12.

Communities of Schools

A major new policy, Investing in Educational Success, was announced in January 2014, seeking to make more of the knowledge held within each school and ensure that knowledge about each student was shared as they moved onto the next education level. This main plank of this policy is to form voluntary Communities of Schools (CoS) of one or two secondary schools with their main feeder primary and intermediate schools.

The schools making up each CoS identify shared achievement challenges and work together to improve teaching and learning outcomes. The new policy came with new additional funding for new roles in addition to existing roles (across the Community for a leader, and for teachers to spearhead the sharing of expertise; and for lead teachers to support the sharing of expertise from across the CoS within their own school). A working party of the Ministry of Education and sector groups forged common agreement on the details, but the primary schools sought more discretion around the use of the additional funding and membership of each Community. At the time of the secondary national survey, the outcome of further joint work between New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) and the Ministry of Education undertaken in the first half of 2015 was out with NZEI members for voting. When this joint work was accepted, it resulted in somewhat less money going to the CoS positions, allowing somewhat more money to access other support, and allowed for the inclusion of early childhood education centres, without funding for new roles. This joint initiative used the term Communities of Learning (CoL), which resonated well with the goal of the policy, and so CoL has become the term used for CoS. In this report, however, we stick with CoS since that is how we phrased our questions.[82]

At the time of the survey, CoS were in their very early stages of formation. Twenty-nine CoS had been approved, and a few of these had started work on identifying their achievement challenges by discussing data and information across their member schools. Another 100 or so CoS had registered expressions of interest. We therefore asked questions about what people expected of CoS, as well as continuing to ask

---

82   For further information, see http://www.education.govt.nz/ministry-of-education/specific-initiatives/investing-in-educational-success/communities-of-schools-making-a-difference/

questions on how secondary schools had worked with other schools and the tertiary sector, to see what experience of working collectively they could bring to the new approach, which is a much more specific framework and purpose than previous clusters or individual arrangements.[83]

Background experience of working with other schools

Many secondary schools already had some kind of existing relationship with local primary schools around the transition to secondary school, and just over half with the local intermediate (not all secondary schools have a feeder intermediate). Table 46 below shows that other ongoing working relations with other schools were mainly with other secondary schools, particularly to provide links for sole subject providers, and inter-school visits, which have increased since 2009. Only the latter and liaison with local intermediates had increased since 2012.

Around a third of the secondary schools were in clusters, including the Learning and Change networks, partially funded by the Ministry of Education, or, interestingly, continuing on with clusters whose Ministry of Education funding stopped some years back.

The new CoS were therefore being formed from quite varied secondary school experiences of working together with other schools.

TABLE 46 **Existing secondary school joint work with other schools (principal report); 2012 and 2015**

Kind of joint work	2012 (*n* = 177) %	2015 (*n* = 182) %
Liaison with local primary schools on transition to secondary school	81	75
Support for teachers if sole subject provider in school	63	63
Liaison with local intermediates on transition to secondary school	53	59
Inter-school visits to learn from each other	41	54
Regular meetings of schools as a group with social agencies	51	46
Work together to place students having difficulty in one school into another school	42	36
Work with other local schools to reduce truancy	29	29
Voluntary cluster after end of ICT/EHSAS cluster	23	21
Part of a Learning and Change network	*	14
Administrative support cluster	15	9

* Not asked

Background experience of working with post-secondary providers

Almost all the secondary schools had also worked with one or more of their local post-secondary education providers (2% had no such provider locally, and 1% had no or limited contact with theirs). Most of this interaction was contractual—the secondary schools augmenting what they could offer their

---

83 Material in this chapter was shared with the Ministry of Education in December 2015, to inform its work developing and supporting the CoLs.

students through the additional government funding of STAR, Gateway or an Academy. Gateway and Academy work with post-secondary education providers had increased markedly since 2012, as shown in Table 47 below, without increasing the frequency of competition between schools and post-secondary providers.

Most schools also had some liaison in relation to student pathways (we did not ask whether this was in relation to individual pathways or more general information to feed into student thinking about where their secondary education could lead).

