

**THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION SUPPORTCLUSTER PROJECT:
WHOSE AGENDAS ARE
BEING MET?**

Lesley MacGibbon

Susan Besley

Alison Gilmore

Unit for Studies in Educational Evaluation

Education Department

University of Canterbury

Paper presented at the AARE/NZARE Conference,

Melbourne, Australia, November 29 - December 2, 1999

**This research is being conducted under contract to the Ministry of Education. The
final report will be available January, 2000.**

The burden for small, rural schools is even greater and is exacerbated by a number of factors: a teaching principal who has full administrative duties in addition to teaching duties; the limited pool of parents available for election to the Board of Trustees; limited access to professional support; and greater costs for resources.

In recognition of these difficulties, and as part of the 1997 Budget, the government approved funding over three years for a project to facilitate alternative administration arrangements for schools. The aims of this initiative were (i) to reduce the workloads of principals and boards of trustees by facilitating co-operative arrangements between schools, and (ii) to assist boards and principals in the effective management of their schools. Schools were clustered geographically to enable this initiative to be explored.

The Ministry of Education contracted six 'providers' to facilitate the establishment of clusters and to support the implementation of alternative administration arrangements in these clusters of small, rural and isolated schools - the focus of the project.

The aims of the evaluation of this project, from which the data for this paper were derived, were to:

- provide a *description* of the initiative as it evolved 'on the ground';
- examine the *processes* by which boards and principals were assisted and assisted each other in the effective management of their schools; and
- examine the *outcomes*, that is, the extent to which the workloads of principals and boards of trustees were reduced by the facilitation of co-operative arrangements.

METHOD

Six providers worked with between six and eight clusters. Each cluster comprised between three and ten schools. In total, approximately 250 schools throughout New Zealand participated in the project.

The evaluation gathered information from two primary sources:

Case study providers

Four of the six providers were selected to represent a range of 'type' of provider (tertiary institution, private provider, School Trustees' Association) and regional location (north, central and lower North Island, and South Island).

For each case study provider, a sample of two clusters (and a sample of at least two schools from each cluster) were selected for in-depth interviews and on-site visits, on two occasions. The first occasion was Term 2, 1998 when the schools had won a contract with their provider to implement an alternative administration arrangement. The second occasion was at the end of Term 3, 1999. This second interview was approximately six to eight months after schools had completed their project (that is, after financial and facilitative support for their projects had ceased). A total of 17 schools are represented in the case study data in this paper.

Survey of schools

At similar points in time, the principal of each of the remaining schools was requested to complete a postal questionnaire. The first questionnaire investigated the process of establishing clusters. The second questionnaire explored the outcomes (intended and unintended) of the project. In total, approximately 190 questionnaires were returned on both occasions, representing a response rate of 80%.

THE QUESTION OF AGENDAS

In addition to providing answers to the evaluation questions stated above, the evaluation revealed the interesting phenomenon of agendas. The agendas revealed themselves through the variable meanings attributed by schools to the Ministry's written statement of aims and objectives for the initiative, the suspicion of schools relating to 'hidden agendas' underlying those written aims and objectives, and the extent to which these suspicions were actually to be founded in the Ministry's unstated intentions.

The following sections discuss the real and perceived agendas of the Ministry of Education, on the one hand, and of schools, on the other. The change and evolution of those agendas are clarified in the third section.

THE MINISTRY'S AGENDAS

In developing the Schools Administration Support Cluster Project, the intention of the Ministry was to encourage small schools with teaching principals to form clusters and develop collaborative school administration arrangements which would reduce the workload of principals.

Clustering with similar schools was viewed as a means by which the administration workload of principals could be reduced and a means of enhancing the effectiveness of their role as professional leaders.

Further, the project was seen as an opportunity to explore alternative administration arrangements which could assist the principals in the effective on-going management of their schools and provide the Ministry with models of school administration arrangements which could be implemented in future initiatives.

The reduction of the administrative workload of principals was widely understood to be the primary objective of the project. However, the importance of the project as a means of exploring alternative administration arrangements in small schools was not as widely understood by principals or, possibly, even some facilitators. This had important implications for the implementation of the policy and was responsible for some degree of tension in the initial stages of the project.

