

Communities of Learning | Kāhui Ako: The Emergent Stage

Cathy Wylie

Findings from the NZCER National Survey of Primary
and Intermediate Schools 2016

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Key findings

Communities of Learning | Kāhui Ako (CoL) have become part of many primary and intermediate principals' work. Two-thirds of the principals responding to the NZCER national survey in August–September 2016 were engaged in the process of CoL formation or early CoL activity.

There is general expectation among the primary principals that CoL will lead to major changes for principals, teachers and students; but the nature of that change seems indistinct to many, reflecting the pioneering nature of this major change.

Sharing of useful knowledge for teaching and learning is the change most expected of CoL. Under half the primary principals in the 2016 NZCER national survey thought CoL would lead to more use of effective inquiry to improve teaching and learning, or more traction on tackling issues around student achievement and engagement.

Expectations are higher among principals whose CoL has done the work to set its achievement challenges. But the achievement challenges may have been too ambitious and set too quickly: only 33% of these principals thought their CoL's achievement challenges were achievable in their time-frame (not surprising since many early ones were set for the end of 2017, with many of the pioneering CoL in the very early stages of real across-school work). Only 56% of these principals also thought their challenges were realistic given the capability of their CoL.

There are tensions evident in survey responses expressing concern about potential negative impacts for individual schools that point to the depth of change and support needed for CoL to succeed. For example, competition between schools is hard to shake off, particularly for primary schools (usually there is only one secondary school in a CoL).

The next few years will therefore be critical for the long-term system change that is signalled by the CoL policy. CoL will need time and well-informed support to ensure that they develop purposeful collaboration that grows member schools' capability.

1.

Introduction

NZCER has run national surveys of primary and intermediate schools since 1989 to show what is happening in schools, and how policy is playing out over time. This report focuses on the questions we asked in 2016 about the new Communities of Learning policy.

Communities of Learning: The policy

Just before the start of the 2014 school year, Prime Minister John Key's announcement of a new educational policy signalled a significant shift in the course of New Zealand's over-reliance on school self-management to provide good-quality, equitable education.¹ *Investing in Educational Success* (IES) provided \$359 million over 4 years, with the intent of lifting student achievement in all schools. Most of this money was to go to new teaching and leadership roles in communities of schools.

While our education system is doing a great job for many kids, on an international scale our achievement ranking has been gradually declining since the early 2000s. We need to enhance the teaching and leadership in the system to raise achievement for five out of five young New Zealanders. These new roles will recognise and use talent where it's needed most and will be implemented from next year to support communities of schools across the country. It is intended that all roles will be fully in place by 2017. (Hon Hekia Parata, Minister of Education, Media Statement, 23 January 2014)

The emphasis on collaboration as a vehicle for improvement was also echoed in the construction of a sector–Ministry of Education working group to flesh out the design, whose report at the end of April 2014 informed final Cabinet decisions on the policy. This working group reframed some of the policy's initial rather individualist emphasis on the new roles (for example, 'Executive Principal' became 'Community of Schools Leadership role'), and agreed on a working definition of student achievement as "valued outcomes as set out in the New Zealand Curriculum and/or Te Marautanga o Aotearoa including student achievement".² It noted the large amount of work that would be needed to implement the new policy,

1 Wylie, C. (2012). *Vital Connections. Why we need more than self-managing schools*. Wellington: NZCER Press.

2 *Investing in Educational Success Working Group Report* (2014), p. 7.
<http://www.education.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Ministry/Investing-in-Educational-Success/Investing-in-Educational-Success-Working-Group-Report-3-June-2014.pdf>

including the inclusion of the new roles in collective employment agreements. A further workstream was to produce guidance on the formation of Communities of Schools by the end of August.

The working group also developed a set of principles to guide the IES implementation, which was described as “a system change”.³ These principles are:

- (a) schools need to be actively supported in establishing their Communities of Schools, implementing the initiative and developing their achievement goals
- (b) implementation of IES initiatives will be led by schools and their communities, who will be supported in setting achievement objectives by the Ministry
- (c) implementation will model behaviours that support collaboration and a positive professional school culture
- (d) sector representatives and the Ministry will work together to implement the IES initiatives
- (e) implementation will be cognisant of school operations to minimise impact.

However, NZEI remained concerned that so much of the IES funding would go to individual salaries, leaving small amounts for other teachers to engage in collaborative work or inquiry, or for the provision of external expertise and advice; that the new positions would take a lead principal and across-school teachers out of their existing responsibilities for 2 days a week, to the detriment of their schools and students⁴; that the pathway model of collaboration between primary and secondary schools following students’ schooling journeys did not include early childhood education, and would not support many existing school clusters; that there were equally pressing needs for more funding; and that a major system change such as this needed real consultation with the sector beforehand.⁵ A majority of its members voted no confidence in the model in August 2014. NZPF members and Te Akatea New Zealand Māori Principals also expressed concern.

