The Starpath Project
Annual Report 2011
what it already has in place, what it needs and what will work best for it. Starpath can then provide the tools, the advice and the professional development to achieve change.

Phase Two has some stringent key performance indicators and the Board is very focussed on meeting these. We are aware that the results of the next five years will determine whether we have solutions to educational underachievement which can work in a variety of schools and situations. Starpath has completed its pilot research and evaluation phase and must now demonstrate its effectiveness on a large scale.

During the last year the Government converted the Starpath Phase One suspensory loan, indicating its satisfaction that Starpath had met all the requirements for that phase of the Partnership for Excellence. The Board was fully involved in the development of the plan and the case for Phase Two and was very pleased when it was approved in late December. Since this time we have received detailed strategic and business plans for the next five years and have watched the Director, Professor Elizabeth McKinley, and the small Starpath team begin the process of recruiting further schools into the project. The Board also strongly endorsed the strategy of the Faculty of Education in bringing three research and development groups, Starpath, the Woolf Fisher Research Centre and the University of Auckland Centre for Educational Leadership, together in one location, with an integrated work programme.

We would once again express our appreciation of our financial partners, the ASB Community Trust, The West Coast Development Trust, the University of Auckland and the Tertiary Education Commission and other sponsors who make our work possible. We are grateful to those schools which have joined the project this year and to our pilot schools which will now take a leadership role in the second phase of Starpath.

The Board would also like to thank two members who have retired, Dr Helen Anderson of Manukau Institute of Technology and Dr Airini of the University’s Faculty of Education, for their participation in its work in Phase One. They have been replaced by Mr John Bongard and Mr Bill Gavin, both of whom have an interest in and commitment to secondary school performance, and Mr Walter Fraser, Director of the University’s Pacific Studies Centre.

Professor Raewyn Dalziel
Chair, Starpath Board

From the Director

Welcome to the Annual Report for 2010/2011. After submitting the Proposal for Starpath Phase Two in July 2010, we received the news in December that Phase Two funding had been granted.

The awarding of Phase Two funding recognises that Starpath has well and truly cemented its position as a project of national significance. The original overall objectives of Starpath, to identify, and to develop strategies to reduce or remove, barriers that stand in the way of educational achievement for Māori, Pacific and other low-income students in secondary schools, still stand. Phase One saw the Starpath team work alongside our partner schools, researching and trialling intervention strategies to raise student achievement. New Zealand was reminded again in a recent OECD report that our education system is of high quality – we produce some of the highest achieving 15 year olds in reading, numeracy and science reasoning in the world. However, equitable outcomes are not distributed across our populations when, in the same report, we are identified as having the highest number of young people who drop out of school early with little or few prospects. Unfortunately the students most affected are Māori and Pacific, and those from low-income backgrounds. We all know that this situation cannot continue. Starpath strongly believes that raised student achievement will occur only when schools, parents, whānau and students work together.

To this end we have supported a very successful family engagement strategy in our schools as part of the overall Starpath intervention. This strategy involves learning conversations between schools, parents/whānau and students. In one pilot school the attendance of parents at parent/teacher meetings went from 10-15% to 86%. Significant increases in attendance have been reported in every Starpath pilot school and these have been
sustained. Such an intervention forms a strong platform for further engagement between parents, schools and students. Starpath welcomes new partners in Phase Two. Two barriers were identified in Phase One which could be addressed by expertise already existing in the Faculty of Education. While we managed to raise NCEA (National Certificate of Educational Achievement) pass rates at all levels, many students in our pilot schools struggled to meet the UE literacy requirements. Meeting the UE literacy criteria is incredibly important for students who wish to enter university and be well prepared for their future there. The second concern was how to build the leadership and data teams required to enable each school to achieve equitable outcomes for all students. Starpath has welcomed the expertise of the Woolf Fisher Research Centre (WFRC) and the University of Auckland’s Centre for Educational Leadership (UACEL) to help deliver programmes in our original pilot schools in the next 12 months.

