



A snapshot of New Zealand primary schools in 2007—some key findings from the NZCER national survey

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NZCER's national surveys of primary schools have been running since 1989, when New Zealand introduced school self-management with boards of trustees. As New Zealand's national independent educational research organisation, we wanted to see what the impact of this major change was over time. We've also tracked other changes in schools, with regular reports on principal, teacher, trustee, and parent experiences and views.

The surveys go to a representative sample of New Zealand primary and intermediate schools. In June 2007, we sent surveys to 351 schools, and surveyed parents at a further representative subsample of 36 schools. Response rates were 56 percent for principals, 48 percent for teachers, and 47 percent for trustees and parents. The responses were generally representative of the national school characteristics, with some under-representation of decile 1–2 schools among teachers and trustees, and over-representation of larger and urban schools among teachers (because the larger the school, the more teachers we sampled).

This snapshot aims to give a quick and up-to-date overview of what is happening in our primary and intermediate schools. We'll be following this up with two more in-depth reports early in 2008 that bring together information from this primary school survey and our 2006 secondary school survey. One report will focus on curriculum, assessment, and ICT use as we head into the new curriculum, and the other will focus on school resources, culture, and connections.

There are many positives in this snapshot picture. Principals and teachers are reporting gains for student performance from the focus of the last few years on professional development and assessment for learning. School cultures appear to bring staff together more to share ideas and focus on how to improve student performance. Parents continue to express high levels of satisfaction with school quality, and trust in their child's teacher and school. Trustees are largely confident, yet they would like more support for their work.

The increased focus on student performance has led to more interest in having more information about it, and for parents, ideas of how to support it. Some countries have set national standards for student performance, with mixed results. Unqualified support for introducing minimum standards in New Zealand is not high; with concern shown about how standards would be measured and the information used.

Funding dominates the issues that people identify. Workloads and having enough time for the new ways of working together and greater analysis of assessment data that now occur also loom large when principals and teachers think of their work, and the sustainability of the gains they have made.

Trustees

In 2007, primary school trustees gave an average 3.4 hours a week to this role, much the same as in previous years. Key elements in that role were most likely to be seen as providing strategic direction for the school and supporting the school staff, rather than scrutinising school performance (though 80 percent said they did this regularly), overseeing finances, employing the school staff, overseeing the principal, or being an agent of government. However, boards were most likely to spend more of their time on financial management, followed by property/maintenance, and monitoring school progress.

A fifth thought their responsibilities were too high, fewer than in 2003, and much lower than their secondary counterparts in the 2006 NZCER national survey. All trustees surveyed wanted some changes to their role: most wanted more money for their school; around a third each sought more knowledge or training, reduced compliance costs relating to education legislation, more support from the Ministry of Education, and more support from parents. Close to half the trustees who came onto their school board in the April elections had no induction for their role, or only material to read. A third of the trustees said their school had not held an election (because there were no more applicants than vacancies).

Trustees were generally positive about the information they got about the school and student performance from their principal. Almost all got regular information on student achievement, progress on the school's annual goals, property, and finance.

Most trustees' schools had consulted with parents in the last year, with about a third of parents taking part, usually through responding to newsletters, questionnaires, or attending meetings.

Business skills, financial skills, and skills in property maintenance and repair were the main areas of expertise within the trustees' boards. Just over half thought their board had governance, strategic planning, understanding assessment data, and fundraising expertise, with even fewer thinking their board had legal or industrial relations expertise. However, most thought their board was making steady progress or was on top of its task (89 percent).

Good financial management, planning for the future, improving grounds or buildings, retaining good staff, and the quality of the school were main achievements of the past year. Funding was by

far the major issue identified as facing trustees' schools (71 percent), followed by property development (43 percent), student achievement (31 percent), parent and community support (25 percent), a declining school roll (24 percent), and assessment workload (22 percent).

Trustees' replies to a question about the roles their closest Ministry of Education office could play in supporting them indicate that many would like more advice and support from this source than they are currently getting.

Parents

All but 8 percent of parents said their child was at the school of their first choice. A third were bypassing their closest school to get to this school. Families were usually relying on information about the school they chose from other people and previous family experience, with just under a third visiting the school themselves, and 26 percent looking at the school's most recent Education Review Office (ERO) report. Other parents, friends, and family were parents' main sources of information about education in general, closely followed by newspapers and books, and then by TV and the Internet. Just over a quarter had used information from ERO, 19 percent information from the Ministry of Education, and 6 percent had used the Team-Up website.

