

The New Zealand Principal's Experience of the School Board as Employer

Survey Report to the New Zealand Principals' Federation and the New Zealand
Secondary Principals' Council

SUMMARY

October 2009

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Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank:

The New Zealand Secondary Principals' Council and the New Zealand Principals' Federation for funding, and for technical support with survey distribution.

Consultant Adviser Howard Youngs, Senior Lecture in Education, and Programme Director for Masters of Educational Management of Unitec, Auckland for his advice and assistance with survey design and statistical analysis, and his review of the final report.

Eileen Piggot-Irvine, Associate Professor of Education and Director NZARRC, Unitec, for reading the report and offering comments and suggestions.

Cathy Wylie, Chief Researcher at the New Zealand Council for Educational Research for her comments on the survey questions.

The group of practicing principals who contributed at the design stage of the survey, tested the survey and offered comments.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

In 2007 several 'governance stocktake' exercises to review the current school administration system were undertaken by the New Zealand Council for Education Research (NZCER), the Education Review Office (ERO), and the New Zealand School Trustees Association (NZSTA) with the Ministry of Education (Ministry). The reports found that the majority of schools were doing a sound job of governance, but all three reports identified principal employment, performance management and support as continuing areas of weakness in the current governance framework.

In light of those findings, and to build on that work, a nationwide electronic survey of all state and state integrated principals was conducted in June and July 2009, in the last year of a three year board term (2007-2010). The survey sought principals' observations of the way in which the board-principal employment relationship works within the governance framework which operates in New Zealand schools (see Appendix 1).

There were 787 responses that were sufficiently complete for use in the data analysis making a response rate of 32% and a small amount of statistical testing was undertaken where the questions allowed for this (see Appendix 5). Representation of different groups within the survey cohort (gender, school size, school type, decile, state or integrated) was generally consistent with their representation in the national group (see Appendix 2). Respondents were given the opportunity to provide written comments on a number of questions and, where relevant, that qualitative data has been included to provide a fuller picture of respondent views.

OVERVIEW

Principals' experiences of the board as employer appeared to depend to some extent on the size of the school and to a lesser extent on the decile and location. While employment relations problems resulting from personality clashes and 'hidden agendas' were liable to turn up in any school board regardless of size (and may be difficult to prevent or deal with), the data tended to show other problems related to non-performance or poor performance of employer and governance tasks appeared to occur more frequently in smaller and low decile schools.

The larger the school the more likely the board was perceived to be effective and knowledgeable about both its employment and its governance responsibilities and statistically significant differences are evident, though the magnitudes of these differences are small. There was more likelihood that the board provided the principal with professional challenge and stimulation and also high quality support. Respondents who were lucky enough to have this kind of board valued it highly.

The smaller the school the more it appeared to suffer from one or more of the following: difficulty getting sufficient candidates to stand for election, a narrower range of skills and experiences brought to the board table; reluctance to take on employer responsibilities for performance management; support and development of the principal; and less confidence or willingness to take responsibility for governance tasks. Turnover in board members may also create a greater training burden for the principal and increase the likelihood of 'rogue' board members and unpredictable demands from the employer. The latter may also increase the likelihood of principal-board conflict in these schools.

For principals in smaller schools this may mean inconsistent performance expectations over time, reduced likelihood of good quality professional development and support, and a greater administrative workload on the principal. Many in this group felt that they had a good relationship with their employer but the principal often did the employer's job as well as his or her own and carried the burden of responsibility for the school.

KEY FINDINGS

Board's performance of its employment duties

Board involvement in staff employment decisions

The larger the school the more likely that staff related employment tasks of most kinds were delegated to the principal, and the less likelihood that the board would be involved, either jointly with the principal, or on its own. There was a clear picture of greater board involvement with most aspects of the staff employment role as the school gets smaller. Over 50% of primary school and 70% of smaller school boards were involved in employment of teaching staff (compared to 6% of secondary schools) and between 35-45% of primary school boards were involved in staff disciplinary and competency matters (22-42% of secondary boards).

Employer understanding of legal requirements

There was a lower than expected level of knowledge amongst primary school principals that all delegations had been properly recorded. Only 38% of primary school principals said all delegations had been recorded, compared to 88% of secondary schools.