We also welcome our new Phase Two schools. Starpath will be rolling out the intervention in up to 40 schools over the next two years. In July 2011 a further 16 schools located in Auckland and Northland will be joining our five original pilot schools. This is a huge step-up for Starpath. We look forward to working with these schools over the next twelve months. I would like to welcome those staff who have joined the team to be part of Phase Two. In particular, I would like to welcome the new Deputy Director, Joy Eaton. Joy is the ex-Principal of Henderson High School and has joined us to become the Starpath schools’ programme co-ordinator and liaison person. Other Starpath staff include Dr Irena Madjar, Dr Earl Irving, Dr Mark Gan, Elizabeth Clarke, and Melinda Webber. The WFRC and UACEL teams will be led by Professors Stuart McNaughton and Viviane Robinson respectively.

And last, but not least, as you read this I will be on research and study leave. In my absence Professor Stuart McNaughton will be taking over as Acting Director for 12 months. I wish him and the team well.

Professor Elizabeth McKinley
Director, Starpath Project

Starpath Project Phase One Summary

The Starpath Project for Tertiary Participation and Success was established in 2005 as a Partnership for Excellence between the University of Auckland and the New Zealand Government and is administered by the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC). Starpath is a collaborative project based on a series of partnerships, which in Phase One (2005-2010) included one mid-decile and four low-decile secondary schools in Auckland and Northland, and two tertiary education institutions. Its brief is to undertake research and develop and evaluate evidence-based initiatives to improve participation and achievement of students from groups currently under-represented in degree-level education. In particular, the Starpath Project is designed to identify and minimise or remove barriers that contribute to lower rates of participation and success in degree-level education by Māori, Pacific, and other students from low-decile schools.

Identified Solutions from Phase One

Starpath is dedicated to achieving a step change in current patterns of educational underachievement in New Zealand. During Phase One, Starpath and its partners developed significant strategies to address the barriers to student success.

The key strategies include:

1. Developing Evidential Data Bases

The development of longitudinal databases to track the achievement of students through secondary and into tertiary study has successfully worked in our five partner schools. Schools have identified a data leader and achieved an increased capacity to systematically collect, manage and use student achievement data to inform their planning and teaching practices.

2. Tracking and monitoring student progress

Tracking and monitoring student progress uses the information on the database, particularly at Years 11-13. Data entered into the school’s database in a timely manner allow the school to focus on individual, class and whole school progress towards their NCEA qualifications. Schools have been able to identify individuals who may require an intervention in order to progress towards their goals.
1. Target setting
This involves using the school data to set two types of targets: school-wide NCEA achievement targets and individual student targets for external standards in specific subjects. We have found that, although the setting of individual targets requires two years of prior data, work can be done using the data collected in other ways during this time.

2. Academic support meetings with students
These are held between each student and a significant teacher (e.g. a Dean, Form/Whānau teacher, etc) two to three times a year to discuss student progress, aims and plans. This allows staff to know a student’s complete academic record (not just their subject) and become significant providers of academic advice. These meetings focus on the educational information from the database to provide evidence based guidance in making optimal academic choices for students in their coursework and other goals.

3. Restructured parent-student-teacher review meetings
In these meetings parents/caregivers meet with their child’s Form/Whānau teacher for an in-depth review of academic progress. Subject and student information from the database is discussed at these meetings.

Identified Gains in Starpath Phase One Schools
Starpath worked collaboratively with five pilot schools to develop, trial and test the Phase One intervention consisting of the five components: developing evidential databases, tracking and monitoring student and school progress, target setting, academic counselling with students, and restructured parent-teacher meetings. The evaluation of these in each school has enabled Starpath to identify improved outcomes for students, staff and schools, and to draw some important conclusions for Phase Two.

