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Māori Education Research
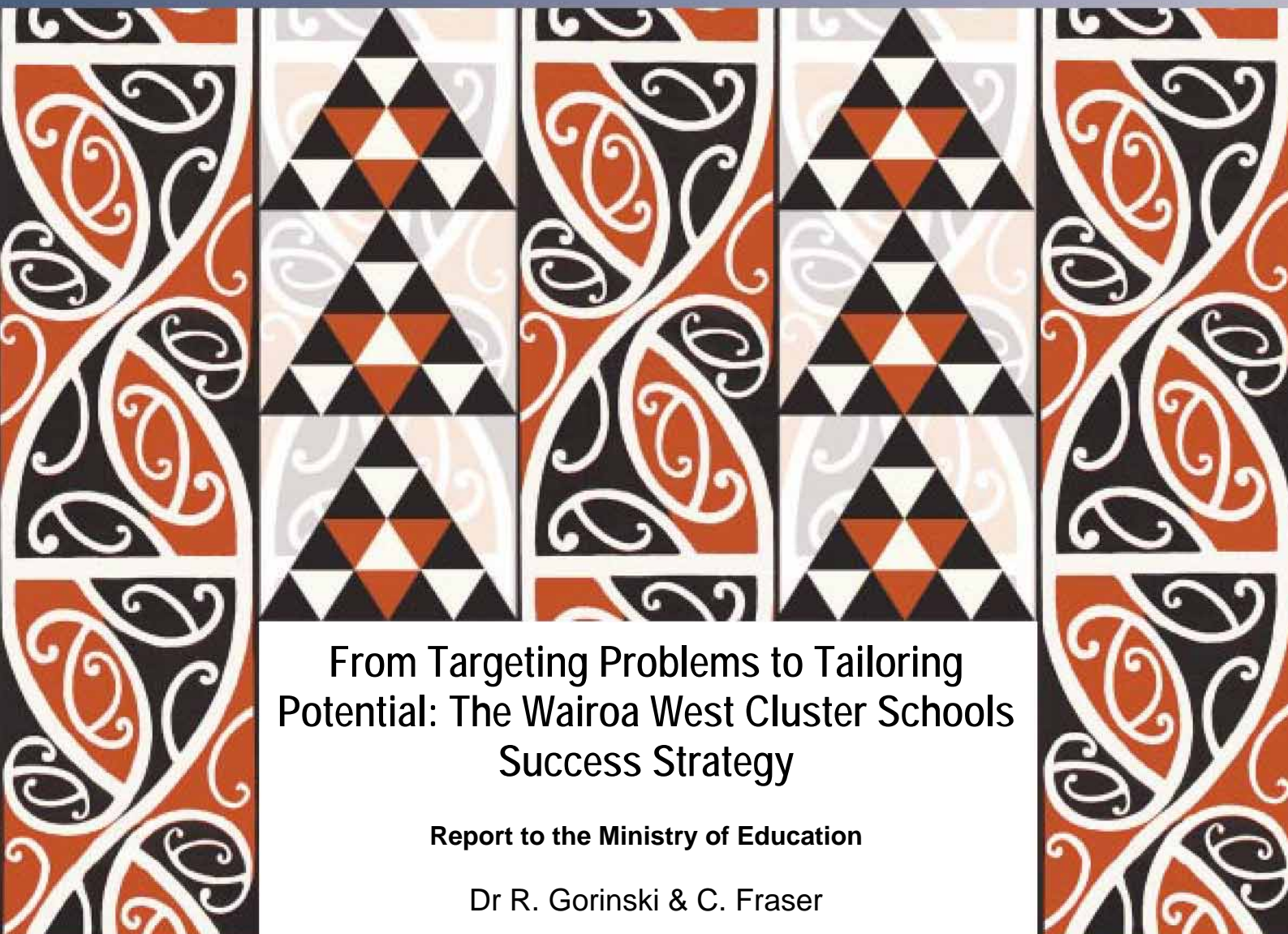
From Targeting Problems to Tailoring Potential: The Wairoa West Cluster Schools Success Strategy

Report to the Ministry of Education

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MĀTAURANGA MĀORI

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarises the changes in schooling practice in a group of remote rural schools, with a combined roll of approximately 120 students constituting the Wairoa West Cluster, as the result of the short term appointment of a Schools' Director. It describes the situation prior to the establishment of the Wairoa West Cluster (WWC) in 1998, chronicles the alternative educational interventions considered, the evolution of the Schools' Director role, and the changes in student achievement, teaching practice, governance and management practices, and the development of a professional learning community, following the appointment of the Schools' Director. It concludes with an examination of the issues surrounding the sustainability of the progress made in the two years since the Director's appointment ended in 2004.

The purpose of the report is threefold – one, to inform policy development and contribute to the body of knowledge about leadership in small schools; two, to document the achievements of all stakeholders; and three, to provide insights into sustainable practices in remote rural schools, through an historical account of the initiative.

The research was guided by a qualitative case study design and used focus groups, face to face and telephone interviews, as well as document analysis as the primary data gathering tools. The data are representative of one cluster of seven schools – all full primary schools. The process of analysis sought to explore the role of the Schools' Director and also, to uncover what factors brought about the changes in student achievement, teaching practice, governance and management practices and the professional learning community, across the cluster schools.

Focus group sessions were conducted with key stakeholders associated with the Cluster schools including the Schools' Director 2002-2004, the Ministry of Education's Schooling Improvement Coordinator, two members of the Cluster Steering Committee who served during the years of the Schools' Director intervention and principals and Board representatives from five of the cluster schools. These focus group discussions were supported by interviews with five of the key stakeholders. An extensive document analysis was undertaken, tracking the changing approaches and shifts in management/governance and student achievement outcomes through both publicly accessible reports (Education Review Office – ERO school reviews) and internal records (Ministry correspondence and submissions; milestone reports; minutes from Cluster meetings, ERO third party reviews).

In addition to geographical difficulties of isolated location and access, the Cluster schools shared a generalised history of student under-achievement. Although there were individual variations amongst schools, ERO reviews had systematically documented dysfunctional Boards; financial mismanagement; staff retention difficulties; and poor curriculum delivery across the region. Early strategies to address these deficiencies included the appointment of a School Executive Administrator, the concept of a roving principal and the application of Section 78 of the Education Act to install a statutory manager (the latter two options were discarded before implementation).

At this time, Schooling Improvement priorities had begun to refocus on a student achievement outcomes approach, rather than school performance. Consequently, when a Schools' Director was appointed for the WWC in term 4 2002, this focus was extended across all participating schools, and improved outcomes were rapidly realised. Consistent strategies for student assessment, data collection, analysis and reporting were adopted across the Cluster, and then used for planning purposes at classroom and Board of Trustees (Board) level. Communication amongst cluster staff and Boards improved, with monthly principal meetings and

regular Steering Committee meetings. A weekly newsletter to teacher/principals was implemented, and newsletters and surveys of parents and community became regular features of schooling life. Professional development for teachers and Boards was prioritised. The focus of the professional learning was upon issues of student achievement and curriculum, and for Boards, it included workshops on finance, property management, and staff recruitment. Importantly, cluster activities – academic, cultural and sporting – were arranged for students to get together and reduce the effects of social isolation.

The initiative yielded some extremely successful outcomes for the Wairoa West communities. Key outcomes included enhanced student academic and social achievement; improved staff retention, improved governance practice; a more clearly delineated interface between governance and management; the implementation of a more effective and reflective style of teaching practice; and significantly, the development of a strong and effective professional learning community. These successes appear to be due to a number of factors, key among them being the commonality of needs and the enthusiasm and motivation of stakeholders – the Schools' Director, Boards, teacher/principals, parents and community, and Ministry personnel with oversight of the project.

The Schools' Director's cessation of tenure at the end of 2004 coincided with a number of changes accompanying school closures and amalgamations under the Network Review. The resultant disquiet within the cluster led to a temporary drop in student achievement outcomes. By the end of 2005, and throughout 2006 however, there was evidence of elevated student achievement outcomes, with results indicating that learners were surpassing national averages in several subject areas. This sustained momentum was undoubtedly, partially attributable to the strong foundation of systems and policies established under the Schools' Director, and partly to the ongoing participation of several key participants who assumed responsibility for passing on the WWC professional culture.

Moving into the future, there is considerable concern amongst Cluster stakeholders, that the gains achieved under this initiative are retained. Many involved believe that sustainability currently rests with a handful of key personnel, and that the Cluster schools remain vulnerable to staff and Board turnover, although this has improved considerably since the intervention. Meanwhile discussion about how to consolidate and resource Cluster practices continues. This has been an energy-intensive programme in terms of time, money and goodwill. On-going, sustainable success will be dependent upon the continued high level of contribution from Boards, principals, communities and the Ministry, and their collective willingness to remain a part of this professional learning community.

Key Learnings

- Improved performance of the WWC schools and concomitant enhanced student achievement outcomes only occurred once school leadership and management moved their focus from operational matters to student achievement. Curriculum goals, requisite resources and appropriate pedagogical and assessment practices needed to become the focus before enhanced student achievement outcomes were realised.
- The collection and analysis of data across the WWC schools provided a significant population for meaningful comparisons with peers and national norms, and assisted Boards, principals and teachers to identify gaps in teaching and learning for evidenced-based planning. It also enabled principals/teachers to be responsive to the range of student learning needs in vertical class groupings prevalent in small rural schools.

- Progress is cumulative: in this case, the leaps in improvement that occurred under the leadership of the Schools' Director from 2002-2004 were facilitated by the raft of earlier supportive interventions and Schooling Improvement projects.
- The key to stability of school management and staffing, and to longer-term sustainability of progress, lies in the establishment and maintenance of strong professional learning communities, with a distributed leadership approach. In this way, expertise becomes a shared resource, reducing reliance on individual personalities.
- Relationships are crucial and must be fostered by all stakeholders including the Ministry, community, parents/whānau and Boards, principals and teachers, and students. Learning is a collaborative, organic process and effective relationships and communication at all levels is essential for facilitating and maximising enhanced social, cultural and academic achievement outcomes.

