PRINCIPALS' VIEWS ON COLs

NZPF has undertaken a survey of school principals (2,300) to gather their observations on the Communities of Learning (CoLs). 964 principals returned completed surveys, which is a sufficiently high proportion to have confidence in extrapolating from the results. The survey ran online from June 16 to June 30 2016.

The survey found that:

7% were members of a fully functioning CoL

17% were awaiting approval of their CoL

21% were actively engaged in forming a CoL

10% had lodged an expression of interest intending to join a CoL

18% had lodged an expression of interest and were undecided about joining a CoL

12% had no intention of joining a CoL

6% are not currently engaged

6% were still collecting information

1% had no CoL to join or had been rejected by the Ministry

2% did not give any detail

 The survey also asked for responses to three open-ended questions. These questions asked about motivations for joining a Col; what further information principals needed who were undecided about forming a CoL; and motivations for not joining a CoL.

The survey revealed high levels of support for collaboration and also showed a number of hurdles in the way of principals feeling positive about CoLs, even

among those whose schools have joined one or have expressed interest. These hurdles include concerns about principal and teacher roles, pressures to join and concerns that the model as it is will not be able to support good collaboration. There are also ongoing issues of trust.

Motivation for Joining a CoL

We asked those who had joined a CoL "What factors motivated you to join a CoL?"

619 principals responded to this question, with their comments falling into five main categories. Percentages given are out of these 619 responses, and are rounded up or down to produce whole numbers so do not necessarily add up to 100.

32% were motivated by collaboration and the mutual benefits of supporting other schools. Most hoped to continue collaborative groups/clusters already in existence only this time having their activities funded.

"Tracking children from pre-school to tertiary. Collegiality among professionals, collaboration among principals, staff, parents, whanau and children, raising student achievement, accessing PD with less financial constraints as a collective group"

20% were motivated to improve learning outcomes for all children, raise achievement levels, moderate data and create smoother transitions

"Working collaboratively with other schools and to ensure that transitions between schools are highly effective for the students. Working together using resources to lift the achievement of our target students."

20% were motivated by the money available to CoLs and do not want to miss out on this resource. Small and rural schools in particular are attracted by what they believe will be generous resourcing which they do not have at present.

"Basically the large pool of money available – need to have a piece of that. We already have a good collaborative model working in our area."

19% were motivated by pressure and coercion from colleagues and the Ministry, and fear of missing out on PLD and property funding in the future. They did not want to be the odd one out despite reluctance to join

"Had no choice as I'm in rural Southland and all the schools in my area needed my FTTEs to make our CoL viable. We (my BOT and I) sustained immense pressure to join. I personally love the idea of collaboration but detest the hierarchical money based structure that has been imposed!!!"

6% want to improve the quality of teaching, create career pathways for staff and have access to better PLD for their staff

"Need for staff in small school to up skill and see that they are working below everyone else. Same old, same old is not good enough. To build on student learning."

Information for those undecided about forming a CoL

We asked what further information did undecided respondents require about CoLs?

513 principals responded to this question with their comments falling into six main categories. Very few wanted more information in fact. Most wanted some change to the strategy.

28% expressed concerns about the inflexibility of the model. By far the most recorded issue was the role of the lead principal. Respondents did not believe that a true collaboration can occur with a lead principal who is paid to lead the CoL. They preferred to use the money allocated to this role to purchase relevant PLD for the whole group and have shared or distributed leadership. Smaller numbers also had difficulty with the geographical limits for CoLs and the requirement to include pipeline transitions, when these were not relevant for some groups.

"The funding and leadership structure is a major hurdle. CoL's are about collaboration but they are set up with a hierarchy which is outside this mindset!"

22% mostly believe the initiative has a hidden agenda and they do not have trust in it. They believe CoLs are a flawed model if intended for collaboration. They also express strong views about the Ministry's approach which they variously describe as putting undue pressure on principals to join CoLs and threatening them with loss of funds for PLD, through to interfering in the CoL's process of establishing achievement challenges.

"Will it eventually turn out to be a mechanism for centralised control of schools? Is it another accountably measure to enable ERO to get schools to put pressure on those in the cluster who aren't performing as well against National Standards?"

20% were not convinced there would be any benefits to the achievement of their students and there could be a negative impact on learning if teachers were out of the class. They predicted extra workload when they are already over-burdened and expected the time out for meetings to be a further burden.

