

SPECIAL REPORT: MY FIRST 100 DAYS AT WOODFORD

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Upon arriving at Woodford as the new Head of School in January, I shared with the community my plans for my first 100 days, and promised to report back what I learned. I am pleased to present my '100 Days Community Summary' to the Woodford Community.

Monday, July 25th was my 100th day as Head of Woodford International School. It has been a very busy 100 days as I've gotten to know the kids, teachers, Board members and parents of the Woodford community and adjusted to life in the Solomon Islands. As promised, I have spent most of my time thus far, observing and interacting with the school community, seeking first to clearly understand the people and the history of Woodford, the systems and operations of the school, and most importantly the unique context in which the school operates. Now, it is time to share what I have learned, and to share my vision on where I believe we can go as a community, as well as plans for how to get there.

As an organic farmer and avid gardener, I am acutely aware that I can not simply arrive from New York with the seeds I've always sown successfully, stick them in the ground at the Head's house in Honiara and expect them to grow. Most of them likely wouldn't in this new context - and those that might would likely succumb to pests to which they haven't adapted, or could themselves wreak havoc on the local ecosystem. And so it is when arriving at a new school. It has been important for me to take time to observe and interact with this new environment,.

Just as I've gotten to know the school and Woodford community over the past several months, the community has gotten to know me a bit better too. Even so, one thing that many still don't know about me is that, in addition to 30 years as an educator and school leader, I also happen to be a certified Permaculture Designer. Permaculture is an integrated system of social and ecological design, based on a set of ethics and principles developed in the 1970's by Australians Bill Mollison and David Holmgren. Permaculture design is a whole-systems approach to maximizing diverse yields by harnessing the power and energy of nature and the local context.

It is with these whole-system permaculture principles in mind that I approach my work as Head of School... becoming intimately familiar with the new 'site', then - as you'll see in the pages that follow - focus on building fertility in the 'soil'. The campus is buzzing as we only now begin sowing seeds that I am confident will provide the diverse 'yields' we seek for years into the future. As with any garden, success depends on the slow, hard work at the start, even as it appears that all we have is a bare patch of ground. But before long, sprouts begin to break through, and with a bit of imagination and a clear focus on where we are headed, we can picture the bounty we'll reap for years to come.

Goals

At the start of the school year, my entry plan set forth five broad, overarching goals:

1. Focus on **student learning and the growth** of the whole child through the alignment of resources and organizational efforts, ensuring all students leave WIS well-prepared for the next step on their educational journey and their life's path.
2. Develop and support highly effective school **governance and leadership** that results in consistency of purpose, continuity and teamwork by nurturing a productive and collaborative relationship with the WIS Board of Management.
3. Establish a positive **culture and climate** throughout the learning community that is focused on a shared purpose, respectful interpersonal relationships, high expectations for student success and continuous improvement.
4. Develop and improve systems designed to maximize **organizational effectiveness and operational accountability** in support of the WIS mission.
5. Build trust, confidence and shared purpose, **engaging the community** through open, honest communication and building positive relationships.

To reach these goals, over the past 7 months I have engaged with the Board, the staff, and the community, in a broad range of entry activities:

Listen and Learn: Through observation and interaction over the past six months, I had an opportunity to review the current realities, existing systems and relationships of the school holistically, taking the opportunity to drill down and study what currently happens across a range of systems and processes at the school. This thoughtful, gradual approach also gave me an opportunity to get to know the students, families and colleagues united in pursuit of our Woodford mission, and to learn from various constituencies how I will best be able to support them and their aspirations in the months and years ahead.

Share and Prepare: In the pages that follow, I now share with the community some of my findings, impressions, priorities and opportunities that have risen to the top over these past hundred days.

Though not always obvious, a tremendous amount has been happening over the past several months as the groundwork has begun and the foundations are being laid upon which to build for the future.

In this report I hope to share just a sampling of the hard work of many that is already underway in preparing for sustainable growth and continuous improvement across the school.

Plan and Build: In the remaining months of 2016, the really hard work (*or as I prefer to think of it - the really hard play*) continues, changes will become more and more visible, and the results will become increasingly measurable. 2016 is the baseline year against which we will be able to measure the real growth and progress ahead. It is an exciting time to be at Woodford.

1. Student Learning: To focus on student learning and the growth of the whole child through the alignment of resources and organizational efforts, ensuring all students leave WIS well-prepared for the next step on their educational journey and their life's path.

Findings (My first 100 days):

- Ample anecdotal evidence confirms that Woodford does a fine job preparing students for the next step on their educational journey. To date, effective systems have not been put in place to help students track their own progress objectively, neither is there a systematic review of Woodford's progress over time and effectiveness against other schools nationally and worldwide. Limited external testing conducted in our Primary School suggests that Woodford students are largely on 'Grade Level' or above in maths, however a significant number of students started this school year below 'Grade Level' in reading. No external assessment has been done at the Middle years level, and IGCSE results have shown growth in most subject areas.
- One on one structured interviews with all Woodford teachers utilizing research-based protocol have demonstrated that the Woodford faculty is personable, invested and committed. However, the current culture and systems actually seem to work against teachers who want to be more compassionate and communicative. There is a very clear opportunity for significant growth in our instructional design skills as well.