This pushback led to the Joint Initiative between NZEI and the Ministry of Education, announced in December 2014, which sought to “identify flexible models of collaboration, improved transitions for children and students from early childhood education through their schooling, and the possible resourcing and career pathways required to support this”.⁶ These career pathways included early childhood educators, support staff and special education staff. The Joint Initiative work in 2015 asked for examples of successful collaboration, and examined and presented research about effective collaboration and the conditions supporting it. It resulted in some flexibility around the money going to lead principals, leaving more for collaborative work, underlined the importance of including early childhood education (though early childhood educators cannot access the new roles), and of attending to what it takes for educators to work more communally than most have been used to. The new name it gave and which was readily accepted signals that this system-wide change involves new learning for all: Communities of Learning (CoL).

Communities of Learning: Implementation

By the end of 2014, 11 CoL⁷ had been approved to start work together to identify their achievement challenges “which could include matters such as student attendance and engagement, achievement, transitions between different levels or types of schools, and student wellbeing. The critical thing is that

³ Ibid., p. 17.

⁴ These roles are built into existing school positions, extending what a principal or teacher does to work across a CoL, or for the within-school CoL roles, to spend some time working with other teachers in the school, and the across-school CoL teachers.

⁵ See, for example, http://www.educationreview.co.nz/magazine/may-2014/ies-a-sector-divided/#.WCuBv_l96Uk

⁶ http://www.nzei.org.nz/COL/The_Joint_Initiative/What_happened/COL/info.aspx?hkey=144fc613-b0e2-4b6c-a54b-7ac6f31adb8d

⁷ I use CoL to refer to both Communities of Schools and CoL.

the challenges will be specific to the community and reflect the particular needs of the students".⁸ Once achievement challenges had been signed off by the Minister, a CoL could start to make its appointments. A year later, 96 CoL had been proposed, but fewer than 20 had their achievement challenges signed off. By early September 2016, 148 CoL had been formed, involving more than half the country's schools.⁹

The policy suggested that each CoL would include around 10 schools. Many CoL are smaller than this. CoL range from four schools to more than 20 schools. Some flexibility around the local nature of CoL has also occurred, allowing CoL of area schools, Māori-medium and Catholic schools; so long as there is coverage of the student pathway through schooling years. CoL generally consist of one or two secondary schools, an intermediate or two, and primary schools that have substantial or reasonable numbers of students going on to these intermediate and secondary schools. After more than 25 years of school choice, few areas have a perfect match. In 2012, the NZCER secondary national survey (Wylie, 2012)¹⁰ found that 49% of students' first choice of school was also their closest school. CoL funding is roll-based other than the CoL leader's position, leading to different configurations of across-school and within-school teacher roles in different CoL.

It took time for schools to establish the relationships and common ground that would enable them to set achievement challenges. This is consistent with the research on collaboration between schools.¹¹ It also took time for them to be endorsed (signed off). One disappointment for many CoL¹² was that achievement challenges had to be framed in measurable student outcomes, and that usually meant framing them in available measures, primarily National Standards and the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA). An NZEI analysis of the achievement challenges of the first 14 CoL¹³ noted that almost all included goals that matched the Better Public Service national targets of 85% or more of students performing at the National Standards, and 18-year-olds achieving NCEA Level 2, by the end of 2017, presenting many CoL with very ambitious goals. Most CoL also had two or three goals in different curriculum areas, which could make it difficult to maintain focus in the early stage as people are also establishing how they work together best.

Only 19 CoL leaders had been appointed by mid-2016. A policy change then saw CoLs able to appoint their leaders before the finalisation of their achievement challenge, and by early November 2016, 44 CoL leaders had been appointed and 103 across-school teacher roles; 17 CoL had completed all their appointments.

CoL | Kāhui Ako¹⁴ are therefore very much still in an emergent stage, as one might expect with a major change of this nature. It asks schools that have often been competing with each other to trust and work together, sharing their student achievement data. It also asks primary, intermediate and secondary schools to cross the boundaries between different schooling levels, and to orient themselves around student progress through the schooling years. While many schools have taken part in Ministry-funded clusters in the past, few have taken this shape, or set clear and measurable goals. They have been a thread in a school's fabric, but not challenged its boundaries.

Yet the CoL framework does not challenge the core of school self-management. Membership is voluntary, schools can leave a CoL as well as join (they can also belong to more than one). Certainly, the Ministry

8 Ministry of Education media release, 12 December 2014. <http://www.education.govt.nz/ministry-of-education/media-centre/archive-of-media-releases/>

9 <https://national.org.nz/news/2016-09-06-more-than-half-of-schools-in-communities-of-learning>

10 Wylie, C. (2012). *Secondary schools in 2012: Main findings from the NZCER national survey*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

11 For example, Stoll, L., Halbert, J., & Kaser, L. (2012). Deepening learning in school-to-school networks. In C. Day (Ed.), *International handbook on teacher and school development* (pp. 493–512). London: Routledge.

