

Report to

The New Zealand

School Trustees

Association

(In fulfilment of
The Crombie Lockwood Study Award)

By John Stansfield

When the only café for 700km is closed for the school sports day, you know the schools are at the heart of the community

My sincere thanks to the New Zealand School Trustees Association and to Crombie Lockwood for the opportunity to undertake this research and to travel and meet both school principals, trustees and families in other island communities. Desk research commenced early in 2014 and visits to the most remote schools were undertaken in November of that year. Unfortunately family illness, a cyclone which cancelled transport, and the unexpected hospitalisation of my daughter delayed the research and I'm grateful for the extension given for this report.

Background to the Study

I am an islander having lived on Waiheke Island for almost 20 years. In addition, I have spent a third of my working life in the small and remote islands of the Pacific as well as some in Asia. I have a lifelong fascination with Island peoples, particularly those in remote locations, and how they adapt their lives to their circumstances. My partner, Denise Roche, now a Member of Parliament preceded me into school trusteeship with two very full following terms on the Board of Trustees for Te Hurihi Primary School. That experience sponsored many a dinnertime conversation about the nature of our community and the social function of the school. I observed some extraordinarily talented fundraisers, parents of school, conjure a really large amounts of money out of the community and very special successful special events. I watched the very close relationship between our daughter (now in her teens) and the school where she remains friendly now in her teens with past teachers and administrators alike. And I also watched a large number of children commuting off the island to schools in the city, in search of broad experiences.

Waiheke, the island in which we live, has some 8000 people (rising to 36,000 at the peak of summer) on 64 km². It is home to some very talented families and individuals. The spectacularly attractive environment is a sought-after home for talented professionals and artists from around the world. And as an island community, services available on the mainland but not provided here, are frequently supplemented by islanders developing their own ways of supporting and caring for each other.

The focus of my study and the thing which I am most interested in is, how island communities make greatest use of the natural environments and talented communities to overcome the tyranny of

distance.

The Tyranny of Distance

Distance has a remarkable effect on how we view ourselves and the opportunities that are open to us. Participants in the Chatham Islands for instance frequently referred to "going to New Zealand", which they clearly saw as another country. A participant from tiny Pitt island remarked that she was probably in the only place in New Zealand where we couldn't get away somewhere for the weekend. But the tyranny of distance is more than mere kilometres, it has a whole structure cost and logistics which need to be considered. Students at Stewart Island have what can be a pretty boisterous hour long journey to travel from Oban to Bluff, but that ferry ride is free to the as Stewart island school children travel free, a fantasy undreamed of by students on other islands. Islanders face very significant financial barriers even closer distances, fuel is dearer and transport often a monopoly. Distance also has subtler effects which affect the governance and management of the school. Recruitment of good staff to remote locations can be very difficult as can retaining the staff, although not all schools, particularly those close to a major urban centre, had the same view of the problem. Getting staff to training and accessing professional development were cited by all principals as a serious disadvantage to their location. One principal noted parents at her school were less accessible than in a more remote rural school she had previously taught at because of the proximity of the mainland centre and the high number of parents who commute long distances to work there.

The Collection of Information For Study

I began the study by reading widely the literature about problems that people had identified for schools in remote locations. There was very little specific material on the problems of island schools but I had some experience of this both through our families experience, my travels and my work in the Pacific islands. The reading helped me to shape the questions and to explore earlier solutions such as school clusters.

Following the desk study questions we developed our proposal put this through the Unitec research ethics committee to conduct interviews. Schools were then contacted by telephone, email and letter, and a schedule of interviews was developed.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with participants from six remote island schools and telephone interviews with a further three schools.

Interviews followed a semi-structured format, notes were taken and the interviews digitally recorded. The digital recording was reviewed and a summary of notes for each interview prepared. Some interviewees had pre-prepared statements, either directly addressing the questions which had been pre-sent to all participants, or collating relevant demographic data on the school in community.

ANALYSIS PHASE:

All of the summary notes we read several times to establish common themes. These were grouped and examined for potential differences among schools, by demographic or between principals and board chairs.

