
10.

Trustees' perspectives and the work of school boards

This section presents school trustee perspectives on their role and the work of school boards. In the NZCER national surveys, we write to the board chair via the school. We send two letters and ask the chair to complete the survey themselves and give the other letter to another board member,⁵⁵ preferably one who might have a different view on some issues.⁵⁶ This year we moved from sending paper surveys to a link to the online survey, in the letter. The response rate for trustees was 22% ($n = 138$). The margin of error for trustees' responses is around 8.3%.

Previous surveys have found differences related to decile in trustee experiences and views, so we continue to analyse trustee responses by school decile. However, because of the low number of trustees responding from decile 1–2 schools this year⁵⁷ (nine trustees, compared with 28 to 38 trustees for each of the other quintiles), any apparent differences related to decile would need to be very cautiously interpreted, so we have not reported them this year. Neither have we reported differences related to school location, because the proportion of responses from trustees at rural and town schools are lower than the national picture.

Fifty-five percent of trustees who responded in 2018 were board chairs. Any marked differences in the views of chairs and other trustees are reported in this section. Principals' views of the key elements in the role of boards and their views of how their school board is working, are also included in this section.

Trustee experience and pathways to the trustee role

Around half of the secondary school trustees have experience on other boards

Almost half (48%) of the secondary school trustees come to their role with previous experience of serving on a primary or intermediate school board of trustees. Over half (57%) have experience on the board of another organisation such as a business or voluntary organisation.

55 Other than the principal or teacher representative.

56 Details of the responding trustees are in the Appendix. Overall, the trustees responding in 2018 were more highly qualified than those who responded in 2015. Slightly fewer trustees were under the age of 50, and fewer were from rural or town schools.

57 The low response rate from trustees in decile 1–2 schools may indicate that trustees at these schools do not have the online access that other trustees have.

Almost all trustees are also in paid employment

Almost all secondary trustees who responded to the survey are also in paid employment; 62% as employees and 33% self-employed. Some board members get support from their employment for their school trustee role: 40% can use some paid time for their role, 37% can use some work equipment, and 34% can use work hours flexibly.

Board chairs have longer experience on the board than other members

Trustees responding to the survey had been on their board for a median time of just over 3 years, very similar to the median time in the 2015 survey, and a year less than the 4.3 years found in the 2012 national survey. Board chairs had longer experience: a median of 5 years, compared with a median of 2.3 years for other board members.

Forty-six percent of trustees intend to stand again at the next trustee election (for many schools, in June 2019), and a further 27% are unsure. Overall, the picture of interest in continuing in the role is much the same as in previous years.

Trustees' views on their role

Board members are motivated to contribute to their community

Table 33 shows that the main driver for taking on school board responsibility is to contribute to the community. A quarter of trustees want to improve their school's achievement levels. Not many went onto a school board to change things at the school, or because they felt the school lacked leadership.

Table 33 also shows that the drivers or attractions of school board membership have been pretty stable over time. Comparing 2018 and 2015, there is a drop in those who want to help their child/children, and in those being asked to stand for election or join the board, and an increase in those who joined because they have particular skills that are useful.

TABLE 33 Trustees' reasons for joining their secondary school board; 2012, 2015, and 2018

Reason	2012 (n = 289) %	2015 (n = 232) %	2018 (n = 138) %
To contribute to the community	78	83	81
I have particular skills that are useful	56	54	66
To help my child/children	55	56	47
I was asked	44	54	41
I wanted to learn how the school operated	*	28	30
I wanted to improve achievement levels	26	27	25
I wanted to change things at the school	16	12	14
Not many people were standing	*	8	6
Leadership at the school was lacking	5	6	5

* Not asked.

Many trustees think the amount of responsibility the board has is about right

Many secondary school trustees (70%) think that the amount of responsibility asked of school boards is about right; 28% of trustees think too much is asked of trustees. This pattern has stayed much the same since 2009.

More chairs than other trustees think the amount of responsibility asked of school boards is too much: 40% of chairs, compared with 15% of other trustees. The proportion of board chairs who think the responsibility is too much has risen from 29% in 2015.

