Succession Planning for School Leadership

Giving new leaders of smaller schools a stronger start

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Judith Catton, Principal
View Hill School
Oxford, Canterbury
New Zealand

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“Effective succession means having a plan and making plans to create positive and co-ordinated flows of leadership across many years and numerous people.”1

Foreword
At their best our small rural schools have the capacity to offer a rich, well-integrated curriculum that responds especially well to the interests and learning needs of the children in those local communities. The multi-level rural classroom has the potential to deliver innovative learning programmes that are highly responsive to children’s needs and the community’s special strengths. Yet small rural schools are especially dependent upon the leadership of their principal who almost always teaches at least part of the week throughout the year. It is clear that New Zealand vitally needs such teaching principals to have, when they set out, a really strong start. These leaders will face challenges enough without suffering complications from a poor start.

The present study reveals that transitions for incoming teaching principals are often poorly managed. For some, there is no local or community induction, and they are simply left to sink or swim. Many who enter the role are out again within a relatively short time, some forsaking the field of education forever after. Bear in mind that a ‘local’ in any small rural community was at least born there. Sometimes the requirement for being a ‘local’ is for the ties to go back many generations. Consider then the principal, arriving from without with a professional role to prosecute. The extent to which board members whose skill sets surround rural living, understand the vast professional demands upon the principal is often limited. The values implied by the curriculum that are core to the principal’s professional functioning are often muted among members of the board. The sense of the school’s place in the community surrounds other functions, indeed often the functions in which adult roles are key. A professional salary such as the principal’s can seem fabulous in the eyes of farmers whose expenses are chiefly business expenses and whose reported income can be small and even negative year upon year. Rural people who are not themselves farming are also liable to think a principal’s salary large beyond reason. This can be a harm to the initial regard that is extended to the incoming principal. (These issues for the incoming principal are virtually unique to the rural context.) The expectations upon the principal can be endless, yet often these expectations relate less to core professional duties to the children that the principal possesses than to other things. Missteps within the community are the more likely since this is so, so that the incoming principal feels the social territory to be somewhat a field of mines. Professional oversight of the physical plant of the school in line with educational agenda and duties of safety and care can prove an especially arduous duty upon the principal, not only because services are far distant, expensive to use, slow to respond if sought for, but also because the board can feel strongly their ownership of the school, often distrust of the principal as an outsider, and can be determined to monitor closely the decisions about expenditure and where or to whom the work goes. Instead of support from the board in the execution of physical care for the school the principal

can seem to possess redoubled responsibilities, first to point to needed changes, repairs or improvements, and second to negotiate resistance to suggestions that are, after all, potentially challenging to established patterns or expectations, and that come from a perceived outsider. The absence of any systematic local induction of principals across rural schools likewise means that boards may devote little if any consideration to an appreciation of their new principal as professional, someone wanting the best for the school according to a scale of values partly determined by the curriculum, and needing to exert their professionalism in the school’s interest in an atmosphere of friendship and welcome.

In light of its findings, the study urges immediate adoption of a multi-point standard for the helpful professional induction and on-going professional support of new principals in rural schools. By definition “double-loaded”, teaching principals in small rural schools need sharper support than they receive at present. It is possible that the remedy in part requires increased administrative and staffing allocations. Systems for in-school evaluation need to be strengthened. New Zealand must create the means to distribute leadership across our smaller schools and strengthen leadership capacity within them. Whether the governance model that New Zealand uniquely has for its schools is working adequately is moot, with small rural schools perhaps the canary-in-the-coal-mine indicator that all is not well. Certainly the potentially overwhelming expectations upon our teaching principals must somehow be alleviated. At a very practical level, the roll-out of a simple but thorough school-based induction programme for the incoming teaching principal, itself at the same time an opportunity for board members to reflect about support and welcome to be extended to an incoming professional for their school, would enable new principals to make a good start as they settle in to their new role and community. (See Appendix I.)

Incoming principals who have access to greater on-the-job support and are able to draw deeply on the wisdom of distributed leadership from across the profession are more likely to experience the positive elements of the job while also developing the bearing that they need for effective leadership. Professional leaders who feel valued are likely to perform better, engage better, and enjoy greater job satisfaction, particularly in their first year. They are also more likely to avoid burnout and stay in the job.

