

Starpath newsletter

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Harnessing the perspectives of students and parents

Mangere College joined the Starpath Project as a partner school in 2011. In 2009 the decile 1 South Auckland school, which has over 75% Pacific students, was involved in an eighteen month project funded by the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) and implemented by Team Solutions to enhance Māori and Pacific student pathways into university. "The project was based on Starpath research and strategies so we had some experience of implementing parent-student-teacher conferences and academic counselling in the school," says Principal John Heyes. "We have seen significant improvement in community engagement and student achievement as a result and wanted to build on this further. Becoming involved with Starpath as a partner school last year was a natural progression."

Historically, parent-teacher interviews at the school were attended by less than 30% of parents. "As part of the TEC project we trailed parent-student-teacher conferencing with one class to feel our way, last year we did all of Years 11 and 12 and had 66% of parents attend," recalls Ruth Luketina, head of careers and transition at the school. "This year we have implemented it across the entire school with 71% and 57% attendance at the senior and junior conferences respectively."

While data has shown improvements in parents' attendance at the conferences, the school was keen to harness the perceptions and experiences of both parents and students. "We felt it was important to ask for their feedback on what was working well so that we could plan next steps and refine our implementation," say Ruth.

At the end of 2011, senior students were asked to complete a survey about their experiences of

different aspects of academic counselling and parent-student-teacher conferences. The results showed that both initiatives helped students to better understand NCEA as well as set and achieve their academic goals.

Every student surveyed said that setting goals for NCEA had helped them to remain focused on what they needed to learn to achieve them. 91% said that the more in-depth, achievement focused conversations with their form teacher at parent-student-teacher conferences improved their understanding of what they needed to do to make better progress toward their goals.

Response from parents has reinforced the positive feedback from students. At the whole-school parent-student-teacher conferences held earlier this year, parents were invited to complete a survey immediately following the conference. 97% of parents who completed the survey felt the conferences were an improvement on the previous report meetings run by the school.

"Parents were very grateful for the opportunity to have an in-depth discussion with the form teacher and their child," says Ruth. "When we asked parents whether they felt the meeting helped them to understand what their child needed to be more successful at school the response was 100% positive."

Ruth says both surveys have provided the school with valuable insight into what students and parents perceive is effective. "There is a lot of hard work involved so, for teachers at the school, it has been particularly powerful to see the value of the work they are doing."

True partnerships



One of the main priorities for 2012 has been to recruit another group of Starpath partner schools to join the 21 others. Since the beginning of the year we have been successful in recruiting 17 new schools, eight in West Auckland, one in South Auckland, and eight

more in Northland. The 38 schools we are now working in partnership with is a long way from the five original partner schools in Phase One.

Partnership development between Starpath and schools is important to us and is essential if we are to make progress toward the aim of raising student achievement for our Māori and Pacific learners.

Our intent is to deliver quality professional development that is contextualised for each school. This is a challenge for us. We recognise that the Starpath schools are incredibly diverse and serve very different students and their communities. In recognising 'one size does not fit all' we try to respond to schools differently with respect to their data and its use.

However, true partnership is two-way and herein lies the challenge for each school. In order for this approach to be successful schools need to be active partners. Schools cannot be receptacles of knowledge but must learn to create knowledge from their data that will assist critical decision-making regarding Māori and Pacific student progress and school performance.

Professor Elizabeth McKinley,
Starpath Project Director

Navigating the star path

On their educational journey, the Starpath project encourages students to 'aim for the stars,' using 'navigational' techniques such as data tracking, good advice about NCEA pathways, high quality teaching, and identifying and dealing with barriers and risks to empower them to achieve their ambitions.

The 'Starpath' name evokes the feat of the first Polynesian star navigators as they crossed the Pacific ocean and the navigation skills that carried them safely to their destination.

By locating the star which marked their direction, they followed it until it sank towards the horizon. Then they located the next star on the star path, and the next, and the next, until they reached their destination.

Starpath implementation update

At the 2012 Starpath Partners' Day it was clear that the project has split into three connected groups: The original partner schools, the partner schools new in 2011 (Group A) and those joining the project in 2012 (Group B). Each group is taking on a new set of Starpath work while continuing with those strands adopted earlier.