FINDINGS:

A Discussion of the Themes

The study represents a snapshot in time. The sample size is too small to reliably draw conclusions which might be possible and more robust with a much larger sample. However, there is a limit to the number of schools on remote islands and this limits the sample. It may be valuable in future to progress this work by gathering data from other remote schools on the mainland. Nevertheless, themes emerged, around which, there was a great deal of consensus and these are reported and discussed below.

Remoteness and Opportunism

Remoteness certainly does pose a challenge to our island schools, but just as we observe a resilience and “make do” opportunism in island communities we see this also in the schools. Participants spoke of building the learning around opportunities that arise, a whale stranding, the visit by oceangoing waka, and there appeared to be a relationship between remoteness (and inevitably size or number of pupils) in the degree to which schools were able to be opportunistic. This was colourfully described by one participant as *'we are a long way from Wellington here, the red tape stretches kind of thin by the time it gets to us'*. Another participant described how the excitement of something novel on the island fired up the community and created an energy or buzz which enabled the school to take advantage of opportunities.

Small Is Beautiful but Bigger Needs A Plan

The larger schools in the study had included engagement with stakeholders as a formal part of the planning process. In these schools the principal and board had identified community engagement as an area for growth and had developed a strategy and milestones against which they measured themselves. Smaller schools also had high levels of engagement but these were more organic in nature. In the smallest of communities the school was a vital part of the social infrastructure of community. One participant noted *'when we have an event, like prize-giving or a concert, I get as many questions looking around the hall by noticing who is not present as I get information by seeing who is.'* In most cases the school facilities were a significant asset in the community and frequently used for community purposes. In several cases the schools had no fences between themselves and other shared community facilities and participants felt that this contributed to a sense of belonging to the community and ownership by it.

Communication Is Everything

All participants reported that communication between the school and the community was crucial to the engagement. In all cases, to some extent, but particularly in the smaller and most remote schools engagement is to the whole community not just pupils and their families. One participant wryly noted *'ah there is really not a lot of entertainment here, so we are kind of perpetually on show. This is a strength but it can make change quite challenging, particularly in a relatively small but diverse*

community where different sections and factions have quite disparate aspirations for the school.' All of the schools had demonstrable examples of communicating to the whole community these included school newsletters which were distributed to the whole community where they were widely read and discussed. One participant noted 'sometimes it does feel like we just talking to the same handful and then out of the blue someone I've never met before will commence in engaged conversation with me about the school's progress, and I realise there is much more interest than I had thought.'

The High Costs of Being Here

All participants raised the issue of additional costs which was a constant challenge to the school boards and management. This is perhaps most acutely felt in the most remote islands where there is no opportunity for students to attend secondary school in their own community. Schools relied upon the generosity of parents and the wider community including local businesses to manage the increased costs of isolation. However, isolation itself meant that parents could often not help in the way that they might in larger centres, both because, there were too few parents available or because the fragile economy meant many people held down a number of part-time jobs and in some cases commuted great distances to find work resulting in less parents available to the school.

An Abiding Sense of Place

Many of the schools had very strong relations with the Department of conservation as a result of the proximity to managed conservation estate. For these schools the relationship with the department and staff were significant and the engagement of pupils with the conservation effort was an integral part of schooling. One participant described *'this is our big plus, this is the expertise and experience they will never get in a city school, our kids know about conservation at a theoretical level, as part of their biology and science, and a very practical level where they are involved in the release, protection and survey of endangered species.'* In some cases the relationship with the Department was almost an extension of the school. 'They, (the Department of conservation) are always bringing new and interesting people to the island and they really think about how the visitor might add value in our school as a result, our students have been taught by some of the country's best conservation scientists as well as other specialties. The fact that the Department takes the trouble to include the school and its visitors planning is an example of how our stakeholder relations can be used to minimise the tyranny of distance.

