

WAPA 2020

Gains and insights from an
enduring school network

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Introduction

WAPA 2020 is a network of West Auckland schools that has endured since 2009. The network came out of the Waitakere Area Principals Association (WAPA). It approached NZCER in late 2014 about working together to support its self-review and evaluative capability. NZCER was interested because WAPA 2020 is one of the few school clusters in New Zealand to have initiated and sustained itself without Ministry of Education contracts or frameworks. What enabled it to keep going in what has been quite a turbulent period in education, including the vexed introduction of National Standards and the switch to Novopay? What insights could it provide for the new national emphasis on school networks through the Investing for Educational Success policy?¹

The WAPA 2020 Steering Group saw the need for a stocktake of what had been achieved, and how. This shared ground was the genesis for this paper. It aims to provide a summary picture of WAPA 2020's progress and what supports it, in order to offer some insights for the new IES Communities of Learning networks that are currently taking shape around New Zealand.

The material for this paper draws on:

- WAPA 2020 papers and updates for schools²
- WAPA 2020 reflection tool and survey for its leadership strand (Term 3 2015)
- WAPA 2020 school self-reviews related to student transitions (Term 2 2015) and cultural responsiveness (Term 3 2015)
- interviews with leaders of four of the schools, the facilitator and the provider of the analysis of e-asTTle trends (Term 3 2015, undertaken by Cathy Wylie)
- interviews with three teachers who had developed through WAPA 2020 to become principals (Term 3 2015, undertaken by Cherie Taylor-Patel)
- NZCER online surveys of current participants, and leaders of schools no longer part of WAPA 2020 (Term 3 2015).

I start with an outline of the origins of WAPA 2020, and its deliberate initial focus on networking itself as the first shared professional learning for school leaders.

¹ Members of the Ministry of Education's Investing for Educational Success (IES) Advisory Group, including me, were very conscious that this major change for schools so used to self-managing and operating individually would need considerable support, particularly for the new network leadership roles.

² Including "West Auckland principals collaborate"

<http://www.educationalladers.govt.nz/Leading-change/Leading-and-managing-change/West-Auckland-principals-collaborate>,

and a paper that describes the underpinning theoretical and evidence base and the gains and learnings of the initial years: Taylor-Patel, C., Reid, M., Lethbridge, S., & Black, J. (2010). "Networking for Learning"—from theory to practice—a cluster's story. Paper given at the 2010 ACEL conference.

Next I describe the nature of WAPA 2020: its activities, and how they are designed to grow individual, school and network capacity, towards a common purpose. I include some of the changes that are evident over time in these activities.

Then I report what current and past participants thought of their experiences through WAPA 2020: what they and their schools had gained.

I end with some key points from the WAPA leader's study of networks overseas³ and some reflections on how WAPA 2020 has worked to achieve its gains, and the insights it has to offer the new Communities of Learning.

The importance of a strong moral purpose

The **purpose of WAPA 2020** has been fundamental to the energy put into it, and the kinds of activities that make it up.

Current and past participants' views of WAPA 2020's purpose often link the sharing of knowledge across schools to the goal of improvement of student outcomes.

Networking and sharing ideas to help raise the achievement of West Auckland primary school children, owning the issues and making a way forward using current research.

Growing leaders of learning through collaborative practices resulting in raising student achievement results in our area.

To gather as a group of schools in the West Auckland area and share (as well as extend) knowledge, skills, teaching practices and data in order to lift achievement levels in all students at our individual schools, also as a cluster.

Building capacity for the adults who work with our children so that we can raise student achievement and develop the capacity of our children, potential of our children and raise student achievement across the whole cluster of schools who are involved.

This enduring network had its impetus in the Waitakere Education Sector Trust work with stakeholders that identified the need for a strategic plan to address the large gap between Waitakere city school leavers' (lack of) qualifications and the jobs available locally, most of which required a qualification. WAPA took up this challenge and developed the WAPA 2020 Learning Plan, drawing on data from 70 of the 93 principals in the area. It envisaged that eventually all the area's schools would work together more so that the students who left the area's secondary schools would be successful. Why 2020? The date gave a student-centred horizon: the student who started their school life in 2009 in one of the network schools at the age of 5 should have achieved qualification success by 2020.

³ Taylor-Patel, C. (2015). *Networking—weaving the net; gathering the pearls*. Research report prepared for the ASB/APPA Travelling Fellowship Trust. <http://appa.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Cherie-Taylor-Patel.pdf>

WAPA 2020 began with a pilot project involving 16 schools (eight primary, four intermediate, three secondary and one residential school). This ran from 2009–10, enabling the network to prove itself, identify what was needed for it to run and to attract more resourcing so it could be scaled up. The conditions it asked schools to agree to when they joined after the pilot included:⁴

- An annual \$250 fee to offset workshop costs
- Commitment to:
 - release days for lead teachers and senior leaders to attend workshops and events
 - principal involvement in workshops and support for the WAPA 2020 Learning Plan
 - inclusion of WAPA 2020 in school annual plans
 - continuity of people taking part in strand work to ensure ongoing coherence and communication
 - use of e-asTTLe to measure student achievement
- People who are willing to be ‘learners’ rather than ‘knowers’.

