

Principals and their work

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

Cathy Wylie

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Key findings

Ninety percent of primary and intermediate principals enjoy their job, but they continue to have high workloads. In 2016, around two-thirds worked 56 hours or more each week. Only around a third thought their workload was manageable or sustainable, or that they could schedule enough time for the key educational leadership part of their role. The proportions were higher for principals of small schools, who were also the most interested in improving their salary, and moving on to another school.

More principals thought they had problems managing their workload than in 2013. More principals than in 2013 also wanted more time to focus on educational leadership, to reflect, read and be innovative, reduce their administration and paperwork tasks, reduce the demands of property management, and have a more balanced life.

High or extremely high stress levels were reported by 42% of principals. Stress levels are highest among new principals. Over half the principals would not meet national guidelines for health-promoting exercise, reflecting their workload and demands in evenings and weekends.

The majority of principals taught for at least 5 years before they became a principal. Over half came from the deputy principal role. However, a few new principals continued to come from a teaching role without formal school leadership experience. Most principals' educational work experience has been solely in schools. Half have led only one school.

Half the principals leading schools in 2016 had been principals for more than 10 years. Principals with 15 years, or more experience were the most likely to say they could schedule enough time for the educational leadership part of their job, and have very good morale levels, and were least likely to report high stress levels. They also were more likely to be leading large schools.

Sixty percent indicated they would stay in their current school in the next 5 years, and 32% would shift to another school. However, some of these principals were among the 47% who (also) thought about moving away from the principalship in the next 5 years. Twenty-three percent were looking at retirement. Twenty-six percent sometimes feel stuck in the principal's role for lack of other local educational career options, and almost half would like more career options beyond the principal's role.

Thirteen percent of teachers were interested in becoming a principal, lower than in 2013 but much the same as in 2010. Deputy principals were more interested, at 28%.

Almost all the principals used some form of external support for their role. They were as likely to use paid advisers, giving them face-to-face discussion, and their own organisations, as they were government-funded advice. The latter is mainly available on the human resources and legal aspects of their role (NZSTA), or in the form of online resources (Educational Leaders website). The majority took some part in principals' own networks and conferences, but figures have decreased rather than increased for the

discussion of common issues and provision of mutual support. Just over half took part in professional learning groups, most in ones that are self-facilitated. There was still little of the joint inquiry work or critical friendship that will be needed in the Communities of Learning | Kāhui Ako. Performance appraisals also remain an area for development so that principals have the ongoing support and challenge they need for their complex roles.

There are signs in the survey that new principals need more support than they currently get, as do principals of small schools. Experienced principals seem to have more ability to focus on educational leadership: some of that seems to be related to their also leading larger schools, with more internal support.

Many principals can see gains from their work for their students, teachers, and the school. However, there has been some decrease in those who report being able to retain or build effective teachers, have a more focused approach to pedagogy, and maintain or improve the quality of school buildings or grounds.

The main issues principals saw facing their schools were that too much was being asked of schools, the maintenance or replacement of digital technology, funding, property, achievement of students with additional learning needs, and staffing levels or class sizes.

Overall

Overall, New Zealand principals enjoy their role, and see gains for their students, teachers, and schools from the work they do. But it is concerning that so few see their workload as manageable. At a time when the expectations on schools to improve student learning are higher than they have ever been, it is also concerning that so few principals think they can schedule enough time for the key component of their role, educational leadership. This situation is not new, which makes it even more worthy of attention. This is not simply a matter of looking at the extent of principals' responsibilities. Just over half the principals saw a major issue facing their school was that too much was being asked of schools, reflecting among other things growing student needs, difficulty in accessing timely support for students or finding experienced teachers, and the recent pace of policy change.

The government support that principals have for their role is more around the management aspects than educational leadership, with little ongoing formal support for educational leadership after the programme for new principals. Principals are also choosing their own advisers, and learning from each other, though this is not yet common practice. The Education Council's work on a national leadership strategy is therefore timely.

1.

Introduction

Principals are the lynchpin in our self-managed school system. It is a large and complex role. This was recognised in a national leadership strategy¹ developed in 2009, *Kiwi Leadership for Principals*, which drew on the strong evidence of the Leadership Best Evidence Synthesis.²

Principals' work has been an area of questioning in NZCER's national surveys since they began in 1989, as we shifted to school self-management. Key areas of interest have been workload and morale, leadership development and ongoing leadership development/professional learning for principals, career pathways, support, challenges, and achievements.

Attention to school leadership development and support has not been strong in New Zealand, apart from the period around the Leadership Best Evidence Synthesis and the *Kiwi Leadership for Principals* framework. It is now regaining momentum with the Education Council's current work with the sector and others on a leadership strategy to support and grow leaders and leadership across the system.

Sector organisations have been concerned about the wellbeing of principals for some time. The 2017 NZPF conference theme is Hauora. NZEI recently commissioned research on school leaders' occupational health and wellbeing which showed that the demands of the role exact a toll in relation to stress and wellbeing.³

NZCER analysed NZPF's first survey of principals' Hauora in 2004.⁴ We have continued to include some key questions from this Hauora survey in our 3-yearly national surveys, to see what has changed over time. We also continue to track how principals come to the role.

This report provides the national picture of the work of principals from our 2016 primary and intermediate school survey.

1 Wylie, C., Burgon, J., & Cosslett, G. (2015). New Zealand principals: Autonomy at a cost. In H. Ärlestig, C. Day, & O. Johansson (Eds.), *A decade of research on school principals. Cases from 24 countries* (pp. 269–290). Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.

2 Robinson, V., Hohepa, M., & Lloyd, C. (2009). *School leadership and student outcomes: Identifying what works and why. Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration [BES]*. Wellington: Ministry of Education. Retrieved from www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/2515/60169/60170

3 Riley, P. (2017). *New Zealand primary school principals' occupational health and wellbeing survey* (p. 13). Fitzroy, Victoria: Institute for Positive Psychology and Education, Australian Catholic University. Report prepared for NZEI, and available at www.nzei.org.nz/documents/Principals%20Health%20and%20Well-Being%20Report_20170120SM.pdf. Around 20% of primary and area school principals took part in this survey.

4 Hodgen, E., & Wylie C. (2005). *Stress and wellbeing among New Zealand principals*. Wellington: NZCER. Available at www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/stress-and-well-being-among-new-zealand-principals-report-new-zealand-principa

The 2016 NZCER national survey

The 2016 survey was conducted from August to early September. It 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).⁵ 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 ($n = 504$).

