

Leadership profile

Simon Heath: principal of Renwick School

<http://www.renwick.school.nz>



Renwick school is a decile 8 school with 520 students. Simon has led the school for the last 6 years, before which he was principal of Fairhall school. Simon was awarded a Woolf Fisher fellowship in 2012, which included a block course at Harvard University. Simon can be emailed at simon@renwick.school.nz, if you want to explore any of these ideas / approaches further.

What big ideas cement your leadership approach together?

Simon spoke of 3 big ideas as critical to his leadership thinking:

1. *Be yourself* - Don't try and follow others, but be true to yourself. You have been appointed because of who you are, so back yourself. Listen to others' thinking and take what you can, but integrate it into your own philosophy. Be willing to dismiss what doesn't fit.
2. *Be reflective, but realistic* - It is important to think about and keep challenging your own thinking - are we improving? Are we changing? Are we moving toward our vision? We need to be a little better every day, rather than sit and be static. Always go for the 'A' game, but accept reality. It is our job, but not our life – many of the best leaders have other stuff on the go outside of school.
3. *Never accept mediocrity* - Mediocrity is the enemy of excellence. We need to demand excellence of ourselves, our team, and our kids. Always go for the 'Rolls-royce' version - you can pare expectations back if necessary – but generally, success comes down to the amount of time and effort we are willing to put in. So surround yourself with great people, and give them the resources and the opportunities they need to succeed.

How do you translate this into action?

Simon spoke of a number of key steps in building a shared vision and then putting it into practice. These included:

- *Take an organic approach* – Simon spent his first 6 months at Renwick school talking to the community. The community he spoke to included students, teachers, parents, family and community members, and business people.
- *Gather data* - key questions - What is important to you here? What is the heartbeat of this school? If you were me, what would you keep / change about Renwick school?
- *Summarise what the group is saying* – Language is powerful, so take time to play back what you are hearing. Check in to make sure you have heard accurately. Use the language of your community to build ownership.
- *Translate the shared vision into tangibles*. Once there is an agreed shared vision then - What does this mean for curriculum, staffing, school wide programmes etc. the key thing now is coherence and consistency.
- *Believe in yourself* - a healthy dose of self-belief in your knowledge and expertise is required to navigate the normal ups and downs of change.

What have been some key learnings for you?

- *Your leadership team is critical* - they take messages out to the rest of the staff. A united approach is required to drive improvement.
- *Use structure to support the vision* – you need to think carefully about the use of units. These can be used to distribute leadership and develop talent.
- *Building leadership capability across the school requires intentional processes and practices*. An example is the use of ‘instructional rounds’ at Renwick school. This is the practice of teams being released to observe and provide feedback to each other on a lesson. The teacher being observed explains what they intend to do, are then observed, and subsequently released for debrief and feedback. They work with the other teachers to develop some next steps for their practice.
- *You need to develop a culture to carry practice* – this begins with the senior leadership team, but can be supported with professional readings and staff discussions. It is critical to develop shared accountability to one another, as the kids move through the school, and are therefore everyone’s responsibility at every level.

What have been some of the toughest things to change?

- Shifting the senior leadership culture from one of management to leadership has been a key challenge. The shift has come through a mixture of challenge and support. Using expertise from outside of education (i.e. business consultant re – leadership) has also helped to inject some fresh ideas that have also supported the shift.

How do you know you are improving

- Students’ results are the bottom line, and seeing progress with achieving targets from the previous year.

- However, this has to be supported by changed teacher practice if it is going to be sustainable. An example here has been the introduction of school wide approaches to the teaching of writing. These changes have led to greater student 'risk taking' in writing.

A couple of things I noticed:

In his role Simon has:

- demanded excellence from himself and others in the pursuit of student learning. This is apparent as you walk through the school and talk to staff. High expectations, and an all out war on mediocrity are central to success at Renwick school.
- actively contributed outside of the school. Simon leads a professional learning group of local principals, who have just returned from a 2 week block learning course at Harvard. Simon has also led the development of the Mistletoe Bay eco-village <http://www.mistletoebay.co.nz> .
- focused on recruitment of leaders and teachers who can actively contribute to the shared vision of the school.