Introduction
Principal recruitment is receiving urgent attention both nationally and internationally at this time. Research into school leadership is consistently telling us that we need to accomplish higher morale and better recruitment, somehow establishing stronger incentives for education professionals to choose to lead schools. National statistics and research is also telling us that those New Zealand schools with the highest principal turnover are our small rural schools, and in particular those with rolls of under 100 students (i.e. U1 and U2 graded schools). Such leadership roles are no longer seen (as they were prior to the 1989 major education reforms) as an important apprenticeship for school principals. Statistics also show that there is a gender

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imbalance weighted strongly in favour of females, across all age groups in U1 schools.

For a host of reasons, fulfilling the role of leading these schools has become problematic. Yet, while these schools are small in roll size, they are not particularly small in number. There are 390 U1 and 337 U2 schools in New Zealand. Schools with rolls of less than 100 students make up around 40% of the total number of primary schools in our country. National statistics consistently show that principal turnover in these schools is alarmingly high. Indeed ‘turnover’ misstates what is in fact a ‘turning out’ of education professionals altogether from the profession, an engine for driving down the number of education professionals. The loss to wider society that is implied by this is large. In some parts of New Zealand, U1 principal turnover (often rather turning-out) is as high as might be found in the least stable service-sector jobs. Flipping hamburgers sports similar stick-with-it to rural school principalship. Sharpening support and nurture for principals, often teaching principals, in small rural schools, is the focus of this study.

**Challenges for new leaders.**
The complex contextual challenges faced by New Zealand principals who take on a dual teaching/leadership role have long been recognised. First-time or inexperienced principals in smaller schools carry a heavy combination of classroom teaching and management responsibilities. For any new principal starting out in a new school, there is a host of new things to learn and a host of challenges to navigate. For new teaching principals entering smaller schools, particularly those with a history of revolving principals, there are likely to be additional challenges. Much reliance is thus placed on the knowledge and energy of the sometimes novice principals who are appointed to lead these schools, often in quick succession.

When choosing their new principal, community-based boards of trustees (sometimes in partnership with consultants or other principals) will have high expectations for their new school leaders. They will put much effort into finding the candidate that they believe is “right” for their school. However, once the appointment has been made, local processes for inducting the new appointee may be quite ill-defined. Board members may be unclear about their role in supporting their new employee, and even, for reasons above discussed, disposed to be initially distrustful of the new employee, perceived to be a handsomely overpaid outsider to the community liable to upset established patterns and so needing to be reigned in. Incoming principals may find that, having won the position, they now have to overcome obstacles that could not have been apparent to them in advance. Simply to get themselves established can seem a lonely, unexpectedly arduous task. Moreover, they may have inherited a layered history of unaddressed issues.

**Principal recruitment, retention, turnover, flight**
Frequent or regular turnover of school principals is potentially destabilising for any school. High principal turnover is also likely to negatively affect community expectations of each new principal. Communities who have witnessed regular

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3 Fullan (2008) notes that it is hard to recruit the right people to a bad situation: “How are you going to keep them down on the farm once they have seen the farm?”

4 Brooking (2008) discusses implications for quality and gender in current board appointment processes, and examines some of the gendered implications of our unregulated, unmonitored principal appointment processes.
principal turnover may become quite weary of change. Fink (2005) suggests that “when succession is frequent and predictable, the principal is treated as merely a temporary aberration”. Within this environment of regular leadership change, school boards and communities may employ their own coping strategies, including strategies of scepticism or mistrust, which effectively increase the complexity and workload demands on each incoming principal. Hargreaves (2006) recommends that principals need to be around long enough to see things through - an estimated five years minimum, otherwise there is the risk that “schools become like early flying machines – repeatedly crashing just before taking off.” National statistics show that it is our smaller, often rural schools that experience the most rapid principal turnover (our U1 schools average a leadership change every 2 years). In this context, each incoming principal is likely to face increasingly layered challenges, with a diminishing likelihood of achieving either continuity or substantive change.

The phenomenon of double loading
A critical issue for teaching principals is the sheer complexity of the role. This role complexity is considerably more complex than might be inferred on the basis of school roll size. An effective teaching principal manages a huge number of complex, interconnected interactions and relationships, and has to work very hard on all fronts. Delivering quality classroom programmes in a multi-level environment adds layers of challenge to the teaching role. It is unfortunate that this role, in all its complexity, so often falls to our less experienced leaders, some of whom struggle to find their way, in partnership with boards of trustees who may be unfamiliar with their governance role.