Similarly, the marine environment, as the dominant natural feature gives definition to the school and opportunities for community engagement. Several schools had organised curriculum around the marine environment and in many of these there was significant resource from the wider community. These included swimming coaches, sailing coaches, shipwrights, use of boats and other gear, and much of this was from the broader community not just parents of current pupils at the schools. One participant commented *'we don't even have a pool, all our swimming and marine activities take place right here in our fabulous marine environment, Mt Aspiring College might have mountains and snow, but we have the coast and it is part of us, it is a classroom and our school.'*

Remoteness and Engagement

Noting the caveat at the beginning of the section about this sample size there did appear to be a

relationship between remoteness and engagement from most respondents. The islands closest to the mainland centres, whilst they did experience the tyranny of distance and were also subject to the increased costs and delays in sourcing resources, were more able to participate with other schools, training and Ministry events and more able to source expertise from the mainland for the programs. In more remote communities there was a stronger sense of having to make do, and having to make do means having to know what resources we've got in our communities. One respondent noted *'that's a small community, we know who we have here, and for the most part we know what kinds of skills and resources exist in our community. I'm not always right about that and it is important to ask as we are sometime surprised when someone steps forward, or more commonly is pushed forward by another community member who knows about the hidden talent.'*

The larger schools closer to urban centres had more organised engagement plans and worried that they were not reaching a fully representative group of stakeholders. The smaller more isolated schools tended to be more engaged with a broader spectrum of the community, including those who had never had children at the school or were not even related to children at the school but recognised the school as a community hub.

Technology Is Changing Everything.

I had a sense in the study of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. For the most, part good computing technology and broadband fast enough to support it, was a very recent arrival. Nevertheless, it was apparent that this technology was a real game changer and had real potential to tackle the tyrannies of distance. In one small school where technology was well established and would probably be the envy of any other school a participant described to me how although remote, *'our kids travel, they travel every day. When the waka came into the harbour we learnt about their voyage and the next day we all jumped online and visited the places they had come from and the ports they had been visiting, it was wonderfully rich because the stories were still fresh in our minds.'* There are reservations with the excitement of course 'technology is not new here, there are acres of it rusting around in various corners of the island, of course we are excited about what the new fast broadband can bring to us but we've been disappointed before when the technology is not backed up and we don't have skilled maintenance engineers amongst our community to manage it.'

In one small isolated school, technology was defining or enhancing a new role for the school as the hub, the place where technology worked, the place you could come and pay your bills and do your emails and be connected. A participant noted that in a future time *'this change in the utility of the school might very well be employed to enhance the schools engagement with its community and that if the technology was really going to work to improve educational outcomes then it needed to prove educational outcomes for everybody in the small remote place not just for the pupils at the school. The new technology needed to become part of our environment part of everybody's lives.'*

Ask and It Shall Be Given

Discussions around how the school is supported by the community were exceptionally rich. There was a tension between being confident that the school knew all the resources in its community and how this might be found out. *One participant noted 'I can think of dozens of examples where people have been volunteered to help by our generous community with talents that we didn't know they had'. Another observed 'I've never had no, in all the years of being here, I've never had no, I think is really important*

that the school is clear on what it needs what kind of help it has to get and is then very forthright in asking for that help.' Few respondents were able to share examples of where this had gone wrong one subtly noticed that being able to educate adults doesn't necessarily mean you're able to talk to children, while another regaled me with an amusing anecdote about a specialist craftsperson who went off message and spent the lesson talking about their unusual spiritual beliefs including that marine mammals communicated through cosmic waves and were actually the champions of the universe.

Several respondents noted the need to be sensitive to people's capacity to give, particularly in what was essentially a very poor community. Several respondents noted that the standard model of school governance and the governance management split, was predicated on the school having access to broad governance experience, which was not always the case.

A Whanau View

Some remote islands schools, have a strongly Maori character. The interviews with participants from these schools were particularly interesting as were discussions about the relationship between the school and community. It was not that the question was not understood but rather that to some extent the question was not believed. One very experienced participant explained *'we have a whanau view, it is not the school or the community. It is the school and the community together being part of our whanau. To look at the relationship in the disaggregated way you suggest, is not how we think, it's not how we observe, believe and participate in the world we are operating, ours is fundamentally a Maori worldview.'* It would be very interesting to test this reasoning in other remote schools with a strongly Maori approach. Another participant observed *'well we are separate, and then we aren't, certainly we spend a lot of time at the marae, we are very comfortable that this is one of our learning places and then the demands of the curriculum will intervene and we sometimes need to just retreat to the classroom and get the work done'.*

Someplace Else we would Rather Be, For A Week

This question is a way of exploring some of the opportunities not available to pupils and remote islands schools participants were asked to reflect on where they would like to relocate their classes to and why. The conversations were fascinating and some interesting themes emerged.

