

Secondary principals' perspectives from NZCER's 2022 National Survey of Schools

Executive summary

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The long-running National Survey of Schools project is part of the New Zealand Council for Educational Research's (NZCER's) Te Pae Tawhiti programme of research, funded through the Ministry of Education.

NZCER has run a national survey of secondary schools every 3 years since 2003. As part of the 2022 National Survey of Secondary Schools, we invited all English-medium secondary school principals (state and state-integrated) to complete our surveys.

This year we trialled a different approach to surveying principals, where we sent out three shorter surveys to all principals, where each third completed only one survey. The three samples cover all English-medium secondary principals (state and state-integrated), and, together, the three surveys allowed us to retain the comprehensive nature of our national survey, while reducing survey completion time for principals. Of all 374 principals we invited to take part in the survey, we received a total of 154 principal responses across our three surveys, giving a response rate of 41%.

The report covers all the questions asked of principals, organised in four areas:

1. Optimism, supporting Māori students, and supporting Pacific students
2. Governance, system-wide interactions, and support
3. Teaching, learning, and wellbeing
4. Equity, curriculum, and working experiences.

Key highlights that stood out to us were:

- Overall, principals reported feeling optimistic and supported by good systems and committed staff (72%–88%), but only 55% had a clear idea of upcoming initiatives or policy changes that impact how they work.
- Most principals (81%–88%) indicated that their school positively supported Māori students through a range of practices. However, there is an opportunity for further involvement of whānau in school activities and initiatives related to Māori language (45%) and ensuring more students have regular access to positive Māori community role models (64%).
- Overall, principals indicated relatively lower levels of support for Pacific students (19%–57%) compared to that provided for Māori students (64%–88%).
- Student data play a key role in guiding boards of trustees' decision making (73%–92%), but only 38% said this was the case for Pacific students' achievement data.
- About half of principals commented on the collaborative nature of Kāhui Ako and their positive impact on relationships, while also asking for improvement in their structure, and additional support to enhance outcomes.

- There was in principle support for the role of Ministry of Education regional staff at Te Mahau (79%–85%), with some reservations: only 44%–47% of principals said that regional staff at Te Mahau help them tackle some of the wider issues for schools in their area, and give them some new and useful ideas.
- Many principals indicated that they had received helpful advice from Ministry of Education regional offices and NZSTA (83%–80%), but fewer agreed they received helpful advice from the Ministry of Education national office and Teaching Council (35%–31%).
- Interactions with ERO, including ERO reviews, were positively rated by 59%–78% of secondary principals.
- General support for mixed ability grouping was reported by 71%–75% of secondary principals, with most principals (77%–94%) reporting timetabling practices that enable students to realise their future career goals or aspirations.
- Most principals changed the ways they work because of COVID-19, specifically offering more opportunities to learn online (74%), increased online communication with parents and whānau, and replacing some assemblies or staff meetings with digital information (54%).
- Providing support for vulnerable students, including those with mental health issues, is identified as the top-ranking issue facing schools. While this is a concern, it was pleasing to see nearly all principals (98%) indicated that their school had well-embedded plans and processes for identifying and acting on students' social or mental health concerns. About three-quarters of principals indicated their teachers were trained to recognise and act on mental health warning signs.
- Recruiting quality teachers is another top issue reported by 71% of principals, with particular difficulties in recruiting maths, te reo Māori, and science teachers.
- Too much is being asked of schools (76% thought so), and principals would rather have more time to focus on educational leadership (80%), and more time to reflect, read, and be innovative (73%).
- In principle, there is support for the new Equity Index (EQI) system and associated funding changes (60%–73%), but reservations as to whether it is likely to challenge stigma and improve educational outcomes for students who face socioeconomic barriers to achievement (only 31%–43% thought it would).
- Actions to combat climate change are emerging (40%–60%), but not widespread. Only 20% of schools had goals, objectives, or actions related to sustainability or climate change as part of their school charter, strategic plan, or annual goals.
- There was low support for National Certificates of Educational Achievement (NCEA) changes and the review of achievement standards (26%–44%), and schools are in the early stages of implementing Aotearoa New Zealand Histories in their local curriculum: most are either getting started (28%) or developing their understandings and relationships (42%).
- Most principals enjoy their job (80%), but only 9% thought their workload is manageable. Twenty-two percent thought their high workload prevented them from doing justice to their school.
- Just over half (53%–60%) were positive about their building conditions and their suitability for teaching and learning.