Taylor-Patel, C. (2015). *Networking—weaving the net; gathering the pearls*. Research report prepared for the ASB/APPA Travelling Fellowship Trust. <http://appa.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Cherie-Taylor-Patel.pdf>

12 Voiced in the Education Council's national and regional CoL Leadership forums, and by sector representatives in the IES Advisory Group.

13 Stephanie Mills, personal communication, 28 April 2016.

14 The Māori title was added in September 2016. I have used the CoL term in this report because our survey used that term.

will give priority to CoL in the new arrangements for professional learning funding, and has started to talk of supporting CoL to access property support, IT services, administrative services in ways that leverage efficiencies of scale. The encouragement of inquiry and learning from difference means that it is not expected that schools in a CoL will lose their individual identity. The CoL leader does not have authority over the principals of member schools. Independent national panels employed by the Ministry work with boards on making the CoL leader and across-school teacher appointments to ensure those appointed meet national criteria, but these roles remain employed by their individual school boards. This can give rise to tensions.

Support for the CoL pioneers from government agencies includes advice from the national panel members, from the newly appointed CoL roles at each of the 10 Ministry of Education regional offices, and provision of student achievement and engagement data from the national Ministry of Education. ERO has also offered workshops as CoL form their achievement challenges, bringing together patterns across members' ERO reviews, and discussion of the ERO indicators of effective self-review. From 2017, each CoL will be able to access an 'Expert Partner' for up to 40 days over 2 years, to work with CoL leaders to develop achievement challenges and action plans. External support is recommended for inter-school collaboration that leads to more effective teacher practice; Stoll, Halbert and Kaser note the importance of its role in checking "the horizon of possibility".¹⁵ Since June 2016, the Education Council has run two national forums and 10 regional forums for CoL leaders, including CoL leaders speaking of their journeys to form CoL and start the work, and networking among CoL has begun.

In June 2016, NZPF ran an online survey of its members to see what involvement they had in CoL, and what lay behind that.¹⁶ Responses from 964 principals showed that 45% were engaged in a CoL that was forming or formed. Some wanted to join a CoL and had lodged an expression of interest (10%). Another 18% had lodged an expression of interest, but were undecided whether they did want to join a CoL. Twelve percent were not engaged with the process or were collecting information about CoL (6%), and 12% were not interested in joining a CoL.

The main motivations for joining a CoL were a mix of benefits principals could see of collaboration, and improving student learning outcomes and creating smoother transitions, of access to more resourcing and, for some, pressure from colleagues or the Ministry, and a fear of missing out on professional learning or access to funding.

Principals whose schools were undecided about joining a CoL voiced concerns about the model itself, particularly the role of the lead principal and the resources it took. They also voiced mistrust of the initiative, particularly if they felt pressured by the Ministry to join a CoL or thought that the Ministry was playing too large a role in the development of achievement challenges, which were too narrow. Others saw costs to learning in their own school, with across-school teacher roles not always in their classroom, and to their own workload. Some thought they would struggle to find suitable people for the lead principal and across-school teacher roles, or to find relievers for those roles.

Those who did not want to join a CoL thought their identity and autonomy would be threatened, saw additional workload and time that they could ill afford and were suspicious of their real purpose. Others wanted to remain in existing clusters that were working well, did not want to release their best teachers for other schools' benefit, disliked the set roles or wanted this new funding to be spent directly on students.

As a long-time researcher into the impact of education policy, and into what supports and sustains productive educational leadership, teaching and learning, I have found myself involved in the development of CoL. First, I have been a member of the IES Advisory Group since it formed in mid-2014 to follow through on the principle of the sector and Ministry working together, now including academics and researchers. The

¹⁵ Stoll, Halbert, & Kaser, 2012, op. cit.

¹⁶ *Principals' views on CoLs*. Summary shared with IES Advisory Group Meeting, 26 July 2016.

complexity of the changes involved has been very apparent in these Advisory Group discussions. Second, I was asked to present material about what makes for effective collaboration between schools, and how ready schools might be to collaborate (what experiences of collaboration *within* schools was occurring as well as *between* schools), to the Joint Initiative in 2015.¹⁷ More recently, I have observed the first national CoL leadership forum and four of the regional forums for CoL leadership provided by the Education Council, and at a national CoL forum for those appointed to the CoL leader roles, addressed some of the concerns around achievement challenges that have become increasingly apparent.

This report uses material from NZCER's 2016 national primary and intermediate school survey to see what is happening now, whether some of the reservations about this particular model of collaboration across schools remain, and what principals expect CoL to enable and achieve.

The 2016 NZCER national survey

This year's survey was conducted from August to early September 2016 and was sent to a representative sample of 349 English-medium state and state-integrated primary and intermediate schools (20% of all these schools in New Zealand).¹⁸ At these schools, surveys were sent to the principal and to a random sample of one in two teachers. Surveys also went to the board of trustees' chair, who was asked to give a second trustee survey to someone likely to have a different viewpoint from their own. Additionally, surveys were sent to a random sample of one in four parents at a cross-section of 36 schools. The response rates were 57% for principals ($n = 200$), 38% for teachers ($n = 771$), 25% for trustees ($n = 176$) and 32% for parents and whānau ($n = 504$).

