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Executive summary

These are the key findings from NZCER's latest survey of secondary schools, conducted in August and September 2018. We have done these surveys every 3 years since 2003. They provide a comprehensive national picture of what is happening in our schools, how things have changed over time, and the impact of policy changes. They also give provide insights into how teachers, principals, trustees, and parents and whānau experience our secondary education system.

Overall patterns

In the 2018 survey responses, there was a general theme of growing demands being made on schools to respond to increasingly complex needs of students. Teachers were feeling hard-pressed to do the job of teaching a student population that has a growing number of needs, including mental health issues. Teachers and principals reported increased stress levels and lower morale, as well as long work hours. Major issues on principals' minds included recruiting quality teachers and having enough funding to meet their school's needs.

A common thread through the different sections of this report are differences associated with school decile, showing that decile 1–2 schools continue to face the deepest challenges in meeting their students' needs. This is especially evident in relation to student wellbeing.

In some areas of the survey, there were indications of respondents' appetite for exploring alternative ways of doing things in schools. Students' wellbeing is an area in which schools were exploring a range of approaches to putting effective supports in place, although they would need time and, in many cases, additional support and external expertise for these to become well embedded. A willingness to explore alternatives was also shown in the combination of teachers' timetabling preferences, where—as well as the status quo of 45–60-minute subject periods—teachers expressed preferences for a wide range of additional timetabling arrangements.

Teacher recruitment and funding are major issues

Recruiting quality teachers was the top major issue facing schools. This issue did not show an association by school decile or school location—it was identified across the board. Many principals are also concerned about providing support for vulnerable students.

Funding was identified as a major issue by nearly two-thirds of principals, compared with half in 2015. The proportion of principals who reported their staffing entitlement is sufficient continues to decline. Taking all the questions about funding together, it appears that funding issues are occurring in schools across the decile range.

Some principals report effective strategies for increasing equity

The achievement of Māori students, Pacific students, and students with learning support needs all continue to be major issues for sizeable minorities of schools, with little change in the picture here since 2015. Many principals of schools that are paying attention to the needs of Māori and Pacific students indicate taking a deliberate focus on tracking and supporting these student groups' learning and wellbeing was the most effective strategy their schools had taken for improving outcomes. Ensuring appropriate staffing topped the list of effective actions schools had taken to improve the integration of students with learning support needs.

Some principals say they need more support for implementing strategies to improve Māori and Pacific students' learning, and differentiating teaching for students with learning support needs. These areas continue to present problems for substantial minorities of secondary schools, indicating needs that cannot be met by asking schools to source their own advice.

More support is needed for student wellbeing, especially mental health

The proportion of principals who say they need, but cannot access, external expertise to help their school work with students with mental health needs increased sharply (62% in 2018, compared with 36% in 2015). Perhaps because of this, school-based supports (such as school counsellors, Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLB), and health professionals based at schools) were judged more useful by principals for supporting students' wellbeing and behaviour than external agencies. In 2018, slightly more schools had well-embedded approaches to using screening data to identify students' social or mental health concerns. More schools had support groups for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) youth than in 2015.

Although most teachers agree they can refer vulnerable students to receive timely help, actually providing support for vulnerable students was the second most identified major issue facing their school by principals and was in the top 10 issues identified by trustees.

The need for more support for students' wellbeing was most obvious in decile 1–2 schools. At these schools, less use was made of data to plan support for students' behavioural, social, or mental health needs, and fewer teachers were receiving training to recognise mental health warning signs in students. Yet these are the schools that stand to gain the greatest benefit from such approaches. In decile 1–2 schools, fewer teachers can refer students to receive timely support, school-wide processes are less likely to be in place to address behaviour that obstructs learning, and teachers are the most likely to have had student behaviour issues *often* cause serious disruption to their teaching.

In 2018, there are indications that deliberate strategies to promote students' wellbeing are well embedded at some schools. However, in many cases such approaches are still being explored or are partially embedded.