Most (83%) of trustees spend under 6 hours a week on their board work. Board chairs spend more time: only 11% carry out their role in less than 2 hours a week, compared with 69% of other trustees. A quarter of the chairs spent at least 6 hours a week in their role.

Trustees most enjoy having positive relationships with the school and the opportunity to contribute to student outcomes

New questions in the 2018 survey asked trustees what they enjoyed most and least about their role. These were open questions.

Almost all the trustees (98%) wrote at least one thing they enjoyed the most about the role. Two themes were the strongest: enjoying and valuing positive relationships with the school and the community (commented on by 30% of trustees); and having the opportunity to contribute to improving student outcomes and achieve the best for students (commented on by 29% of trustees). Other aspects trustees enjoyed were the community service, and opportunity to “give back” and contribute to the local community (23% of trustees); making a difference (22% of trustees); getting the opportunity to contribute to setting the school’s strategic direction (18% of trustees); and the trustee’s own learning (13% of trustees).

Feeling like you can make a difference for your community in how our secondary students achieve in education. Supporting the school management team in an increasingly difficult job.

Helping to ensure our school remains a great place for all kids in our community to grow and learn.

Being part of the strategic direction of the school and contributing to the community.

Supporting the school to achieve the very best results, academic and other, for its students. In particular Māori and Pasifika students—seeing their rates of achievement improve—and celebrating that.

Trustees least enjoy having to attend disciplinary meetings about students

Almost all trustees also wrote at least one thing they enjoyed the least about the role (126 responses, 91% of trustees). One theme emerged most strongly—disciplinary meetings and supporting students who have been excluded (commented on by 25% of trustees).

Disciplinary meetings for students. I feel that we are ill-equipped as parent reps to be able to make life-altering decisions for students. This is made even more difficult when there is a lack of support services within our community.

From 6%–9% of the trustees also made comments on each of the following themes:

- Dealing with the Ministry of Education
- The extent of responsibilities
- Employment and personnel issues
- The time and workload involved in the trustee role
- Property issues
- Inadequate school funding.

The role of boards

Principals and trustees agree that providing strategic direction is a key element of the board role

Table 34 shows how trustees and principals answered the question: “What do you think are the key element(s) in the role of the board of trustees?”

Providing strategic direction was selected by the highest proportion of both trustees and principals. The pattern of responses from trustees and principals is the same, with one exception: 60% of the trustees see it as the board’s role to oversee the principal’s performance, compared with 26% of the principals.

TABLE 34 Trustees’ and principals’ views on the key elements of the board of trustees’ role

Key element of board role	Trustees (n = 138) %	Principals (n = 167) %
Providing strategic direction for school	96	86
Supporting the principal	78	81
Representing parents and whānau in the school	74	80
Overseeing school finances	65	61
Scrutinising school performance	63	62
Employing the principal	36	47
Overseeing the principal’s performance	60	26
Agent of government/representing government interest	8	10

In 2018, the proportion of trustees selecting each element is much higher than in 2015, for nearly every element. For example, 60% of trustees say a key element of their role is overseeing the principal’s performance, compared with 16% in 2015; 78% selected supporting the principal, compared with 46% in 2015; and 65% selected overseeing school finances, compared with 34% in 2015. There was a very slight change in question wording which may have contributed to this.⁵⁸

Trustees report that boards spend the most time on student progress and achievement

When we asked trustees to rank a range of board activity by the amount of time spent on it, student progress and achievement topped the list (see Figure 47). Attention to financial management and property/maintenance followed. This is a similar picture to 2015. Two differences from 2015 are that student behaviour is higher up the list (moving from position 7 to position 5 in the ranking), and day-to-day management has fewer trustees ranking it as highly (the median ranking remained at 9, but the upper quartile moved from 5 to 7).

⁵⁸ The core question was identical. The only difference was that in 2015 trustees were asked to tick the most important, and in 2018 they were asked to tick the most important *that apply* [italics added]. This may have encouraged trustees to select more items. In 2018, just 2% of trustees only selected one item from the list; in 2015, 32% of trustees selected only one item. In 2018, trustees selected a median of five items; in 2015 the median was three items.