Dunning (1993) observes that teaching principals of smaller schools are effectively “doubly loaded”, charged as they are with the dual responsibilities for both leadership and classroom teaching:

“Teaching heads are required to demonstrate a much more sophisticated technical competence in their teaching, while dealing with the same teaching load and new management commitments which are as demanding as those of non-teaching heads in larger schools.” (Dunning, cited in Southworth, P. 16.)

In reality, teaching principals may find themselves not just doubly, but triply loaded, given the weight of personal commitment and mental conviction they bring to their work (see Southworth, 2004). In theory these professionals have a unique opportunity to shape and develop their school in exciting ways, with a clear and direct influence on teaching and learning programmes, and the ability to model and promote to their small team, a cohesive learning philosophy. In practice, they can be caught out by the sheer incoherence of the role, and become mentally overloaded. Collins (2003) notes that “the little research that has been done on teaching principals in small school settings in New Zealand paints rather a gloomy picture – principals in small schools...”

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7 Hargreaves, Sustainable Leadership, P. 83
8 The term “teaching principal” is a catch-all term that unfortunately conceals the hugely different classroom demands for principals who work in schools within these three U-grade. (U-grade is determined by roll size, so the greater the U-grade the greater the school’s staffing allocation and the greater the options for staffing use.) Thus while U1 to U3 principals all carry a teaching load, there are typically quite substantial differences in the leading of the teaching role. Unlike their U3 counterparts, U1 and U2 principals typically teach for a good part of every day or week, typically within a multi-level environment. They teach classes of students from two up to eight year levels, a factor which adds further layers of complexity and demand to the teaching role.
have to work harder, are under more strain, and generally perform worse than principals in other settings.”

Workload Issues
Disincentives to working in small and rural schools have been repeatedly identified in the literature. They relate predominantly to workload, professional and physical isolation, concerns about career advancement; and concerns about perceived lack of board experience or understanding of their role. NZER research on principal stress, well-being and workload (2007) indicates that stress levels for principals in small and rural schools are consistently high. It also indicates that principal morale tends to be weaker in schools where principals have regular class teaching responsibilities.

“Workload issues are not simply the long hours worked, but the nature of the principal’s role. The tensions between educational leadership and management or administration implicit in self-managing schools has been evident for some time.”

This loss of morale may be related not only to pressures of workload, but also to an undermining of deeply-held personal convictions about education that led them into the job in the first place. People who opt to work in school leadership roles are typically looking for meaning and reward through their hard work. Their motivation is the belief that they can and will make a difference for students. Wylie (2007) observes that “stress is often associated with a sense of lack of control, powerlessness, and this may be particularly important for leaders.” The impact of excessive workload demands across administrative, managerial and professional domains has the potential to cascade into system overload.

Principal turnover in smaller schools
To develop the hypothesis that New Zealand principals are more likely to resign from our smallest schools (following the research of Brooking, Wylie, etc.), assistance was sought from Ralf Engler, Ministry of Education Demographic and Statistical Analysis Unit. An analysis was developed that used both Ministry of Education payroll data and census statistics to learn more about the likelihood of principal loss in relation to various factors including age, length of service, and, of key significance to this study, the size of the school. (See Appendix 1 for full report, courtesy Ralf Engler.)

Engler’s statistical analysis confirms that principals in our smallest schools (except principals approaching retirement) have a statistically significantly higher likelihood of leaving the profession than their counterparts in larger schools. It also establishes that U grade, gender and age are all important factors in understanding the likelihood of a principal’s leaving. In particular, the analysis identifies a significant three-way interaction of these factors: That is to say, U grade, gender and age need to be considered together to understand the underlying patterns of principal resignations.

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12 Hodgen and Wylie 2005, p. 64.
Engler’s research indicates that overall, New Zealand principals in smaller schools (except those over 60 years of age) have a significantly higher likelihood of leaving not just their position, but the profession overall, than their counterparts in larger schools.15 (Principals aged over 60 have generally the highest likelihood of leaving, and this occurs in all schools regardless of their size. This is probably attributable to retirement.)

