

Partners in Learning:
Good Practice

September 2008



Ko te Tamaiti te Pūtake o te Kaupapa

The Child – the Heart of the Matter

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We welcome your comments and suggestions on the issues raised in these reports.



Foreword

The New Zealand Government has grouped its priorities and activities under three themes:

- Economic transformation
- Families, young and old
- National identity

The Education Review Office (ERO) contributes to these themes through its role of reviewing and reporting on the quality of education in schools and early childhood education services.

ERO's whakatauki demonstrates the importance we place on the educational achievement of our children and young people:

Ko te Tamaiti te Pūtake o te Kaupapa
The Child – the Heart of the Matter

In our daily work we have the privilege of going into schools and early childhood services, and this gives us a current picture of what is happening throughout the country. We are then able to collate and analyse this information so that it can be used to benefit the education sector and, therefore, the children in our education system. ERO's reports contribute sound information for work undertaken to support the Government's themes.

ERO is interested in what happens in the classroom and also in how parents and the community can help in the education of school students. We have therefore evaluated the way schools engage their parents, whānau and community. The result is a collection of three reports on different aspects of *Partners in Learning*: the findings of the evaluation; examples of good practice; and the voices of parents. This report outlines the good practice found during our reviews to help school boards of trustees, principals and staff think about how they might apply the findings and ideas in their own schools.

The successful delivery of education relies on many people and organisations across the community working together. We hope the information in this booklet will help them in their task.

Graham Stoop
Chief Review Officer

September 2008

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Introduction

Research evidence shows that effective partnerships between schools and parents, whānau and communities can result in better outcomes for students.¹ The better the relationship and engagement, the more positive the impact on students' learning.

In this evaluation, 'engagement' is defined as a meaningful, respectful partnership between schools and their parents, whānau and communities that focuses on improving the educational experiences and successes for each child.

This report complements ERO's major evaluation, *Partners in Learning: Schools' Engagement with Parents, Whānau and Communities*, published in June 2008.

It presents case studies of eight schools, identified during ERO reviews, that were successful in engaging with their parents, whānau and the wider community.

The report also discusses key factors that contribute to the success of this engagement.

Although all schools have differing ways of involving and communicating with parents and families, six key factors have emerged as critical to enhancing and strengthening engagement.

- *Leadership*: Engagement between schools and their communities works well when there is vision and commitment from school leaders to working in partnership with all parents.
- *Relationships*: Mutual trust and respect are critical to relationships in which staff and parents share responsibility for children's learning and well-being.
- *School culture*: A school's culture reflects the values and attitudes that underpin home-school relationships. Schools that are committed to being inclusive enable all parents to be actively involved in decisions affecting their child, and respond to parents' concerns and questions promptly.
- *Partnerships*: Learning partnerships strengthen parents' understanding and involvement in their child's education. Parents feel that their contributions are valued. Effective learning partnerships can have positive impacts on student outcomes.
- *Community networks*: Schools are an integral part of their communities. Parent and community expertise contributes to school programmes and activities. Networks are built through effective consultation, and there is a shared understanding about priorities for student achievement.
- *Communication*: Timely, useful and easily understood communication with parents provides opportunities for exchange of information, appropriate for those involved. Barriers to effective communication are actively identified and overcome.

This report discusses what was happening in schools where engagement was working well. The first section gives an overview of what each of the eight schools was doing to engage parents, with a focus on particular strategies. The second section discusses the six common factors evident in schools where engagement was successful. It also includes further examples from other schools where practice reflected these factors.

¹ Biddulph, Fred; Biddulph, Jeanne & Biddulph, Chris. *Best evidence synthesis: the complexity of community and family influences on children's achievement in New Zealand*. Wellington: Ministry of Education, 2003.

ERO's evaluation methodology

CASE STUDY SCHOOLS

ERO identified schools for this study from education reviews in 233 schools.

Fifty-two schools were identified as possible case studies, of which eight were selected for a further visit to gather more in-depth information about specific practices that supported successful engagement with parents, whānau and communities. This report draws on the findings from those eight schools.

Successful engagement: Good practice

This section discusses the practices in each of the eight schools that supported successful engagement with parents, whānau and the wider community.

ARANUI SCHOOL: RESPONSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Aranui School is a decile 1, Years 1 to 6, contributing school in Wanganui. In 2007 the school's roll was 118, of whom 58 percent were Māori, 41 percent were New Zealand European/Pākehā and one percent were Pacific students.

The principal knows the school's community well, having been in this role for some time. He makes a conscious effort to involve the school in its local community through his quiet support of staff and parents, and through leading by example.

“It is our school. We look after each other.”

Principal

The school's values and beliefs are founded on the CARE approach (cooperation, attitude, respect and effort). All staff model the philosophy implicit in this approach in their day-to-day practice. They use the four words regularly to explain the way things are done at the school.

During the initial enrolment process, the CARE approach is discussed with parents and whānau while their child is present. This discussion helps to build a partnership based on common understandings of school values and how these are woven into day-to-day practice. The principal maintains relationships and lines of communication with parents and whānau by visiting 40 to 50 homes each year and by monitoring student safety, especially after school when students are on their way home.

Staff work as a team. They have a shared understanding of the school's vision and their place in its implementation. Part of the board's interview process for new teachers involves asking questions about whether potential staff will interact well with students and their parents, because this underpins the school's vision.

“Teachers are warm and welcoming.”

Principal

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Staff build strong relationships with parents in a variety of ways. They are accessible, friendly and caring towards families and they seek opportunities to talk with parents when they drop off and pick up their children. Parents feel they can approach staff about matters to do with their child's learning or well-being. They take an active role in their child's education and participate in the many activities available at the school. Students learn in an inclusive environment where they are respected as individuals and where teachers hold high expectations for their achievement and progress. Teachers show respect for and understanding of their students' backgrounds.

“We discuss small things before they become bigger problems.”

Principal

Staff intervene early to prevent potential problems. They respond promptly to behaviour concerns by making contact with parents and whānau and discussing strategies to help resolve any issues. Students are aware of the consequences of their behaviour and understand that their parents share responsibility for finding solutions and making decisions about what will happen. A focus on dealing with small matters before they escalate helps promote shared responsibility and strengthens home-school partnerships.

“Parents receive a personal invitation to come to interviews.”

Principal

The school has very high attendance at school interviews. Parents are given a personal invitation to these important occasions. The invitation includes a photograph of their child and explains the purpose of the interview and how parents might benefit from the process. If parents have not responded to the written invitation, staff either phone the parents or visit the home. Teachers prepare for the interview by sending home a written report. They invite parents to discuss and ask questions about the report and to contribute to setting goals for their child's future learning. Student workbooks (and in some classes digital portfolios) are available for parents to view. Students are invited to be part of the process so they can share what they are learning with their parents. Parents gain a better understanding of their child's progress.