At its peak, WAPA 2020 included 35 schools. This number of schools stretched the ability of the network’s slim infrastructure to ensure that participating school leaders shared the common framework underpinning WAPA 2020, including the importance of contribution as well as gain for their own school. Resourcing also dropped. The current network membership is 13 schools, mostly primary. Membership is based on belief in its purpose, the alignment of network and school interests and commitment to contribute: to grow professional capability through sharing.

The WAPA 2020 Learning Plan’s pilot project’s global goal was “to work together to raise student achievement across a region”. It identified three strands for the network’s work:

- Leadership, with a focus on change management and developing senior leaders
- Student achievement—using e-asTTLe as a common language for schools and teachers to share and sharpen their formative use of assessment information to improve learning
- Student transitions—encompassing home–school partnerships, transitions between early childhood education (ECE) and primary school, transitions between school stages, and including a focus on student voice.

These three strands have largely continued since 2009, with refinements as school leaders gained in knowledge and practice. WAPA 2020 strands are currently:

- Leadership
- Teaching and Learning, with a focus on inquiry and digital learning
- School–community engagement, with an emphasis on cultural responsiveness.

WAPA 2020’s work is ‘owned’ and steered by the principals of the schools that constitute the network. Its capacity at any time is reliant on their and their school’s commitment of time and resources. It has benefited considerably from having continuity of energetic commitment from its

⁴ WAPA 2020 Project Update, Term 4 2010.

leader, Cherie Taylor-Patel, who also spearheaded the original research and identification of relevant external expertise; its highly knowledgeable and trusted co-ordinator, Chris McLean; and two championing principals, Darren Smith and Jude Black.

Network leaders have also been essential to source external funding, without which it could not exist. External funding enabled WAPA 2020 to employ its essential co-ordinator and bring in respected external experts to provide workshops targeted to WAPA 2020's self-identified needs. Main external support for WAPA 2020 has come from the former Waitakere City Council (2009–10), the Trusts Charitable Foundation and ongoing sponsorship from businesses, particularly Konicaminolta, Furnware and Ed Tech. One-off support has included funding from The Todd Charitable Foundation and a small amount of Ministry of Education support for ICT infrastructure and shared PLD related to the use of e-asTTle online.

Growing the capability to be an effective network

The research used in the formation of WAPA 2020 showed the early leaders that school networks were a promising way to improve student learning, but that not all networks were effective. To have an impact on student learning, network activity had to provide purpose and motivation and “opportunities for school leaders to embrace new ideas, to reflect upon and challenge their own and colleagues’ beliefs in order to improve practice at all levels” (Taylor-Patel, Reid, Lethbridge, & Black, 2010, p. 3).

WAPA 2020 developed on fertile ground but it did not assume that what was already present in West Auckland would be enough to build a strong network that really would make a difference. West Auckland had the benefit of a strong principals’ association that had taken an active interest in sourcing relevant professional development and bringing schools together, and a shared commitment to the wellbeing of West Auckland. But the opportunity to work collaboratively is not frequent even in strong principals’ associations. Networking was seen as a definite step-change from existing friendships, attending general meetings together or working on committees.

The founding group also had some experience of working in clusters funded by the Ministry of Education which, with a few exceptions, tended to be time-limited, often only achieving some commonality by the end of the funding. Cluster activity was frequently seen as a way to access professional development for one’s own school, for ‘business as usual’ or as a nice-to-have (or sometimes tiresome) add-on that was not a school priority.⁵

WAPA 2020 did not want to repeat what had not worked before. It wanted networking to make a difference to student learning. It saw the need to find out about and use existing research and

⁵ Wylie, C. (2012). *Vital connections: Why we need more than self-managing schools*. Wellington: NZCER Press, pp. 118–122, 240–241.

evidence about effective networking.⁶ There was therefore a conscious focus on the practice of networking itself, as the most productive way to start the work of WAPA 2020, rather than diving straight into other professional learning.

The WAPA 2020 pilot plan reference group chose to do the Networking for Learning simulation (Crandall & Stoll, 2005).⁷ This was recalled by those who had participated in the three connected workshops as memorable and enjoyable learning. The Networking for Learning simulation gave powerful understanding of what was needed for effective networking to change practice, and what school leaders needed to do to improve practice. It also built the shared understanding of WAPA 2020's common purpose, and it forged the relationships and trust necessary to give life to WAPA 2020. It underlined the importance of developing and supporting leadership capacity, since "we learnt that a network is only as strong as its weakest link".⁸

The Networking for Learning simulation has been used several times since as new members come into WAPA 2020, and in network self-review, as a way to develop and check shared understanding and to identify common needs.

