

Health Schools: the Florence Nightingales of the Education System

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When a child is unwell with a serious sickness, or injury, it can have serious implications for their school attendance and, consequently, their academic performance. Health Schools are the education system's solution. Southern Regional Health School principal Chris Parsons provides an insight on the work they do.

What's a Health School?

New Zealand's Health Schools were established five years ago to help keep children learning when they are unwell for extended periods and missing school.

There are three Health Schools in New Zealand – Northern Health School, Central Regional Health School and Southern Regional Health School – and together they assist around 2,000 students each year. All three schools are sponsored by Telecom and funded by the Ministry of Education.

It's a common misconception that Health Schools only help children who are ill in hospitals. This is largely because Health Schools evolved from the earlier framework of Hospital Schools which had classrooms based within the hospital, but our mandate now extends far beyond the hospital grounds.

Health Schools today provide educational support to children whether they're in hospital or at home in the community. This change reflects the fact that modern medical practice has reduced the amount of time patients actually spend in hospital for treatment, and the fact that there are long-term illnesses which don't require hospital treatment.

Today, Health School teachers spend about two-thirds of their time teaching children in a community setting and only one-third of their work occurs in hospitals. It was this growing emphasis on community-based teaching that provided the rationale for a change in name from "Hospital School" to "Health School" in 2000.

A unique set of challenges

Health Schools face a unique set of challenges in meeting the educational needs of students. One of these is making sure that every student who requires their support actually receives it, especially as many people don't even know that Health Schools exist.

We're not the kind of school that parents tend to seek out and, in some respects, we're like the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff – people generally only find out about us when something has gone wrong. Even then, we're largely reliant on the hospital staff, or the student's school, establishing contact with us in the first place.

Telling school principals about us and what we do is an ongoing focus for us because they can be crucial in ensuring a student doesn't slip under our radar when the student stops attending their regular school because they're unwell for a lengthy period.

A fluctuating roll

Another challenge is the fluctuating nature of a Health School's student roll. While we have a core group of 'long-term' students, we can never be too sure just how many students we're going to have on our roll from week-to-week. Illness and injury are obviously unpredictable parts of the equation, as is the recovery time for each student – at which point they'll leave us to return to their usual school.

Accidental injury, oncology, cystic fibrosis and other chronic ailments occupy most of our teachers' time in hospitals. On discharge we follow our students to their homes as they recuperate, or to school where we assist with transition if required.

The total number of students on Health School rolls continues to grow from year-to-year, particularly mental health admissions. On average most students spend about six weeks on the Health School roll.

Ultimately, it means we have to build flexibility into the way we operate so teachers and Health Schools can cater for varying student numbers throughout our respective regions. Having said that, we're probably the only school which is pleased to have a diminishing school roll, simply because it means less ill children.

Planning for students' needs

Health School teachers must also work with students who have wide-ranging learning needs and abilities depending on their illness or injury. Teachers develop an Individual Education Plan for each student when they enrol with the Health School and this is tailored to their specific needs and abilities. In preparing the Plan, the teacher will consult with the student's regular teacher, parents and medical practitioners.

Our teachers are a part of life changing, sometimes life saving, multi-disciplinary teams in mental health and alcohol and drug addiction recovery programmes.

For some students, the fact they get one-on-one time with a health school teacher can actually improve their learning because they are able to work on areas they otherwise struggle with in a class situation.

Our teachers essentially become advocates for the educational needs of their students and when a student recovers from their illness they'll liaise with the students' school to ensure that their return is as easy possible.

Inspiring students

While the circumstances of some students' wellbeing can be emotionally challenging for some teachers, the students can also be a wonderful source of inspiration.

For many students, the learning time with teachers is something they look forward to at what might otherwise be a very stressful time. Even for students who are limited to their home, contact with a teacher can be the highlight of their day because it is something they associate with being 'normal'.

Technology plays a key part in helping Health School teachers motivate and teach their students. Through Telecom's support, the Health Schools have been given laptops with mobile broadband data cards so that teachers can work remotely. Southern Regional Health School's Southland-based teacher, for example, can use her laptop to upload student notes to the School's centralised database while visiting students within her area.

Laptops are also used by students in Hospitals to access online resources and communicate with their friends from their hospital bed. These have proven an invaluable teaching tool, allowing students to access resources from their hospital bed or home and even keep in touch with classmates at their usual school via email. Students have also prepared presentations about their hospital experience or illness for their classmates.

It's also amazing just how powerful the prospect of being able to use a laptop can be for our students. Often, when a teacher is meeting a student for the first time, the laptop is the ice breaker which helps establish a rapport with the student.

Technology to overcome distance

For Southern Regional Health School, the geographic scale of our region is another huge challenge and is reflected in the fact our teachers travel about 100,000kms each year. Telecom's support means we're now at the point where we can begin to overcome distance using the latest in telecommunications technology and still provide our students with the best learning possible.

At the end of 2004 we opened our new school premises in Christchurch, but rather than being a traditional bricks and mortar school we're developing it into the 'mother ship' or virtual command centre from which we'll deliver lessons to students around our region using this technology.

The platform for this is Telecom's SchoolZone package which gives us a private online working space and a video conferencing capability. Our plan is to use this online capability so students armed with laptops can connect with our teachers virtually anywhere. Video conferencing, or the transformation of laptops into mobile teaching tools through a combination of webcams and mobile broadband data cards, will enable us to link students with teachers virtually anywhere.

As well as helping the school overcome its unique geographic and educational challenges, this technology will lessen the influence of time with students able to complete and post their work online 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

This will be invaluable if a student has, for example, disturbed sleeping patterns.

Who can become a Health School student?

The school admits students from Year 1-13 who:

- are unable to attend school due to illness – they may be in hospital or at home for a period expected to exceed 10 school days
- have had, or are likely to have six hospital admissions in a twelve month period
- have had repeated school absences due to ill health exceeding (or likely to exceed) 40 days per year
- need support to return to school after hospitalisation and/or recuperation/rehabilitation at home

	Regional locations	No. of teachers	No. of Students in 2004	For more information
Northern Health School	Headquarters in Newmarket in Auckland and teachers based at Starship Hospital, Kidz First Hospital, Taranaki Hospital, Gisborne Hospital and in Whangarei, Hamilton, Tauranga, and Rotorua.	30	1,500	www.nhs.school.nz Phone: 0800 153 002
Central Regional Health School	Headquarters in Newtown in Wellington and teachers based at Hawke's Bay Hospital, Palmerston North Hospital, Wanganui Hospital, Kenepuru Hospital, the Regional Rangatahi Adolescent Inpatient Service, Hutt Hospital and Wellington Hospital.	12	360	www.centralregionalhealth.school.nz Phone: 0800 153 000
Southern Regional Health School	Cardale House in Christchurch, Classrooms in the community and hospitals in Christchurch, Nelson, Dunedin and Invercargill	14	320	www.srhs.school.nz