Approaches to promote Māori students' belonging were more evident at decile 1–2 schools

Te reo Māori and tikanga Māori were more likely to be incorporated in teaching to promote Māori students' sense of belonging at decile 1–2 schools, where Māori students tend to be enrolled in disproportionate numbers. Although this is strongest among teachers at decile 1–2 schools, over half of teachers at decile 9–10 schools also incorporated te reo Māori and tikanga Māori.

In 2018, greater proportions of teachers had professional learning that provided practical help for engaging Māori students in their classes than in 2015. There were no decile-related differences related to teachers having this kind of professional learning.

Over half of the principals reported that the school has discussions with iwi about how best to provide for Māori students. A minority of principals reported that the school interacts with local iwi in other ways, suggesting there is considerable opportunity for secondary schools and iwi to work together more. Some principals say they would like more support with this.

Progress with *The New Zealand Curriculum* key competencies largely plateaued in 2018

In 2015, there was evidence of teachers making small shifts towards greater inclusion of students in decisions about their learning. Although there was little further change evident in 2018, more teachers were talking about how they make assessment decisions with their students and co-creating with students their individual NCEA plan related to their goals.

Progress is variable for teachers implementing learning with digital technology

Teachers reported ongoing challenges with access to digital equipment and its reliability, although more had good technical support to deal with problems than in 2015. Many teachers also said they need more professional learning and development (PLD) to keep developing their use of digital technology. Teachers saw the value of using digital technology to support the learning of students with learning support needs, but some teachers remained sceptical about digital technology's benefits for all students' learning.

Compared with 2015, there were increases in some uses of digital technology for students' learning, more specifically, generating multimedia work and playing games or simulations, and to a lesser extent, coding and programming. Many teachers said their students use digital technology for collaborating with others *inside* the school. Around half would like to have their students use it for collaborating and communicating with people *outside* the school.

Kāhui Ako are still developing

In 2015, we sought people's expectations for Kāhui Ako. In 2018, most responding principals were in a Kāhui Ako and most were positive about the learning pathway that they enable. Other benefits to being involved include principals supporting each other more, and principals having a greater understanding of the needs of the community. Under half of principals agree that the time investment is worth it, and many principals think that the way Kāhui Ako are set up needs changing. There are signs of progress towards some of the expectations expressed as Kāhui Ako were getting underway in 2015, but involvement in a Kāhui Ako has yet to lead to changes within the school or for students for many.

Most trustees and principals were positive about how well their school board is doing

The proportion of principals who considered their board is on top of its task has continued to increase since 2012. Many principals see their school board as adding real value to the school, but a sizeable minority consider their board needs a lot of support from school staff.

Almost all trustees think their board is making steady progress or is on top of its task. The majority of trustees would like to change something about their role. More funding for the school topped this list. When we asked trustees what they least enjoy about their role, student disciplinary meetings were mentioned most.

Most parents were positive about their child's secondary school

Most parents were positive about their experiences of their child's secondary school, and their child's teachers. The majority are positive about how well their child's school fosters the development of skills and attitudes that support learning.

Most parents say their child attends their first choice of school, though this is less so for parents with a child at a decile 1–2 school. More parents are using electronic sources to get up-to-date information about their child and the school than in the previous survey. However, this is also related to school decile, with parents with a child at a decile 1–2 school less likely to have online access to information about their child, and also less likely to get information about the school via emailed newsletters. This is consistent with what parents also say about their child's access to the internet at home for school work.

Cost had meant that almost a quarter of parents report their child being unable to do at least one school activity. An overseas trip for a particular subject or class was the activity most often cited. There was very little difference related to school decile. A higher proportion of Māori parents than non-Māori parents indicated their child has been unable to do sport, or do school work at home that they need the internet for, because of the cost.

Just over half of parents responding to the survey have been involved in their child's secondary school in the past year by responding to a survey or attending sports events. This had increased steadily since 2012 and is consistent with an increase in 2018 in parents feeling genuinely consulted by their school.