TABLE 47 **Secondary school interactions with local post-secondary education providers; 2012 and 2015**

Kind of interaction with post-secondary	2012 (*n* = 177) %	2015 (*n* = 182) %
Use to provide STAR courses	88	89
Liaison to support student pathways	*	88
Use to provide Gateway courses	61	78
School is part of a Trades/Service Academy	37	64
Share information on students	31	31
Some competition with local post-secondary education providers	22	18

* Not asked

Interest in joining a CoS

At this stage, 65% of the secondary principals were interested in their school joining a CoS. Twenty-three percent were unsure; 9% did not want to join a CoS. A quarter identified the decision about joining a CoS as one of the major issues facing their school.[84]

Although only 42% of secondary trustees thought the CoS approach was clear to them, 45% said their board was interested in joining a CoS, 41% were unsure and 9% thought their board did not want to join a CoS. More trustees in decile 9–10 schools said their board was not interested in joining a CoS (23%) and that they could see no benefits for their own school (23% also).

We also asked principals and trustees what their school's current CoS position was. Around a fifth said they were already part of a CoS (presumably including those at the Expression of Interest stage). Almost half the principals were discussing the possibility with other schools. Some caution was expressed by 29% of the principals who were either waiting to see how the first CoLs worked out, did not think the current model would work or did not see benefits for their school. Table 48 has the details.

---

84 See *Chapter 11: Support and challenge* for the full picture of issues principals, trustees, teachers and parents identified as facing their school.

TABLE 48 **School position in relation to CoS**

Position	Principals (*n* = 182) %	Trustees (*n* = 232) %
Already part of a CoS	18	22
Discussing it with other schools	49	19
Discussing it internally	17	15
Considering it	15	18
Waiting to see how first CoS works out	18	13
Do not think the current model will work	12	4
Do not see benefits for our school	5	9

Decile 9–10 school principals were least likely to be discussing becoming part of a CoS with other schools (36%, compared with 65% of decile 1–2 school principals). Fourteen percent of decile 9–10 school principals and 6% of decile 5–6 school principals saw no benefits to them in being part of a CoS.

Teacher interest in the new professional learning roles

We asked teachers whether they were interested in the new CoS roles, and found that interest was high enough that these roles should be readily filled if teachers meet the national criteria. All told, 36% of teachers were interested in one or both of these roles: 27% were interested in the across-CoS teacher role and 25% in the *within-school* CoS role. Greatest interest in the across-CoS role came from specialist classroom teachers (36%) who already work across their school to support teaching, followed by deputy/ assistant principals, then heads of departments and those with management units. Classroom teachers without additional roles were least interested (17%). There was almost the reverse pattern in terms of interest in the *within-school* CoS role, with classroom teachers showing the greatest interest (40%), followed by heads of departments (29%) and by senior classroom teachers who currently have some responsibility to share and improve pedagogy across secondary departments (18%). Decile 7–10 school teachers (with and without existing additional responsibilities) were somewhat less interested in the new CoS roles than teachers in decile 1–6 schools.

We asked teachers if they would like to comment on these new roles, and 24% did so. While 18% of these comments were positive about the purpose of the CoS, 23% were uncertain about the nature of the new roles, and most of the comments voiced some scepticism or concern, particularly about:
  · how well these roles would work in practice without adding to high workloads, or at the cost of the teachers' own classes
  · whether it would mean some schools contributing more than others, at the cost of their own school's quality or staff workloads
  · whether CoS were sufficiently resourced to enable good sharing of good practice across schools
  · whether sharing in this way would really make a difference to the quality of teaching, with comments about wanting to work more with other secondary teachers in their subject area, rather than with primary teachers

- whether those chosen for the new roles would really hold their colleagues' respect as good teachers, and have proven ability, whether the money going into CoS would be better spent within schools (e.g., on reducing class sizes)
- whether the new roles would supplant or make less attractive existing within-school roles supporting teacher practice changes, such as senior classroom teachers.

