

## Greytown Primary School



**In 2006 when an ERO reviewer asked Greytown Primary Principal Kevin Mackay about whether absences were a problem at his school he replied no – he thought there were only about three children to worry about. Now that his school has been monitoring attendance electronically he knows there are significantly more than three. And that wasn't the only surprise for his school.**

Greytown Primary is located around an hour and a half north of Wellington in the South Wairarapa District.

A tragic child death during school hours in the district in 2003 had focused local attention on school attendance procedures but it wasn't until ERO did a manual count of attendance in 2006 that the Greytown Principal realised that his gut feel for absence issues at his school was well off the mark.

Faced with regular laborious manual counts of the paper based registers to monitor improvements, Kevin jumped at the chance to trial the Electronic Attendance Register process available through a new Student Management System (SMS) the school introduced in 2007.

Greytown School staff had been using an SMS for their assessment and report writing for several years and so were familiar with the advantages an SMS could provide. The addition of electronic attendance monitoring was therefore not such a technological challenge although Kevin does admit to a few initial hiccups.

“For the first term we kept a paper register as well as the online version to ensure we were getting an accurate record. Our SMS had a quirk that saw it shut down as soon as a teacher closed up a laptop, so initially the attendance wasn't loading up into the system. But once we figured out things like that we switched to a fully automated approach,” says Kevin.

Now as the teacher calls the roll, he or she enters data directly into their laptop. After pushing save and send, the office secretary can open up each class file and enter in reasons for absences that she has collected off the dedicated absences answerphone. Any 'unexplained' absences can be followed up quickly by the office.

Absences are recorded at 9 am and 1.30 pm and Kevin says the office makes a particular effort to check teachers are recording the afternoon attendances.

“Teachers can be somewhat forgetful about doing afternoon absences. Now if the information isn't in the system by 1.40 pm a runner appears at their door.”

While the information is now being entered electronically, the attendance process remains pretty similar and Kevin says that, and the fact that he has made it compulsory for all but relieving staff, has helped teachers quickly adopt the new system.

“Entering the data is quick and easy and isn’t so different from marking it on a paper roll. And one unexpected benefit is that by having to open the SMS twice a day staff are regularly uploading any other changes that have been made since they last logged on. Before if teachers didn’t use their laptop for a while it was really slow to feed through changes to the server.”

An electronic attendance system gives you instant access to attendance statistics and in the package Greytown use the home screen has a count of records. At the time of the case study, (after nearly a year of use), the system showed 4834 records of half day absence or lateness in the school – equating to about 16 per student.

“I showed a similar number to the board recently and they were amazed at the number of absences,” says Kevin.

Obviously not every individual has that many absences but the system enables Kevin to easily work out the problem children.

“Each month I generate a report that tells me students with more than 20 days absent for the year to date,” says Kevin. “We have a standard letter we send home and we note on the system the action we’ve taken. I also check with the teachers about whether there are any concerns about achievement at that stage.”

At 30 days the District Truancy Service gets involved. “We can quickly pull off reports to help us find the children we need to monitor closely,” says Kevin. “I’ve also talked to the vendor about getting an automatic flag added when a child reaches 20 days. That would be an even faster way of spotting problems.”

Success with attendance monitoring has encouraged the school to use the SMS to record behaviour as well. Teachers take a notebook when on playground duty then update the system about incidents when back in their classes.

“My Deputy Principal has just done an analysis of the data we’ve been recording and we can see that 13 children were creating 48% of entries. 12 of those were boys. Knowing this means we can target those children in a special programme of behaviour management that will kick in next year.”

At this stage Kevin hasn’t done that level of analysis with his attendance reporting but having the data in place means this will become much easier.

For example, the SMS provides a button that quickly indicates the average percentage of children who are attending school. Kevin now knows that the highest rate of unjustified absence is occurring at Year 8. He also knows that the attendance rate for Maori boys is better than the average for the school.



The attendance rate for any cohort is available at the push of a button so the next question for Kevin will be how does the attendance rate relate to achievement?

