

RESEARCH BRIEF

# **Strengthening schools' supportive systems: The role of assessment and reporting**

**Findings from National Survey  
of Primary Schools Uiuinga  
ā-Motu o ngā Kura**

**Mengnan Li and Jessie Dong**



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## Key messages

This brief draws on data from the 2024 National Survey of Primary School Principals to examine how schools' assessment and reporting practices contribute to wider school systems that support student attendance, wellbeing, and behaviour. This research brief foregrounds student attendance in recognition of its critical role in students' overall achievement (Education Review Office, 2025), and in response to current Government priorities (Ministry of Education, 2024) and ongoing national attendance challenges (Education Review Office, 2023).

Findings from the 2024 National Survey of Primary School Principals show that improving attendance is a concern for many schools, with one-third of principals identifying it as a major issue. Alongside this, Aotearoa New Zealand's curriculum and assessment increasingly emphasise clear and meaningful communication between schools and families, with attendance information identified as one of the four Common Components schools are expected to include in reports to parents and whānau. It is crucial to understand how assessment practices and reporting to parents support schools' efforts to improve attendance, within the context of broader systems that also promote student wellbeing and positive behaviour.

Using structural equation modelling, we found that reporting to parents and whānau acts as a key mediator between school culture and schools' support systems. While assessment and reporting practices are interrelated and both shaped by school culture, only reporting practices directly predict all three areas of the support system. This suggests that it is not simply the assessment information schools generate, but how effectively schools communicate this information to families that drives stronger school support systems.

In summary, this study shows a clear pathway: assessment and reporting practices play a central role in translating positive school culture into stronger systems that support student engagement and attendance. These findings underscore the importance of in-school factors, particularly reporting to parents and whānau, in encouraging students to attend school regularly and meaningfully.



# 1 Background

The National Survey of Schools is part of the New Zealand Council for Educational Research's (NZCER's) Te Pae Tawhiti programme of research. NZCER has run a National Survey of Primary Schools regularly since 1989, with the last survey of primary schools taking place from October to December 2024. A complete report of the latest 2024 National Survey can be accessed here: [Uiuinga ā-Motu o ngā Kura; National Survey of Schools | New Zealand Council for Educational Research<sup>1</sup>](https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/projects/national-survey)

This research brief is part of the National Survey's series of topic-based publications, where we present findings of interest to policy makers and school leaders, and highlight areas worthy of further exploration.

## Assessment practices and reporting to parents in Aotearoa New Zealand

In recent decades, New Zealand's curriculum and assessment reforms have placed increasing emphasis on clear communication between schools and whānau about student progress and achievement. For example, the recent revisions under the national curriculum refresh include new "progress descriptors" and a structured system for reporting to whānau,<sup>2</sup> showing a policy-level push for better assessment-to-reporting alignment. Notably, attendance information has been identified as one of the four Common Components that schools are expected to include in reports to parents and whānau. These changes reflect a growing recognition of the importance of reporting and the need for assessment information to be accessible and meaningful not only for teachers, but also for parents and whānau who support students' learning and engagement.

This research brief focuses on the role of schools' assessment practices and reporting to parents and whānau, by exploring the foundations that underpin these practices, and how they contribute to broader school support systems. In this research brief, **assessment practices** refer to how schools use reliable and formative assessment to support learning, improvement, and decision making, including identifying students who need additional support and evaluating the effectiveness of teaching. **Reporting to parents and whānau** refers to the systems and approaches schools use to communicate assessment information and involve families as partners in learning. This includes providing information about students' progress, as well as seeking feedback on the usefulness of reporting. Reporting is therefore understood as a two-way, relational process that supports shared understanding and collaboration between schools and families.

## Fundamental role of school culture in shaping assessment and reporting practices

As suggested by a growing body of research, school culture is pivotal in shaping assessment practices and building parent-school partnerships (Li, White et al., 2025; Stoll, 2000). Schools with collaborative, learner-centred cultures tend to use assessment information transparently, focus on students'

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/projects/national-survey>

<sup>2</sup> <https://newzealandcurriculum.tahurangi.education.govt.nz/reporting-to-parents-and-wh-nau/5637158852.p>



strengths, and actively involve families in understanding progress. These cultural conditions influence not only *what* schools communicate, but also *how* they communicate, and the extent to which whānau feel connected to their child's learning. For example, Smaill et al. (2024) found that, in schools with higher University Entrance (UE) attainment, assessment and reporting practices were deeply shaped by school culture, particularly through high expectations, relational trust, and culturally responsive engagement with whānau.