In WAPA 2020, networking to achieve change has been treated as an important area of learning and knowledge in its own right, rather than just a network activity.

We had the opportunity to develop understanding of the theory of networking and how to effect change. This has been key to understanding the dos and don'ts, the should and should nots of leading change. It has helped me understand better when things have worked and when they have gone wrong.

Growing and sharing capability

WAPA 2020 is organised through an overall steering group of principals and the co-ordinator (called the reference team for many years), with its members also part of one or more of the steering committee for each strand. Steering committees for the strands include curriculum leaders and senior school leaders; and in the past have also included external expertise. The community engagement strand steering committee has also included people from other education sectors, such as ECE.

⁶ Prime sources were Earl, L., Katz, S., Ben Jaafar, S., Elgie, S., & Foster, L. (2006). *How networks work: Learning networks that make a difference for pupils* (www.nsl.org.uk) and Katz, S., Benn Jaafar, S., Elgie, S., Foster, L., Halbert, J., & Kaser, L. (2008). Learning networks: The key enablers of successful learning communities. *McGill Journal of Education*, 43(1), 1–27.

⁷ Crandall, D., & Stoll, L. (2005). Networking for Learning software. Innovation Unit and NCSL, Networking for Learning London: Innovation Unit and NCSL. Retrieved from <http://research.ioe.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/networking-for-learning%283fd40d81-dc30-4c99-be33-9ee9f3771a6b%29/export.html>

⁸ Quotations are from interviews with current WAPA 2020 participants.

Professional learning priorities are identified through steering groups' self-review at the end of each year in WAPA 2020, building on what has been experienced. Professional learning has taken the forms of one-day conferences and workshops, half-day or after-school workshops, and professional learning groups. It has also occurred informally, through the links made through participation in the formal events and knowledge of each other's interests. The co-ordinator often identifies and shares relevant research and accounts of change in areas that she knows are ones that particular network members are working on or thinking about. This customised and timely information and links are greatly valued.

Sharing between schools both formally and informally also means that network members benefit from hearing about each other's experiences with professional learning and development and change undertaken beyond WAPA 2020. Schools have shared work they were doing through the Mutukaroa home-school engagement project, the Learning and Change Network (four schools in WAPA 2020 formed a network within this framework), ALiM or on oral language, for example.

Each strand has had two to three workshops each year, weaving together external and local expertise, on aspects of professional practice and challenges that matter to WAPA 2020 schools. Workshops build on previous workshops, with school leaders and, to a lesser extent, teachers, contributing descriptions of their own practice and its effects for student engagement in learning, transitions or parent engagement. They also build from school self-review, using common questions that identify effective practices to share, and common needs. The co-ordinator has played a significant role in identifying teachers and schools which have improved practice and student learning and encouraging them to share their practice with other WAPA 2020 teachers.

The best part of the conference was 'Our people telling our stories'. The group that Chris had set up—the presenters—had come from the data,⁹ so we had street cred with the teachers.

This sharing of practice expands horizons of what is possible—an important aspect of effective PLD.

WAPA 2020 learning offered a range of perspectives of how things look in different contexts, so you drew upon and had access to a wealth of information and conversations about that. It was multidimensional as opposed to being one dimensional, through just doing PLD in your own school.

It also builds the confidence of those who present.

Opportunities to present were really valuable ... having a chance to share what we were doing on boys' education broke down barriers, people came to visit our school and schools then did work in this area.

There has been an increased emphasis on every school presenting or sharing. Every school shared their enrolment packs at one community engagement workshop in 2015. This sharing and the eye

⁹ Me and My School student engagement survey, see www.nzcer.org.nz/tests/me-and-my-school.

of Alison Sutton from COMET Auckland¹⁰ who observed that, for parents who have English as a second language, there was a lot of information to read, and “how can we simplify that?” led to changes for most of the schools. They have simplified enrolment packs, reduced information to a single page and one school “has come up with a PowerPoint which they run slowly on their website and it tells parents visually the important things they need to have, in very simple English”.

Other workshops within the transition strands have brought ECE and primary school leaders together (working with Sally Peters) to create an action plan; shared results from case studies where schools focused on at-risk students to ensure their engagement with school and learning; and shared results from schools in and beyond WAPA 2020 that have increased parent engagement in student learning. Some workshops have included parents and students working with teachers to understand student and parent perspectives on home–school partnerships.

Views of the WAPA 2020 workshops are largely positive: school leaders and teachers describe real gains from taking part and contributing.