“Next year we’ll be able to compare against last year’s statistics and look at whether there are particular trends. There are lots of possibilities here but even now if ERO asked me again, I could tell them exactly what type of attendance I had in my school.”

# Nelson Park School



**“Let’s see. There were 53 students late or absent today. Monday it was 82, Tuesday 40, Wednesday 33 and 61 on Thursday. Yes it does get quite interesting looking at this stuff doesn’t it.”**

Nevan Bridge, Principal of Nelson Park primary school in Napier, had been explaining the process of implementing eAR in his school when we got distracted by looking at what the data might show.

“I heard the other day that nationally one of the highest absenteeism years is Year 1,” says Nevan. “I’d be fascinated to see if that was the case in our school once we’ve got enough data in here.”

Nevan’s school is one of a growing number moving to Electronic Attendance Recording or eAR. Approved schools enter attendance information into their Student Management System (SMS), replacing the old paper based E19/1 rolls.

With instant statistics, and hours saved for teachers in adding up entries in the paper returns, the switch to electronic might seem obvious but as Nevan explains it can take some effort, rethinking of processes and leadership.

“Last year we did a lot of upgrading of our network and we’re increasingly becoming a digital school. Many of the teachers are very technically literate but others need a bit of an oomph and when I talked to my management team about why I thought we should do eAR I said that if nothing else it would get teachers to open the SMS.”

Nevan got agreement from the management team to progress the plan then briefed the wider staff about the ability to generate reports, identify trends and identify at risk students.

Involving the office staff in those briefings was an important step, and while there was a bit of a “do we have to” attitude, teachers were encouraged to give it a go.

Before implementing the new system the school did a thorough review of their existing attendance processes.

“We had to work out all the scenarios and how electronic recording would fit those,” said Nevan. “For example, some of our programmes had us doing physical exercise first. But we wanted all the roll information entered at the same time, so we had to switch to taking a roll before the exercise.”

Once they'd worked out the process, staff received training in how to make the entries then had a two week period to get used to the new system. During that time they continued with the paper based rolls as well.

"At first it was questions, questions, questions and it didn't help that we had some technical issues. Resistance to using the system was pretty high in those first few weeks," says Nevan.

But he persevered and with technical issues reducing and support that ranged from ongoing updates at staff meetings, to Nevan sitting in on classrooms to help the teachers with entries the change was adopted across the school.

"At the end of two weeks we said, right that's it, you're going solo now, and we dropped the paper rolls."

The school has only been using eAR for one term and the focus has been on becoming familiar with using electronic attendance.

"But I can see that next year we'll be able to do so much more. When we can pull out some good trend data we'll be able to build up a picture of our attendance to discuss as a staff. Plus we'll report to the board and I can see us being able to show summary information to parents."

For now though Nevan is fascinated with the ad hoc information he can pull out.

"Hey I tell you what, I bet there wasn't much of a problem the day we had the MissonOn fun day. Yip let's have a look here – yes 16 November, only 29 absent and of those 6 were just late. I bet it'd be a different picture if we looked at the cross country day though," he chuckles ruefully.

# Tawa Intermediate

A combination of electronic attendance and behavioural incident reporting has led to the most settled end of year in memory at Tawa Intermediate in Wellington.

At the beginning of 2007, Tawa Intermediate switched from paper based recording of attendance and behavioural incidents to using their new Student Management System (SMS).

With a fully networked school and laptops for each teacher the switch was compulsory and immediately expected of all staff.

“As a staff we talked about the whole school taking attendance electronically,” explains Principal Carolyn Stuart, “and all the teachers agreed to give it a go.

“Well it did take a bit of selling,” adds Deputy Principal Louise Bray-Burns. “A lot of them were a bit scared of the system to be honest but Carolyn sold it to them by reminding them they wouldn’t have to keep manually adding up daily and weekly attendance totals and showing that it would save them some time each week.”

At the same time it was also decided to go to electronically recording behavioural incidents which coincided with a significant change in the behavioural management culture being introduced at the school.

