

School governance in New Zealand – how is it working?

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Overview

This paper draws on the findings of a number of national surveys of primary schools conducted by NZCER since 1989, and in secondary schools since 2003. It includes new analysis from the latest 2006 survey of secondary schools, which questioned principals, trustees, teachers and parents. The paper also looks at other evidence about how boards of trustees are faring, including Education Review Office reports, and it examines the research literature on school governance both here and overseas. The Minister for Education Steve Maharey has indicated there will be a government review of the role of boards of trustees and this paper is intended to contribute to that debate.

Key points

- A number of boards have significant issues of capacity and capability but there is no sign the current system of governance is about to fall over. The report concludes none of the problems with boards are “so deep, widespread, intransigent or costly to student learning that one would want to either move to another form of school governance or ditch the governance layer completely.” On the contrary, there are good reasons for strengthening the board of trustees system.
- After more than 16 years of self-managing schools, a more realistic view is needed about what can be expected of volunteer trustees. On average they can commit around four hours a week – no more. Consistent surveys have shown widespread frustration that funding and financial management tend to dominate.
- Adequate funding for the employment of administrative staff to service school management and boards is crucial. This will help reduce the time boards and schools must spend on tasks that take away from the key focus: student learning
- Measures are needed to make things easier for school, such as a helpdesk system schools can go to for expertise on legal, regulatory and policy changes. Any new policy should have to pass the test: does this increase school workloads?

- The analysis of student and school performance data is a complex new area for boards. The Ministry of Education should fund the development and dissemination of material that can be used in board sessions focussed on school strategic planning or review.
- The appointment of the principal is probably the most important decision a board makes. Most get some external advice on this; the paper recommends they go further with inclusion of a member from a local team of accredited education professionals contracted by the Ministry of Education in the appointment process and principal appraisals.
- Overall, there are issues with boards in around 10-15 percent of schools, which is consistent with earlier NZCER surveys. Asked about 23 different items in their school, principals marked board-related issues in the bottom quarter. Funding topped the list of concerns for both principals and trustees.
- Secondary trustees were generally positive about their role and boards were relatively stable. Working relations between trustees on the board were rated good or very good by 92 percent of respondents. Three-quarters of trustees reported a very good working relationship with their principal, and principals had a similar perspective.
- Asked if trustees had too much responsibility placed on them, 61 percent said yes. That's up from 36 percent in 2003. The average number of hours each trustee spent each week on their role was about the same as in 2003 so the change is not to do with time but with the nature of the responsibilities. Secondary principals had a different view – in 2003, 48 percent thought trustees had too much responsibility, in 2006 that had decreased to 35 percent.
- Most trustees and principals agreed their board lacked some expertise (71 percent of trustees and 79 percent of principals), with strategic planning and legal skills the biggest gap.
- Parental satisfaction with schools is high – 79 percent were generally happy with their child's quality of education which is similar to the 2003 response. Many parents – 46 percent – had raised issues with the school, bullying, concerns about a particular teacher or about a student's behaviour or attitude being the most common concerns. Of those, three-quarters felt they had been fairly listened to and half thought the right action had been taken as a result.
- There are differences related to school decile, with principals of high-decile schools more likely to think their board was on top of the task than colleagues in low-decile schools. Low-decile school principals rated board experience and skill as much lower. Trustees in low-decile schools were far more likely to have received training in their role and were also more likely to use an independent person for their principal appraisal than higher-decile schools.
- Overall the survey revealed some problems with capability on boards in lower-decile schools but not with commitment. They face deeper and more complex challenges than other schools, with less access to the skills and networks of their higher-decile counterparts.