- Feedback from Woodford parents and teachers, as well as a review of best practices, confirms that our current reporting system requires review and redesign.

Groundwork (currently underway):

- Adoption of an internationally normed external assessment program which measures individual student growth and academic progress at the individual, class, grade-level and whole-school level.
- Implementation of the Ventures for Excellence Teacher Profile Tool to recruit top teachers. Adoption of the national teaching standards and revision of the WIS Performance Review process.
- Revision of the WIS grade keeping and reporting systems to more clearly communicate grade-level targets and students' progress towards them, while providing students timely feedback on their individual progress towards their goals.

Next Steps (completion in 2016):

- Administer the Measures of Academic Progress Test (MAP) to all students in years 2-10 in November 2016. This will enable WIS students and their families to measure their own progress, and benchmark to their own classmates at WIS and to their peers across the globe.
- Develop a differentiated mid-term (2017) and long-term (2018-2020) professional development plan that is job-embedded, differentiated to individual teacher needs and interests, and focuses on student outcomes and strategic goals.
- Ensure technology, systems and capacities are in place to provide timely, regular feedback to students and accurately communicate students' progress on a fortnightly basis from 2017.

2. Governance & Leadership: To develop and support highly effective school governance and leadership that results in consistency of purpose, continuity and teamwork by nurturing a productive and collaborative relationship with the WIS Board of Management.

Findings (My first 100 days):

- An overly broad Vision of where Woodford is heading as a school, rather than a Vision focused on where Woodford students are heading, combined with a Mission that lacks specificity and context has lead to a community that sometimes appears to be working at cross-purposes with itself.
- The WIS Governance structure is designed not to ensure continuity. With a lack of clear policy and guidelines, as well a lack of institutionalized systems of transparency and good governance, lines between the governing, planning and accountability role of the Board and the day to day management of the school have, at times, been blurred.
- Due to rapid growth in previous years, long term proactive financial and facilities planning have been foregone in the interest of reactive response to the dynamic context of the school.

Groundwork (currently underway):

- Compilation, adoption and publication of clear policies and governance protocols.
- Completion of a full market analysis and community survey to gather input required to ensure a shared long-term Vision and clear

strategic direction for the school over the next 5-7 years.

- Streamlining the delegation of responsibilities and empowerment of school level leaders and teacher-led teams and development of 'Terms of Reference' for standing Board committees.

Next Steps (completion in 2016):

- With full community participation, revise the Mission and develop a compelling shared Vision focused on student outcomes, setting challenging, measurable goals around which a new 5 year strategic plan is built.
- Develop a Facilities master plan, a capital expenditures budget, and 3 and 7 year financial projections for the sustainable operation of the school.
- Align all systems, resources, processes and curricula to the new Strategic Vision of the school and in support of the strategic goals and priorities.

"Someone's sitting in the shade today because someone planted a tree a long time ago."

-Warren Buffet

3. Culture & Climate: To establish a positive climate throughout the learning community that is focused on a shared purpose, respectful interpersonal relationships, high expectations for student success and continuous improvement

Findings (My first 100 days):

- The School Performance Survey (SPS) conducted in March, 2016 highlighted the pride and overall satisfaction with the school shared by Woodford students, teachers and parents.
- The SPS identified opportunities to improve students' engagement by allowing them to pursue their passions and interests within the school program and to improve their connections with each other and the adults who care about them.
- Adversarial and competitive relationships have sprung up across the various school constituencies through an apparent lack of transparency, perceived lack of equity, and broken trust. Existing systems, and often a lack thereof, seem to have too often led to a sense of disempowerment for families, students and staff.

Groundwork (currently underway):

- Vacancies in physical education and the arts have been filled by teachers recruited on a proven track record of cultivating students' interest and passion.
- Design and implementation of a new Career Guidance program for secondary students, and ongoing cultivation and development of vital relationships with governmental and institutional partners to ensure clear pathways for Woodford graduates.

- Engagement of students and teachers in developing whole school and multi-age activities and opportunities for cooperation, teamwork and organization around shared interests and passions (i.e. International Arts and Kalsa Festival, Teacher Book Clubs, common free play).

"When a flower doesn't bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower."

-den Heijer

Next Steps (completion in 2016):

- Revise the K-12 Academic and Career Guidance program and the WIS After-school Activities program for 2017 and implement a Middle School Advisory program.
- Develop a Classroom Without Walls program, Leadership Development program, and Entrepreneurship focus and Service Learning component to the Woodford Curriculum.
- Implement a Peer Coaching and Team Teaching protocol for teachers and actively cultivate Teacher Leadership and mentoring.

4. Operational & Organizational

Accountability: To develop and improve systems designed to maximize organizational effectiveness and operational accountability in support of the WIS mission.

