

This month Denise retires after 25 years of principalship. The last 19 years have been at Dyer Street School. Dyer Street school is a decile 3 school with 240 students. Before being at Dyer Street school, Denise was the principal of Korokoro school. Denise can be emailed at sainsburydn@gmail.com, if you want to explore any of these ideas / approaches further.



What have you loved about teaching and principalship?

- **The people and strong sense of community** – I have loved the children, their families and my team. That's what has kept me in the job and kept me fresh. Every day is different, full of variety, and challenge. At the heart of Dyer street school is a sense of community, caring, and extended family.
- **I have also loved being a part of the teaching community** - I remember back to the early days in Wainuiomata, where debate was at the heart of what we did. Tossing around ideas in the staffroom, forming views that stood you in good stead for your career. It was intellectually stimulating and fun. I think teaching should be fun, because our kids deserve it.

What will you miss?

- For me it will be **the people, the collegiality, and the strong sense of community**. Being a part of the Naenae cluster has been critical for me. The shared purpose, professional critique and mutual support has been an amazing part of our journey as a school. We have also developed a strong team committed to our values and culture. Many of the team arrived as trainees, went away at varying points of their careers, but have returned to us, often in senior roles.

From your experience what do you think we are doing well in New Zealand?

- I can only speak from my own experience in Naenae. But from my perspective I believe that some of **the work on collaboration has been excellent**. Being a part of schooling improvement and a learning and change network has really supported this approach. There are tangible benefits for our kids when we think of them as the 'children of Naenae' from primary through college – this has built a sense of collective responsibility. Trust is the key. We have been able to put our collective challenges on the table, problem solve, and take the learning back to our own schools.
- I also believe we are at exciting place in classroom teaching. Classroom teachers are able to take their kids to amazing places through **the learning environment good ICT provides**. I am noticing even greater opportunity for kids to control their own learning. This learning is also going wider than the classroom, as they share their learning with a range of audiences, including me, on line.

So what are your main leadership concepts?

- **The strength of your leadership is the team you build around you.** At Dyer Street we have taken an active approach to nurturing and growing talent. We have done this through formal and informal leadership opportunities. At a formal level, I allow syndicates to work independently, but I also expect clear communication i.e. that they "keep me in the loop, as I want to be there to support you and share in the problem solving as/if required." At an informal level, we give all staff opportunities to lead and grow. We also seek to role model the kind of leadership we are talking about. For instance, we model that leadership is about taking risks, and even modelling how to fail well.
- **That inclusive education is available for all students.** The inclusion of special needs students at Dyer Street school is central to our philosophy and approach. Because our school is on the flat, are not zoned, have a philosophy of inclusion, and are perceived as welcoming – we often attract special needs children. Through these children I have learned a couple of life lessons. Firstly I have personally learned so much / been enriched from each of these children, and secondly that as a school you need to be proactive and adapt as you go along. There is no use waiting for the 'calvary' to come and save us. If we are going to get it right, it is up to us. You also learn to watch your team and make sure you are not expecting more of them than they can manage at that time. Our inclusive approach is also built upon the foundations of teaching as inquiry, and Art Costa's habits of mind. These are the glue that bind our approach together.
- **Contextualise and align new things with the old** – a key role of leaders is to make sure that new initiatives, ideas, approaches make sense with what is already happening in the school. Whenever we are exploring a new approach we ask ourselves – do we need to throw anything out? How will this fit with what we are already doing? How will we shape this so it fits with our culture and values? A good example is the implementation of national standards. As a team we recognised that each child should know where they are at and what their next steps are. We believed that they should be able to articulate what they are learning and why. Our approach reflects these beliefs, rather than being driven by compliance. A saying of David Stewarts probably sums this up - "you don't change what people do until you change the way people think, and you don't change the way people think until they've got ownership"

What have been some key learnings for you as you have put your leadership into practice?

- **First and foremost you need to know yourself.** You need to understand your strengths and areas of need as a principal. That way you can build a team around you to complement what you bring.
- **Pick your battles carefully.** I am very clear about the 'hills I am prepared to die on' and communicate these to the team. These are my non-negotiables as a leader, and include our inclusive approach, and being proactive in our response to parental concern. After all, we need to respect the trust they have given us to care for their 'precious cargo'.
- **Be very careful when making appointments.** I have found that making the 'wrong appointment' can be costly for all involved. The issue is not usually the capability of the person, but rather the fit with the culture. As such, we take an inclusive approach to appointments, and are not afraid to appoint from within where appropriate. But with all recruitment, good reference checks are essential, and gaining the views of colleagues I

trust is useful if appropriate. We have also ensured that every JD has the dimensions of quality teaching at Dyer Street School and clear descriptors of our values, culture and approach.

- **The pace of change can be frustrating.** There are times when something new arises, and in your heart you know it is a worthy vision. But you know what it is going to take to get people there, and you are mindful of the load they are already carrying. So there is frustration that the job is never quite finished, and it will probably take longer than you expected.

So, how do you think about the sustainability of your legacy at Dyer Street?

I am proud of what we have achieved as a team, but also realistic. From a sustainability perspective, I realise that some of what we have done will continue and some will not. It pretty much depends on how much the grassroots has brought in, and the degree that it has been normalised i.e. it is now just the way we do things around here.

A couple of things I noticed

In her role Denise has:

- remained true to the philosophy and values that she developed as a young teacher and continued to grow. Her involvement in debate, formal professional learning communities, and collegial groups has grown her approach over time.
- Connection to external collegial groups. Although it was clear that collective decision making determined the approach at Dyer street, it was also clear that Denise is connected to a wide range of external groups and colleagues whom she trusts.
- An awareness of, and uncompromising focus on, her non-negotiables. It was pretty clear what Denise stood for. This clarity helps others to determine whether they will fit with the 'mission' or would be better contributing elsewhere.