

Starpath newsletter

The Starpath Project For Tertiary Participation and Success | Issue 6 | October 2013 | www.starpath.auckland.ac.nz



Bay of Islands College became a Starpath partner school in 2012.

Taking ownership of their future

Bay of Islands College is located in the heart of Northland in the small town of Kawakawa. It is a proud school which boasts many sporting and cultural successes. Lately it has been celebrating its academic achievements, with NCEA results climbing steadily for the past six years.

The opportunity to join Starpath in 2012 was perfect for a school looking to make the most of a growing culture of academic success.

The College is typical of many Northland schools to have recently joined Starpath. It is decile 1 with a majority of Māori students on a roll of about 400. The community it serves is widespread and diverse, from the affluent towns of Russell and Paihia, small farming communities and those towns facing economic challenges. Many students travel long distances by bus to reach the school each day.

It was no surprise then that the school's traditional parent-teacher subject report evenings were not highly attended. Parents tended to find the five minute interviews per teacher very frustrating. Connecting parents, students and teachers is a cornerstone of Starpath's work with schools.

With Starpath's support, this year the College introduced formal Parent/Student/Teacher conferences to replace traditional subject report evenings. Parents were asked to make appointments and the form teacher followed this up by contacting families. When the first conferences were held in August the turnout was very good with many parents wanting to discuss their child's progress for much longer than the allocated 15 minutes.

Students take part in the conversations held at PST conferences, which encourages them to take ownership of their own future and learning. This meant practising their role in the lead-up to the day. Each student has an Academic Counsellor (in this case the Form Teacher) who holds at least four individual sessions to discuss academic progress and goals per year. This links the PSTs with goal setting and career discussion.

Importantly, the conversations between form teachers, parents and students were underpinned with good data. School reports and NCEA results were used to create student goal sheets. This data is held in Kamar (the student management system). Families with internet access were encouraged to access this data through a Parent Portal.

Joy Eaton, Starpath Deputy Director, worked closely with the school and said the conferences were a chance for a realistic discussion on academic and vocational pathways, where career aspirations are discussed even at a young age. Students were encouraged to think and talk about Merit and Excellence endorsements.

The reaction from parents was overwhelmingly positive. "Parents are interested in their child's future, enjoying the opportunity to have a conversation with their young ones."

"They are supportive of their child's career focus and we are seeing positive relationships developing between teacher and parents," Joy says.

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From the Dean



One of the goals at the outset of the Starpath programme was to create a set of tools that would be transferable across schools. The collaborative work that Starpath has engaged in with schools has helped us to develop those tools and now their transfer to a wider

group of schools is coming to fruition. We have entered into a partnership with Waikato University and Te Whare Wānanga o Āwanuiārangī to deliver a new programme called Building on Success. The aim is to combine the strengths of Starpath, Te Kotahitanga and He Kakano to build school leaders' and teachers' dispositions, knowledge, skills, relationships and capability to develop, embed and sustain what works for Māori students in their school. This work will complement and extend Starpath work in current schools.

Starpath has also been invited to extend its work to focus on Years 9 and 10. This new work will extend the knowledge of Starpath processes to more teachers across current Starpath schools. Working in Years 9 and 10 will mean that the capabilities and goals of students are identified earlier and that students will be tracked and monitored from their entry into secondary school with the aim that they successfully complete their school years.

Both of these new initiatives reflect the impact that Starpath has had in our partner schools and the value it is adding. Achieving interventions at scale is a major challenge in education but we are optimistic that we are on the cusp of doing this. My thanks to all Starpath schools, and to Liz and the team, for the many years of dedicated work, and for the ideas and insights, that have enabled us to reach this important stage of development.

Professor Graeme Aitken
Dean, Faculty of Education
The University of Auckland

Three ways to sharpen engagement with parents and students

The Parent-Student-Teacher (PST) conference is a unique opportunity for schools to engage in meaningful and academic conversations to improve student success. It serves as one of Starpath's key strategies of the Data Utilisation, Academic Counselling, and Target Setting (DUACTS) Programme.