Over half the principals responding were women (59%, somewhat more than the national proportion of women principals of primary and intermediate schools) (52% in 2015). Twelve percent identified as Māori, and 1% Samoan or Cook Island Māori. Māori principals were more likely to be heading decile 1–2 schools (42% of Māori principals) and small schools (46% of Māori principals), and more had started as principals in the last 5 years (42%, compared with 28% of non-Māori principals).

This report uses information from the principals, with some information from teachers. The survey returns for principals and teachers 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 maximum margin of error⁶ for the principal survey is 6.9%, and for the teacher survey around 3.5%. 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 to complete surveys, we cannot guarantee that these samples are random. Therefore, the margins of error for the teacher surveys should be regarded as approximations.

Report order

I start with principal careers: their pathway, years of experience overall and in their current school, and career plans. Then I focus on principals' workload and morale. Next comes the support principals have for their role. Finally, what do principals perceive as their achievements, and what are the main issues or challenges they work with in their school contexts?

5 Further details about the sample, response rates, school and respondents' characteristics are available in a separate report: Berg, M. (2017). *NZCER national survey of primary and intermediate schools 2016: Methodology and sample information*. Wellington: NZCER. Available at www.nzcer.org.nz/system/files/Technical%20Details_Report.pdf

6 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.

Principals' careers

Stepping into the principalship

It is rare for principals to come to their role with just a few years' teaching experience: 1% had less than 3 years' teaching experience, and 11% had 3 to 5 years' teaching experience. Forty percent had taught for more than 15 years before becoming a principal. Most had also gained school leadership experience: 60% had been a deputy principal just before they first became a principal, more so than the 51% in 2013 and 54% in the 2010 national surveys. Some came from an assistant principal role (7%), some from being a Scale A teacher with management units (9%), or being a syndicate leader (4%). However, the most recent role for 11% had been a Scale A teacher without receiving a management unit, which is given for some school-wide responsibility. This is less than in 2013 or 2010, when 19% first started in the role without a management unit. While a few of those coming straight to the principalship from a classroom teaching role without a management unit were appointed in the last 3 years, most of this group started as principals more than 10 years ago, and most currently led small or small-medium schools, with over half leading schools in rural areas.

Most principals' experience in education has been in schools only (77%). Others have (also) worked as professional learning development (PLD) providers (8%), college of education or university lecturers (6%), consultants (5%), ERO reviewers (2%), at the Ministry of Education regional or local office (2%), or the Ministry of Education national office (1%). Experience beyond schools was related to school size: 15% of those leading small or small-medium schools had such experience, 27% of those leading medium-large schools, and 37% of those leading large schools.⁷ (There was no overall relationship with school decile or location; however, almost all those who had been PLD advisers or lecturers remained in cities.)

Length of principal experience

Half the principals had been in the role for more than 10 years. Table 1 also shows that the proportion of new principals in 2016 was smaller than in 2013, but the difference is not statistically significant. The proportion of new principals in 2016 was much the same as in 2010. Overall, however, the proportion of principals with less than 6 years' experience in the role was highest in 2010 (41%). Forty-one percent of principals in 2016 had between 6–15 years' experience in the role, increased from 27% in 2010.

⁷ We define large schools as having 351 students or more, medium-large schools having from 201–350 students, small-medium schools as having 101–200 students, and small schools as having 100 or fewer students.

TABLE 1 Years as principal: 2010, 2013, 2016

Years as principal	2010 (n = 210) %	2013 (n = 180) %	2016 (n = 200) %
Under 3 years	19	12	18
3–5 years	22	18	12
6–10 years	16	18	21
11–15 years	11	19	19
16+ years	33	31	31

School size and the length of principal experience are related, with 55% of the principals of large schools having more than 15 years' experience of leading schools, compared with 23% of the principals leading medium and small schools. Only 12% of the principals of large schools were in their first 2 years of being a principal, compared with 21% of those in small or medium–small schools, and 16% of those in medium–large schools.

Almost a third of the principals had been at their current school for less than 3 years, and half for up to 5 years, a lower proportion than the 62% in 2010. Twenty-seven percent had been at their current school for more than 10 years in 2016, up from 18% in 2010. Table 2 has the details.

TABLE 2 Principals' years at their current school: 2010, 2013, 2016

Number of years	2010 (n = 210) %	2013 (n = 180) %	2016 (n = 200) %
Under 3 years	33	22	32
3–5 years	29	24	19
6–10 years	19	26	23
11–15 years	7	12	13
16+ years	11	11	14

The length of time principals have led their current school was unrelated to school characteristics.

Probably linked to the increase in the proportion of principals who have been at their current school for more than 10 years, there has also been an increase in those who have led only one school—now 50%, as shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3 Number of schools principals have led: 2010, 2013, 2016

Number of schools	2010 (n = 210) %	2013 (n = 180) %	2016 (n = 200) %
1	41	44	50
2	26	22	25
3	13	13	14
4	7	10	6
5+	11	7	5

Principals of large schools were most likely to have led more than one school (67%), and those leading small schools, least likely (37%).

Most schools have had just one or two principals in the last 10 years, indicating a desirable stability. High levels of principal turnover (four or more principals in 10 years) occurred in 12% of the schools, a figure that has not improved since 2010, as Table 4 shows.

TABLE 4 Principal turnover in last 10 years: 2010, 2013, 2016

Number of principals at school over 10 years	2010 (n = 210) %	2013 (n = 180) %	2016 (n = 200) %
1	22	33	32
2	45	43	39
3	21	12	17
4	5	6	5
5+	6	5	7

Having one principal for the last 10 years occurred most in decile 1–2 and 9–10 schools (44% and 39% respectively). However, decile 1–2 schools also experienced high turnover rates of four or more principals over that period (17%). Decile 5–6 schools also stood out for having more schools with this high principal turnover rate (23%).⁸ This may be related to decile 5–6 schools also having the highest proportion of small and rural schools: 40% were small, compared with 29% of schools overall, and 46% were rural. Small schools also had high principal turnover of four or more principals in 10 years (25%), as did rural schools (20%). It seems plausible that the higher turnover rate for decile 5–6 schools is affected by location and size. These are not so associated with the principal turnover rate for decile 1–2 schools.

Career plans

Where do principals see themselves in the next 5 years? Many principals gave more than one answer here. On the whole the picture is much the same as it was in 2013 and 2010.

