

Principal today

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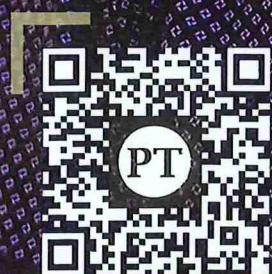
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GROWING GREAT LEARNERS

Hands-on learning, community connection, and rural education leadership

As told to Paige O'Brien

Tucked into the rural landscape near Tauranga, Oropi School is a place where learning goes beyond the classroom. With a strong emphasis on community, hands-on experiences and connection to the natural environment, the school reflects many of the qualities that define rural education in Aotearoa.

In this Q&A, Principal Andrew King reflects on what drew him to school leadership, the culture and philosophy that guide learning at Oropi School, and the distinctive opportunities and challenges rural principals face today. From building strong community partnerships to navigating ongoing changes in education policy, his insights highlight why rural schools remain an important part of New Zealand's education system.

What inspired you to pursue leadership in education, and what led you to your current role as principal?

There are a few reasons why I ended up in educational leadership. Within my immediate and extended family, there were a number of teachers who went down the educational leadership pathway, which sounded appealing listening to their 'stories' as I was growing up. Once I made the decision to enter teaching, I decided pretty early on that I wanted to be a school

principal. I was intrinsically motivated to achieve that goal. Leading a school's curriculum and programmes on offer was what excited me the most. Along the way, I also had a number of people who said things to me that 'stuck.' One was an ERO reviewer who said, "You'd make a good rural education advisor." That, combined with what I think about how rural schools can provide a great context for educational leadership, influenced me to be on the journey I find myself in today.

How would you describe the culture and character of Oropi School?

Within my first few years at Oropi School, we developed a school philosophy as a team of teachers. This very much defines our school culture, which is about providing a rich, broad curriculum that connects Tamariki to real-world and hands-on experiences. It is about connecting children to their natural environment

as well as to encapsulate the notion that education does not just happen in the four walls of a classroom. You will notice children immersed in a range of experiences across the school, indoors and out, throughout the day. Ensuring all children have equitable access to our programmes and resources is really important, and cross-age group interaction is really important, so children are known by all staff and to optimise learners being good people who care for one another.

In what ways does being a rural school shape the learning experiences you offer students?

Local context is really important in a rural school because of the naturally strong connection to the community and natural environment in which we all reside. Our programmes, such as Garden to Table, very much reflect this. A rural school provides solutions to modern-day problems, such as getting children off screens and remembering how to play, and being a context where you can often provide strong relationships and connections involving the whole school, which is really good for school culture.



Andrew King
Oropi School Principal

What do you see as the biggest strengths of rural schooling?

Local context and resources for bringing life to the curriculum and tuakana tenei. Rural schools tend to be under 250 students, and so all the learners are known across the school and are not just a number. This has many benefits, including minimising peer pressure so 'kids can be kids' and not be worried about modern-day influences as much.

What are some challenges rural principals face today, and how do you navigate them?

We're going through a period of rapid change, which I liken to 1989; Tomorrow's schools. However, the type of causation of this reform is different. I think it is because of a 'swing back' to a more knowledge-rich curriculum. Navigating this reform as a rural school leader is immensely challenging because you often



do not have a team of people amongst your staff to be able to delegate to and support the change and strategy needed. You can very much be doing it all on your own without being able to 'bounce ideas' with others easily. You can join virtual meetings and so forth, but there is nothing richer than face-to-face conversations with other leaders.

How important is the relationship between the school and the wider community in a rural setting?

The success of a rural school relies strongly on this community partnership because the school is often the hub of the community. I would argue more so than in an urban setting. Why? Because typically a rural school is smaller

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than its urban counterpart, and there are no other central community facilities. It becomes a meeting place for parents to gather and a venue for many things outside of school hours to occur, such as Calf Club Day and

fundraising events. Everybody knows everybody in a rural community, and so it is vital for a school leader to be able to navigate this and ensure the school is well-connected to its community.

What strategies do you use to build strong relationships with students, staff, and families?

We regularly offer opportunities for families to come together for a range of events throughout the year. This is in the shape of parents offering their time to support programmes such as Garden To Table, fundraisers, Calf Club Day, and Parent Information Evenings about topics related to our strategic plan.

What are some of the initiatives or approaches at Oropi School that you are particularly proud of?

Our Play Based Learning and Garden To Table programme, and outdoor learning and play Gully spaces. The children love coming to school because of



these. We also implemented a Global Citizenship strategy, which means we encourage second language learning. First and foremost, this is about Tikanga & Te Reo Māori, and we also include Mandarin Language Learning and opportunities for learning with, from and about Asian cultures in our school.

How have the needs of students and families changed during your time in education?

I have now been at Oropi School long enough to see that some needs and trends are quite cyclical, and some are based on events and 'things going on' outside of our control. A sense of community and involvement of parents in the day-to-day life of the school is harder to achieve because of the demands for both parents to be working to make ends meet. Social media and media in general are also a major influence on education, which is causing problems and issues we navigate to be more complex because 'everybody has an opinion', and so it becomes

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harder for us to understand and navigate truth and fact. This puts immense pressure on a principal. We need to do more to educate our children about this, media bias and misinformation.

What are the biggest opportunities you see for rural education in the coming years?

Being a context that offers solutions to modern-day problems – real person connectivity, a sense of community, smaller class sizes, connecting children to their natural world, and context to

be educated about modern-day problems, such as climate change, and therefore being able to provide real-time, practical, experiential learning to understand this.

If you could influence one change in education policy to better support rural schools, what would it be and why?

A staffing formula based on need, not school size, and numbers of students in the school at two key dates of each year. This measure of resourcing and staffing is very outdated and needs major

re-thinking, a bit like when we moved from Decile funding to an Equity Index model.

What advice would you give to teachers who are considering stepping into school leadership?

Breadth of experience and a smaller rural school can easily provide the experience required to become a school leader because you are teaching in a multi-level context, and so are 'forced' into the situation of needing to plan for and teach a very diverse range of levels of needs. You get to be a part of most school-wide areas of responsibility so much more, as there are fewer people to delegate roles to. You learn the 'art' of working with a community. Greater levels of experience and understanding of a wide range of areas of school operations, management, and leadership occur in a small school setting.





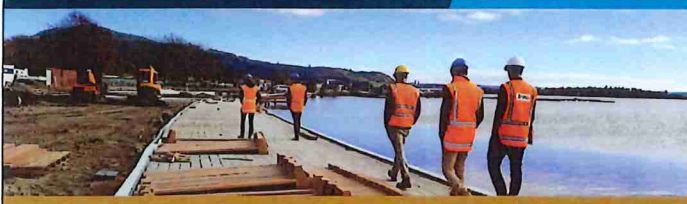

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