

EDUCATION REVIEW *series*

Education Review explores the big issues in New Zealand education, from early childhood through to tertiary education

SELWYN COLLEGE - SCHOOL UNDER TRANSFORMATION April 2015



Strong and unrelenting leadership and an effective professional learning programme have seen the once troubled Selwyn College achieve an astounding transformation.

As far as Education Review Office (ERO) reports go, Auckland's Selwyn College's 2007 report was less than complimentary.

"Improvements in the quality of teaching since the 2004 ERO review have been limited," it stated. The 2007 report outlined that while there was evidence of some high-quality teaching, such practices were not widespread.

"Teaching in many classes has yet to incorporate those elements of best practice that foster engagement in learning and help students to develop an understanding of their own progress and next learning steps.

"School leaders and teachers should now work to establish a shared understanding, consistent with current educational research and literature, of what constitutes high-quality teaching for the range of students in the school."

Seven years later, in November 2014, the comments in ERO's most recent report made it clear that the school had risen to ERO's challenge. It was apparent that Selwyn College had undergone a complete transformation.

"Teachers are inspired and supported to provide high-quality, effective teaching that is informed by current educational theory and research," the 2014 report stated. "Led by the principal, they have evolved a learning toolkit that makes the Selwyn approach to teaching and learning visible for teachers, students and parents. It has gained rapid acceptance and is transforming classroom teaching and student learning."

The processes involved in achieving this transformation are, of course, complex and multi-layered, but what is clear is that they are the product of work carried out by Selwyn's teachers – all of whom have been engaged in focused, powerful and sustained professional learning that has equipped them to demonstrate strong leadership. Through collective efficacy and action, Selwyn College has shifted from being labelled "a failing school" by the Minister of Education in 2008 to an educational success story in 2015; this is reflected in their NCEA pass rates, which are well over 90 per cent at all three levels. When Sheryll Ofner became principal in 2008, she encountered an impatient local community who had lost confidence in the school and had to a large extent stopped enrolling their children there. The anger they expressed at community meetings about the school's failure to deliver the outcomes they expected demanded huge and sustained change as fast as possible, as well as exceptionally high energy inputs.



Critical leadership aspects

To deliver change of this magnitude and pace required buy-in, passion and leadership from all staff and a preparedness to go the extra mile. Change could not wait, but no one could be left behind.

This meant that 'relational trust' needed to be secured rapidly, and it was. Two key aspects of leadership were critical. One was moral leadership, modelled consistently. As deputy principal Denise Edwards says, "I always endeavour to model the attributes and behaviour that I expect in others."

The other critical aspect was distributed leadership. Shortly after her arrival, Ofner set up two new crucial leadership groups – the leaders of the learning areas and the heads of houses. These groups meet with senior leaders every week and have played essential and highly effective roles in communicating key messages about change and handling concerns. They have enabled the principal and senior leaders not only to keep their 'foot on the pedal' but also to gauge when the pressure needed to lighten in order to keep everyone 'on the bus' and moving forward.

Alix Coleman, leader of the visual arts learning area, substantiates this.

"For me, leadership at Selwyn means inclusion and role modelling. I feel the leaders do as they preach, and work incredibly hard to get a wide variety of voices and ideas on a wide range of issues. This includes students, teachers, all staff, and the parent community. Responsibility is distributed, and there is a high-level trust model here.

"As there is a collaborative approach to discussing policy, procedures, curriculum and pastoral concerns, everyone has a sense of empowerment and buy-in to what and how the school operates and moves forward."

Ofner believes that another major factor in the turnaround of Selwyn has been keeping their eyes on the road ahead. The changes required were significant and had to be research-based, transparent, widely understood, agreed on and carefully planned. Hence, she and her team have been deliberate in their avoidance of being distracted by another 'great idea'. The phrase 'continue to embed' appears regularly in every Annual Plan as everyone continuously strives to do the important stuff better and better.

SELWISE a pivotal turnaround tool

Leadership at Selwyn also involves ensuring goals and expectations are co-constructed, coherent and highly visible to the community. Ofner regards herself as first and foremost an instructional leader.

"Right from the start we sought to develop a school-wide toolkit of cutting-edge, effective pedagogies with a common language for learning," she says. "The result today is SELWISE, our toolkit for effective learning. The successful, implementation of SELWISE is critical to the turnaround in our results." This required outstanding teacher-leadership and explains why professional learning is at the heart of what happens at Selwyn. Ofner quickly implemented a planned programme of professional learning for staff every Wednesday morning. Mary Anne Foley, director of learner support, is a strong advocate of the programme.

“Professional learning is vibrant, exciting, collaborative and triangulated, in the sense of being obviously linked through from the Annual Plan right through to student achievement. We all share in the journey of learning and the Wednesday morning sessions are a chance to share, reflect and develop,” says Foley. Paul Summerville, leader of the technology learning area, agrees.

“On Wednesdays, we learn how to use our SELWISE learning toolkit to maximise every student’s opportunity to reach their true potential and become lifelong learners,” he says.

Ofner feels a strong responsibility to be a critical driver in this learning, attending every session and regularly leading them. She also sees the sessions as opportunities for making visible the pedagogical leadership of other staff, and for student voice. Alix Coleman is enthusiastic about this professional learning. “We continuously learn from each other and share ideas through our Wednesday morning professional development slot. We learn from colleagues in other learning areas, we learn from students, and we learn from outside ‘experts’ on occasions. I love that we use the SELWISE process to engage in professional discussions around a wide range of topics, which are always relevant to our school-wide goals.”

Lucy Jansen, leader of the English and languages learning area, relishes how well leadership and professional learning are intertwined. “For me, leadership at Selwyn means working collaboratively at all levels in order to improve. It is ako: where the teacher becomes the learner and the learner the teacher.”

Ofner says maintaining momentum is important. “We have learnt that excitement and the deep sense of self-actualisation and shared joy derived from success harnesses the passion teachers have for their profession and encourages them to aspire to even greater achievement. Hence, joyous celebration of achievement with students and staff is one of the factors that are essential to sustaining further improvement. Our full school assemblies are the embodiment of this belief.”

Self-review provides the key

Another essential factor to sustaining improvement at Selwyn College is continuous self-review. Selwyn leaders have established a culture where errors are seen as valuable learning experiences. This encompasses a preparedness to learn from feedback, to welcome dialogue, to embrace suggestions and to hear multiple voices. Ofner sums it up nicely.

“Our engagement in vigorous and ongoing self-review is undoubtedly a key to the transformation of our college.”

It is fitting that ERO has the final word on Selwyn, since they have visited regularly since 2007 and know the school very well. “The principal provides outstanding professional leadership, clearly articulating the school’s vision, values and strategic goals,” ERO’s recent report states. “The effective leadership and collaborative teamwork of the senior and middle managers and staff is a hallmark of the school.

The innovative, individualised school curriculum using proven effective teaching practices is recognised by educators nationally and internationally.”