

Secondary principals' perspectives from the 2025 national survey

Uiuinga ā-Motu o ngā Kura

He whakarāpopototanga | Executive summary

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NZCER conducted the National Survey of Secondary Schools in Term 4 2025 and early Term 1 2026. We invited principals and teachers from all English-medium secondary schools (including composite schools and teen parent units) in Aotearoa New Zealand. This report presents the findings from the principal survey. The findings from the teacher survey are presented in a separate report.

Data collection took place from 27 October 2025 to 6 March 2026. All principals from the 435 schools in the sampling frame were invited to complete the survey and 143 responses were received. After data cleaning, 106 principal responses were included in this report, resulting in a response rate of 24%.

NZCER has run a National Survey of Secondary Schools regularly since 2003, with the last survey of secondary school principals taking place in 2022. This enables us to monitor trends over time. This report presents the findings in each of the six survey domains alongside a section on principals' working experiences and future plans.

Key findings

Support and resourcing

- Overall, principals were less favourable about the Equity Index (EQI) in 2025 than they were in 2022.
- Two-thirds of principals supported the policy shift away from building open-plan spaces. Just over half indicated their school had unmet property needs that are having a negative impact on teachers and students, and, compared with 2022, fewer schools have sufficient space for all classes. Keeping learning spaces cool poses more of a challenge than ventilation or heating. Forty percent of principals reported experiencing impacts from excessively hot days.
- Principals received more helpful advice from the New Zealand School Boards Association and Ministry of Education (MoE) regional office than from other agencies. Professional learning groups and the Secondary Principals Association of New Zealand (SPANZ) were the most accessed sources of advice and support by principals.
- Schools need better access to external support for supporting students with mental health needs, supporting staff to work with students who have complex needs or trauma-related responses, and supporting students with chronic absence issues. Over 40% of principals said they needed, but could not readily access, school-based social workers, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, Te Kahu Tōi Intensive Wraparound Service, Youth workers, and Oranga Tamariki social workers.
- Principals had mixed views about MoE attendance supports. Some have implemented new approaches that are improving attendance.
- “Keeping up with the pace and volume of educational change” and “too much being asked of schools” were the leading issues for principals in 2025. Compared with 2022, more principals considered “supporting students with complex learning needs” as an issue but “providing support for vulnerable students” has returned to pre-pandemic levels. Recruiting teachers was an issue for just under two-thirds of principals, but this proportion has declined since 2018.
- More than half of schools, from 14 of the 15 regions, have experienced flooding and extreme winds in recent years. Around half of schools have supported their communities through climate-related events. Despite policy signals about the need to reduce climate emissions across the education sector (Ministry of Education, 2024a), only one-third of principals said they had information about their school’s carbon footprint.

Collaborative relationships

- Principals had mixed views on the impact of the disestablishment of Kāhui Ako on their future collaboration with other schools. Around one-third said they would continue to work with schools in their network or community, and 41% thought they would be less likely to collaborate.
- Most principals reported engaging with hapū and iwi in ways that support ākonga Māori and build staff capability. A small proportion of principals reported not currently interacting with local hapū or iwi—no change since 2022.
- Most schools currently interacted with their Pacific families and communities in at least one way. However, in one-fifth of schools with Pacific students, principals responded that they did not interact with Pacific families and community leaders. Consistent with how schools engaged with hapū and iwi, the most common interactions were in relation to cultural groups and seeking guidance around how best to support Pacific students.

- Nearly all schools focused on providing information about achievement and progress to parents and whānau and worked with them to improve attendance. Most schools asked parents and whānau about satisfaction with information they received from school, but it appears to be challenging to hear from a high proportion of them.

Curriculum and assessment

- Many principals were concerned about the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) change proposal. There were divided views on whether the proposed new qualifications were going in the right direction. Principals emphasised concerns about equity.
- Views on the direction of curriculum changes were mixed, but most principals disagreed that the pace of changes was appropriate. Views on benefits to students in the Mathematics and Statistics and English learning areas were also mixed, with high levels of neutral responses.

Teaching and learning

- Bilingual and immersion pathways are available in some schools but are not widely established or expanding. Principals reported that te reo Māori was widely promoted in schools. Whānau engagement in Māori language planning and planning to improve staff reo Māori capability were less consistently reported.
- Principals are frequent users of generative AI intelligence (AI)—only 15% reported that they rarely or never used AI. Over half of principals wanted professional learning and development (PLD) on AI. Schools were at different stages of responding to AI in terms of having policies about teacher and student use. Access to school-provided AI tools was more common for teachers than for students, but funding was a constraint.
- More principals than in 2022 reported their school paid close attention to Years 9–10 students' academic progress, aspirations, and career goals. Principals were positive about the opportunities offered by their school's timetable for students to choose subjects that aligned with their future career goals and aspirations, and take subjects they were interested in. Nearly all agreed it was flexible enough for academic and vocational subjects to be taken at the same time. Over two-thirds of schools did not use streaming or fixed ability grouping, unchanged from 2022.

Inclusion

- Nearly all principals agreed their school had well-embedded plans or processes for addressing comments or behaviour that are racist, sexist, homophobic, or transphobic. However, fewer principals than in 2022 agreed their school had well-embedded practices focused on inclusion and support for gender transitioning students and Rainbow students.
- Most principals reported good access to assistive technologies, but home access to digital technologies was more uneven, and reflected a school's EQI group, pointing to continuing inequities in students' access to the digital infrastructure needed to support learning beyond school.
- Most principals reported strong confidence in understanding and enacting Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Nearly all agreed or strongly agreed (90%) that Te Tiriti o Waitangi was enacted in their school values and day-to-day activities.
- Practices and approaches that affirm ākonga Māori identities were widely reported. There is potential for more schools to introduce approaches that affirm the identities of Pacific students.

