



COMET Model of Community Engagement in Education: Local government as a champion for learning

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Schools, early childhood services, tertiary providers, and education agencies are part of the city “infrastructure” that shapes community well-being. Many New Zealand local authorities recognise that skills are vital to economic development and that the quality of education impacts on social outcomes.

This paper outlines a model of community engagement in education. The paper uses the City of Manukau Education Trust (COMET), an organisation established by Manukau City Council, to illustrate the model.

Why should local government be involved in education?

The purpose of local government is to provide for the economic, social, cultural, and environmental well-being of citizens¹. Good community governance - an attribute of ‘social capital’ – arises from the active engagement of leaders and their networks in developing and maintaining a range of social and infrastructural services resulting in strong communities and economic development.²

Many councils feature education as an agent of well-being in their Long Term Council Community Plans

(LTCCPs)³, because they recognise that the delivery of locally-defined goals (such as “safer communities” or “environmental sustainability” or “a thriving economy”) can only be achieved when people have the skills to participate in the economic mainstream and broader community life.

The Local Government Act provides for Councils to become the pivots for achievement of community goals. But how can we tell whether a council is effective in orchestrating community action? It is challenging to measure the social or cultural circumstances of local communities, and then to shape services that enhance civic life – without suggesting that local government services funded by ratepayers cover central government responsibilities (such as education or social services).

¹ Local Government Act, 2002.

However, the Minister of Local Government, Rodney Hide, proposes legislation to remove these well-beings from the legislation. It is ACT policy (but not yet government policy) to limit local government to “core activities”. What constitutes core activities is not specified at the time of writing this paper.

² The international literature supporting this statement is led by Robert Putnam’s work in 1993: *Making Democracy Work*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

³ Reid, Mike, Scott, Claudia, & McNeill, Jeff. (2006). Strategic Planning Under the Local Government Act 2002: Towards Collaboration or Compliance? *Policy Quarterly*, 2 (no 2), 18-25.

The government's annual *Social Report*⁴ provides some raw social data that describes national well-being. Indicators (for education) include such things as participation rates in early childhood education; the qualifications of school-leavers; participation rates in tertiary education; and educational attainment levels in the adult population.

But hidden underneath this generic social data is a more complex local story. Many local authorities are troubled by truancy rates, young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs), or changing economic conditions resulting in skills shortages. Underneath city averages lie local pockets of poverty and disadvantage which impact on the lives of everyone.

These so-called "wicked issues"⁵ – because central governments have been unable to satisfactorily address them - can be better handled when all the parties that have pieces of the jigsaw are engaged in generating solutions that make a difference to real people in local places. Good community governance is a deliberate **process** of engagement of all those who can impact on the solution, and **structures** that support action.

The Manukau Story

Manukau's pockets of urban poverty are more visible than most. It has the highest concentration of low decile schools in the country; the highest birth rates in any public health board district; large numbers of young people not participating in education and training; endemic truancy issues; significant demand for public housing; and a significant migrant population.

⁴ The Social Report is published annually by the Ministry of Social Development. www.socialreport.msd.govt.nz.

⁵ Clarke, Michael, & Stewart, John, 1997: *Handling the Wicked Issues – A Challenge for Government*. (Discussion Paper: University of Birmingham.)

In 1996 the Education Review Office published a report about schooling in Mangere and Otara. It highlighted education and social systems failure in these two suburbs. The Manukau City Council was distressed by the findings, not only because of the social consequences for communities, but because of the drag effect on economic growth. A lengthy and consultative analysis under the leadership of the mayor and the Chief Executive of the Manukau Institute of Technology resulted in the establishment of the City of Manukau Education Trust (COMET) in October 1999 as a stand-alone entity.

While the Ministry of Education established a number of initiatives focused on student achievement, the Trust has independently developed a series of high-profile programmes that focus on community engagement and collaboration. **The projects connect wider central government strategic priorities and community aspirations.**

THEME: Business and Schools Working Together

PROJECT 1: COMET Principal For A Day

This event matches high-profile business and community leaders (called PFADs) to a school principal for a one-day experience of leadership inside a Manukau school.

The purpose of the day is to build critical relationships that enable sound understanding of the issues affecting education in our community.

Over 400 influential people have participated in the programme over the seven-year life of this event.

The day finishes with a Civic Function hosted by the Mayor, illustrating local government leadership in facilitating school-business connections.

PROJECT 2: COMET Authentic Learning Project

The activity enables businesses to learn about the curriculum requirement for connected and relevant learning. Together with their local school they develop projects that help students learn in meaningful ways.

The project has a facilitator who works alongside the school and the business to shape learning for both partners.

A structure to connect local government to education

There are a number of possible structures that could be put in place to connect different stakeholders in a community. This paper describes the structure created by Manukau City Council.