There may be a lower than desirable level of board chair familiarity with the collective agreement in primary schools - little more than half of primary respondents were sure that their board chair had a copy of the agreement compared to 70% of secondary respondents. It is possible that, in a sizeable minority of schools, boards may be unaware of their obligations under the agreement.

Performance management of the principal

Although 89% of respondents said that their school had an agreed principal performance management policy, and 93% of respondents said they have a current annual performance agreement, slightly fewer (80%) of those who had an agreement said it was signed. Over a quarter of respondents in secondary schools did not have a current signed agreement. New principals may take a year or two to establish a performance agreement with their board.

Nearly a quarter of all primary school respondents said that they had to take responsibility for ensuring their performance management process occurred. Boards in smaller schools were slightly more likely to leave it up to the principal (27%). Deference, lack of time, lack of interest, lack of skill, and no perceived need, were the main reasons suggested for board reluctance to take responsibility for this.

Around 12% all of respondents (but only 4% of secondary respondents) said that the principal had the final say on the content of the performance management agreement while 19% said (correctly) that the board has the final say. A majority of respondents (67%) said that the board and the principal jointly had the final say. This may indicate that in the majority of schools agreement is reached between the parties and where there has not been significant disagreement the issue of who has the final say has not arisen.

Appraisals

Most respondents (90%) had received a written appraisal in the last year, even though not all of those who had an appraisal (80%) had a signed annual performance agreement. Most found the appraisal useful in their professional development.

How useful? A large majority (80%) found the appraisal process 'useful' or 'very useful' (37% very useful and 43% quite useful). Perceived usefulness was slightly lower amongst respondents from secondary and large schools, and tended to decline with the years of experience of the principal.

Internal or external: Around 69% of appraisals in the previous year were done externally and 31% were done internally (with 25% of appraisals done by the board chair and only 6% by a committee). High decile schools, large schools and secondary schools were more likely to have had internal appraisals (36%, 46% and 57% respectively) whereas only 23% of small and rural schools undertook internal appraisals. Secondary school and large school respondents expressed slightly less satisfaction with their appraisal and this appeared to be linked to the fact that many had been done internally.

Cost: There was some alignment between the cost of appraisal and school size but decile did not appear to affect the amount spent on external appraisal. Respondents tended to rate appraisal under \$1000 as less useful, those in the primary sector attributed most usefulness to appraisal in the \$1000-\$2000 category, and those in the secondary sector to the \$2000-\$3000 category. There appears to be a point at which appraisals over \$3000 may not be perceived as proportionately more useful than an appraisal for less than \$3000.

The external appraiser: Nearly three quarters of those respondents using an external appraiser used an independent consultant and only 8% used another principal who was known to them personally. The latter group expressed the lowest satisfaction with the usefulness of the appraisal, whereas, an independent appraiser was perceived as being more useful when the appraiser was known to the principal. The average number of years respondents had been appraised by their current appraiser was 2.16 and the highest was 19 years of being appraised by the same board chair. Respondents tended to place increasing value on the appraisal as the principal and appraiser get to know each other over time, peaking at around three years.

Reporting back: In more than a quarter of schools (29%) the chairperson reports back to the board that the appraisal has been done, and the report is not viewed by the rest of the board. In about a third of schools (33%) a summary of the report was provided to the whole board in-committee. In 16% of respondent schools the entire appraisal report is put before the whole board in-committee. In 14% of respondent schools the report of the principal's appraisal, whether in full or in summary is tabled at the board in open session. Tabled and/or discussing the appraisal report in open or public session, against the wishes of the principal, is a breach of employment obligations to respect the mana and the privacy of the principal. However, 88% of respondents from this group said that they were happy with this method of reporting.

Professional development

Despite a legal requirement to ensure that their principal receives professional development, boards of trustees did not appear to be particularly interested in, or take an active role in ensuring that this occurred. Only 52% of respondents (38% of secondary respondents) said that their performance management agreement recorded what professional development they would receive.

Almost all principals had received some form of principal professional development in the last year, with local principals' meetings and principals' conferences predominating. However principals also listed a very wide range of programmes and study in which they had participated in the last year.