“Parents see school as a valuable place to be.”

Principal

Parents build valuable skills through becoming school trustees, helping in the school canteen, and organising school events. The Computers in Homes programme, facilitated by the school, has enabled some families to have their own computer and to learn about using it. In addition, some students have taught family members computer skills. Many parents participate in the Duffy Heroes Assemblies, where the value of reading is promoted and students see their parents as learners alongside themselves.

PAKURANGA COLLEGE: LEADERSHIP PROMOTING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Pakuranga College is a large decile 9, coeducational secondary school located in Pakuranga, Auckland. In 2007 the school's roll was 2084, of whom 49 percent were New Zealand European/Pākehā, 17 percent Chinese, nine percent Indian, seven percent African, five percent Māori, four percent Korean, three percent Pacific, with the remaining six percent from various other ethnic groups.

"I have the opportunity to enjoy my learning...negotiate a process for successful outcomes in partnership with teachers who endeavour to include my family, whānau and community in my learning."²

The principal provides high quality leadership based on well-researched educational practice. The learning charter, developed in consultation with the community and shared extensively with students, establishes a common understanding and ownership of school direction. This charter and plan give trustees, teachers and students appropriate direction to engage with parents. A goal to 'extend and develop the home-school partnerships and engage the parent community with the school to improve student achievement' provides a sharp focus on learning and the importance of good quality relationships. Strengthening engagement with parents and whānau is a key strategic priority.

The principal, senior managers, teachers, and students lead different aspects of parent and whānau engagement. The principal promotes and sustains a mutually respectful culture and leads by example. Senior managers lead by meeting with specific ethnic groups. They are the first point of contact in the school and oversee the organisation of events and processes to promote the achievement of particular groups of students.

2 Learning Charter.
See <http://www.pakuranga.school.nz/page.asp?zone=2&page=9&sub=1>

“Students are instrumental in providing a link with their families.”

Principal

The students represent 55 different ethnicities. They provide the bridge between parents and families, and the school. Students encourage family attendance and interest in their work and life at school. They are pivotal in imparting their enthusiasm for learning to their parents. Student leaders from various ethnic groups are involved in attending meetings, translating invitations and newsletters and providing language support for parents.

Meetings with parents of specific ethnic backgrounds are customised for those particular groups. Parents are invited through personally addressed and mailed invitations. Those parents who are familiar with school personnel network with their ethnic community to recruit other parents and whānau to attend meetings. Senior student leaders also attend these meetings at which parents determine the format and agenda.

Parents have regular opportunities to meet with school managers, teachers and trustees. Information evenings are organised to promote parents’ understanding of learning and assessment processes. Parents are able to discuss and share information and issues.

“These meetings provide an opportunity for ‘coffee table’ conversations.”

Board chairperson

Cottage meetings are held in parents’ homes. Each term a parent organises a meeting for up to 15 other parents from their street (or of their acquaintance). The principal attends these meetings and discusses any topics parents want to present. School managers welcome opportunities to consult with parents, and whānau and hear their comments.

“You are what you celebrate.”

Principal

Parents participate in celebrations of achievement. Cultural festivals, performances, displays and open days give parents opportunities to share in their children’s learning. Achievement breakfasts are held each term, where 15 to 20 students attend with their families. Students are honoured with the presentation of a citation of their particular achievements.

FORBURY SCHOOL: BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL CULTURE

Forbury School is a decile 2, Years 1 to 8, primary school in Dunedin. In 2007 the school's roll was 114, of whom 59 percent were New Zealand European/Pākehā, 25 percent Māori, nine percent Pacific and seven percent Asian students.

“When I first arrived here I thought there was no community.”

Principal

The principal has made the school the heart of the community. She spends considerable time and energy to create a partnership with a community that was previously marginalised. Her leadership style is consultative and she firmly acknowledges that parents have the ability and wisdom to know their children.

The principal leads by example in her dealings with people. She provides ready backup for teachers when incidents arise, and spends much of her time working with students, parents, and external support agencies.

“I treat families with respect and expect families to do the same.”

Principal

A strong culture of respect permeates the school. Staff are encouraged to discuss with their students and their parents what respect means. The need to listen and to be approachable, to thank parents and to use the pronoun “we” is emphasised. The principal telephones parents regularly with positive and not so positive news. Both teaching and support staff use an informal approach in their communications with parents and they know students and their families well.

Contact on the first day of school is regarded as very important in establishing a link between home and school. A photograph is taken of parents and their child when they first arrive at the school. Photographs are also taken of parents' involvement with their children, and displayed throughout the school. These displays are a visual record of happy and engaging times.

An open morning, with a barbecue for parents, is held once a term. This event gives parents an opportunity to look at student work and talk with teachers about their child's progress. Parents know what is happening in their children's education and are able to support them.

Parents are encouraged to involve themselves in school activities. Some activities are about children, for example making breakfasts and lunches. Activities also include helping in the library and maintaining school property. The school offers parent-focused activities, such as adult literacy and scrap-booking classes. These provide parents with opportunities to engage positively in the school so that it becomes a place of learning for adults as well as children.

“The way you teach impacts on engagement with parents.”

Principal

Staff encourage families into the school by involving them in activities related to their child’s learning. Parents participate in class projects and social activities and students enjoy seeing their parents involved. The school’s open door policy gives children and their families a sense of belonging in the school and increased trust in the staff. Restorative justice processes, involving parents in the resolution of behavioural matters involving the child, are used to enhance learning opportunities.

School personnel organise community events that are increasingly well supported by parents. Various community groups also use the school buildings. These include adult literacy groups and a language nest. The school is well supported by many local businesses.

NAPIER BOYS’ HIGH SCHOOL: SHARING LEADERSHIP IN THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Napier Boys’ High School is a decile 5, Years 9 to 15, single sex, boys’ secondary school in Napier. In 2007 the school’s roll was 1122, of whom 72 percent were New Zealand European/Pākehā, 23 percent Māori, three percent Pacific students, with the remaining two percent from other ethnic groups.

“The boys and their parents see you there – what we are doing counts.”

Principal

The principal provides strong leadership in engaging with families. He spends considerable out-of-school time attending sporting and cultural events, and meetings and hui, where he develops relationships with parents. The principal knows his students well and shows respect for them and their families. He has high expectations for students’ learning and behaviour.

The Parents' League provides a conduit for sharing information between the school and the community. Not a 'cash cow' but a conduit for information."