“Like many schools, we had a very reactive and punitive behavioural management approach,” says Carolyn. “I wanted staff to see how recording and using data about attendance and behaviour could help staff deal with behavioural problems in a different way.”

The process now involves each teacher recording attendance directly into the SMS. If the teacher is aware of the absence reason they enter that directly. If not, the attendance officer logs into the system after 9.15 am and can add explanations based on messages received on the dedicated answer phone and email address that were also introduced as part of the process.

Each teacher also marks the absences on a printed emergency evacuation folder daily.

“It’s very quick to just mark the absences and we felt strongly that it was a safety issue to have a folder that could be quickly grabbed during emergencies,” says Carolyn. Relievers also use the emergency folder.

Absences are recorded in the morning and afternoon and all teachers, including spec teachers, have access to the database to enter information directly.

“When introducing this we introduced what we thought was the right new process around it, but we did have to keep adapting it. For example, we decided we would also record late arrivals so we had a number of goes at writing our procedures about exactly what time we would record the attendance,” says Carolyn.

“Carolyn also did a good job explaining the new system to parents,” says Lou. “She put a message in the newsletter telling them that if they didn’t notify us the system automatically marked children truant. That improved attendance straight away.”

On the behavioural side, Carolyn and Lou have developed an approach that sees a teacher entering explanations about behavioural incidents directly against the student’s name.

“The best time to do that is when you are talking to the student about the incident,” says Lou.

“Most of the time you’re sitting at the teacher’s desk anyway so we encourage them to write up the incident straight away with the child. It gives children a real insight into what is being recorded about their behaviour.

Teachers across the school can access and update the records of students enabling them to see a pattern of behaviour building over time.

“In the past I had a behaviour book which sat in my office,” say Lou. “The only person seeing the full picture was me and even I struggled because entries about pupils would go onto different pages over time so it was really hard to see the patterns.”

Lou now uses the data in the system to pull up reports on students each term. Where there are large numbers of behavioural or attendance incidents coming up in the class summaries, she can look at specific students to see the exact problems and print out a report showing all the incidents.

“The first time she did this, Lou found there were about 10 kids who were real repeat offenders,” says Carolyn.

“She got them into her office and she put the full picture out in front of them. She didn’t even have to say much beyond, we think we’ve got a problem here, because the students suddenly saw that teachers across the school were saying the same things about them. Of those 10 kids 9 significantly improved their behaviour in the next term with pretty much no further intervention.”

Introducing the system hasn’t been without technical problems and at one stage those problems got so bad the teachers considered going back to paper systems.

“The system crashed and it was sending up weird error messages,” says Lou “but the teachers could see Carolyn was on the vendor’s back and in time we got the bugs ironed out. It helped them to see the principal was listening to them.”

Some teachers have taken a while to come fully on board and encouraging use is an ongoing process.

Generally however, now the system is up and working teachers are appreciating the benefits of the approach.

“Gloria, our attendance officer, can get straight online and immediately see who she needs to follow-up. She says the system has made the attendance follow-up much faster and by morning tea she’s normally finished calling any parents who haven’t contacted us”, says Carolyn.

“We can get easy summary reports showing us where there are problems in attendance. The lateness reports are good too because if you see a pattern there it gives you a reason to call the parents.

“And the behaviour reporting is giving us really dramatic improvements. So far we’ve only been using it to monitor poor performance but we’re thinking about using it next year to record merits.”

“It’s true some teachers still get a bit pippy about having to use a computer for this,” says Lou “but the fact that everyone can see what’s going on with all the kids when they’re dealing with a behavioural problem is a huge benefit.”

“I wasn’t here last year,” says Carolyn, “but the teachers who were are saying the approach is giving us the most settled Year 8 students they’ve ever seen. That’s got to be proof of the pudding.”



### **Key learnings**

- Don't set your policy and particularly your procedures in stone. As you begin using the system you'll inevitably need to adapt them.
- The leadership team need to keep reinforcing the benefits and modelling use of the system. Teachers may need help getting into the habit of using electronic recording.
- Involve your students. Letting them see the data you've collected has a powerful effect on future behaviour.