

**First Progress Report from Forbury Primary School,  
Dunedin, NZ  
to the Ministry of Education**  
Auckland, 4 March 2002

*Barbara Prashnig, Emeritus Professor and Director of Creative Learning Centre in Auckland reports on a break-through pilot project for a decile two primary school, funded by the Ministry of Education. It is the first time in New Zealand's educational history that Learning Styles and the Diversity concept have been accepted as a promising intervention programme for achieving school success.*

Forbury Primary School in South Dunedin had experienced significant difficulties in recent years and had been governed by a Commissioner, Mike Allison, for a period of 18 months, ending in December 2001. In his report he stated: "The school has now reached a .... plateau, well below acceptable levels, hindered by the ongoing and ingrained social dysfunction of many of its pupils, their parents and many in the community." ERO reports over the past five years pointed out serious problems at Forbury, strongly criticised the performance of the principal and questioned the viability of the school. By March 2001 the school roll had fallen by 52.3% to 71 compared to 149 pupils in 1997 and the learning needs of many of the remaining students were not being met by traditional teaching approaches. For this reason, closure of the school or merging it with neighbouring Caversham School were options being considered by the Ministry.

This was the dire situation presented to me in May of last year when I was approached by the Commissioner who conveyed to me that a 'radical and innovative' approach was needed to rescue this troubled school.

After a two-day visit to Forbury in August 2001 I put together a detailed proposal consisting of six developmental stages for a period of three years:

**Stage I:** (year 1 - 2)

**Management Training/Team Building** (for all staff, support staff & BOT)  
**Management Coaching** (for principal)  
**Diploma in Holistic Education** (7 Modules for staff and parents)  
**Coaching/Mentoring Sessions** (for teaching staff between Diploma Modules)

**Stage II:** (year 1 - 3)

**New Learning Style Advisory Service** (initially in conjunction with Professional Development in Stage I, later as independent ongoing service)  
**New Diagnostic Services for Students** (Irlen Method for Reading & Perceptual problems, SPELD and GLD assessments for learning problems where Learning Style Assessments - LSA are not sufficient)

**Stage III:** (year 1 - 3)

**Audio-Visual and ICT Equipment** (replacing outdated hardware, integrated in learning style classrooms, building up software and music libraries)  
**New Parenting Programmes** (year 1: for parents of 6 - 12 year old children, year 2: for parents of 0 - 5 year old children; year 3: for parents of teenagers)

**Stage IV:** (year 1: establishment, year 2 - 3: maintenance)

**Information Communication Technology** (LSA, Forbury website)

**Establishing Multi-Purpose Classroom** (initially for Parent Programme, later utilised as Homework Centre & for Enrichment and 'Gifted' Programmes)

**Stage V:** (year 1.5 - 3)

**Study Support Centre** (established after first six months of Project, initially for primary school students, later also for intermediate and high school students from the South Dunedin area;

**Enrichment Programmes** (for all students: music, art, sports, languages)

**Education for the Gifted and Talented** (with special emphasis on GLD students - gifted learning disabled based on their learning styles & interests)

**Kiwi Can Programme** (for year 5, 6, 7 & 8 students in second half of year 1 of the project to build confidence and positive attitudes in older students)

**Stage VI:** (year 2 - 3)

**Pre-School Centre** (to be established after the first year of the Project utilising one empty classroom; training parents as 'First Teachers' in conjunction with the Parenting Programme for 0 - 5 year-olds in year 2)

The Diversity Concept based on Learning Styles and the 'holistic, inclusive' approach to education which has been developed by myself and successfully implemented in numerous education institutions in NZ and internationally, provides the framework for the ultimate goal of this project: to create a blueprint for a zero-failure school. My intention behind my proposal was that such a model could then be used in future for other failing schools in New Zealand.

I predicted that in applying progressive but proven educational methods, based on scientific and academic research, it will be possible to recognise and utilise students' true learning potential, develop high teaching standards and positively influence and change a parent community which has been largely dysfunctional up to now.

Given the current professional development of staff, the age group of the students and their past/current learning and behavioural problems, I suggested that there is the absolute necessity to:

- >> introduce experiential, brain-friendly, creative learning techniques based on diversity in the classroom and eliminate traditional 'reading recovery' programmes for individuals;
- >> subject the teaching, management and support staff to radically different professional development programmes, including mentoring and coaching;
- >> include parents in the change process and offer new parenting programmes;
- >> create new Advisory Services with a focus on Learning Styles and Creative Learning;
- >> establish a Study Support Centre as well as a Pre-School Centre, offer Enrichment Programmes and additional education for the Gifted and Talented.

In mid November 2001 the decision of the Ministry was made public, I was appointed project manager, received details about the budget and the monitoring process so that preparations for the January 2002 starting date could begin.

Naturally the whole sad saga around Forbury had attracted a lot of media attention in the past and after Forbury had now got a new lease on life there were even more comments in the media, most of them positive and encouraging, some cautious, some cynical and some hostile (which I interpret as professional jealousy). Overall, the South Dunedin community was excited about the development at their school and support is coming from the most unexpected areas (e.g. Literacy Aotearoa is currently

running a programme for parents; cushions and teaching aids have been donated, volunteers are offering their help).