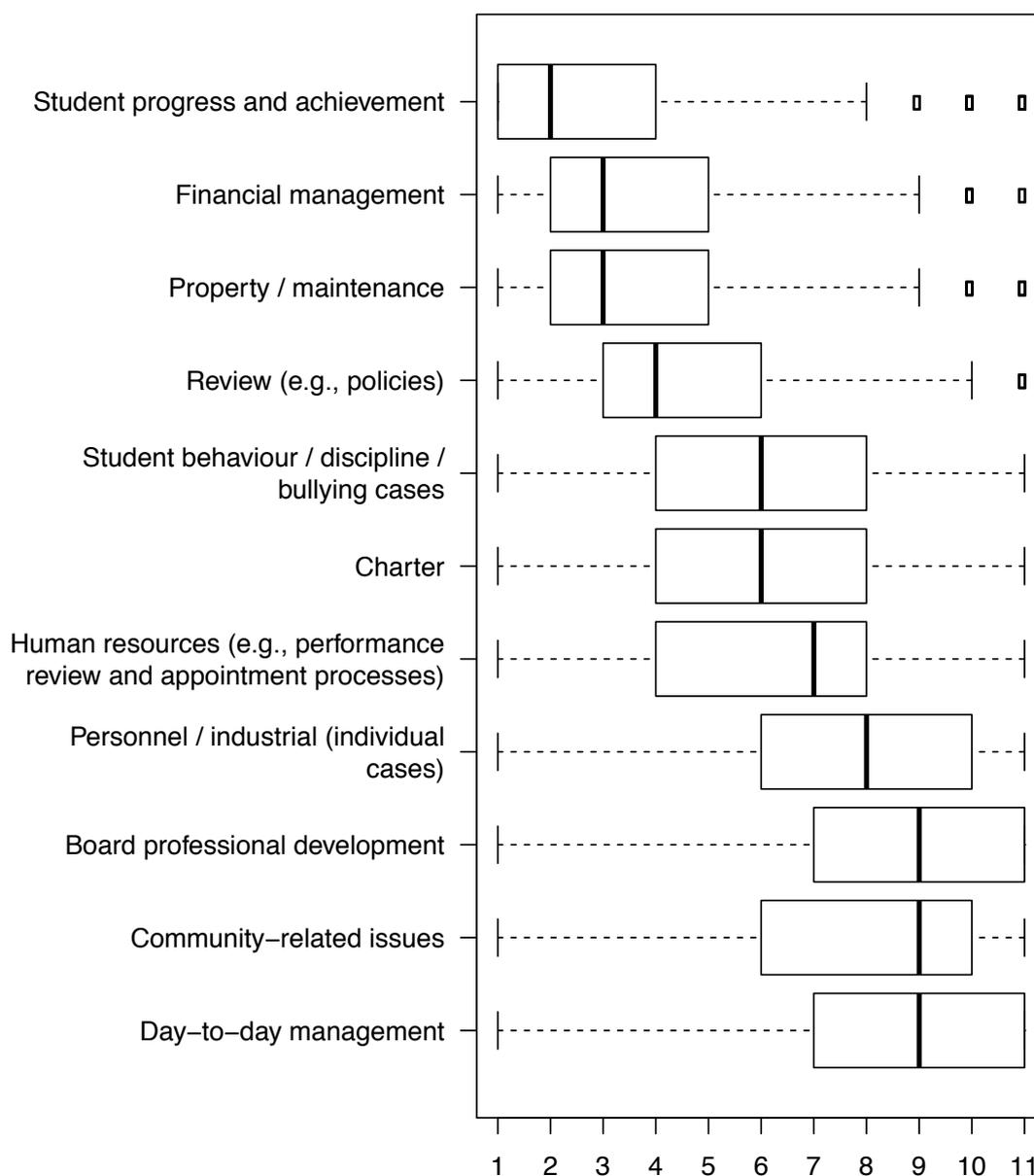
FIGURE 47 Main activities of boards in terms of time,⁵⁹ reported by trustees (n = 138)