Where there are issues with workshops, they are largely issues of resourcing. Some of the 2015 workshops were reduced from previous years’ whole-day workshops to after-school sessions, so that schools did not have to find and fund relievers. Those who attend all workshops in a strand—or several strands—value the continuity this gives them, and the ability to keep building on what has gone before. However, without additional funding, schools cannot generally afford such continuity for more than principals or those in senior leadership positions who are not teaching. It can be harder for those in small schools to benefit from the workshops and the progression in them because leaders may also be teaching or unable to afford release for other staff.

The leadership strand has made much use of **professional learning groups** (PLGs), which were established in 2009, but further strengthened through work done on coaching and mentoring with Jan Robertson in 2011.

The quality of professional development in leadership and coaching was of a really high standard and I found it provided the upskilling needed in our school ... it was focused on theory, the latest research and the latest models of teaching and learning.

PLGs are small groups meeting over the course of a year. They provide regular discussion of reading on change leadership, opportunities to share situations and role-play difficult situations.

The PLGs for teachers who show interest in becoming principals or senior school leaders have a WAPA 2020 school principal as facilitator. WAPA 2020 was keen to grow its own people and there have been some notable successes with principal and senior leadership positions gained. Asking principals to facilitate, with guidelines, has also benefited principals’ leadership skills.

¹⁰ COMET Auckland provides thought leadership, research and project development to improve the equity and effectiveness of the Auckland education and skills system.
<http://www.cometauckland.org.nz/>

Most of the comment on the PLGs was positive, but a few teachers had had disappointing experiences if the facilitation was not strong or the group was too much alike to be able to learn from each other.

Some of these PLGs are for principals only, to counter the sense of isolation that they can have within their own school. These PLGs are led by principals from outside of West Auckland. They canvass issues for leadership in this period of rapid change and exciting possibility, such as teacher inquiry, innovative learning environments where teachers work collaboratively and use digital technology to change the way students learn and information about student progress can be shared between student, teacher and home.

Growing data-use capability

The original focus within the student achievement strand was on enhancing teachers' capability to use assessment formatively, so that they were able to respond more effectively to student need. Lorna Earl and Eric Waardenburg led full-day workshops for principals and assessment leaders in 2011, concluding with a workshop where each school shared evidence of how they used data that year to drive their practice. The use of information on needs was also seen as valuable in the transition strand, leading to the collection of information from students on their engagement in school and learning, and the development of school self-review tools. The Educational Leadership Practices survey (NZCER) was also used in 2011 and 2015 to provide school leaders with feedback they could use in their own school while also giving the leadership strand a picture of the network's leadership strengths and areas for development.

WAPA 2020 has also looked at trends for the network as a whole using common information.

Achievement

WAPA 2020 identified e-asTTle as a suite of student assessments that schools were interested in using, with the added attractions that it could be customised to provide a common assessment across WAPA 2020 that they hoped could be used to look at progress within and across schools, and the progress of WAPA 2020 as a whole.

Substantial support (including valued access to ICT 'trouble-shooting' that is often unaffordable for primary schools) and professional development went into ensuring schools could use e-asTTle, and workshops were held on how best to use the results and interpret the data. This focus was valued, particularly for the schools that used the new capacity to make better use of assessment data to improve both teaching practice and student understanding of their progress and learning goals.

Implementation took longer than expected and use was variable, with some schools opting to use asTTle (the paper form) rather than the e-asTTle. Schools undertook to use the common assessment of reading twice a year after its development in a workshop at the end of 2011.

Analysis of this common assessment data at the network level has proved to be complex and time consuming. It has been difficult to use to identify sites where improvements in learning had been made, and learn from them: “We haven’t had enough collaboration on this because we haven’t had the wherewithal to drill down into the classroom level.”

The changing nature of the network has added to the complexity of analysis of trends over time for the WAPA 2020 network as a whole.

Individual schools have also seen gains for their students on other measures of achievement, such as the National Standards, that are not reflected in the common e-asTTle data, which has shown little change at the network level from 2012.

Over time, as the National Standards have become assimilated or integrated into school curricula, they have become more attractive to some schools to use as a common focus for activity across schools, in competition with WAPA 2020’s e-asTTle metric.

However, lack of change in student performance on the common measure did provoke important discussion.

We were collecting this data but we did not see the change we were hoping to see and we had all tried different things at our schools but we did not see any significant change... In fact one of the most powerful conversations for us came from this recognition, and I know a lot of schools went away from that discussion, a very good robust discussion, and put in place a range of initiatives, for example a class for boys or programmes that supported reading over the summer holidays.

Student engagement

The transition strand saw the need for information on student engagement with learning to be used within individual schools and across the network. The Me and My School survey¹¹ was used first in 2009 with a sample of students from Years 5, 7 and 9 (straddling the years before and after school-level transitions) and the results collectively unpacked by the facilitator with lead teachers from each school. From 2012, all Years 5–10 students in most of the WAPA 2020 schools have taken part.