Principal

A committee of parents (Parents' League) plans and facilitates activities for informing and involving parents. They take a lead role in organising information evenings on such topics as the National Certificates of Educational Achievement (NCEA) and preparation for tertiary studies, consultation meetings, report evenings and the orientation programme for Year 9 students. Parent committee members survey the parents of all Year 9 students to discuss their satisfaction or concerns about transition from Year 8, providing a useful conduit for feedback to the school. This committee provides leadership for parents, by parents.

The Parents' League and school management promote networks with the wider community. They identify and encourage community members to contribute to school events. In particular, appropriate speakers and presenters contribute to events for boys and their fathers.

The school participated in research about what makes a 'good man'. As a result of this research, school managers have implemented some formal and informal strategies to encourage greater participation of fathers, or significant males, in the life of their adolescent boys. For example, the 'Dads and Lads' events include a breakfast for Year 9 students and their fathers and a car rally.

"We want to learn how things could be done better for our Māori students."

Principal

The recently appointed head of department Māori (HOD) leads formal engagement with Māori whānau. He has found that whānau attendance at hui increases if it coincides with a sporting event. A successful hui occurred following a touch tournament in which students, teachers and whānau all participated.

“We don’t feel alone – support is critical and it will have a positive impact on our boys.”

Māori HOD

The principal and HOD Māori have invited a group of Māori from the local community who have connections with the school (Kahui Tautoko) to assist in encouraging the engagement and involvement of Māori parents and whānau. This group offers support and advice about local protocol. Kahui Tautoko also has a key role in supporting the school’s networking with Māori whānau.

We try to give parents good information about what is going on in the school.”

Principal

Teachers communicate effectively with parents and whānau. Newsletters are published in English and te reo Māori. Teachers are increasingly using text and email to communicate with parents. Meetings and hui are organised to suit participants. For example, meetings with hostel parents coincide with times when students are being returned to school by their parents. Hostel parents receive weekly emails from the hostel manager.

“We need to be able to develop meaningful relationships.”

Principal

Parents have many opportunities to develop relationships with teachers. These relationships are underpinned by teachers’ availability at school sporting and cultural events. As part of discipline procedures, the principal makes a conscious effort to contact fathers first, where appropriate. Meetings about serious behavioural matters focus on finding solutions rather than apportioning blame.

TAIHAPE AREA SCHOOL: WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP WITH IWI AND THE WIDER COMMUNITY

Taihape Area School is a decile 5, Years 1 to 15 composite school in Taihape. In 2007 the school’s roll was 278, of whom 50 percent were New Zealand European/Pākehā, 48 percent Māori students, with the remaining two percent from various other ethnic groups.

“Iwi were proactive in putting themselves forward to work as partners with the school.”

Principal

This school was established following a network review in 2005. Clear lines of communication have been instituted between the establishment board of trustees and the iwi through the appointment of an iwi representative on the board. Iwi also established an education sub-committee to provide direction for their representative. This person has a mandate to speak on behalf of the iwi, and to obtain direction from iwi for board decisions. Clear procedures ensured that iwi needs were considered in the appointment of a new principal in 2006.

The pōwhiri to welcome the new principal was an opportunity for iwi to discuss the importance of pōwhiri for them and to share this event with the community. The decision to hold it at the nearest marae signified the importance of the link between the iwi and the school. The kaumatua and kuia who were involved were (and still are) seen as showing younger iwi members that support for the school is important. This event set direction or expectation for engagement at the highest level of the iwi. Following the pōwhiri the iwi then joined the new principal to walk from the marae to the school. This further acknowledged the iwi's support for the school.

The board, in consultation with the iwi, established a vision for the school that included goals to improve Māori student achievement and to engage more effectively with whānau/families. The board and iwi expect the new principal to lead the change.

“Look at your community and get to know your community.”

Principal

The philosophy espoused by both iwi and the principal is that the school and the community are part of the whānau of the student. The principal strongly advocates that all staff “be seen, be available, use the pronoun ‘we’, be high profile and listen.” He firmly believes that to engage parents and whānau, staff should know their community and acknowledge that whānau are well informed about what is happening for their children.

The principal identified that students needed to ‘re-engage’ with learning before the school could successfully engage with parents and whānau. He organised an audit of teaching practice. Of the three auditors, one was an iwi member (and member of the iwi education sub-committee). Her role was to comment on teachers’ practice in relation to the professional standards, but from an iwi perspective. This included evidence of manaakitanga and te reo me ngā tikanga Māori. This audit demonstrated to school managers and the board, the professional development needs of teachers.

“Teacher professional development concentrated on contact with whānau in a positive way.”

Principal

Following the audit of teaching practice, teachers’ strengths and weaknesses were identified. It became evident that some teachers did not fully recognise the learning potential of all Māori students. Using funding from Te Kauhua, two professional development facilitators were employed. Both women are iwi members. They seek and use the expertise of the manawhenua to plan professional development for teachers. Iwi assist the facilitators to identify the important goals for development and the effectiveness of the changes are shared with iwi. The programme includes a strong emphasis on engaging with families and whānau by involving them in behaviour management processes, programme planning and individual goal setting.

“Getting whānau involved in their children’s learning and not just behavioural issues.”

Principal

Parents are invited to attend interviews with teachers. In the school’s pānui/newsletter, parents are given information about how to take a lead role at parent-teacher interviews. The principal insists that the interviews are a discussion about student achievement, not behaviour. While teachers engage with parents in interviews, the principal cooks sausages on a barbecue. He believes that parents enjoy the relaxed conversations that this social setting promotes and that working parents are more likely to attend late afternoon or early evening interviews if they know there will be food to share.

The school is developing a new interview process where a student appraisal conference attended by the parents, child and teacher will occur four times a year. The intention is to have the teacher and parents working as partners to improve the student’s achievement outcomes and engagement with learning.

LINWOOD NORTH SCHOOL: STRENGTHENING LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS

Linwood North School is a decile 3, Years 1 to 6, contributing primary school in Christchurch. In 2007 the school's roll was 225, of whom 47 percent were New Zealand European/Pākehā, 32 percent Māori, 17 percent Pacific students, with the remaining four percent from other ethnic groups.

“We are working towards being a school that values diversity.”

Principal

Trustees, teachers, support staff, parents, whānau and students in this school value cultural diversity and acknowledge learning and achievement. The school's Māori and Pacific communities strongly support their children at school and the ethnic background of students is acknowledged and celebrated. The cultural expertise of parents and whānau is used to provide leadership in organising events to celebrate the school's cultural diversity.

The school has a strong relationship with key personnel in the Māori and Pacific communities. These people encourage others to become involved and engaged in their child's learning. Community fun days celebrating Māori culture are well attended by parents and school staff are planning a similar Pacific day.