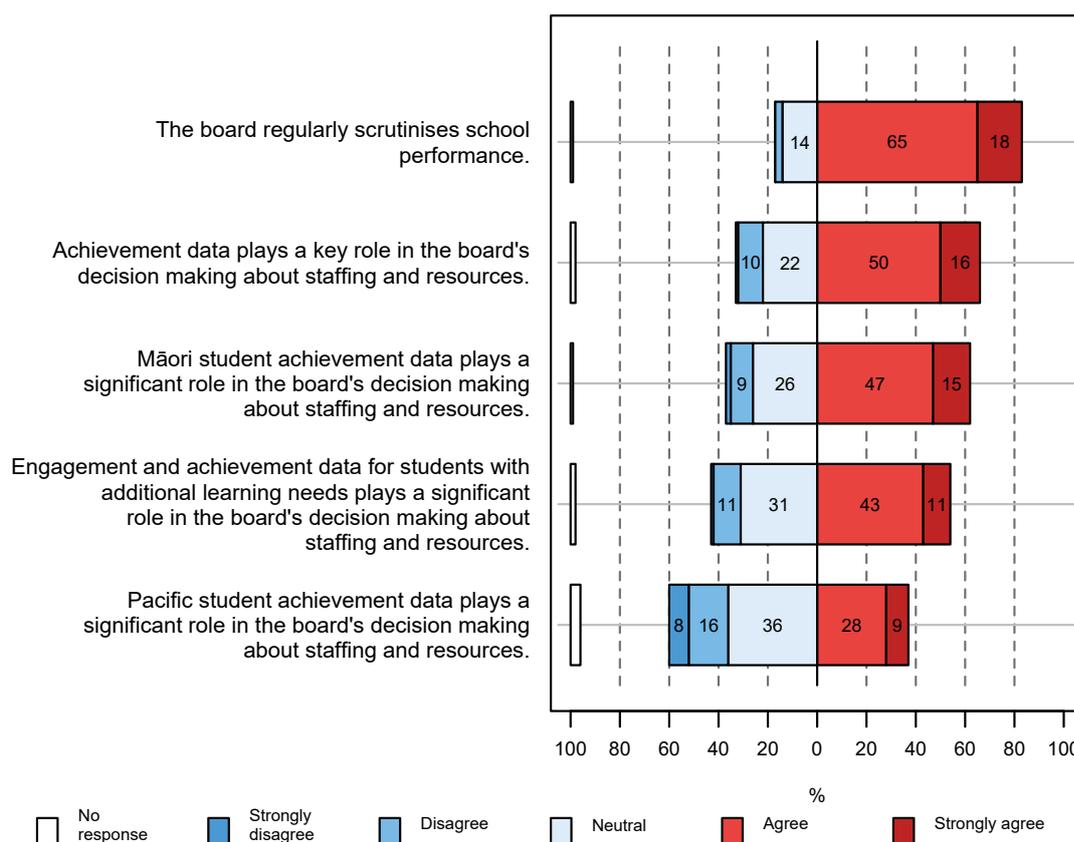
Figure 47 shows also the wide range between boards in how much time they give to particular aspects of their role (or, in the case of day-to-day management, what they should not be doing as the school's governing body). All the aspects we asked about have at least one trustee saying that was what their board spent most of its time on over the past year, and one trustee saying that was what their board spent least time on.

⁵⁹ In order of the median ranking given. The figure is a "box and whiskers" graph, with the line in the middle of the box showing the median ranking (on a scale of 1–11), and the left hand side of the box indicating the spread of the 25% of scores above the median, and the right hand side of the box indicating the spread of 25% of scores below the median, with the single bars indicating the full range, and dots, extreme outliers.

Most principals agree that the board scrutinises school performance and uses student achievement data in decision making

We asked principals, as the school’s professional leader employed by the board, for their perspectives on how their board worked. Figure 48 shows that most of the principals report that their board regularly scrutinises school performance and actively pays attention to achievement data in making decisions. The proportion agreeing drops for statements about use of data about students with additional learning needs and about Pacific students.

FIGURE 48 The role of student data in board decision making, reported by principals (n = 167)



Half of trustees report that parents raised student behaviour issues with the board

Sixty percent of the trustees said that parents had raised issues with the board in the 2018 year (70% of trustees had experience of this in the 2015 year). The issues raised are wide ranging (see Table 35). As in previous national surveys, student behaviour and dissatisfaction with a staff member remain top issues. This year they are joined by mental health and wellbeing, and school uniform.