- Continuing as principal of their current school was indicated by 60%.
- Applying for sabbatical or study award was indicated by 37%.

⁸ Compared with 2% of decile 9–10 schools, 7% of decile 7–8 schools, and 11% of decile 3–4 schools.

- Leading another school was indicated by 32%.
- Retiring was indicated by 23% (5% of the principals responding were aged 65 or more, and 22%, 60–65). Interestingly, thoughts of retirement did not exactly match principals' age. Looking back, in the 2013 national survey, 16% of principals responding were aged 60 or more, and 19% were thinking of retirement; in the 2010 national survey, 17% of principals responding were aged 60 or more, and 17% were thinking of retirement.⁹ In 2016, 78% of those aged 65 or more were looking at retirement in the next 5 years, as were 66% of those aged 60–64, and 14% of those aged 50–59.
- 14% were unsure, up from 5% in 2013.
- Taking a Community of Learning | Kāhui Ako leadership role was indicated by 12%.
- Taking on a different role in education was indicated by 8%.
- Retraining or changing to a different career was indicated by 8%.
- Returning to classroom teaching was indicated by 5%.

In total, 80% of the principals thought they would either continue as principal of their current school, or lead another school. Twelve percent could see both options. Yet only 53% did not (also) have other thoughts about moving away from the principalship in the next 5 years, whether retiring, taking on a different role in education, changing to another career, not being sure of where they would be, or returning to the classroom. Thus there are indications that these plans to continue on as principal are not without some questioning or openness to alternative paths.

School characteristics, experience as a principal, and career plans

School roll size (which determines principal base salary) is related to whether principals see themselves leading another school in the next 5 years: 45% of those leading small schools did so, decreasing with size down to 17% of those leading large schools. School size was also related to principal experience: principals with 11 or more years' experience were more likely to be leading large schools. It was related to principals' age too: most of those under 40 headed small and small–medium schools. Sixty-one percent of the principals aged in their 40s were also in this group. Seventy-two percent of small schools were headed by women, compared with 43% of the large schools; this may be related to fewer women having more than 15 years' experience in the role (19%, compared with 48% of the men).

Rural principals and those heading schools in minor urban areas were most interested in leading another school in the next 5 years (45% and 41% respectively). Most of those who thought about returning to the classroom were in their first 5 years as a principal.

As one would expect, retirement thoughts increased with principals' years of experience, rising from 3% of those in their first 3 years in the role, to 40% of those with 15 or more years' experience. Half of the latter group were aged 60 or more.

Figure 1 in the next chapter shows that half the principals would like more career options beyond the principal role, and 26% sometimes feel stuck in the role because there are no further local educational career options for them.

Teachers' interest in becoming a principal

We asked teachers if they were interested in becoming a principal: 13% were, with a further 19% unsure. In 2013, 17% of teachers expressed interest in becoming a principal, and in 2010, 14%. Deputy principals showed the most interest, at 28%.

⁹ Most principals were aged 40 or more, with 9% under 40.

3.

Workload and morale

Around two-thirds of principals worked 56 or more hours a week in 2016, much the same since 2003, despite the increasing demands on school leadership related to policy changes, such as increased reporting, the introduction of National Standards, stronger calls for increased student achievement, the spread of digital technology and its associated costs, and property issues, such as leaky buildings. The lack of change in principal work hours overall over this period of time suggests that rising expectations cannot be met by asking principals to work more.

