Virtual Learning Network Primary School Consultation CoOLs April 2018

The [Virtual Learning Network (VLN) Primary School](#) is a schools based initiative, working with and across Aotearoa New Zealand schools and kura, and is inclusive of all New Zealand children at all year levels. The VLN Primary is about providing equity and access to better learning opportunities for New Zealand students. It connects schools through a collaborative online network in order to share the best of our teaching strengths, open up access to specialist teachers and to build professional capability that enables schools to become more flexible and open places of learning for our children. Young learners have the choice to engage with a range of subjects that may not be available in their school. We provide teachers and school leaders with professional learning and support to enable them, their students, and their communities to develop networked future focussed learning organisations. The VLN Primary School is a registered Charitable Trust governed by its participating schools and supported, in part, by the Ministry of Education. In 2017 we had approximately 1200 NZ students from 50 schools participating in our online programmes & projects.

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1. What are your views on the repeal of COOL?

The VLN Primary was supportive of the introduction of CoOLs with some reservations. We were supportive because:

- It would provide recognition and support for virtual learning in the 'mainstream' education setting;
- The VLN Primary has been actively lobbying and making submissions for the resourcing and support of online learning for many years;
- It would provide a regulatory framework and resourcing for virtual learning that is already taking place in New Zealand;
- It would provide more choice and learning opportunities for learners;
- It would help build capability across networked communities of schools;
- It has the potential to level the playing field especially for smaller rural schools.

We had concerns about CoOL because of:

- Privatisation of education;
- Quality of online education and the important role of teachers;
- An open educational marketplace that has the potential to undermine public schooling;
- Full time online schools as an option for all students;
- Equity and access for learners.

The MoE have made recommendations to the Minister to repeal CoOLs based on stakeholder discussions and research that we were an active part of, and that was originally set up to inform the guidelines for CoOLs. In considering this we appreciate the opportunity to align online learning with the whole system review that is underway. However we have some concerns about repealing CoOLs legislation in that:

- online learning doesn't get left by the wayside within the wider process of review,
- small rural schools get equitable and fair opportunities,
- the government understands there are many models of working online across schools and they all require adequate funding and support,
- online learning in primary schools is just as important as online learning in other parts of the schooling sector.

There needs to be an ongoing deliberate strategic focus for online learning as part of the review process. Educational leaders from the online learning sector need to be part of advisory groups and summits.

Online learning has the potential to support system change and grow capacity across the schooling system and help address issues such as teacher shortages, shortages of te reo Māori kaiako, provision of PLD & teaching to support the introduction of Digital Technologies | Hangarau Matihiko, provision of wider curriculum opportunities such as learning language. Online learning is not just for students who cannot access schooling, it is for all students in any school, and it can provide opportunities for students, schools and communities as well.

There needs to be immediate funding support for VLN communities to enable them to continue to lead and support schools through future focused changes.

2. What should the Government consider to support the effective development of high quality online learning?

There are good models of high quality online learning in place with the VLN communities collaborative online clusters, including our own VLN Primary School. However they have been held back in their development because of limited resourcing.

It should be noted that the Ministry commissioned research by Cognition did not provide information about online learning in primary schools and instead only described the secondary VLN/NetNZ model. The VLN Primary model is quite different. **The government should consider that online learning is *as* important in primary schools as it is in secondary, and that they have different models of collaboration and resourcing needs.**

In the VLN Primary model, most online teachers are contracted in to work with our schools. Out of 13 online teachers, only 2 are contributed on a reciprocal basis by our own schools. Our schools collaborate through the VLN Primary because they are looking for the expertise and the shared resource to widen curriculum opportunities for their learners. They have very little teacher resource or funding resource with which to contribute. The VLN Primary would not exist without the operational support of the MoE. The MoE provides a small amount of contract funds to employ an ePrincipal through a host school arrangement. This hasn't changed since 2014 when we had a role of less than 200, now we have over 800 and it continues to grow. The schools themselves contribute to a shared funding pool to pay for part time teachers who all work under casual contracts set up through the VLN Primary. This isn't desirable for our online teachers and is a risk to the long term development of online learning.

A regulatory framework of some kind is necessary to enable sustainable and equitable resourcing for VLN community online learning initiatives.

