

MARK OSBORNE

3. WHAT WORKS

Changing Practice When Spaces Change

CONTEXT

In 2010 and 2011 Christchurch, New Zealand suffered a series of catastrophic earthquakes that left tens of thousands of city, buildings damaged and hundreds of people dead. Many public buildings across the city, including schools, were damaged beyond repair and the programme to rebuild them has resulted in one of the largest school network renewal projects the world has ever seen. The New Zealand government has invested more than NZ\$1.1 billion to rebuild and renew 115 schools (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2014a, p. 1). An explicit goal of the New Zealand Ministry of Education through this process was to make what they call “modern learning environments ... common throughout greater Christchurch” (2014a, p. 2).

The New Zealand Ministry of Education (2012) also set out a number of other objectives for the programme, namely, to “improve the delivery of education, extend the options available for learners, and lift student achievement”, “support the establishment of modern learning environments designed to meet the needs of the whole community”, build “fewer schools offering a wider range of educational options and specialised training that give greater Christchurch a distinctive advantage”, offer “single site provision of early childhood education (ECE) through to tertiary education, alongside a range of other services”, and share facilities “to extend the learning opportunities available to a wider group of learners” (p. 2).

The New Zealand Ministry of Education made it clear that the rebuild was an opportunity to rejuvenate buildings and pedagogy to better serve student learning:

The majority of school buildings were built between 1950 and the 70s. Since then, teaching practice and student learning needs have changed significantly. New technologies and building materials allow for new, vibrant and well-connected learning spaces. All students deserve to be taught in these new modern learning environments, and benefit from new teaching methods. (2014b, p. 1)

The programme for the rebuild is set to progress until 2023, and includes three distinct categories of build that reflect the scale of the work being undertaken; (1) restore – repair of earthquake damage, remediation of weather-tightness and

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building resilience issues; (2) consolidate – rationalisation, mergers, closures and co-location, and (3) rejuvenate – consideration of future educational provision for the most significantly affected schools, in terms of damage to facilities and sites, and movement of people (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2012, pp. 8–9).

One can see from the scope and complexity of these priorities that the rebuild programme is ambitious and multi-faceted. Achieving goals such as the improvement of student achievement, raising community participation in education, co-locating and vertically aligning education providers, and making improvements to access and inclusion will present significant challenges.

As school leaders guide their staff, students and communities through this process, their abilities to lead change will be tested. They will need to draw from research into effective change leadership and apply what they learn to their own work, rebuilding not only the physical environment, but also cultural, emotional and social environments as part of the process of reimagining what school might be. Staff, students, parents and communities will be challenged by the process of moving from pedagogies and practices that have been shaped and guided by industrial-era classrooms to pedagogies and practices that can make the most of open, flexible, and collaborative teaching and learning spaces.

A number of people and organisations are working in Christchurch to support schools through the change. The writer's role as a consultant for a not-for-profit organisation was to do exactly this. The role entails helping schools develop and articulate a vision for learning, and to design and develop not only the buildings, but also the human capabilities, dispositions and support structures required to ensure this vision is achieved. This means drawing on experiences in a wide range of schools as they redevelop their built environments and their approaches to teaching and learning.

OBJECTIVE

While there is a body of change leadership literature that can help us to understand change and offer some general guidance on how to navigate it successfully, what is missing is specific advice on changes related to physical learning environments. The size of the financial investment in New Zealand and the opportunities to raise outcomes for learners means that it is particularly important to get this right, despite some researchers estimating that “only 30% of change programs are successful” (Aiken & Keller, 2009, p. 1).

With many of the 115 Canterbury schools facing significant change as their physical environments are remodelled and rebuilt, it is important to evaluate the change leadership strategies that are most effective when it comes to shifting teacher practice once physical spaces change. The essential question is: “What can leaders do to increase the likelihood that 19th century pedagogy is not imported into 21st century spaces?”