School managers and teachers develop, and share with parents, positive expectations for students' learning and behaviour. These expectations include reference to students' attendance and punctuality. Teachers expect that all parents will attend student interviews and they take steps to encourage their attendance.

“We still have a long way to go. We are on a journey to get the community back into the school.”

Board chairperson

The board consults Māori and Pacific families and includes their aspirations for their children in the school charter. The vision is a focal point for the community. The school encourages parents and whānau to work together for the benefit of the students.

The principal and teachers, in consultation with parents and whānau, have an integrated values programme as part of the curriculum. Values such as responsibility, perseverance and self-discipline are taught specifically. Students' acceptance of these shared values is evident in assemblies, in day-to-day classroom activities and in the courtesy shown to visitors at the school.

“Teachers know students’ lives and their families.”

Principal

Teachers and students choose contexts for learning that match students’ prior experience, knowledge and cultural backgrounds. Teachers note that this practice breaks down barriers between what is considered *school knowledge* and what is *home knowledge*. The learning contexts acknowledge and value what parents and whānau are able to teach their children.

Three-way goal setting with a student, their teacher and parents, allows parents to contribute their ideas about their child’s learning needs, as well as receiving useful information about their child’s progress and achievement. This is a joint exercise that ensures good communication between all parties. Parents are well informed about their child’s achievement and better able to understand and support their learning.

KAITAO INTERMEDIATE: INCREASING PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE SCHOOL

Kaitao Intermediate is a decile 3, Years 7 to 8, intermediate school in Rotorua. In 2007 the school’s roll was 534, of whom 75 percent were Māori, 19 percent New Zealand European/Pākehā, one percent Cook Island Māori, one percent Pacific, one percent Asian students, with the remaining three percent from other ethnic groups.

School-wide expectations focus on ‘being at school and behaving at school’. The motto ‘Kia puawai i roto i te whānaungatanga’³ underpins the school’s practice.

Staff have introduced an initiative that has resulted in the establishment of five distinctive learning academies. The academy approach is part of the school’s vision to improve student engagement in learning. A survey of parents indicated positive support for the academy structure, with 91 percent reporting that the academy structure had helped their child’s learning. The impact of the learning academy approach is evident in improved student attendance and punctuality. Parents and whānau are taking a more active role in their child’s choice of learning academy.

“We are getting an increase in the numbers of parents at our evenings at the end of each term. At one of our prize-giving evenings, a parent said it was the first time ever that her child had got a prize.”

Principal

Academy evenings are regular events. They start with a shared barbecue, followed by an opportunity for the principal and board to share the strategic plan and targets for improved student achievement. Academy evenings provide opportunities for students to

3 To blossom within the family concept. <http://www.kaitao.school.nz/>

perform and present the outcomes of their learning. Academy prize-giving evenings are well supported with a reported 50 percent increase in the number of parents attending school activities and events.

The school is flexible about the timing of meetings. An open day, held on a Saturday, allowed working parents or those who could not attend an evening meeting to participate. The open day provides a further opportunity for the principal and trustees to share the school's forward planning and its targets for improved student achievement.

“Parents feel they can make a contribution to the school through this programme.”

Deputy Principal

As a way of increasing parent and whānau involvement in the school, staff implement a programme developed and promoted by the New Zealand Parent Teacher Association called ‘Give Me 5’. The expectation is that parents give five hours of their time annually to the school. Parents can contribute to the school in a way that suits them and at a time that works for them. The school has set up a database using information from parents as to how they want to contribute. Parents and whānau are informed about this project by flyers and through discussions with teachers. The school is broadening the programme to include whānau and families who would like to give their time as a group.

“The focus is on keeping children at school.”

Principal

Staff have been involved in professional development about using restorative justice. Meetings with parents and their child focus on solutions rather than blame. Data indicate a reduction in numbers of stand downs and suspensions between 2005 and 2006.

ROWANDALE SCHOOL: SUPPORTING PARENTS AS LEARNERS

Rowandale School is a decile 1, Years 1 to 6, contributing school in Manurewa, Manukau City. In 2007 the school's roll was 445, of whom 42 percent Māori, 26 percent were Samoan, 10 percent Tongan, five percent Cook Island, five percent New Zealand European/Pākehā, four percent Niuean students, with the remaining eight percent from other ethnic groups.

“People make a difference.”

Principal

A strong focus on building relationships with parents and whānau when their child starts school provides a foundation for respectful and meaningful partnerships. The principal believes that it is important to work with parents to influence what happens at home, in particular the parent-child relationship. She gets alongside parents, encouraging them to come to school and offering genuine support. Relationships are based on mutual trust and a belief in making a difference for families and their children.

A high level of commitment from the school supports the implementation of a family literacy programme. A small group of parents and whānau or families commits to this programme for 20 hours a week over the period of a year. The programme is offered through a partnership involving the school, local government and a tertiary institution.

The principal noted:

“We wanted to engage our families in the education of their children. We had tried lots of strategies, but none of them really seemed to make a difference. We liked the idea of a programme that assisted parents, grandparents or caregivers who had no school or tertiary qualifications. This programme really values inclusiveness. We see:

- our parents raise their self esteem, and become more confident and capable as models for their children;
- parents in the programme are enjoying improved incomes and lifestyles;
- improved parenting practice and much greater engagement of family members in their children’s education and the school;
- a much better relationship with our kindergarten and improved transitioning for children at five; and
- parents realising their own potential and that of their children.”⁴

A feature of this programme is that while parents and children learn separately, parents also spend time each day in the classroom with their child, learning together. This activity leads to improved relationships between parents and children and greater engagement with the school and their child’s learning. Parents’ achievements, through the family literacy programme, are recognised at the same assembly that the achievements of their children are celebrated. Parents are visible in the school and more confident about approaching teachers. A culture that values success and builds confidence is promoted.

4 City of Manukau Education Trust. *Manukau Family Literacy Programmes: Intergenerational Family Learning in Practice*. August 2006.

“I learnt a lot that strengthened my relationships with my kids, especially my 13-year-old daughter.”

Parent

“Before the course my only time at school was if teachers needed to talk about my child. Now teachers say hello and I’m more involved with my child’s learning.”

Parent

Parents involved in the programme talk about the positive impact it is having on their lives, particularly in relation to their parenting, understanding of their own and their family’s educational needs, and their aspirations for the future. Parents learn strategies they can use to change their reactions and relationship with their children. For many parents, there is a second chance to be successful learners.

“I’m going to university – I want the best for my kids.”