The survey returns for principals, teachers and trustees were generally representative of schools in the sample, with the following small variations:

- Principal returns showed a slight over-representation of large schools, and urban schools. Decile 8–10 schools were somewhat over-represented, as were schools in the Auckland region.
- In the schools from which teachers returned surveys, there was a slight under-representation of large schools, and an over-representation of small–medium and small schools. Slight under-representations were evident of decile 1 schools and schools in the Auckland and Hawke's Bay/ Gisborne Ministry of Education regions.
- The schools from which we received trustee surveys reflected some over-representation of large schools and under-representation of decile 1 schools.

The maximum margin of error¹⁹ for the principal survey is 6.9%, for the teacher survey around 3.5% and for the trustee survey around 7.4%. Sometimes we report results for smaller groups of respondents within each survey; the maximum margin of error reported for each survey does not apply to these groups. Calculating the margin of error relies on random sampling and because we rely on schools to select the teachers and trustees to complete surveys, we cannot guarantee that these samples are random. Therefore, the margins of error for the teacher and trustee surveys should be regarded as approximations. The parent and whānau sample is not a random sample, therefore we do not calculate a margin of error for that survey.

This report uses responses to questions asked of principals, teachers and trustees.

17 Some is included in this PowerPoint: <http://www.nzei.org.nz/documents/JI/Cathy-Wylie-Conditions-for-effective-collaboration.pdf>

18 Further details about the sample, etc. will be available at the project web page (see www.nzcer.org.nz/research/national-survey).

19 The maximum margin of error added to and subtracted from a proportion gives a confidence interval. We can say there is a 95% chance that the proportion is inside this range of numbers.

2.

Engagement in CoL | Kāhui Ako

CoL | Kāhui Ako have become part of many primary and intermediate principals' work. Two-thirds ($n = 144$) of the 200 principals were engaged in the process of CoL formation or early CoL activity in August–September 2016. Table 1 shows the nature of their engagement.

TABLE 1 Primary and intermediate school engagement in CoL formation or activity²⁰

	($n = 200$) %
In discussions with other schools about forming a CoL	28
Part of a CoL, developing our achievement challenges	23
Part of a CoL, achievement challenges endorsed	12
Part of a CoL, waiting for achievement challenges to be endorsed	11
In discussions with our community about forming a CoL	5

A further 10 principals were interested in their school being part of a CoL, but said that other local schools weren't interested, or that there was no local capacity to lead one.

Thirty-six percent of principals ($n = 72$, 26 of whom were also involved in discussions about CoL formation) had some reservations about CoL, as shown in Table 2.²¹

20 Some principals ticked more than one item in questions summarised in Tables 1 to 7.

21 Principals were responding to a set of items about their involvement in CoL.

TABLE 2 **Primary and intermediate school principals with reservations about CoL**

	(n = 200) %
Not interested in joining—don't think current model will work	15
Waiting to see how first CoL work out	12
Not interested in joining—want to stay in existing cluster/network	12
Would join CoL if more flexibility about roles	11
Not interested—don't see benefits for our school	10
Would join CoL if it wasn't based on the student pathway	5

In the 2016 national survey, respondents were asked to identify (any) major issues facing their school from a set of items. The decision on whether to join a CoL was a major issue facing their school for 22% of principals and trustees, and 14% of teachers. Top of the list of major issues facing their school for principals and teachers alike was “too much being asked of schools”, 53% and 46% respectively, followed by resourcing; trustees put property maintenance and development first.

We also asked about engagement in CoL in our 2015 secondary national survey. At that stage 67% of secondary principals said they were either part of a CoL, or discussing it with other schools: much the same proportion as primary²² principals report a year later.

Table 3 compares primary and secondary principals' expectations of CoL. It shows that a greater proportion of secondary principals than primary principals expected changes in line with the ultimate policy purpose of CoL. Both groups are most expectant about something they have probably already experienced in clusters—sharing of useful knowledge for teaching and learning. They are less sure about what is new about the CoL: working together to ensure continual progress for students, tackling issues of achievement and engagement more effectively and making more use of effective inquiry to improve teaching and learning.

 TABLE 3 **Expectations in relation to the policy purpose of CoL**

Expectation	Primary principals	Secondary principals 2015
	2016 (n = 200) %	(n = 182) %
More sharing of useful knowledge for teaching and learning	55	75
Improve student transition to secondary school	48	65
More use of effective inquiry to improve teaching and learning	44	58
More traction on tackling issues around student achievement	42	57
Improvement of student transition from primary to intermediate	39	*
More traction on tackling issues around student engagement	35	53
Improvement of student transition from ECE to primary	28	*

²² I use 'primary' for the rest of this report to refer to both primary and intermediate.