In this research brief, **school culture** refers to the ways schools create shared expectations, support continuous improvement, and embed equity and partnership in their ways of working.

## How assessment practices and reporting contribute to a school's support system

Schools' assessment and reporting practices, underpinned by school culture, has been found critical to establishing schools' wider support systems (OECD, 2013). In this research brief, **school support systems** refer to the extent to which schools have co-ordinated school-wide and targeted approaches to supporting students across three areas explored in the National Survey (wellbeing, positive behaviour, and attendance).

While these three areas are closely interconnected, this brief places particular emphasis on student attendance, given its critical role in students' achievement, school engagement, wellbeing, and lifelong outcomes (Education Review Office, 2025). However, in Aotearoa New Zealand, regular attendance rates remain below those of comparable countries and have declined steadily since 2015 (Education Review Office, 2023). Based on the findings from the 2024 National Survey of Primary School Principals, around one-third (34%) of principals identified "improving attendance" as a major issue facing their school (Li, MacDonald et al., 2025). Improving attendance has therefore become a key government target,<sup>3</sup> with an aim of 80% of students attending school more than 90% of the time.

Evidence shows that attendance concerns rarely occur in isolation; they are closely intertwined with student wellbeing, sense of belonging, and behavioural patterns (Alansari et al., 2025; Moore, 2022). Students who feel disconnected, struggle with learning, or face wellbeing difficulties are more likely to disengage and attend irregularly.

While out-of-school factors such as poverty and health challenges contribute to non-attendance, the Education Review Office (2023) found that the strongest in-school drivers of attendance are parents' attitudes, learners' attitudes, and learners' experiences of school. Effective reporting directly strengthens these drivers by offering families timely, meaningful information that links regular attendance with learning progress and future pathways. Assessment information also enables schools to identify concerns early. By systematically collecting and analysing assessment and progress data, schools can detect early warning signs, initiate timely interventions, and maintain consistent communication with families and community partners.

In these ways, assessment practices and reporting to parents are core components of strong school systems. They allow schools to detect attendance risks early, engage whānau in solutions, and uphold consistent school- and community-wide practices that promote regular attendance alongside wellbeing and positive behaviour.

3 <https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/our-programmes/government-targets>



## What we wanted to find out

This research brief explores how assessment practices and reporting to parents can contribute to schools' support system in the unique context of Aotearoa New Zealand. In particular, it investigates the enabling conditions, such as a positive school culture, that support schools' assessment and reporting practices, and whether these conditions contribute to a stronger support system for student wellbeing, behaviour, and attendance, and, if so, how.

### Research questions

- How does school culture underpin assessment and reporting practices?
- How do assessment and reporting practices contribute to schools' approaches to supporting student wellbeing, behaviour, and attendance?

Building on the research literature, this study focuses on three sets of factors to understand how the assessment and reporting practices help shape schools' support systems:

#### **A. School culture**

- Factor 1: School culture and ways of working

#### **B. Assessment and reporting**

- Factor 1: School's assessment practices
- Factor 2: Reporting to parents and whānau

#### **C. Support system**

- Factor 1: School's approaches for assisting students who need extra wellbeing support
- Factor 2: School's approaches for promoting positive student behaviour
- Factor 3: School's approaches for improving student attendance



## 3 What we did

The 2024 National Survey engaged principals and teachers from a nationally representative sample of all English-medium full primary, contributing, and intermediate schools in Aotearoa New Zealand. This research brief draws on data from the principal survey only.

### Who we asked

Data collection took place from 16 October to 5 December 2024. 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%. The responses are nationally representative by School Equity Index (EQI) Groups and broadly representative by area and region. All technical information, including a full demographic breakdown of teacher responses, is reported in the full report (Li, MacDonald et al., 2025).

### What we asked

We analysed principal responses to survey questions that fall within the six factors in Table 1 (see the appendix for the full list of items).