The Ministry's agenda was to encourage a process of exploration to see what 'exciting, innovative and flexible' solutions would emerge. The policy was deliberately 'loose' and the intention was to introduce a project with 'few strings attached'. The agenda was to find ways in which structural changes could be made to administration arrangements but to avoid the use of a 'top-down' model to bring about change. In other words, to avoid imposing structures such as district councils on schools. They wanted to develop a 'bottom-up' approach. Their idea was to say: 'let's put some money in [schools], let's put some

facilitation in, [let's] see from the bottom up what schools come up with that would help them to get together to make economies of scale and efficiencies of working closely together'.

This agenda created a degree of uncertainty for some principals and board members. They were excited by the opportunity to have a sense of ownership of the project and yet were fazed by the degree of latitude afforded by this open agenda. "The Ministry doesn't give you money with no strings attached!" was not an uncommon concern expressed by principals and board members. This led to 'second guessing' by principals as to what the 'real' agenda might be. "Was it a step towards combining boards of several schools? Was the intention to have a 'lead' school take over the administration of smaller schools? Was it to close down schools (EDIs)?" [In fact, the Ministry had made it their policy not to include schools which were under the threat of closure. This was not, however, wholly successful as some schools were involved in the project which were subsequently closed.]

The impact of an open agenda was more powerful than the Ministry may have predicted. Even a year after the implementation of the policy, some principals still reported that they knew they weren't doing 'what the ministry wanted' or that they were the ones that the Ministry referred to when they talked about doing the 'wrong thing'. These fears and suspicions had to be addressed by the facilitators and Ministry officials before many principals and board members would proceed with the project.

There were risks for the Ministry in implementing an 'open' agenda. Firstly, they were dependent on the providers and facilitators understanding implicitly what the project agenda was as they were the ones who conveyed the messages to the principals and board members. Secondly, 'interpretations of what schools were able to do within the policy framework varied'. Some schools saw it as an opportunity to bring about administrative change whilst others focused purely on the financial gains.

As the project evolved, so too did the Ministry's understanding of the issues related to the project and the agenda was modified. Firstly, not all principals had understood the need to use the start-up grant for implementing structural changes which would assist them in the on-going management of the schools. As a result, the need for structural change was made explicit in the Ministry's more recent documentation.

Secondly, the Ministry recognised that a number of projects that were being developed were not 'robust enough' to ensure that the clusters would be on-going. The Ministry had not made this need for on-going clustering explicit at the outset. 'On-going management' was outlined in the initial documentation but this too evolved and became 'on-going clustering'.

THE SCHOOLS' AGENDAS

The reason expressed by most schools for joining this project was that they wanted to reduce the administrative workload of their principals. In some situation their involvement in the cluster project did reduce the principal's workload - especially in clusters where they employed an administration or executive officer to whom could be delegated some of the administration work.

In others, however, it did not reduce the workload as much as change it. It reduced the administration workload, and freed up principals for curriculum development and staff development and more direct work with the children.

However, there were a number of **other agendas** operating at the same time.

Access to funding

- Some principals saw this project as an opportunity to access funding to implement projects they would not otherwise be able to fund.
- Some saw it as the opportunity to fund projects they were going to complete anyway, but this freed up finances for other purposes.
- Some principals just want the funding.

Principal: *We feel that we have got a responsibility when pools of money are available to actually investigate whether or not we should be involved in accessing that money. I don't know if it will reduce my workload, but you never turn down money that is offered.*

The average grant to schools was \$5,000 and the types of projects undertaken included:

technology purchase 82%

collegial support 56%

management systems 38%

professional development 31%

Principal: *We have established a good network, we support each other, we have the hardware to communicate by e-mail, we have had in-service for all our staff, we have as a group of principals visited other schools for training.*

Principal: *As a cluster we did not really achieve a lot. The task was too large because people within the cluster were all at different levels. We have all improved our computer skills and usage but there is still a long way to go to get the programme up and running efficiently cluster wide.*

Pre-empting EDIs

Educational Development Initiatives are a Ministry initiated project of rationalising small rural schools to ensure that all children have access to high quality education. These have resulted in closures of some rural schools and amalgamations of others. Sometimes EDIs are implemented against the wishes of the particular school communities involved.