What people expected of CoS

We asked principals and trustees what they thought CoS would offer overall, and teachers what difference being in a CoS would make for their professional learning.

Table 49 shows that principals had higher expectations than trustees (perhaps because quite a few of the trustees were not clear at this stage what a CoS was) in terms of the policy purpose. It also shows, however, that these expectations were not as strong as the policy makers would hope, with just over half seeing gains in tackling achievement and engagement more successfully, and around two-thirds seeing an improvement in the transition to secondary school.

TABLE 49 **Expectations in relation to the policy purpose of CoS**

Expectation	Principals (*n* = 182) %	Trustees (*n* = 232) %
More sharing of useful knowledge for teaching and learning	75	64
Improve student transition to secondary school	65	50
More use of effective inquiry to improve teaching and learning	58	37
More traction on tackling issues around student achievement	57	39
More traction on tackling issues around student engagement	53	37

Decile 1–2 school principals were the most optimistic that CoS would bring greater use of effective inquiry to improve teaching and learning, and get more traction on tackling the issues around student achievement. Among trustees, it was also those from decile 1–2 schools who were the most optimistic that CoS would lead to more use of effective inquiry to improve teaching and learning, and also reduce competition between schools.

Table 50 shows more of the expectations principals and trustees had about the difference CoS could make in terms of relations between schools, resources and support. These were not as high as expectations related to the policy purposes. Trustees did have higher expectations than principals that CoS would lead to the sharing of specialist facilities or equipment, and better professional support for principals.

TABLE 50 **Expectations of CoS in relation to relations between schools, resources and support**

Expectation	Principals (*n* = 182) %	Trustees (*n* = 232) %
Better opportunities to access new funding sources	35	21
Sharing of specialist facilities/equipment	30	41
Better professional support for principals	23	36
More of a "shared team" approach between school sector and Ministry of Education	23	25
Better interaction with the local Ministry of Education	20	17
More effective work with social agencies	18	19
Improvement of transitions for te reo Māori learners from immersion settings to English-medium	16	16
Provide more subjects/courses than the school can offer on its own	15	22
Less competition between schools for students	11	17
Schools in a CoS having a single board of trustees	7	7

Trustees in provincial cities were most likely to expect that a CoS could provide more subjects or courses than their own school. Otherwise there were no differences related to school location.

Benefits and drawbacks

Principals were asked to comment on the benefits or drawbacks they saw with CoS. Of the 119 principals who commented, 59 noted potential benefits, and 88 noted potential drawbacks; some saw both, as this comment illustrates:

> Drawbacks: how to replace the expertise of any people released. Why would you release an excellent teacher to replace them with a relief teacher who was not as capable? This negatively affects student outcomes. Benefits: Greater sharing between schools. Smoother transitions. Shared thinking and new knowledge created between Primary and Secondary sectors.

> Much depends on the community it serves. Problems of overly competitive high schools. Problems of rivalry, cultural issues. But we will set up, and if the 'niggles' can be overcome, then it should be successful.

The main benefits identified:

- improved transitions to secondary school (20% of the comments)

  Coherence and consistency possible for students as they move through the community from primary to secondary.

  Sharing of knowledge about students and expectations for their learning.

- sharing expertise and learning together (18% of the comments)—with indications that this covers a range of expectations and views about the relationship of secondary schools and their approach, to primary schools and their approach

  Better sharing of achievement data; Better sharing of good pedagogical practice; Better understanding of the issues impacting on student success or lack of it.

>   Unlocking expertise and skills available only in one school to share with others.
>
>   Flexibility, relationships, strongly student-centred, shift in education paradigm for secondary teachers.
>
>   Great opportunity to link secondary with primary. Demystifying secondary.

The drawbacks principals saw were related to increases in their own and their teachers' workload, loss of good-quality teachers to work across schools, wanting more flexibility with the form of a CoS and the use of its resources, and competition between schools. Experiences of working with the Ministry of Education to identify and develop CoS had not always been positive.