Leadership tenure and continuity
There is much for us to learn about the challenges and opportunities for leadership in our small rural schools. We need to learn more about both the recruitment and the retention of our teaching principals. For example, what contextual variables are the most significant forces that influence the high principal turnover in these schools?

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15 Principals aged over 60 have generally the highest likelihood of leaving, and this occurs in all schools regardless of their size. This is probably attributable to retirement.
What forms of professional learning or support would better support these people in a way that balanced just-in-time support with more strategic problem-solving?

The newly published Kiwi Leadership: Principals as Educational Leaders (2008) identifies some specific national leadership challenges for our country, including:

- to recruit and retain quality principals for all school contexts, particularly for small rural schools, and those with high Maori and Pasifica populations.
- to increase New Zealand research and development into educational leadership, aimed at systemic improvement. "16

Strengthening in-school succession processes might go some way towards easing the transition into their new role for our incoming teaching principals. We need to find ways to make the job more do-able. We need to find out more about the background and experience-base of these principals when they were appointed, as well as their situational challenges, needs and subsequent career paths. We need to get a fuller picture of their workplace movement. For our schooling system we need to learn more about what further support these principals might need. As well, we need to learn more about the impact that principal turnover has on school improvement initiatives. Most importantly, we need to consider what impact this rapid turnover has on the learning progress of the students in these schools.

Part 2: Strengthening Support Systems

New school leaders need considerable support as they learn to grow into their role and develop the resilience and skill set that comes with experience. The following section, which traverses aspects of leadership, management and administration, identifies some critical pressure points for incoming teaching principals and suggests some possible pathways for strengthened support.

2.1 Tighten pathways of professional support for new principals.
While there are local exceptions, there is currently no nationally formalized mechanism to inform leadership and management advisers when a new principal has taken up their new position. Ensuring a conduit for this information would enable leadership and management advisers to make early contact with incoming principals and establish an ongoing professional partnership.

2.2 Ensure school-based induction training
Most new principals opt to participate in the national first-time principal’s training programme, thereby gaining access to a mentor, release time, residential training, and web-based support. However, they also need access to some specific, school-based induction to help them learn “how things are done around here”. At a very practical level, the roll-out of a simple but thorough school-based induction programme for the board to use with their new principal would go some way towards easing the

The term ‘teaching principal’ is a catch-all term that unfortunately conceals the hugely different classroom demands for principals who work in schools within these three U-grades. (U grade is determined by roll size, so the greater the U grade, the greater the school’s staffing allocation and the greater the options for staffing use.) Thus while U1 to U3 principals all carry a teaching load, there are typically quite substantial differences in the loading of the teaching role. Unlike their U3 counterparts, U1 and U2 principals typically teach for a good part of every day or week, typically within a multi-level environment. (They could be teaching students ranging from two up to eight year levels in the one classroom), a factor which adds further layers of complexity and demand to the teaching role.

16 "Kiwi Leadership for principals, P. 11
transition process. Appropriate exit procedures with the outgoing principal would also assure the board that key information has been transferred. (See Appendix 1)

2.3 **Strengthen in-school evaluative capacities**

There are opportunities for incoming principals to use an evaluation model as the basis for capturing, understanding and scoping their school’s development priorities. For example, a field-based research project could form part of the new principal’s first year induction programme, as is the case for first time principals in Victoria, Australia. This could serve several purposes: it could contribute to a better contextual understanding of the school, feed specifically into the school’s planning and documentation processes, and link to the appraisal cycle. It could also be used as a tool to guide Boards of Trustees in identifying school development priorities.

2.4 **Establish benchmarks to identify school development priorities**

School principals are held accountable in many ways - to their students, their board, their community, and to wider government agencies. These accountability systems could be further dovetailed, to acknowledge the actual and existing conditions in schools at the time of principal changeover.

2.5 **Align ERO reviews with leadership turnover**

Some incoming principals report the benefit of an external (ERO) evaluation at the time of principal turnover. Their boards are provided with a timely and useful outside baseline analysis against which ongoing progress and achievements can be benchmarked. (In the normal course of events, the timing of a school’s external review is not currently linked to leadership turnover, and, generally only occurs once in every three years.)