Wellbeing

Principal wellbeing

- More principals were positive about their job, morale, and levels of workload and stress than in 2022. However, there was an increase in the proportion of principals who strongly agreed or agreed that their workload is so high they are unable to do justice to their school (34%, compared with 22% in 2025).
- Most principals worked at least 56 hours per week, with 12% working over 70 hours. This picture has changed little over the past decade.
- The majority of principals (over 70%) felt supported by their school board, got the internal support to do their job effectively, were optimistic about the year ahead and felt confident in tackling new challenges or changes that the school may face.

Student wellbeing

- Consent education is relatively widespread in secondary schools, with nearly all principals reporting students had opportunities to learn about safe relationships and consent, and relationship strategies such as building friendships. Opportunities to learn about gender identity and diverse sexualities were reported by three-quarters of principals.
- The proportion of principals who agreed that students had opportunities to learn about the healthy use of digital devices had increased substantially from the 2022 survey (82%, up from 62%).
- Nearly all schools had well-embedded processes for addressing bullying behaviour, but ensuring teachers recognise and support a wider range of student wellbeing needs was more variable.

Principals' working experiences and future plans

- Many principals continue to want more time for educational leadership, as well as for reflection, reading, and innovation. There was an increase in the proportion of principals who would like to reduce the demands of human resource management (from 30% in 2015, increasing each cycle to 60% in 2025) and reduce external agencies' demands/expectations (from 30% in 2015, increasing each cycle to 55% in 2025).
- Principals' career plans have remained fairly stable over the past decade. More than half expect to continue as principal of their current school. Overall, there is no change in the proportion who think they will lead another school or retire (approximately a fifth each).

Responding to the research questions

The 2025 National Survey of Secondary 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.

The 2025 survey data showed a strong commitment among principals to **honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi**. School engagement with hapū and iwi was still not universal—just under 10% of principals reported no current interaction. Encouragingly, around one-third of principals expressed a desire to build their capabilities in this area through PLD. Policy developments in the past 5 years, including the introduction of the Aotearoa New Zealand's histories curriculum and the requirements under section 127(1)(d) of the Education and Training Act 2020, may have played a role in deepening this engagement (Bolstad et al., 2025).

Our findings show widespread reporting of practices that affirm the identities of **ākonga Māori** such as access to co-curricular activities, clear goals for academic achievement and cultural, social, and emotional wellbeing, and access to positive Māori role models. Since the last survey in 2022, there has been an increase in principals reporting that te reo Māori and tikanga Māori are incorporated into daily school-wide practices. Te reo Māori is a “hard to staff” learning area across immersion levels, and access to bilingual and immersion pathways is limited in English-medium schools. Addressing these shortfalls is critical to expanding reo Māori access for ākonga Māori in English-medium education.

In one-fifth of schools with **Pacific students**, principals said they did not interact with Pacific families and community leaders at all. Most principals reported that their school interacted with their Pacific families and communities in at least one way. There are opportunities for greater involvement in school governance—less than one-third have Pacific representation on their board. There is also potential for more schools to introduce approaches that affirm the identities of Pacific students.

Multiple topics in the survey enable us to consider the extent to which the system is designed and supported to achieve **equitable outcomes for all students**. Principals' views in 2025 reflected that they have had time to observe and reflect on what the EQI changes truly mean for their operational funding and decision making related to supporting students who face the greatest socioeconomic barriers to achievement. Overall, principals were less favourable about the EQI in 2025 than they were in 2022. Many principals wanted and needed more access to mental health and wellbeing support for students. Principals in 2025 showed less agreement than in 2022 that support for gender transitioning students and Rainbow (LGBTQIA+) students was embedded. Opportunities to learn about gender identity and diverse sexualities were also less common than other wellbeing learning opportunities. Our findings show that inequities remain in students' access to digital technologies and connectivity at home, required to support learning beyond the school gates. Equity issues also came to the fore in principals' responses to questions about changes to NCEA and senior secondary qualifications.

Finally, in relation to **supporting the success of everyone within the system**, principals reported variable experiences of advice and support from government agencies. The leading issues facing schools in 2025 were “too much being asked of schools” and “keeping up with pace and volume of educational change”. Both issues were reported by more principals than in 2022. Most principals disagreed that curriculum changes were happening at an appropriate pace. Despite these challenges, principals are overall positive about their jobs. However, over one-third reported unmanageable workloads and levels of stress.

The 2025 national survey has provided a snapshot of principals' perspectives amidst a period of significant shifts within the sector, with uncertainty about where some proposed changes will settle. The value of the longstanding NZCER national survey is its ability to monitor educational trends and policy impacts over time. The next national survey of secondary schools is likely to be 2028, when we can gain principals' perspectives on the impacts of changes that are being introduced now.

References

Bolstad, R., Bright, N., Palmer, G., Durie, K., & Barnes, A. (2025). *Teaching and learning about the histories of Aotearoa New Zealand: School leaders and kaiako experiences with early curriculum implementation*. New Zealand Council for Educational Research. <https://doi.org/10.18296/rep.0067>

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