Table 5 has the details.¹⁰

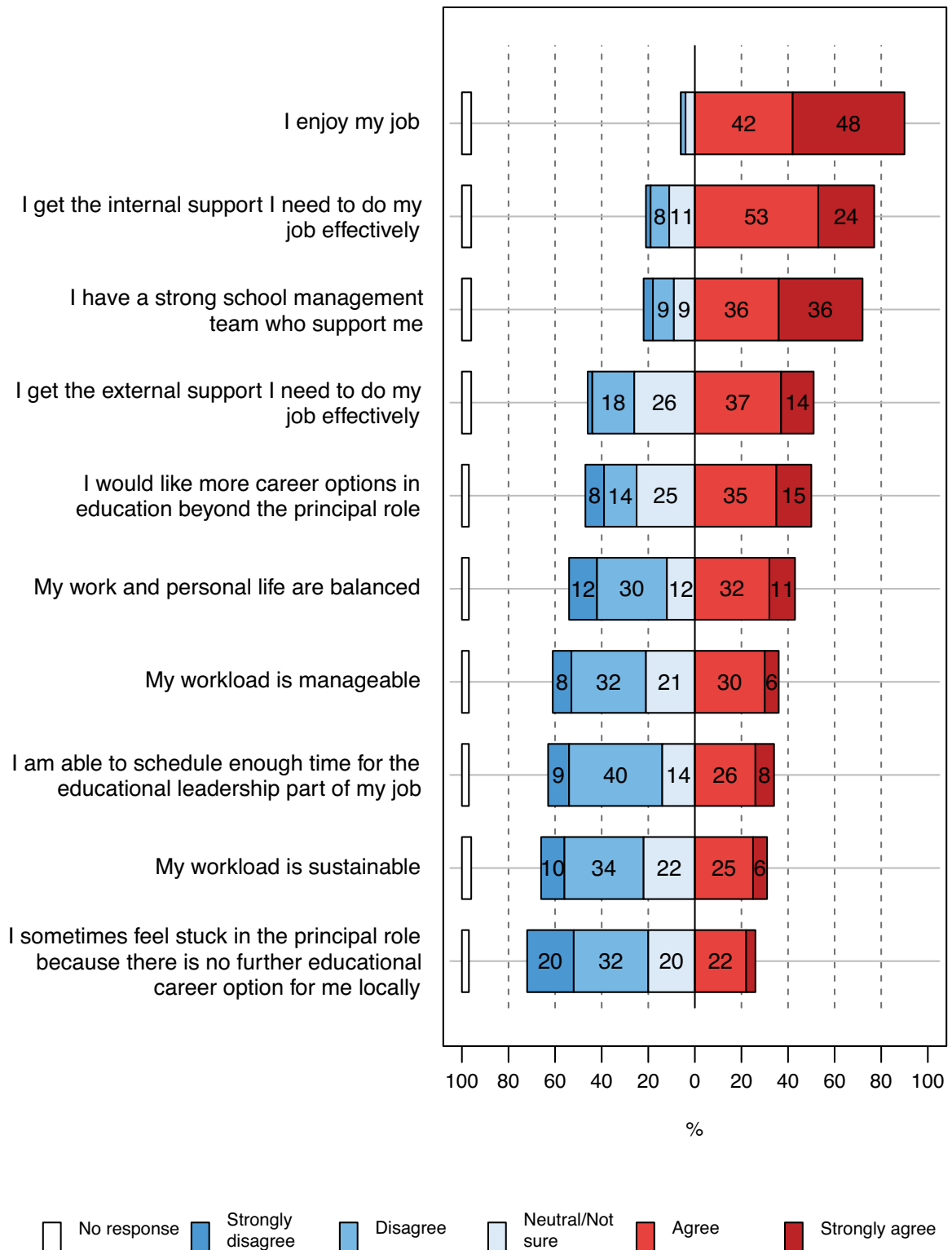
TABLE 5 Principals' work hours per week

Hours per week	2010 (n = 207) %	2013 (n = 180) %	2016 (n = 200) %
41–50	12	14	9
51–55	22	24	23
56–60	33	29	30
61–65	14	12	15
66–70	12	13	13
71–80	4	4	5
81+	1	1	3

Most principals enjoy their jobs, as shown in Figure 1. However, only around a third think their workload is manageable or sustainable, or that they can schedule enough time for the educational leadership part of their job.

¹⁰ Our question asked principals: In total, approximately how many hours a week do you work? (This includes meetings, contact with trustees, and contact with parents and whānau: all the work you do that is for the school.)

FIGURE 1 Principals' views of their work (n = 200)



There were just a few differences associated with school characteristics. Principals of decile 3–4 schools were least likely to say they got the internal support they needed to do the job (57%, compared with 81% of principals of other decile schools). Why might this be? One difference related to school decile might have a bearing. Just over half the decile 3–4 principals were new to the role: 51% had taken part in the First-time Principals' Programme in the last 3 years, compared with 23% of principals at other decile schools.

Principals of large schools, who also had more experienced principals among them, were most likely to say they had a strong school management team and the internal support they needed to do their job effectively. Small school principals had the most difficulty with scheduling enough time for the educational leadership part of their job (67%), and 51% did not think their workload was sustainable. Somewhat more small school principals did not think they got the external support they needed to do their job effectively (30%).

Experience as a principal showed some relationship with how principals felt about their job. Those in the role for 3 years or less were less likely than others to feel that their work and personal life were balanced (34%, compared with 48%). Principals with more than 15 years in the role were most likely to say that they could schedule enough time for the educational leadership part of the job (47%, compared with 28% of principals with less experience).

There has been little change in principals' responses to this set of questions since 2010, apart from two key items covered next.

Workload, morale, and optimism 2010–16

In 2016, fewer principals found their workload manageable (36% in 2016 agreed or strongly agreed that they did, compared with 58% in 2013, and 47% in 2010). Fewer also thought they could schedule enough time for the educational leadership part of their job (34% agreed or strongly agreed that they did, compared with 46% in 2013; 2010 had a similar level as 2016: 38%).

Principal morale was much the same in 2016 as in 2013 and 2010. Twenty-seven percent said their overall morale was very good; 43% said it was good, 19% said it was satisfactory, 7% said it was poor, and 1%, very poor.

Morale levels were unrelated to hours worked per week, or school characteristics. The most experienced principals had the highest proportion of principals saying their morale was very good (36%), and the least experienced had the lowest proportion (17%).

Levels of optimism were highest in 2010, when 79% said that they were very or quite optimistic about their life and role as a school principal over the past week, compared with 73% in 2013 and 65% in 2016.

Stress levels

Principals have higher stress levels on average than the general population.¹¹ Five percent said their typical stress level for the year was extremely high, and 42%, high. Forty-five percent reported their stress level was about average, 8% that it was low, and 2%, very low. The picture has not changed much since 2010.

Stress levels were associated with morale: all but one of the principals reporting poor or very poor morale also described their typical stress levels as high or extremely high, compared with 71% of those whose

11 Riley, P. (2017). *New Zealand primary school principals' occupational health and wellbeing survey* (p. 13). Fitzroy, Victoria: Institute for Positive Psychology and Education, Australian Catholic University. Report prepared for NZEI, and available at www.nzei.org.nz/documents/Principals%20Health%20and%20Wellbeing%20Report_20170120SM.pdf

morale was satisfactory, 38% of those whose morale was good, and 17% of those whose morale was very good having high or extremely high stress levels.

Stress levels were highest for the principals in their first 3 years (60% said they were high or extremely high), and lowest for those with 11 or more years in the role (30% said their stress levels were high or extremely high).

The NZEI Occupational Health and Wellbeing survey found that principals' main sources of stress were:

- Lack of time to focus on teaching and learning
- Sheer quantity of work
- Government initiatives
- Resourcing needs (Riley, 2017, p. 26).

Health and exercise

Principals' health is good, though it seems a little less so overall than in 2010. This may be because more of the 2016 principals were aged 60 or more (27%, compared with 16% in 2013 and 17% in 2010).

- 13% described themselves as exceptionally healthy, much the same as in 2013 and 2010.
- 33% described themselves as very healthy, rarely getting sick, much the same as 38% in 2013, but less than the 53% who said this in 2010.
- 46% saw themselves as generally healthy, much the same as 43% in 2013, and more than the 33% who thought this in 2010.
- 6% said their health was really not good, as did 4% in 2013 and 3% in 2010.

Principals still seem to have difficulty undertaking regular exercise, likely related to their workload and activities that often involve evening or weekend engagements. The pattern has stayed much the same since 2010. At least 58% would not meet the recommended Ministry of Health guidelines for 2.5 hours moderate exercise each week. Most would not meet the Heart Foundation's guideline of 30 minutes moderate exercise each day.

- 25% had not done some form of fitness activity of 30 minutes or more within the past week.
- 33% had done so for 1–2 days of the past week.
- 30% had done so for 3–5 days of the past week.
- 10% had done so for 6–7 days of the past week.

Tiredness is a feature of most principals' working days, though only 6% think it affects their performance. Fifty-three percent reported some level of tiredness through their day, and 20% reported a constant feeling of tiredness that does not affect their performance. Eighteen percent felt wide awake and raring to go most of the time.