The five original partner schools have once again been the pilot schools for developing literacy and leadership strategies that will be "rolled out" to the next group of schools later this year. At the same time they continue to develop and improve their Starpath strategies for success. A number of these schools are starting to really examine their data and deepen their inquiry into factors that hinder student progress.

For Group A schools the start of the year saw the Starpath team complete a series of professional development workshops for Student Achievement Managers. The workshops were designed to assist schools to build a longitudinal database that can be used for setting achievement targets and starting data inquiry processes.

For these schools there has been an emphasis on bringing the Data Utilisation, Academic Counselling and Target Setting (DUACTS) programme into school operations this year. Different schools in the group are at different stages and are developing individual models of practice. The Starpath team is taking a monitoring role providing schools with feedback on their academic counselling and the parent-student-teacher conferencing sessions. The schools continue to work on their data processes providing real time information for achievement discussions in the school and result monitoring by the Starpath team in the office.

By June this year Starpath had formed a partnership with 17 new schools, thus creating the Group B schools. The first sub-group, mainly from West Auckland, has been taking part in a baseline survey to ascertain their position on the implementation continuum. The report of the survey will be out to schools by the middle of Term 3.

These schools have also had a focus on building their database and the Starpath team is preparing supporting workshops for later in the year. The last group of schools to sign the partnership agreement is from the north. Three of them are located fairly close to Auckland and five north of Whangarei. All these schools will start the baseline work in Term 3 and have a customised implementation plan ready for the start of 2013.

Profiling informs literacy focus with original partner schools

In the latter half of 2011 the Woolf Fisher Research Centre completed a profiling phase with the five original Starpath partner schools. This involved investigating patterns of achievement in specific achievement standards at NCEA Levels 1-3 identified by subject experts as having a high subject literacy component and providing a pathway to further study.

In most of the five schools, both achievement and participation levels in these specific achievement standards were lower than for schools nationally and these levels had not changed over time. This picture is in marked contrast with their pattern of achievement in NCEA attainment rates overall which has generally improved in the past few years.

Teachers' knowledge and practices were also investigated to see how these might contribute to current patterns of student achievement and identified variability across and within schools. Findings from the profiling phase have informed targeted professional development for each of the five schools.

The first strand involves three half-day professional learning sessions with school and subject leaders. The second is focused on the specialised subject literacy demands of English, mathematics and science and involves subject-based groupings of department leaders from across the five schools.

Because the profiling identified significant work load issues for middle leaders associated with the introduction of new achievement standards at Level 2 (Year 12) NCEA, the Woolf Fisher Research Centre have used these new standards as the context for the literacy work.

Both the Woolf Fisher Research Centre and The University of Auckland Centre for Educational Leadership are working closely to plan and deliver professional development to middle leaders to develop their knowledge of effective literacy instruction and how to lead this in their departments.

Target setting supports better learning

One of the five key elements of Starpath's approach to data is target setting, and Starpath researchers are often asked: "what is the use of the target setting exercise?" The approach adopted by Starpath involves careful manipulation of the data, and can seem like an awful lot of work for schools.

Starpath schools estimate the number of NCEA credits for each individual student in a year-level cohort by examining the patterns of learning found in the evidential database for the preceding three cohorts at that school. Instead of using "better than last year" or the statistician's approach of using the line of best fit through the middle of the data, the designated Student Achievement Manager is shown how to use cohort data and a modified version of data envelopment analysis (DEA) to set/estimate achievable but challenging targets for each student.

Once each student has an estimated target, the Student Achievement Manager can aggregate

these to determine the whole school target (for example, 63.4% success at Level 1), and targets for various sub-groups such as female and male, or the various ethnic groups in the school. This provides a data-informed estimate of what the students could achieve for the coming year.

There are several ways that the targets can be put to use:

- 1. Annual charter:** the aggregated targets provide an evidence-based approach to target setting in the annual charter that is sent to the Ministry early in the year.
- 2. Traffic lights:** How do individual targets compare with the aggregated estimates that subject teachers make in the traffic lights exercise early in Term 2? The traffic lights are informed by how each student is actually performing in the year to date.
- 3. Tracking and monitoring:** Throughout the year, the number of internally assessed

credits obtained can be checked against the individual target that has been estimated.