### **Commencement of the Project:**

In late January 2002 I spent 10 days at Forbury in Dunedin, starting the management and professional development programme:

1. conducting a management seminar for staff & board of trustee members with team building, communication and self knowledge components; the last part of this seminar will be delivered end of March;
2. facilitating a two-day Learning Styles workshop for teachers, support staff, board members and parents;
3. coaching sessions with teachers (re: lesson planning, use of classroom space, work flow, own teaching style, observation of teaching practices and learning progress of students, introduction to journal writing);
4. helping to re-arrange classrooms to make them more user-friendly by utilising existing furniture and teaching aids more efficiently;
5. advising on purchasing classroom outfits (curtains, boxes, bean bags) and teaching resources (learning tools, cassette recorders, music CD's);
6. meeting parents and students on an informal basis before and after the assembly;
7. coaching sessions with the principal (re: support in decision making, staff problems, staff development, board interaction, student behaviour);
8. planning for the year: introducing the Parent Programme and Irlen Method; meeting with Dunedin College of Education staff to discuss time line for student moderation; setting dates for continued professional development and LSA assessments;
9. coaching teachers on LSA interpretations (individual & group profiles) and how to explain LSA to students and teachers;
10. ongoing planning and communication regarding LS advisory services, time frame for the Kiwi Can programme later in the year and students' LSA & GLD assessments.

### **Interim Conclusion:**

At the end of my stay there was reason to celebrate a successful start of the new school year in a once depressed school community where spirits are now high, smiles are on students' and teachers' faces, motivation is great and little wonders are beginning to happen. And what's most pleasing for the moment is that the school roll is up to 96 because parents are bringing back their children, confident that this is a good place to be because teachers allow learning to happen in different ways. Although the full Learning Styles programme cannot be applied as yet due to the student testing during March, changes in teacher attitudes are already bringing about changes in student behaviour.

I commend the principal on her vision for Forbury and her leadership strength, as well as the staff on their commitment and enthusiasm for this project. But most of all I am impressed by the willingness of all concerned to be open to scrutiny as part of this development, by their readiness to change their thinking about education, to put a considerable amount of time and work into personal/professional development and by their acceptance of being advised, observed and judged on every step of the way.

# Recommendations after Successful Near Conclusion of the 'Forbury Project'

Auckland, 13 December 2004

Since 2002 Forbury Primary School in South Dunedin has enjoyed significant improvements (see attached Principal's report dated December 2004) and has become a 'Magnet' school as planned. Based on these specific developments as well as international experiences, the following projects and initiatives are recommended:

## **Completion/Continuation of 'Project Forbury'**

Due to the fact that quite a large proportion of the funds in year 2 and 3 were used for teacher salaries and additional classrooms due to the increased student numbers, Stages IV and VI could not be completed as planned and Stage V needs to be continued.

**Stage IV:** (year 1: establishment, year 2 - 3: maintenance)

**Information Communication Technology** (LSA, Forbury website)

**Establishing Multi-Purpose Classroom** (initially for Parent Programme, later utilised as Homework Centre & for Enrichment and 'Gifted' Programmes)

**Stage V:** (year 1.5 - 3)

**Study Support Centre** (established after first six months of Project, initially for primary school students, later also for intermediate and high school students from the South Dunedin area;

**Enrichment Programmes** (for all students: music, art, sports, languages)

**Education for the Gifted and Talented** (with special emphasis on GLD students - gifted learning disabled based on their learning styles and interests)

**Kiwi Can Programme** (to continue for year 5, 6, 7 & 8 students to build confidence and positive attitudes in older students)

**Stage VI:** (year 2 - 3)

**Pre-School Centre** (to be established after the first year of the Project utilising one empty classroom; training parents as 'First Teachers' in conjunction with the Parenting Programme for 0 - 5 year-olds in year 2.

## **Replacement of fluorescent lights in classrooms:**

Although the much healthier 'Bio' lights have been sourced from Germany, it was impossible to install them into the existing light fittings because funds had to be used for non-planned expenses due to the increase in student numbers. These were not anticipated and therefore not included in the original budget which lead to shortfalls in purchasing the recommended light tubes. The full spectrum bio lights will contribute to further reducing agitated behaviour in children.

**According to Janice Tofia, Principal at Forbury School, the following is still needed:**

1. It is very evident that a missing component of this recovery programme has been the inclusion of a social worker in the school. We have all worked hard to provide what we can to improve the lot for our students. As many of the problems stems from environments out of school it is a social worker who has the knowledge, skill and the mandate to help solve these.

We are fortunate to have had an application (1 position shared with 4 other schools) to the Social Worker in Schools (SWiS) programme approved. This position begins Term 1 2005.

2. We need a higher level of assistance from special education personnel to help manage the difficult behaviours of some students. There are so many children who need IEPs and for whom there are interagency meetings involving Child, Youth and Family Service – this is time consuming but important.
3. We would value the Ministry of Education giving a lower staff/student ratio for low decile schools. This is most important in a school such as ours where we have more than our share our students with challenging behaviours. I find it difficult to make people aware just have hard this is for staff and other students on a daily basis. An easy solution would be to move these students on.

It is strongly recommended, the MOE acts on these requests to bring the successful initiation of this project to an even better conclusion and guarantee the sustainability of the achieved gains into the future.

Forbury staff December 2004

