



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

Over the past month ERO staff have been across the motu sharing their plans for a new education review model. They describe this new approach as being, *'grounded in partnership and collaboration, embedded in your own planning and improvement cycle, and one that will be tailored to your school's circumstances'*.

The new model involves regular school visits with a focus on improvement and facilitated by an ERO staff member who can establish an ongoing relationship with you and your team.

This significant rework was prompted by the Tomorrow's Schools review that proposed the disestablishment of school-based reviews so that ERO may focus on the schooling system's high-level goals.

I believe that Chris Hipkins' rejection of the Tomorrow's Schools proposal represents a lost opportunity. The Minister pointed ERO back to schools.

At this juncture, principals must be very careful that they don't slow walk into a future that is more damaging than the past.

When I talk to principals about ERO's new model I get two responses:

- guarded interest that if done well, the approach could be useful
- concern at having to endure an ERO review not just once every 3 years but multiple times a year, every year!

Let's be clear. If we are to judge how we respond to the new ERO model we need to examine ERO's past modus operandi.

An ERO review creates an artificial reality in a school. Principals know what ERO values and gives the reviewers what they want to see. We dress up our schools, we dress up the paperwork, and make sure that we have lots of numbers to tell the story of achievement. We endure the review and we are awfully polite.

Once the review is over, we shelve the report and get on with the real business of teaching and learning.

To date, ERO has deployed a narrow and soulless view of achievement:

- an emphasis on reading, writing and mathematics achievement as the single measure of school quality
- a heavy emphasis on quantitative data and a preparedness to be the 'boots on the ground' in ensuring implementation of damaging Government policies such as the National Standards
- an accountability mindset that involves publicly calling out school performance against inaccurate and narrow measures
- the exercise of power over schools through the external evaluation model that reinforces a 'we know best' mentality and public shaming as the disinfectant required of apparent poor performance
- a highly Eurocentric review approach that fails to embrace holistic learning, broad curriculum achievement and culturally sustaining teaching and learning
- a review team that too often includes those who are distant from the practice of teaching and learning and dismissive of the influences of social factors on achievement

Many schools have had experiences of ERO that are so destructive of their confidence, wellbeing, and local curriculum, that under the new proposed model, the thought of seeing an ERO reviewer in their school multiple times a year, creates palpable anxiety.

It was only a short 3 weeks ago that a principal was sharing with me his experience of a highly judgemental reviewer that left him feeling disempowered and demoralised.

ERO should be congratulated for thinking differently but their new model will not succeed unless there is substantial change to their mindset, staff capability and culture.

For principals, there are many bottom-lines. Unless principals are confident that real change in ERO practices has occurred then it will be impossible to welcome reviewers into an ongoing and iterative partnership.

I encourage you to think about what your bottom-lines are and stand firm in both insisting that they are respected and in calling time on an ERO visit if you judge the tentacles of the past are creeping into the new model. Muscle up on this and be prepared to be staunch.

We have a window as this new model is worked up, to be part of the process of establishing norms. That means principals, who are responsible for the tone, culture and practice of what occurs in schools, insist that the new ERO model is congruent with that culture.

It is sad that schools have had to 'endure' ERO reviews in the past. 'Enduring' reviews in a partnership model is not what we want. Given the frequency of visits proposed in the new model, anything short of ERO reviews being non-hierarchical, helpful, and realistic will result in lasting damage to schooling and principals' wellbeing.

ERO reviewers will need to:

- be up to date in curriculum and pedagogical knowledge – there will need to be a significant refresh of ERO staff to replace those who have only ever known the evaluation of data
- have the capacity to see themselves as listeners and learners of a school's vision and context
- embrace diversity including a total rework of what counts as educational success
- accept the multiple and complex influences on student achievement
- be realistic about the demands of a practice-based setting and understand that good improvement cycles are not separate from day to day teaching and learning but embedded in it
- leave a school genuinely wanting a reviewer back, not dreading a return visit

I suggest that if ERO wants to implement their new model successfully, they make the first 6 months of an embedded partnership solely about understanding a school's context and establishing trust. The principal would then be given permission to 'green' or 'red' light further engagement.

My message to you is be hopeful but firm about this new model. Hold ERO to your expectations for your school and how you expect to see this model function. Should you be unhappy with the engagement then don't hesitate to send reviewers on their way! You call the shots in your school.

We have run out of patience regarding the good, but frequently misguided, intentions of central agencies. We are not prepared to be told what is important and what to value.

When the new model launches, NZPF intends to seek cycles of feedback from principals about how it is being implemented so that we may communicate directly with ERO and support principals to experience the very best changes to the review model.

Thank You

As the holidays are upon us, I would like to wish you all well. I know you will be going into this break, exhausted.

My thanks to Wayne Leighton at Royal Road Primary in Auckland who suggests an addition to my holiday reading booklist. He recommends, *Eyre Affair* by Jasper Fforde-very clever silliness that will make you laugh and Peter Verstappen from Wakefield School recommends, *The Mirror and the Light* by Hilary Mantel. He says it is stunning and, at 900 pages, a one-stop holiday reading shop!

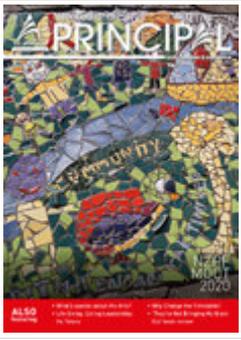
Relax and enjoy your well-deserved break.

Ngā manaakitanga

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