Including school donations, activity fees, school trips, uniforms, school fundraising, stationery, and transport to and from school, parents spent an average of \$489 a year on their primary school child's education.

Most parents had some contact with their child's teacher, and almost all thought that their child's teacher would be available if the parent wanted to talk with them. Two-thirds said the information they got about their child's overall learning programme and progress was good or very good. Around 40 percent would like more information about their child's progress: most of these would like either a comparison with national standards, or information about the assessments being used, more detailed information, and ideas to support learning, and many would like more information about their child's attitudes or behaviour.

Parents are generally happy with the quality of their child's education (83 percent), with 9 percent expressing uncertainty, and 7 percent expressing dissatisfaction. Just under half would like to see some changes though, with smaller classes at the top of the list, followed by more communication about their child's progress, more help for their child individually, and more information to support learning at home.

Most parents (88 percent) felt welcome in their child's school, 10 percent felt welcome some of the time, and only 1 percent said they did not feel welcome. Just under a quarter of the parents had no involvement in their child's school—an improvement on the 35 percent in 1999, but more than the 14 percent in 1989, when we first switched to self-managing schools. More parents were helping with sport (40 percent cf. 25 percent in 1999), and somewhat more with school trips; about the same in classrooms (now 19 percent), and somewhat less with fundraising (41 percent cf. 50 percent in 1999).

Most parents also felt they got enough school-level information from their child's school (all were getting regular newsletters, and three-quarters got one weekly; websites were used less often and by less than 20 percent of parents). While just over half thought their school genuinely consulted them about new directions or issues, with another 26 percent unsure, only 13 percent would like to have more say in their school, with another 10 percent unsure about this.

Just under half the parents had voted in this year's board elections at their school, with their choice between candidates influenced by whether a candidate had shown previous commitment to the school, had the skills the school needed, or was known to the parent. Reasons for not voting were mainly to do with not getting round to it, thinking that it did not matter who was on the board, or lacking enough information to make decisions. Like trustees, parents also think that the key element of the board of trustees' role is to give strategic direction to the school, but parents place more weight on representing parents.

Also like trustees, funding tops the list of issues parents see confronting their school, followed by keeping good teachers.

In June–July when this survey went out, most parents had not heard of the new national curriculum that was launched on 6 November. Of the quarter who had, views were divided between not knowing what difference it would make to learning in the school; hopes that it would enrich learning; and that what it meant for the school would depend on what the school decided to do with it.

Teachers

Over 90 percent of teachers enjoyed their job. Most were positive about the general support they got and their opportunities to continue learning. Morale levels were much the same as they had been in 2003, with two-thirds saying their morale as a teacher was good or very good.

But less than half of the teachers thought their workload was fair or manageable, and only 32 percent that their work and personal life were balanced. Despite the introduction of classroom release time, most teachers continued to work outside school hours, with half putting in at least 16 additional hours a week. Not surprisingly, around three-quarters would reduce the amount of administration or paperwork, and reduce class sizes. Next on the list of changes they would make was having more time to work with individual students, and better pay.

Over half included improvements in student achievement among their main achievements as a teacher in the last three years. Other main achievements included increasing their own knowledge and skills, improving the learning environment and teaching programme, and improving student assessment for learning.

Around two-thirds of the teachers were in schools where they felt teachers had a good or better level of working together to plan, to share resources and ideas, and to support each other when they encountered teaching or behaviour problems. About half were in schools where they reported

good or better consistency of teacher assessment, discussion of student assessment results to improve student performance, and sharing of ideas to improve students' performance.

Yet there were signs that teachers may not get the time and experiences they need to support these practices. Twenty-nine percent said they had enough time to work together to plan and discuss student work, and 22 percent enough release time to plan and implement new initiatives in their school. Around half thought they had enough access to professional development, other staff, and resources. Around half also thought their school did not get distracted from priorities, but around half also thought that they didn't get the opportunity to bed changes in before the school moved on to another initiative. Around 20 percent of the teachers thought that their school let external organisations dictate how they did things at their school. Only 11 percent said they had opportunities to see good teaching practice in other schools.

The new curriculum was seen as providing the opportunity to integrate different curriculum areas and skill development (50 percent), or to focus on fewer things (47 percent). Some felt it would not make much difference to their teaching, possibly because quite a few were already integrating different curriculum areas, using the key competencies, and using inquiry learning and problem-solving approaches. To make the most of the new curriculum, the main thoughts were that teachers needed to discuss it and examine what others were doing; and they needed good professional development, collaboration with other schools, external support, and time.