Parent

Completion of the course opens up doors for parents in terms of further study and work opportunities. Many parent graduates continue on to further tertiary education. The learning community is one in which responsibility for learning is shared. Benefits for the school include more parents being keen and willing to stand for the board of trustees and more parent involvement in activities and events.

Discussion

This evaluation offers an insight into what some schools are doing to influence engagement with their parents, whānau and the wider community. These case studies highlight the common themes that underpin and contribute to successful engagement.

Six themes provide a structure to discuss successful partnerships in practice:

- leadership;
- relationships;
- school culture;
- partnerships with parents and whānau/families;
- community networks; and
- communication.

Each theme is discussed and supported by further examples from schools where ERO identified successful practice in engaging parents, whānau and the wider community.

LEADERSHIP

Throughout this evaluation, ERO found leadership was a critical factor in determining the success of home-school partnerships. School leaders influenced how well a school engaged with its community. Strong and committed leadership was underpinned by a strong belief that parents play an important role in their children's education.

In many of the schools that were successfully engaging with parents, whānau and the wider community, shared values and beliefs were clearly stated and well understood by all. Consultation with parents, whānau and in some schools local iwi, established the values to be promoted throughout the school. Values were advocated that promoted respectful relationships between everybody in the school's community.

In these schools, the strategic vision and goals took account of parents' aspirations for their children. Some schools actively planned to increase engagement with parents. This planned approach was often supported by explicit initiatives and activities to welcome parents and whānau into the school and to strengthen relationships. Such strategies were useful starting points for ongoing dialogue, and supported the development of partnerships focused on student learning and well-being.

Principals worked in particular ways to develop relationships that supported partnerships with parents and communities. These included having a collaborative and consultative approach to leadership where the views of others were heard and considered. Principals put time and effort into getting to know the families whose

children attended the school. They expected all staff to demonstrate positive attitudes towards parents by being accessible, approachable and willing to develop partnerships.

Opportunities for others to take a leadership role were evident in many schools where partnerships were strong. Principals devolved leadership responsibilities for engagement to other members of the school community. In some schools, middle managers or teaching staff coordinated a range of activities to engage with particular groups of parents. Parents took on leadership roles with other parents, with members of their own cultural community and also with students.

Student involvement in leading and contributing to partnerships was a feature in some schools. Students talked to their parents about what was happening in the school and encouraged parents to attend activities and events at the school that they were involved in leading. This was particularly evident in some secondary schools.

Further examples of leadership contributing to successful engagement

The knowledgeable, committed principal continues to lead by example as he effectively manages a range of initiatives designed to promote and maximise learning outcomes. A feature of his leadership is his ability to foster trusting relationships within the school community. The senior management team is united in support for the school vision and actively promote and model the agreed expectations. Leadership roles are available at all levels of the school, with student, staff and parents having meaningful opportunities to participate in decision making.

Decile 2, coeducational Years 9 to 15 secondary school in an urban area.

There is a strong sense of ownership of the vision and direction from all involved in the school. The principal is an all encompassing leader. He effectively implements the school's vision of partnership between the school and its community. He lives the school motto of kotahitanga; dream, strive and achieve, creating a strong culture of inclusiveness.

Decile 4, Years 1 to 6 contributing primary school in an urban area.

RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships mattered where schools were successfully engaging families and communities. A commitment to investing time and energy in positive relationships was reflected in how parents and staff interacted through a variety of activities and events. Positive relationships were a necessary part of effective engagement for the benefit of students.

In schools that had clear expectations that teachers would develop meaningful relationships with parents:

- recruitment practice focused on appointing teachers with proven skills in forming positive connections with others;
- self-review practice identified families or groups of families with whom teachers were not connecting, and
- school staff undertook professional development focused on engaging parents and whānau.

Transition-to-school processes were pivotal in the development of positive relationships. Contact on the first day of school established the link between home and school. Many parents confirmed the importance of feeling welcome, particularly on their first contact with the school, and praised school personnel such as office or reception staff for making this happen. Parents liked to be well informed and have opportunities to meet a range of school personnel. Parents benefited from effective transition processes that quickly enabled them to become part of the school community.

Considerable time and effort was put into making contact with parents and whānau/families, in both the school and the wider community. In some schools, the early development of relationships occurred through open days, visits to contributing schools, performances and community events. Meeting teachers informally at school events, activities and sports, provided opportunities for parents to talk, ask questions and connect with their children's school lives. Parents enjoyed being involved in non-threatening, social and student-focused activities, making it easier for relationships to be developed and nurtured. Informal contact strengthen relationships and paved the way for more formal partnerships to develop. Parents' involvement in school activities assisted the development of trust, respect and understanding between the school and parents.

Further examples of relationships contributing to successful engagement

New students who are enrolling for Year 9, and their parents, are given the opportunity to meet the principal. This is followed by a phone call from the Year 9 dean and the prospective tutor teacher. Prior to the start of the year students receive a letter of welcome, a calendar showing the dates of school events and a newsletter. Parents report that this process helps their children to feel valued, important and welcome. Parents feel involved, informed, and have met some key personnel at the school. They begin to form positive relationships with staff.

Decile 4, Years 9 to 15, single sex girls' secondary school in an urban area.

Opportunities for parents to be involved socially with the school include open coffee mornings held for an hour once a month. The school supports this activity by having activities for the younger children while parents are involved in discussions. Parents come from a wide area. Parents network with each other getting to know other parents of children in their class in an informal setting. This is particularly good for immigrant parents who are new to the area.

There are good relationships between teachers, parents and school managers. The school is a familiar place so parents are comfortable to talk to teachers about concerns or to share their child's interests. Families are well informed about school events and children's learning. They readily participate in the many opportunities provided by the school to be involved in and to support their child's education. The school philosophy of caring and giving attention to detail has resulted in visitors and families feeling valued at the school.

Decile 8, Years 1 to 8, full primary school in an urban area.

SCHOOL CULTURE

School culture is often referred to as 'the way things are done at this school'. Culture reflects the values that underpin the actions of school staff and students. In schools where partnerships were working well, it was easy for parents, whānau and community members to come into the school and participate in formal and informal activities and events. An inclusive and welcoming environment helped parents to feel comfortable and at ease in the school. Parents' interactions with school staff, including office staff, the principal, senior managers, and teachers were positive. Being included and accepted was crucial to successful engagement.

Where personnel, such as the principal, senior managers, deans, and teachers were approachable and accessible, parents responded positively to opportunities to meet and talk. The ease with which interactions took place, influenced the nature of the relationships that supported successful engagement.

These schools acknowledged and respected the diverse backgrounds of all their students. Parents, whānau and families experienced a sense of belonging in their child's school and felt comfortable contributing to programmes and their child's learning and well-being. The diversity of each school's community was valued and celebrated.