Findings (My first 100 days):

- Although functional systems are in place across the organization, documentation of systems and procedures is scarce or non-existent, and no record of ongoing systematic review and revision has been found.
- Due to prior rapid growth student achievement data, reporting systems, communication systems, tracking of demographics, maintenance procedures, human resource policies and emergency protocols are often inconsistent, antiquated, inefficient or have been developed ad hoc.
- School policies, rules and procedures exist, but vary across and between grade levels and divisions and are not always easy to locate or clearly communicated.
- Financial procedures and audit protocols are in place, and well managed. Reporting and Board oversight can, however, be improved.
- There is significant room for improvement in hardware, internet connectivity, networking protocols and data management.

Groundwork (currently underway):

- Successful and satisfactory completion of the 2015 Audit. Revision and adoption of the 2016 Budget, and budget control measures put in place and functioning well.

- Revision of the Woodford Organizational Chart and the Woodford Chart of Accounts has been completed. Draft Financial Procedures have been presented to the Audit Committee for recommendation and revision, and are currently being implemented.
- Ongoing migration of all data to a new School Management System (SchoolTime), which will eventually include a parent portal.
- Testing and revision of Emergency Procedures and a revised Emergency Procedures manual is being drafted.
- Revision and consolidation of existing Staff and Student/Parent Handbooks aligned with newly adopted Strategic Policies.
- Implementation of a Sanitation Plan, including installation of new faucets and soap dispensers, successful testing of drinking water systems, and development of monitoring protocols for all school restrooms.
- Implementation of a maintenance ticketing system and IT Help Desk system. Development of a Security and Access Control Plan and Hazard Response Protocols.

Next Steps (completion in 2016):

- Publish WIS Staff Handbook, Financial Procedures Manual, Student/Parent Handbook, Emergency Procedures Manual, Preventive Maintenance Manual, Communications Manual, and Human Resource Manual.

"If you can't describe what you are doing as a process, you don't know what you're doing."

-W. Edwards Deming

5. Community Engagement: To build trust, confidence and shared purpose through open, honest communication and positive relationships.

Findings (My first 100 days):

- The 2016 School Performance Survey (SPS) found that Teachers and Students report that parental involvement in the life of the school was, in general, low. Though perceptions exist that parents don't participate, attendance at school assemblies, the Annual General Meeting, Back to School Night and 3-Way Conference attendance was admirable this year.
- The 2016 SPS also found Students, Parents and Teachers suggesting that there is tremendous room for improvement in engaging with the broader Honiara community.
- WIS Communication has largely been centralized, with most formal communication one way (school to home) and limited/far-removed from the classroom (office to parent). Communication has also been haphazard, often inconsistent and occasionally confusing.

Groundwork (currently underway):

- Differentiation and decentralization of communication from the school. Weekly emails are now sent directly from the Principals of each division, and are specific to Primary or Secondary. The Wavelength is now a monthly news blog documenting the life of the school.
- Revision and communication of the Woodford Chain of Communication, ensuring parents are able to discuss suggestions and concerns directly with the school staff member most able to address the particular issue or concern in a timely manner.

- Implementation of a 'classroom parent' protocol to link the classroom teacher with the broader classroom parent community and to engage parents in the day-to-day life of their child's class.
- Implementation of a Principals and Teachers 'Home Visit' protocol to better know and support our students and their families.
- Enlistment of Woodford parents to support the work of the school, beyond governance, in providing after-school activities, supporting students with career guidance, coordinating parent efforts around special events (i.e. International Day), participating in weekly assemblies and accompanying students on excursions.

Next Steps (completion in 2016):

- Develop a "New Family Intake / Orientation" program for families new to Woodford.

"It takes a village to raise a child."
-African Proverb

Where are we going? 2017 and Beyond...

Monarch butterfly migration, spotted hyena hunting behavior, the day-to-day life of a honeybee colony or a coral reef... nature operates complex systems with awe-inspiring success. Recent work in fields as diverse as ecology and cognitive science, from the study of cybernetics and evolution to research in neural networks and particle physics, has led us to an important realization: by focusing on the interactions and relationships which occur in nature, we are able to identify a set of dynamic properties common to all successful complex, living systems: **self-organization**, **adaptation**, **resilience**, and **emergence**. Aren't these the precise characteristics that we want for our children so that they may thrive in the world of the future?

There is, perhaps, no human endeavor more complex than education: nurturing the learning, growth, and development of a child. As a School Head, I strongly believe that a dynamic, meaningful education, as well as a truly sustainable school, is best modeled on complex, natural systems. During my time at Woodford, it will be my job to focus on adapting our classrooms and evolving our school for a future that has yet to be created. As an educator (and as a permaculturist!) I am convinced that there is true power in harnessing the energy and synergy of nature to 'redesign' our school as a vibrant, flourishing ecosystem.

By tapping the nature-based wisdom of indigenous knowledge systems and 'Kastom', while embracing the insights of cutting-edge science and the transformative power of new technologies and tools, we at Woodford are uniquely situated and equipped - through our diversity and drawing on our local context - to have a powerful impact, designing and creating a sustainable, regenerative landscape where our kids (and teachers) are empowered to become connected, empathetic innovators, capable of leveraging their own resilience, imagination and creativity to realize new outcomes for themselves, for their families, for their communities, for the Solomon Islands and other home nations.

