

Making community connections at Linwood Avenue School

Introducing Linwood Avenue School

Linwood Avenue School (LAS) is a decile 2 contributing school located in an inner suburb of Christchurch. The school serves a supportive community. Community issues that impact on the school include poverty, transience, mental health, and dependency. The school has a stable staff, a number of whom have been at the school for over 10 years. The roll includes approximately 330 students: about half are NZ European, one-quarter are Māori, and one-seventh Pasifika. LAS is a Phase 1 FIS school.

The school philosophy is that academic successes are intertwined with physical and emotional wellbeing. Therefore, for a number of years, alongside literacy and numeracy, health has been a key priority area.

The fit between FIS and school culture and practices

A number of features of the existing school culture are supporting FIS goals to be incorporated into the daily life of the school. These are described below.

Strategic leadership

At LAS the principal has a strong vision for the school. She aims for high standards and benchmarks the school against all NZ schools, not just those that are low-decile. This benchmarking is used to identify gaps and target professional development (PD) and resources. Health is one area identified as requiring extra resourcing. In 2003, staff were shocked by the results of a PHN's survey of students' diets that showed many did not eat breakfast and ate unhealthy food at school. Staff also identified that behaviour problems often appeared to be linked to poor nutrition. This suggested that student health and wellbeing needed to be more of a priority. Accordingly, a senior teacher was given an "R" management unit¹ and responsibility for developing initiatives. This health teacher, who is also the FIS lead teacher, is respected by the staff and parent community. Since 2003, she has led a range of health and safety initiatives. Teachers and parents noted that the allocation of resources to health, and support from management, give the school community the view that student health is important.

Giving students a "head start"

LAS has an emphasis on the early identification of group and individual needs and the allocation of resources and PD to address these needs. Before they start school, students and their families attend four "head start" sessions. At these sessions, staff discuss school routines and teaching

¹ Extra funds allocated in the form of salary or release time.

strategies such as goal setting, and model activities and strategies that can be used at home. Staff also use this time to develop an understanding of students' home environment. Building on this knowledge, when students enter school they are given a range of assessments. Students with extra needs are targeted through an IEP process or through initiatives such as an oral language programme.

The school recently received extra funding to expand the "head start" programme to include a "focus on families". It is planned that this will tie in with FIS goals by including a greater focus on student health, and consideration of how family strengths can be used to support school initiatives.

Building connections with the local community

An emphasis on forming connections with local schools and the community is a feature of the LAS culture. The school has strong connections with other local primary, intermediate, and secondary schools, which are fostered through the Linwood cluster. For a number of years this cluster has been drawing on international research to explore the characteristics of high-performing schools and ways of managing school change. The parents we talked to noted that being part of the cluster created a sense of pride in the community and gave them a sense of continuity about their children's education.

Over time LAS has also developed connections with local businesses and the council. The principal noted that local councillors are dedicated to improving the community. The school has links with the people who look after the local community gardens, the Linwood community house, the Linwood resource centre, and the police. These connections are used to support school health-related initiatives and spread messages about health to the community. Supported by a FISC, the school makes connections with local media to raise the profile of the school and increase community awareness about health issues. The school has also developed sponsorship relationships with Rotary and local businesses such as The Warehouse.

Using curriculum planning to explore the "big picture"

At LAS, whole-school ICTPD was the impetus behind a move to develop a whole-school approach to the curriculum that centres on "big issues". School leaders considered this thematic approach will promote whole-school consistency, assist staff to manage curriculum coverage, and support students to engage in deeper learning about topical health and wellbeing issues.

One of the whole-school themes in 2006 was healthy eating. In each syndicate, classes engaged in a variety of activities designed to support them to learn about this topic. With a trainee teacher, some students developed a PowerPoint presentation showing what they had learnt. A slide from this is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Health topic PowerPoint slide



The healthy eating topic culminated in a celebration week supported by local health promoters and parents. During this week, among other activities, the school was presented with a Gold Heartbeat award from the National Heart Foundation. Students developed menus and prepared healthy options at school, visited the local edible community garden maintained by some Year 5 students, and displayed their art work about healthy eating. The Cancer Society organised a number of activities including displays about sunsmart practices, and an interactive “colossal colon” which students could walk through to learn about the function of the colon and the effect of poor nutrition on their health. Local health promoters also organised a display of healthy and unhealthy foods and their sugar and fat content. This week was linked to courses at the local community house on preparing cheap and nutritional food.