Further examples of the school culture contributing to successful engagement

At this school, students' self esteem and cultural identity are actively nurtured. Strong links are established with the local marae and kaumatua. Staff are proactive in engaging in student-focused liaison with each child's whānau. The resulting positive wairua is a feature of the school.

Decile 2, Years 1 to 8, full primary school in a rural area.

The school has developed a whānau/family atmosphere. The principal and the teachers demonstrate care and respect for each other and for the children. Students express pride in their school. The principal and teachers model the behaviour they expect of students. Consistent and fair practices have ensured a successful behaviour management system that students know and understand. Inappropriate behaviours are prevented from escalating, while positive behaviours are readily acknowledged by teachers.

Decile 2, Years 1 to 8, full primary school in an urban area.

PARTNERSHIPS

Where partnerships were working well, the involvement of parents, whānau and communities was explicit in the school's plans and visible in its day-to-day interactions and activities. There was a clear expectation for parents to work in partnership with the school to benefit their child's learning and well-being. The school community shared this expectation.

Where learning-focused partnerships were working well, a key aspect was the ease with which parents accessed information and understood what it meant in terms of their child's progress and achievement. Written information was supported by face-to-face discussions that enabled parents to ask questions and involved students taking a lead role in sharing and reflecting on their learning. Regular opportunities to share information meant that parents felt well informed and were able to have conversations with their children about their learning and support learning at home. Parents appreciated receiving accurate and reliable information about how well their child was achieving.

Successful engagement involved parents and whānau in decisions affecting their child. In some schools, they were involved in decisions about their child's learning goals, subject choices, class placement, and solutions to behavioural and learning matters. Parents gained confidence and trust in the school through decision making partnerships.

There were many opportunities to share students' achievements and involve the wider community in acknowledging success. Celebrations included award ceremonies, cultural events and performances, festivals of learning, whānau hui, class presentations, art exhibitions, curriculum evenings, and daily communication books. Students' pride in themselves and motivation increased when their parents, whānau and families were involved in celebrating their learning successes.

The implementation of restorative justice practices that promoted a partnership approach to dealing with more serious behavioural issues was a strength in some schools. Success depended on the way the school personnel involved students and their parents and whānau in decisions based on finding solutions rather than attributing blame. In most cases there were positive outcomes for students and their families in terms of strengthening partnerships.

Further examples of partnerships contributing to successful engagement

At this school parents have an opportunity to discuss their child's learning with the teacher with their child present. The school produces folios of assessment information and student samples of work that are discussed at the interview. Interviews are also undertaken for a specific purpose such as transition to school, reporting school entry assessment data or sharing the outcomes of the diagnostic testing. Parents receive information at certain points in their child's learning. The junior syndicate establishes close relationships with parents in the first few years. Parents are contacted and consulted when special programmes are put in place. They are also invited to sit in on lessons. This familiarises them with the specific learning needs of their children and gives them ideas about how to help them at home. They are able to reinforce learning.

Decile 4, Years 1 to 8, full primary school in an urban area.

Parents are well informed about their child's progress and achievement. Student-led conferences focus on individual portfolios of work samples and give students an opportunity to discuss their learning and successes with their parents and whānau. Formal and informal parent-teacher meetings and interviews inform parents about their child's current learning. School-based curriculum forums promote a stronger learning partnership between parents and the school. Parents spoken with stated they gained better understanding from these sessions.

Decile 3, Years 1 to 6, contributing primary school in an urban area.

Opportunities for parents to be involved in their child's learning include:

- curriculum evenings where the following term's focus areas are discussed with parents;
- three-way goal setting interviews involving parent, child and teacher;
- meet the teacher interviews and parent interviews to share and discuss individual student achievement;
- opportunities for parents to share their expertise with other students in their child's class;
- informative newsletters; and
- parent involvement with trips and reading programmes.

Parents know how their children are doing and are interested in their children's achievement. Many parents speak of learning conversations continuing at home. A home-school partnership is developing where parents, teachers and children themselves all contribute to children's learning. Parents are involved in many ways. One father developed a presentation on the meaning of the Treaty of Waitangi to their family and presented it with his daughter to her class. The school values children's homes as an extension of the learning environment.

At the beginning of each term parents receive a newsletter about what their children will be learning. Curriculum meetings give parents a further opportunity to be informed about the learning programme. Sharing the same conceptual theme across the school enables students with siblings of different ages to engage in conversations about their learning with each other and with their parents. Parents report that students are transferring school learning to other situations outside the school.

Decile 8, Years 1 to 8, full primary school in an urban area.

Restorative justice practices at this school have received a very positive response from parents. Respect for the individual and an expectation that each member of the school community takes responsibility for their actions form the basis of the school's vision. Restorative justice practices support this vision and positively influence the school tone. Processes involved are very clear and have resulted in a commitment by all parties into finding real solutions to problems rather than punitive outcomes. Students are staying in school and feel valued. The school promotes a culture of inclusiveness.

Decile 2, coeducational Years 9 to 15, secondary school in an urban area.

COMMUNITY NETWORKS

Parents felt that they knew what was happening for their child where the school actively sought their view on a range of topics and where those views were then considered as part of the school's direction. Consultation that was regular and took account of the diverse ways in which parents wanted to express their views and ideas, strengthened partnerships between the schools and their communities.

In many of the schools with diverse communities, partnerships worked well because of the way in which the cultural identity and values of students, their parents and their community were acknowledged and included in day-to-day activities. In these schools, parents were involved in organising and leading cultural celebrations. Community expertise and skills were identified and contributed to strengthening partnerships that benefited student learning and well-being. Regular meetings, hui, fono, and forums involving parents, whānau and families had a positive effect on engagement. These meetings were often led by key people from either the school or the wider community. Such gatherings provided a bridge for parents to come into school. These helped to build parents' confidence, especially if schooling had not been a positive experience for them in the past.

Some schools had developed purposeful links with the wider community through involvement with community groups and agencies, both in the school environment and outside the school. Links with the local iwi facilitated further engagement with whānau and families. Regular meetings were convened with a wide variety of agencies that supported children and their families. School personnel worked in partnership with community agencies to support students' learning and well-being.

Formalised links with community groups and agencies involved various groups working in partnership with parents, whānau and school personnel. The benefits of such partnerships were evident in the shared understanding parents had about student achievement priorities and the support given to achieve these.