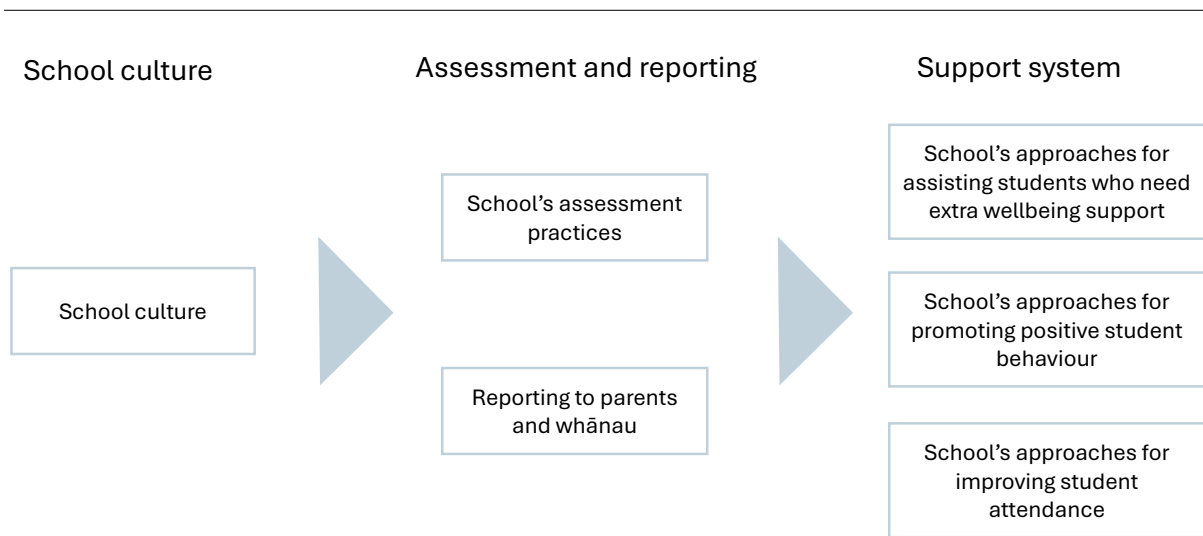
TABLE 1 Factors and sample items

Scale	Factor	Sample items
School culture	School's culture and ways of working	"We use reflection and self-review to check what we're doing and keep developing our practice."
Assessment and reporting	School's assessment practices	"Teachers are expected to use a range of formative assessment approaches in their day-to-day teaching and learning interactions."
	Reporting to parents and whānau	"We regularly check how satisfied parents and whānau are with the information they receive about their child's achievement and progress."
Support system	School's approaches for assisting students who need extra wellbeing support	"A system for identifying individual students with social or mental health needs."
	School's approaches for promoting positive student behaviour	"Consistent approaches to behaviour incidents that build students' relationship skills (e.g., restorative or problem-solving approaches)."
	School's approaches for improving student attendance	"We work collaboratively with whānau and community to improve student attendance rates (e.g., discussing the benefits of regular student attendance with parents and whānau)."

## How we analysed the data

Figure 1 shows the hypothesised model that presents the possible relations between school culture, assessment and reporting practices, and schools' broader support systems. This model explores whether school culture predicts assessment practices and reporting to whānau, and how these two factors, in turn, predict the strength of the overall support system.

Quantitative data analysis included descriptive statistics (see the appendix for details), factor analysis, and path analysis. These methods allowed us to examine whether, and in what ways, assessment and reporting practices contribute to schools' support for student wellbeing, behaviour, and attendance. It is important to note, however, that these analyses do not allow causal conclusions to be drawn.



**FIGURE 1 Theoretical framework**



## What we found

### Relations between school culture, assessment and reporting, and support system

Table 2 shows the correlations between different factors. The three strongest statistically significant associations observed across the different scales were:

- **Assessment practices** and **Reporting to parents and whānau** ( $r = .87$ )
- **School's culture and ways of working** and **Reporting to parents and whānau** ( $r = .52$ )
- **School's culture and ways of working** and **Positive behaviour support** ( $r = .46$ ).

School's approach for improving student attendance was found to be statistically significant related to school's reporting to parents and whānau ( $r = .34$ ).