In 2007, staff plan to incorporate inquiry approaches within the whole-school themes. The first theme for Term 1 is “Me and myself”. Staff suggested this could include a focus on belonging and identity, making healthy choices, or mental health issues such as coping with change.

Teachers viewed FIS as less about the curriculum and more about changing the culture of school and home. They considered they could benefit from more curriculum resources linked to the four health areas. Suggestions included: units on the Web that have all the resources attached and could be adapted; ideas about how to give students more responsibility over their learning; ICT and other resources which contain a visual element such as video clips, PowerPoints, pictures, and books; or resources that show high-profile role models engaging in healthy practices.

The impact of FIS on school health initiatives

The students, parents, school leaders, and teachers we talked to all saw FIS to be about changing school and home patterns and providing students with the lifelong learning skills and information

they would need to make healthy choices in the future. Being part of FIS had prompted an upgrade of school policies and procedures to reflect the FIS emphasis on the learning of skills that will enable students to make healthy choices.

School staff saw FIS as a catalyst that was adding impetus to school approaches to health, encouraging further discussions with the parent community, prompting greater awareness of health issues among the school community, and providing the connections and support the school needs to take further action on health goals.

Three key aspects of FIS are making change possible. Staff described how the gift of fruit was setting up a partnership between the MoH and schools. Staff and parents thought this practical gift showed a commitment to health that had not been evident in prior approaches.

The second aspect of FIS that supports change is the relationship building occurring with health promoters. School leaders noted that prior to FIS they had developed useful relationships with local health and dental nurses. They had tried to make connections with other health promoters such as nutritionists, but had experienced difficulty in finding people who could work with schools. In contrast, they found the health promoters they were being introduced to through FIS to be passionate about working with schools. In 2006 they built relationships with a FISC, and representatives from SPARC, the Cancer Society, and the Heart Foundation.

The local FISC keeps staff up to date on new developments, introduces school leaders to health promoters who assist staff to develop initiatives, assists the school to publicise health messages, and supports staff. Staff saw all these connections, and the support offered, as a major benefit of FIS. As the health teacher noted, once the school became part of FIS:

...all the stuff I had been trying to push suddenly happened!... I've meet all these people since FIS...they're wonderful ambassadors—they've helped us a lot.

The relationship building occurring with other schools is also an important aspect of FIS. The health teacher attends FIS cluster meetings and shares the ideas she gains from these sessions with school staff.

In 2006, school priorities centred around student wellbeing with an emphasis on healthy eating and physical activity, and a minor focus on sunsmart practices. The main initiatives the school community are developing are described below.

Healthy eating

Since 2003, LAS has been working on improving student nutrition, and FIS is strengthening this focus. In 2006, along with the healthy eating week, the school developed a number of healthy eating initiatives. One was a focus on healthy lunchboxes. In class, students learnt about the food pyramid, and green light (can be eaten regularly) and red light (should be eaten once a week) foods. Each class had a green and red light food poster and messages were sent to the parent community about these foods, the school “water-only” policy, eating only one treat food a day, and the banning of sweets, chocolate, and chewing gum. Teachers considered the “green and red light” approach gave students an effective message to share with their family, and all those we talked to noted this approach was supported by the community and was very successful in

changing the food students brought to school. At lunchtimes teachers stayed with students as they ate lunch, and encouraged students to eat their healthy food first. Teachers and parents noted the social benefits of this shared time.

The focus on lunch food was also used to extend an existing initiative developed with the local dental nurse. Over a period of time students were given points for green light foods in their lunchboxes. They graphed this information to observe change over time. Those students who scored highly on healthy lunches and dental hygiene went into a draw for prizes donated by the local Warehouse. One student from each syndicate received a bicycle and all others, smaller prizes. Staff reported that about three-quarters of the students had healthy lunches and no dental decay.

Prior to FIS, LAS had changed the food they offered in their canteen, and as a result received a bronze Heartbeat award from the Heart Foundation. Being part of FIS encouraged staff to aim for a silver award. With the assistance of a Heart Foundation representative and a survey of parent views, alternative menu options were developed by the health teacher and trialled by students. This resulted in the school removing pies from the menu and adding a salad roll and fruit salad. As a result, LAS was upgraded to a gold award.

Modelling by staff of healthy eating, and encouraging parents and whānau to bring healthy food for celebrations of learning and other school events, are also part of the LAS approach. For example, a focus on food was part of recent celebrations of Māori, Pacific, and international cultures.