2.6 **Expand interpretations of leadership**

Principals of smaller schools that are not part of an established school improvement cluster can be professionally isolated. (Wylie notes that these principals are much more likely to be stressed than those who are part of a wider schools cluster.) A group administrator (much like the role of the previous rural adviser) could provide significant targeted support and leadership assistance to a cluster group of small schools, for example, on charter development improvements, or interpreting and reporting achievement information from multiple data sources. Further leadership development opportunities for talented principals could also be seeded here.

2.7 **Provide incentives for recruitment to smaller schools**

The impact of professional and physical isolation calls for strong networking and advocacy. More work is needed to improve career pathways for successful small school principals, such as providing specific secondment or leadership opportunities for high performing principals, or additional support for principals in need of refreshment. Because smaller schools have less scope to build new leaders from within their own ranks, there could be incentives for aspiring principals to take up leadership roles in hard-to-staff areas. Financial incentives could also be offered for top-flight teacher graduates to take up classroom teaching placements in hard-to-staff schools.

2.8 **Redefine challenging circumstances**
Challenging student behaviour, staff change, demanding community expectations, board training, or major financial and property issues can seriously deflect attention from best teaching practice and improved outcomes for students. By its very nature, a small rural school is more quickly challenged by the presence of one or a combination of these indicators than a larger urban school. Timely interventions may therefore be required more promptly than in larger schools.

**2.9 Further tailor support options.**
Leadership and management support staff across New Zealand provide important “just in time” support for first time principals in their regions. These professionals could be invited to work with boards of trustees during the appointment and changeover time, as already happens in parts of New Zealand, to ensure that strong and supportive transition processes are in place.

**2.10 Strengthen systems for ICT and data management**
Coming to terms with technical systems for ICT and student management systems can be a major time issue for incoming principals of smaller schools. Troubleshooting technical challenges with ICT can also cause major financial and logistical challenges. Additional ICT support for problematic infrastructure and networking systems would liberate new principals from tasks that are essentially technical, but which are integral to their work. Improved ICT systems would also enable them to foster networks and alliances through more innovative electronic routes.

**2.11 Strengthen administrative support for smaller and rural schools.**
Effective administrative and financial management systems are crucial for smaller schools who work within very tight budget constraints. Smaller schools have to find local solutions for administrative and financial management and there is variation in the quality of these arrangements. Some small school principals are better supported than others in this area, depending on a range of contextual factors including location or other local circumstances.
Appendix 1: Suggested induction plan for new principals

The changeover of school principal, surely one of the most challenging and demanding roles in education, is an area that deserves careful attention. The handover of a school’s principalship is a significant time for that school’s community and board. Ideally it should be a time of welcome, for settling in, familiarization and positive transition. Following on the heels of an intensive recruitment and selection process, there are some fairly obvious components of an induction process — formal welcome, initial familiarization and training, time for prioritizing and scoping issues and challenges, and ensuring a positive work environment.

New principals may have had little detailed contact with their school prior to their first day. There may have been no opportunities for overlap between outgoing and incoming principal. During the first few weeks of the appointee taking up the position, the board, staff and community may be feeling unsure about the new appointee and adopt a “wait and see” approach. Particularly in rural settings, the new principal may have moved house or changed location to take up their new position. They have already made a significant commitment to their new position. The following are suggestions for an effective welcome and induction for the new principal. They have been developed in consultation with a range of people across the education sector.

1. **Time with exiting principal.**
   It may be helpful for the new appointee to have some professional contact with the outgoing principal simply to get their perspective of highlighted achievements, work in progress, and other relevant contextual information.

2. **Walk through school and community.**
   Part of the initial welcome to the new principal should include an in-depth “inspection” of the school buildings, property and introduction to key staff. For a rural school, the chance to be taken around the community, and shown a little of the rural district would be beneficial, especially if many of the children come by bus.

3. **Meeting the board and staff.**
   A shared meal or relaxed get-together with the board and staff could be a good opportunity for social interaction and introductions prior to the first formal board meeting. If the new principal comes with a family, they should not be forgotten.

4. **Accessing key documentation.**
   The board should ensure that the necessary paperwork and documentation is easily accessible. The school’s strategic plan, analysis of variance, financial information, recent ERO reports, curriculum documentation, etc., should all be at hand. Information about the school’s office and administrative systems (passwords, access codes) also need explanation and introduction.