A. BACKGROUND

Purpose

This report aims to provide the Ministry of Education (Ministry) and the Wairoa West community with a summary of the changes in schooling practice in a group of remote rural schools as the result of the appointment of a Schools' Director for nine school terms. Possible uses for this report include:

- to inform policy development and contribute to the body of knowledge about leadership in small schools;
- to document the achievements of, and contributions made by the Ministry representatives, Board members, principals/teachers, community and the Schools' Director herself; and
- to assist with the sustainability of the gains made by the Wairoa West Cluster schools since 2002, by providing a history of the initiative for new appointees.

Setting

The five schools that currently comprise the Wairoa West Cluster – Frasertown, Ohuka, Putere, Ruakituri and Waikaremoana are all primary schools situated inland from Wairoa, the closest significant township, at distances ranging from 8 to 62 kilometres, often over unsealed and winding roads. Other schools which were part of the initial cluster, but have since closed are Ardkeen, Te Reinga, Tuai and Tukemokihi.

Table 1: Schools and cluster involvement

Ardkeen	1998 – 2003 (closed)
Frasertown	2005 – present day
Ohuka	1998 – present day
Putere	2003 - present day
Ruakituri	1998 – present day
Te Reinga	1998 – 2004 (closed)
Tuai	1998 – 2004 (closed)
Tukemokihi	1998 – 2006 (closed)
Waikaremoana	2004 – present day

Figure 1: Wairoa West Cluster schools, past and present
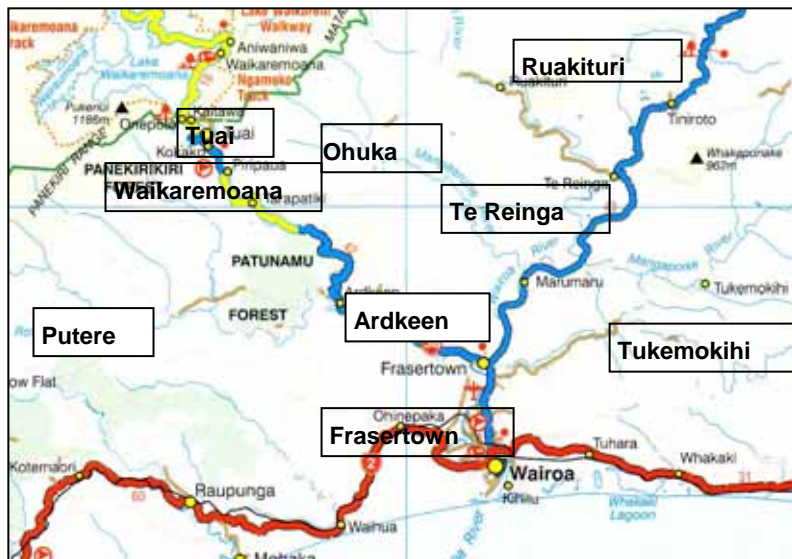
The communities served by the schools are mainly oriented around farming and forestry. Many of the farms in the area are owned by multiple or absentee owners, so that a large proportion of families whose children attend the schools are those of farm workers and managers, who tend to move frequently on seasonal contracts. Overall, the region has a declining population, high unemployment, a history of low levels of education and low household income (Martin, 1997). While rural schools nationally show a "slight tendency towards the higher range of the socio-economic spectrum" (ERO Education Evaluation Reports, 2001), with 59 percent in the decile 6 to 10 range (national average 50%), in the Wairoa West Cluster, only one school (20%) is above a decile 4 rating.

Table 2: Demographics for Wairoa West Cluster Schools

School	Decile	Roll	Teachers/ Principal	% Māori	% Pākehā/ European
Frasertown	3	78	5	58%	42%
Ohuka	7	14	1	64%	36%
Putere	4	16	1	75%	25%
Ruakituri	4	15	1	100%	-
Waikaremoana	1	50	4	88%	12%

A feature of the composition of the schools is the high percentage of Māori students compared to a national Māori population percentage of 15.1% and a national Māori student population percentage of 21.6%. (MOE, 2007, p.45) In every cluster school, Māori are the dominant ethnic group.

The cluster schools are also typified by a vulnerability to staffing turnover, which has been significant since the abolition of country service in the 1970s. One of the fundamental changes resulting from Tomorrow's Schools, introduced in October 1989, was to make Boards of Trustees responsible for staff appointments. Consequently, small rural schools were placed in direct competition with larger, urban institutions. This has tended to translate into a limited supply of teachers applying for positions, and a problematic pathway to

promotion for rural principals (Martin, 1997). Recruitment and retention of staff was certainly an issue for the WWC prior to 2001, and undoubtedly always will be an issue for this region, however, retention in terms of length of service has improved markedly.

In addition, the focus of Tomorrow's Schools' Boards is on delivering education, in contrast to the earlier role of School Committees supporting the Ministry to run schools, particularly in areas such as fundraising and community liaison. Rural New Zealand, with its different, non-corporate skill base has been ill-equipped to adjust to this new era. The Wairoa West community has exemplified this dilemma in terms of the difficulties they have experienced with school governance and management.

Over the past decade, roading in the Wairoa rural region has improved, and electronic technology has become more accessible through schools, if not yet as a standard feature of most households. However, these communities remain some of the most remote and isolated of New Zealand's rural districts. With geographic, social, economic, historic and technological challenges to overcome, these communities remain strongly supportive of their local schools. It is important to remember, as noted by the Education Review Office (ERO) in their 2001 Education Evaluation Report on Rural Education, that:

> *Parents living in rural areas share the same educational goals as their urban counterparts. They want to know that their children are in a safe environment, they want them to reach their academic potential, and they want them to emerge from the school system well prepared for the world of work or tertiary study…However, for parents in many rural areas, the range of options available is limited (p.1).*

B. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This evaluation was guided by a qualitative, cumulative case study approach which brought together the multiple case studies across the participating school communities to answer the research questions. The finer points of the case study approach in qualitative research are detailed by a number of authors (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, Burns, 1994; Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1994; Yin, 1989). It is sufficient for purposes of this evaluation, to note that the focus of the research was upon qualitative issues which probed the changes in schooling practice in a group of remote rural schools as a result of the short term appointment of a Schools' Director. It also sought to a) compare and contrast the quality of leadership in the Wairoa West schools prior to 1998 and at the end of 2005; b) articulate the role and impact of the Schools' Director upon the educational community; c) identify what brought about the changes in student achievement, governance practice, teaching practice, the management and governance interface and the professional learning community and d) identify what aspects of improved practices have been sustained.

For these reasons, case study was selected as the most appropriate methodological tool. A case study methodology provided a useful way to systematically look at the specific school cluster cases, collect, analyse and interpret the data and report the findings. In sum, case study was selected because it enabled the examination of specific teaching, learning, management, governance and professional learning community practices; provided a comprehensive description of those practices and aided the identification of areas of sustainability.

Credibility of the findings was enhanced through the triangulation of additional data gathering sources including interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The data collection processes implemented throughout this inquiry have been guided by the ethical principles adopted by the American Anthropological Association. These included written communication with participants explaining that their participation was voluntary, confidential, and that their anonymity would be maintained (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992), as well as discussions, either by telephone or email with key personnel. Letters explaining the project aims, and accompanying informed consent forms were given to all participants. The protection of identity was effected at all times through the non recording of names on focus group data.

Selection of Participants

Potential participants included parents, Board Chairpersons, teachers and principals in each of the cluster schools, as well as the Schools' Director and Wairoa West Schools' Cluster Chairperson. The initial contact emails/letters explained the nature of the research and sought the cooperation of respondents to participate in focus group discussions, and/or interviews. In total, fourteen people contributed to the data collection. This included five principals/teachers, eight Board representatives and the Ministry Schooling Improvement Coordinator. Twelve respondents contributed to the focus group discussions as noted in Table 3.

Table 3: Focus group participants (Total N = 12)

School	Group One: Teacher/Principal	Group Two: Board of Trustees representatives (past & present)
Frasertown	1	2
Ohuka	1	2
Putere	1	2
Ruakituri	1	1
Waikaremoana	1	-

In addition to the focus groups, five individual interviews were conducted. Four out of the five participants interviewed also contributed to the focus group discussions. Interviews were conducted with:

- a past Board member and Steering Committee representative
- two retired members of the Steering Committee
- the Ministry of Education Schooling Improvement Coordinator, (in addition to telephone and email communication) and
- the Schools' Director 2002-2004.

Data Collection and Analysis

Primary data for this evaluation then, were collected from the 14 respondents who attended focus group meetings or participated in interviews. To enhance the credibility and dependability of the findings (Anderson, 1998), the data were triangulated with secondary data gleaned from document analysis of a range of Ministry reports and relevant documentation. Focus group discussions were the primary data gathering tool for working with principals and Board representatives.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are particularly suited to this type of social research in that they provide a powerful means for gaining insight into the opinions of the particular groups involved. Broad questions for this research were provided by the Ministry and these provided the framework for the focus group discussions. Questions permitted probing into ambiguous answers and the context and reasoning behind the answers.

A loosely structured interview schedule based on the Ministry provided broad research questions, was used for both face-to-face and telephone interviews with other key personnel.

Interviews

An interview is a "purposeful conversation usually between two people (but sometimes involving more) that is directed by one in order to get information" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982, p. 135). The major purpose of an interview is to learn to see the world from the eyes of the person being interviewed – their perspective. For purposes of this research, a loosely structured interview schedule was used. This kind of interview used the same questions for all participants. These questions provided a frame of reference for participants'' answers, in addition to permitting probing into the context and reasoning behind answers given. According to Taylor and Bogdan (1984), "open-ended interviews are face-to-face encounters between the researcher and

informants, directed towards understanding informant's perspectives on their lives, experiences or situations as expressed in their own words" (p.77). Five respondents participated in interviews for this study – four males and one female.

