
- The ability to change how people act in their classrooms;
- Up to date curriculum knowledge;
- Skills in analysing and using data to ensure that evidence informs pedagogical decisions;
- A commitment to their own on-going professional learning – especially evidence based research;
- The ability to assimilate new learning within the school programme as appropriate to the needs of the school.

There Has Never Been a Greater Need for PPLC

1. Educators, including all at the school level, are expected to make evidence-based decisions. This includes knowledge of current research and the ability to interpret and use it within schools and classrooms. The 'Information Age' means that there is a continual flow of new research becoming available.
2. PPLC are structured such that principals meet and talk about research and how it can be applied at the school level. Group meetings include discussion based on reflective questions aimed at eliciting deep thinking and learning. Many of the readings are focused on leadership and in particular leading change in schools. Principals are required to keep a written record of their reflections. Thus principals are exposed to the latest research, are required to think deeply and record their thoughts. This is reflective practice.

3. NZPLC provides the necessary expertise and structure. Academic staff provide current quality articles and appropriate reflective questions. NZPLC staff monitor the work and learning of the groups and there is a strong sense of accountability.

PPLC are Valued by Principal Participants

NZPF is strongly committed to the continuation of PPLC. Feedback from members suggests that they are valued. Noted below are some written comments sent to NZPF:

“The themes of Leadership, Culture and Change all extended my knowledge and ability to make the changes I deemed necessary to enhance student learning.” (Janice Gulbransen, Brightwater School, Nelson).

“Having read selected professional articles, we meet and spend an afternoon discussing these and the impact the ideas might have on our own professional practice or in our schools.” (Margaret Harris, Takapuna Primary School, Auckland).

“The readings are relevant and challenging and the discussions are focused on the impact on our schools. In summing up, the group is focused, there is accountability and the work done is relevant.” (Peter Simpson, Belfast School, Christchurch).

“Many of us in our group knew that we should be doing more professional reading in our job as principal but the contract gives us the scaffolding for that to happen and an opportunity for discussion and action. I now do professional readings as part of staff meetings with my own staff after seeing the benefits from the principal discussions. Eileen also chooses topics that are very relevant but not often focused on – appraisals, relationship building, defensive behaviour etc. – really crucial things needed for a principal to be more effective. The action plans are also good, as we have to show there has been a change as a result of the readings and discussion.” (Diane Paterson, Myross Bush School, Southland).

To Conclude

The Ministry of Education has provided excellent development for beginning principals. The Principal Development Planning Centres will assist principals to develop professionally as individual principals and this will no doubt impact on their schools. The value of the Principal Professional Learning Communities is that they continually expose principals to current research within a collegial culture and leads to a close examination of practice.