5. **Community welcome**
   The board might consider writing a note of welcome in the school or community newsletter, introducing the new principal and perhaps providing a little biographical information. At any rate, some official way should be settled upon to show publicly...
that the incoming principal is accepted, valued, and welcomed as a significant new community member.

6. Managing the change process
At least initially, the new principal will have much to learn about local community events and traditions, and will have lots of questions. Particularly if there are other changes of staff, the board needs to support a smooth transition and manageable workload for their new principal.

7. Protocol for handling complaints
The time of a new principal’s arrival is a good opportunity for the board as a whole to revisit and publicize the school’s systems for managing complaints. This will set out the appropriate lines of communication and pathways for finding effective resolutions. This is another way in which the board can be seen to be supportive of their new principal.

8. Administrative support
Opportunities for delegation, sharing workload, such as managing school accounts finances, processing and managing the library, overseeing administrative roles etc. are not necessarily available to the rural teaching principal. At the time of a change in principal, the provision of additional administrative support could be considered.

9. Scoping the priorities and challenges.
With the arrival of the new principal comes the opportunity for a fresh start, but this needs to be built on the school’s history. A sharing session which outlines the school’s strengths and priorities might be fruitful. The board might consider asking for an ERO review at the time of transition, or maybe 6 months into the new principal’s tenure, to reassure themselves that everything is reasonably on track, and to assist with developing priorities.

10. Being a good employer
As employer, the board has an obligation to be supportive of their new principal. The board chair must ensure that the board is working collectively and in the best interests of the school and children. Clear and effective role definition for board members through the governance manual, can clarify roles and responsibilities.

11. Legal support scheme
Boards should discuss with their new principal the importance of having individual legal support as recommended by NZPF. They might consider paying for this, as part of the employment package for their principal. Details can be obtained from the New Zealand Principals Federation, 04 471 2338.

12. Mentor and professional support.
If the new leader is a first time principal they should be encouraged to sign up for the First Time Principals Programme. Although not currently obligatory, this national programme provides excellent Ministry of Education funded support for new principals, including mentor support for the first twelve months. Other Ministry of Education support is readily available on request.

13. Review and evaluate the induction process with your principal
As part of the exit interview, if not before, have your principal share their ideas about their experience of their induction.

**Feedback from First Time Principals on the draft induction plan July 2008:**

- “While it may seem obvious when we read it I do not imagine anyone on the BOT had the time to come up with this list or even thought it was their role. It would have required a reasonable understanding of the demands of the job and even I did not, could not, envisage that before I started.”

- “Time with the exiting principal getting an understanding of the vision and culture of the school as a living rather than just a paper-based thing. What really makes the school tick?”

- “I encountered many empty folders as documents had been wiped. I think the board needs to make sure it has an exit policy and that it ensures that no school business is wiped.”

- “Remember that BOT have often had little or no training either, do not necessarily have an education background, and may or may not ever have had a successful induction themselves”.

- “If I’d really known what I know now would I have willingly taken it on? With a new principal and a new BOT it can be like the blind leading the blind.”

- “I had no computer, and no school curriculum documents. Was not on payroll.”

- “I found there was so much to learn, and a lot of time was spent trying to find information.”

- “My chair and I both looked at this and both thought it would have made such a tremendous difference for my transition and of course for future transitions into our school.”

- I applaud your induction development. I hope this will prove helpful for Boards to support their chosen Principals in getting off to a good start in their schools. I also hope that the days of handing over the school keys to the new Principal to 'get on with it' are well and truly over.

- “Very comprehensive and a worthwhile thing to think about for all boards.”

- “It’s a great document, well done.”

- I personally recommend to those that ask that they wait 6 months before enrolling in the FTP programme. Then at least you know what it is you need to find out! This for me is particularly important in the case of struggling or failing schools where the principal’s immediate energy is taken up with tackling tough issues. I wasn’t aware that I could choose my FTP start date.
• Most things were left for me – a bit more assessment data would have been useful but! I got the key to the front door and my office and that was it- so the first summer was a bit difficult.
References


Are principals more likely to resign from small schools?

Ralf Engler  
Demographic and Statistical Analysis Unit  
Ministry of Education  
August 2008

Abstract

The likelihood of a principal leaving the teaching profession depends on the size of the school, and the age and gender of the principal. The decile of the school does not influence this, and the results observed are consistent over the past six years. Principals in the smallest schools, except those over 60 years of age, have a significantly higher likelihood of leaving the teaching profession than their counterparts in larger schools. Older principals are equally as likely to leave the profession in smaller or larger schools.

