

Primary school principals' perspectives from the 2024 National Survey

Uiuinga ā-Motu o ngā Kura

He whakarāpopototanga | Executive summary

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NZCER conducted the National Survey of Primary Schools from October to December 2024. We invited principals from a nationally representative sample of all English-medium full primary, contributing, and intermediate schools in Aotearoa New Zealand to complete our survey.

A sample of 324 principals was invited to participate in the survey. After data cleaning, the final responses included in this report were from 187 principals, giving a response rate of 58%.

NZCER has run a National Survey of Primary Schools regularly since 1989, with the last survey of primary school principals taking place in 2019. This enables us to monitor trends over time.

The report presents the findings in each of the six survey domains alongside a section on principals' working experiences and future plans.

Key findings that stood out to us in each of the survey domains were:

Support and resourcing

- Despite mixed views on the Equity Index (EQI) system, schools facing more socioeconomic challenges were more likely to see benefits from equity funding changes.
- Three-quarters of principals indicated their schools have sufficient space and buildings in good condition, but nearly half indicated they had unmet property needs.
- Most principals were positive about the advice and support they received from education agencies and organisations.
- Principals identified a growing need for external expertise in mental health, trauma, and differentiated teaching for students with learning support needs, but access to this support was limited.

- Compared with 2019, fewer principals reported major issues facing their schools, with fewer principals (49%, down from 72% in 2019) feeling that “too much is being asked of schools”. Of concern is that 82% of principals indicated that “Support for students with complex learning, social and emotional needs” is a major issue facing their school.

Collaborative relationships

- Nearly all principals indicated that Te Tiriti o Waitangi was valued, and ongoing teacher learning and self-reflection were practised in their schools.
- Schools' interactions with local hapū and iwi were increasing, while working collaboratively with Pacific families and communities could be strengthened.
- Nearly all schools were working with whānau and communities to improve attendance, although some require better access to good support.

Curriculum and assessment

- Seventy percent of principals supported the direction of the curriculum changes, but a similar proportion (71%) were concerned about the pace.
- Principals generally felt positive or neutral about the benefits of changes in the English and math and statistics learning areas for students.
- Nearly half of principals indicated that a structured approach would require changes to their maths teaching, while about a third felt the same for literacy.
- Formative assessment underpinned school assessment practices, and principals continued to trust the assessment information they have access to.

Teaching and learning

- Most schools actively promoted te reo Māori, with a potential to involve whānau more in planning and implementation.
- However, most schools do not offer opportunities for ākonga to learn in a reo Māori bilingual or immersion setting. Of the 33 schools that offered this opportunity, a third could not accommodate all ākonga who applied.
- Most principals reported challenges in finding kaiako to teach te reo Māori.
- Two-thirds of principals were having conversations about AI, with many expressing a need for more information and professional learning and development (PLD).

Inclusion

- Most principals reported that students had good access to assistive technologies at school, although digital access at home remained inequitable.
- Most schools have practices in place that affirmed ākonga Māori identities, but there has been a slight decline since 2019. Compared with 2019, there were also fewer schools that used practices that affirmed the identities of Pacific students.
- In an open-ended question, principals were asked to describe the most effective thing their school has done in the past 5 years to achieve equitable outcomes for four groups of students:
 - o For ākonga Māori, the most common response from principals was the importance of engaging whānau, and embedding tikanga, te reo, and te ao Māori values into school-wide practices. Professional development for staff was equally critical.

- o For Pacific students, about half the principals responded, and the most common response was related to teaching and learning, and particularly that culturally responsive pedagogies had been effective.
- o For students with additional learning support needs, the most common response was employing additional staff and engaging with specialist staff.
- o For students with complex social and emotional needs (a new group added to this question in the 2024 survey), most principals highlighted the importance of supportive collaborations with in-school specialist staff, teacher aides, and specialist services such as psychologists.

Wellbeing

- Most principals (89%) enjoyed their job, but 40% disagreed or strongly disagreed that their work-related stress was manageable. Consistent with the 2016 and 2019 surveys, almost all principals (93%) worked more than 50 hours per week.
- Around half of schools had well-embedded systems to identify individual students with social or mental health needs.
- A similar proportion (53%) reported that support for the wellbeing of students with disabilities or additional learning support needs was well embedded, a decrease from 74% in 2019.
- Most schools had embedded approaches for promoting positive student behaviour.
- The main reason for schools not using support services was a lack of access, rather than a lack of need.

Principals' working experiences and future plans

- We asked principals what they would like to change about their work as a principal. Consistent with previous surveys, they continued to want more time for leadership, reflection, and innovation.
- Many principals planned to stay in their roles, with fewer planning to lead another school but more considering a career outside education than in 2019.
- Two-thirds of the 31 new principals felt well prepared for their role.

Responding to the research questions

The 2024 National Survey of Primary Schools addresses five research questions on how the education system in Aotearoa New Zealand is progressing over time in: 1) honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi; 2) serving ākonga Māori; 3) serving Pacific students; 4) achieving equitable outcomes for all learners; and 5) supporting the success of everyone within the system, while assessing the impacts of recent policy changes and identifying strengths and areas for improvement.

Most principals reported a strong commitment to **honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi** indicating that it is enacted through school values and daily practices, and with growing engagement with hapū and iwi, particularly in curriculum planning. However, deeper and broader partnerships remain limited.

Challenges remain in **serving ākonga Māori**. While most schools actively promote te reo Māori, only some schools offer reo Māori learning opportunities and practices that affirm ākonga Māori identities, and barriers—such as difficulty in finding kaiako to teach te reo Māori—persist. A decline in schools reporting identity-affirming practices for ākonga Māori signals the need for stronger systemic support and sustainable implementation.

Regarding **serving Pacific students**, although some schools are very focused on the needs of their Pacific students, fewer schools in 2024 reported having identity-affirming practices compared with 2019. Continued progress will require schools to deepen cultural responsiveness and collaborate more closely with Pacific families and communities.

In addressing the broader goal of **achieving equitable outcomes for all students**, the transition to the EQI system has shown some positive effects, particularly for schools in high socioeconomic need areas. These schools reported greater access to healthy food programmes and were more likely to benefit from EQI funding, but continued to face ongoing challenges in teacher recruitment, attendance, and digital access. Student wellbeing has emerged as a top concern, with increased demand for mental health services and a noticeable decline in the embedding of wellbeing-focused practices since 2019.

Finally, regarding **support for all people in the system**, principals acknowledged the direction of the curriculum changes and the potential benefits but expressed concern about the pace of change. Concerns also remain around access to support and resources, and their own workload, with more considering careers outside of education. Moving forward, efforts are needed to ensure that the system can support all stakeholders equitably and effectively.

Full report: Li, M., MacDonald, J., Boyd, S., Bolstad, R., Rowe-Williams, J., Dong, J., Durie, K., Smail, E., Palmer, G., and Kupenga-Keefe, H. (2025). *Primary school principals' perspectives from the 2024 National Survey—Uiuīnga ā-Motu o ngā Kura*. New Zealand Council for Educational Research. <https://doi.org/10.18296/rep.0071>.