Changes principals would like in their work

Consistent with the information on principals' workload, and the doubts about its manageability and sustainability, Table 6 shows an increase since 2013 in principals seeking more time for the essence of their work—educational leadership—and the reflection, reading, and innovation that should go with it. Also increased since 2013 was the proportion of principals who want to reduce the demands on them from paperwork and property management. Interestingly, fewer principals sought a reduction in external agencies' demands or expectations in 2013 or 2016, perhaps reflecting that 2010 was a particularly demanding year, with the introduction of National Standards.

TABLE 6 Principals' desired changes to their work

Change	2010 (n = 207) %	2013 (n = 180) %	2016 (n = 200) %
More time to reflect/read/be innovative	68	68	78
More time to focus on educational leadership	62	59	75
Reduce administration/paperwork	60	54	64
Have a more balanced life	51	42	54
Reduce demands of property management	44	36	45
Higher salary	33	26	34
Reduce external agencies' demands/expectations	40	29	31
Get consistent advice from Ministry of Education and ERO	*	*	29
More professional dialogue about my work	33	28	29
Reduce human resource management demands	27	28	23
Reduce parents' and whānau demands on me	18	18	16
More productive relationship with board chair	*	*	9

* Not asked.

Reducing property management demands was a change desired most by principals of decile 9–10 schools (65%, decreasing to 31% of decile 1–2 school principals). Principals of deciles 5–6, 7–8, and 9–10 schools were more interested in reducing parents' and whānau demands on them (23%, 26%, and 18% respectively, compared with 6% of decile 1–4 school principals).

Having a higher salary was desired most by principals of small schools (54%, compared with 25% of other principals). In terms of school location, having a higher salary was of most interest to principals of rural and minor urban schools (49% and 41% respectively).

Experience as a principal was unrelated to the changes principals would like to see in their role.

4.

Support for principals

Even the most experienced principals cannot do their job well without ongoing support. We asked about three different kinds of direct support for principals:

- government-funded advice and professional learning development that principals can access for free
- advice or work with professional organisations (NZEI, serving primary and intermediate teachers and principals, school support staff, and early childhood education teachers, NZPF, and with school or individually funded advisers)
- communication or joint work with other principals.

We also asked about the annual principal appraisal process, since appraisal should provide opportunities for insight and discussions that support the principal's work with their school, as well as being a formal reporting requirement.

Government-funded support

Almost all principals used some of the Ministry of Education-funded support that they can access without cost. Table 7 shows that the patterns for support used over the last 3 years are generally consistent since 2013. Changes are most evident in the period between 2010 and 2013. The most marked drop relates to the change in specific government support for the leadership role from a general service provided by School Support Services Leadership and Management advisers, accessed by 47% of principals over the 3 years to 2010, to more targeted development. Also marked is the drop between 2010 and 2013 in the use of the Educational Leaders website.

TABLE 7 Ministry of Education-funded support for the principal's role, used by principals over the last 3 years¹²

Support	2010 (n = 207) %	2013 (n = 180) %	2016 (n = 200) %
NZSTA Helpdesk (now Advice and Support Centre)	49	50	52
Educational Leaders website	65	43	48
NZSTA professional development	46	43	48
NZSTA employment and industrial relations advisers (HR advisers in 2016)	52	37	42
First-time Principals' Programme	38	26	28
Leadership and assessment professional development through Ministry of Education contracted providers**	47	16	20
Sabbatical	*	14	20
Nothing	7	8	9
Other	6	6	6
Aspiring Principals' course	9	4	6

* Not asked

** In 2010, this item asked about School Support Services Leadership and Management advisers.

In the last 3 years, most of those who were in their first 3 years of principalship had taken part in the First-time Principals' Programme (86%), as had 71% of those who had 3–5 years in the role. It is interesting that the First-time Principals' Programme, which is voluntary, was not reaching all new principals.

The Aspiring Principals' course had been undertaken in this period by 23% of principals with less than 3 years' experience, and 13% of those with 3–5 years' experience. Sabbaticals were taken only by those with more than 5 years' experience as a principal. Otherwise, years of experience as a principal were unrelated to the use of Ministry of Education-funded support for principals.

Decile 3–4 principals had the highest level of participation in the First-time Principals' Programme (51%), and the Aspiring Principals' course (20%), reflecting their newness in the role. School size was also related to participation in the First-time Principals' Programme, and was highest among those heading small–medium-size schools (48%) followed by those heading small schools (33%).

Support from representative bodies, and paid advisers or study

All but 9% of principals also drew on other support for their role over the last 3 years. Only 1% of the principals used neither Ministry of Education-funded support for their role, nor other support as described below.

- 54% used a private consultant or adviser who had been a principal.
- 51% used NZEI.
- 40% used NZPF.

¹² In 2010 we asked principals about their use of support in the last 2 years.

- 21% used a private consultant or adviser who had not been a principal.
- 15% undertook postgraduate study.
- 4% took part in MACS, the Māori Achievement Collaboratives.¹³

Other support mentioned included working with the non-profit Springboard Trust, which provides a leadership development programme and ongoing support for alumni from the programme with strategic innovation at their schools.¹⁴

School size (and therefore school funding) was reflected in the use of private consultants who had not been a principal. This use was reported most by principals of medium-large schools (36%) and large schools (31%), compared with 15% of principals of small-medium schools and 7% of those of small schools.

Mutual support

Eighty-nine percent of the principals took part in non-Ministry of Education-funded principal networks or groups, much the same as in 2013 and 2010. These include local principals' associations and NZEI regional groups that offer meetings and conferences, and national-level conferences, as well as personal contacts. There have been marked increases since 2010 in conference attendance. However, fewer principals were discussing common issues or providing mutual support in 2016 than in 2013. Professional learning groups (PLGs) were being used by 54% of the principals in total.¹⁵ Interesting in light of the expectations that Community of Learning | Kāhui Ako will undertake joint inquiry work are the low and declining proportions of principals who have undertaken such work in relationship to leadership, or critical friendship based on visits to other schools. Also of note in Table 8 are the even lower proportions using online discussion forums or Twitter, though these have doubled in the last 3 years.