Document Analysis

Document analysis, as its name implies, is the analysis of the written or visual content of a document. In this research, document analysis enabled an accurate historical tracing of the WWC arrangement to be conducted and this was used as confirmatory (Gorinski, 1997) data following the focus group discussions. The documents examined for this research were readily accessible and provided information that 'filled the picture'. As a qualitative tool, document analysis provided a source of information that helped to validate the oral interpretations of the situation (Strachan, 1997), as well as providing information that was not obtained in the focus groups.

The form of analysis for this study was one of qualitative interpretation. Essentially, the analysis and interpretation of the data sought to assess the overall effectiveness of the Wairoa West Schooling Improvement Initiative within the specific cluster of schools, and to explore the wider effects of the initiative on various stakeholders within the school communities.

Findings from this evaluation are discussed in the following section under three key headings including: the evolution of the Schools' Director intervention, the impact of the Schools' Director role and the post intervention phase 2005-2006.

C. FINDINGS

Section 1: Evolution of the Schools' Director Intervention

Situation prior to 1998

The seven individual schools that had been early members of the WWC group prior to, and during the Schooling Improvement and Schools' Director interventions, were Ardkeen, Ohuka, Putere, Ruakituri, Te Reinga, Tuai and Tukemokihi (See Table 1, p. 8). As a cluster, they presented a range of risks and issues common to small, remote primary schools across Aotearoa New Zealand. While there was certainly variation amongst schools concerning the prevalence and magnitude of the issues, there was enough commonality that these concerns were collectively documented to include:

- community friction;
- inconsistent competencies of Boards;
- inconsistent principal competencies;
- rapid transition of principals;
- difficulties in multi-level teaching;
- difficulties for principals balancing administration and teaching duties; and/or
- students with learning difficulties using up the time and energy of sole-charge principals.

The overall result of these risks was evidenced in:

- dysfunctional Boards;
- financial mismanagement;
- staff retention difficulties; and
- poor curriculum delivery (WWC, 2002, Memorandum of agreement for joint cluster initiatives, adapted from Workman, 1999, p. 26).

A series of reports from the ERO highlighted the difficulties faced by the WWC schools. The following representative extracts provide evidence of the nature of those difficulties (Workman, 1999, p.14):

> *Continued Board support is needed to overcome the problems resulting from poor governance, board disharmony and financial mismanagement (1999).*

> *During 1998, there was a period of community and board tension related to ongoing personnel issues (1999).*

> *After extensive external intervention and assistance, the Board seems unable to progress independently and carry out its governance responsibilities to an acceptable standard (1997).*

> *The school's involvement in the Ministry of Education's school support initiative…has enabled board members to better understand their governance and management roles and responsibilities (1999).*

Overall, during the period from the mid to late 1990's, there were low levels of achievement for most Ministry expected outcomes, and the quality of education for students was at risk in five out of six Wairoa West cluster schools. One of the schools, Te Reinga, had been the subject of six ERO reports over the previous five years, with the November 1998 ERO Acceptability report evaluating "the quality of

governance, management and curriculum delivery as unsatisfactory and question[ing] the school's viability"
(ERO, 2000, School Support Project Evaluation, p. 10).

A key indicator of the reasons behind this situation was found in a paper seeking Ministry assistance for the
region - referring in this case to a grouping of five schools - Tukemokihi, Ardkeen, Ohuka, Kokako and
Tuai. The paper noted:

> *In the seven years since the inception of Tomorrow's Schools the five schools have had a total
> of 33 principals – an average of 6.6 each in seven years!" (original emphasis, Martin, 1997,
> p.5).*

Past and present Board members who contributed to this research confirmed the assessment of
dysfunctionality, commenting:

> *We had an image problem attracting and retaining good principals.*

> *A lot of our principals were very new...Boards were very poorly trained with no experience...In
> the country, it's just you on your own.*

> *Back country areas can be pretty ruthless if you don't perform [*and*]*

> *Some of the new principals left the whole profession, there was so little support.*

In response to these issues, representatives of schools throughout the region had been meeting in different
fora, recognising common challenges and accepting that the situation of loose and informal inter-school
relations and individual approaches to educational administration and delivery was severely limited in its
effectiveness. Consequently, a series of negotiations culminated in early 1998 with the formal establishment
of a Wairoa West Cluster of six schools - Ardkeen, Ohuka, Ruakituri, Te Reinga, Tuai and Tukemokihi.

Alternative initiatives

In May 1997, a group of schools, facilitated by The University of Waikato School Support Services adviser
met with a Ministry liaison officer to plan and implement a programme of support to improve the quality of
education, leadership and governance in the Wairoa West schools. The Ministry agreed to fund a School
Executive Administrator as part of a Schooling Improvement Project (Evaluation of Wairoa West Schools'
Project, 1998). The intention was to "relieve teaching principals of the pressure of administrative tasks so
that they can concentrate on teaching and learning" (ERO, 1999, Confirmed Accountability Review Report,
p. 8) and also to include "advice and guidance to Boards of Trustees" (Evaluation of Wairoa West Schools'
Project, 1998, Attachment 2, p. 6).

In February, 1998 an appointment was made for the School Executive Administrator position. The appointee
met regularly with, and reported to, a Cluster Coordinating Committee comprising of Board chairs, the
principals of the six schools, and two external representatives. During the planned three year period of the
initiative, schools were expected to make an increasing financial contribution to the cost of the enhanced
administrative support.

Early results were positive - training sessions for Board chairs and principals were organised, a common filing system for National Administrative Guidelines developed, and the November 1998 Evaluation of Wairoa West Schools' Project noted both trustees and principals feeling that they were more aware of legal requirements, and that therefore their level of compliance had increased. Stakeholders appreciated assistance with conflict resolution and the opportunity to share good practice and resources.

However, a number of insurmountable difficulties began to emerge, particularly in relation to financial management. Further, there were human resource issues, difficulties of delivery and confusion between schools over the School Executive Administrator's day-to-day management role. High turnover of Board chairs and principals continued, and attendance by some members at Cluster Coordinating Committee meetings was sporadic. Amongst those who did attend regularly, there was some dispute over the continued role and associated expenses of the School Support Services adviser and the need for regional self-management (Edwards & Hussein, 1998).

To this point, with the implementation of the School Executive Administrator position, improvements had begun. Indeed, ERO noted "her work is of the highest quality" (ERO, 2000, Confirmed Report: Schools Support Project Evaluation; Wairoa West Schools Support Project, p. 3). There were however, doubts about sustainability, and the extent and implementation of the position's authority. As one Board chair from this period stated:

> *We didn't have to take her advice, or even have her there. Nothing was enforced, or enforceable. With each blow-up, the teacher would leave and the Board would change.*

Above all, student achievement levels remained unsatisfactory and curriculum delivery weak. The same 2000 ERO report stated:

> *In many schools, assessment and evaluation systems are inadequate or inconsistently applied, so that high quality achievement information for individual students is not available and progress cannot be demonstrated (*p. 3*).*

This was reiterated by a principal who said "simply taking work off the principals didn't work – there wasn't enough of a major change of focus back into the classroom." This key understanding underpinned a shift in focus across the WWC schools away from classroom management, to a focus on student achievement and evidence based classroom practice.

The Ministry, realising that the schools would not be able to self-fund the initiative, agreed to underwrite the position until mid-2000, with modified performance targets and reduced contributions from participating schools. Meanwhile, a cluster meeting in late 1998 determined that the required improvements in governance, management and student learning outcomes needed to look beyond this first response. It was decided that an investigation of alternate options for collaboration and/or reorganisation of the Wairoa West schools was necessary. The Ministry made additional funds available to engage a consultant to prepare a feasibility report.

In November 1999, a consulting company produced the 'Schooling Options in the Wairoa West Area Report' which outlined a number of options to progress educational achievement in the region. The report (p.7) stated that:

> The key options available to the cluster are:
> - disestablishment;
> - continuation of current arrangements;
> - opening the cluster to a wider group of schools;
> - focusing the cluster on collaborative approaches;
> - employing a roving principal for the schools; and
> - seeking to combine school boards.

Consultancy personnel canvassed the different school communities and concluded that the concept of a roving principal was the best 'fit', likely:

> *to allow for the creation of more systematic approaches within the schools to address key issues…to facilitate collaborative ventures…[*with*] the potential to be financially viable (*Workman, 1999, p. 8*).*

However, the report did include two important provisos: first, that such an option could not ensure improved board capability (although it made the point that there were no more satisfactory options in the current regulatory environment that would better address the governance issues evidenced by the cluster schools); and second, that community support was by no means unanimous. Early dissention centred around a vulnerability to inter-school disharmony, the loss of school identity and autonomy, and the possibility of school site closures. Nonetheless, the recommendation to the Ministry was that the cluster continue to investigate the concept of a roving principal.

Subsequently, a discussion paper presented to the cluster committee by the Ministry Liaison Officer, led to the development of terms of reference for the feasibility study. This document sought clarification of legal and theoretical issues and the practical considerations associated with a roving principal, with a possible secondary measure of a combined schools' Board (MoE, 2000). At this stage, Te Reinga School stated that it did not wish to be part of the feasibility study, while Putere School, which had experienced similar problems to others in the cluster, joined the group. In February, 2000, The University of Waikato was contracted to undertake the study.

Throughout 2000, the University team met with boards, principals, staff and communities to refine the options for shared governance/management. Three milestone reports were produced in October, November and December 2000 detailing structures, costs, advantages and requirements for three options: one Board - one principal; six Boards - one principal; and six principals – one Board (University of Waikato, Milestone Two, 2000, p. 11). A proposed framework for the establishment, transition and implementation of the first option - one Board - one principal, was included in the third milestone. This framework was presented by the University researchers to a cluster group meeting with Ministry representatives and the School Executive Administrator in attendance. Boards were advised that the Ministry believed the report to be "of high quality… [offering] real benefit for teaching and learning" (Letter to Cluster Committee members, 29 January, 2001) and they were asked to think about their level of commitment in order for the Ministry to

proceed with the model (WWC, Minutes, 13/12/00). Boards were given until the end of February 2001 to accept or reject the model. Ministry communication at this time noted:

> *Indications are that Ohuka, Tukemokihi, Tuai and Putere will accept the model. The position of Ardkeen and Ruakituri is less clear. (*Te Reinga had not committed to the project at this time*).*

By March 2001, all six schools formally agreed, in principle, to progress the development of a combined governance/management structure, an initiative strongly supported by the ERO (2001, submission IS 51).