Improved Student Achievement Outcomes
The overall results for the five Phase One schools have been very encouraging.
1. There is evidence that the Starpath programme is associated with increases in student achievement in each of the five schools. The most significant changes in levels of achievement have occurred after the evidential database and academic counselling and target setting have been put in place. Changes for some students have been very rapid (within one year).
2. To date the effects are variable across schools and time, but show consistent improvement at NCEA Levels 1 and 2.
3. The student outcome changes are educationally significant. Four schools had by 2010 some success in matching national pass rates where they hadn’t previously (one school already was matching national pass rates). Two schools had at least one instance of significantly higher than expected pass rates or significantly higher distributions of achievement.
4. There is evidence that low decile schools with largely Māori or Māori and Pasifika students can achieve NCEA Level 1 and 2 pass rates at national levels and that changes associated with the database and ACTS (Academic Counselling and Target Setting) are sustainable at these levels.

Professional Gains
The schools have also made gains in relation to staff professional development, and student and community relations.
1. There has been increased capacity in the school to collect, manage and use student achievement data to inform their planning and teaching practices.
2. The schools have increased parent/whānau engagement with attendance at the restructured parent-teacher conferences having risen from less than 20% of parents/whānau to between 70 and 86% attendance. These attendance figures have been sustained over time. Parents/whānau have consistently given positive feedback on the restructured parent-teacher meetings, which have included students and a conversation focused on student achievement supported by the data.
3. All teachers have reported more achievement-focused conversations with students on a regular, everyday basis. Deans, in particular, have reported the up-to-date availability of data makes conversations with students more positive. Teachers have valued the academic counselling, seeing it as an essential part of everyday practice.
4. There has been professional growth and development among staff taking responsibility for aspects of the new programme.
5. Principals have reported a closer alignment between the schools’ strategic plans and practices designed to improve student achievement.

These conclusions provide us with important vision for Phase Two. We know that nationally expected pass rates in NCEA are achievable in low decile schools with Māori and Pasifika students. The next Phase will extend the Starpath vision to new schools, testing how additional components increase the effectiveness of the schools even further.
Partnering for success: Data-based parental-school engagement

One of the highlights from Phase One of Starpath work has been the success and impact of the new parent-student-teacher conferences. Traditionally, schools hold “parent evenings” where individual subject teachers are available for brief (five minute) meetings with parents, mainly to report how well a student is doing in a specific subject. The evidence from the first five Starpath partner schools was that such meetings were poorly attended with only 10%-20% of parents turning up. As a means of family-school engagement, the meetings were seen as ineffective and often as a frustrating “waste of time” for parents and teachers alike.

The redesigned parent-student-teacher conference – first trialled by Massey High School – includes a set appointment time, a longer (20-30 minutes) meeting with a dean or form teacher, student participation, and data-based, three-way discussions of students’ overall goals, specific achievement targets, current performance, and strategies (including family support) to maximise student achievement.

In all five schools, the results were obvious, the impact on the schools radical, and the flow-on effects supportive of the focus on student achievement. More specifically, the following outcomes were observed:

- Change in attendance figures from as low as 10% to as high as 85%. Importantly, the significantly higher attendance figures have been sustained in subsequent years.
- The feedback from parents has been overwhelmingly positive. They like individual appointments and having plenty of time to discuss their child’s aspirations, goals, performance and areas where help is needed.
- One of the most productive changes resulting from the redesigned format has been the impact on teachers’ perceptions of parents. They see parents as much more interested in their children’s education than they expected.
- Changed perceptions have led to changes in practice, including improved and more frequent communication between school and families.
- Teenagers are not always happy to have their school life and behaviour scrutinised and reported to their parents. Nevertheless, students reported that having parents and teachers “in tune” with what they [students] hoped to achieve was helpful.

On its own, the parent-student-teacher conference will not lead to significant improvements in student achievement (although it might do so in individual cases), but it is a vital part of a broader programme. The findings indicate that it can have a synergistic effect with other initiatives – energising teachers, focusing them on student achievement and the role they are playing or could play in lifting performance, and appreciating that they are not alone in this task. The findings also indicate that, given the right conditions, parents are keen to engage in discussions about their children’s education. This, in turn, can have a profound effect on teachers, as it did in these five schools, challenging deficit beliefs about families and the aspirations they hold for the education of their children.