Primary and secondary principals' expectations about what CoL might lead to in terms of relations between schools, resourcing and support were more similar than their views on the purpose of the policy, as shown in Table 4. Generally, few principals expected change here, including in the reduction of competition for students, which may have implications for the depth of CoL activity. More primary principals are hopeful that working with other principals will give principals better professional support, perhaps because secondary schools have larger school leadership teams, and secondary principals have more experience of school leadership roles before they take on the principalship.

TABLE 4 **Expectations of CoL: Relations between schools, resources and support**

Expectation	Primary principals 2016 (n = 200) %	Secondary principals 2015 (n = 182) %
Better professional support for principals	36	23
Sharing of specialist facilities/equipment	32	30
Better interaction with the local Ministry of Education	15	20
Less competition between schools for students	14	11
Schools in a CoL having a single board of trustees	14	7
More effective work with social agencies	10	18
Improvement of transitions for te reo Māori learners from immersion settings to English-medium	5	16

Picking up on the concerns that CoL work could come at the cost of learning in individual schools, we asked primary principals questions related to student needs. Table 5 shows uncertainty around the effects for students, a mixture of some seeing a negative impact for their own students, and others seeing gains. Yet only 16% think that CoL would not lead to major changes for students.

TABLE 5 **Expectations of CoL in relation to students**

Expectation	Primary principals 2016 (n = 200) %
Less focus on student needs specific to this school	24
Less flexibility in how this school responds to student needs	23
More learning opportunities for students than this school can offer on its own	22
Improvement of support for students with additional learning needs	17
No major changes for students	16
More opportunities for Māori students to learn te reo Māori	13
Improvement of transitions for te reo Māori learners from immersion settings to English-medium	5

Table 6 shows that many principals saw the CoL as channels for Ministry of Education resourcing and support, and that there would be less support for schools staying on their own. Close to three-quarters of the principals ticked one or more of these items.

TABLE 6 Expectations of CoL in relation to school resourcing

Expectation	Primary principals 2016 (n = 200) %
Fewer resources for schools not in CoL	49
Less support for schools not in CoL	48
Better opportunity to access MoE PLD funding	47

While the launch of the IES policy made much about improved career pathways for teachers and principals, Table 7 shows that few principals see the policy in these terms. However, only a few thought it would mean no major changes for teachers and principals.

TABLE 7 Expectations of CoL in relation to teachers and principals

Expectation	Primary principals 2016 (n = 200) %
Better career pathways for teachers	18
No major changes for principals	10
No major changes for teachers	9
Better career pathways for principals	7

As one might expect, more principals who were engaged in CoL formation or early activity had positive expectations of what CoL would achieve than those who had reservations. School characteristics were not generally associated with differences in expectations of CoL. Principals of schools in minor urban areas were the most positive that CoL would support more sharing of useful knowledge, more effective teacher inquiry, better professional support for principals and more traction on tackling issues around student achievement. These are the areas where the CoL model, based on bringing together primary schools feeding into just one or two secondary schools is the closest to the reality.

Principals' comments on CoL

Seventy-six principals commented on CoL. The main themes voiced were:

- A lack of choice about becoming part of a CoL (20 comments)
- The structure was too inflexible (16 comments)
- CoL work would be at the expense of their own school, resulting in having to share good teachers and higher workloads (14 comments)
- Positive views about CoL (10 comments).

Other views included concerns that it would be difficult for small schools to take part, that the evidence base for the new policy was not convincing, that there was not enough common ground between local schools and that the money set aside for CoL could be better spent.

Illustrations of the range of views are expressed here:

Imposed—seen as means of control. Many of our principals can't get relievers for release let alone releasing staff or themselves.

It seems pretty clear that to access PD a school has to be part of a COL. I'm feeling forced to join.

Too much MoE pressure to get these underway—too inflexible and achievement challenges all about National Standards. Building collaborative relationships takes time—some schools being forced because of geographic reason to work with schools they do not have any relationship with!

Has resulted in data gathering, sharing, forming principal PLD with focus on future focused inquiry. Developed open, transparent discussion as the challenges for learning and participation for PD for teachers and trustees. Has facilitated more visits between schools across the cluster.

I think it is really hard to comment on this. COL could lead to many of the positive changes; however it will only be if the model is flexible and responsive enough to meet the communities' needs. As it is the model is not flexible enough particularly around the area of leadership.

So far so good but probably because we already had a positive working relationship across the schools that have formed the CoL.

Need for schools to be pedagogically aligned and not competing for students.

I am not prepared to have a lead teacher out of his/her class to the detriment of the students' learning. Similarly for a lead principal.

The current model lacks flexibility to adapt a COL to specific community needs. Boards appointed principals to run their school, not to be employed part-time with a CoL with possible negative consequences for their school. Student achievement challenges are not necessarily applicable to all schools in a COL.

3.