Teachers' expectations of CoS

Since teachers' professional learning is core to the work of CoS, we asked them for comments on the difference they thought being in a CoS would make for their professional learning. Fifty-eight percent of the teachers made a comment. Thirty-one percent voiced positive expectations, 12% negative expectations including scepticism that CoS would have any impact on secondary teachers' professional learning, and that the benefits for learning would outweigh the costs in terms of workload and distraction. Some included both positive hopes and scepticism in their comments. Ten percent said they did not know anything about CoS, or that it was too soon to tell. Some hoped for more subject-specific sharing with other secondary teachers, which was not a key feature of the CoS.

Those who saw greater opportunities for professional learning mentioned the sharing of good practice and teaching resources, and knowledge of students that would support their progress more; some mentioned positive experiences they had had collaborating with others. Some illustrations:

>   Very positive. It has a great opportunity to provide shared/collaborative resources and reduce individual teacher workload.
>
>   Increase opportunity for moderation. Better resource sharing. If vertical community—there's more sequential development of core skills.
>
>   With Year 9s, a better understanding of their needs, levels and abilities to assist with course planning and meeting their needs. Better opportunities to discuss amongst teachers issues and ideas; ability to adapt others ideas to meet your own needs.

Illustrations of mixed feelings:

>   Lovely idea … finding the time (even with the allowance) to engage in the learning opportunity something like this would offer is the real problem. I like the idea of working with a primary school to look at differentiation in the classroom, and curriculum mapping from primary through to secondary would be awesome, but there is just no time in what is already a busy year filled with marking and assessment feedback to engage in the CoS programme.
>
>   Little effect as it is not about putting multiple high schools together so little subject support is likely to be offered. It may help teachers in high schools learn how to group students and differentiate more effectively but only within the confines of the timetable.
>
>   This depends on which schools are involved and the structures. This would only be useful if we worked with innovative schools and not traditional schools. It would likely have minimal influence on real classroom practice and outcomes (could get dragged down).
>
>   It could make educational practice in an area more cohesive. As far as my professional learning goes, it could be helpful, I suppose, but I'm wary that it is only going to increase my workload further. It is my workload that has the strongest bearing on the quality of my lessons and my ability to implement new learning.

Illustrations of low expectations:

> Not much. As a specialist Visual Arts teacher, primary/intermediate teachers etc. have very little understanding of NCEA etc. What we need are our FACILITATORS of Visual Arts, 'SPECIFIC' help!! How can we prepare students for future pathways with the wrong support? Should be more industry + specialist people involved.

> What are the new Communities of Schools? If you mean an 'expert' comes and helps me at the expense of their own class, then it may be a little helpful, but if I'm the expert then I am more concerned about the needs of my own students during school time.

Summary and discussion

Communities of Schools (now Communities of Learning) were just starting to form in mid-2015. Sixty-five percent of secondary principals were interested in their school joining a CoL, and 35% of secondary teachers expressed interest in the new within-school or across-CoS roles. Teachers' views of the new roles included positive views of the purpose of CoLs, but also some scepticism about the ability of CoLs to meet their purpose, and concerns about negative impacts for teachers or schools. Principals' expectations of CoLs were highest in relation to the sharing of useful knowledge for teaching and learning, with just over half thinking the CoLs would bring more traction on tackling issues around student achievement and engagement, and a minority expecting more sharing of resources and access to support. Principals saw somewhat more drawbacks than benefits from working in CoLs.

As we write in early April 2016, there are 96 CoLs formed, covering 793 schools. Another tranche of CoLs will be announced soon. Many of the CoLs are still finalising their achievement challenges and starting to make the across-school and within-school appointments.

These are still very early days for the CoLs, and it appears as if it will take at least a few more years before some of the questions secondary teachers and to a lesser extent secondary principals voiced in this survey about what shape they will actually take and the impact that would have on everyday teaching can start to be answered. It will be very interesting to return to the expectations and queries voiced in the 2015 national secondary survey in 2018 to see whether the gains are showing, and outweighing the costs that some feared; and whether the CoL approach is gradually changing secondary pedagogy, and coherence across primary and secondary schooling, or has become another "add-on" to already high workloads.