This survey has proved to be particularly useful to gain insight into student needs, and to think about those in relation to current teaching practice. The WAPA 2020 co-ordinator looks at the data for each school, identifying schools with higher Māori student engagement levels than others, for example. Such schools were asked to share what their approach was in WAPA 2020 conferences or workshops, which might be followed up in more detail in PLGs or school visits. The co-ordinator, Chris McLean, also used her school visits to make connections. She reports that other schools that changed their own approach as a result saw improvements in their students’ engagement data, and these stories in turn were shared with others.

¹¹ www.nzcer.org.nz/tests/me-and-my-school.

Survey data on its own may make little difference, so the schools have also shared the ways in which they have unpacked the data alongside other material with their staff, discussed it with their board of trustees and “drilled down” on particular aspects with focus groups of students.

Patterns across WAPA 2020 each year are also reviewed, with Chris providing the network with commentary on trends over time. These have largely been stable for the network as a whole, with some improvement in the engagement levels of Māori students evident by 2015. Some schools have had consistently high engagement levels and little variation between classes, indicating a strong collective professional culture in the school. WAPA 2020 data generally show somewhat stronger student engagement than the national means for the Me and My School survey, including for Māori and Pasifika students.

School self-review tools

Two school self-review tools have been developed within WAPA 2020: one on transitions (used in 2009, 2010 and again in 2015) and one on cultural responsiveness (2015). School leadership teams are encouraged to discuss how they would rate themselves, and why. This gives the opportunity to identify areas of strength and areas to be given more attention. The collated network picture has been used to identify what should be given priority in professional development workshops: what is most aligned to network schools’ needs.

Comparison of the 2010 with the 2009 transition self-review ratings showed more schools seeking feedback about their welcoming of, and induction programmes for, students and parents. Other gains over the course of the year, through the workshops and work with the co-ordinator, were improvements in how well students settled into school, having processes to identify student strengths and more use of assessments to identify incoming students’ academic needs. Improvements were also evident in sharing information on students when they went on to the next schooling level, in work with education services and government and social agencies to support student achievement. WAPA 2020 schools also improved their engagement of parents in learning-focused activities and in the school’s cultural and sporting life.

New questions added in 2015 to the transition self-review tool focused schools on how well they transitioned students internally, between levels or classes, how well they used information from other schools to support achievement, how they worked with ECEs to align curriculum and how they celebrated their leaving students’ achievements when they ‘graduated’ from the school. Most of the current WAPA 2020 schools rated themselves 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale in 2015 for their transition practices. This indicates that the network focus on transition has supported member schools to pay attention to and change practices that are known to help transition.

The 2015 cultural responsiveness self-review provides a baseline for WAPA 2020’s focus within the school–community engagement strand. Ratings on this self-review were often 3–4 on the 5-point scale.

Gains from WAPA 2020

Table 1 shows the gains in knowledge, skills and confidence among current WAPA 2020 participants, as reported in the 2015 online survey. Network learning particularly enhanced leadership and teaching practice. Only one current participant felt they had not gained anything much.

Table 1 **Gains from WAPA 2020 participation—current participants**

Gains	Current participants N = 32
Network of colleagues beyond my own school	27
More leadership skills	21
Stronger ability to reflect on my practice	21
Useful ideas for teaching practice	20
A supportive social network	19
More skills in working collaboratively within own school	18
Greater sense of purpose	18
More confidence	18
Useful resources for teaching practice	17
New thinking about what I could do for my students	16
Stronger teaching as inquiry processes	15
Better understanding of student data and how to use it for student gain	15

Sharing across schools in a supportive environment that motivated change was the main theme in what participants experienced as the best thing about WAPA 2020.

The PLGs, being part of a steering committee, taking part in workshops, visiting other schools to see their models of what the workshops refer to, building a network support system of like-minded people who are ready for moving from a senior teacher position to AP/DP positions.

Stronger ability to reflect upon my leadership skills and practice, being able to work more collaboratively with other management colleagues as time spent at WAPA allows in-depth discussion. Also social networking.

Seeing and sharing what other schools do and finding a whole lot of like-minded people with similar goals for their students.

Collaboration with colleagues, opportunities to learn from others' practice. Strong moral purpose and moral compass of key people in the group.

Meeting colleagues across the area, sharing information, skills and ideas. Visiting other schools. The challenges to my thinking. The expertise that has been available.

Interviews with principals continued this theme of the gains to be made through schools sharing what they were doing with each other.

For me as a beginning principal it was one of the most amazingly energising and inspiring experiences to be a part of with my leadership team and with teachers from my school.