Diversity came up a great deal. Respondents were aware that the ethnic diversity and cultural richness of New Zealand was often changing much faster on the mainland than in the remote island communities and felt it was important for the pupils, as young New Zealanders, to experience that diversity.

Wellington, Te Papa, and Parliament featured highly for the density of the experience and the utter contrast to the way of life in remote island communities.

Different landscapes, particularly the snow and the experience of the diverse geography of New Zealand we also considered important.

One participant, from a semi urban school noted that there was little real farming in his island community yet this is such an important part of who we are as New Zealanders that he would like to relocate the school through time to a rural farming community.

Several participants felt it was important that the pupils visited other islands compare and contrast

the experience with their own.

For the islands where pupils would need to go off island, to secondary schooling, this was seen as a really important transition, and they would travel to where pupils would move to secondary school, to be part of the bridge of their transition.

Strategies To Help Overcome Isolation

A recurrent theme and isolation was the costs of running and improving islands schools. This caused us to be interested in how remote school communities raise the money they needed to face that isolation challenge and also what they spend that money on. Some of the fundraising themes were

'Almost a third of the houses here are holiday homes, we had to find a way of engaging that part of our community, which was already rich enough to have a holiday home, in the life of the school.' This has been really successful for us and some of the best sponsorship particularly company or corporate sponsorship comes through our connection with our part-time holiday residents.

'Events are really successful for us not only do they raise money but they raised the possibility to raise further money by building the island identity with the school at its centre or hub' success with events ranged from relatively small scale socials, meals and functions to a very large scale athletic event which attracted many people from the mainland.

'Our biggest, most successful, and most expensive event is taking our years seven and eight pupils on tour to the mainland in connecting them with some of the schools they might attend when they have to leave our community at the end of year eight. This is a huge logistical undertaking and I'm endlessly amazed at how generous people are towards that my only explanation can be that these are all of our children they belong to us is an island as well as to families'.

'Nimble opportunism, I might call it being ever ready to take advantage at whatever learning has washed up on our shores.'

'Virtual learning network's webinars and new distance learning have just arrived for us along with the broadband needed to run them and this is having a real impact on the engagement of children and on our ability to deliver child-centred learning and adopt enquiry methods'.

'Building a culture where we make the effort to get off the rock, we know it's expensive and it's logistically difficult but we have to have a culture that says this is part of what we do. This gives our pupils a more real sense of their place in the world, sporting competitions are great for that.'

'Being part of the community, joining in and where appropriate sharing resources.'

'Having a real good close look at what we have in our community and letting that guide us in what we will do. We had no idea gymnastics was going to become a big thing it wasn't even really very much on our radar until we found we had a brilliant gymnast in our community, one who was heaps better than any of the teachers.'

Really careful recruitment, was cited by several respondents as crucial to the school's ability to meet the needs of its learners.

Cunning use of relievers was happily cited by one respondent who noted that on the rare occasions she might be allowed a reliever she sought not to replace the person being relieved, but to seek out a reliever with strengths in an area the school did not have.

In one school the Tiriti settlement processes had helped redefine the relationship with the Ministry

'Being clear about our values and who we are, gives real strength to our board and enables us to

be innovators and trust ourselves

Looking Over The Fence

Most schools felt they had a close a relationship with the community than they might in a more urban environment in a larger school. The exceptions were participants who had had experience of schools in United and homogeneous communities or schools which had much longer and stronger cultural traditions. Many participants, particularly those from smaller schools, felt the pupils had a greater sense of belonging and of identity, that they were known to most people in the community. Many felt that the small and close nature of the community meant the community and the school were more frequently connected beyond the school gates. All schools are enthusiastic about the opportunities students had and their communities. In communities without access to a local secondary school the demographics are quite different. One participant noted *'there are no teenagers here to do the babysitting, the entire secondary school is on the larger island for the mainland. This means kids get taken to everything, environment.'* One participant wistfully yearned the roads and reliable weather but noted that living in a location which required a great deal more personal resilience and responsibility had a very positive impact on the culture of the school.

