

# What's happening in our English-medium primary schools

Findings from the NZCER national survey 2019

## SUMMARY

Every 3 years NZCER surveys principals, teachers, trustees, and parents at a random sample of English-medium primary schools to provide a national picture of what is happening in teaching and learning. This allows comparisons and tracking of how things change over time.

Here are many of the main findings from the NZCER national survey of English-medium primary schools 2019.<sup>1</sup> They show many positive things occurring in primary schools, along with gains in key areas. They also show continuing and deepening challenges, often related to support and resourcing. The 2019 survey also provides some pertinent information against which to evaluate changes to improve schooling and equity that have been heralded by the Government's response to the Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce.

**Most parents and whānau are positive about their child's experience of school and teachers**, and their own involvement in the school. More parents in 2019 than in 2016 felt welcome in their child's school, saw their child's teachers as committed and enthusiastic, and felt their child's cultural identity was recognised and respected. Parents with a child with a disability or needing learning support were less positive than other parents.

**Schools are giving more attention to the success and wellbeing of ākonga Māori.** More principals said that Māori student achievement data played a significant role in board decision making, and that their school made use of approaches such as tuakana-teina. Almost all the principals were able to describe something their school had done to improve Māori student outcomes. However, 41% of principals still need but cannot access external expertise to implement reliable strategies to support Māori student learning, and 46% still need but cannot access external expertise to engage with whānau, hapū, and iwi.

Māori parents and whānau showed higher levels of satisfaction with their child's progress in 2019 than non-Māori parents.

**Te reo Māori was a part of daily life in most English-medium primary schools, but in a limited way.** Sixty-one percent of teachers used te reo Māori to give instructions or directions, 52% used a few Māori words or phrases, and 41% said their students helped them practise and strengthen their reo Māori so they learnt together. Fourteen percent of teachers now reported their students being able to learn te reo Māori most of the time, up from 8% in 2013. More principals, however, have difficulty finding teachers of te reo Māori.

**More attention to Pacific student learning is evident.** More teachers included practices that support Pacific students' learning in 2019 compared with 2016. Pacific student achievement data played a significant role in more boards' decision making in 2019, and many of the principals whose schools had Pacific students described something their school had done to improve their outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> Full report available at <https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/national-survey>

**Schools are taking a more systematic approach for students who need learning support.** Most teachers reported confidence in teaching students with learning support needs, and had useful professional development to engage them in learning. They were positive about these learners' use of digital technology for those who needed assistive technology. However, only 54% said they had the support they needed to teach these students, and 35% now wanted more support to adapt *The New Zealand Curriculum* for these students, up from 19% in 2016.

**Most teachers are confident they have the skills and knowledge to cater for English language learners.** However, a third said they did not have sufficient support to help these learners.

**'Learning to learn' activities and student involvement in their own assessment have changed little since 2013.** One exception was that 39% of teachers now reported that their students could take part in hands-on/practical activities, almost double the 20% who said this in 2016. Close to 90% of the parents and whānau thought their child's school did a good job at helping their child learn to keep at it when learning is difficult, ask good questions, and develop problem-solving skills and attitudes.

**Schools are attentive to student wellbeing.** More principals report taking part in the Ministry of Education-funded PB4L (Positive Behaviour for Learning) programme, or are using its approaches. Also noticeable is an increase in students learning about healthy eating and engagement in physical activity. Most primary teachers were consciously including strategies and topics to support students' relationships with their peers, their cultural and social identities, and emotional and physical wellbeing.

More recent areas of concern for student wellbeing, such as the impact of social media and healthy use of digital devices, and gender identity and consent, which are included in the 2015 sexuality guidelines for schools, were less commonly reported by teachers.

**More schools have systems in place to support students' mental health but it is still a major issue for schools.** Training for teachers to recognise mental health warning signs and provide classroom support was reported by 59% of principals in 2019, compared with 15% in 2016. There were also increases in schools having systems to identify individual students with social or mental health needs, and to identify groups of students with social or mental health needs (63% well embedded compared with 52% in 2016). However, 63% of principals identified support for students with mental health or additional wellbeing needs as a major issue for their school: one of the top four issues.