We have learned from other schools hugely and so we haven't had to make all the mistakes ourselves. We've also been a great magpie and we've pinched all the good ideas that we've heard over time. Things like community engagement. Currently it's an area of strength but that's come out of a lot of work along the way with schools who have always been really quite strong in that.

The added value that we've had as a school has been fantastic and, you know, no principal is good at everything. No school is in the same place of development. No school is the best at everything but collectively we have strengths in a range of areas and because we had Chris as our superglue networker she was quite instrumental in actually utilising all the strengths, she would gently shape conversations or steer thinking around themes but also who we could utilise within our network for different things.

The theme around inquiry this year for our teaching and learning workshop has really opened my eyes around what different practices there are within schools within our network, and I think that has been really valuable. I am really enjoying learning about the way the different schools operate and the systems that they have established. So I have had lots of conversations with people about the way that they run the staff meetings, the way that they run PLGs and the way that they do teacher appraisal or the way that they do inquiry links between those. Induction meetings, whānau hui, there have been all sorts of neat conversations that have arisen and some of them have been planned as part of what we have done within the workshops but not all, sometimes it is just sitting next to someone who has got an interest about something that you are interested in.

All but one of the leaders of schools that were no longer participating in WAPA 2020 who responded to the online survey also saw some gains for their schools, particularly around the network of colleagues and new thinking about what they could do for their students. Table 2 shows these reported gains.

Table 2 **Gains from WAPA 2020 participation—past participants**

Gains	Past participants N = 14
Network of colleagues beyond my own school	13
New thinking about what we could do for our students	9
Better understanding of student data and how to use it for student gain	6
Stronger ability to reflect on practice	5
A supportive social network	5
More networking skills	5
More leadership skills	4
More skills in working collaboratively within own school	4
Useful resources for teaching practice	3
Useful ideas for teaching practice	2
More confidence	2
Stronger teaching as inquiry processes	2
Greater sense of purpose	1

Their comments about the best things in WAPA 2020 were also about the importance of sharing and the relationship between sharing and support.

Sharing of ideas, successes and failures with colleagues from a variety of schools.

Support of colleagues from outside the school and being able to support them.
Hearing some great speakers. Knowing there was someone to ask if needed.

Learning from network experience

Current participants' gains may have been more than past participants' because they tended to have been in WAPA 2020 longer (only five of the 33 current participants were from schools that had been in WAPA 2020 for 3 years or fewer, compared with seven of the 14 past participants).

They were also from schools that had committed to their principals being part of the steering group for the whole network, and to school inclusion in all three strands. These two new requirements for WAPA 2020 membership came out of reflection on the previous few years, when WAPA 2020's resources were over-extended to try to meet the long-term purpose of including all the area's schools. It had also been harder to develop depth of trust and sharing if schools took part in only one strand, treating the network as if it was (simply) a provider of professional learning, rather than a new way of working and building knowledge together.

When WAPA 2020 had more than 30 members it was harder to also have coherence. Drawbacks identified by those who had left WAPA 2020 were largely about this period of expansion, thought to have affected the progress of the network, and a sense that its focus was not sufficiently clear.

Possibly got a bit large as a group which stretched the sense of connectedness.

The quality of the workshops varied considerably. Think the focus was too wide and thus it was too difficult to have real purpose and direction.

After the first few years when everything was new and exciting, the programme tended to repeat itself to bring in new schools, which meant the foundation schools were treading water and not progressing as hoped.

With hindsight, said one of the WAPA 2020 leaders, it had been a mistake to break up the existing PLGs so that the new members could be included with existing members.

Nonetheless, there were gains for many in this time, and some seeds sown for new networks.

It pulled together 30 very different schools and had them all talking about the West and success and learning and it opened up huge conversations across schools that maybe didn't have strong relationships. And it strengthened relationships that were already existing and gave principals a voice within West Auckland. I think it also paved the way for the new networks [being formed as Investing for Educational Success communities of learning], it gave the West a platform to pull together. I don't think we can underestimate the impact that Cherie has had.

The value of collective responsibility

When WAPA 2020 expanded, the variability of school commitment became more evident. Leaders who were fully committed were keenly aware of schools that 'took' without sharing back and that dipped in and out rather than contributing to the ongoing development of the network. They also saw that the schools that experienced more gains than others were those that had full commitment to WAPA 2020, that took part in all three strands or followed through connected workshops and that had aligned school and WAPA 2020 priorities.

Working in the steering groups is valuable professional learning for WAPA 2020 principals. As importantly, it also deepens their sense of collective trust and purpose and sharpens their understanding of what it means to be responsible to a shared purpose.