"What are the actual benefits, aside from monetary for individual staff member and the lead Principal, that being in a CoL will bring that is different from what schools can already access now? This was not able to be answered by MOE personnel presenting to our group last week. Also what will go when CoLs comes n that will enable Principals to maintain a healthy work load? We all know how pressured with compliance and accountability related matters principals are currently."

16% indicated that the achievement challenges that the Ministry find acceptable are too narrow and based on national standards or NCEA, rather than being relevant to what schools want. Some reported that finding a common goal for all schools is a struggle. They also objected to the use of national standards and NCEA as measures of the CoL achieving success.

"We are determined to set our own vision and establish our shared values. We want to be able to direct the path we take ourselves and are reluctant to be channelled into just a collective of schools that focuses on NS."

10% believed they would struggle to find anyone suitable for either the principal or teacher roles, and if they did, they predicted that student learning would be negatively affected by having quality teachers and the principal out of their schools. They also expressed concerns about the availability of relievers.

"In our area there is a lack of interest due to the competitive nature of the town. It is hard to staff in our area which means releasing our star teachers causes issues. There is no person keen to lead the COL."

4% of largely rural, sole charge or small schools reported the CoL system as inequitable with distances to travel not funded. They also found the requirement to include secondary and intermediate schools irrelevant in many cases and feared losing all autonomy and authority in a CoL system.

"We are all rural schools with large distances between us. Funding for attending meetings will dry up very quickly…"

Motivation for not joining a CoL

We asked what factors motivated respondents who had decided not to engage with CoLs?

257 principals responded to this question with their comments falling into seven categories.

18% listed pathways and incompatibility with other schools along with the difficulty in finding schools to collaborate with. A number raised the issue of maintaining relationships within the CoL when it has been forced on them. Some felt they could be dragged down by under-performing schools.

"No college that can relate to us, the need to find schools willing to collaborate, a more flexible model especially for those schools that don't fit the mainstream model. Applaud the fact that people are trying to raise achievement through a collaborative approach but we might be a square peg that would thrive with fellow square pegs!"

17% pointed to the extra workload and time, having other priorities and seeing no benefits to the school and their students by joining a CoL.

"Seems to be a select club. Haven't got time for numerous meetings for an outcome that isn't clear. Complete waste of money. Should be directed to real issues in schools. Already hearing negative stories from people who have joined COLS."

17% voiced their disappointment at the lack of consultation in developing this model, the lack of clarity from the Ministry when seeking answers to questions about the real purpose of CoLs and the way the Ministry is influencing the proceedings. Many expressed their view that there is a 'hidden agenda'.

"Cynicism. Break down of meaningful relationship with MOE. COLs are clearly another weapon in the great neoliberal agenda to undermine public education, which I value hugely. (Education is for the greater good of everyone, not for individual advantage.) COLs are another tool (like PACT, National Standards, changes to EDUCANZ, amendments to the Education Act, even the latest budget etc.) that can be spun as supporting public education, whilst actually seriously undermining it. Either every kid deserves a fair go or he doesn't. The lack of critical thinking shown by my colleagues that are engaging in COLs is very disheartening – just look at the UK mess! Look at the USA mess!"

13% indicated that they are already participating in collaborative practice so why fix something that isn't broken?

"I am in a cluster that works effectively, I have high student achievement and staff who enjoy PLD and are very reflective. I have a supportive BOT. Why would I join an initiative that has an end game of having my school governed by a different school's BOT who is not connected to my community? Why would I also have a 'lead teacher' who will end up being paid more than me as a U1 Principal come in and lead change in our school?"

13% disagreed with the allocation of the money. A high proportion said the money should be allocated to the children's learning not staff.

"Money in wrong area!!!! Students not teacher's/principal's pockets. Will make little difference as its not directly related to students!!!"

12% do not want to release their best teachers for the benefit of other schools whilst the children in their own schools have relievers. Many suggested that this would be damaging to children's learning and staff morale.

"Can't see the benefit for the children in our school, the potential for schools to lose autonomy (super-boards etc.), potentially having our best teacher (or principal) out of the school and the impact this will have on the children, the backfilling using relievers – finding quality relievers is tricky enough already, we already work collaboratively – this model is too inflexible and resourced the wrong way."

10% focussed on the inflexibility of the CoL model, especially in respect of the principal role.

"The need for one principal to be identified as leader – no-one in our cluster wishes to undertake this role. The restrictive parameters within which the Community is required to work."