Little headway however, was made throughout 2001. The majority of Boards did not want to combine, and the idea of sourcing and managing a roving principal encountered union, financial and human barriers. The New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) union involvement was around salary issues; there were financial concerns over which school would hold the money and how it would be spent equitably; and there were human resource concerns over the sheer distances to be covered by a roving principal. Given NZEI's interest in participating in discussions around the creation of a new position, it was felt that other associated groups such as the School Trustees Association, the New Zealand Principals Federation and the Federated Farmers also needed to be informed (Hellyer, 2001 Memo).

During this period, key project participants arrived and departed. Concurrently, a Ministry appointed contract researcher attended some cluster group meetings and was charged with developing an alternative approach. Replacing the concept of a roving principal, the role of someone to assist the principals and the Boards was then developed, initially referred to as a "Curriculum Adviser" and later, "School Curriculum Director" (Minutes of the Wairoa West Combined Governance/Management Overview Group meeting, March 6, 2002). The actual mechanism for this appointment initially looked to ask all schools to simultaneously request a Section 78 intervention, resulting in the appointment of a Schools' Director.

This concept however, created considerable debate and renewed resistance from principals and NZEI. Section 78 of the Education Standards Act 2001 (which allows either the Secretary or Minister of Education to intervene in the management of a school) would have created a statutory authority which was not needed in all schools. Following discussions with the Ministry, the proposed Section 78 intervention was withdrawn, on the proviso that it would be only be implemented if the cluster failed to progress (MoE*: Draft submission,* June 2002).

Consequently, a Memorandum of Agreement was then prepared, presented to the cluster group, and signed by five schools - Ardkeen, Ohuka, Tuai, Te Reinga and Ruakituri. Tukemokihi abstained, while provision was made for Putere to join at a later date (Minutes of the Wairoa West Combined Governance/Management Overview Group meeting, June, 2002).

The Schools' Director position: Proposal to appointment

This document, the Memorandum of Agreement for Joint Cluster Initiatives (2002), contained three interrelated principal agreements. These included:

> (a*) locally owned solutions, (*b*) working collaboratively, and (*c*) drawing upon the support and services of a Schools' Director (*p. 4*).*

By signing the Memorandum, schools agreed to work "in good faith" with the Schools' Director, "trialling and using resources and educational approaches" and working "closely, harmoniously and in partnership with the Schools' Director, in order to develop and implement improvements in school governance, management and curriculum delivery approaches" (p. 5).

A cluster steering committee was to oversee the pursuit of specific outcomes to improve schooling in the region including measurable:
- improvements in student learning and curriculum delivery;
- improvements in staff retention, satisfaction and performance;
- improvements in board governance and school administration systems; and
- increases in collaborative education initiatives throughout the cluster (p. 5).

The Schools Director position was to be a one year appointment, funded by the Ministry until 31 December 2003 with a review against outcomes in May 2003. Outcomes sought by the Ministry were clearly defined, and included:
- the collection of student baseline data;
- improvements in student achievement, particularly Māori achievement within the first three months of appointment;
- a stock take of resources and
- a requirement that all schools be on the normal three year cycle of ERO reviews by December 2003.

Boards were to receive training, principals were to have professional development plans, and joint cluster activities at student, staff and Board levels were to occur at least once a term. If the midyear 2003 review showed these outcomes were being met, there was provision to extend the contract (MoE, 2002, submission IS 01 - 57).

Following acceptance of the Memorandum by the cluster schools, a Service Profile and Work Programme were developed. An advertisement for the position of Schools' Director was placed in the Education Gazette with email follow-up to draw the attention of a number of industry groups: the Gisborne Principals' Association, The University of Waikato School Support Services, and Wairoa Principals Association. A Selection Advisory Panel made up of one member from each signed-up school, shortlisted and interviewed candidates, and a smaller three-person panel made the final appointment (Minutes of the Wairoa West Combined Governance/Management Overview Group meeting, July 24, 2002). In September 2002, the, principal of Ardkeen School was appointed to the Schools' Director position, commencing Term 4, 2002.

Section 2: The Schools' Director's Impact: 2002 – 2004

Personal and professional attributes

When the Schools' Director reflected on the success of her tenure, she suggested that an overriding success factor was her hometown status and local experience. She had taught at a number of schools in the region, had been principal of one of the cluster schools for the previous four years, was married to a local businessman and had raised her own family in Wairoa. She said:

> *I had the personal advantage of prior knowledge. I knew the schools, teachers and Boards. I'd taught their children. I know them all – the relationship is the key… I was an experienced teacher - far more than the others who were there at the time.*

The Ministry Schooling Improvement Coordinator for Hawkes Bay/Tairawhiti, confirmed that the "appointment from within" eased the transition phase saying:

> *She was the ideal candidate…she was one of the group and already had the social connections; she had the skills and was able to hit the ground running. And she had the support networks already established.*

The Schools' Director also had strong professional credentials. At a time when other cluster schools had been the subject of repeated ERO visits, the school where the Director had been principal had already achieved a three-year cycle status, with the most recent report completed in July 2002, paying tribute to the contribution made by the then-principal. The ERO report stated:

> *Ardkeen School is clearly a learning centre where students' learning is enhanced and celebrated...The teaching principal uses a rich variety of strategies based on sound pedagogical practice to engage students in their learning. She knows students' capabilities well and uses high quality achievement information to tailor the most appropriate strategy to meet the needs of each student…The principal is a strong professional leader, both within her school and the wider Wairoa West schools' cluster. High quality curriculum reports, including analysed student achievement data, inform board decision-making processes (*Education Review Office, July, 2002 Report*).*

In addition, the appointed Schools' Director had been responsible for two noteworthy educational initiatives that directly evidenced her suitability for the role of expert advisor and mentor to less experienced colleagues. First was the success of her school's Information and Communication Technology (ICT) strategy. This strategy built on the initial grants of recycled government computers to schools through Project Rorohiko, to see a ratio of one computer to each student by 2002. The principal had completed a tele-learning paper through Auckland College of Education and developed a unit whereby junior students had daily email contact with an Auckland school, comparing life and learning in city and country areas, and breaking down the geographical isolation (MoE, 2002, KAWM Newsletter).

A second project which had well prepared the Director for her role was her involvement in a Literacy Leadership course which foreshadowed her later work in 2003 as Lead Teacher for a cluster-wide literacy focus.

Demonstrable success and skills in these two projects, a proven professional track record, an outgoing and energetic personality and acceptance and respect from the community, provided a strong foundation for the Schools' Director appointment. In the words of local Board members:

> *She was the right person. She had the experience, but especially, the passion!*

> *She was the short cut. There was just one person to phone at night. She knew where to get help from.*

> *She fostered learning initiatives – she became a conduit for sharing experiences.*

The role and how it evolved

From the time of the appointment of the Schools' Director, the Ministry provided clear and detailed guidelines of the expected achievement targets and outputs, milestone reporting requirements and the agreed review process (WWC, 2002, Memorandum; Service Profile & Work Programme, 2002). In addition, the Schools' Director, along with Ministry representatives, attended cluster meetings, during which the terms of the appointment were discussed and finalised (Minutes of the Wairoa West Combined Governance/Management Overview Group Meeting, 2001-2002). Already conversant with the educational issues and the challenges faced by the schooling community of the region, the Director was able to step into the role immediately, without the need for front-end training or orientation. This was repeatedly identified by a number of respondents as a key aspect of the intervention's success.

One of the Schools' Director's initial tasks was to undertake a community survey. All parents from participating schools received a questionnaire and were invited to give feedback about their levels of satisfaction with teaching, leadership and governance in their school. The feedback suggested that parents wanted more meaningful reporting on student achievement. This led to a change in practice the following year. The survey also resulted in increased sharing of information with the community in the form of newsletters – a popular and successful move which continues today.

The Director built her role on the foundations already in place: schools were already meeting for sports days – now more joint events were planned. Under Schools' Director's leadership, Ardkeen School had already started collecting, analysing and using data from Progress and Achievement Tests (PAT) to inform future learning steps. Using this model, the Schools' Director instigated an assessment schedule for 2003 across the cluster, with the Director initially undertaking all data collation and analysis – both to free up the principals and to model process.

At the beginning of 2003, many of the schools had no baseline data – this was now to be collected four times per annum. The Literacy Leadership Project continued, but now as a cluster-wide initiative, with six schools resourced as one and the Schools' Director as Lead Teacher. The contract incorporated data collection and analysis, peer observations, exemplars, resource preparation, and above all, team work and commitment. Regular teacher/principal meetings were held on a rotational basis around the schools, which meant staff were committed to considerable travel, but it enabled them to see inside one another's schools and promoted a sharing of responsibility. Resource sharing and development was initiated, and external professional development arranged.

From this successful literacy enhancement model, similar programmes were set for other curriculum areas, and a three year schedule to 2005 set for curriculum reporting. Ardkeen's Charter document was shared with other cluster schools for strategic planning purposes, and by February 2003, all seven schools in the cluster had submitted their own charter. The Schools' Director also provided assistance to cluster schools in terms of models, and guidelines for policy development, financial management, and analysis of variance reporting.