It's been a new level in terms of my learning and my thinking and the opportunities that have presented themselves, because I am spending more time with those people and debating with them and arguing with them. When you go to a workshop it is all sorted and it just sort of flows, and it is all nice. But when you are in a steering committee you have got to work out what the big business is, so you argue and work out what you are going to do and you talk about what's important and what's not, and we hear what's going on in other schools or what people are struggling with. So I think the involvement in a steering committee is something that is most important.

Within a steering committee there is someone facilitating the group but you are there as equals so there is always equal sharing and you come with your individual perspectives and your individual ideas and you leave with the ideas of the group as a whole. It's different from my PLG, where I go with my ideas, I listen to everyone else and I leave still being me.

When you are part of a steering committee you go with your ideas, you share as much as you possibly can so that by the time you leave you leave with a steering committee's group's ideas and that's is the page that you sing from because everything else has been laid on the table.

I am empowered at my PLG, the group's empowered from the steering committee and through that empowerment then the cluster grows.

Challenges for WAPA 2020

Lack of resourcing for participation lay behind the main drawbacks identified (by 19 of 33 respondents). Difficulty funding teacher release meant that school participation was more limited than people wanted. Lack of time to follow up once back in the school was also a challenge. A few also identified a lack of alignment with school priorities or their interests as challenges to their participation.

School priorities being or becoming different from WAPA 2020 was the main reason given by those who had not continued with WAPA 2020. Some wanted to work more with their nearest schools and a few lacked time for participation.

The new Communities of Learning support tighter geographic groupings, organised around the same student journey through schooling levels that WAPA 2020 had its sights on when it was formed, and with more resourcing. The recent announcement of two West Auckland Communities of Learning includes former WAPA 2020 members and may owe something to WAPA 2020 learnings. Some current members of WAPA 2020 are also among these two new Communities of Learning and others are weighing up how to be members of two networks or whether they can afford the necessary commitment for both their own school and the network's gain. While the Communities of Learning model is not based on an assumption that schools will only be members of one network, schools that have experienced WAPA 2020 may be more aware than others of the relationship between commitment and gain.

Learning from effective networks

Cherie Taylor-Patel received an ASB-APPA Travelling Fellowship in 2014 that allowed her to investigate experiences of school networks in other countries. Her report¹² provides a valuable

¹² Taylor-Patel, C. (2015). *Networking—weaving the net; gathering the pearls*. Research report prepared for the ASB/APPA Travelling Fellowship Trust. <http://appa.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Cherie-Taylor-Patel.pdf>

overview of others' experiences and some useful reflections on what makes for effective networking that draw also on her own experience as the leader of WAPA 2020.

The most effective networks she found overseas had:

- Self-selected membership
- A clear vision with a moral purpose, working for all students in the network
- Evidence that collective work was making a difference
→ strong relationships and commitment over time
- Flexibility in roles and use of funding, enabling timely use of relevant expertise (Taylor-Patel, 2015, p. 51).

She notes the importance of school and network plans being aligned (but not to the point of uniformity). Working collectively means finding ways to de-privatise school and teacher practice, to share failures as well as successes. It means using ongoing cycles of inquiry that equip leaders and teachers to continually build on what they learn from their work to enrich student learning and improve their achievement, in cycles of 'incremental innovation'. New approaches to teachers' time to work like this need to be used, otherwise these cycles and the gains from sharing will not be viable. The worth of a network is measured not by whether its members are alike or doing exactly the same things: it is measured in the gains evident for the diversity of students, teachers, school leaders and their contexts that make up the collective.

Learning from the WAPA 2020 journey

WAPA 2020 has achieved a great deal on the resources it has had available to it. There is good evidence that it has grown leadership capacity and improved the quality and effectiveness of West Auckland schools' attention to student, parent and community engagement. Where changes have been made to school cultures, leadership practices and processes that reach into classrooms and homes, it has improved outcomes for students.

WAPA 2020's journey also shows that, even with schools giving leader and teacher time (which is not without monetary cost) and some cash, networks need additional resourcing if they are to grow capability and provide the gains for participation that keep members engaged and contributing. It has not been possible for WAPA 2020 to support its members to grow their capability with data use and inquiry into classroom practice as much as was probably originally envisaged. There are a number of reasons for this: lack of resourcing to analyse and support; the legacies of competition between schools, which is evident in some continuing sensitivities about comparing school and class data; and the difficulty of teachers having time to learn from visits to other schools. Links with the secondary schools have also proved difficult to maintain over time.

Insights for the new Communities of Learning

The Investment for Educational Success policy is underpinned by a belief that collective responsibility and collaborative work using robust evidence to identify and respond to student needs will lift system performance. It has framed collective responsibility in part around the educational journey of a student through different levels, leading to criteria for networks that are centred around a single or a small number of secondary schools, and the primary and intermediate schools around them. The new Communities of Learning are voluntary but, with a few exceptions, must be within this framing. Like WAPA 2020 schools, the proximity of member schools to each other will mean that they will often need to overcome competitive attitudes and disquiet about sharing data.