TABLE 35 Issues raised by parents with their secondary school board, reported by trustees (*n* = 83)

Top issues—more than 30% of trustees in schools where parents have raised issues say parents have raised this issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student behavior (51% of trustees in schools where parents have raised issues say parents have raised this issue, 47% in 2015, 35% in 2012, 43% in 2009) • Mental health and wellbeing (34%, not asked about in the 2015 survey) • School uniform (33%, up slightly from 29% in 2015) • Dissatisfaction with staff member (30%, down from 44% in 2015—back to a similar level as 2012 and 2009)
10%–20% of trustees in schools where parents have raised issues say parents have raised this issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision for students with learning support needs • Student achievement • Funding • Provision for Māori students • Placement of students • Costs for parents and whānau • NCEA (13%, up from 7% in 2015) • Digital technology • School zone/enrolment scheme
Under 10% of trustees in schools where parents have raised issues say parents have raised this issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modern learning environments • Curriculum • Transport • Homework • Grounds/maintenance • Theft/vandalism • Provision for Pacific students • Co-curricular provision • Class sizes

Board capability

Almost half of principals consider their board is on top of its task

Most of the trustees and principals are positive about how well their school board is doing (see Table 36). The overall picture has remained much the same since 2009, with 47% of principals seeing their board as being on top of its task in 2018. Principals are more likely than trustees to consider the board is coping or struggling.

TABLE 36 Trustee and principal views of how their board is doing

View	On top of its task %	Making steady progress %	Coping %	Struggling %
Trustees (<i>n</i> = 138)	37	57	4	1
Principals (<i>n</i> = 167)	47	35	13	5

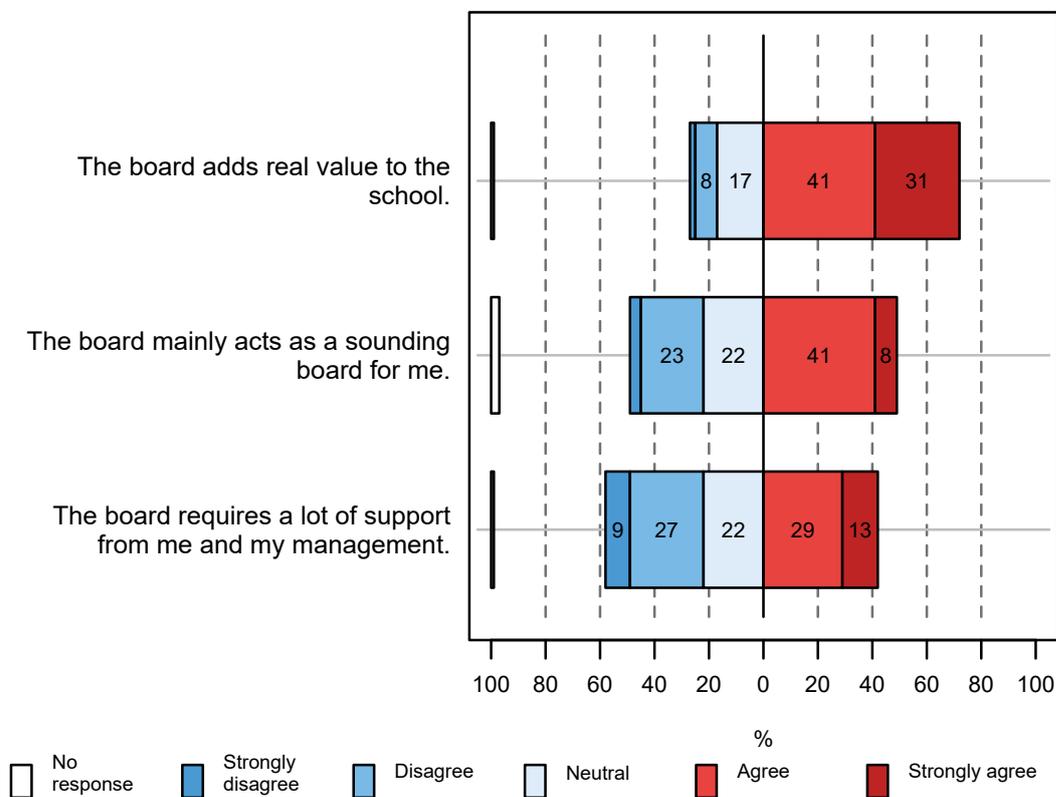
Twenty-six percent of the decile 1–2 principals think their board is on top of its task (up from 5% in 2015), compared with 68% of the decile 7–8 principals, and 60% of the decile 9–10 principals. While no decile 1–2 principals think their board is struggling, they are more likely to say their board is coping (32%, compared with 7%–15% of principals leading schools of other deciles).