COMET is a charitable trust, now registered with the Charities Commission. COMET is able to access funding and community support that the council cannot.

The Mayor is the Settlor for the Trust, and appoints the Trustees. Elected Councillors are not eligible for appointment. The Trust Deed is broad in scope, but Manukau is the area of benefit. Trustees and the Chief Executive and staff can exercise independent leadership.

COMET is a council-controlled organisation. CCOs are required by the Local Government Act 2002 to issue an annual Statement of Intent that is approved by the Council, and present Annual Accounts and an Annual Report - a process that ensures that the Trust's operations are aligned to Council strategic priorities, and that its actions are transparent. COMET has a contract for service with the Council. The services are "Analysis, Advocacy and Leadership in education; Facilitation and Co-ordination of education projects."

COMET receives base funding from the Council for the delivery of the above services. There is an expectation that the base funding is "leveraged" to obtain funding from other sources for projects and other services. In the 2008-09 financial year, the Trust will leverage \$4 from other sources for every dollar of council contribution.

COMET also functions as a visible expression of **partnership between the major tertiary education provider in the city (MIT) and the council**. The MIT provides the Trust with office accommodation and computing and support services. This relationship acknowledges the leadership role that tertiary institutions can play in the economic development of the communities that they serve – as major employers; as transformation agents through their research and development activities; as pipelines for

THEME: Working Together for Early Childhood Education (ECE)

PROJECT: Increasing Participation

Step 1: Data analysis. ECE is a local "wicked issue" – complex and challenging. The Trust prepared a summary in early 2007 of the context of early childhood education in Manukau City.

Step 2: Data-sharing. The Trust published the data in a public document distributed to community leaders and local stakeholders. August 2007.

Step 3: Action framework. Increasing participation became a collaborative "city priority" project under the Tomorrow's Manukau umbrella. October 2007.

Step 4: Community problem-solving. April 2008 COMET hosted a summit on Early Childhood Education in collaboration with the Ministry of Education. Leadership was grown through the attendance of the mayor, a councillor, and other community leaders. Local and systemic barriers to full participation of families in early childhood education services were identified. A Taskforce was established.

Step 5: Action 1 - Changes to resource and building consent processes. **Action 2** – Ministry leadership in preparing a (successful) funding bid for capital investment in targeted areas. Political advocacy came from community actors. **Action 3** – Labour market development project scoped.

Concurrent Steps: Community Information-Sharing on project progress through newsletter and forums.

Outcomes to date: Over a period of 18 months early childhood education has come out of the Ministry closet ... and is now near the top of the community social agenda in Manukau. This project will "spin out" into a number of other related community-driven activities.

THEME: Working Together with Families

PROJECT: Manukau Family Literacy Programme (MFLP)

2001: Data analysis and problem-solving. *Literacy is an intergenerational issue related to family poverty and the educational attainment of adults in the home. Family disengagement from learning was identified by schools as an issue. Two literacy summits in 2001 and 2002 explored ideas for holistic approaches to connecting families back into learning.*

2002 - 2004: Project Development. *A Stakeholder group participated in discussions on the development of a new model incorporating adult education, positive parenting and relationships for learning. The four-component model is based on research evidence of good educational practice and cultural well-being.*

2003-2006: Pilot. *COMET became the “lead agency” for model implementation at two pilot sites. The partnership included tertiary, school and early childhood centres.*

2003-2006: Formative evaluation and summative analysis. *The pilot process was accompanied by research that underpinned development. It showed highly successful outcomes. At the end of this period COMET moved from lead agency status to contracted provider of co-ordination services to AUT University.*

2007: Scaling Up. *COMET commissioned an Outcomes Valuation from PricewaterhouseCoopers that showed exceptional return-on-investment. The programme received government support to deliver to 80 families each year.*

2009-2010: *COMET is now engaged in redesigning the model to better fit new funding structures – but wider scaling and government policy commitment is still not achieved.*

Outcomes to date: *Graduating adults move into higher-level programmes and employment. Some are now in the education labour market. Valuation showed \$200 per week improvement on family income, reduction in benefit dependency, reduced family violence, increased aspirations for children, improved student achievement. Positive impacts on over 2,000 family members since programme began.*

skills in the labour market; as a resource for cultural and social development; and as a driver for democratic engagement. At least one trustee has a significant leadership role within the MIT.

Processes – a bit of theory.

The **structures** of education and local government are very different. They rarely come together.

Process is about the interactions among structures. Community governance of education refers to the process of co-ordination of all those who have a part to play in order to steer towards a community vision [for better education outcomes].