Since April 2012, the Starpath research team has observed 122 PST conferences (Years 9 through 13) in 25 of its 39 partner schools. Based on data collected and feedback provided thus far, we offer three key areas for schools to reflect on as you continue to sharpen your facilitation of PSTs.

3-Way Talk

The first step is getting the parents to the conference. In addition to posting home letters, follow-up phone calls by teachers can help parents prioritise this influential meeting. For the day(s) of your conference, it is important to create a welcoming environment for parents. Are there staff and/or prefects at the front office to greet and possibly escort your visitors? Is there signage and ample lighting (for evening times) around the school to guide families to conference locations? Providing morning/afternoon tea can also send a positive message to families and work in your favour towards improving parent attendance.

Consider, too, the space where conferences will be held. A private, warm, and comfortable setting can elicit candid conversations about concerns related to student learning. When in doubt, direct teacher modeling and questioning may be necessary to engage parents and students in the discussion. Active participation is essential in establishing concrete action plans for improving student success.

Data-Based & Achievement-Focused

Part of knowing which direction to go is knowing where you are and even where you've been. Utilising accurate student profiles from the school database (e.g. KAMAR) with current assessment and credit information is critical in the goal setting process. Similarly, identifying short (tutorials, resits etc.), medium (NCEA level requirements, merit and/or excellence endorsements), and long-term (UE, career) goals helps students to see the big picture in manageable units of time.

Individualised

Personalising the data to the student's context can be powerful in developing academic relationships with families, especially by connecting career pathways to current achievement. Addressing students' study skills (e.g. homework, motivation, or time-management), attendance, and other behaviours (e.g. attitude, social skills, or extracurricular involvement) can also help to identify enablers or barriers to student achievement.

Overall, Starpath's partner schools have established a solid foundation in facilitating and engaging in academic conversations with parents and students. We commend you for your efforts and wish you the best for a successful completion of the 2013 academic year!

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Bay of Islands College Principal John Paitai says one of the positives in working with Starpath are the deep conversations around student data and the interrogation of evidence that runs alongside this.

"Starpath holds the mirror up for staff to reflect on their pedagogy and more importantly the relationships they have with our students. The Starpath staff are enthusiastic and encouraging, they constantly seek ways to meet our school's needs. I see it as a win-win whenever they come to visit us."



An academic counselling session at Bay of Islands College.

Implementation update



In the past few months Starpath teams have been out in schools in force.

Our data team members, Earl, Mark and Karen, have been visiting our 39 partner schools on a regular basis to help them maintain a focus on tracking

student progress, asking Student Achievement Managers (SAMs) vital questions related to school performance and progress reaching targets set at the beginning of the year. They also offer schools advice on EDB maintenance and data analysis. The last of these visits are scheduled for late November.

During Term 3 the qualitative research team completed an intensive data collection phase with 16 Group A schools (the 2011 cohort). For each school this consisted of several interviews and focus group feedback sessions with students and teachers. The team is currently working with this data to produce individual school feedback reports and a collective project evaluation report. Special thanks to all the people who participated in these conversations, your thoughts and opinions are of immense value to the project.

Term 3 was also the time when the literacy team from our partners, the Woolf Fisher Research Centre, visited Group B (2012 cohort) schools to conduct observations of Year 12 English, mathematics and science classes. This will be useful for the UE literacy training workshops planned to start at the end of this year. They also joined the Centre for Educational Leadership to complete the joint workshops with the Group A schools.

Our visits to observe Parent-Student-Teacher conferences and academic counseling have continued and we managed to fit in a few "in-school" training and planning sessions when requested. Mark has also developed his work with a small group of schools interested in tracking student progress in science.

At the end of this short update I want to thank the schools who willingly gave feedback to our external evaluator, Dr Luanna Meyer. Her report will give us a good steer for development next year. A special thanks also to the person taking the Starpath Liaison role. Thank you for your generous support of the project.

Joy Eaton, Deputy Director

All teachers in every subject encouraged to raise literacy

The Woolf Fisher Research Centre (a Starpath Project partner) shares an insight into the importance of improving literacy in the classroom.

As students advance through school, the literacy and language demands of different subjects get more complex and more subject-specialised. Achieving the ambitious goals of Starpath requires that all teachers make a concerted effort to raise students' subject literacy.