TABLE 2 Correlations between different factors (*n* = 163)

Scale	School culture	Assessment and reporting		Student support and wellbeing		
	School's culture and ways of working	Assessment practices	Reporting to parents and whānau	Wellbeing support	Positive behaviour support	Attendance support
<b>School culture</b>						
School's culture and ways of working	1					
<b>Assessment and reporting</b>						
Assessment practices	0.45***	1				
Reporting to parents and whānau	0.52**	0.87***	1			
<b>Student support and wellbeing</b>						
Wellbeing support	0.21	0.32*	0.26	1		
Positive behaviour support	0.46***	0.38***	0.43**	0.34*	1	
Attendance support	0.28	0.11	0.34*	0.16	0.03	1

Note: \*\*\**p* < .001, \*\**p* < .01, \**p* < .05.

## Assessment practices and reporting to parents make a difference

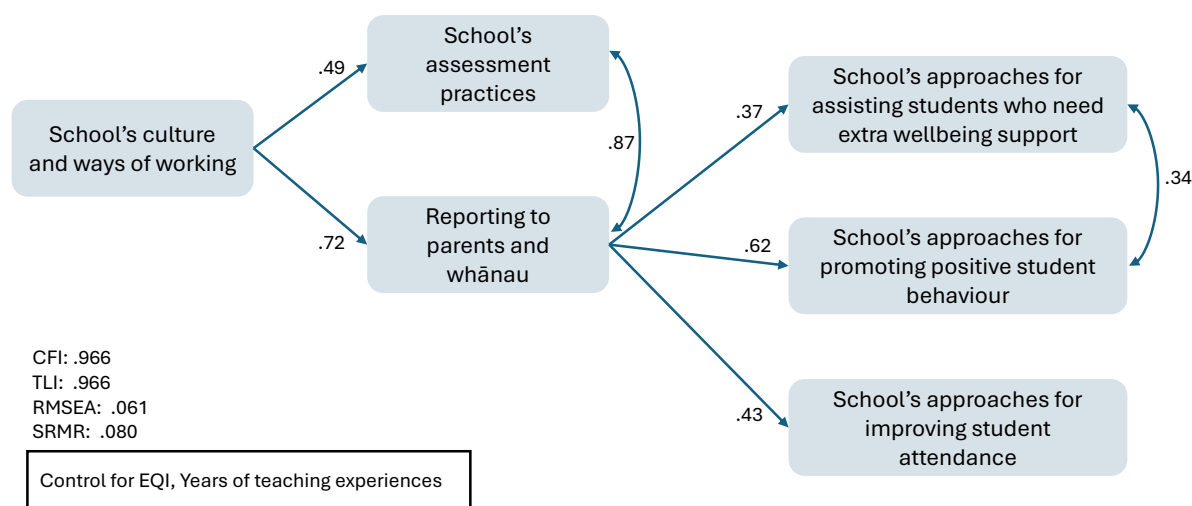
**Figure 2** shows hypothesised relations among various school-level factors. The structural equation model highlights the central role of **Reporting to parents and whānau**, which predicts all schools' support approaches explored in this brief.

Key findings include:

- **School's culture and ways of working** emerged as strong predictors of both **Assessment practices** and **Reporting to parents and whānau**.
- **Assessment practices** were positively linked to **Reporting to parents and whānau**.
- **Reporting to parents and whānau** was a moderate predictor of **School's approaches for assisting students who need extra wellbeing support**.
- **Reporting to parents and whānau** was a strong predictor of both **School's approaches for improving student attendance** and **Promoting positive student behaviour**.

Although both assessment practices and reporting are shaped by school culture and they are interrelated, reporting works as a direct predictor on all three support areas. This indicates that it is not simply the assessment information schools generate, but how effectively they communicate this information to families that drives meaningful engagement and more responsive support.

The model also suggests that reporting acts as a key mechanism for translating positive school culture into everyday practice, extending school values outward to homes and communities, and strengthening shared expectations.



Note: .1 = weak, .3 = moderate, .5 = strong.

**FIGURE 2 Our model showing statistically significant paths**



## Key messages and implications

The findings from this study highlight a clear pathway through which schools can strengthen their support systems for student attendance, wellbeing, and behaviour. Reporting to parents and whānau stands out as an influential factor, acting as the key mechanism that translates positive school culture into strong school support systems. The model also reinforces that in-school factors matter: when assessment information is used proactively and communicated effectively, it becomes a powerful lever for early identification of concerns and collaborative problem solving with whānau.