Case Study:
Manurewa High School

Manurewa High School introduced parent-student-teacher conferences – calling them Student Achievement Conferences – in 2010. The key aims were to support and challenge students in setting goals and targets as part of a Personal Learning Plan; to empower students to reflect on, manage and refine their own goals, and to encourage families to feel involved and supported in their child’s education.

During the conference students lead the discussion on their personal learning plans and interim reports, the whānau teacher leads the discussion on asTTle and other student achievement data (explaining asTTle and NCEA systems as needed), and together they discuss how best to support the students to achieve their immediate and longer term goals.

After the conference whānau teachers continue to track students’ progress and have regular academic conversations with them, and maintain contact with parents as needed.

There is resounding support from staff and parents for the Student Achievement Conferences, with parental attendance increasing from 15% to 85% (including 80% of Māori and 85% of Pacific parents) with the same level of attendance in 2011, improved relationships with families, inappropriate NCEA course choices being identified sooner, students and parents having better understanding of NCEA, students being more aware of their academic progress, and staff having greater appreciation of the role of data in working towards improved student and school outcomes.
Starpath Project Phase Two

The Starpath Project in Phase Two (2011-2015) aims to implement and evaluate the initiatives trialled and tested in the five pilot schools in up to 40 low-mid decile secondary schools. The overall outcomes for Starpath Phase Two are:

- A measurable increase in achievement at NCEA levels 1-3 for Māori and Pacific students, and for other students from low-to-mid decile schools; and
- A measurable increase in participation and success at degree-level tertiary study for Māori and Pacific students, and for other students from low-to-mid decile schools.

These are rigorous performance objectives to achieve. In order to achieve these goals Starpath will:

- Work with participating schools to develop their capacity to use longitudinal student achievement data for tracking and enhancing individual student and school performance.
- Promote a culture of inquiry and commitment to evidence-based practice in participating schools and among teachers and prospective teachers.
- Track and monitor progression of students from participating schools into tertiary education and continue research into factors that facilitate their increased participation and success at degree level study.
- Enhance our influence on policy development, ensuring we become a valued contributor to, and participant in, policy formation.
- Collaborate with other researchers, ensuring we utilise opportunities to deliver enhanced outcomes.
- Advocate at the national level for student management and data systems that allow for tracking students across their educational careers and building towards success.

Collaborating with new partners

Phase Two of the Starpath uses the evidence from collaborations with Phase One schools, and adds the intervention evidence and experience from two partner research and development teams in the Faculty of Education. The aim is to test how the additional components of literacy and leadership can increase the effectiveness of the low-mid decile schools in improving student outcomes.

The work with Phase One schools demonstrated that the strategies were associated with gains in student outcomes, especially notable at NCEA Levels 1 and 2. The results from the original partner schools indicated that to impact more fully on Level 3 and University Entrance, two further components would be necessary: These components are designed to enhance instructional effectiveness especially in Literacy (LI) and to enhance leadership effectiveness, especially in the role of departmental leadership (EL). This is an important feature for Phase Two.

The central idea for the LI component is that literacy is a barrier to higher pass rates at NCEA Level 2 and UE levels for Māori and Pasifika students in low-mid decile secondary schools. Teaching needs to be fine-tuned to achieve more targeted effects for these students at these levels. The EL component addresses the need for organisational learning and organisational problem solving. There will be a particular focus on the extent to which the Starpath project and school leaders succeed in developing a coherent focus and on the properties of effective leadership.

The overall comprehensive programme is a very significant development. Combining the research base and intervention models from three teams is unique in New Zealand and has seldom happened in this systematic and staged way internationally. The combined Starpath, Woolf Fisher Research Centre and Centre for Educational Leadership teams have come together to implement and evaluate a programme that is designed to have the fullest impact on the educational outcomes for students typically ‘underserved’ in our schools.