Examples Of Community And School Cooperation And Engagement

The study had some truly wonderful examples of how they interacted both of the local community and a wider community to enrich the school, and the learning of pupils. There is probably a book load of potential case studies detailed below a brief notes on some of the more memorable

- a filmmaker whose partner, a musician came to our island and with our school made the movie about us
- we sent people to the peace conference they learnt banner making, storytelling, writing, clay art carving, organic gardening, permit culture, sustainable ecology, Taonga Puoro and Karetoa. All of this came back to the school and enriched our school and our community
- our teachers have been involved in iwi initiatives including our education strategy
- we have history, we have local history we engage a local historians
- beekeeping is Wednesday, two local beekeepers help us, we have hives of the school
- we use local resources to build the curriculum
- right down here, no street lights, we charted the transit of Venus special faltering glasses from the star dome it was a worldwide activity
- we connect with the wider community of teachers through the virtual learning network and also webinars
- when someone exciting comes to our community one of our spies will find out and we'll get them to school, we even had a space explorer from NASA
- performance is everything, we are the community's entertainment, everybody comes to every competition we have
- we had fantastic support from the businesses and the transport operators, we could not get by without the generous support
- In a little place, everyone with many hats, many people in our community keep one hat for the school. You might be the mechanic Monday to Friday by Wednesday afternoon you're the

swimming coach.

- Not so many languages on our staff but tucked away in different parts of the community there are people from all over and they love to come and share that with us. Bringing their books and their songs and their pictures it's a very authentic language experience.

How Does Interaction With The Community Help You Overcome The Challenges Of Your Location?

'The community is endlessly generous all of the extra-curricular things that we managed to do we managed to do because of the generosity

'there is rich talent here and volunteers'

'is we have creative people here, whole artistic communities which we could not hope to cover with such a small staff'

'it broadens what we can do, we have fantastic support from our sea Academy which we could never do with just staff and parents'

'I get very valuable teacher aide help which frees me up to do the research to extend the learning'

'The island's clubs and crafts societies are wonderfully embracing of our pupils and consider us as a school in their plans.'

'Our school is used as a hub its where we meet and greet, it's a central place for communication and now that we have technology I can see this becoming a stronger stop'

'Our community is welcoming and enables us to build a school which is not static, not in one place, we have the school that comes to you.'

'It makes us braver to be flexible innovative and extend the school, because we know the support will always be there.'

What Could Encourage Greater Interaction and Support Between The Community And The School?

Discussion around this was rich and varied and participants had frequently discussed this in their schools and on their boards. Comments included

'us, we the school, we can make the difference, we can be more creative and more innovative in how we engage, how we encourage and how we welcome'

'this happens best when you plan for it'

'being fun, doing different things'

'Allowing communities to take leadership, it can't be just a one-way street, the community needs to know that we can support with our resources as well.'

'Being honest and genuine being able to call it when the school needs to improve, being able to hear the different points of view and being able to listen.'

What are the Obstacles to engagement?

The obstacles to greater participation by the community and the school in school in the community fall into three groups

Obstacles For The Community:

- While our schools serve remote island communities and this to some extent means they have a captive audience, some of that audience is still remote from the schools. In the most extreme cases pupils might need to walk some distance, then travel by boat, then walk a little further and then come by bus to the school. Such isolated families have real difficulty in participating in the day-to-day life of the school.
- Costs are also an obstacle particularly transport costs as fuel prices in remote island communities are significantly higher than those on the mainland, roads frequently in poor repair, also exact price from the vehicles that use them.
- Simply having enough time was also cited as an issue. In some schools parents commute long distances to work and are not available during the day. Conversely in the same communities there are families where one parent commutes long hours and the other has increased time available for school and community affairs. In small remote communities it is not uncommon for parents to hold down a number of very small part-time jobs in order to eke out a living, making them frequently unavailable for community and school events.
- And as in all communities there will be some parents whose own experiences of school are not happy ones and who are reluctant to engage.