- Preventing EDIs in their area was an agenda of several clusters. They developed a number of strategies:
 - Strength in solidarity. The schools co-operated and worked together to pull all schools up to standard and work closely together.
 - Developing their own models of rationalisation. Some clusters developed models that would suit their own particular needs. These included, education boards, hub and spokes, and satellite schools under central school management.

Principal: *I think clustering is great - get a few more schools involved and call it an education board!!! I support clustering but I still think that it is a way for the Ministry to push an agenda of EDI from the bottom up. I think the Ministry would be delighted if schools worked out a better utilisation of resources.*

Principal: *I still wanted ownership of the management day-to-day decision stuff but I could see the practicalities of the hub and spoke model. But if we were attached to a school that was further down the road that was actually getting some of our pupils, and were driving past in a bus when they shouldn't have been, then we would panic about that school being in charge of what happens to us. That's what happens in little schools. There's a lot of competition between them to retain pupils, to retain staff. You would need that element taken out and actually given everyone a good equal playing field to be able to run it. Then I think it probably would work. There would be a lot of resistance but I do think it would work.*

Principal: *Autonomy is not actually a problem with me. What would suit me would be if I tapped into a bigger school, then there would be someone there that would take responsibility for a lot of the administration issues in terms of this ICT plan. , school policies, running field days, all these sorts of things. As a satellite school we'd basically be the school in this area. We'd be working to the management of the bigger school. The principal might even be in charge of me. But that wouldn't actually worry me because I'd be free here to deliver education to this community. I could probably do that a lot easier if I didn't have to worry about all these other things. I mean I'm writing a school scheme at the moment, which to be perfectly honest is basically twinking out the names of other schools I've pinched them from, and getting it re-typed and putting it in my document.*

Reducing isolation

Professional isolation is a problem for many principals in rural schools. They may have to travel up to 1.5 hours to the nearest school which may also be a one or two teacher school. They saw this project as one way to implement things that would help reduce their isolation:

- Use of technology to reduce isolation - e-mail, on line discussion groups, shared web pages, tele-conferencing;
- Supporting each other with introducing technology - peer support networks with common software/hardware - difficulty of accessing support people;
- Sharing of policies/documents/teaching resources;
- Sharing professional development;
- Combined purchasing - accessing trades people in rural area is often difficult and expensive. Combined purchasing power of the entire cluster made work contracts more attractive for trades people.

Principal: *As a new principal I would say that the support is vital. You could go crazy out here. We have no idea whether we are doing our job or not.*

Principal: *Because our schools are so similar we already operate an informal peer support system. We are going to purchase polycoms which allow us to have groups discussions using the telephone technology. It will increase our ability to keep in touch without having to travel. Because the distances are so great, travel is the killer.*

We don't want to have to travel more, because time spent on the road is time spent out of the classroom. We will be able to use advisors for professional development. They could go to one school, and all the schools will be able to participate using the polycom. I guess the next step is video conferencing, but we don't need technology to that extent. We just have to be able to hear each other - we already know what we look like.

If for example I need a policy on truancy, I will just go into the internet site that we will set up and check out what is there. If Mary at the next school has developed a policy on truancy, I will download it, review it and we can use it, rather than starting from scratch with everything. A lot of our policies need reviewing, and rewriting, but it is very time consuming.

However, despite good intentions and a desire to work co-operatively with other schools, some principals found that the reality was different:

I wish I was fanatical about clustering but in reality the day-to-day running of a school sucks all your time away. You have all these good intentions and no time. Time's my worst enemy. I agree with the idea of little schools working together but I'm not proud of the fact that I'm not a walking advertisement for it because I just don't have the time.

EMERGING AGENDAS

Were the Ministry's agendas met?