Recruiting new schools for Phase Two

One of the most important jobs in the first six months of 2011 has been recruiting the first group of schools (Group A) to join our project and to work alongside our five pilot schools. Further schools (Group B) will be invited to join the project next year. We held meetings with the Ministry of Education, our partner research teams, and the Starpath team, to determine the criteria to be used to identify this first group of schools.

To become a Starpath school the demographics of the school need to match our target students (i.e. low-mid decile, high percentages/numbers of Māori and/or Pacific students), and stable governance and leadership environments. Our first group of schools needed to be located in Auckland and Northland, preferably close to one of our original pilot schools that would act as ‘lead schools’ over the next five years. We were also interested in whether the schools were involved in further projects, knowing ‘project overload’ can be a problem. Consultation was held with our Phase One schools as to whether any local schools had shown interest in the Starpath programme, and if there were existing clusters of schools we could make use of (e.g. secondary literacy project, AIMHI).

Sixteen new schools were identified as Group A schools and were invited to join the project. All 16 schools have accepted. The new schools are grouped in three clusters around three of our original pilot schools. One cluster is based in Whangarei and surrounding districts, and two further clusters are based in South Auckland. The schools have their first formal gathering 13 July 2011. We welcome them all and we are looking forward to working with them.

Starpath strategy for student success

The overall comprehensive programme is a very significant development. Combining the research base and intervention models from three teams is unique in New Zealand and has seldom happened in this systematic and staged way internationally. The combined Starpath, Woolf Fisher Research Centre and Centre for Educational Leadership teams have come together to implement and evaluate a programme that is designed to have the fullest impact on the educational outcomes for students typically ‘underserved’ in our schools.

Recruiting new schools for Phase Two

One of the most important jobs in the first six months of 2011 has been recruiting the first group of schools (Group A) to join our project and to work alongside our five pilot schools. Further schools (Group B) will be invited to join the project next year. We held meetings with the Ministry of Education, our partner research teams, and the Starpath team, to determine the criteria to be used to identify this first group of schools.

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Sixteen new schools were identified as Group A schools and were invited to join the project. All 16 schools have accepted. The new schools are grouped in three clusters around three of our original pilot schools. One cluster is based in Whangarei and surrounding districts, and two further clusters are based in South Auckland. The schools have their first formal gathering 13 July 2011. We welcome them all and we are looking forward to working with them.

Collaborating with new partners

Phase Two of the Starpath uses the evidence from collaborations with Phase One schools, and adds the intervention evidence and experience from two partner research and development teams in the Faculty of Education. The aim is to test how the additional components of literacy and leadership can increase the effectiveness of the low-mid decile schools in improving student outcomes.

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On May 25 Starpath launched a new book Towards University (2009). A relatively short and very useful guide for secondary students and their parents (NZCER Press) written by project team members Dr Irena Madjar and Professor Elizabeth McKinley. The event, held in the Manurewa High School library, was attended by approximately 40-50 people consisting of teachers, students, members of school boards of trustees, community members, University of Auckland staff and Starpath team members. The book is based on the Starpath team’s research on NCEA carried out over the last four years and, in particular, the Towards University (2009) report where we interviewed secondary school teachers, students and parents from a range of different communities. This research found that, while the flexibility of NCEA is appreciated by students, teachers and parents/whānau, the complexity of navigating through the qualification created a significant barrier to educational progress. One way of addressing this barrier is to ensure students and their families have a good understanding of NCEA so that they can make the best possible course choices and avoid pitfalls during senior high school years. NCEA’s complexity and flexibility mean it is vitally important that students approach it with clear goals, good advice and careful planning. The book tackles common student and parent questions over the National Certificates of Educational Achievement system and is intended to help plug the gaps in knowledge and clear away misunderstandings. It includes advice for parents and whānau who need to know what their children are studying, how well they are doing and what they hope to do when they leave school so that they can help them make informed choices about their future. Disseminating research to students and their parents/whānau is an important goal for Starpath. The book features stories drawn from the real-life experiences of more than 120 students interviewed by the research team. The book has just gone to its second printing, indicating its importance in helping parents and students find their way through NCEA. This book follows in the steps of the first book from Starpath research on students transitioning to university, UniBound? (2010, NZCER Press). At the time of this Annual Report sales for Understanding NCEA: A relatively short and very useful guide for secondary students and their parents had surpassed 1,000 and a second printing is underway.