Around 70 percent said there was a regular identification of failing students and a focus on their achievement in their school, and that student achievement data was used to make important decisions. The same proportion thought there was a 'can do' attitude at their school. Around half thought that teachers took part in important decision making, that everything fitted together well at their school, and that everyone pulled their weight.

Only a third of the teachers felt that career progression was available at their school. Thirteen percent of teachers expressed interest in becoming a principal in future, and another 15 percent were unsure, much the same as in 2003.

Over 80 percent said that students at their school were generally enthusiastic about learning, believed they could make progress in their learning, and were clear about the behaviour standard that the school expected. Seventy-three percent thought that students at their school showed respect to the teachers.

Parents were seen as generally interested in their children's learning (80 percent), and teachers said they encouraged feedback from parents (84 percent), and regularly talked to parents about how to help their child's learning (76 percent). About 60 percent of parents in their classes had discussed their child's last report with the teachers.

Almost all the teachers made some use of ICT for learning, and saw it as helping to make learning more engaging for students (84 percent), and to a lesser extent to help them integrate knowledge from different subject areas (69 percent) and get deeper understanding (55 percent). Two-thirds said the use of ICT was an essential and routine part of learning. However, most of the specific ICT uses we asked about do not occur often in classes. Where ICT was used often, it was for

creating printed documents (42 percent), interactive games to develop skills (37 percent), for students searching independently for information (29 percent), and for practising skills such as addition (22 percent).

Teachers think that key elements in the role of the board of trustees are to support the school staff (84 percent), and then to provide strategic direction for the school, represent parents in the school, and oversee finances. A fifth see being an agent of government as a key element in the board's role.

Funding tops teachers' list of the major issues facing their school (60 percent), with the next top issues being assessment workload (43 percent), and property development (39 percent).

Principals

Funding was also a major issue for principals. All but 5 percent said their funding was not enough to meet their school's needs. In addition, half said their 2007 financial situation was worse than 2006, either because costs had risen or they had less income than expected, and another 16 percent said 2007 was better than 2006, because they had cut costs. Forty-six percent thought their school could end the 2007 year in deficit.

A quarter thought their staffing entitlement was enough to meet their school's needs. Two-thirds were employing an average of 1.2 additional teachers from their operational and locally raised funds, mainly to teach a particular curriculum area, provide literacy or numeracy support, and work with students with special needs.

Just over half the principals had difficulty finding suitable teachers for their school, mainly because of a limited number of suitable applicants. Thirty-nine percent were having difficulty finding suitable teachers for school management roles. They thought the main reasons for this were that the responsibility outweighed the additional money, the workload was demanding, and they could not offer enough management units to cover the management work at the school.

Most of the principals also had at least occasional difficulty finding registered teachers to relieve their staff, with a quarter having frequent difficulty. The main reason was that there were too few good-quality relieving teachers available, with many in long-term relieving positions.

Only 15 percent thought they had enough funding to employ the support staff the school needed.

A fifth of the principals thought there was some community interest in changing or adding to their school's present programme. Possible changes included adding bilingual units, having more emphasis on sports or arts or languages, more inquiry learning, and parent workshops.

Primary schools were putting their main energy and focus into teaching mathematics (69 percent), reading (68 percent), and writing (60 percent). Around half the principals said making more use of formative assessment, inquiry learning, and ICT were where they were putting their main energy and focus. Next were getting to grips with the new curriculum, then in draft form (26 percent), engaging parents in their children's learning (22 percent), and teaching physical activity/health

(21 percent). Ten percent were focused on marketing their school or arresting roll decline. Arts teaching was a specific major focus for 6 percent, social studies for 3 percent, and science for 2 percent.

Eighty percent of the principals reported some marked gains in student performance over the last three or so years, mostly in literacy (55 percent) and numeracy (30 percent). These gains were mainly attributed to an increase in teachers' knowledge and confidence, school-wide professional development, having more consistency across the school, and making better use of assessment data. Around half also mentioned teachers working together more on looking at assessment results, sharing goals for students with the students, and changing their approaches in some areas.

Sustaining these gains was found to be difficult though for 58 percent of those principals who reported gains in student performance. High levels of staff commitment were required, key staff were lost, other areas might need to be prioritised, and sometimes additional funding from contestable pools was coming to an end. Only 34 percent of the principals thought their school could afford the professional development it needed.