Once a base of teaching, learning, management and human resource development had been established, the Schools' Director suggested that it was relatively easy to maintain momentum. She said:

> *The development of a new charter was a great launchpad – we were able to develop directions*
> *in common. We had cluster-wide student achievement targets, which we set collectively with*
> *Boards and teacher/principals. We started doing shared data…the foci fell out of mutual need,*

> *from gaps identified. We'd break it from cluster-wide to an individual school picture, and that would determine our next goal. And we shared professional development and curriculum exchanges.*

> *We were meeting so often because there was just so much collaborative stuff going on. And as School Director, I was in on all the appointments, all the committees.*

While both a series of successful milestone report accounts and personal recollections from those involved with the cluster between 2002 and 2004 testify to relatively rapid progress, some hurdles did exist, especially at the beginning of the project. Immediately prior to the Schools' Director's appointment, some of the principals and Board members were concerned about the autonomy of their positions and the "cost of power-sharing". There were concerns around "unilateral appointments" and squabbles over accommodation and a teacher house. One principal, despite having signed the Memorandum of Agreement earlier in 2002, subsequently appeared reluctant to collect or share any student data. Upon his/her departure, the only available replacement principal at short notice, was an inexperienced and unregistered newcomer. Board members from other schools remember this period as "difficult" for this school.

In order to function successfully therefore, the School Director's role entailed considerable negotiation skills. In keeping with the earlier cluster/Ministry decision to avoid the complexities of an appointment made under Section 78 of the Education Act, the role was one of a professional, collegial guide rather than an authoritarian, hierarchical manager. In one of the focus group meetings conducted by the researchers, a principal from the time joked that "The Director would come in with a bottle of wine in one hand, a gun in the other!" The Director comfortably called herself "a control freak", and described her own leadership style as "directed, directive and get-on-with-it!" when necessary, yet she recognised her ability to also stand back and value others' contributions. She said:

> *I never felt that I knew all the answers, but I was able to facilitate the group. I annotated, analysed...we all learnt new content knowledge, teaching strategies and approaches from one another.*

Clearly then, the actual role evolved considerably beyond the formal Service Profile for Schools' Director. Initially charged with improving student achievement outcomes, governance and management capabilities, and cluster and community interactions, the Director had made considerable inroads towards these outcomes by the first milestone reporting date early in 2003. Six of the seven schools had ERO reviews, with no schools having to meet compliance tasks, and Te Reinga returned to a three year cycle after years of discretionary reviews. Boards had received training, management systems had been established, charters and strategic planning completed and a schedule of meeting timelines and policies set. Principals had been involved in collective professional development, cluster wide assessment and combined events for students. Further, data had been analysed to begin evidence-based reporting to Boards and the community. As the Ministry noted in their communication (April, 2003):

> *Sixty-five percent of cluster students, based on recent informal Prose/Running Records are reading at or above their chronological age. A cluster wide target has been set at 70% for 2003.*

Such successes were also reported to the Cluster Steering Committee in monthly reports, together with comments to the teachers/principals containing first-hand observations about students' strengths, areas for development and helpful suggestions.

This first milestone report was based on a template developed around Ministry required outcomes and key performance indicators (KPI) from the funding provision agreement. The milestone was "very favourably" received by the Ministry and circulated to other regions "as an example of the milestone reporting that they [Ministry] are looking to see." Particular mention was made of the way the report:

> *links the KPI to past and future activities and show one way in which a cluster is using the KPI*
> *format in its reporting to its governance group (*Adlam, 2003, Memo*).*

In this way, the WWC pioneered a model which was directly transferable beyond the original context.

The Milestone 2 Report documented steady progress through the first half of 2003, and in an internal memo, it was noted that, among other areas, six of seven schools were operating within budget and that a term two community survey indicated high levels of parent satisfaction (Adlam, 2003, Memo). Funding for the initiative was then approved for the remainder of the year. Milestone 3, covering the period to December 2003 was equally thorough and well-received – by this time, five of the seven schools were on three yearly ERO cycles.

Running records showed steady student improvement and teachers/principals were using a wider range of assessment tools. Milestone 4 was submitted in May 2004 and at this point the Ministry agreed to fund a continued, but reducing work programme until June 2005. The fifth milestone report covered the period to the end of 2004 and was concerned with issues of consolidation and planning for future sustainability. The Schools' Director position ended and although she was appointed principal of Te Kura o Waikaremoana, funding was actually allocated for a 0.5FTE Schools' Director, but no reliever was available to enable the position to be filled. At the final Cluster Steering Committee meeting, a principal who was originally resistant to the cluster schools arrangement, had become a vocal proponent of the Schools' Director. S/he stood up and said what a marvellous job the Director had done – "and how's that from someone who opposed it!"

The personality, capabilities and enthusiasm of the Schools' Director, were thus, key factors in the success of the initiative. The Director identified problems, established management, administrative and assessment systems where they didn't exist, and enabled and empowered those around her to develop their professionalism as educators and managers. The Director described herself as a mentor, and was certainly seen as such by the principals, Board members and community representatives interviewed for this report. As one Board Chair reported: "We didn't really know what we were doing. [She] was just a principal to us all."

Outcomes

a.   Improved student achievement

Prior to the Schools' Director appointment in Term 4 2002, a substantial amount of documentation evidenced concern with the quality of education students were receiving in the Wairoa West schools. In June 2002, the submission for funding noted that:

> *Forty-two percent of all ERO reports since 1992 have been discretionary ones. Since 1999, 67%*
> *of visits have been discretionary, and all 5 visits in 2001 were discretionary visits (*Scott, 2002*).*

The First Sieve Analysis of ERO reports accompanying this submission included the following concerns:
- Māori achievement: 84.4% Māori rolls. Five schools have curriculum issues identified as potentially affecting student achievement.
- Numeracy and literacy: Several schools have identified this as a priority. Tuai reported only 6 of 43 students reading at or above their chronological age.
- Putere, 2000: The education of students is at very serious risk.
- Ruakituri, 2000: Disruptive behaviour an issue.
- Tukemokihi, 1999: Quality of education at risk. Teacher curriculum knowledge very poor.

Workman's (1999) report suggested that the lack of systems in place to support small schools to identify and meet individual educational needs, had a negative effect upon student achievement and learning opportunities. He commented:

> *Many participants agreed that they [smaller schools] faced a higher exposure to the risk of*
> *poor performance from principals and teachers, as there were fewer checks and balances in*
> *place to assure professionalism. Hence if a teaching principal failed to address a particular*
> *need of a pupil this situation could continue for a number of years until either the pupil or the*
> *principal left the school (*p. 17*).*

Workman (1999) also highlighted social and cognitive risks for students, including the effects of transience and constraints imposed by geographical isolation, as well as the limited range of learning, sporting and social interactions inherent in small sized schools. Such issues, together with at-risk home environments in which poverty was prevalent, contributed to social and behavioural difficulties in the classroom. The Schools' Director Milestone One Report (2003), reiterated Workman's concern noting:

> *four schools have opened for 2003 with rolls of under 10 students, and in such cases the lack of*
> *peer contact must be regarded as a barrier to children's learning and social development.*

The cluster project resulted in considerable improvements to student achievement outcomes. An early result indicated marked enhancement of literary outcomes, as evidenced in Table 4.

Table 4: Improvement in student achievement

Curriculum Area	2002	2003
	% achieving target performance	
PAT Reading comprehension	61	73
PAT Vocabulary	53	70
Basic facts	69	82
Spelling	61	71
Written language	58	68
Written language for Year 3	20	50

By the end of 2004, 72% of students across the WWC schools were reading at or above their chronological age. In numeracy, NUMPA[1] goals were nearly met with 73% of students reaching the target level (Cluster goal was 80%) - an improvement from 34% at the beginning of the year. The gains made by the majority of students were even more significant when the full context was considered:

> *The five smaller schools - Ruakituri, Putere, Te Reinga, Ohuka and Tukemokihi [*Ardkeen had closed voluntarily in 2003*] individually well exceeded the target. Overall achievement was lowered by the X School results, where student progress was considerably less significant [*referring to the non-performing school with the principal who was reluctant to engage in data collection mentioned previously*](School Support Project Performance Plan Report, Milestone 5, January 2005*).

Gains in terms of students' social development were also a significant feature of the project as revealed in the following Milestone account:

> *Students keenly anticipate the events which bring them together, and they mix readily. There have been several combined school camps, overnight sleep-overs between schools, combined entries into sports events and in the district kapahaka festival, and shared unit studies where students exchange work. The chat-room established for a cross-cluster literature unit has continued to be used on an informal basis (*School Support Project Performance Plan Report, Milestone 5, January 2005*).

These collective improvements were largely due to the existing cluster group operating to its potential under the leadership of the Schools' Director. Where earlier attendance at combined Board, principal and school events had been sporadic and undertaken with a lower level of commitment, from 2002, in keeping with the Memorandum of Agreement, academic, social and administrative calendars were set and adhered to. As Board members and principals commented:

> *A functioning cluster means a critical mass. In a school with eight kids, it was hard to figure out where they were. Collecting the same data from all the schools and sharing results gave us a picture across the region and we could compare ourselves with national figures.*

> *If you have one bright kid there's no competition. Interaction with peers is vital.*

> *We have 12 kids – one Year 8 and one Year 9 with a disability, lots of younger ones. You can't really put them in a team to play basketball. For kids joining a sports team in town, it might be an incentive that another cluster kid is there.*

> *At an arts and crafts day, the greatest bonus might be the lunchtime games on the field. We've even heard kids comparing their PAT[2] and STAR[3] scores!*

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[1] NUMPA - Numeracy Project Assessment

[2] PAT - Progressive Achievement Test

[3] STAR - Standardised Tests Achievement of Reading

> *The cluster helps negate some of the effects of transient families… moving around the region it's different schools but the same cluster, so we know some of the kids and we know some of the programme…it keeps them from missing out on the social side.*

These anecdotal impressions are supported by research and educational theory. Alton-Lee (2004) for example, noted that across OECD countries, New Zealand has high mean achievement. However, our achievement disparities are the second widest out of 30 countries participating in the PISA[4] testing. This variance is found predominantly, within, rather than between-schools. Alton-Lee argues that much of this variance can be explained by educational practices which fail to accommodate diversity, whether this be related to cultural heritage, gender, family background, the different experiences students bring to learning a particular topic, and/or their previous achievement levels in relation to the skill area. As noted previously, there is a real risk that in a small school, students with particular needs may remain unnoticed and unsupported, particularly when limited financial and/or human resourcing precludes redress of identified needs.

