

Auckland and perhaps lost to the region. If they show true ability and that's been identified at a younger age, there are schools in Auckland that will provide some form of scholarship or something to assist those children to attend their school. How do you compete with that down here? If you have an opportunity to send a boy to one of the private schools in town, say Kings, St Kentigerns, Auckland Boys Grammar – and they're going to look at paying half or all of his fees? Parents want what's best for their children. Why would you not take hold of that opportunity and send your child there?

Then you come back to "are there mechanisms in place to protect those kids, from a selfish point of view – for Counties?" If they go up there, is there something to ensure those kids come back here when they've finished to play for Counties?" I'm not sure there is at present. There are children from Counties who have been picked up by the Auckland Academy system up there, and I feel that they're probably lost now, unless Auckland decides they're not quite good enough and discards them. Then they might choose to come back here. But if they choose to say, "you are good enough, we're going to hang onto you," then Counties has lost them.

We need in some way to ensure we can keep some of those kids who leave to go to the city, by putting some mechanism in place to bring them back here - like a bonding system. It might cost a few dollars initially, but long term, you would reap those rewards, if they end up playing for Counties at a later date. Some kids leave this area to go to Sacred Heart, because we don't have a Catholic High School in the area and some very good players have come out of there recently. What is imperative is that those players are kept here – Counties could have someone whose prime objective is to ensure these players get a chance to be part of the Counties Academy side and secure those players from the city who might originally be from here. Perhaps looking at team photos from four or five years ago, and seeing that these kids may now be 15 at schoolboy level, finding out where they are – are they going to school in the area or up in Auckland. And then touching base with them and finding out what their intentions are. We need to fill in that gap now and carry on monitoring, because up in Auckland, kids are always going to be right out there, under the eyes of the selectors. Some from our area go to school in Hamilton and it's important that they are brought back here too.

#### POP OUT BOXES:

"Playing rugby is such a natural thing for children to do – it's good for their health, gets them off the couch and promotes ethos as a team, teaching them to inter-relate and get on with others. Rugby, like all team sports is valuable to teach life skills and is very social - friends made on the sports field are friends for life. It is a great avenue for a lot of children to succeed."

- Marlene Fletcher: Deputy Principal Buckland School, life-long supporter of rugby and children's sport, rep team manager, rugby referee, school rugby coach. Marlene holds rugby skills days attended by members of the Steelers prior to the season to help parents support children in the sport.

