

Dear fellow school trustees,

August 2018

Being a Trustee at Epsom Girls Grammar School I had a wonderful opportunity to learn about community engagement as a result of a NZSTA Award Scholarship and now have ideas I would like to share with like-minded board members. They include the use of the National Network of Partnership Schools programme and utilising the "Question Formulation Technique" to help policy writing and finding governance solutions. At the end I ask to meet with you and to consider being part of a 'Community Builders' group.

Instead of a formal report I now write to you 'informally' about engaging our school communities because, like a letter, the answer for community engagement is personal, very human and close at hand.

Having travelled to the United States as a recipient of the study scholarship I met with recognised leaders in family and community engagement within primary and secondary school levels. I concluded that you, in your school, can find many of the answers by examining the nature of your own experience with personal relationships.

You can see parallels from personal relationships to group relationships when you begin to think of someone you love or who you deeply respect or admire. You will make opportunities to spend time with them, you will want to find out more about them; you'll probably want to show them your best side; you'll look them in the eye, shake their hand... embrace them; you'll treat them as special and show them that you care. The same behaviours can be transferred into how best to foster group relationships.

Engagement of any kind is scary and can make us vulnerable, but as humans we are, and should be, constantly drawn to seeking and making meaningful relationships.

Relationships are both the means and the reason for LEARNING. Meaningful learning is not simply a transaction of knowledge. We have a desire and responsibility to see our children achieve and grow strong; to live life well. We recognise that we need collaboration and others with specialist skills to help us. If those we love have a difficulty, a weakness or impediment we support them, make up the shortfall or constructively choose to look beyond it.

You possibly have two thoughts right now, "Yes, I know this and could also write about the 'touchy feely'", and/or "I need to know something practical; something that can help me here and now."

Let me then speak plainly and get to the practical. There are already enough programmes, research papers and organisations available to you to help you relate and engage your wider school community with a view to improving student achievement. The issues are motivation, prioritisation and available time. However, like a gym membership or weight-loss programme, **pick one and stick with it.** But whatever you choose, know that your commitment will be tested, there will be distractions and you will need to have an underlying reservoir of the soft stuff, "love" and "respect" to see you through. Here are some options to pick from...

HARVARD X

My first place 'visited' was online at **www.edx.org** where you can find Harvard University's course on an "Introduction to Family Engagement in Education".

Dr Karen Mapp will take you through a suitably comprehensive overview of the topic using evidence-based research, practical case studies and the guidance of practicing academics. The prescribed readings give you a strong foundation. While American in nature the content remains valid and relevant to the New Zealand environment. Completion of this recognised course can be made without cost but will involve at least sixty hours of your time. You will be rewarded by having a strong foundation in the nature, challenges and strategies for engaging families as a basis for your own implementation and for validation with colleagues.

Worth having a Trustee do the course



In brief, engaging families in child education is valid because the research confirms the formative and contributive role of the home with its direct impact on student levels of motivation, aspiration, resilience, capacity and competence.

It's a fact: positive partnering with families brings measurable improvement to student learning. It is another fact that teachers can do better, are more committed, have greater accountability and reward when they have the support of families.

Deliberate Implementation does differ between age levels; primary (elementary) levels are open to adult leadership whereas high school levels must adapt to increased student agency and self-determination. Programmes and strategies will differ accordingly. Home visits can play a significant role at primary age level. Sharing information through carefully chosen channels along with shared decision making are likely to play a significant role at the secondary age level.

CINCINNATI, OH

My second place to visit was Cincinnati, Ohio. The city is the home-base for a civic engagement organisation founded by Peter Block, author of "Community, a Sense of Belonging". ASG stands for "A Small Group" (www.asmallgroup.net) and at its formation in the early 2000's the organisation took to heart Margaret Mead's words "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Their mission is a commitment to the creation of a restorative and reconciled community and bases itself on the work of Robert Putnam and John McKnight.

Understandably I wanted to take its broader civic emphasis and focus on its application within high schools. To this end I was able to meet with two practitioners, Jeff Stec and Dan Joyner.

Jeff and Dan attested to the positive effect that applying Peter Block's method of "Six Conversations" brought students, staff and parents together to improve the performance and culture of participating high schools. They expressed that to change how you educate children, you must first change how you engage all stakeholders, including staff, parents and community members so that they support what they co-create.



Empowering the 'many' to discover unforeseen solutions and avoid existing assumptions appeared to be an important ingredient. They emphasised the importance of crafting a physical meeting environment that minimised authorities, agendas and preconceptions. The six conversations begin with invitation. Transformation occurs through choice, not mandate. Invitation is the call to create an alternative future. It asks, what is the invitation that we can make to support people to participate and own the relationships, tasks, and process that lead to success? The model then works sequentially through conversations of Possibility, Ownership, Dissent, Commitment, and finally Gifts.