Similarly, small and isolated communities with limited opportunities for social interaction may find it difficult to prepare students for education in large, heterogeneous secondary schools. Historically, Māori students are particularly at risk of underperformance and early school-leaving, a critical concern for the Wairoa West community with such a high (84.4% in 2005) Māori population. This situation was of particular concern given the need for students to learn "effective cooperative and social skills that enable group processes to facilitate learning for all participants" (Alton-Lee, 2003, p. vi).

A number of factors combined then, to enhance the achievement outcomes of students in the WWC schools. The expanded community and greater pool of educational professionals and expertise accessed through cluster affiliation certainly facilitated changes in student achievement. As the Ministry's enthusiastic response to the Milestone 5 report (2005) noted:

> *Staff and Board members all comment on the improved social skills demonstrated by the students, who are no longer hesitant on school trips and who regularly meet in sporting, cultural and social events (*Roscoe & Adlam, 2005, p.1*).*

b.   Governance practice

Prior to the Schools' Director intervention, a series of ERO reports testified to the inconsistent governance of schools and fluctuating levels of compliance. The 2000 ERO Confirmed Report: Schools Support Project Evaluation recognised that attempts had been made, particularly through the School Executive Administrator position, to help Boards develop systems to monitor their governance activities. However, changes in personnel and the lack of statutory authority embedded in the role meant that advances were often short-lived. ERO noted in this respect:

> *In the present circumstances, the Ministry of Education will never be fully assured that all schools in the cluster are able to constantly maintain high levels of compliance – let alone maintain quality systems (p. 7).*

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[4]   PISA - Program for International Student Assessment

Workman (1999) had canvassed Boards and principals for their perceptions of the issues and found an almost unanimous concern over the difficulty of drawing a group of people with the requisite skills to establish a functional Board in a small community. A high turnover of Board members exacerbated the situation, with those remaining often deflected from their priorities through reactive responses. Many Board members and principals felt that the professional advice and support they received was inadequate.

However, there was tremendous goodwill and commitment to improvement. One long term Board chair interviewed for this report traced his involvement back to a request from the community to assist, even though at the time, he was single and had no children. As a landowner, the only significance that local schooling had for him was in how it impacted on his ability to attract workers (and their families) to his station. Through his involvement with the project, he became such an advocate of the local cluster schools, that on more than one occasion he offered a vacant farm house rent-free to families with school-aged children, as a support to counter the effects of a declining roll.

This type of extended commitment to Board membership was indicative of the satisfaction felt by many, as roles became clearer and outcomes improved. The Schools' Director, who attended almost every Board meeting throughout the cluster during her two and a half years of tenure, instigated management systems, established an operation timeline with a clear framework of what needed to be covered at each meeting, and a portfolio of job descriptions. For many Board members there was a sense of "Oh, so this is what our job is!" Another member remembered "when I first started out, I didn't know what the principal was talking about – now I could write a document!"

By accepting their role was about learning how to govern, rather than the minutiae of day-to-day management decisions or wrestling with budgets, Boards came to understand and expect comprehensive reporting of student data. With appropriate and timely training programmes, Boards became more focused on the curriculum and better able to assess the efficacy of their schools' delivery. The Charter became a central 'living' document and students' needs and achievements were paramount. Board members stated that they also felt more confident making good appointments: "People who can do the job, not just who will fit in with the community and who we can get along with" became the focus.

There were two immediate external indicators of this new successful governance practice. Firstly, turnover of Board members markedly declined and schools enjoyed a period of relative stability. Secondly, ERO feedback was extremely positive:

> *Board members show an increasing understanding of their individual roles and shared*
> *responsibilities. Comprehensive and informative weekly and monthly reports from the director*
> *ensure trustees are fully informed of cluster developments. Recently written charters for each*
> *school provide a sound platform for strategic planning. Board operations are more efficient*
> *through the use of timelines and review schedules (*ERO Confirmed Report: Schools Support
> Project Evaluation, 2003*).*

c. The management/governance interface

As the shifts in governance practice were occurring, the interface between day-to-day management by the principals, and strategic oversight by the Boards became more clearly delineated. This was a significant step forward, particularly given that in such small communities there had been a lot of "blurring and overstepping of boundaries" and some "totally inappropriate behaviour" prior to the Schools' Director assisting Board

members to understand their roles. Indeed, the Director's first milestone report submitted early in 2003, referred to the resulting clashes:

> *In at least seven cases [*over the last three years*] there has been significant conflict and breakdown of board and principal relationship prior to the principal's resignation (*p.3*).*

However, with the implementation of uniform systems and protocols established across the cluster, Boards were able to move from discussions about school trips, money-raising sausage sizzles, and lawn-mowing, to a focus on student achievement.

Where previously there had been a belief that "what happened in the classroom stayed in the classroom" and "Leave the teaching to the professionals please" (Principals), Boards began to spend more time working with learning outcome documents, comparing progress graphs to planned goals and making corresponding strategic decisions. Thus the interface between Boards and principals, both working towards a common, overriding purpose of improving the quality of education for the district's children, was more successful and more seamless. ERO and Board members noted:

> *Trustees are better informed about student achievement and therefore well positioned to make appropriate decisions to support their principals and ultimately students' learning. They are developing a greater understanding of the role of assessment in focusing planning and teaching. Through this heightened awareness, there has been a marked shift in board operations from the management side of governance, to a focus on lifting outcomes for students (*ERO Confirmed Report: Schools Support Project Evaluation, 2003*).*

> *Reporting on achievement had never really been done consistently. We used to hear that kids were doing all right – but now we could see it (*Board member*).*

> *It made the Boards look up and say 'This is working'. We could see if we were average, below, if grades had dropped – and what actions to take (*Board member*).*

> *So it got the Board and principal working together and six months later we could see that it did help (Board member).*

d.   Teaching practice

Just as Boards benefited from the introduction of an operations framework, so too did teachers/principals. Curriculum management documents, long term planning and the use of shared templates and forms were "a real time-saver" (Principal). The Schools' Director's milestone report noted that there were several changes of principal across cluster schools in the early phases of her appointment. This had resulted in the Emergency Staffing Scheme being used nine times in the previous five years (Milestone 1, 2003). The support and the resulting growth in professional self-assurance, the improved relationships with Boards and the recognition from Ministry and ERO of improved practices and outcomes, all contributed to a markedly more positive work environment. As a consequence, staff turnover reduced and a period of stability ensued resulting in a focus on enhanced teaching practice.

Prior to 2002, standardised assessment, data collection and its use for planning curriculum delivery had been inconsistent and/or poorly implemented across the cluster schools. Key outcomes sought by the Ministry, of

the Schools' Director position included the collection of baseline data - particularly for literacy and numeracy, and Māori student achievement, and the establishment of "good practice assessment practices across the cluster using such resources as Asttle and Arbs[5] and encouraging common practices" (MoE, 2002, Submission IS 01 – 57).

Within the first term of the Director's appointment, all cluster schools had collected some initial baseline data, set an assessment schedule and registered for Asttle training. By the end of 2003, Milestone 3, (p.2) reported:

> *The schools have all utilised a good range of assessment tools for both formative and*
> *summative purposes. These have included NEMP[6] tasks, ARBs, NZCER Essential Skills, STAR,*
> *PROBE, TORCH, PAT, Peters' Spelling and use of the Written Language exemplars.*

These changes in teaching practice were largely attributable to the substantive professional development programme facilitated by the Schools' Director. Previously, principals had attended courses sporadically; now group programmes were organised for training in assessment tool usage, and literacy and numeracy projects. The Director suggested that it was the critical mass provided by cluster membership that made a difference. She said "experts were much more willing to come and talk to six schools than one."

Another important factor was that professional development was "very targeted and focused" with the opportunity for learning built into the everyday teaching responsibilities already assumed, as, for example, with the cluster-wide Literacy Enhancement Project. As Timperley (2006) noted, teacher participation and satisfaction with a course is no longer an adequate measure of effectiveness. Rather, it needs to result in practice that improves student achievement. The WWC was able to demonstrate this link to classroom outcomes, thereby providing tangible evidence of the effectiveness of in-school, transformational professional development. This was consistent with Barnett's (2005) synthesis of the changing face of teacher professional development that highlighted the benefits of shifts from out-of-school, to in-school professional learning (Table 5).

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[5]   AsTTle – Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning
       ARBs - Assessment Resource Banks
[6]   NEMP - National Education Monitoring Project
       NZCER - New Zealand Council for Educational Research
       PROBE – a tool used in conjunction with NEMP
       TORCH – Tests of Reading Comprehension for years 4-11
       PAT – Progress and Achievement Tests

Table 5: The Changing Face of Professional Development

Moving from	Moving to
PD out of school	PD in school
Workshops	one-to-one
Large numbers	smaller numbers
One off workshops	series with follow up
Surface learning	in-depth learning
Transmission	transformation
Strategies/activities	underpinned by theory
Discrete	sustained
Advisor as deliverer	advisor as coach/mentor
Teacher focused	student learning outcomes focused
Addressing a PD want	use of evidence & data to identify PD needs.
Individual learning	learning community

With professional development providing the direction and incentive to change, principals embraced the new approach as they recognised its critical role in shifting student achievement outcomes. ERO noted the progress commenting:

> *As a result of analysed student achievement information and target setting, teaching is becoming more focused on the next learning step for each student (*ERO Confirmed Report: Schools Support Project Evaluation, 2003*).*

A Ministry representative also commented:

> *Two years ago, none of the schools could have analysed data like this. Now any principal in the cluster can, and they take it in turns.*

Teachers/principals also recognised the extent of the skill and competency developed:

> *I'm amazed at how much we know! When we travel to PD courses, we lead the discussions.*

> *How far ahead we were!*

> *Wairoa is a real go-getting educational community.*

e.   The professional learning community

Underlying all these shifts in understanding and professional competencies, was the growing sense of collaboration and co-construction amongst stakeholders. The Schools' Director used the framework of a cluster of schools to encourage people to talk and work together. The environment of support and learning that she facilitated grew however, to exist independently of any individual personality. Timperley (2006) defined a professional learning community as:

…one in which teachers update their professional knowledge and skills within the context of an organised, school-wide system for improving teaching practices. In addition, teachers' efforts, individually and collectively, are focused on the goal of improving student learning and achievement and making the school as a whole become a high-performing organisation (p. 1).