Physical activity

Regular physical activity is a priority at LAS. Students have frequent sessions in class time and a range of activities and sports are available. Staff are exploring how to introduce students to a wider range of types of physical activity. The school runs one or two organised community activities a term such as jump rope day, cross-country, and kapa haka performances. In 2006 the school included a Commonwealth Games event, a Push Play “Have a go” day, and a kite flying day, and started a tri-sports tournament with two other local schools. Parents are able to help organise or take part in all of these events.

As a result of FIS, in 2006 the whole staff took part in Active Schools PD. School leaders were appreciative of the way the PD facilitators were flexible about extending the time frame of this PD and organising it after school so teachers did not have to be released. Teachers were very positive about how the PD was supporting them to shift their practice away from teaching isolated physical activity skills towards student-centred practices. They valued the focus on developing students’ leadership, co-operative, and higher order thinking skills such as goal setting, problem solving, and reflecting, and the way the PD gave them ideas about incorporating physical activity within other curriculum areas. Together with students and parents, they noted that the new equipment and the Active Schools games were improving the physical activity focus at the school.

Sunsmart

As a result of FIS, in 2006 the school reactivated a sunhat policy which includes sunhats as part of the school uniform. The school has a number of sunsmart procedures. All students are required to wear a hat and sunscreen whilst on trips outside the school and students without hats have to stay in the shade at lunchtime. Teachers also endeavour to model sunsmart behaviours. Plans are afoot to increase the shade areas by planting trees and installing new shade sails.

Smokefree

School leaders noted that they had yet to focus on smokefree as part of FIS, but the school had a smokefree policy. They did not use the Life Education Trust bus due to the Trust's use of tobacco sponsorship money. Learning about smokefree was already part of the school's programme, with senior students completing a health unit on the impact of smoking every second year. The school was planning to review their coverage of smokefree and develop a way to approach this area in partnership with the parent community.

Wellbeing

As part of their focus on health, staff at LAS are developing whole-school approaches to enhancing student wellbeing. One approach is an emphasis on sharing student successes with regular class and assembly celebrations which include parents and whānau. Another approach is the development of activities designed to settle students at school and connect with families such as the "head start" programme described earlier.

A school-wide approach to behaviour management is another focus. This includes training for staff on nonconfrontational and positive interactions with students, collective ownership of student behaviour issues by all staff, a focus on respectful behaviours (towards other students, teachers, equipment, and the environment), and zero tolerance towards bullying. Staff and parents considered this school-wide approach, combined with better nutrition as a result of FIS, was resulting in improvements in students' concentration, social skills, and behaviour.

Staff noted that, for a variety of reasons, students might not always get the support they need at home. Therefore a focus on encouraging students to be leaders, and take responsibility for their life choices and learning was a priority. To this end, teachers use goal-setting approaches with students, and offer a range of leadership opportunities such as maintaining the local community garden. FIS is providing more leadership opportunities for students as they act as fruit monitors or design and manage games at break times.

Student perspectives

During our visit we talked to four student fruit monitors from Years 5 and 6. These students thought learning about the FIS areas was important so that they could make good choices in the future and be role models for others. All described recent school activities related to three of the FIS areas: healthy eating; physical activity; and sunsmart. Most could describe a recent change that had occurred at school or at home in these areas.

The school's emphasis on healthy eating and nutrition was having a powerful impact on students, and they were taking home the messages they received about nutrition:

We used to ask for lollies and now I ask for nectarines.

I used to eat junk food all the time but I decided to eat healthy and eat fruit every day and I've lost heaps of weight!

Students connected a number of school activities with their behaviour changes including: the emphasis on healthy lunches and one treat a day; learning about the food pyramid and green and red light foods; and the healthy eating week and the resources from the Cancer Society such as the "colossal colon".

Students were very positive about the school's focus on physical activity and organised events, especially the Commonwealth Games day. They reported learning about a range of different activities and about keeping fit from "cross country, Commonwealth Games, 'Have a go' day, and all the other stuff..." They also noted that teachers encouraged them to run around at break times and "at school heaps of people make up new games". As a result of the emphasis on physical activity one stated "I started doing more running, jumping, skipping, and throwing tennis balls around" and another noted that at home "I don't sit round watching TV".

Students had learnt about the dangers of sunburn in previous years and said that the school had various rules about keeping sunsmart and had "just got on top of everyone wearing sunhats again". As a result of this renewed focus, they had made changes to aspects of their behaviour such as spending more time in the shade or wearing a sunhat, more clothes, or sunscreen:

Before I learnt about sunsmart I used to wear a singlet and get burnt. Now I wear a tee-shirt and sun-block, and I'm a role model for my little sister.