For points two and three, schools should ask how these different targets compare, and what that means for possible action on the part of the academic counsellor and individual subject teachers.

Targets can be set for each subject area, or specifically for the literacy and numeracy requirements of NCEA. The science department could take several years of assessment data from their junior programme, and apply it to the NCEA science results to estimate a target number of credits that each science student should be aiming for.

Targets are only as good as the data that schools have. The better the record keeping, the easier it is to feel confident that the targets are meaningful and reliable.

Bridging the gap

Students' experience of the transition from low-mid decile schools into university

Research indicates that New Zealand European/Pākehā students' transition to tertiary education at a higher rate than any other ethnic group in the country. Between 1998 and 2008, Māori and Pacific student participation in bachelor level degree studies doubled yet this figure still remains at less than half the national average (Ministry of Education, 2009).

Simply making it into tertiary education does not guarantee success. Surviving the transition from school to university can have a big impact on whether students succeed at tertiary education, particularly for Māori and Pacific students who are more likely to be the first in the family to attend university.

One Starpath study has followed the transition of 44 secondary school students intending to start a full-time undergraduate degree. The participants attended two urban, and six rural low-mid decile secondary schools, two thirds of whom identified as Māori or Pacific Island.

Starting from October 2007 the students were tracked over the last term of their final year at school, through the summer, to the end of their first semester of tertiary study in July 2008. A series of interviews were conducted at six week intervals, academic results were analysed and students kept journals and photographs of their experiences.

Of the original group, 37 went on to tertiary study, and 29 participated in the study until the end of their first semester. Of these students, 25 agreed to be involved, through regular follow-ups, until the end of 2009.

The findings illuminated some of the critical stumbling blocks and stepping stones experienced by students as they made the transition from school into tertiary education. The study raised questions about the adequacy of transitional and ongoing support for students who clearly struggle to become academically engaged, to find direction as their initial study choices prove inappropriate or too challenging, and to persist despite stumbling blocks on their pathway to academic success.

So how can schools help to prepare their students for the transition to university and tertiary studies?

- Facilitate strong academic preparation for their studies, including the choice of the right subjects for their goals. The better prepared they are the easier it will be.
- Encourage independent learning habits. When students get to university they need to initiate contact with the learning support services that are separate from their classes. Teach them to ask questions and seek out what they need.
- Facilitate flexibility (things don't always turn out how we want).
- Build their confidence and belief in themselves so that they are not afraid to ask for support. Support is part of learning. Universities have considerable resources for students to access but they need to find them.
- Encourage them to be outgoing. Students need to make new friends for study groups in their new subjects and their old friends may not be there.
- Don't be too quick to cut them loose. Some students need support at the time they get their NCEA results. Words of reassurance go a long way, especially from someone who knows them academically.



The tertiary institutes also have a role to play. The learning environment universities create is a critical element of the transition experience.

- Ensure the students are engaged early in their study. If they miss class follow it up immediately.
- Don't assume Christmas turns students into adults. Many students will continue to need some guidance for a little while until they become familiar with the university.
- Try to build academic support into your coursework. Assist students in reading and critiquing articles, referencing, writing an argument, and writing an extended essay. Make it explicit about what is required. Help them build study groups.
- If needed, help students locate and become familiar with learning support centres and structures. If staff/tutors think the students could do with support take them to places they can find it. The aim of the learning centres is to help students to become more competent and more confident learners.

Many Māori and Pacific students make a successful transition from school to university. However, it is those students who lack the key stepping stones, and who don't engage academically early on at university, who are at high risk of failing to stay on and achieve university qualifications, and need further support.

School principals meet for annual Starpath partners day

Principals from Starpath partner schools in Auckland and Northland travelled to Ellerslie Event Centre to attend the annual principals day in July.

With a total of 38 partner schools now involved in the Project, the principals day needed a much larger venue - a far cry from the few who gathered in earlier days and a clear sign of the substantial growth that has occurred in the early stages of this exciting phase.