Timperley further suggested that as teaching practice is 'deprivatised', teachers move from working in isolation in their classrooms to a more collaborative approach, with open discussions and observations of one another teaching, and modifying their teaching methods in the light of achievement information.

In the WWC, principals had already been meeting, along with Boards and their communities in the strategising group meetings that led to the 2002 Memorandum of Agreement with the Ministry and one another, and the resulting Schools' Director appointment. Steering Committee meetings continued, but more teacher/principal meetings were added as shared systems and foci were introduced. As teachers and/or principals became more aware of each others' strengths, and relationships became more open, teachers practice became more transparent. This was evidenced in teachers /principals observing one another's classroom practice, or teaching a unit of work at another's school as a demonstration. All involved appreciated the shared problem-solving approach, and the sense that they were not on their own.

With the support of colleagues, there was widespread enthusiasm for, rather than resistance to professional learning opportunities for the cluster. As the shared norms and values, reflection on practice, and clear focus on student achievement, identified by Timperley (2006) as essential characteristics of a strong professional learning community came into being, so the confidence of individuals grew. Participants interviewed, reported a trust in collective knowledge, a sense of mutual respect and the freedom to challenge one another in a spirit of openness and transparency: "There was no gate-keeping of knowledge – there were no gates!" (Principal).

The sense of belonging to a professional community extended beyond the classroom and directly impacted on the management/governance interface with Boards. Regular meetings and communication through newsletters and reports meant that all cluster members knew what others were doing, and all were working closely together with the same shared goal of improving student outcomes. Board members attending Cluster Steering Committee meetings spoke with knowledge and pride about what principals were doing, not what they as a Board were doing.

The Ministry also contributed to the building of a professional learning community within the cluster, both throughout the intervention period, and in the eras which preceded and postdated it. The Ministry took its commitment to the integrity of the support offered seriously, with a consistency of philosophy and actions all designed to assist the cluster schools to improve their performance. Far more than just a funding provider, Ministry representatives have functioned as a sounding board, a conduit to appropriate expertise and supportive participants of the process. As one of the principals stated:

*We've been lucky with the degree of Ministry involvement, and very lucky in [*the Schooling Improvement Coordinator*]. He's been part of our professional community.*

Section 3. The Post-Intervention Phase 2005 – 2006

Quality of leadership compared to pre-1998

In December 2004, the Schools' Director made her final report to the Cluster Steering Committee, sharing results which indicated the overall gains made in student achievement during the two and a half years of her tenure. Seventy-two percent of students in the cluster were reading at or above their chronological age, compared with a baseline 58% two years earlier (the target was 75%). Numeracy data showed 73% achievement (against a target of 80%), compared to the baseline of 34%. In basic facts, 88% of students met cluster expectations - up from a baseline of 64% (Schools' Director's report to meeting of 9 December, 2004). The priority given to these results as an indication of leadership effectiveness, demonstrated the way school and cluster leadership had come to view the value of any and all educational initiatives – that is, the impact they have on student outcomes.

Change in the cluster however, was imminent. The latter part of 2004 and the start of 2005 were considerably affected by the Network Review, with Te Reinga merging with Ruakituri, and Tuai and Kokako schools closing, and the formation of a new, larger school, Waikaremoana. The disruption to schooling routines and the addition of a significant number of low achieving students to the cluster meant that Milestone 6, submitted mid 2005, reported some decline in overall achievement from the end of 2004, with, for example, 62% of students reading at or above their chronological age (72% in 2004). However, schools that were unaffected by the network review maintained performance, and the cluster gradually assimilated the changes and began to progress again. As one of the principals said:

> *It was a difficult period for everyone after the review – it stuffed things up – but we were able to address it within the year – Stunning!*

The resilience evidenced in this principal's comment, contrasts sharply with early ERO reports for the region that testified to a widespread lack of direction and leadership. Sample compliance concerns noted across cluster schools included:

- poor monitoring of achievement;
- poor monitoring of progress against national objectives;
- little analysing and addressing of barriers to learning;
- inadequate curriculum documents;
- no progress on planning, assessment or recording;
- concern over curriculum balance;
- at risk educational environment;
- poor quality teaching (Scott, 2002).

In addition, the high turnover of staff made consistent leadership and performance management difficult. In 1998, in two schools, the junior classes had had five and three teachers each. On average, principals were leaving after twelve months: the longest-serving sole-charge principal when the cluster was formed in 1998 was three years (ERO Confirmed Report, June 2000, Wairoa Support Project Evaluation: Wairoa West Schools Support Project).

School leadership in the cluster in 2006 was markedly more stable and assured. Two of the six current principals have worked alongside the Schools' Director, and the Director herself is now principal of one of the cluster schools. One of the principals involved had been with Ardkeen School when it closed voluntarily in 2003. However, the principal had enjoyed the support of the group and seen the benefits for students to

such an extent that she stayed in contact with her colleagues, and in 2005 encouraged the Board, where she was principal, to join the cluster. As noted by the Ministry:

> *This is seen as a vote of confidence in the sustainability of the cluster and local endorsement of the WWC methodology. As this high performing school is numerically on a par with Waikaremoana, this will now mean that there are two 'large' schools in the cluster, and will provide strong leadership support for X [*Schools' Director*] (Roscoe, 2005, Memo).*

The three newer principals in the cluster were also fully conversant with the philosophy behind the intervention and enthusiastic supporters of the cluster's professional learning community A key indicator of the way in which leadership is now shared amongst the cluster principals is evidenced in the shared responsibility taken for cluster-wide data collation, analysis and reporting. Indeed, the local success of such strong, shared leadership is also evident outside the cluster. Recently, the region's Schooling Improvement Coordinator was able to feed back to the cluster that their 2006 reporting had provided the Ministry with "one of the best sets of data they'd seen."

Further evidence of shared leadership approaches is seen in the changing venues for cluster sports and activities days, and in the range of in-service professional development initiatives undertaken. The WWC school principals' success in these areas has been shared at a range of meetings, where the principals were acknowledged for having shown strong leadership within the Wairoa educational community

Sustainability

The remote rural setting, isolation and gravel roads, the decline in the permanent rural population and the challenges of multi-level classrooms – these issues remain constant for the region. Undoubtedly there will remain some difficulty in attracting and retaining high calibre staff. It is also probable that the potential for considerable personal-professional cross-over in the lives of Board members will continue to be problematic. As many participants noted, this makes the cluster group even more important. It was therefore, both significant and positive, that following the cessation of the Schools' Director's appointment, the cluster schools drafted and agreed upon a new Memorandum of Agreement amongst themselves, committing the schools to continued collaborative work in an endeavour to lift education in the region (WWC, 2005, Memorandum). The consequences of this renewed affiliation in 2005 and 2006 were evident at a number of levels including Board, school leadership and classroom/students.

a.   Board level

The minutes from Cluster Steering Group meetings towards the end of 2004, evidenced considerable concern about the effects of both the Network Review and the cessation of the Schools' Director position. Nonetheless, there was strong community mindedness about the need to work together for succession planning. Discussions were held around the possibility of schools contributing financially to the Director's position, and of using remaining Ministry funds to continue the position at 0.5 for the first half of 2005. Plans were made to continue collective professional development for principals, and training for Boards, and suggestions made around responsibility for data collection, induction and support of new principals and cluster events for students. Importantly, there was agreement to maintain the steering group structure, with meetings held twice a year.

As a result of the progress made over the previous two and a half years, Boards realised that monitoring of both schools and students needed to occur as a regular event, and not as a reactive measure. Boards

evidenced sound understanding of their role, particularly in respect to their involvement in the learning community. Board representatives continued to meet, however attendance from some members began to diminish. This was in part due to a sense that with sound systems in place, less needed to be done, and partly due to other prioritisations.

Ohuka School experienced a crisis when the roll dropped from nine families to three; Putere School had an entire new Board and a Chair with only four months experience and currently has an Emergency Staffing principal. Individual Board members believed that they were very vulnerable to turnover: They said:

> *We need someone who knows the systems passing them on. [*and*] When we go, there's no one*
> *left to brainwash them [*new Board members*] into our way of thinking.*

When asked what was in place that was currently sustainable, some Board members identified having two strong principals in the cluster was its key asset. There was a shared belief that the cluster needed a 'driver'. For example, a principals said, "We'd like to see a Schools' Director back in."

In September 2006 it was announced that Tukemokihi, with a roll of five students was no longer viable and would close. Of the remaining five schools, four received ERO visits in 2006. Waikaremoana, Ruakituri and Ohuka were commended for a range of teaching and governance strengths, and placed on a three year cycle. Frasertown, the newest cluster school member had some inconsistencies and will be re-visited in 2007, whilst Putere's last review was 2004 and will be re- visited in 2007.

b.   School Leadership

Principals felt generally positive about sustaining the advantages of cluster collaboration and the professional learning community. Throughout 2005-2006, regular meetings and frequent informal contact continued, even without a Schools' Director. The principals believed that a 'culture' of continued learning had been established:

> *It's how we do things here and it's part of the appointment – if you join here, you need to be*
> *part of this cluster.*

Data, assessment and planning are discussed at every meeting, and the cluster is driven by a sense of achievement: Principals and Board representatives agreed that "kids are achieving, and success breeds success."