Students were very clear that smoking was bad for you and stated that they got this message mostly from family members and TV ads rather than school. As a result of this knowledge, they had, with limited success, been trying to change family members' behaviours. Students described how they felt they were in a difficult situation, with many of their whānau smoking around them, and not taking notice of their views because they were "too young":

It's really hard 'cause my mum smokes, my two brothers smoke, and practically every one of the visitors that come over smoke too!...

Overall, these students enjoyed learning about, and engaging in, healthy practices. They had the knowledge they needed to make healthy choices and they felt empowered to make these choices. When asked if any of the health-related activities at school were boring or did not help them to learn, they emphatically stated they had "enjoyed it all", except for a long talk about cereals. They considered learning by "doing" was the most worthwhile. Students valued the responsibility they had as fruit monitors and role models and noted that almost all the students at their school were "really into" the fruit, with one commenting "I learn better when I have fruit".

Connecting with parents and whānau

During our visit to LAS we talked to four parents who supported the school and FIS-related activities by either being on the BoT or part of the school health team, or by organising school events. These parents viewed the school as very welcoming, connected to the local community, and proactive about asking for parental support and keeping parents well informed. These parents and staff described how the school holds frequent events that connect the school with its community. The recent healthy eating celebration week and the “Have a go” day, which 40 families attended, were described as particularly successful.

Parents and staff outlined a number of other mechanisms the school used to connect with parents and whānau. Strategies considered effective included: personal phone calls and frequent invitations; getting feedback from parents via surveys; the recruitment of new parents by parents already working with the school; involving students, parents, and food in the sharing of student learning; and events that enabled parent groups to provide input from their culture.

Providing parents with information is also part of the school’s approach. School newsletters regularly include messages about healthy eating such as the focus on healthy lunchboxes, and teachers include messages about healthy practices at parent–teacher interviews.

These parents were very supportive of FIS and school approaches to health, and noted the influence FIS was having at home. Some commented their families were already health-focused, but all were more conscious about shopping for healthier food, and some were more conscious of wearing sunhats and sunblock and keeping their kids active. They considered they and the school were all working towards the same health goals, and that the school was empowering students:

We call our kids the food police! They are making their own choices outside of school—even down to the [type of] milk [they select]... I think the messages have got through.

The parents noted that FIS assisted those on a low income by providing healthy food and giving students the opportunity to try new foods. They also noted some of the inconsistencies they faced:

It’s really difficult if you are on a really low income—you buy milk when you can afford it, but coke is cheaper.

Parents and staff suggested that the health goals they were pursuing would be supported by more direct action from the government such as banning TV advertising of unhealthy foods, subsidising the cost of healthy food, giving low-income parents vouchers that could be redeemed for healthy food, or spreading FIS-like initiatives to early childhood and secondary education.

Challenges

Staff noted that some initial resistance had been experienced to the school’s messages about nutrition. Some parents felt they were being “told” what to do and some staff did not appear to see the value of this focus. School leaders noted that change is a slow process which needs to be carefully managed. To this end, they consulted with all groups, took small steps, and kept parents and staff well informed about new initiatives:

Every year we’ve moved a little bit further in the message we give to the community.

This approach had been successful, and all considered the community was now very supportive. Finding new ways of engaging parents and developing partnerships was an ongoing challenge which school leaders intended to increase the focus on.

Sustainability and where to next?

Across the school community, all showed strong support for the partnership initiated by the gift of fruit. One staff member made a comment that was echoed by all those we talked to: “The excitement and enthusiasm from the children has never waned.” Health and wellbeing was clearly on the school agenda, with positive changes being observed, and practices becoming part of the school culture. Existing school approaches to health and wellbeing were being strengthened as a result of FIS, and staff, students, and parents were all committed to continue this focus.

All those interviewed would like to see fruit provision continued in some form. Staff and parents were concerned about the school’s ability to self-fund. The principal was considering ways the community could take ownership. One possibility was students bringing fruit to school to share.

For 2007, plans include extending the wellbeing, healthy eating, and physical activity initiatives by addressing student sleep deprivation, continuing Active Schools PD, developing the playground to support physical activity and with sunshade areas, diversifying the types of physical activity available for students, and extending approaches that enabled students to take on decision-making and leadership roles. Other plans to keep FIS goals on the agenda include the exploration of new approaches to smokefree, such as the development of an inquiry topic that included smokefree, and a partnership approach with parents.