The COMET model shapes the process of engagement around six governance levers⁶:

- **the vision** of the *Tomorrow's Manukau* strategy for “an Educated and Knowledgeable People”;
- **distributed leadership** that includes the mayor, principals, tertiary leaders, and community elders and leaders, as well as initiative from COMET;
- **shared information** and data to underpin decision-making;
- accessing the widest possible range of **resources** available in communities;
- **collaborative activities and inclusiveness** in meeting shared goals;
- **public debate** and openness to community input.

COMET uses these levers to underpin core services. Analysis and advocacy doesn't sound very sexy, and not many funders want to support the wishy-washy nature of “intermediary services”. So while these services underpin all activity, it is the collaborative projects and events that make the work of COMET visible and meaningful in the community.

⁶ This model is further explored in an article published in *Policy Quarterly*, March 2008.
<http://ips.ac.nz/publications/publications/show/223>



A community education strategy

The first Manukau Education Strategy was to establish a stand-alone charitable trust. Now what?

Having achieved the structure, the next step is to create a community mandate about what the structure will do to support the community vision for “Educated and Knowledgeable People”. COMET was commissioned to prepare a report (*Working Together: Mahi Tahi Tatou*⁷) for the Council which identifies what the central theme of a community education strategy should be, and supporting themes. The report’s recommendations were accompanied by examples of “Action Opportunities”.

Adopting a city strategy is a “confirmation step” in an endlessly iterative process – collaborative action doesn’t have to wait for formal permission, although it helps! A formal strategy releases resources and provides powerful impetus to action (but is not

necessary for action). Because of changes to Auckland governance, it is unlikely that a city strategy – in the manner envisaged – will be formally adopted in the shorter term. This has not prevented COMET addressing “Action Opportunities” and adopting our own recommendations as the basis for future planning (as expressed in the Statement of Intent).

A community strategy should be inclusive of other initiatives and open to change over time. For example, COMET does not have the internal capacity to shape a Maori education strategy for Manukau. This work has become owned by the runanga for the Manukau Institute of Technology, and a “Maori Outcomes” working group of the *Tomorrow’s Manukau* Strategic Steering Group, which is chaired by the Council Chief Executive. It supports *Ka Hikitia*, the national strategy of the Ministry of Education, but has a particular local dimension and ownership over the action framework.

⁷ The report is available on the COMET website.

Leverage

COMET receives “base funding” for identified services from the Manukau City Council. Additional funding is received for specified projects from other sources, including government agencies. Many of the action examples given here have been funded by government agencies, and more generally through innovative funding pools.

For this reason, it is important to align community strategic priorities to government strategic planning, and to be well-connected into decision-makers.

Philanthropic partners have also made a significant contribution to COMET work. We thank them for their generosity and support.

The projects are selected for their ability to offer “Double Duty Value”. They are built on the concept of partnership and collaboration. This often results in complex funding streams that must be carefully managed.

Conclusion

There remain some challenges in the COMET model. Initially, the Trust was viewed as another “service organisation” able to tender in a competitive market. The notion of “community governance” is not yet incorporated into the way that government agencies operate. Further development of the model in Manukau will be shaped by any changes in the Local Government Act and decisions accompanying the creation of the new Auckland Council.

THEME: Working Together for Positive Youth Transitions from School

Community Challenge 2000: Over 20% of Manukau youth - nearly 1,000 - leave school each year and do not reach a working or training or education “destination”.

PROJECT 1: Youth Mentoring

Youth mentoring as an approach to youth support has demonstrated value. It is not supported in New Zealand by public policy, and networks for programme support were initially weak. COMET sponsored a group youth mentoring approach to better fit the cultural context of Manukau, and by using a local Pasifika provider built their capacity to deliver services.

With the support of COMET, another Manukau-based group formed a national Youth Mentoring Trust and in 2006 hosted a national conference to stimulate network development. (www.youthmentoring.org.nz)

PROJECT 2: Youth Transitions Services

In partnership with the Ministry of Social Development, Careers Services, the Tertiary Education Commission and seven schools in Mangere and Otara, COMET began a youth transitions service pilot in 2004 that took a preventative, case-management approach to young people defined as being “at risk” of not reaching a positive post-school destination.

This project preceded the development of national policy for youth transitions services. The model of community-owned, school-based youth transitions brokers was highly successful in ensuring positive destinations were reached. For at least six months from the time the young school-leaver was enrolled in the service, a broker monitored that young person to ensure that the destination was stable, operating a hand-over to tertiary institution, work-related or community supports.

Following a government decision to scale up youth transitions services nationally, COMET advocated for scaled-up services to meet the numbers of young people in Manukau. However, a policy of competitive service tendering undermines the fundamental operating principle of collaboration. Therefore, Trustees decided to “mainstream” this service to a commercial provider.

Outcomes: Over 1,000 youth received the service over a period of four years. The principle of youth support through transition is now part of government policy.