Collegial support and induction continue to be a cluster strength. One of the new principals remembered that within two weeks of her appointment, she had been visited by two of the other principals, and was invited to visit other schools. She said:

> *It's been a really smooth transition. I felt very supported. And with X [new principal] coming in,*
> *I'd expect that I can probably help her next year – it's like baton passing.*

As another principal noted "it's about people. People prepared to give up a day with 500 other things to do".

Similarly, curriculum planning continues to be conducted in a collaborative manner, with a number of agreements proposed in 2006. For example, two schools worked on a Literacy Professional Development

Project (LPDP), all schools worked on Assessment for Learning (AFL), with a cluster focus on formative assessment, and all schools continued with an Information Literacy programme (Minutes, Cluster Steering Group, November 21, 2005). Shared data collection, analysis and reporting has become embedded as part of this culture, and responsibility is shared amongst cluster principals, rather than outside 'experts' being contracted.

Professional development continues to be seen as vital to continued learning, and cluster members pursue common key objectives. School Support Services are consulted for their particular expertise, for example, whole school writing development in 2006 and all schools were invited to join (Minutes, Cluster Steering Group, August 8, 2005). The final cluster meeting for 2005 noted the purchase of three new cluster resources and an agreement they be housed at Waikaremoana (Minutes, Cluster Steering Group, November 21, 2005). The 2006 school year finished with a 'Building Learning Power' course in Gisborne and the purchase of a book which the cluster intends to use together in the future.

Generally, principals are optimistic in respect to the sustainability of a strong professional learning community and are committed to a shared, distributed leadership model. They feel that they have been fortunate with the personalities involved: "We've had people that have clicked!" The following representative comments from current principals interviewed for this report, highlight the optimism felt for the WWC:

> *It's a real learning community. We talk or email most days. Not a meeting, it happens informally- and not necessarily with School Director in the loop.*

> *We talk about learning. It's inspiring. You think of something you might do, someone adds something, it builds from there.*

> *We have a collection of professional resources we share. Not just a one-off, but a progression. We can talk, we've all read it – it enriches our professional conversations.*

> *We've created a 'virtual' staffroom!*

c.   Classroom and students

As discussed previously, 2005 began with considerable disruptions for some schools and students as a result of the mergers and closures arising from the Network Review. Waikaremoana in particular, was faced with the challenge of establishing a new school from schools with less than optimal performance - one mainstream English and one mainstream full immersion. This situation impacted significantly upon the student achievement outcomes reported in Milestone 6, in mid 2005. However by the end of 2005, changes had been assimilated and teacher/principals and Boards had followed through with a renewed commitment to professional practice. By the year end in 2005, STAR testing across the cluster showed positive results, only slightly below the target, as exemplified in the statistics below:

> 33.8% of students were at stanine 3 or less (National Norm 23%).
> 62% of students were at stanine 4 or above (National Norm 77%).
> (Overall Wairoa West Results, 2005).

By 2006, results had continued to improve, and were 14.5% above target:

> 16.1% of students were at stanine 3 or less (National Norm 23%).
> 84.5% of students were at stanine 4 or above (National Norm 77%).
> (Wairoa West Cluster Star Results, 2006).

Social outcomes for students also remain positive. A cluster event calendar is set each year around one sporting and one curriculum-based event each term. Students share a chat-room and a recent initiative has been an on-line novel study to extend gifted and talented children, via the exchange of stories and feedback. Students also travel to Wairoa for technology once a week for a six week block. Teacher/principals comment that where previously children would 'huddle shyly' in their school groups, they are now very comfortable intermingling – and their parents too!

One of the potential barriers to such inter-school meetings is the need to involve parents with transport, with the two furthermost schools facing over an hour's travel to Wairoa. In spite of these obstacles, there is strong community support and the recognition that such interaction is essential for the students. With long-term planning and clear communication of forthcoming events through school/community newsletters, parent support does not appear to be problematic. Results from a recent Community Survey show strong support of, and satisfaction with schools. This was also noted in the four ERO reviews undertaken in 2006.

Challenges for the future

Much of the concern around sustainability comes from Board members, who recognise that while policy and performance frameworks are in place, and they do have an understanding of how to interpret and plan from student data, they need to "keep it rolling" in order for the cluster to remain strong. There is a real concern about reliance on key personnel, without whom, they feel, the momentum will diminish. Some stakeholders would like to reinstate a part-time Schools' Director position, or to share the cost of a reliever so that the original position-holder can undertake follow-up reviews or be called upon as a consultant. Irrespective of what decision is reached, it will be important for all stakeholders to recognise that this has been an energy-intensive programme of improvement, in terms of time, money and goodwill. On-going success will be dependent on the continued high level of contribution from Boards, principals, communities and the Ministry, and their collective willingness to remain a committed part of the professional learning community.

D. SUMMARY

Between 1998 and 2006, a number of proposals were considered, and interventions implemented in the quest to support the Wairoa West Cluster schools improve student achievement and management/governance performance. Over the same period, the composition of the cluster also changed. Table 6 provides a chronological account of the key dates and actions around the Wairoa West cluster school initiative.

Table 6: Key dates and actions

1997	Group meetings to plan support options. Submission for School Administrator position
1998	Cluster officially established: Ardkeen, Ohuka, Ruakituri, Te Reinga, Tuai, Tukemokihi
Feb 1998	School Executive Administrator appointed; shortcomings apparent by end of the year
1999	Consultancy company contracted to investigate options – report in November recommends roving principal concept
Feb 2000	University of Waikato contracted to develop proposal
2001	Cluster attempts to reach consensus – unsuccessful. Begins alternative proposal for School Curriculum Developer. Concern over use of Section 78 – eventually abandoned
2002	Schools' Director position developed. Memorandum of Agreement for Joint Cluster Initiatives signed by Ardkeen, Ohuka, Tuai, Te Reinga and Ruakituri. Tukemokihi abstained for the present, provision for Putere to join at a later date
Sep 2002	Schools' Director appointed
2003	Ardkeen School closes voluntarily
Dec 2004	Schools' Director contract ends
Dec 2004	Network Review - Te Reinga merged with Ruakituri. Tuai and Kokako closed, new school, Waikaremoana established.
2005	Frasertown joins cluster. New Memorandum of Agreement for Joint Cluster Initiatives signed by Frasertown, Ohuka, Ruakituri, Tukemokihi, Putere and Waikaremoana
Sep 2006	Tukemokihi closes – small school roll - no longer viable
Dec 2006	Ministry contracts RMG Consultancy Ltd to chronicle the WW Cluster's story

The net result of this intensive effort by all stakeholders - Boards, principals, community and the Ministry – has been vastly improved leadership and governance practices and an enhanced quality of education for students in the Wairoa West Cluster schools. While an informal cluster framework for working together had been established as early as 1997, it is clear that this began to function effectively under the auspices of the Schools' Director's appointment, commencing in the final term of 2002. Through the implementation of consistent management systems and common targets, the provision of strong leadership and professional skills - particularly around the collection, analysis and reporting of student data, the Schools' Director created an environment of collegiality and collaboration that has outlasted her tenure.

While there is certainly great potential for this project to inform policy around support provision for rural schools, it is important to remember that this situation, like others, had its own unique features. The Schools' Director herself identified four key features which she believed accounted for the initiative's success. First, the majority of principals were highly motivated: "If there was a different group who didn't want to share, it may not have worked so well". Second, the schools were small – consensus and participation were comparatively streamlined. Third, there was a commonality of needs - "We were coming from a bad place.

There was a good incentive to do something about it!" Finally, timing was important – the personalities involved, the emergence of Ministry models, assessment tools, exemplars, and even the Network Review changes, all contributed to the overall success of the WWC schools initiative.

Clearly, within even this single region, substantial changes have occurred since 1998. Of the original seven schools, four no longer exist and only three sole-charge schools remain. The needs of the cluster schools have also changed, and if a new Schools' Director were introduced to the cluster, the role would necessarily be different. The long term legacy of the Wairoa West Cluster Schooling Improvement Project therefore, needs to be viewed as inspirational, rather than the provision of a universal blueprint. With enquiries from other potential school groupings in the area, the ripple effect of the Wairoa West Cluster's exemplar of success in changing schooling practice and students' outcomes has already begun. It is hoped that this summary of a professional learning community's achievement will assist the dissemination of the story to a wider interested audience. In the words of a WWC Board Chair:

> *The benefit is in human capital – our children.*

The onus is upon all educators to ensure a continued shift from a focus on targeting problems, to tailoring for potential. The Wairoa West Cluster School's success strategy was enshrined in maximising the conditions for realised potential. In doing so, it has provided an exemplar for other isolated rural communities in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Key Learnings

- Improved performance of the WWC schools and concomitant enhanced student achievement outcomes, only occurred once school leadership and management moved their focus from operational matters to student achievement. Curriculum goals, requisite resources and appropriate pedagogical and assessment practices needed to become the focus before enhanced student achievement outcomes were realised.
- The collection and analysis of data across the WWC schools provided a significant population for meaningful comparisons with peers and national norms, and assisted Boards, principals and teachers to identify gaps in teaching and learning for evidenced-based planning. It also enabled principals/teachers to be responsive to the range of student learning needs in vertical class groupings prevalent in small rural schools.
- Progress is cumulative: in this case, the leaps in improvement that occurred under the leadership of the Schools' Director from 2002-2004 were facilitated by the raft of earlier supportive interventions and Schooling Improvement projects.
- The key to stability of school management and staffing, and to longer-term sustainability of progress, lies in the establishment and maintenance of strong professional learning communities, with a distributed leadership approach. In this way, expertise becomes a shared resource, reducing reliance on individual personalities.
- Relationships are crucial and must be fostered by all stakeholders including the Ministry, community, parents/whānau and Boards, principals and teachers, and students. Learning is a collaborative, organic process and effective relationships and communication at all levels is essential for facilitating and maximising enhanced social, cultural and academic achievement outcomes.

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