

Why Schools Need Advisers

In today's school system, who is resourceful, reliable, understanding, practical, experienced, prompt, professional and collegial?

Answer: advisers. That's what a quick survey of 20 principals has revealed.

The praise flowed openly for these roving helpers who are available when teachers need expert help. It might be a reading recovery situation, maths difficulty, Māori language questions, management hurdle or an information technology mystery that needs unraveling. Whatever the concern, advisers are meeting the demand from principals and teachers all over New Zealand.

"They keep you sane," said one teaching principal. "They are our mentors," said another. "We would be shattered without them," said another.

Advisers are respected for their ability to stimulate ideas and empower teachers as well as helping them take ownership of programmes. They are seen as thoughtful colleagues.

They are respected for their ability to find needed resources, and hailed as colleagues at the chalk face who know what it's like to be in a jam and have nowhere to turn for help.

Lee Wadds, a teaching principal at Halfmoon Bay School in Oban, Stewart Island, was aghast that advisers might not be available to her. Here's her view:

"They are wonderful. They come so quickly and are so helpful. You can absolutely count on them. All their advice is realistic because they are teachers too. Your lifeline is your advisers here."

"My life is this job. That means I need to rely on the people who are advising me. I have no faith in advisory groups that have to be a business as such. I have faith in people who have done it and have proven their worth."

"In the past year, I paid to go on a course that was not organised by the college of education at Invercargill. I did not come out of it feeling I had gained much. It was all theory. I have never been to anything organised by the college that hasn't been practical, useful and thought-provoking."

“A rural adviser becomes your mentor. They are the person you can turn to when you have had a really bad day, when you can’t turn to anyone else. They keep you sane. For example, when you have a crisis in school where a parent complains about something and you know you haven’t handled the problem well, you can discuss the problem with the adviser.”

“Rural schools don’t have anyone else whose shoulder they can cry on. You’ve got to be able to get on that phone and when you do they are there for you right away.”

Tim White, principal at Russell Street School in Palmerston North says the advisory service has been responsive to his school’s needs. Here’s how:

“A practical example of this is two staff who identified as one of their goals the development of the skills needed to effectively lead class/assembly singing. This included the establishment of a school choir.”

“The adviser worked with them on the initial setting up of the choir and the selection of songs. She then returned to develop successful strategies with the newly formed choir and later to observe them in action. This was followed up with feedback and advice which set the goals for the next stage.”

“Feedback from staff has been positive and the role of the advisory service invaluable. The ability of advisers to be responsive to individual school and staff needs and to provide a range of follow up options has greatly enhanced the effectiveness of our school’s professional development”.

Graham Camfield, principal at Redcliffs School in Christchurch, was grateful for the knowledge of resources that advisers can provide through wide contact with other schools. His example follows:

“Our school became aware of the need for a standardised approach to identifying children who were not making progress after the 6 year net and before they entered the progressive achievement test level. Running records were not giving us all the information we needed.”

“In our discussions with an adviser in English we focused our needs and, with the adviser’s wide range of sources and resources, we were able to draw up a list of easily recorded indicators to identify those students in need.”

“The adviser was able to provide resources through contact with other schools who were developing similar programmes. This sharing of information, suggested approaches and new ideas from a central point by credible colleagues is the strength of the advisory service.”

“The work is going to benefit our reading programme in future.”

Ross Willocks, principal at Papanui Primary, sought help from advisers on curriculum delivery support:

“We wanted someone with broad experience who would provide on-going support. The adviser we got was excellent.”

“They are vital to teachers who are working in an environment of curriculum overload. Teachers desperately need such resource support.”

Peter Ross, principal at Wakefield School, used advisers from the College of Education in Christchurch during two Ministry-funded contracts:

“We’ve had some wonderful support from the advisory service over recent years, especially when we have bought into MoE-funded contracts such as the Assessment for Better Learning and Social Studies in the NZ Curriculum.”