The day provided principals with the opportunity to connect with the Starpath Project and engage with a mixture of information sessions about research findings, participate in debate about recent challenges in NCEA achievement and share their thoughts and ideas as well as discuss implementation issues in Phase Two.

Keynote speaker, Professor Saville Kushner, gave a thought provoking presentation about the power of principal leadership to wrest the school agenda away from political demands and bring it back to meet community interests.



Massey High School principal Bruce Ritchie shares his experience about the use of student achievement data to develop the annual charter for the school.

Minister of Education launches Samoan translation of popular Starpath book

The Samoan translation of Starpath's popular book *Understanding NCEA* was officially launched by the Honorable Hekia Parata, Minister of Education and Pacific Island Affairs, to mark the start of Samoan language week in May.

Over a hundred students, parents and members of the education community attended the national launch of the Samoan translation, *Malamalama i le NCEA*, at Porirua College in Wellington.

In her speech at the event, Hekia Parata praised the book for its emphasis on helping Samoan parents and students understand the importance of planning pathways through NCEA as well as providing the practical information required for students and their parents to navigate their way through NCEA to achieve their goals and aspirations.

The national launch was followed by an Auckland event hosted by Mangere College, a Starpath partner school in South Auckland. "It is critical that our Samoan students and their parents are fully able to understand the complexities of the palagi world," said principal John Heyes. "We know that NCEA is complex to understand for those who

speak English as a first language. This book is just one way of assisting our Pacific community to fully understand what this academic world means for their children and their futures."

The book translation is a result of research undertaken by Professor McKinley and Dr Madjar during phase one of the Starpath Project. "We often needed to take interpreters when we went to interview parents of Pacific students," said Professor Liz McKinley. "We quickly learned that we needed to be able to talk to parents in their own language if we are to have an impact on student achievement. We chose to translate the resource into Samoan language as it is the third most commonly spoken language in New Zealand and second most common in Auckland."

Co-authors Dr Madjar and Professor McKinley credit the success of the translation to the commitment and dedication of Faimai Pisu Tuimauga and members of the Samoan community who worked tirelessly to ensure the quality and readability of the translation was relevant for Samoan students and their parents.



Left: Mangere High School principal John Heyes with book translator Faimai Pisu Tuimauga and co-author Dr Irena Madjar. Right: Year 13 Samoan language students perform at the Auckland launch in June.

Starpath toolkit

New DVD resource supports Starpath schools with academic counselling

Academic counselling is one of Starpath's proven strategies that enable schools to effectively support students' academic progress along pathways to meaningful qualifications. It provides the opportunity for students to meet with trained teachers or deans two to three times each year to review their academic progress, goals and plans and the strategies required to achieve them.

A new DVD resource, currently being developed by the Starpath Project, aims to provide valuable advice and guidance for partner schools new to academic counselling.

The structure of academic counselling varies and is unique to the context of each partner school. Teachers or deans involved as academic counsellors require an in-depth knowledge of NCEA, University Entrance requirements, the students and their backgrounds, as well as the skills to effectively engage students in conversations that support their academic progress and achievement.

Featuring a series of short interviews with teachers and students, as well as visual examples of academic counselling in practice, the DVD can be used as an in-school professional development tool and provides a useful starting point for schools to plan an effective academic counselling programme.

Malamalama i le NCEA

Irena Madjar and Elizabeth McKinley



Officially launched in May this year *Malamalama i le NCEA* is the Samoan translation of Starpath's popular book *Understanding NCEA: A relatively short and very useful guide for secondary school students and their parents.*

The translation explains, in plain language, just how NCEA works for Samoan secondary school students and their parents - everything from standards, levels and credits to subject choices. It includes stories drawn from the real-life experiences of more than 100 students who have navigated various NCEA pathways. There's also a chapter specifically for parents, with the information needed to support their children through NCEA.

How to order

Copies can be purchased directly from NZCER Press for \$19.95 each with free delivery.

Organisations and schools wishing to provide copies of the book for their Samoan community can purchase multiple copies at a special price. Please contact NZCER directly for details.

Visit: 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.

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