13 MACS is a “grassroots leadership-based initiative committed to the goal of Māori educational success as Māori” (Santamaria et al., 2016, p. 99) with 63 primary and intermediate principals working together in 2016, with resourcing from NZPF and latterly the Ministry of Education. Evaluation found that it worked to shift school leaders from “responding to students’ culture to making deliberate choices that result in actions and practices that positively impact upon and change school culture”. Santamaria, A. P., Webber, M., Santamaria, L. J., Dam, L. I., & Jayavant, S. (2016). Te Ara Hou—A new pathway for leading Māori success as Māori. *Evaluation Matters—He Take Tō Aromatawai*, 2, 99–129. Retrieved from www.nzcer.org.nz/nzcerpress/evaluation-matters/articles/te-ara-hou-new-pathway-leading-m-ori-success-m-ori

14 The NZCER evaluation of this programme found that it had positive impacts on the leadership of most of its participants. Wylie, C., & Burgon, J. (2016). *Strengthening the strategic leadership of New Zealand principals*. Wellington: NZCER. Available at www.springboardtrust.org.nz/images/site/documents/Strengthening-the-Strategic-Leadership-of-New-Zealand-principals.pdf

15 Eight percent of principals were taking part in both a PLG facilitated by principals, and one facilitated by an external consultant.

TABLE 8 Participation in principal networks or peer learning

Form or purpose	2010 (n = 207) %	2013 (n = 180) %	2016 (n = 200) %
Attend regular meetings	74	86	83
Attend conference	58	71	80
Discuss common issues	58	79	62
Provide mutual support	53	75	62
Part of a PLG that we facilitate	*	*	43
Part of a PLG that is externally facilitated	*	*	28
Mentor another principal	*	20	21
Critical friendship based on visits to other schools	*	23	17
Part of inquiry project to improve practice	22	20	16
I am mentored by another principal	*	11	15
Online discussion forum	*	6	12
Use Twitter to get advice or ideas	*	4	7

* Not asked.

Most of those who were undertaking inquiry projects to improve practice were also taking part in PLGs. Inquiry projects were happening for 31% of the principals who were part of a PLG facilitated by an external consultant, 21% of those who facilitated a PLG themselves, and 23% of those who had critical friendships based on visits to other schools.

Participation in an externally facilitated PLG was lowest for rural principals (14%). Provision of mutual support was lowest among those who headed small schools (47%). Principals of small schools were also least likely to be involved in inquiry projects with other principals (4%). They were mentored more by other principals (26%).

Length of experience as a principal was related to involvement in principal networks and peer learning. The newest principals (with less than 3 years' experience) were most likely to be mentored by another principal (52%), probably as part of the First-time Principals' Programme.

Mentoring another principal was most likely for those with the most experience: 39% of those who have been principals for more than 15 years did so, as did 27% of those who had been in the role for 11–15 years, and 17% of those with 6–10 years' experience.

Annual principal appraisal

Performance management should provide principals with useful feedback and discussion that supports ongoing effectiveness and growth. Each school's board of trustees has the responsibility of carrying out the annual appraisal of the principal they employ. Principals must provide evidence in relation to criteria included in collective employment contracts, including evidence related to the three stages within the principal career pathway. The appraisal also looks at evidence in relation to agreed goals relating to school goals, and identifies goals for the principal's ongoing development. Such annual appraisal is intended to provide both accountability and support. The appraisal may be carried out by the board chair,

or often, by a professional, usually with educational experience. There has been considerable variability in the quality and usefulness of principal appraisal.¹⁶

Previous national surveys showed that, while many principals felt their work was acknowledged well in their appraisal, it was less common to use these appraisals as opportunities to support principals in their work with the school. Table 9 shows that this pattern continues. Some improvement since 2010 is evident in discussion and agreement on useful goals, but these are still reported by only two-thirds of the principals. Only 40% of principals say they get new insight into how they could do things from their appraisal. Nor are appraisals being widely used as opportunities for joint problem solving or strategic thinking, as they could be.

TABLE 9 Gains from principals' most recent performance appraisal

Gain	2010 (n = 207) %	2013 (n = 180) %	2016 (n = 200) %
Good acknowledgement of contribution to school	74	78	80
Agreement on goals that will move me forward	54	62	65
Agreement on goals that will move the school forward	57	66	64
Opportunity for frank discussion of issues at school and joint problem solving	50	43	43
New insight into how I could do things	35	34	40
Opportunity for frank discussion of challenges facing the school and joint strategic thinking	44	39	38
Nothing much (2016: nothing, it was not professionally done)	7	9	6

16 See Anderson, C. (2009). *The New Zealand principal's experience of the school board as employer*. Report to NZ Principals' Federation and NZ Secondary Principals' Council, School Governance Solutions.
Chapman, P. (2008). *In search of effective principal appraisal*. Unpublished Masters of Education thesis, Victoria University of Wellington. Retrieved from <http://researcharchive.vuw.ac.nz/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10063/725/thesis.pdf?sequence=2>, and Education Review Office. (2013). *Supporting school improvement through effective principal appraisal*. www.ero.govt.nz/publications/supporting-school-improvement-through-effective-principal-appraisal/

5.

Results of principals' work

We ask principals about their main achievements in the role in the past 3 years, offering items relating to students, teachers, and the school as a whole. This gives a broad-brush picture over time as well of the things on which principals and their staff work, and an indication of the degree of challenge for principals, which can also vary according to their school context. A low level does not mean that an area is not important: 18% of principals reported increased student attendance over the past 3 years; student attendance in most primary and intermediate schools is not a major issue. Similarly, Table 10 below shows that, in 2016, 23% of principals reported that one of their main achievements had been that Pasifika student performance levels stayed high or improving; but many schools lack Pasifika students. A decline in the proportion of principals reporting that among their main achievements was developing student leadership roles may be because that these roles had become part of 'business as usual' in the school.¹⁷

Student-related achievements

There are two overall patterns evident in Table 10. First, while most principals saw continuing high levels or improvement of student behaviour and achievement in general as one of their main achievements, more principals reported this in 2010 than in 2013 and 2016. Perhaps the policy attention that started to be paid to behaviour in 2010, focusing school attention, and perhaps the increased expectations for student achievement between 2010 and 2013 at the national level, setting a higher bar, and greater attention to student data, including the National Standards, are playing a role here.

Second is that in 2016 more principals report an increased focus on meeting individual student learning or targeted groups' needs than they do an increased focus on wellbeing. It may be that this difference between a focus on achievement and a focus on wellbeing also reflects some of the issues schools face in getting support beyond their own professional knowledge and reach for students dealing with mental health issues, as noted further on when I look at the major issues facing schools.¹⁸

¹⁷ In 2010 and 2013 the item included 'or increased student choices and ability to feed into decisions'. The largest decrease was between 2010 and 2013, on the same item, making it unlikely that the item change accounts for the decrease.