To illustrate, a recent Level 2 NCEA resource for biology featured this sentence:

An increase in light intensity will generally lead to an increase in the rate of photosynthesis, but if the increase in light intensity also leads to an increase in temperature, the rate of photosynthesis may decrease or even stop completely.

Some of the reasons students may find it complex to comprehend this sentence are that:

- It is very long and has multiple clauses
- It uses technical vocabulary that would rarely be encountered in everyday life or in other subjects
- The relationships between different parts of information are complex and conditional ("will generally lead to", "may decrease")
- It features long noun phrases which operate in the sentence as if they were a single word ("an increase in light intensity");
- It is written in the passive voice ("an increase in the light intensity") rather than the active voice ("when light becomes more intense").

These features are common in the language of science because they reflect particular scientific values. Long sentences with multiple clauses and long noun phrases are used because scientists deal with complex phenomena; qualifiers such as "generally" and "may" are used because scientists value accuracy; and the passive voice is preferred because it sounds more objective.

To achieve well in biology, students will not only need to have sophisticated content knowledge about biology, they will also need to have strategies for reading and writing complex biology texts like this one.

Of course, this situation is not limited to biology. Every subject has its own specialised language and students need to learn how to understand and use that language. Sophisticated subject knowledge alone is not enough.

Four important things teachers can do to develop sophisticated literacy in subject areas are to:

1. Immerse students in a text-rich environment. Students



need frequent opportunities to read and write the kinds of texts valued in the subject areas. Without lots of practice reading, students will not develop the strategies or resilience they need to deal with complex subject texts they will encounter in NCEA assessments for example.

2. Increase opportunities for rich, authentic, student-centred talk about the texts that they read. Recent research suggests this is one of the most powerful ways for students to learn strategies for reading and writing and to raise reading comprehension and subject achievement.

3. Provide vocabulary instruction. As well as learning how to understand a lot of complex subject vocabulary, students will need to develop confidence to use that vocabulary in their own speaking and writing. It is also useful to develop students' strategies for 'solving' unfamiliar words, for example using knowledge of prefixes, roots and suffixes, and context clues.

4. Develop their own and their students' knowledge of 'how texts work' in different subjects. This includes knowing about: the intended audience and purpose of the texts; the kinds of ideas, evidence and reasoning that are valued in that subject; what organisational features (such as headings, labels, and typographic features) are common; and language features at a sentence level.

Transforming teaching so that every teacher is a knowledgeable and effective teacher of literacy is a hugely challenging task that will require strong and supportive leadership.

A view from the top

A survey of middle and senior school leaders has provided some interesting findings about how the two groups perceive their own and each others' performance in overcoming barriers to improving student achievement.

Leadership in schools is intimately connected with day-to-day decision making and problem-solving. Much of it involves creating the conditions for improvement by persistently reducing and removing barriers to improved teaching and learning. In order to do that, senior leaders must engage with the views of middle leaders and teachers (and students and parents) to understand how they are experiencing the school as an organisation; and they must continually pursue greater coherence and alignment of practices if their schools are to be successful in reaching ambitious academic goals.

In 2013 a team from The University of Auckland Centre for Educational Leadership (UACEL) surveyed the senior and middle leaders of 14 secondary schools about what they considered to be major barriers to achievement in their schools (see bullet points). They were invited to rate 13 commonly reported barriers, and to add to the list if they wished. They were also asked about their own and others' (senior or middle leaders) effectiveness in addressing those barriers.

Senior leaders considered themselves to be 'satisfactorily effective' (about four on a seven-point scale) at addressing all barriers. Middle leaders also considered themselves to be 'satisfactorily effective' at addressing most barriers but least able to address absenteeism and student transience, both of which impacted results.

Middle Leaders: On the whole, self-ratings by middle leaders were close to senior leaders' rating of middle leaders. Middle leaders, however, rated themselves less effective in dealing with low teacher expectations and student absenteeism than senior leaders rated them. So, in summary, the middle leaders rated themselves either the same or lower in effectiveness than they were rated by their senior leaders.