Research update

Building effective literacy practices in secondary schools - The West Coast experience

Like the overall Starpath Project, this specific project conducted by a team from the Woolf Fisher Research Centre led by Dr. Mei Lai and doctoral student Aaron Wilson has focused on understanding the barriers to and sources of higher achievement in secondary schools. In this case however, the secondary schools are all those in the towns and rural areas on the West Coast of the South Island. Māori students make up 16% of the student population. The programme’s overall aim is to raise achievement in these schools, particularly in literacy. The specific foci include researching how to enhance secondary school literacy instruction (both cross-curriculum and within the English department) to increase levels and rates of progress in English, mathematics and science and to develop more effective instruction for writing and reading comprehension to improve upon students’ performance in their high school years.

Annual Reports have described the early phases. The overall intervention began in 2008 with a ‘profiling and reporting’ phase, similar to the data utilisation process in Starpath schools, which was designed to build professional learning communities in the schools which had a focus on using evidence to judge the effectiveness of their teaching. The intervention team presented analyses of student achievement and instructional practice to each of the schools three months before the 2008 examinations. The profiling showed that student achievement in NCEA at Year 11 was significantly below national levels, despite the students having reading comprehension scores significantly above national levels at the end of their primary schooling in Year 8. There was a marked shift in pass rates in each content area associated with the first profiling phase in 2008 as has been reported in previous Annual Reports. The overall shift, in which pass rates moved closer to nationally expected pass rates, is consistent with evidence from other projects including Starpath schools that shows that developing an inquiry process using evidence can have an immediate effect on students’ outcomes.

A specific programme of professional development was designed from the profiling phase using the systematic observations of classroom teaching and the patterns in the assessments (both from standardised assessments as well as detailed analyses of NCEA pass rates). All English, mathematics and science teachers participated in cross-curricular literacy and subject specific professional development during 2009 and in 2010. The project is measuring a number of outcomes including NCEA pass rates. While prior to 2008, Level 1 NCEA pass rates in English and mathematics standards were lower than national pass rates by between 10% and 35%, by 2010 the pass rates had substantially improved to less than a 5% difference from national pass rates. Rates for science standards have improved too but not to the same degree. The research team is currently completing detailed analyses of a range of measures from the intervention. These include achievement data across year levels and within subject areas, student ‘voices’ (students’ reflections on expectations, beliefs about teaching and learning) and teachers’ knowledge and classroom teaching. An important finding is that Māori students made the same gains in the professional development intervention phases as non Māori students and their achievement levels in standardised tests of reading comprehension in Year 9 and 10 are the same as non Māori students.

This project is providing valuable evidence for the Phase Two Starpath intervention. It shows how detailed understanding of students’ learning and of classroom instruction can be used to design more effective instruction on a school by school basis. The exciting prospect in Phase Two is that powerful interventions can be built by combining knowledge and skills about successful interventions for literacy and for leadership, with academic counselling and target setting.
Project outputs
(1 July 2010 – 30 June 2011)

Technical reports

Books

Journal papers
Jensen, S. Madjar, I., McKinley, E. (2010). Students and NCEA course choices and allocations. SET: Research Information for Teachers, 2, 45-51

Invited keynotes

Ministerial meetings and visits with Starpath
• Te Ururoa Flavell, 21 July 2010
• Steven Joyce, 3 December 2010

Project media coverage
(1 July 2010 – 30 June 2011)

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Television
Interview - TVNZ 23 May 2011 Breakfast show, NCEA book launch

Radio
Interview - Radio NZ 8 June 2011 Nine to Noon show, NCEA book launch

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