Experiences of the early CoL

We asked the 45 principals who were in a CoL that was under way (ones with endorsed achievement challenges, or waiting for those to be endorsed) to rate their agreement with a set of 19 items about their experience so far.

Most of the schools in these early CoL had already worked together before the CoL was formed (82% strongly agreed or agreed).²³

Positive relationships

Most of the principals were positive about the relationships and commitment underpinning their CoL:

- 82% strongly agreed or agreed that a good level of trust existed between the CoL members
- 80% strongly agreed or agreed that it was easy to add their ideas to the collective discussion
- 78% strongly agreed or agreed that all the schools in their CoL were really committed to working collectively
- 71% strongly agreed or agreed that they respected the CoL leader.

Developing a sense of shared responsibility

The collaborative lens of CoL will need to be supported by a sense of shared responsibility for the students of all the schools. Twenty-nine percent of the principals felt now that all the students in the CoL were “our students”; 24% disagreed (31% gave a neutral/not sure answer, and 16% did not answer this item).

²³ Because of the small number here, the maximum margin of error increases to 14.6%.

Achievement challenges: Some doubts

Seventy-six percent of principals strongly agreed or agreed that their CoL achievement challenges aligned with their own school's priorities. However, somewhat fewer thought these challenges were realistic with the capability of their CoL (56% strongly agreed or agreed) or achievable in the time frame given by the CoL (33% strongly agreed or agreed).

CoL resources

The CoL resourcing for within-school CoL teachers and inquiry time for all teachers is allocated per school, but CoL can choose to pool some of this to better meet differential needs. Sharing time allocations so that small schools did not miss out was occurring in the CoL of 60 percent of the principals, with less pooling of CoL money to have shared professional learning and development (PLD) (38% of the principals strongly agreed or agreed).

New teaching roles

Views about making the new CoL teacher role appointments and releasing them to do this work were mixed. The high proportion of those who did not answer some of these questions probably indicates that these appointments were yet to be made. High proportions of neutral or not sure answers are likely to indicate that principals have not been personally involved, or are waiting to see how things pan out.

While 16% of the principals said it had been easy to make good appointments to the new across-community teacher roles, another 16% disagreed (38% gave a neutral/not sure answer, and 31% did not answer this item).

Twenty percent said it had been easy to make good appointments to the new within-school teacher roles; 11% disagreed (36% of the principals gave a neutral/not sure answer, and 33% did not answer this item).

Releasing the new across-community teachers was not always easy: only 7% of principals agreed that it had been easy, and 16% disagreed (42% gave a neutral/not sure answer, and 36% did not answer this item).

The CoL leader, across-community teachers and those within-school teacher roles were starting to work together in 24% of the principals' CoL. Four percent disagreed that this was happening, 33% gave a neutral/not sure answer and 38% did not answer this item.

Positioning with Ministry of Education and ERO

Sixty percent of the principals thought the Ministry of Education had given their CoL good support and only one principal disagreed, with 27% giving a neutral/not sure answer, and 11% not answering this item.

Sixteen percent thought they had had a useful workshop with ERO. Twenty-two percent disagreed that their workshop had been useful (anecdotally, this may be because some schools' ERO reviews—which are used to give an overview of the CoL which is one part of the workshop—were not recent); 27% gave a neutral/not sure answer, and 36% did not answer this item, perhaps indicating that they had not attended a workshop, or their CoL had not taken up the offer of one.

Forty percent felt that what they did in the CoL was up to them, not the Ministry; 13% disagreed, with 36% giving a neutral/not sure answer.

Reasonable optimism

Sixty percent of the principals were optimistic that their CoL would be worthwhile to be part of. Only 4% disagreed, with 27% giving a neutral/not sure answer.

Advice for others

What advice did these principals already in a CoL have for schools thinking about joining or forming a CoL? Twenty-three made a comment here. Seven principals advised others to take their time and approach with caution; and six emphasised the importance of building relationships and trust, and substantive discussions. Three said it was important to remember it was for the students, and worth the effort. Seven said simply, “Don’t!”

4.

Teacher perspectives

We asked teachers what interest they had in the CoL roles available to teachers. Thirteen percent were definitely interested: 2% had been appointed to a CoL teacher role, 6% were interested in taking on the within-school role and 5% the across-school role. Another 37% were unsure if they would be interested in these roles, and 45% were not at all interested in them.

Fifteen percent ($n = 113$) of the teachers responding made a general comment on CoL. The main themes among these comments were:

- CoL occur at the expense of individual schools and their students (35 teachers)
- Positive comment on CoL (20 teachers)
- Mistrust of other schools or of ECE services (12 teachers)
- Mistrust of the government or Ministry of Education (11 teachers)
- Positive views of the CoL concept, but doubts that it would work (9 teachers)
- Money could be better spent (8 teachers)
- Negative view of CoL (7 teachers).

Comments illustrating this range of views:

I think it will be detrimental to our school with our principal leading the CoL. It will take him away from his role in school and I think the quality of teaching and collaborative nature of our teaching staff will diminish.

