Case studies in

Innovative thinking from New Zealand's public sector

Case Study #1:

ROCKON gets results – but it's not rocket science

A highly successful inter-agency tactic for tackling truancy is "not rocket science, it's simple. Just get the right people together at the right time for the right purpose,"[1] says a participant.

ROCKON (Reduce Our Community Kids Offending Now) began in the Waikato and has expanded steadily across the country. At mid-2011, there were more than 70 ROCKON groups involving schools, government agencies and Police.

A developing philosophy

ROCKON began in 2003 in North Hamilton, prompted by Police concerns about the high number of serious youth offenders who were also regular truants.

Traditionally, Police, schools and government agencies had addressed attendance problems (and worked with the same young people) independently, with variable results. "We thought we could do this better,"[2] said Jackie Talbot, the Ministry of Education's Manager of Education, Curriculum and Performance for the Central North Region.

Local agencies and schools joined forces, sharing information and coordinating actions. The model was soon picked up in other areas, and consistent guidelines developed. Core members of ROCKON groups are representatives from local schools who elect to be involved, the Police, Ministry of Education, Truancy Services, and Child, Youth and Family. Groups may also include public health nurses, staff from the Resource Teacher: Learning & Behaviour service, Child and Adolescent Mental Health, Strengthening Families coordinators, and local non-government organisations. Agencies' involvement is formalised through memorandums of understanding, although participants say relationships between individuals are the 'glue' that holds groups together. Groups meet monthly and are chaired by Police.

The programme's underlying philosophy has evolved. According to a 2010 investigation commissioned by the Ministry of Education:

> *"ROCKON is not just about compliance and prosecution, but about getting a community together to support a young person and their family, and to engage a family in education... [It has become] a broader based proactive programme that has as its central tenet the value of education."*

Addressing attendance through family-agency partnership, rather than meting out punishment or blame, is key to ROCKON's philosophy. For some involved, the partnership approach is entirely new. One parent originally considered that government agencies and her child's school "did not listen to families, did not understand family needs and really were something to be avoided at all costs." ROCKON showed her that "not only did the school care about her son, but the Police cared about her son too," leading the wider family to rethink some long-held attitudes.

At the same time, the involvement of Police gives ROCKON real 'teeth'. Families know it is a compliance mechanism that can ultimately lead to prosecution.

Multiple benefits

ROCKON has gained national momentum for a simple reason: schools, agencies and communities find it works. A lack of comprehensive national data makes it difficult to quantify the programme's impact. However, evaluations of selected ROCKON and RAAYS[3] initiatives in 2003, 2008 and 2009 found evidence of reduced truancy and youth offending, while attendance increased. Inter-agency communication and collaboration also significantly improved.

The 2010 investigation highlighted the range of benefits it can deliver:

Benefits for students:

- Participating schools report better attendance. Students themselves acknowledge that this is the vital first step. "Everything has changed for me. I am doing the work in class, I am going to class, I'm not sitting with the wrong kids, it's turned things around for me," said one student quoted in the review.
- Student achievement improves as the routine of attending school became more motivating and rewarding.

Benefits for schools and communities:

- ROCKON is locally driven and locally responsive. The push to establish an inter-agency group comes from local schools and agencies – in fact, many involved think the programme would not work if nationally mandated.
- Schools remain self-managing. They decide who to refer to ROCKON and when, and continue with their own attendance procedures and policies.
- Responding to truancy becomes a challenge for the wider community, rather than for schools alone.

Benefits for government agencies

- The inter-agency approach costs agencies (and schools) no more than tackling the same truancy problems independently. For most, it is "just a different way of working with the same problem that they would have to be managing anyway."
- Relationships between agencies working in the youth sector become stronger and more productive, with high levels of trust and accountability.
- Agencies develop broader understandings of truancy and its causes. As a Police representative explained, "we envisaged [the programme] would be focused on kids who couldn't be bothered attending. [We] now see that a lot of the kids have poor coping strategies and low social skills. They don't want to go to school because of this."

Towards greater effectiveness

The 2010 independent review of ROCKON found that greater national oversight and coordination could make the programme even more effective. It said this would enable more communities to participate, while professional development, training for group members, and data collection and analysis would be better coordinated and more consistent.

For now, ROCKON's champions remain the prime movers behind the very first group, Jackie Talbot of the Ministry of Education and Inspector Karen Henrikson of Hamilton Police. On top of their normal workloads, they travel the country as much as possible to help establish groups, provide ongoing support, and assist agencies with the challenges of working collaboratively. "A lot of work goes into changing agency thinking – getting people to move out of their silo mindset and start thinking 'what can we do together'," Jackie acknowledges.[4]

After eight years, Jackie and Karen remain passionate about ROCKON's ability to improve educational outcomes and address youth crime – areas specifically targeted in Government's ground-breaking Trialling New Approaches to Social Service Delivery initiative. And Jackie says the programme's strengths – low cost, flexibility, local ownership, teamwork – make it a model for all kinds of inter-agency collaboration.

> *"This is a grassroots approach that does not cost any money – it's just about working differently."*[5] ■

The ROCKON process

1. A school identifies a problem by monitoring attendance data. It implements its own measures to address the student's non-attendance eg phone calls, home visits, letters from the Board.
2. If attendance does not improve, the school refers the case to the ROCKON group. At the first meeting, agencies share information about the student, their family, and issues that may be contributing to non-attendance. An appropriate intervention strategy is agreed, and responsibilities allocated.
3. Police hand-deliver the student's family a letter about ROCKON and the proposed intervention. This home visit is also a chance to identify and discuss other issues underlying non-attendance.
4. The school monitors attendance for the next month and reports back to the group. If attendance improves, monitoring usually continues for a few months to ensure there is no relapse.
5. If there is no improvement, ROCKON interventions increase and may include:
   - an informal family hui with all the agencies involved
   - a CYFS Family Group Conference seeking family agreement on a plan of action
   - a decision to prosecute the student's parents or guardians on behalf of the school Board.

   Prosecution is very much a last resort.

1 *An Investigation of Community Based Inter-agency Case Management Approaches to Dealing with Truancy*, C. Malins with B. Burns, D. Grennell & M. Pasene, 2 November 2010, p18. Unless otherwise stated, all other quotations are from this source.
2 'Close watch on truants', *NZ Education Gazette*, 9 Feb 2009, available at http://www.edgazette.govt.nz/Articles/Article.aspx?ArticleId=7765, accessed 27 June 2011
3 Raising Achievement Across the Youth Sector, a spinoff programme established in Porirua in 2006
4 Personal communication, 4 July 2011
5 Personal communication, 21 February 2011