¹⁸ A fuller picture of primary and intermediate schools' focus on student wellbeing is given in Boyd, S., Bonne, L., & Berg, M. (2017). *Finding a balance—fostering student wellbeing, positive behaviour, and learning. Findings from the NZCER national survey of primary and intermediate schools 2016*. Wellington: NZCER. Available at www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/finding-balance-fostering-student-wellbeing-positive-behaviour-and-learning

TABLE 10 Principals' main student-related achievements in the last 3 years

Achievement	2010 (n = 207) %	2013 (n = 180) %	2016 (n = 200) %
Student behaviour stayed positive or improved	88	76	77
Increased focus on meeting individual students' learning needs or targeted groups' needs ¹⁹	*	*	77
Student performance levels stayed high or improved	82	70	71
Retained/built a school culture that is inclusive of students with special education needs	66	60	67
Developed a safe and positive learning environment for students	*	*	63
Increased focus on meeting individual students' wellbeing needs or targeted groups' needs	*	*	56
Māori student performance levels stayed high or improved	67	51	54
Increased student choices and ability to feed into decisions	*	*	48
Developed student leadership roles	69	53	45
Pasifika student performance levels stayed high or improved	34	22	23
Student attendance improved	21	17	18

* Not asked.

Improved student attendance was noted most as one of their main achievements by deciles 1–2 and 3–4 school principals (32%). High or improved student performance levels were related to the socioeconomic community served by the school: they were noted most by decile 9–10 school principals (90%) and decile 7–8 principals (77%). High or improved Pasifika student performance levels were noted least by principals in rural schools, who were least likely to have Pasifika students.

Teacher and teaching-related achievements

Many of the principals thought that among their main achievements was that they had maintained or improved the quality of teaching, and the use of assessment data to plan learning. Fewer thought they had been able to retain or build effective teachers in 2016 than in 2010. Just over half counted the recruitment of effective teachers among their main achievements. Table 11 shows that changes resulting in a more focused approach to pedagogy were reported most in 2010, perhaps coming out of the work that schools did between 2007 and 2010 in relation to the introduction of the New Zealand Curriculum.²⁰ Interestingly, in light of the strong emphasis on inquiry in the Community of Learning | Kāhui Ako framework that is now at the centre of the Government's policy to improve teaching and learning, there has been little change since 2013 in using learning teams to create a stronger professional learning and inquiry culture. Also of

19 In 2010 and 2013 this item did not specify 'learning' needs. In 2016 we therefore split the item into two, asking separately about learning and wellbeing needs. Seventy-seven percent of principals in 2010 said they had an increased focus on meeting individual or targeted groups' needs, and 68% in 2013.

20 Wylie, C. (2014). *Progress and stalling on the path to learning-centred schools in New Zealand*. Paper presented at AARE-NZARE conference, Brisbane. www.nzcer.org.nz/system/files/2017-Progress%20and%20stalling%20on%20the%20path%20to%20learning-cathy-conference-paper-web.pdf

relevance to the Community of Learning | Kāhui Ako emphasis on thinking of the student journey across year levels, just over a third of the principals indicated more coherence across year level teaching among their main achievements—though perhaps the item could also be understood as referring to teachers at the same year level.

TABLE 11 Principals' main teacher and teaching-related achievements in the last 3 years

Achievement	2010 (n = 207) %	2013 (n = 180) %	2016 (n = 200) %
Use of student assessment data to plan learning was good or improved	82	69	75
Overall quality of teaching staff stayed high or improved	66	63	70
Provided more leadership opportunities for school's teachers	69	63	68
Created a stronger professional learning and inquiry culture in school through learning teams	59	64	67
Retained/built effective teachers	81	76	66
School has a more focused approach to pedagogy	77	64	57
Recruited effective teachers	63	59	56
School has a more positive working environment for teachers	*	*	55
We now have a clearer 'big picture' or coherence across year-level teaching	*	*	37

* Not asked.

The ability to recruit effective teachers continues to reflect school decile: varying from 37% of decile 3–4 and 44% of decile 1–2 school principals noting this as one of their main achievements over the last 3 years, compared with 65% of decile 9–10 school principals. Small school principals' views of their main achievements had less mention of the provision of more leadership experiences for teachers (49%, compared with 75% of small–medium schools), retaining or building effective teachers (47%, compared with 71% of small–medium schools), the creation of a stronger professional learning and inquiry culture through learning teams (44%, compared with 69% of small–medium schools), or a more focused approach to pedagogy (40%, compared with 67% of small–medium schools). Fewer (21%) also reported having a clearer 'big picture' or coherence across year-level teaching as one of their main achievements, but that may simply indicate that this was already present.

School-related achievements

School reputation matters a great deal to principals, and it is this that heads their list of school-related achievements, shown in Table 12. More principals than in 2013 counted retaining or building a strengths-based culture. Offering a good range of co-curricular activities, building stronger relationships with local iwi, hapū, and marae, and simply “keeping the ship afloat” were also mentioned more by principals in 2016 than in 2013. There were indications of slippage in what principals could achieve around property, and the proportion who thought they had worked with their senior leadership team to remain strong or become stronger has not increased since 2010, staying at just over half the principals.

TABLE 12 Principals' main school-related achievements in the last 3 years

Achievement	2010 (n = 207) %	2013 (n = 180) %	2016 (n = 200) %
School reputation remained good or improved	80	80	86
Retained/built a strengths-based school culture	70	59	71
Roll remained stable or grew in a manageable way	60	64	65
Building/grounds quality stayed good or improved	71	67	59
I remained optimistic	68	60	57
Offered a good range of co-curricular activities	49	48	55
School senior leadership team remained strong or got stronger	55	53	54
Kept the ship afloat	51	35	43
Built stronger relationships with local iwi, hapū, and marae ²¹	*	28	37
A crisis we experienced did not overwhelm us	30	25	30
Found new revenue to support new initiatives	29	22	20
Got school back into the black from a deficit	19	15	13

* Not asked.

Decile 1–2 school principals were less likely than others to include among their main achievements that their school reputation had remained good or improved (63%). Urban and minor urban principals were more likely to note a crisis experienced that did not overwhelm them (36% and 41% respectively). Small school principals were less likely to note a stable or growing roll (51%, compared with 67% of principals of small–medium schools), and, not surprisingly since senior leadership teams occur less in small schools, were less likely to note their strength (18%, compared with 63% of principals of small–medium-size schools).