“These contracts were successful in that the advisers really delivered, yet let us remain in control. They empowered us.”

“In the first case, the adviser was called in to help develop an in-school professional development programme focusing on assessment in English. His gentle manner was a real support and we came away with a solid programme with a greater understanding of assessment. This has improved both teaching and learning.”

“With the other case, the adviser was thoroughly professional, extremely well organised, very exacting, even demanding at times. But in the end the school has a great social studies program that all teachers have ownership of.”

“There are also many less obvious moments when issues can be clarified and advice sought at the end of the phone.”

Warren Dobbs, principal at Burnham School, wanted help in implementing a performance management system and professional standards:

“The adviser provided practical workshop assistance and produced a draft performance agreement and other documents in computerised form. We then able to adapt and modify these as required.”

“Without the adviser’s contribution, this task was almost impossible. They can see the ‘big picture’ and help reduce it to a manageable workload. We benefited immensely from our contact with the school management adviser.”

“There is no one else employed or qualified to advise schools in management and curriculum. The advisers must remain. We can do without the Ministry and the Education Review Office, but not our superb team of advisers.”

Rod Widdon, principal at Brightwater School in Nelson, looked to the advisory service when consultation on the awarding of an R unit got bogged down:

“A rural adviser was chosen as he would have contact with many schools faced with M or R unit problems. He ran through the range of ways schools had used their units.

“His assistance took the emotive heat out of the discussion and left the staff with a way to proceed. As an ‘outsider’, the adviser was able to progress the situation without taking a personal position.

“It is paramount that schools have access to the right type of advice whether it be for personnel or curriculum issues.”

Keith Williamson, principal at Clifton Terrace School in Nelson, seeks support from advisers when “stuck” for ideas:

“Not all advisers are useful, but we have found the basic advisory service in Nelson is excellent.”

“The ‘old’ education department inspectorate had good points. They would not only point out areas of need, but would offer suggestions as to how to improve the situation and/or another teacher to contact who was doing it effectively. The Education Review Office doesn’t do this. Advisers do.”

“We could not do without them. Standards of teaching would drop.”

Bob Morrison, principal at Arthur Miller School in Napier, needed help with the maths curriculum and the cumulative record card:

“First, our adviser worked with teachers in Years 4–6 to establish practical resource kits covering various topics in the maths curriculum. The next assignment was to help us implement the record card. And, this year, she has been working with the whole school on the Assessment for Better Learning contract.”

“We have found her perceptive, innovative, forward thinking and hard working. Her ideas are practical and useful. She understands our school, knows the teachers and our systems.”

Waiata Sullivan, principal at Te Haroto Bilingual School in the Hawkes Bay area, says advisers keep him in touch with professional and educational standards:

“I am a sole-charge principal of a rural school. The pressures of a huge, inhumane workload require continued support from the rural advisory service. They facilitate regular contact and provide constructive professional support and guidance.”

“The rural advisers are always ready to go the extra mile. They enable the remote school to keep up with the professional and educational standards that are required from the education ministry.”

“It is vital that the rural advisers’ support remain intact to meet the needs of rural principals, staff, boards of trustees and the community.”

Heather Titchener, principal of Poukawa School in Hastings, says advisers help her “reinvent the wheel”:

“Our adviser has been supportive, helpful and knowledgeable about new developments in education. I usually talk to him once a term about both administration and classroom-related issues.”

“Advisers are the only people who actually get into classrooms to see what is going on. They are the only people who can observe teachers who

are doing things supremely well and pass on their observations to others who might find them useful.”

“The Education Review Office gets into the classrooms, but information like that doesn’t come from them. ” Mentor, colleague, supporter, facilitator. Advisers are all of these things to principals and teachers throughout New Zealand. When nothing seems to be working, they are also a shoulder to cry on.”

Advisers are an essential part of the education system, say those who have benefited from the advisory service. As one of the above principals noted, they are “bloody marvellous”.