Thirty-one percent of the trustees say their board regularly reviews its own processes, as recommended (down from 41% in 2015), and 59% say they do this sometimes (up from 47% in 2015).

Many principals see their board adding real value to the school but a sizeable minority say their board needs a lot of support

Figure 49 shows that many (72%) of the principals see their school board adding real value to the school. A sizeable minority feel the board needs a lot of support (42%, up from 34% in 2015). As in 2015, just under half of principals (49%) agree that the board mainly acts as a sounding board for them.

FIGURE 49 Principals' views of their board (n = 167)



While principals' views of their board are largely unrelated to their school decile, the principals of decile 1–2 schools are the most likely to agree that their board requires a lot of support (63%, compared with 43% for decile 3–4 schools, 50% for decile 5–6 schools, 35% for decile 7–8 schools, and 13% for decile 9–10 schools).

Support for the trustee role

Nearly all trustees received advice for their role in the past year

Nearly all trustees responding (99%) had some advice to help them in their role. Table 37 shows that most of the trustees got advice from their principal and other school staff (78%, up from 66% in 2015), and their own colleagues on the school board (73%, not significantly different from 2015). Just under half had taken part in NZSTA workshops, 41% had sought advice from the NZSTA Advisory and Support Centre, and a smaller proportion had used other NZSTA services. We can't compare these NZSTA options with 2015 responses as NZSTA services have since been reorganised and renamed.

TABLE 37 Advice trustees have had for the role in the past 12 months

Advice	Trustees (n = 138) %
Guidance and information from principal/school staff	78
Guidance and information from other trustees on the school board	73
Took part in NZSTA workshops	49
Advice from NZSTA Advisory and Support Centre	41
PLD in their own paid work	40
Advice from regional Ministry of Education office	35
Advice from NZSTA Employment Adviser	28
Advice from ERO	23
Advice from NZSTA Governance Adviser	20
Advice from other schools' trustees	18
NZSTA online modules	17
NZSTA conference	11
Other	10

The most frequently used resources for trustees are produced by NZSTA

NZSTA, the Ministry of Education, and ERO have all published guidance for school boards; some of it overlapping, or exemplifying core principles applied to different priority areas. National reports produced by the Ministry of Education, ERO, and NZQA are also useful sources of information and understanding. Table 38 shows that the most used written or digital resources that we asked about are those that come regularly from NZSTA. NZSTA resources are in bold in the table, with Ministry of Education material in italics, and ERO resources underlined. Overall, 92% of the trustees had used one or more NZSTA resource, 55% had used one or more Ministry of Education resource, and 55% one or more ERO resource.

The picture is similar when compared with 2015. One notable increase in use is ERO national reports (used by 35% of trustees, up from 21%).

The Hautū resource saw a decrease in reported use between 2015 and 2018 (used by 14% of trustees in 2018, down from 26% in 2015).