**Many teachers experienced incidents of extreme behaviour.** Twenty-five percent of teachers said that student behaviour often causes serious disruption in class, and 42%, sometimes. In 2019, 25% of teachers occasionally felt unsafe in their class, double the 12% who felt this in 2016.

**Most schools work with agencies to support their wellbeing and positive behaviour work.** Principals were most positive about those who can work with them closely, particularly those located in or near their school, those who are responsive, or providing PB4L professional learning and support. More schools are working with CAMHS and Oranga Tamariki than in 2016.

**Assessment information is commonly used to improve learning.** Primary teachers generally see the assessment they do as valuable and providing dependable information, though they are somewhat less positive about the time and energy needed to collect assessment information. Use of the online PaCT (Progress and Consistency Tool) remains low, with highest use in decile 1–2 schools.

At the school level, assessment information is used most to identify students who need to make accelerated progress, and to decide priorities for professional learning and resourcing.

**Most parents and whānau are positive about the information they receive about their child's progress in reading, writing, and mathematics.** About a fifth were not. Parents are slightly less positive about the information they received about their child's progress in relation to the rest of the curriculum, such as in science or social studies, with a quarter or more indicating they did not get good information.

**Classroom use of digital technology has markedly increased since 2016, but over 40% of teachers are not yet confident about their knowledge and skills for the revised digital technologies learning area.** Use of digital technology has increased most for coding and/or programming, now reported by 60% of teachers. Generating

multi-media work, playing games or simulations, collaborating with others within the school on shared learning projects, and collaborating with others beyond the school have also increased. More students were taking part in coding on digital devices, gaming or game design, and Makerspace activities.

**Teachers are positive about the use of digital technology for learning.** Many also said it created some difficulties because not all students had home digital technology access. While principals were also positive about the use of digital technology for learning, 64% identified the cost of it as a major issue for their school.

**Many teachers have ongoing opportunities to share, reflect, and discuss teaching and learning with colleagues.** More teachers now shared ideas with colleagues to help students improve their performance. However, around a fifth of teachers rate sharing between colleagues in their school as poor or very poor, and between 23% and 46% of teachers did not rate their school's support as good or very good, particularly in relation to support with particular students, and to understand and address bias. There was little progress in most of the aspects of professional school culture that we asked about. Time remains a fundamental challenge here. More teachers would also like more customised support and advice beyond their school, and more time to work with parents and whānau.

**Most teachers make some use of digital technology for their own professional learning and support.** Most downloaded or shared resources. Under half had contributed to online discussions about teaching, and like other digital use, this was more sometimes than often.

**Team teaching and teaching in innovative learning environments work well if teachers are well supported.**

Team teaching is becoming a feature of primary schools: 26% of the teachers responding said they taught in a team all the time, and 28%, sometimes did so. Many of these also taught in innovative learning environments. Teachers who team-taught all the time were most positive about their work, including their school's professional culture. They were also positive about the benefits for learners. Those working in innovative learning environments did, however, think that some students find them overwhelming.

Teachers noted the importance of preparatory development to work well as a team, consistency in practice, the use of different strengths in a team, even workloads, and sufficient space and good acoustics.

**Kāhui Ako are starting to have some effect.** Most schools are members of a Kāhui Ako, and principals are seeing gains for their own school. Principals from schools that are in a Kāhui Ako are more likely than other principals to say they share information about student learning with other schools. Teachers have had more varied experiences with Kāhui Ako, but around half had useful PLD through their Kāhui Ako. Slightly less than half had good support from their within-school teacher, and useful interaction with other schools' teachers. Trustees' views also varied, but tended to the positive, particularly seeing benefits for their school.