For female principals, in all schools, those aged 40–49 were significantly less likely to leave than those in other age groups.

In larger schools, in the oldest age group, female principals were less likely to leave than male principals, but in the youngest age group female principals were more likely to leave than men.

Introduction

This document presents results on the likelihood of a principal leaving the profession and what factors are associated with this, in particular, school size.

The proposition that principals are more likely to leave smaller schools was proposed by Judith Catton, principal of View Hill School, Oxford, Canterbury. Principals in small schools often have a teaching role in addition to their management and oversight role, and this extra work, it is proposed, results in a principal more likely to leave. This hypothesis was developed after looking at principal vacancies in the Education Gazette.

This study used Ministry of Education payroll data to look at principal losses by various factors. Principal losses (which include resignations and those on leave without pay) were used rather than principal turnover, to distinguish between those people who transfer to another school from those that leave the profession entirely. It could be argued that principals might move more frequently from smaller to larger schools as part of their career progression. In any case, the movement of principals between schools was not considered in this study.

The factors that were considered in the study were school size (as measured by decile\(^{17}\) and the school’s location (urban versus rural\(^{18}\)), and the gender and age of the principal. Length of service was considered separately. Clearly there are other factors that would be important in determining whether a principal resigns or not; however these are not readily available and await further study.

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\(^{17}\) Deciles are indicators of the socio-economic status of the communities from which a school draws its students. Lower decile schools draw their students from lower socio-economic communities.

\(^{18}\) The urban category included main, secondary and minor urban areas. The rural category comprised rural centres and rural areas.
Data

Ministry of Education payroll data was the primary source of information. Principal losses for the six years 2002-03 to 2007-08 was used. A principal paid in May of one year and not in May of the next year is considered to have left the profession. The loss rate is calculated as the number of losses divided by the number of principals in the first May.

Length of service information is not stored in the Ministry’s payroll data. To assess the importance of the length of service on loss rates teacher census information from 2004 was matched with loss data for 2004-05, as described in a previous paper19. The original dataset was modified to allow comparisons of loss rates for principals by gender and length of service.

Methods

The loss data across the six years was combined. This was done on the assumption that principals’ leaving decisions are independent events across years. Combining the loss records provided sufficient information for a logistic regression model to be fitted to the data. Data from just one year was too sparse to enable any robust analysis to be done.

The dependent variable was whether a principal had left the profession in a particular year. The size of the school (as measured by ugrade), the decile group and location of the school, and the principal’s gender and age group were used as explanatory factors, together with all third order interactions.

Schools were categorised into two size groups; the smallest schools (with ugrade of 1) were in one group, and all other schools (ugrade of 2 or more, signified as ugrade 2+) in the other. The rationale for this is explained below.

The probability of a principal leaving needs to be converted to odds20 to fulfil the requirements of the logistic regression, and the results of the regression are expressed in odds ratios. Since odds and odds ratios are not intuitive statistics, the report will focus on the actual probabilities (likelihoods) observed and use the results of the regression to guide the focus of the work. Actual odds ratios are provided for reference in table 1.

Oblique principal component cluster analysis was used to test for correlations between the factors.

The analysis was undertaken using the SAS statistical software package.

Results

Figure 1 shows the average likelihood, over the six years of data, of a principal leaving the teaching profession, by the ugrade of the school they left. It can be seen that the likelihood of a principal leaving is highest for the smallest schools, and that the likelihood is much the same for the other school sizes. The likelihood becomes more variable in the larger schools, and in some cases reaches the rate seen in the smallest schools21. This distinct separation between the smallest schools and the remainder prompted the decision to categorise the schools into two size groups. It also simplified the analysis and discussion. An average of 13 percent of principals worked in ugrade 1 schools in any one year. Over the six years, the overall average likelihood

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20 Odds are calculated as the probability of an event happening over the probability of that event not happening.
21 Excluding the higher ugrade schools made no difference to the results so they were retained in the analysis.
of a principal leaving the profession was 0.075 (75 out of every thousand principals resigned).