Major issues in school contexts

Consistent with patterns in the main achievements that principals report from their work, and patterns around their workload and things they would change about it, are the issues that they see facing their school, shown in Table 13. More principals than in 2013 thought that too much was being asked of schools. While funding per se was less of an issue than in 2013, areas with significant costs feature: digital technology and property maintenance or development. The adequacy of ICT equipment and internet access was, however, much less of an issue in 2016, reflecting the Government's improved resourcing of internet access.

Staffing levels and supply also feature among the main issues.

The proportion of principals who see general achievement levels at their school as a major issue has remained pretty consistent since 2010. Māori and Pasifika student achievement levels are mentioned more in 2016 than in 2010. Thirty-seven percent of principals also said in the 2016 national survey that they could not access the external expertise they needed to implement reliable strategies to support Māori

²¹ In 2013 this item included only local iwi and marae.

student learning, and 21%, to support Pasifika student learning. There is a marked increase since 2013 in those seeing the achievement of students with additional learning needs as a major issue for their school, with 24% also saying they could not access the external expertise they needed to differentiate teaching for these students. The increases in attention to these three specific groups of students are likely to reflect strong government focus on their achievement, and greater attention to this in ERO reviews.

TABLE 13 Major issues in principals' school contexts^{2223 24}

Major issue	2010 (n = 207) %	2013 (n = 180) %	2016 (n = 200) %
Too much is being asked of schools		42	53
Maintenance/replacement of digital technology	*	*	52
Funding	66	66	48
Property maintenance or development	30	38	48
Achievement of students with additional education needs	*	19	39
Large class sizes/Staffing levels/Class sizes	34	18	38
Māori student achievement levels	18	29	34
Student achievement levels	33	35	31
Attracting or keeping good teachers ²²	*	*	31
Partnership with iwi and hapū	*	*	30
Too much assessment ²³	*	*	29
Joining a Community of Learning Kāhui Ako	*	*	22
Student behaviour ²⁴	12	12	21
Adequacy of ICT equipment and internet access	46	54	20
Providing a balanced programme	*	37	20
Pasifika student achievement levels	8	13	19
Some staff are resistant to change	*	24	19
Declining school roll	21	18	16
Motivating students	12	21	9
Responding to cultural diversity	6	14	9
Inappropriate use of technology	*	*	8

* Not asked.

Student behaviour has increased since 2013 as a major issue for principals, as it has for teachers, 17% of whom said that student behaviour often disrupts their teaching, up from 13% in 2013 and 11% in 2010.²⁵ Teachers are generally positive about their school's approach to behaviour. It seems likely that behaviour as a school issue is related to the concerns that principals have been raising about a greater number of students having deeper issues around behaviour and mental health. Work with students with mental health issues headed the set of external expertise that principals identified as needed by their school but

22 In 2010 and 2013 this item was given as two. Keeping good teachers was identified as a major issue facing their school by 27% of principals in 2010, and 25% in 2013. Attracting good teachers was identified as a major issue by 22% in 2010, and 15% in 2013.

23 In 2010, when National Standards were first used, 61% of principals said their introduction was a major issue for their school, and 37%, assessment workload.

24 In 2010 the item was 'student behaviour/discipline'; in 2013 'improving student behaviour'.

25 Bonne, L., & Wylie, C. (2017). *Student learning and teachers' work. Findings from the NZCER national survey of primary and intermediate schools 2016*. Wellington: NZCER. Available on the National Survey website: www.nzcer.org.nz/research/national-survey

which they were unable to access (38%), much higher than the 15% who identified expertise to improve student behaviour as a needed area they could not access. Views on support of external agencies in relation to individual students with wellbeing needs show more principals having mixed or negative experiences of their usefulness than finding them useful.²⁶

More principals of decile 1–2 schools noted major issues relating to student achievement levels (67%), Māori (72%), and Pasifika (39%) student achievement than did others. Half experienced difficulty attracting or keeping good teachers. Principals of decile 7–8 schools mentioned providing a balanced programme (35%) more than others.

A declining school roll was a major issue for 33% of the principals of small schools, and 21% of the principals of small–medium schools, compared with 5% of the principals of medium–large schools, and 2% of principals of large schools.

Pasifika student achievement was more of a major issue for principals of large schools (31%), decreasing to 4% of principals of small schools.

Too much assessment was also more of a major issue for principals of large schools (41%), and 31% of the principals of medium–large and medium schools, but only 12% of principals of small schools.

Good quality professional learning and development was an issue most for rural school principals (44%), and least for those in urban schools (19%). More rural school principals and those in schools in minor urban areas also mentioned declining school rolls as an issue facing their school (25% and 23% respectively, compared with 11% in urban areas).

26 Boyd, S., Bonne, L., & Berg, M. (2017). *Finding a balance—fostering student wellbeing, positive behaviour, and learning. Findings from the NZCER national survey of primary and intermediate schools 2016*. Wellington: NZCER. Available at www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/finding-balance-fostering-student-wellbeing-positive-behaviour-and-learning

6.

Discussion

Overall, New Zealand principals enjoy their role, and see gains for their students, teachers, and schools from the work they do. But it is concerning that so few saw their workload as manageable. At a time when the expectations on schools to improve student learning are higher than they have ever been, it is also concerning that so few principals thought they can schedule enough time for the key component of their role, educational leadership. This situation is not new, which makes it even more worthy of attention. This is not simply a matter of looking at the extent of principals' responsibilities. Just over half the principals saw a major issue facing their school was that too much was being asked of schools, reflecting among other things growing student needs, difficulty in accessing timely support for students or finding experienced teachers, and the recent pace of policy change.

The government support that principals have for their role was more around the management aspects than educational leadership, with little ongoing formal support for educational leadership after the programme for new principals. Principals were also choosing their own advisers, and learning from each other, though this was not yet common practice.

There are signs in the survey that new principals need more support than they currently get, as do principals of small schools. Experienced principals seemed to have more ability to focus on educational leadership: some of that seems to be related to their also leading larger schools, with more internal support.

Just under half the principals indicated that they had thoughts of moving away from school leadership in the next 5 years. Some also indicated that they envisaged staying at their school, or leading another. Nonetheless, that seems quite a high figure, particularly set alongside the 26% who sometimes felt stuck in the principal's role for lack of other local educational career options, and the almost half who would like more career options beyond the principal's role.

The Education Council's work on a national leadership strategy is therefore timely. It needs to think not only of how we develop and support capable and energetic leadership in all schools, but how we also use that capability and experience beyond schools, building a more coherent and stronger educational system.

