Collaboration in Action:

Lessons from a Community of Practice

There is a growing body of research which shows that schools who work together are more effective in improving the quality of teaching and student learning, and in supporting school development. Place-based school networks support local solutions, which are relevant to local contexts and community needs, and can support improvement through the sharing of innovation and good practice.

Why might schools collaborate?

New Zealand has a highly decentralised and autonomous education system. The Tomorrow's School review recognised that previous reforms in education have contributed to a culture of distrust between schools, stifling collaboration.[1] "There is an urgent need to 'reset' the system to focus on collective relationships of interdependency and collaboration, the sharing and spread of effective practices, and ongoing improvement."

The benefits of high quality collaboration are numerous. Collaboration allows greater opportunity for schools to provide mutual support and solve complex problems with each other. This results in economies of scale, shared workloads, and optimisation of time, resources and expertise. The literature points to the positive impacts of such collaboration on teacher practice and learner outcomes. The long-term outcomes of such collaborative efforts are authentic achievement and meaningful learning.

1 Tomorrow's School Government response. Retrieved from: conversation.education.govt.nz/assets/TSR/November-2019/TSR-Government-Response-WEB.pdf

Kahukura Community of Practice is one approach to school collaboration

New Zealand schools have been exploring different approaches to collaboration through the establishment of school networks, clusters, or communities of learning or practice. This case study provides an insight into the journey of a network of schools, the Kahukura Community of Practice (Kahukura). It highlights critical lessons which can guide national policy and support others looking to improve teaching practice. The study, led by Te Ihuwaka – ERO's Education Evaluation Centre, builds upon ERO's 'Collaboration in Action' series of reports. These reports present examples of collaboration between schools in order to encourage and support collective improvement.

Kahukura is composed of seven schools in Christchurch.[2] It was formed from existing relationships between the schools in response to the 2010 and 2011 Christchurch earthquakes. There was general agreement across this network that working together provided greater benefits than working in isolation.

The principals of the schools involved felt that through working together they could:

- create local solutions to the local educational problems affecting their learners

- provide collective and shared leadership

- support pedagogical innovation and professional development

- sustain an ongoing focus on capability building and school improvement through pooling and sharing resources.

What did ERO find?[3]

The vision for Kahukura was shared by all the principals but delivering the vision and implementation of the strategic plan was up to each individual school.

Kahukura's vision is:

"… supporting responsive, collaborative learning; connecting students and teachers across the south-west of Christchurch."

The vision provided structure to Kahukura and drove deliberate actions across each of the schools. ERO also found that this network provided substantial collegial support outside of the focus areas for each of the principals involved.

The principals had strong, well established relationships with each other

The principals had high levels of trust with each other, were highly collaborative, and supported a collective approach to decision-making and accountability. They valued the collegial, consultative approach they had for Kahukura strategic decisions, while they retained decision-making for their own school's needs.

"[Kahukura] has developed a view of not having specific, but distributed leadership and maintaining individuality."

Team leader

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2 The schools belonging to Kahukura are: Addington Te Kura Taumata; Cashmere Primary Te Pae Kererū; Christchurch South Intermediate; Somerfield Te Kura Wairepo; Sacred Heart School (Addington); Te Kura o Huriawa Thorrington; and Te Ara Koropiko.

3 ERO visited each of the schools in the Kahukura CoP during Term 2, 2019. ERO spoke to staff, students, and parents, and looked at Kahukura's documentation. This data was supported with the use of a new method called Social Network Analysis (SNA), which measures the strength and quality of relationships.

Each principal held responsibility for a focus area

Each principal led one of the five focus areas, which were introduced over time. The intent of the focus areas was to establish student-centred teaching practice and to raise students' sense of wellbeing. The five focus areas are listed below.

- **Deep learning:** Prioritising students' competency development through designing learning, which focuses on learning partnerships, learning environments, pedagogical practices (such as student agency), and leveraging digital technology.

- **Cultural responsiveness:** Building teacher and student capability with te reo Māori and improving educational outcomes for Māori students through the Māori Achievement Collaborative.

- **Creativity:** Through music, using creativity and personal expression to develop key competencies and self-esteem of students.

- **Leadership:** Professional learning and development (PLD) to build leadership in Kahukura and providing mentoring and professional guidance to Lead teachers.