I would hate my own children to have a teacher who has a CoL role.

I think it is a bit of a fuzzy area in education at the moment. There are lots of questions to be answered to convince me of its effectiveness. I think the premise of schools in the same area helping each other, upskilling and learning from each other is awesome but the logistics needs to be sorted out. If a teacher or principal is going to go to another school 2 days a week what happens to their own school? And how will this help everyone?

A truly welcome initiative. I am, however, sceptical of how this will pan out. It is potentially the perfect initiative for schools to share knowledge and insights and for teachers to grow in their teaching careers without having to leave their beloved classrooms.

Love the opportunity to learn, share and be more effective!

CoL—I wonder if it is really necessary as we achieve good results and are a supportive school. The money could be better spent on resources and teacher aides.

As a DP with less than 50% class time I am not eligible to apply for one of these positions. As a school which works extremely collaboratively we as a group would be better off dividing the monies to us at the 'coal face' rather than paying large amounts to individual teachers. Cannot see this CoL will improve our already proactive and effective cluster learning community.

I agree with the concept of sharing expertise as we were part of a successful EHSAS years ago. My biggest concern around CoL is the negative effect of key personnel working out of our school—who fills their role, maintains the good practice, how do they cope with the additional role on top of being classroom teachers. Our priority is to our students, this is what our parents expect.

CoL mean that good teachers are taken away from students and schools that need them. These teachers have an increased workload trying to juggle a teaching role with being available for other schools. It is the children who miss out.

Crazy idea! Not necessary for big schools—have all the expertise and leadership within the school. We are all too busy to spend time out of our classrooms and schools to work in other schools.

- 1) At present my perception is there is no clear focus for our schools to work together as a group.*
- 2) Poor leadership/lack of inspiration from worn out principals does not bode well for the future.*
- 3) We need a clear vision, strong leadership and a plan for the future.*
- 4) I'm also worried that our schools will compete with each other rather than work together collegially. So a CoL will be doomed to fail if that happens.*

Love the idea of sharing more but we don't even do enough of it in our own school. How will we have enough time to access further information?

Won't really know until it happens. Am concerned about the best teachers being away from the classroom regularly and relievers taking classes.

A great initiative for fostering across-school relationships, aiming for better learning outcomes for our students—but will take time to build the trust between schools/staff and to build processes that each school is comfortable with.

Feel very unsure/low understanding of how CoL will operate with 13 schools in our group. Have no idea about the potential roles that could be on offer—so hard to say how this will play out—a 'wait and see' game at the moment.

5.

Trustee perspectives

Sixty-one percent of the trustees responding to the national survey thought they had a clear picture of what a CoL was. Another 31% said “not really”, and 5% thought they did not have a clear picture. There is more awareness now among primary trustees of CoL than there was among secondary trustees a year before, when 42% said the (then CoS) approach was clear to them.

More trustees whose school was engaged in CoL formation or activity said they had a clear picture of what a CoL was (76%, compared with 32% of those who expressed reservations about CoL).

Two-thirds of the trustees ($n = 116$) were from schools engaged in CoL formation or activity, as shown in Table 8.

TABLE 8 **Primary and intermediate school engagement in CoL formation or activity—trustee reports**

	($n = 176$) %
In discussions with other schools about forming a CoL	25
Part of a CoL, developing our achievement challenges	22
Part of a CoL, achievement challenges endorsed	14
Part of a CoL, waiting for achievement challenges to be endorsed	10
In discussions with our community about forming a CoL	9

Thirty-six trustees expressed reservations about their school joining a CoL, as shown in Table 9.

TABLE 9 Primary and intermediate school trustees’ reservations about CoL

	(n = 176) %
Waiting to see how first CoL work out	11
Not interested in joining—don’t think current model will work	6
Not interested—don’t see benefits for our school	6
Not interested in joining—want to stay in existing cluster/network	5
Would join CoL if more flexibility about roles	2

A further 22 trustees did not answer this question about their school’s involvement with a CoL.

We asked trustees what benefits or drawbacks they saw with CoL. Ninety trustees commented. Quite a few saw both benefits and drawbacks.

The main themes among trustees’ comments were that CoL would:

- lead to gains from increased knowledge and sharing of best practice (28 trustees)
- occur at the expense of individual schools’ focus or needs (24 trustees)
- occur at the expense of individual schools’ quality of teaching (22 trustees)
- occur at the expense of increased workloads (12 trustees)
- lead to gains through the sharing of resources (10 trustees)
- lead to gains for student transition (10 trustees)
- have to overcome competitive relations between schools to develop common ground and trust (10 trustees)
- need boards of trustees to have a clearer and more central role (6 trustees).

Some illustrative comments:

Great opportunity for all of the cluster to benefit from each other’s attributes.

In small schools, the loss of skilled people at any part of the school day is a major loss. This is exacerbated by time for travel. Other shared learning within our cluster appears to be meeting our specific needs.