**Principals and teachers enjoy their work, but this is undercut by workload issues and increasing expectations.** Top of the list of major issues principals saw as affecting their school in 2019 was that too much is being asked of schools: 72% now say this, markedly increased from 53% in 2016, and 42% in 2013. The effect of this for principals is to intensify their workload, with increases in stress levels, tiredness, and more feeling that they cannot give sufficient time to educational leadership. Only a minority felt supported by government agencies, and only half by parents and whānau. Many principals saw themselves continuing in the role over the next 5 years, but there is more interest in educational roles beyond the principalship than seen in previous surveys.

Government support used by principals was mostly to do with the management aspects of their role. What they were using more for their role as a whole were ex-principals, paid for by their school or themselves. Their professional organisations were also sources of support. Collegial support was widespread, but not necessarily deep. Only half the principals felt prepared for their first principalship.

**Trustees are positive about their role and see that the most important part is to provide strategic direction for the school.** Trustees report that most of their board's time is spent on student progress and achievement, followed by attention to property/maintenance, financial management, and strategic planning. Nearly all trustees responding had some advice or support to help them in their role. Trustees were supported in a variety of ways, both from within the school by staff and other trustees, and from external organisations,

particularly NZSTA, and to a lesser extent the Ministry of Education and ERO. Over half the principals considered their board needed a lot of support from school staff.

**Most boards had consulted with their parents, whānau, and community in the past year, through a range of means.** There was an increasing use of digital technology in the consultation processes. Only 41% of trustees said parents had raised issues with their board, with the most common issues being student behaviour or bullying (19%) and dissatisfaction with a staff member (12%).

**Almost all trustees would like to change something about their role.** More funding for the school topped this list, selected by more trustees in 2019 than in 2013 and 2016. Close to half of the trustees would like to improve their own knowledge or training. Compared with 2016 data, more would like Ministry expectations to be reduced, and more support from parents and whānau.

**Most schools interact with other schools.** Nearly all principals say they share sporting events, and many share professional learning and development, visit other schools to learn from them, or talk with fellow principals. Around a third of the schools had ongoing interaction with other schools encompassing sharing and discussing their work, and working together to achieve satisfactory outcomes for individual students.

**Principals were more positive in 2019 than in 2016 that they received helpful advice from the (now) Teaching Council and the national office of the Ministry of Education.** Most thought their regional Ministry of Education office worked constructively with them, and half thought they had given their school good support and were trustworthy. They showed somewhat less satisfaction compared with 2016 in relation to ERO's advice. However, many principals continued to find value in ERO school and national reports. Around half thought that ERO school reviews were a valid indicator of overall school quality, and that the review process developed school capacity for self-evaluation.

**Schools continue to have unmet needs for external expertise that they cannot readily access.** This is most evident for particular groups of students, and for engaging with whānau, hapū and iwi, and with Pacific families. Schools' growing awareness of the need to partner with iwi and hapū was also evident in almost half the principals identifying this as a major issue for their school.

**The top issues that principals identify facing their schools are: that too much is being asked of schools (72%), funding (67%), costs of digital devices and infrastructure (64%), and support for students with mental health or additional wellbeing needs (64%).**

## About the survey

Our survey went to a representative sample of 350 English-medium primary and intermediate schools. The survey went to the principal at each school, the board chair, and, through them, to another trustee, and through the school administration, to a random sample of teachers and parents. The survey was in hard copy, with trustees and parents having an online option.

Response rates this year were the lowest they have been since the survey began in 1989: 145 principals (41% response rate), 620 teachers (27% of a potential 2286 surveys sent to schools, from 181 schools), 126 trustees (18%, from 95 schools), and 395 parents (17% of a potential 2,286 surveys sent to schools, from 170 schools). Although higher numbers would give greater confidence that a full spectrum of views and experiences were covered, the 2019 national survey respondents' perspectives were also largely consistent with previous survey rounds which had higher response rates. The changes we saw were ones that made sense in the current educational landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand, such as new policy or additional provision, or concerns evident in the material presented in the course of the schooling reviews carried out for the Government in 2018–19, or raised by teacher unions, the NZ Principals' Federation, and parents.