- **Inclusiveness:** Lead teachers who were also Special Educational Needs Coordinators allocating learners to Mana Ake (a Canterbury DHB primary school wellbeing initiative) and supporting teachers with PLD opportunities and strategies to identify how individual students can be supported socially, emotionally and in their learning.

A 'Lead teacher' role was pivotal to changes in teaching practice

Lead teachers were identified for each focus area to support teachers' adoption of new practice. Lead teachers designed and trialled changes in practice with teachers and learners in their school. Lead teachers and principals for each focus area met regularly and shared ideas, suggestions and reflections based on their school's experiences.

A key feature of the approach was sustaining and building on focus areas over time, ensuring that new practice became deeply embedded within each school.

Teachers became more confident in their practice

With Lead teachers' guidance, teachers increasingly opened their practice to scrutiny by colleagues in their school, and increasingly across Kahukura. Teachers were mostly connected to Kahukura through their Lead teachers' connections.

Students across Kahukura told ERO about authentic learning experiences, an increased understanding of the learning process and opportunities to extend their agency.

The boards of trustees in each school supported the priority placed on student learning and wellbeing, and each released operational funding to support Kahukura. Operational funding supported: release time for Lead teachers; professional learning and development opportunities; and joint teacher-only days across Kahukura.

Internal monitoring and evaluation were developing across outcome areas

Kahukura leaders set up and monitored student outcomes in the deep learning focus area. Tracking of student wellbeing was also developed. Lead teachers for the inclusiveness focus area worked with the Ministry of Education to develop a database across Kahukura schools to track student wellbeing. Kahukura now collects data with Mana Ake, which includes information on children's anxiety levels, 'Ongoing Resourcing Scheme' funded learners, home factors, and contact with 'Resource Teacher: Learning and Behaviour'.

Implications for collaboration between schools

Overall, ERO found the Kahukura model supports and builds collective improvement through the use of focus areas. The Kahukura model clearly adds value through networking, creation of knowledge and exploring innovation. Kahukura's approach also looks to sustain change through Lead teachers. These roles shifted over time from implementation to maintenance of practice as they become more embedded.

While collaboration through a community of practice is not a 'one size fits all' model, there are lessons from Kahukura for other schools to consider when collaborating. The following prompts and questions can be considered, along with examples from Kahukura.

1. Have a shared vision and priorities

Questions for consideration include:

- What are we hoping to achieve?

- What evidence supports what we want to do?

- How will collaboration help us achieve this?

- Could we achieve this without collaboration?

- Do we have strong processes for determining priorities for action?

- Is there clarity around our collective priorities?

- Are the conversations we have focussed on improving teaching and learner outcomes?

- Do we frequently review our priorities and explore new opportunities?

- Could we build on existing practices and collaborations to innovate?

Learnings from Kahukura

Schools in Kahukura had a high level of commitment to working together, founded on trust and common values.

Their agreed vision provided motivation for their collective action. Being deliberate early on in identifying only a small number of priorities to jointly work on contributed to success.

Kahukura then built on their success and explored new opportunities to extend their focus and further innovate. Kahukura built on existing focus areas and added more over time.

2. Clear decision-making processes and communication are important

Having clarity around how decisions are made and agreed actions are delivered is an important feature of collaborative networks.

School leaders could consider the following:

- How does our network or collective make decisions?

- Who do we consult about decisions?

- Is there joint ownership for the decisions we make?

- How do we effectively communicate our decisions and priorities?

- How do we ensure our agreed actions are progressed?

Learnings from Kahukura

Principals agreed to a consensual approach to decision making. They met and communicated regularly and felt comfortable sharing concerns with each other.

3. Distributed leadership, role clarity and a shared direction are key

Working collectively requires clarity around roles and responsibilities, and shared direction. Leaders may want to think about the following prompts:

- How will the commitment of working together be achieved, while being clear on what decisions and actions will be retained by individuals and/or schools?

- What resources (including expertise) do we need to achieve our goals?

- What resources do we have available across the collective that can support the initiative?

- How do we engage everyone who needs to be involved in our improvement journey?

Learnings from Kahukura

Kahukura developed clear structures to support their change programme. This included clarity around the role each participating principal took on, and the effective distribution of leadership across participating schools through identifying dedicated Lead teachers. The model of implementation developed in the early phases of the network now operates to guide subsequent improvement initiatives.

Critical to the success of Lead teachers has been explicitly acknowledging these roles as leaders across the collective. The role has been supported by release time, resources, and training to support their mentoring, coaching and facilitative roles.