What does 'invitation' look like at your school?



A session on Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) presented by Cormac Russell (www.nurturedevelopment.org) immediately followed this meeting. ABCD demonstrates that local assets (people, physical assets etc.) and individual strengths are key to ensure sustainable community development, and that people have a life of their own choosing. Cormac emphasised that public organisations can do their

work to people, for people, with people, or by people. He encouraged the latter where collaboration and inclusion occurs, where possible - acknowledging that there are areas that national and local government can solely remain responsible for. As schools we can look to identify and include our people 'assets' while recognising any areas that the community can't participate in.

BALTIMORE, MD

Dr Joyce Epstein is a recognised leader, often cited, in the field of School, Family, and Community Partnerships. As director of the National Network of Partnership Schools, within the Department of Education at Johns Hopkins University (www.nnps.jhu.edu) she led a two day Leadership Intensive which I was able to attend.



The workshop resulted in its participants being able to guide schools' Action Teams for Partnership in strengthening their programmes of family and community engagement for student success in school.

She posed the question, "How do we get parents involved so that we get students to do what they need to do, in order to get results."

The basis of the NNPS model are six types of involvement that need to be activated collectively.

- Type 1: PARENTING: Help all families understand child and adolescent development and establish home environments to support children as students. Help schools understand families' backgrounds, cultures, and goals for students.
- Type 2: COMMUNICATING: Conduct effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's progress.
- Type 3: VOLUNTEERING: Recruit and organise parents to support the school and students.
- Type 4: LEARNING AT HOME: Provide information to families on how to help students with homework, other curriculum-related activities, course decisions, and future plans.
- Type 5: DECISION MAKING: Include parents in school decisions and develop parent leaders and representatives.

Type 6: COLLABORATING WITH THE COMMUNITY:

Coordinate resources and services from the community for families, students, and the school, and provide services to the community.

ATP's structure can be setup in your school

As a result of attending I was authorised and equipped to conduct the NNPS One-Day Team Training Workshops for schools' Action Teams for Partnerships (ATP), to be able to evaluate schools' One-Year Action Plans for Partnerships and to help schools write good plans.

If you were to follow the programme then you would be required to understand the roles and responsibilities of facilitators for partnerships, be able identify strategies for effective facilitation and leadership throughout a school year, write a Leadership Action Plan to develop a local network of partnership schools and be able to strengthen collegial support for partnerships. This could well occur within the Community of Learning (CoL) structure that many schools are currently involved in.

Resources from NNPS to assist in leading and facilitating schools' action teams on partnership programme development are available through their website and are fully accessible by becoming a member school a nominal cost and open to New Zealand schools.

A remarkable volume of case studies have been documented since the 1990's and are available as annual editions titled "Promising Partnership Practices". These provide practical ideas across the six types of involvement and cover age levels from 5 to 18.

BOSTON, MA

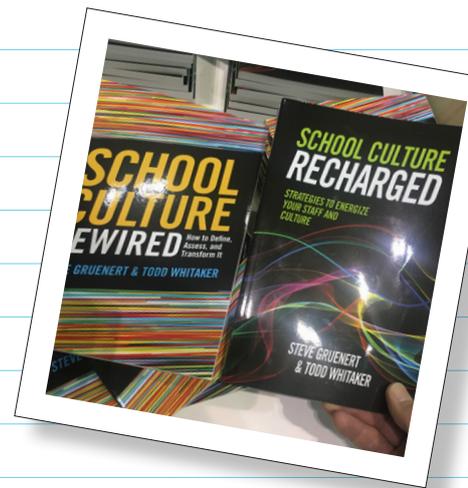
While not included in the NZSTA scholarship I discovered that one of the largest educator conferences in the United States followed immediately after the NNPS Leadership Intensive. On the final evening I flew to Boston to attend the ASCD Empower18 conference. (ASCD originally stood for the "Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.")

Continuing on with the community engagement theme my list of sessions looked like this:



- 1126 - BrandeD: Tell Your Story, Build Relationships, and Empower Learning
- Eric Sheninger
- GS01 - A Teacher's Remarks by Dr Jill Biden
- 1409 - **Recharging Your School's Culture** - Todd Whitaker & Steve Gruenert
- 2120 - Spark Curiosity, Fuel Deeper Learning: Engage All Students in Asking Their Own Questions - Dan Rothstein, Right Question Institute ⚡
- 2213 - **How to Easily Build Partnerships with Families: The Right Question School-Family Partnership Strategy** - Luz Santana, Right Question Institute
- 2307 - Keeping Your School Welcoming for Transgender (and All) Students
- David Meoli, Port Washington UFSD
- GS02 - How to REACH Youth Today - Manuel Scott << an original "Freedom Writer"
- ES06 - School Culture Not School Culture - Joe Dombrowski
- GS03 - Diplomacy: Persuasion, Trust, and Values - **General Colin Powell (ret.)**
- 3301 - Family Engagement for Student Success: 10 Foolproof Ways to Drive Parent Participation in Education - Meghan Everette, Salt Lake School District
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I'll briefly highlight the work of **Todd Whitaker** and Steve Gruenert as being worthwhile of investigation. Their publications, online materials and video examine the nature of school culture and climate (there is a difference between the two). They provide a framework to define, assess and change the culture of a school which can then impact the wider community.



However the most profound takeaway came from the Right Question Institute sessions. **Dan Rothstein** and Luz Santana are firm believers that formulating your own questions is "the single most essential skill for learning" and they argue that it should be taught in the simplest way possible.

Through their non-profit organisation they have developed the Question Formulation Technique (QFT), a concise and powerful protocol that enables learners to produce their own questions, improve their questions and strategise how to use them. Having obtained various grants they freely provide this method under Creative Commons licensing.

(www.rightquestion.org).

Use it during policy drafting
& strategic planning

The technique is primarily used in the classroom, however it has relevance as a means

for encouraging micro-level democracy. This makes it applicable in both the market place and broader community. Dan and Luz have recognised its use for school community engagement directly and have published "Partnering with Parents to Ask the Right Questions". It "distils complex, important ideas on effective civic participation into an easy-to-learn process that teaches parents two fundamental skills they can use to support the education of their children, monitor their progress, and advocate for them: asking better questions and participating effectively in key decisions." That makes it **an ideal tool for New Zealand Boards of Trustees!**

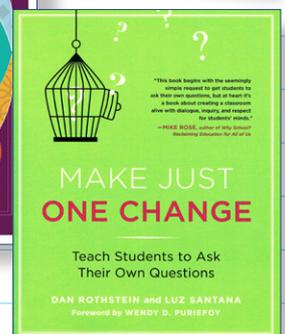
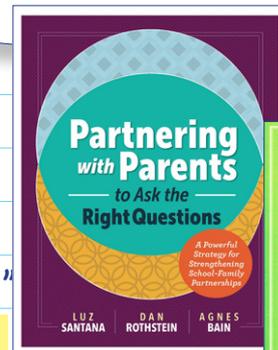
+ The QFT, on one slide...

- 1) Question Focus
- 2) Produce Your Questions
 - ✓ Follow the rules
 - ✓ Number your questions
- 3) Improve Your Questions
 - ✓ Categorize questions as Closed or Open-ended
 - ✓ Change questions from one type to another
- 4) Prioritize Your Questions
- 5) Share & Discuss Next Steps
- 6) Reflect

1. Ask as many questions as you can
2. Do not stop to discuss, judge or answer
3. Record *exactly* as stated
4. Change statements into questions

Closed-Ended:
Answered with "yes," "no" or one word

Open-Ended:
Require longer explanation



our role in governance intrinsically requires us to ask the right questions of management and to frame policy with the knowledge gained in doing so. I am yet to see specific training or tools provided to Trustees in order to carry out this task. I believe that the QFT has the potential to plug this gap.

You have done well to have read so far! You must have a similar passion to me.

These shared lessons, taken from Cincinnati through to Boston, can be incorporated within a framework for your own work in school/community engagement and I provide them as robust options for the setting of strategy and their use as proven tools.

Reflecting back on the nature of personal relationships, these programmes will work most successfully when you take time to think about the members of your community, when you deliberately take time to document what you know about them, then put the effort into showing the school's best side before setting up regular occasions to meet the group, look them in the eye, shake their hands... embrace them.

Recognising the contribution of community engagement to student achievement, your school will need to dedicated time and funds to develop ongoing relationships with your community. Like a personal relationship, your community will respond best if you invest in them by treating them as special and showing that you care for them.

SO WHERE TO FROM HERE?

I suggest that we meet, in person or by video call, to discuss what we have in common. I would then like to see a group come together as "Community Builders" for New Zealand high schools - believing that both the need and the content exist to justify it. A "Community Builders" workshop is likely to be a starting point to ongoing interaction and cooperation.

Email or phone me - we will be better together! I look to make a difference at my school, Epsom Girls Grammar.

Sincerely,

PHILIP BRADLEY

Mt Eden, Auckland.

Mob: 021 474 837

Email: philip@blueriver.co.nz



"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." - Margaret Mead

"The cost of our detachment and disconnection is not only our isolation, our loneliness, but also the fact that there are too many people in our communities whose gifts remain on the margin." - Peter Block