TABLE 38 Trustees' use of written or digital resources in past 12 months

Resource	Trustees (n = 138) %
STA News	75
Trusteeship—a guide for school trustees	47
NZSTA operational updates via email	43
NZSTA handbook	35
NZSTA members' memos (Membership Matters) via email	35
ERO national reports	35
<i>Effective governance—working in partnership (MoE)</i>	28
<i>Effective governance—how boards work (MoE)</i>	28
ERO indicators	27
NZQA website	23
Material on good governance in other sectors	23
<i>Ka Hikitia</i>	18
NZSTA guidelines for principal appointment	16
Wellbeing guidelines (ERO)	16
<i>Effective governance—supporting education success as Māori</i>	14
Hautū	14
Other	12
School trustees—helping you ask the right questions (ERO)	11
<i>Effective governance—recruiting and managing school staff (MoE)</i>	9
<i>Effective governance—building inclusive schools (MoE)</i>	8
<i>Bullyingfree.nz website or Bullying prevention and response guide for schools (MoE)</i>	8
Guidelines to assist boards of trustees to meet their good employer obligations to Māori (PPTA and NZSTA)	6
<i>Effective governance—supporting Pasifika success (MoE)</i>	4
<i>Pacific Education Plan</i>	4
NZ Schools—Minister of Education's annual report to Parliament	1

Changes trustees would make to the role

Nearly two-thirds of trustees would like more funding for their school

Only 1% of the trustees say they would make no changes to their role. Table 39 is shaded to highlight the changes selected by up to 10%, 10%–19%, 20%–29%, and 30%–39% of the trustees. More funding for their school topped the list by a considerable margin (64% of trustees, up from 55% in 2015). Thirty-seven percent would also reduce Ministry expectations of what the school can provide for the funding they get (up from 28% in 2015). A third of trustees would like improvements in their own knowledge or training.

We have already reported that the aspect of their role trustees say they least enjoy is disciplinary meetings. Sixteen percent would like clearer guidelines to make disciplinary decisions, and 14% would like to reduce their role in disciplinary decisions.

TABLE 39 Main changes trustees would make in their role

Change	Trustees (n = 138) %
More funding for the school	64
Reduce Ministry expectations of what we can provide for the funding we get	37
Improve my knowledge or training	33
More support for community consultation	30
More time to focus on strategic issues	28
More support/advice from Ministry of Education	27
More advice about modern learning environments	27
Work more with other schools	25
More remuneration	25
More guidance on how to use achievement data to inform board decision making	22
More support to meet community expectations	21
More support/advice from independent education experts	21
More support from parents and whānau	18
Better information from school staff to inform our decisions	17
Clearer guidelines to make disciplinary decisions	16
Reduce role in disciplinary decisions	14
Clearer distinction between governance and management	9
Better communication between board members	9
Reduce workload/paperwork	9
More support/advice from NZSTA	8
More support for property issues	5

Summary and discussion

Secondary school boards of trustees draw on parents and others who are motivated primarily by wanting to contribute to their community. Trustees most enjoy having positive relationships with the school and the opportunity to contribute to student outcomes. Many secondary school trustees bring with them other governance experience, through serving on primary school boards, voluntary organisations, or business boards. Almost all those responding are in paid employment. A significant minority can use or give themselves some support from their employment for their trustee role. This picture is unchanged from previous surveys.

While the majority of non-chair trustees spend less than 2 hours a week on their role, a quarter of board chairs give at least 6 hours a week to their role. A higher proportion of board chairs than other trustees think the amount of responsibility asked of school boards is too much.

Trustees and principals all identified that the key role for boards is to provide strategic direction for the school, followed by supporting the principal. Consistent with the main focus on strategic direction, student progress and achievement topped the list of the things boards generally spent their time on, followed by financial management and property/maintenance. Most principals report that the board regularly scrutinises school performance, with achievement data playing a key role in board decision making about staffing and resources.

Parents also raise issues themselves with school boards. As in previous years, student behaviour is the most common issue raised, but this year this was joined by mental health and wellbeing.

Most trustees and principals are positive about how well their school board is doing. The proportion of principals who consider their board is on top of its task has continued to increase since 2012. Many principals see their school board as adding real value to the school. However, a sizeable minority consider their board needs a lot of support from school staff. Trustees report getting advice for their role from the principal and other school staff, and each other. They also use written and digital resources from NZSTA, the Ministry of Education, and ERO.

Almost all trustees would like to change something about their role. More funding for the school topped this list, and was selected by nearly two-thirds of the trustees. Around a third of the trustees would like to improve their own knowledge or training, and have more support for community consultation. When we asked trustees what they least enjoy about their role, disciplinary meetings were mentioned most.