Have the projects reduced principal workload? The answer to this question might appear to be 'no'. Most principals reported that their workload was not reduced but altered: they became more efficient, had more time to teach or to help other teachers, and had more flexibility in the way they approached their administrative responsibilities. But, from the outset, the Ministry's view had always been much broader than those of many principals. For the Ministry the notion of 'reducing workload' was not confined to reduced administration but included increased efficiency and the enhancement of the principal's role as a teacher and professional leader. So in these terms, 'yes', the Ministry's agenda has been met.

Has the Ministry's 'open' agenda given rise to 'innovative and exciting' administrative arrangements which are on-going? Once again the answer to this question is yes and no.

Many of the projects have not produced structural management changes. Nor have many projects required on-going clustering. However, some cluster groups did initiate innovative and on-going management systems and the Ministry did, therefore, acquire models of successful initiatives to disseminate to other schools. The project has been a catalyst for principals and boards to remain in, or develop, cluster groups for support, sharing and professional development. However, it might be too soon to answer this question.

Once again, the Ministry's agenda may be more powerful than they realised. What principals and boards needed was time - time to consider the options, time to explore and trial clustering, time to think in collective terms, and time to trust the agenda. The project has promoted discussion about, and evaluation of, alternative administrative systems which involve shared administration, shared boards or district management structures. It has prompted schools to explore options for the second project which does involve structural change and which does require on-going clustering. And it has led to a rethink of teaching

principals' workload by some. "I'm called a teaching principal. The teaching comes first in that title but it seems that I'm principal first and teacher second and something has to be done about that."

So what has the Ministry done about that?

As the project has evolved and as the second phase of the project has developed, the Ministry's agenda has become clearer. Projects are still aimed at reducing teaching principals' workload. But this time, the parameters of the project have become clearer and examples of likely outcomes and models are clearly stated in Ministry documents; projects need to involve structural changes within the management systems of the school and they need to involve on-going clustering.

Is the agenda still to introduce change from the 'bottom -up'? It is still the responsibility of schools to develop and implement their own ideas for effective management systems. At this stage, then, it still appears to be a 'bottom up ' approach.

CASE STUDY OF CLUSTER

This case study is an example of one very successful cluster. It is included in this paper as an example of how the Ministry's stated agenda (written aims and objectives) have been successfully interpreted and fulfilled. The case study describes the physical and professional context within which clusters of schools operate; their expectations (or agendas) for the project; what they managed to achieve through the project; and features of clustering which enable a cluster to be successful.

The experiences of two principals in the clustering project are also described to illustrate the issues identified earlier in relation to 'double guessing' and pre-empting the perceived hidden agenda of the Ministry.

(It should be noted that this case study cluster was **not** a typical cluster within the project. While the issue of real and hidden agendas was apparent for many clusters, their solutions to the stated Ministry agenda were variable and generally 'less successful'.)

Descriptive context

Cluster One is a geographical cluster based around a rural centre. All 10 schools in the area are part of the Schools Administration Support Cluster project, and were part of a pre-existing cluster that traditionally joined together for cultural and inter-school sporting events and professional development for staff and principals. More recently the cluster also joined together for projects such as:

- Direct resourcing of school transport (combined contracts to run schools busses);
- Resource Teacher of Learning & Behaviour (RTLB);
- Ongoing Resourcing Scheme funding for students with severe disabilities (ORS);
- A combined information technology suite to be used by all schools;
- Overseas exchange projects for students;

- Employment of an Attendance officer for the cluster;
- Combined teams for Saturday sport; and
- A shared sports equipment pool for all schools in the cluster.

Four of the schools in the cluster are based in the rural centre, and the remaining six schools are within a radius of 8 - 22 kilometres from the rural centre. Schools range in size from a 44 pupil (2 teacher school), to a secondary school with 420 children and a staff of 29.

What the cluster hoped to achieve

The cluster proposed a number of initiatives that they wanted to achieve as part of the project. These included:

- Employing an administrative staff member of carry out the co-ordination and implementation of projects;
- To open an Information Technology Resource Suite based at a central school;
- To carry out a survey of all schools to collect information about schools' specific needs in the areas of resources, property, finance, curriculum, personnel and administration;
- To stage an Education Expo where suppliers of books and all other curriculum and educational resources display their products;
- To arrange for annual property maintenance checks to be completed on all schools; and
- To centralise a pool of curriculum resources.