It appears that, where funding permits, many principals drove their own professional development and were pro-active about seeking out further opportunities to improve their professional skills and knowledge. Some principals, particularly in small or low decile schools, said they were reluctant to use school funds for this purpose. It is unclear to what extent principals spend their own money on their ongoing professional development.

Professional support

Planning for support: Overall, 40% of respondents said that professional support to be accessed was recorded in their performance agreement, but there was a difference between primary schools (43%) and secondary schools and large schools (30% and 25% respectively). About one quarter of respondents had not discussed support mechanisms with their employer, either formally or informally.

Usefulness of support: For most respondents the first port of call was colleagues in other schools, followed by NZSTA and the Ministry, NZPF, NZEI or PPTA and Principals Advisers. For most the advice received was considered helpful or very helpful.

Legal support: 41% of respondents said they had professional indemnity insurance (54% of secondary respondents, 39% of primary respondents, and 28% of respondents from small schools).

Board's performance of its governance duties

Relevance: In addition to the board's performance as an employer, the board's performance as a governing body may impact on the principal's employment conditions in two key ways: the relationship that it develops with the principal; and the competence and willingness with which the board performs its own tasks.

'Supportive': The data showed that most principals enjoyed a supportive and positive relationship with their boards and that only a small percentage (8-9%) were experiencing significant stress in the relationship, describing it as quite stressful or very stressful. A further 18% were experiencing some stress. Small and rural schools and integrated schools were a little more likely than other schools to find the relationship quite or very stressful (11%).

Competent?: The data showed that the competence and willingness of some boards to be actively involved in governance was an issue. This was particularly so in small, low decile and rural schools which make up half of all New Zealand schools. Nearly half of this group of respondents (45%) described their boards as passive; 40% felt that the board did not give them clear direction; only 15% said their board provided professional challenge; fewer than half (40%) thought the board chair brought useful professional skills to the job; 25% of these respondents wanted to see more of their board chair, who was unavailable when needed; only 30% could say (towards the end of a three year board term) that their board chair was experienced or was knowledgeable about educational issues or educational management issues.

Pro-active?: Unwillingness, or lack of time, or confidence, to take on governance responsibility was also an important issue in many schools but more so in the small, rural, low decile categories. Around 65% of all primary respondents and notably, around half of all secondary school respondents, thought that it was the principal (not the principal together with the board) who drove the formulation of the school's vision and goals (70% primary, 56% secondary), developed the strategic plan (69%, 51%), monitored progress towards school goals (79%, 72%) and decided what the principal would report to the board on (68% 43%). Around 65% of all schools thought it was the principal who managed risk. In accordance with tradition, all boards were more likely to involve themselves in financial and property issues but 31% of all respondents (24% of secondary respondents) still said that the principal decided on financial priorities and ensured the financial soundness of the school. Board involvement in financial matters was less likely in low decile schools.

In the case of the small, rural, low decile school categories, around 70% of respondents said the principal performed most governance tasks. This has significant implications for principal workload and qualitative comment focused on this point, often at length.

Problems with the board and appropriateness of available support

Dealing with problems in the early stages

For respondents who thought that relationships with their current board were problematic (120) the most frequently mentioned contributing factor was failure of the board to follow through when they have promised to attend to things (56 respondents, 46% of group), followed by over-involvement of the board in day-to-day management of the school. Secondary respondents were more likely to be troubled by board over-involvement in day-to-day management of the school than by board inertia. For large schools the most commonly cited contributing factor was unrealistic performance expectations of the board. 40% of this subgroup were from rural schools although rural respondents made up 32% of the total respondent group.

Useful interventions: Strategies currently being used involved using different independent people to assist, advise or train the board, or to referee, and most strategies appeared to involve additional time and input from the principal. The need for mandatory ongoing whole board training was mentioned frequently. Independent advisers with sufficient authority or mana that the board would listen to them were also suggested. There was a call for greater clarity about board roles and principal's role, preferably in the Education Act, and a few wanted principals' organizations to take a stronger role in defining these. A few wanted to move on from the individual school board system and have some form of professional governance, or governance at district level to replace boards. After colleagues and friends, NZSTA was rated the most helpful source of advice on problems with boards. There was positive comment on the quality of current board training and trainers.