Further examples of community networks contributing to successful engagement

At this school consultation and feedback to the community about school matters are ongoing. At fortnightly marae hui, the principal shares information and questions from the community are responded to directly. Teachers are responsive to requests and concerns from parents. They value the support, feedback and interest provided by parents and whānau. Teachers listen to parents and adjust programmes to directly benefit students. Students and staff enjoy a high level of support from the local community and schools in the wider region. The principal and board believe that the “positive wairua” within the school community is inclusive of all students and their families. The strong links with local kaumatua are a key factor in nurturing the well-being of students and their sense of who they are as young Māori learners. As the result of community cooperation, students readily access comprehensive medical services at a local clinic and through regular school visits from health professionals. The well-being of children and their families is recognised by the staff and the board of trustees as a key factor in supporting students to achieve and gain from education.

Decile 2, Years 1 to 8, full primary school in a rural area.

The involvement of Pacific parents and communities in school activities is a strong feature of the school. The board is made up of representatives from the Pākehā, Māori, Samoan, Cook Island Māori, Tokelauan, and Tuvaluan communities. Regular community meetings for specific ethnic groups include the parents and whānau of Māori, Samoan, Cook Island Māori, Tokelauan, Tuvaluan, and Niuean students. These forums serve several purposes. For example they provide an opportunity for parents to discuss students’ well-being and learning, provision of first-language classes, board topics, fundraising and preparation for cultural events.

The school’s open-door policy means that parents feel welcome and can meet the principal and staff without having to make an appointment. Parents are very positive about the college’s efforts and results in reducing absenteeism and attribute the college’s communication with them, including by text messaging, as having positive outcomes.

Decile 2, Years 7 to 15, State integrated secondary school in an urban area.

COMMUNICATION

Communication played a key role in the development and maintenance of successful engagement. Activities were tailored for specific groups and consideration given to using different ways to impart information. For some parents, face-to-face communication worked best and for others the use of information and communication technologies (ICT), such as email and interactive websites, were more useful. In some schools, the more traditional means of communication, such as weekly newsletters handed out for students to take home and twice yearly written reporting, were complemented with more personalised and regular opportunities for sharing information.

Good use was made of formal and informal opportunities to relay information. Formal means included telephone calls, individual letters, and interviews and meetings. Informal contact at sports events or the beginning of a school day added value to and strengthened partnerships, especially when these were in their early stages. Much of the communication activity most valued by parents and whānau or families was the opportunity to have regular one-to-one contact with their child's teacher to exchange information.

Some schools had developed useful ways for teachers, parents and whānau to communicate on a daily basis through communication notebooks or diaries, telephone calls, text messages, and emails. The use of ICT such as email, text messaging and interactive websites broadened and enhanced the ways that schools and parents communicated with each other. Rather than replacing traditional forms of communication, ICT offers a means for school to reach parents whose busy lives prevent them from having regular face-to-face contact with teachers. Effective forms of communication bridge the gap between home and school.

The regular and personalised nature of this communication contributed to its effectiveness. Parents appreciated informal contact as a way of building a relationship that enabled two-way sharing of information about their child. They responded well to communication strategies that allowed them to express their views and contribute to their children's learning.

Communication processes that took into account the language and cultural diversity of parents and whānau and families were more successful in developing partnerships with a wide range of parents. The availability of school personnel to listen to parents was vital, as was having school staff who could relate to parents from diverse cultural backgrounds. In some schools, language barriers were overcome by the use of interpreters at meetings and through the translation of newsletters and other information into the languages of groups in the school community. Such services made it easier for parents to attend and participate in meetings, and to gain an increased understanding of their child's progress and achievement in, what for many was, an unfamiliar education system.

Further examples of communication contributing to successful engagement

At this school parents seek information about their child's education through a variety of means including: newsletters; email correspondence; and the school's website. Parents find the articles written by the principal about different educational matters to be informative. They also respect the way many teachers make their email addresses available so that they can contact them with questions about their child's progress. The school website, although not used by all parents, is valued for being another communication channel for parents who want to know something in particular.

Decile 9, Years 7 to 8, intermediate school in an urban area.

The school engages parents from wide multicultural backgrounds. Translators are available to assist parents to understand curriculum and school processes, and provide active engagement with the school's language centre teachers through cultural meetings and informal means. On a practical side, newsletters are translated for two major groups of the school population. Burmese parents of children who arrived as refugees are especially appreciative of the school's efforts to teach their children and help them to help their children at home. An Asian board of trustees member also assists with translating for a significant Chinese community. The school has a parent-school liaison person for each class. A new school parent is telephoned by the parent liaison person and invited to a meeting at the school. This helps new parents to know what the school expects of them and how they can contribute and get involved.

Decile 6, Years 1 to 8, full primary school in an urban area.

This school uses a wide range of communication methods including the school website and related software, emails to teachers, telephone calls and the quarterly newsletter. Ninety percent of the school's families have access to the internet. Web-based and other software methods are used to give parents and whānau information about learning programmes and homework. Parents report that the school's website and the use of email are particularly helpful. They are kept informed about forthcoming school activities and two-way communication is fostered.

Decile 5, Years 9 to 15, coeducational secondary school in an urban area.

Conclusion

Successful engagement between schools and parents, whānau and communities is largely influenced by the extent to which schools are aware of their community and responsive to it. West-Burnham and Otero (2004) suggest that:

*a school that is visible in society can be seen as a ‘social school’, a school that is of the community not just in the community.*⁵

The eight schools in this report are working towards being schools ‘of their community’ not just ‘in their community’. This endeavour requires strong and committed leadership, where relationships are valued and set in a positive school culture. Partnerships with parents, whānau and members of the wider community are developed through effective community networks and the use of timely, useful and appropriate communication processes. A feature in all of these schools was the spirit in which everyone in the community worked together to develop and strengthen partnerships for the benefit of students’ learning and well-being.

Schools and parents, whānau and communities can use this report to review and reflect on the extent to which established partnerships contribute to successful engagement. A set of indicators, developed from this evaluation, is included in *Appendix 1: Indicators of successful home-school engagement*. These indicators reflect ERO’s findings about what works well in schools that are successful in engaging parents, whānau and communities.

CONCLUSION

5 West-Burnham, J. & Otero, G. *Educational leadership and social capital*. Incorporated Association of Registered Teachers of Victoria Seminar Series, August, No.136, 2004.

Appendix 1: Indicators of successful home-school engagement

LEADERSHIP

- The involvement of parents, whānau and families is valued and welcomed by the principal and senior managers in the school.
- Teachers initiate and develop partnerships with parents that focus on student learning and well-being.
- Students have opportunities to take a lead role in activities and events that involve their parents, whānau and the wider community.
- There is a shared vision that reflects the aspirations of parents, whānau and families for their children.
- The strategic intent of the school reflects a commitment to working in partnership with parents, whānau and families.