Cluster analysis showed that the location of the school was strongly associated with ugrade. This is not surprising as just two percent of urban schools had a ugrade of 1 compared with 35 percent of rural schools. It is inappropriate to include highly auto-correlated factors in the regression model, and since the primary focus of this study was the size of the school, the location of the school was omitted from the analysis. Of course the results for ugrade can be applied to location with some care.

The logistic regression model building indicated that the decile of the school had no bearing on the likelihood of a principal leaving, controlling for all other factors. That is to say, principals in ugrade 1 schools were more likely to leave their schools than principals in ugrade 2+ schools across all decile groups. In addition, there was no significant difference between years.

Ugrade, gender and age were found to be important in understanding the likelihood of a principal leaving. In particular, a three way interaction of these factors was found to be significant. In other words, ugrade, gender and age need to be considered together to understand the underlying patterns of principal resignations.

Figure 1. Average likelihood of a principal leaving, and 95 percent confidence limits, by ugrade.

Overall, principals in smaller schools, except those over 60 years of age, have a significantly higher likelihood of leaving the profession than their counterparts in larger schools.

Figure 2 shows the results graphically. It shows the likelihood of a principal leaving the profession controlling for ugrade, age and gender.

Principals aged over 60 have generally the highest likelihood of leaving, and this occurs in all schools regardless of their size. This is most likely due to people retiring.

Figure 2. Likelihood of leaving for principals, controlling for ugrade, age and gender.

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22 The low decile category includes schools in deciles 1-3, medium 4-7 and high 8-10.
However, in larger schools female principals over 60 have a significantly lower likelihood of leaving compared to males of the same age in the same sized schools. This is likely to be because females generally enjoy a better standard of health than men, so would have a lower rate of leaving due to illness or health reasons. In contrast, again in larger schools, female principals under 40 years of age have a higher likelihood of leaving compared to male principals of the same age. This is likely to be the result of these women having children, or choosing to interrupt their careers to care for their young families.

The likelihood of leaving across age groups for female principals follows a U-shaped pattern, with the likelihood of leaving significantly lower in the 40–49 year age group compared to other ages in both school sizes (although the likelihood is always higher in the ugrade 1 schools). For males the distribution of likelihoods across the age groups is somewhat dissimilar between the two school size categories. This reinforces the suggestion that the factors influencing principals’ decisions to leave are different between the genders at the different ages, as discussed above. It certainly contributes to there being a significant difference between the genders in the likelihood to leave in the 40–49 age group in small schools (males and females have the same likelihood of leaving in the other age groups in the ugrade 1 schools). However there was no evidence of an imbalance in the gender makeup of principals in ugrade 1 schools for this age group, although there certainly is a gender imbalance, weighted in favour of females, across all age groups in ugrade 1 schools.

The odds ratios for the ugrade factor and associated probabilities from the logistic regression model are shown in table 1. As an example, the data shows that the odds of a female principal under 40 years of age leaving a ugrade 1 school are 2.73 times the odds for a similar principal in a school with a ugrade of two or higher.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>&lt;40</th>
<th>40–49</th>
<th>50–59</th>
<th>60+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2.73 (p=0.0004)</td>
<td>2.06 (p=0.001)</td>
<td>2.10 (p&lt;0.0001)</td>
<td>1.57 (p=0.1308)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.41 (p=0.0001)</td>
<td>4.87 (p&lt;0.0001)</td>
<td>2.25 (p&lt;0.0001)</td>
<td>0.65 (p=0.2785)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Odds ratios* for principals in schools of ugrade 1 leaving the profession versus principals in schools of ugrade 2+. 
* An odds ratio measures the odds of one event over another. If the odds ratio is equal to one, then the odds of both events are equal. The probability indicates how likely the odds ratio is equal to one.

Length of service showed a similar result to the other factors considered above (figure 3). This data was less complete (there is no data for some length of service categories for the smaller schools), but generally principals in ugrade 1 schools with greater than 9 years of experience had a higher likelihood of leaving than similar principals in schools with a ugrade of two or more. Note that the value for ugrade 1 and 4–9 years experience was based on only 35 principals. In many respects this data ought to correlate with principal’s age, and indeed the pattern seen in the figure confirms this, with a higher likelihood of leaving seen in the longer years of service. No further attempt was made to dissect this data as the sample was quite small.

**Figure 3. Likelihood of a principal leaving by ugrade controlling for length of service.**