Currently for our organisation having no legal status within the schooling system means that:

- we have no ability to share staffing, for example FTTE staffing, permanent or fixed term units with schools;
- it is difficult to employ all our teachers equitably according to their collective agreements (if they are working independently of a school);
- VLN Primary personnel have no access to a wider range of PLD;
- it is difficult to provide the professional support needed for teacher appraisal and registration;
- we don't have the oversight and support of educational agencies such as ERO;
- we don't have access to additional benefits of being part of the school system; for example, TELA laptops for our teachers, or software for schools.

We have managed our basic operations through the development of a Charitable Trust entity that is 'owned' by participating schools along with a host school arrangement supported by Memorandums of Understandings and lots of trust and goodwill. This isn't sustainable in the long term. With increasing numbers of schools and students participating in the VLN Primary, piggy-backing through a host school system for long periods of time puts pressure on this goodwill arrangement.

 A regulatory framework and improved resourcing to online communities of learning would enable sustainability of operations, accountability and systems level support to

provide quality programmes and fair employment conditions and recognition for online teachers.

3. What do you see as the opportunities and barriers to enabling any state school to provide distance education, if they have the infrastructure to do so?

Opportunities:
For children:
- Engage with other learners from different schools,
- Access a broader curriculum,
- Connect to iwi from different parts of the country,
- Be part of diverse learning communities,
- Be retained in their own local communities, this contributes to their well being and the health of the community as a whole, especially in rural and disadvantaged communities.

For schools:
Teacher expertise can be shared across the system, leveraging on skills from one area to support needs in other areas,
Raise teacher capability through teaching online & blended, and by supporting online learners.

Barriers - need to:
- Have a consistent, shared definition of online learning
- A common misunderstanding is that online learning is a more 'cost effective' model of provision, whereas, if it is done well it requires a similar level of resourcing as purely face-to-face learning opportunities.
- Think with a collaborative mindset not from service/curriculum delivery mindset
- Put needs of all students first, not just the students from your own school - Tomorrow's Schools environment makes this difficult
- Integrate seamlessly through blending face to face & online for students by aligning online learning with specific learning goals and pathways and for schools and communities by aligning strategic goals and pathways.
- Have coordination and support, mechanism for contributing & participating in equitable ways. High level of support for learners and teachers.

This is what the VLN communities have been developing for the last 15+ years. It can't be done by one school in isolation, it needs to be schools working together systemwide. It needs a framework for good pedagogical practice, resourcing and support.

4. How can online learning, and in particular, online distance learning, be used to improve education outcomes for children and young

people at risk of disengaging or in need of additional learning support?

Firstly online learning needs to be more clearly defined, if you are consulting with the sector you need to be more specific about what you mean. It is important to make the distinction between online learning platforms and software, where children are being taught *by* technology and virtual learning, where children learn together with online teachers in both synchronous and asynchronous environments (the second definition is the model of learning that is practiced by the VLN Primary School).

Online learning when done well, can support children who are at risk or in need of additional learning support as it provides children with a safe environment to access the curriculum, and helps develop key competencies and social skills. Online learning gives students more agency in their learning by enabling personalised learning pathways. Students have a better measure of themselves as a learner and are more equipped to make the transition to secondary school.

Principals have told us that online is very motivating for children who are not engaging or who have diverse learning needs. Children have opportunities to experience success, access learning in different way, show leadership and support other learners.

For ALL learners, regardless of age or ability, learning support is most important. School based support is critical to students' success; and strategies such as communication, adult support and supervision, and scaffolding learners to develop independent learning skills are important.

From recent research, our Principals tell us that:
- Online learning is beneficial to learners but one small part of their whole learning experience,
- Blended learning was considered to provide a good balance between online and face to face learning,
- There will always be a need for a physical place for 'school' and adult educators - however this may look or be called in the future;

And that benefits to learners are:
- A connection to the wider world,
- Access to curriculum subjects,
- Catering for special interests & diverse learners,
- Learning alongside peers their own age,
- Interacting with teachers other than their own,
- Prepared children to go to secondary school,
- Engaged families & communities,
- Students retained in their schools.

Supporting Documents:

VLN Primary Schools Feedback 2017

Collaboration Across New Zealand Rural Primary Schools: A Virtual Learning Perspective
(Unpublished Thesis 2017)

Grassroots Funding Report - Wairakei School "Connecting to Expert Teachers Virtually" (*this is a MoE report and not public - it would be good to have public access to this please.*

VLN Primary School - CoOLs Submission