Many of the schools had benefited from Ministry of Education initiated or supported professional development programmes over the last five years, particularly the numeracy contract, and work on literacy; some with the literacy professional development programme, some with the ATOL programme, and some with school support services and consultants; and from being in an ICT cluster.

While schools are making more use of assessment information to guide their work with students to improve their learning, principals are not in favour of having national minimum standards of achievement. These remain controversial. Trustees show more support, but, like principals and teachers, most trustees are also cautious about the form they could take and the use made of the information (see Table 1). In our 2008 report on curriculum and assessment, we'll follow up these concerns by reporting on the experiences of other countries with national standards, and the impact they have had on curriculum and student outcomes.

Table 1 Primary school views of national minimum standards of achievement

View	Principals (n=196) %	Teachers (n=912) %	Trustees (n=329) %
In favour	10	13	38
Depends on how the standards are measured	32	44	47
Depends on how the information is used	37	38	36
Depends on the standards	34	33	32
Not in favour	53	32	12
Not sure	8	12	6

* Column numbers add to more than 100% because people could express more than one view.

Principals were generally positive about their work with their board of trustees. Strategic direction and support for school staff are the two key elements they see in the board's work. Principals put more weight than do trustees on financial oversight and employment of school staff as being key elements in board of trustees' work. Just over half thought that the strongest voice on the board came from both the board chair and principal, and 89 percent said there was trust between themselves and the board chair (as did 90 percent of the trustees). However, 55 percent of primary principals thought that the overall amount of responsibility asked of school trustees was too high.

Principals were also less sanguine about board capability than trustees, with only 71 percent thinking that their school's previous board (before the April elections) was making steady progress or was on top of its task. Sixty-five percent thought this board had added value to the school. Just under half had experienced problems at some stage with a board, including 23 percent with minor problems at their current school, and 10 percent who faced major problems.

Most schools have some contact with their neighbouring schools, mainly through being part of a cluster, sharing professional development, or resources or support. Thirty percent said there was some competition between them and other local schools, a decrease from the 43 percent in 2003. Around three-quarters of principals would like to see more contact with other local schools, particularly around sharing professional development and providing professional support, and to gain access to new funding pools that require schools to work together. A quarter would like to share specialist facilities.

Over 70 percent of the principals said they got appropriate and timely advice and support from the local office of the Ministry of Education, New Zealand School Trustees' Association, NZEI, and School Support Services (advice and professional development providers located within universities and contracted by the Ministry of Education). Sixty-one percent said this applied to the national office of the Ministry of Education, and around half, to ERO and Group Special Education. They were less likely to get such advice and support from the Teachers Council or Child, Youth and Family.

Like their secondary counterparts, principals do think that the Ministry of Education has a role to provide them with advice and support, particularly around property and if they encounter a problem (over 90 percent already experience or would like this). Sixty percent would like or already have professional discussions on their annual report and targets. Views are more divided when it comes to principal appointments, with half wanting Ministry of Education advice to a school board on principal appointment, and 39 percent wanting the Ministry of Education to work with a school board to appoint a principal.

Like teachers, all but a few principals enjoy their job. Their morale levels are also similar. However, 42 percent rated their typical stress level this year as high or extremely high, and their average work week continues to be 59 hours. Only 29 percent think their work and personal life are balanced. Just under half think they can manage their workload. Only 20 percent of the principals thought they had enough time for professional leadership in their job.

Something of the multiple competing priorities for schools and principals is evident in looking at principals' identification of the issues facing their school. Like everyone else, funding is clearly in front (82 percent), yet there were about nine other areas that came next, identified by between 42 and 28 percent. These included property development, the new curriculum, student achievement, ICT, using assessment data, assessment workload, assessment driving curriculum, staffing levels, and declining school rolls.

On the whole, this snapshot shows that our primary schools are largely positive places, with an interest in continuously developing their practice to meet children's needs. They have benefited in recent years from more support from the Ministry of Education in the way of professional development, curriculum, and assessment resources. But what is also apparent is that our self-managing schools need continual support to sustain their gains, and that the workload, funding, and staffing issues that have been increasingly evident in the NZCER surveys over time will not go away unless we are prepared to take some new approaches in what we ask of schools.¹

¹ Some suggestions for how we could refresh our system are given in *What can New Zealand learn from Edmonton?* NZCER Occasional paper, available at www.nzcer.org.nz/default.php?cPath=130_137&products_id=1991