Obstacles for the school:

Discussion around this was lively with one participant describing "we are a bit of a frontier town, we have to have some pretty clear expectations about behaviour that is appropriate for a school, these are not always widely understood".

- Pedagogy is changing, changing out of sight, it's difficult enough for those of us who are professional educators to keep up with how the classrooms is changing and it can be quite bewildering for other members of the community whose last experience of school might have been 40 years ago and in an entirely different educational era. One participant described the biggest obstacle as 'our own imagination and knowing who to involve and how to involve them and who best to ask'.
- 'More involvement, more engagement can be marvellous, can be hopeful, but can also be hugely disappointing. I remember building everybody up to this fantastic event from visiting performers only to feel really crushed when they failed to connect with their island audience'.
- 'The question suggests a homogeneity of community which isn't really so in our case, we have a small number of quite diverse communities who have quite different expectations of behaviour and of the school.'
- 'Honestly it might be me, I'm kind of weary now over asking people, I seem to be always asking

them'.

Structural obstacles

- 'Parents and community people often don't understand how prescribed our work is in the sheer amount of curriculum that we need to get through'
- 'it's tough living on an island, you need to be a lot more resilient, and take care of your own water, your own sewerage, some of your food needs, in most cases your energy and all that takes time so the very fact that we are in the environment where it chews up a lot of resources.'
- 'Compliance with the never-ending stream of rules, which seem to have been developed for a far better resourced community is a real tension and obstacle.'
- One advertisement told me of their absolute shock at the roadworthiness of vehicles on the island and noted that parents could not provide transport to school events because the cars would not meet EOTC guidelines.
- Another commented that the whole of the island environment was risky, they did not have a learner's pool let alone a swimming pool of any kind, so a very high ratio of helpers was required

Other Matters Raised

While the focus of the study was particularly around how the relationship with community could help overcome the tyranny of distance there were some strongly put in recurrent themes where many in the communities were unable to help. Moreover participants expressed the view that some of these situations were deteriorating and that as a result island children were being denied quality of education which they deserve.

Principal amongst the concerns was access to professional development for school staff.

Participants identified a rapidly changing education environment with bold new pedagogies which they were at risk of not being able to fully utilise. In particular the high cost of attendance at professional development falls most heavily on remote islands schools, a two-hour workshop might mean more than a day and overnight travel plus significant air fares, ground travel and accommodation costs. The ability to bring professional development to the islands, particularly for specialised areas, was similarly limited by cost. In all cases principals and boards saw this professional development as an absolute priority and almost all had used other funds for this purpose but all felt like the poor cousin in danger of being left behind and of not delivering the best educational outcomes to the pupils.

The provision of specialist support was also cited as a real concern. Several participants identified that this was a deteriorating situation and that progressive reorganisations within the support services, had resulted in even less access to service for schools and pupils in need.

Available governance skill, was raised by several participants as an area where the communities tried very hard to help, but often did not have the diversity of experience and professional skill to invest in school governance. Similarly school governance training was described as haphazard and sometimes not grounded in the realities of place.

Implications for practice

Implications for boards of trustees:

Planning to maximise the strengths talents and generosity of the community has been shown to be effective in achieving that engagement which can improve outcomes for the school. School boards should consider how they plan for community engagement and how they monitor this stop

Communications between schools and their communities have been found to be pivotal to the level of engagement. This communication exists on a continuum from the very informal to the planned and regular. School boards should consider how they communicate with the community, Map this communication and develop from it a communications plan which they can monitor and report to the community.

Information on the available resources and talents of the community enhances the likelihood that these will be used to the benefit of the school. School boards should consider how they gather information on skills and resources within the communities, how they use this information both in practice and in planning and how they refresh and keep information current.

Access to professional development has been identified as a significant risk to schools and isolated island communities. School boards should consider how they make it known to the Ministry and funders in such a way as to best effect consideration and improvement. The schools should take care to identify the full costs of professional development and to include these in reporting.

Implications for the providers of services to school boards and trustees:

Isolated island communities identified problems in recruiting and training boards with a depth of governance and professional experience. Providers should investigate this further, with boards from isolated island school communities, examine whether this is a problem for other isolated school communities and engage with those communities to develop and improve appropriate services.