Senior Leaders: In contrast, on six out of 13 barriers, senior leaders rated themselves as significantly more effective in addressing barriers to achievement than their middle leaders perceived them to be. The most significant gaps between senior leaders' self-ratings and the ratings given to them by their middle leaders were (in order from greatest to smallest significant difference) for senior leaders' effectiveness in dealing with:

Barriers to achievement

The 13 commonly reported barriers to achievement identified from previous research with leaders from the five Starpath pilot schools.

- Students not coming to school prepared to learn (e.g. with required materials)
- Variability of teacher performance/ teaching effectiveness issues
- Timely access to student achievement data
- Low literacy levels of students
- Lack of resources/financial issues
- Limited cultural responsiveness/ knowledge on the part of staff
- Motivation/self-belief of students
- Low teacher expectations of students
- Behaviour of students
- Lateness to class by students
- Student absenteeism
- Transience of students
- Competing demands on teachers' time e.g. realignment of standards for NCEA.

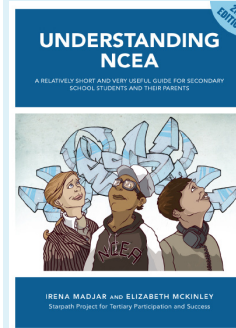
- a) behaviour of students
- b) competing demands on teacher time
- c) variability in teaching quality;
- d) lateness, motivation and preparedness of students.

Senior leaders also *overestimated* middle leaders' concerns about student issues (such as lateness and behaviour) and *underestimated* their concerns about undesirable variability in teacher performance.

Why is this important? When an organisation is well coordinated and has clear communication, senior leaders will understand the concerns of middle leaders and work with them to resolve those problems. The two groups of leaders need to work effectively in tandem given that it is middle leaders in secondary schools that have the direct responsibility for effectiveness in their departments. Large gaps between senior and middle leaders' perceptions of effectiveness suggest that team work is not strong enough. Most research in secondary environments indicates that creating effective teams across layers in the school hierarchy is a challenge few schools resolve, but that the truly effective ones do.

Publications

A guide to NCEA



A second edition of Starpath's popular handbook Understanding NCEA has been released to keep up with changes to NCEA.

A must-read for all secondary school students and their parents, the book has been updated to reflect

big changes to NCEA level requirements and to University Entrance since it was first published in 2011.

Understanding NCEA: The relatively short and very useful guide for secondary school students and their parents (2nd edition) is available in both English and Samoan.

Written for Year 9 and 10 students and their parents, it explains in plain language just how NCEA works – covering everything from standards levels and credits to subject choices.

How to order: copies can be purchased directly from NZCER Press for NZD\$19.95.

Taiala mo le NCEA



O le lomiga lona lua o le Tusi a le Starpath, O le Malamalama i le NCEA, ina ia fetauti ma suiga fou i le NCEA, ua uma ona faalauiloaina, ma ua matua faafiafiaina ai le toatele.

E tatau ona faitau iai fanau oloo i aoga mauaululuga ma o

latou matua, ona ua tele ni suiga o iai e faatatau i Laasaga taitasi o le NCEA, faapea foi ma itu uma e manaomia mo le ulufale atu i lunivesete, talu mai le lomiga muamua i le 2011.

Malamalama i le NCEA: O le tusi e puupuu ma aoga tele e fai ma taiala mo fanau i aoga mauaululuga ma o latou matua, (lomiga lona lua) e maua i le gagana Igilisi ma le gagana Samoa.

Tusia mo fanau ma matua o le Tausaga 9 ma le Tausaga 10 ise gagana faigofie, e faamatala ai tulaga uma o le NCEA, e aafia ai ausiga, laasaga, ma toggi, faapea foi le filifiliina o mataupu.

Okaina o Tusi: e mafai ona faatau sao mai lava i le NZCER Press i le tau e \$19.95 tala Niu Sila.

Asiasi i le upega tafailagi: www.nzcer.org.nz/nzcerpress.



The Starpath Project for Tertiary Participation and Success is a partnership between The University of Auckland and the New Zealand Government. The Project works in partnership with schools to transform educational outcomes for students who are currently under-achieving at secondary school and, as a result, under-represented in tertiary education.