Problems with previous boards

Around 151 respondents (19%) said they had experienced conflict or stressful relationships with previous boards. Across all school types the most frequently mentioned contributing factor from past conflict experiences was 'over-involvement of the board in day-to-day management of the school'. This was followed closely by 'disruptive, demanding or antagonistic board members'.

Outcomes: In many cases the problem was solved by the individual(s) who were causing the problem leaving the board (44% of the sub-group) or a change of board chair (24%). 18% of the group had managed to repair the relationship, 12% had resigned and found another job because the situation was so unpleasant and 3% had been actively pressured to resign. None said that they had been dismissed by the board.

Assistance: The most frequently used forms of assistance in repairing or resolving the relationship in this situation were: informal (other principals / staff / friends), followed in order by NZSTA Industrial Advisers, NZEI, Board Training, NZSTA Helpline, NZPF, and MOE. Almost all of these forms of support were described as quite helpful or very helpful.

Serious conflict and employment issues

Where the principal had resigned under pressure or was dismissed (16 respondents), support from several organisations was rated slightly less highly and in particular, NZSTA ratings dropped slightly. This is to be expected because when the board and the principal are in an employment conflict NZSTA represents the board. Friends and family became the top source of support, slightly ahead of fellow principals.

Some common themes from comments related to this section were that in situations of serious employment conflict with the board principals may not necessarily expect support from NZSTA. Support from unions may also disappear, especially if there is any kind of conflict with staff. Where there is an employment dispute Ministry support is also likely to decline. Some principals who were

members of their union but not of a principals' organisation, found themselves in a conflict situation with no legal or other support. Some who were members of the principals' organisations did not have indemnity insurance and had the additional financial stress of having to take legal action at their own expense. Some of those who were members of principals' organisations felt that the organisations should take a stronger role in supporting principals in difficulty.

Several principals in this situation and their families experienced extremely high levels of stress, and one had contemplated suicide. Others talked of the high cost of legal advice to solve some very complex situations when support from key organisations evaporated.

While there may be valid reasons for the board to be in conflict with the principal, a number of features of the parent board/employer system make the resolution of the problem more problematic and stressful than it would be in other jobs. There appears to be a need for a group to play a greater support role for principals who find themselves in this position.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

The data from this survey tends to suggest that the size and decile level of a school community may affect the ability of its board to consistently fulfill its "good employer" obligations, both in relation to its performance management and professional support of the principal, and its ability to provide the strategic direction and monitoring which the current legislation envisages. The data give rise to the following broad questions:

- Being a 'good employer' of the principal and providing effective school governance support requires some degree of skill, knowledge and experience. Is a voting pool of a few hundred parents or less capable of consistently, over time, generating boards with suitable skills to perform the duties required of them?
- If not, are current training mechanisms and support adequate to make up the deficit?
- Given the extensive powers and responsibilities that boards have, should board training be ongoing and compulsory? Should basic 'employer' training be higher priority or can principals rely on boards knowing when they need guidance? For example
 - a. Given the apparent gaps in board awareness of the collective agreement, if conflict develops can principals be assured of fair treatment in accordance with that agreement?
 - b. Should more use be made of independent referee/mediators early on in principal-board conflict situations rather than waiting until each side has an advocate?
 - c. Where it becomes apparent that a principal is struggling and should probably leave a school, who should ensure that support is provided during the dispute and that counselling is provided afterwards? Boards are not always aware of the need for this and are often focussed on their own side of the problem.
- Is the system of devolving employment powers and performance management responsibilities to each school board capable of ensuring good quality performance management expectations and systems across all schools?
- Do boards provide equal or adequate access to support and professional development for all principals, appropriate to their school type and size?

- Is the devolution of extensive powers and responsibilities to numerous small school boards ensuring equality of opportunity and expectations for students in those schools and is it the most cost effective way of doing so? A consideration of some approximate comparative governance costs for different sized schools is set out in Appendix 4.¹
- The literature is unclear as to how governance impacts on outcomes for students, but *if* effective governance does make a difference to student outcomes then does the “one size fits all” governance model ensure that every school gets good governance.

¹ See Appendix 4