RELATIONSHIPS

- Relationships between school personnel and parents, whānau and community members are valued and based on mutual respect and trust.
- Responsibility for developing and maintaining relationships is shared.
- Parents from different ethnic groups have a point of contact on the staff of the school.
- Relationships are developed in formal and informal ways, with personalised, one-to-one contact being as important as the group activities and events.

SCHOOL CULTURE

- An open, inclusive and welcoming environment invites parent participation in a wide range of non-threatening activities and events.
- Staff are approachable and accessible.
- Diversity is valued and celebrated in a variety of ways.
- The backgrounds and cultural heritage of all parents, whānau and families are respected.
- Parents, whānau and families are visible in the school in a variety of role and activities.

PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS AND FAMILIES

- Contact with parents is timely and opportunities taken to share their child's successes and concerns.
- Regular formal and informal opportunities are provided to discuss student progress, achievement and well-being.
- Reporting of achievement is based on sound data, easily understood, honest, and timely.

- Students have opportunities to lead conferences about their learning with their teacher and parents, whānau and families.
- Parents, whānau and families have opportunities to be involved in their children's learning, for example in goal setting and developing career pathways.
- Parents are involved in celebrations of their child's achievement.
- Parents are supported in helping their children to learn at home.
- Parents, whānau and families have opportunities to learn about teaching programmes (curriculum), assessment practices/processes, initiatives that support their child's well-being and parenting.

PARTNERSHIPS FOCUSED ON WELL-BEING

- Transition practices for students coming into the school include parents, whānau and families.
- Processes for managing student behaviour concerns include parents in finding positive solutions to issues.
- Parents' concerns are listened to and there is appropriate and timely follow up.
- Parents are able to share ideas and strategies to support their child's well-being at school.
- The school has established links with a range of relevant agencies and organisations in the wider community that support its own pastoral care practice.

COMMUNITY NETWORKS

- The school values and makes use of the expertise and skills of parents, whānau and families in the community.
- Parents, whānau and families can contribute in a variety of ways, for example through education outside the classroom activities, working bees, helping in the classroom, and activities such as sports coaching.
- The school is involved in community activities and events.
- Cultural celebrations are supported by community groups and leaders.
- The school works with and/or employs liaison people to work with and support families.
- The school uses a variety of approaches to gauge the perspectives of parents, whānau and families on a wide range of topics.
- The views of parents, whānau and families are sought, listened to and contribute to what happens in the school.
- The school regularly evaluates how well it is engaging with its community and knows which parents are involved and which are not, what the barriers might be, and the effectiveness of the practices used to engage parents, whānau and families.

COMMUNICATION

- There are various ways schools and parents, whānau and families communicate that meet the needs of all groups.
- Information communicated is useful, timely and easily understood.
- Language barriers, where they exist, are addressed through the translation of written material and the use of translators for meetings.
- Communication is two-way, with opportunities for sharing on a wide range of topics relevant for school personnel and for parents, whānau and families.

QUESTIONS TO SUPPORT SELF REVIEW IN SCHOOLS

- Who is the best person/people to lead engagement in our school community?
- What opportunities are there for parents, whānau and families, and students to take a lead role?
- What opportunities, both formal and informal, are there for parents, whānau and families to meet with school staff and with each other?
- To what extent do such opportunities take account of the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of all involved?
- How open is our school to identifying and discussing the beliefs held by staff about engaging with parents?
- In what ways is diversity valued and responded to?
- What does engagement mean to parents, whānau and the wider community and what might it look like if it was working well for them?
- To what extent are parents, whānau and families included in decisions about their children's learning and well-being?
- How well informed are parents about their child's learning and well-being, teaching programmes, assessment processes, and pastoral care practices?
- What links does our school have with its community?
- In what ways does our school value and utilise the expertise and skills of its community?
- What do we know about the effectiveness of the ways in which we engage with parents, whānau and families, and the wider community?
- What expectations do parents, whānau and families have for how they want to be communicated with?
- What kind of information do they find most useful?
- How is our school community changing?
- What does this mean for how our school communicates with all parents and whānau, not just those who come through the school gate?

Education Review Offices

Corporate Office

Level 1, Sybase House
101 Lambton Quay
Box 2799
Wellington 6140
Phone: 04 499 2489 Fax: 04 499 2482
info@ero.govt.nz

Te Uepū-ā-Motu

c/o Corporate Office
Phone: 04 499 2489 Fax: 04 499 2482
erotu@ero.govt.nz

Auckland (Area 1)

Level 5, URS Centre
13–15 College Hill
Ponsonby
Box 7219
Wellesley Street
Auckland 1010
Phone: 09 377 1331 Fax: 09 373 3421
auckland@ero.govt.nz

Moana Pasefika

c/o Auckland Office
Phone: 09 377 1331 Fax: 09 373 3421
auckland@ero.govt.nz

Hamilton (Area 2)

Floor 4, ASB Building
214 Collingwood Street
Private Bag 3095 WMC
Hamilton 3240
Phone: 07 838 1898 Fax: 07 838 1893
hamilton@ero.govt.nz

Rotorua (Area 2)

Floor 5, Zens Centre
41 Arawa Street
Box 335
Rotorua 3040
Phone: 07 348 2228 Fax: 07 348 1498
rotorua@ero.govt.nz

Napier (Area 3)

Level 1, 43 Station Street
Box 742
Napier 4140
Phone: 06 835 8143 Fax: 06 835 8578
napier@ero.govt.nz

Wanganui (Area 3)

Floor 1, Education House
249 Victoria Avenue
Box 4023
Wanganui 4541
Phone: 06 345 4091 Fax: 06 345 7207
wanganui@ero.govt.nz

Wellington (Area 4)

Floor 8, Southmark Building
203–209 Willis Street
Box 27 002
Marion Square
Wellington 6141
Phone: 04 381 6800 Fax: 04 381 6801
wellington@ero.govt.nz

Nelson (Area 4)

Floor 2, 241 Hardy Street
Box 169
Nelson 7040
Phone: 03 546 8513 Fax: 03 546 2259
nelson@ero.govt.nz

Christchurch (Area 5)

Floor 4, Pyne Gould Corporation Building
233 Cambridge Terrace
Box 25 102
Victoria Street
Christchurch 8144
Phone: 03 365 5860 Fax: 03 366 7524
christchurch@ero.govt.nz

Dunedin (Area 5)

Floor 9, John Wickliffe House
Princes Street
Box 902
Dunedin 9054
Phone: 03 479 2619 Fax: 03 479 2614
dunedin@ero.govt.nz

www.ero.govt.nz