What the cluster did achieve

All principals met for a full day each term, with teacher release time funded from the Schools Administration Support Cluster project funding. This reduced the number of meetings for different purposes and also cut down on travel time. The cluster achieved all its objectives and in September 1999 was operating 18 initiatives. In addition to the above objectives, the cluster also established curriculum teams of 2 or 3 teachers to develop general schemes of work for the cluster; is putting out a combined newsletter on common educational issues to all its communities under the banner of the combined schools; set up a dance group for talented dancers who meet together once a week; planned two combined outward bound type courses for behaviourally challenged children; completed planning for the appointment of a property maintenance person for all 10 schools.

Benefits the cluster got from the project

The cluster was already operating, with principals meeting for various purposes, but the funding available through the project enabled them to actually do the things they wanted to. The cluster may have completed some of the initiatives anyway, but the funding has enabled them to do a lot more and to get things off the ground much more quickly. The employment of an administration officer meant that when they brainstormed ideas and initiatives there was someone available to carry out the actions required.

The schools were co-operating rather than competing. Collaboration was seen as a major strength, and many initiatives that would be impossible for a single school were possible for a cluster of 10 schools. In terms of collective purchasing there was strength in numbers, and the co-operative nature of the project resulted in the cluster attracting community funding for the first time. The projects were seen to be viable and successful and therefore of benefit to the whole community, not just one particular school community. The involvement of the college brought additional resources into the cluster.

Critical factors for success of this project

One of the key factors in the success of this cluster is that it achieved early success which convinced the members of the cluster that there were tangible benefits for them from their membership in the cluster. The administration officer has been the biggest success of the whole project. The creation of this position has enabled many of the tasks necessary for the smooth running of the project to be completed, without adding to the existing workload of the principals. When Schools Administrations Support Cluster funding runs out, schools in the cluster are committed to supporting the position from their existing budgets.

The principals were asked to identify what they thought were the critical factors in the success of this project in their area:

- the people get on really well together and trust one another;
- they all operate in a non - competitive way;
- they were already working together on joint projects such as the buses, special education, truancy;
- they have always had a strong Principals' Association;
- they are proactive, willing to take risks and to support each other in doing this;
- they believe that they have a concept of being self reliant and helping each other, and that bureaucracy actually creates problems for them;
- they are confident about sharing ideas and looking forward;
- all schools in the area are involved;
- they had early success in the project; and
- schools can opt in or out of specific initiatives.

School Exe

School Exe is a rural school with a roll of 56 and a staff of 2.2. The principal of Exe School joined the administration cluster because he wanted to reduce his administrative workload. He believed that there was a lot of repetition within the schools in the area and that a lot of his workload could be cut down by combining with other schools on projects. He also stated:

The other reason I wanted to go with it was that I didn't want to miss out. I think that you have got to try something and see if it works out, and if we had just sat there and said 'no' we could have missed out on something beneficial to us all.

The principal of Exe School believed that the Schools Administration Support Cluster project had the potential to reduce his workload in the long term.

In small schools the reality is that the administration work is nearly as heavy as in larger schools where the principal is not teaching. In an ideal world I would like to spend more of my administration time on curriculum and working with teachers; unfortunately this is not an ideal world, but this project will assist... The last ERO report said that we need to update our schemes because they are very old, and [other principals] in the cluster have offered us the opportunities to look at their schemes of work and so develop our own.

Another example of the way the project has reduced the workload of this principal was the running of the Educational Expo which was organised by the administration officer. One of the time-wasting events in a rural principal's day is visits from representatives selling books and educational resources. The Expo provided the opportunity for representatives to set up displays in a central location once a year; the principal no longer had visits from individual reps coming to his school. The administration officer does the bulk buying for all schools in the cluster, which also reduces the workload of the individual principals.

Joint property management was also an area that reduced the principal's workload. He stated:

For example if Joe from [City] comes in and does all our property work that will save me lots of time, and joint capital works applications will also save heaps of time. One person coming around to do all the quotes at the same time means that I don't have to ring around and organise them all myself.