Forging a common moral purpose through the deliberate attention to what a network entails, as WAPA 2020 did in its early days, will be critical to how well the Communities of Learning can work collaboratively for the gain of all involved. There is reasonable understanding now that it is unrealistic to expect Communities of Learning to be up and running in a short time-order. However, it may not be clear just how important it is that the initial period of building relationships and identifying how best to tackle the achievement challenges that Communities of Learning set themselves is clearly also focused on what it means to work collaboratively. WAPA 2020's deliberate focus on professional learning about effective networking that built trust between members in the process was vital to its original growth and sustainability.

Criteria for school membership that WAPA 2020 identified at the end of its pilot phase are worth returning to as food for Communities of Learning thought:

- A contribution of money from each school to offset workshop costs
- Commitment to:
 - release days for lead teachers and senior leaders to attend workshops and events
 - principal involvement in workshops and support for the WAPA 2020 Learning Plan
 - inclusion of WAPA 2020 in school annual plans
 - continuity of people taking part in strand work to ensure ongoing coherence and communication
- People who are willing to be 'learners' rather than 'knowers'

and its more recent specification that

- principals must be a part of the network steering committee, and
- schools contribute to all three strands,

are also important pointers to key principles of contribution that will make or break Communities of Learning.

Working together to decide priorities, review progress and set the programme for the year ahead should not be left to a few individuals but used to keep the network and its purpose thriving. There also need to be deliberate connections made between different Communities of Learning

activities and groups so that there is overall coherence and shared learning. The way things are done matters as much as what is done.

Schools will need to contribute real attention and time.¹³ What the Communities of Learning focus on therefore needs to matter to each member school, so that Communities of Learning activity is a gain, not an add-on that is resented. Workshops and other professional learning need to be high quality, relevant, not busy-work or repetitive. They need to draw on Communities of Learning members' own inquiries into how to improve student learning. Leaders and teachers who share the puzzles of practice they face, what they try, the difference it made for students and what they have learned should gain further from the act of sharing. The acts of sharing also deepen the commitment to a Community of Learning, as evident in the design of the WAPA 2020 workshops and PLGs have done.

It is also important to keep the programme of work realistic for the people and time resources: aiming for focused, powerful and deep rather than spread too thinly. Deeper adult learning is more likely to lead to fresh thinking that can be used to good effect. Given the importance of inquiry as the engine of what Tony Bryk calls the "improvement paradigm",¹⁴ inquiry practice itself merits attention in the formative work of Communities of Learning.

Communities of Learning leadership roles need to also harness relevant external expertise and have connections to timely information that they can put before school leaders and teachers who want to change their practice. WAPA 2020's co-ordinator has been vital to the gains made by member schools: in sourcing the right workshop leaders at the right time, using valid evidence to identify presenters from the member schools, in the discussions at schools, sharing relevant resources that principals and teachers do not have time to track down and the contributions she has made to this network's direction.

The facilitation and coaching skills of the Communities of Learning leadership roles will be crucial. Communities of Learning leaders need to be visionary and exemplify the moral purpose driving the Communities of Learning. They also need to take people with them to ensure the structures and processes of shared decision making and learning develop the shared sense of responsibility and ability to contribute through which a network can flourish.

It is vital that the new roles are well supported beyond each Community of Learning and are also enabled to share their own experiences, so that New Zealand gets a sound understanding over the next few years of the approaches, processes, tools and resources that best support lively networks that change teaching and learning for the better.

¹³ How small schools contribute needs particular attention, so that the cost for them does not outweigh the gains.

¹⁴ Bryk, A. S. (2015). 2014 AERA Distinguished Lecture, Accelerating how we learn to improve. *Educational Researcher*, 44(99), 467–477.
<http://edr.sagepub.com/content/44/9/467.full.pdf+html?ijkey=nivlR./JY.5Y6&keytype=ref&siteid=spedr>

The additional resourcing that comes with Communities of Learning will not be enough on its own to allow the depth of network sharing that will make a difference, or the data analysis and unpacking needed. It will require schools to provide additional resource and for wider support from government agencies. Communities of Learning will also need to decide what measures and self-review tools they need to anchor their inquiries and evaluate their progress and to weigh up benefits and costs of common measures of achievement particularly. Thought will also need to be given to school self-review tools that align with the Communities of Learning achievement challenges.

Network self-review of progress will also need thought about the kinds of tools that are useful and how best to describe and respond to unevenness of gains and progress between member schools. This needs thought ahead of time, so that the focus of Communities of Learning discussion is not the identification of stars and weaklings, entrenching the defensiveness and competition that has made it harder than it should be for New Zealand schools to progress, but the ongoing development of capability and agency to keep learning and using that adult learning for student gain.