These insights carry important implications for both practice and policy, shedding light on the need to shift attention from assessment systems alone toward strengthening the quality and frequency of reporting, as well as the relationships schools build with whānau. These findings highlight the importance of ensuring communication with whānau is consistent, accessible, reciprocal, and clearly linked to learning progress and attendance expectations. At a system level, policy settings can further enable this work by recognising reporting as a key strategy for strengthening attendance, supporting alignment across schools, and providing guidance and tools that help schools communicate with whānau in meaningful ways. Strengthening these processes will help build coherent, school-wide systems that better support student engagement and attendance.

### Acknowledgement

Special thanks are extended to Esther Smaill for her guidance in developing the model and thoughtful feedback on this report.





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## Appendix

TABLE A1 Descriptive statistics by factors and items related to school culture, assessment practices, and reporting ( $n = 163$ )

Factor 1 School's culture and ways of working		Disagreement %	Neutral %	Agreement %
This school has a real focus on the ongoing learning of teachers as adult professionals.		0	4	95
We use reflection and self-review to check what we're doing and keep developing our practice.		0	10	90
Te Tiriti o Waitangi is enacted in our school values and day-to-day activities.		0	4	96
Factor 2 School's assessment practices				
Teachers are expected to use a range of formative assessment approaches in their day-to-day teaching and learning interactions.		0	2	98
The assessment tools and processes we use produce dependable information about what students know and can do.		1	7	92
We use assessment information to ...	identify and support students who need to make accelerated progress	0	1	99
	evaluate the effectiveness of our teaching and determine professional learning priorities.	0	6	94
	decide priorities for resourcing.	2	4	94
Factor 3 Reporting to parents and whānau				
We regularly provide parents and whānau with detailed information about their child's achievement and progress.		1	1	99
We regularly check how satisfied parents and whānau are with the information they receive about their child's achievement and progress.		13	25	63
We ask parents and whānau what assessment information they would like to receive.		29	36	36

**TABLE A2 Descriptive statistics by factors and items related to school approaches for supporting students with extra needs and promoting positive student behaviours (n = 163)**

<b>Factor 4 School's approaches for assisting students who need extra wellbeing support</b>	<b>Not a current school focus %</b>	<b>Exploring %</b>	<b>Partially embedded %</b>	<b>Well embedded %</b>
A system for identifying individual students with social or mental health needs.	3	11	38	48
Targeted emotional skills programmes for students with additional wellbeing needs (e.g., about self-esteem, resilience strategies, dealing with anxiety or change).	5	11	51	33
Targeted programmes designed for identified groups (e.g., a boys' group with male mentors).	28	24	31	17
<b>Factor 5 School's approaches for promoting positive student behaviour</b>				
Consistent approaches to behaviour incidents that build students' relationship skills (e.g., restorative or problem-solving approaches).	1	7	27	65
Consistent approaches are used to manage unwanted student behaviours (e.g., clearly set out consequences for actions, PB4L approaches).	2	7	18	72
Safe reporting system for students (e.g., racist or bullying behaviour).	2	8	34	56
Consistent whole-school approach to bullying behaviour that builds students' competencies (e.g., being a helpful bystander).	2	9	34	55
Targeted social skills programmes for at-risk students (e.g., conflict resolution)	6	14	42	38

\* One item in "School's approaches for assisting students who need extra wellbeing support" factor was removed during factor analysis due to low factor loading

("Kaupapa Māori support for ākonga Māor with additional wellbeing needs (e.g., from Kaupapa Māori health trusts))."



**TABLE A3 Descriptive statistics by factors and items related to school approaches for improving student attendance ( $n = 163$ )**

<b>Factor 6 School's approaches for improving student attendance</b>	<b>Disagreement %</b>	<b>Neutral %</b>	<b>Agreement %</b>
We work collaboratively with whānau and community to improve student attendance rates (e.g., discussing the benefits of regular student attendance with parents and whānau).	2	4	94
We have access to good support to help us remove barriers to school attendance.	5	16	62
We work with local schools to improve student attendance.	9	31	44

\* One item in "School's approaches for improving student attendance" factor was removed during factor analysis due to low factor loading ("The Ministry of Education's support for attendance monitoring is helpful").