The principal of Exe School believed that by being part of the cluster his school was more effectively managed. He had access to resources developed by other schools, and was able to draw on the expertise of the other principals in the cluster. He cited freeing up his time from administrative tasks and spending more time on curriculum and staff development resulted in a more effectively managed school.

Although this principal has some initial reservations about clustering, and was suspicious of the motives of the Ministry, he stated that his involvement in clustering has been all positive. He thought that clustering was a way for communities to take the initiative themselves, and therefore prevent Ministry imposed EDIs in their area. Even though his experiences of the project had been all positive, he stated:

I think clustering is great - get a few more schools involved and call it an education board!!! I support clustering but I still think that it is a way for the Ministry to push an agenda of EDI from the bottom up. I think the Ministry would be delighted if schools worked out a better utilisation of resources.

School Wye

Wye School is a rural school with a roll of 155 and a staff of 6.8. The principal of Wye School has a .3 three teaching component, but his board has released him full time. He has taken on the responsibility of key organiser of the cluster, and the immediate supervision of the administration officer. This principal was extremely enthusiastic about the notion of clustering in general, and the Schools Administration Support Cluster project in particular. He promoted clustering, and was happy with his leadership role in the cluster but was very clear about nurturing other principals to take on responsibility.

Wye School had a tradition of working closely with other schools in the geographical area for a number of years, and the principal was keen for the schools to develop initiatives to strengthen the educational opportunities offered to all children in the district. Part of the motivation for developing new strategies within the district, was the threat of EDI.

I think that schools in our district have realised that because of EDIs elsewhere, that we have got to be a bit pro-active. We have got to get a bit ahead of the 8 ball, in what we are doing. We realise that if one of us goes down, in time others will follow. We don't want any of our communities to lose their schools, so we are making jolly sure that it doesn't happen here.

The prime motive for the principal of Wye School participating in the cluster project was that he could see the potential for reducing the administrative workload, not just of his own position, but for all principals in the cluster. His goal was to free up the principals to work more on the curriculum, and although he recognised that this would take time and was a long term goal, he believed that the project has substantial benefits within the first year.

The appointment of the administration officer was a key to the success of the project. The principal of Wye School stated:

I have ended up with an assistant. The administration officer does some of the things I would have had to do myself. He is able to do something once, and it benefits all 10 principals.

By delegating some of the administration responsibilities to the administration officer, the principal of Wye School explained that he was freed up to put this energy into areas of curriculum development.

My workload probably isn't reduced, but it is focused where I want it to be - on the children. For example, we have initiated a primary enterprise project where 100 children have set up 10 businesses. This has huge parental involvement and support, and wouldn't have happened if I had not been freed up from some of the administration work.

The principal of Wye School believed that the project contributed to the more effective management of the school. One of the issues with rural schools is that the BOT is often forced to become involved in management issues in the school, simply because there are not enough hours in the day for the principal to complete everything that needs to be done. Both the Chairperson of the BOT and the principal believed that the establishment of shared systems within the cluster resulted in more effective management of the school. Examples given included financial management and property management, which resulted in not only the principal having more time for curriculum development, but the BOT having more time to address governance issues rather than the day to day management tasks.

The principal of Wye school believed that clustering of rural schools offered possibilities for rural schools to reorganise themselves in a way that maximised the effectiveness of the education offered in rural areas.

I think it is quite ironic that what we are developing here is like putting the clock back 10 years and we are creating our own mini education board. If you are in the city you have an advisory service and got resource people right on hand. I know it is only a phone call from here, but it is not the same as being able to meet face to face with those people. We can't do that here. Working as a cluster is a way of helping

overcome this, a way of putting us on a bit of a level pegging with our city counterparts.

REFERENCES

Weyl, I. (1997) Self-Motivation: The Secret to Success.
Years On: What the Hawthorne
Experiment tells us about
Cooperation in the Workplace.
Research in Education, 10(1), 1-10.

Lange, Rt.Hon. D. (1988) Tomorrow's Schools: The Reform of Education Administration in New Zealand, Government Printer, Wellington, New Zealand.