Having a dedicated lead principal to provide guidance, support and a dedicated point of contact into Kahukura's leadership has also ensured effective communication in the progress of each initiative.

4. Calibrate the network to the local context

When leadership determines how a network could develop, it is useful to consider the scope and boundaries of the network, such as:

- What is the desired governance structure of the network?

- Who needs to be 'central' to the network, and who can be at the 'periphery'?

- Are there further networking opportunities, at different levels, within the collaboration?

- Is there anyone close to the network who could be brought in and why?

Learnings from Kahukura

Kahukura principals championed the structure of their network and established Lead teacher positions. Lead teachers and principals were central to the network, while collaboration between teachers was more at the periphery in individual schools. Kahukura also actively engaged with the Mana Ake network to support a common approach and resourcing for learners with additional needs.

5. Recognise the importance of relationships

Relationships are the basis of collaboration. It is useful to think about what collaboration may look like with the three characteristics of *purpose, frequency* and *between who* intertwined.

Some questions for consideration include:

- Is this collaboration for general conversations or for developing and evaluating an innovation?

- Is collaboration happening daily, weekly, monthly or yearly? Depending on the purpose of the collaboration, the importance of frequency will vary.

- What are the characteristics of people collaborating (for example, is it limited to senior leaders or does it involve everyone)? Do they have the capacity or capability?

- If key relationships were to cease, how could this effect collaboration across the network? How could potential negative effects be mitigated?

Learnings from Kahukura

Leaders mitigated the risk of key people leaving by having a range of relationships linked into the network. Not one Lead teacher or principal had sole responsibility for a focus area.

6. Pay attention to resourcing

Resourcing (financial and time) to collaborate will need to be scrutinised. It is useful to consider the plan of action and ask the following questions:

- How much resourcing will this take?

- What is the opportunity cost of resourcing (i.e. if time and money is put into collaboration, is anything forgone)?

- Could any opportunity cost negatively impact on what we are trying to achieve?

Learnings from Kahukura

The boards of trustees shared the vision of Kahukura from the start. They actively supported the priority placed on student learning and wellbeing by releasing operational funding to support the community of practice.

7. Monitor and measure impacts and progress

Systematic monitoring and evaluation can help support a plan of action. It can also determine what is working and identify any shifts required. From the outset it is important in goal or target setting to understand what success will look like, in agreement with each member, in addition to associated stakeholders such as boards of trustees.

Collaboration will need to have a clear purpose. The effort, time and resources which go into collaboration must be commensurate to the result achieved. Consider:

- How will we know that our actions and investments result in demonstrable improvement?

- Do we have the appropriate level of buy-in at each layer of the network, including: governance; senior leaders; teachers; relevant stakeholders; parents and students?

- What are our measures of success, including key targets or indicators?

- Are we generating data to understand our impacts on collaboration and learner outcomes?

- Do we understand the impact of our initiatives on all learner outcomes?

- Are we transparent with our findings?

- How do we celebrate our successes?

It is also important to periodically build in time to reflect on how the network is going.

It can be useful to consider:

- where the network has been successful

- what might not be working so well

- if something should be discontinued

- where focus can be expanded and evolved to further address areas of common interest.

Learnings from Kahukura

A number of the initiatives Kahukura adopted had a strong research foundation and involved the adoption of programmes, which explicitly emphasised data collection and monitoring.

Additional resources on collaboration

- ERO's Collaboration in Action series, which include:

    - Collaboration in practice: Insights into Implementation

    - Communities of Learning | Kāhui Ako: Collaboration to Improve Learner Outcomes

    - Communities of Learning | Kāhui Ako: Working Towards Collaborative Practice

    - Communities of Learning | Kāhui Ako in Action

- Communities of Learning | Kāhui Ako – Education in New Zealand

- Building a Thriving Community of Learning – Education in New Zealand

- 7 Principles for Cultivating Communities of Practice

- Promoting and Assessing Value Creation in Communities and Networks: A Conceptual Framework

- Evaluating PK–12 Professional Learning Communities: An Improvement Science Perspective

- An Exploratory Case Study of PBIS Implementation Using Social Network Analysis

- Getting Ideas into Action: Building Networked Improvement Communities in Education

- A Review of Research on the Impact of Professional Learning Communities on Teaching Practice and Student Learning

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