



# PRINCIPAL MATTERS

NGĀ TUMUAKI O AOTEAROA

THE MOST RESPECTED AND INFLUENTIAL ADVOCATE FOR NEW ZEALAND'S PRINCIPALS

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### President's Message



Kia ora e te whānau

I was going to start this first *Principal Matters* of term 4 by saying 'welcome back'. Then I looked at the massive volume of information and work, already fired at you this week, and thought that may sound ambiguous!

But you cope because you must cope. That is the nature of principalship.

The current daily challenges are urgent and crowd out the mental space you need to focus on the achievement challenges in front of you for term four. They also distract you from your strategic planning for 2022. I know you will all be bringing your most resilient self to cope with these demands and perhaps the best approach is to keep it simple. It is likely that we will still be living with COVID in 2022 so keeping a focus on the health and wellbeing of your students and avoiding complications might be the best plan.

However, we must not make the mistake of thinking that wellbeing is less about explicit teaching and more about soft skills. Students' wellbeing is best served by the provision of expert teaching that leaves young people feeling secure and supported.

At a time of considerable disruption to schooling, our children are deserving of teaching that doesn't relegate curriculum progress to the too hard basket.

Front and centre in 2022 is the progress we need to make in addressing pedagogical change in mathematics.

The report from the Royal Society Te Apārangi's panel on mathematics education in New Zealand schools has now been published and the findings make for worrying reading.

Chair of the panel, Massey University's Distinguished Professor Gaven Martin, has indicated that, 'even if all [14] recommendations were taken up, it would take a decade to see results.'

And therein lies the problem. Young people cannot wait 10 years to see substantive progress on mathematics achievement.

We must act now to address the current flaws in our mathematics teaching and learning. How does the report assist teachers who will be taking mathematics lessons as the new term begins?

The report is an excellent summation of the macro factors influencing our slide in mathematics achievement. It offers a well-argued case but does not detail what specific improvements are needed to lift the practice of primary school teachers.

Yes, ability grouping is damaging and must be eliminated from our classrooms; yes, a genuine drive to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi will enable teaching to be culturally sustaining; and of course a suite of carefully designed nationally coherent resources is important (although before we get to a suite let's start with one nationally coherent resource); and yes, we need teachers' professional learning to be rescued from the deeply flawed, market driven approach that currently exists; and national leadership by expert sector based mathematics teachers and principals is urgently required, although of course this will be subject to Government provision in Budget 2022.

But what about the classroom and the practices we have been expected to use in the teaching of mathematics?

The report offers limited but welcome commentary on the Ministry of Education's Numeracy Project. It has been the dominant mathematics education approach since it was introduced in the early 2000s. This has led to negative consequences for many students who simply struggle with the emphasis on strategy when a simply taught and practised procedure would grow the capability a learner needs to persevere and flourish.

NZPF was anxious to garner expert advice on primary school mathematics teaching, so invited mathematics expert, Dr Audrey Tan, to address the New Zealand Principals' Federation Conference in August. Her presentation was enthusiastically received and downloaded by nearly a thousand principals at the conclusion of the conference.

Her key message was a simple recipe for rapid improvement: reduce the emphasis on mental strategies and increase student confidence and understanding through explicit teaching and plenty of meaningful practice. Principals have been actively implementing these changes and will continue to do so at pace.

Helping young people discover the pleasure of being successful in mathematics is a key goal in our response to the slide in achievement. As Dr Tan emphasised, student confidence is a critical component in developing competence and understanding. Competence and understanding are the gateway pillars to higher-order problem solving. Let's help our young people love mathematics again!

Principals need Government to deliver on the recommendations in the Royal Society Te Apārangi's report so that success in mathematics can be experienced by all students, but there is much that can be done to facilitate immediate success in the classroom.

I am far from despondent about change. We know what needs doing, so let's get it done!

Ngā manaakitanga

Perry Rush

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