Chris Herlihy Wanted a Strategic Plan His School Could Get Behind

When Chris Herlihy took on the principalship of Te Uho o te Nikau Primary School in Flatbush, Tāmaki Makaurau in 2024, he inherited a strategic plan that wasn't his. "It was great, there was nothing wrong with it, but it wasn't mine," he says. "I found it very difficult to follow because it wasn't mine. I'd had no input into it."

Chris has led schools for 13 years, and along the way has mentored five deputy principals into principalship of their own. These days he's at Te Uho o te Nikau, a school where 35 different cultures and 50 languages are represented.

The requirement to submit an updated plan gave him the chance to start again from a blank page, with a new community, and he decided to do it properly this time, through the Strategic Leadership for Principals Programme, alongside his capacity partner, Joy.

The Strategic Leadership for Principals Programme (SLPP) runs over 10 months and connects principals with strategic leaders from outside education, working in cohorts through a series of workshops delivered both in person around the country and online, alongside a dedicated one-to-one capacity partner.

For Chris, one of the clearest outputs of that work has been the plan-on-a-page, the single-page strategic plan overview that forced him and his cohort to get precise about what really mattered.

Each cohort is also facilitated by a volunteer skilled in strategic leadership development, who brings the programme content to life. Megan McGrath does that for Chris's cohort.

Building it from scratch

SCOT and PESTLE are among the tools the programme uses to work through strategic thinking.. "As we develop through workshop after workshop, it's amazing that everything goes back to that," Chris says.

The real test was getting it all down to the plan-on-a-page. Dianne, the programme's Delivery Manager, gave Chris and his fellow cohort members direct, no-nonsense feedback along the way. "She was pretty brutal with us. Too many words," he laughs.

Between Dianne's feedback and further sessions with his capacity partner Joy, Chris credits the two of them with getting him there. "They guided us to be able to pull things out to ensure that our goals were succinct, the initiatives were succinct, and linked directly to the success that we wanted." The result, he says, is a document his whole school is proud of and working through, not one gathering dust in a drawer.

His leadership team now unpacks the plan together at weekly meetings, a routine part of how they work. "To begin with, it was me doing the work and then presenting it back to them for feedback," he says. Before long, he realised he couldn't do it alone, which reflects how Chris sees leadership more broadly: "giving others real opportunities to grow into leadership themselves, rather than holding it tightly."

Joy, his capacity partner, sees it as a skill Chris was deliberately building, not just a step in getting the plan finished. "Bringing his team and the board on this journey was going to be key, and a leadership skill Chris wanted to hone," Joy says.

The vision statement itself went through 16 rounds of feedback from staff and students before landing, something Chris says caught his staff by surprise when he told them. "The vision has purely come from your feedback."

He's kept that habit going since, closing the loop with regular updates once decisions are made, so staff and the wider community keep buying into the work and always have a genuine chance to feed back into it.

At the same time, he was careful not to throw out what was already working. The school's values and its motto stayed put, "with that direct link to Ngāi Tai ki Tāmaki, our local iwi," and the new vision builds on the old one rather than replacing it outright.

An outside view

Chris puts a lot of what's worked down to his capacity partner. "She is so knowledgeable and she works so hard in the background. I don't think we appreciate that they go away and they're actually part of the school."

Joy brings a perspective shaped by years of success in the business world, and Chris says that's exactly the value she adds. Her outside view helped him get honest about measurement, working out which of his initiatives could actually be tracked and which couldn't, sharpening the plan into something genuinely measurable.

"Our sessions are full of gold, and I'm an avid golfer," Chris says. "I think Joy's learned a lot about golf over time, because she'll often use golf terminology, or

put together little infographics that use golf, just to make it a little bit clearer to me."

It's a strength that runs through the wider cohort too. SLPP is delivered to cohorts of principals through a series of workshops, each led by an expert facilitator, with every principal also paired one-to-one with a capacity partner bringing experience from outside education.

Comparing notes with people facing very different pressures in their own sectors gave Chris some perspective on his own. "Knowing the challenges that we face are being faced by everybody, it's not just education where there's all these rapid changes."

Beyond the plan itself, he says the programme has given him something harder to put a number on: real confidence in his own decisions. "I can stand up and say that I'm doing what's right for my school and my community. And if you've got the data to back it up, it's very hard for someone to go, well, you're doing it wrong."

That clarity carries through to something as ordinary as board reporting. Before, Chris says, updates could feel like "creative writing," casting around each month for something to say. Now every initiative is tied to a specific measurement. "I know exactly when we do report back, I know exactly what measurements link to each initiative. So it makes your reporting a lot easier, rather than thinking, oh, what am I going to say."

His advice to other principals

> *"Just do it. It's the best PLD I've had as a principal."*

His advice for anyone considering it:

- - Calendarise the time each week for strategic thinking, because it's the first thing to get squeezed out by the day to day.
- - Lean on your capacity partner as much as you can.
- - Don't skip the workshops. "When we get a full room with everybody in there, the energy and the dialogue that goes backwards and forwards is incredible. That's where you form not only the partnerships, but pretty good friendships too."

> *"Every principal should be doing this," Chris says.*

What it's added up to

Eight months into the programme, Chris says what's changed goes beyond the plan itself. SLPP has sharpened how he leads: protecting real time for strategic

thinking each week, bringing his leadership team into the work rather than carrying it alone, and building the confidence to stand behind decisions with evidence to back them.

> *"Te Uru Amokura gave me the clarity and confidence to lead with a vision strong enough to outlast any government, and the partnerships to make it real."*

There are only a few spots left in the 2027 SLPP cohort. If Chris's experience sounds like something your school could use, express your interest below.

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