Benefits—possible additional funding, best practice sharing across schools, data travelling with students as they progress. Drawbacks—loss of autonomy in learning direction, time to run.

The benefits are that we learn from others and can share what works for our school. The drawbacks are the time it takes away from staff not being at our school.

Key drawback is that principals have not engaged their boards in trying to set achievement challenge. We are currently looking to correct this, but it is essentially a bad way to start with your community.

Individual schools (boards and principals) are very passionate about their own schools so become very protective of their own patch.

6.

Discussion

It is almost 3 years since the IES policy was announced. Bringing self-managing schools together in voluntary clusters is not new to New Zealand. But the CoL model comes with much more signalling of deeper change, and has been more complex to bring to life than the initial political expectation that “all roles will be fully in place by 2017”. Our expectations of how long this change might take, and what it takes, need to take into account the “deep cultural changes in philosophies and practices as well as relational ties” that are needed.²⁴

Around two-thirds of schools now have some engagement in the formation or early life of a CoL. There is general expectation among the primary principals that it will lead to major changes for principals, teachers and students, but the nature of that change seems indistinct still to many. Sharing useful knowledge for teaching and learning is the change most expected of CoL | Kāhui Ako. This may be because this is what many have experienced in the way of collaboration. Under half the primary principals who responded to the 2016 NZCER national survey thought CoL would lead to more use of effective inquiry to improve teaching and learning, or more traction on tackling issues around student achievement and engagement.

Expectations are higher among those whose CoL has done the work to set itself achievement challenges. But the achievement challenges may also have been set too quickly or ambitiously: only 33% of these principals thought their CoL's achievement challenges were achievable in their time-frame (not surprising since many early ones were set for the end of 2017, with many of the pioneering CoL in the early stages of real across-school work). Only 56% of these principals also thought their challenges were realistic given the capability of their CoL.

The next few years will therefore be critical for the long-term system change that is signalled by IES. CoL will need time and well-informed support to ensure that they develop purposeful collaboration that grows member schools' capability. The collaboration needs to be more than the sum of separate parts. CoL membership needs to be something that is seen positively, providing understanding and joint support that adds to what each member school can do, rather than an extra workload. School leaders will need to

²⁴ Diaz-Gibson, J., Zarazoga, M. D., Daly, A. J., Mayoyo, J. L., & Romani, J. R. (2016). Networked leadership in educational collaborative networks. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership* doi: 10.1177/1741143216628532

make a commitment, however, if CoL are to have a positive impact on teaching practice.²⁵ The continuing concerns or hesitations around CoL in relation to what they might cost individual schools point to a system cost of revolving educational provision around school self-management, with schools too used to seeing each other as competitors for students. The CoL pathway model may be seen more positively by secondary principals because in many cases it does not ask competing secondary schools to work together.

Another reason why primary principals may be less convinced than secondary that CoL can achieve their purpose is that, while student achievement was framed in terms of the much-loved New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) by the initial joint working group and early Ministry of Education guidance (see p. 3 of this report), the wider public sector framework of measurable outcomes has been applied to the achievement challenges, narrowing these to literacy and mathematics in the form of the National Standards at the primary level. NCEA at secondary level is a much wider measure, and refers to an assessment structure that is far more established than the National Standards.²⁶ The unpacking of these achievement challenges through inquiry into pedagogy and understandings of progression in relation to developing the key competencies will be important in relating them to the fuller NZC. 'Inquiry' is part of NZC, but is still highly variable across and within schools.

The new CoL roles also challenge some of the traditional arrangements for teaching and school leadership, particularly if individual teacher time is still locked to a single class, without timetabled sessions for teachers to work together, and the school does not have a reliable cadre of relievers who are familiar with the school, its pedagogy and students. The CoL leader role is a particularly demanding and new one, and may be easier to fulfil where schools have strong leadership teams (an indicator of capability for the CoL leader role), where there are good existing relationships between principals and where the CoL is of a reasonable size.

CoL | Kāhui Ako are not the only system change occurring. Ministry of Education-funded PLD will be accessed from 2017 through CoL or school self-review, for priority areas and students only, and allocated through regional panels of Ministry of Education and people from schools. CoL and schools will be able to select their own facilitator. There are likely to be at least teething problems with this new arrangement, and it will be important to ensure some coherence across facilitators responding individually to CoL and school needs.

The update of the Education Act and the Funding Review also herald potentially major changes for schools and their operation. If the CoL are to succeed in changing practice for the better, then any changes to legislation and funding need to be coherent with the purpose of CoL, and the conditions that support the openness and shared responsibility for students on which they will depend.

25 Wylie, C. (2016). *WAPA 2020: Gains and insights from an enduring school network*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research. <http://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/wapa-2020-gains-and-insights-enduring-school-network>

26 Bonne, L. (2016). *National Standards in their seventh year*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research. <http://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/national-standards-their-seventh-year>

