

1.

Introduction

This report presents the main findings from NZCER's latest survey of secondary schools, conducted in July and August 2015. We have done these surveys every 3 years since 2003. They provide a comprehensive national picture of what is happening in our secondary schools, how things have changed over time and the impact of policy changes.

These national surveys are part of NZCER's Government Grant funded through the Ministry of Education. We get strong support from sector groups who encourage their members to fill out the surveys, and the Ministry of Education and the sector groups also give us very useful feedback on our draft surveys.

The NZCER National Secondary Survey goes to the principal, to the board of trustees chair and one other trustee (we asked the board chair to give the survey to someone whose opinion might differ from their own) and to a random sample of one in four teachers at all 313 state and state-integrated secondary schools in New Zealand; and to a random sample of one in four parents at a cross-section of 32 of these schools. Details on the sampling, margin of error and survey methodology are in Appendix 1.

In this report, we discuss statistically significant differences in responses related to school decile, location and size.

Decile showed the most association with difference. One common thread through the different sections of this report are differences associated with school decile, showing that decile 1–2 schools face the deepest challenges in meeting their students' needs. We grouped the schools into decile bands for analysis purposes: decile 1–2, decile 3–4, decile 5–6, decile 7–8 and decile 9–10.

We use the phrase “changes with decile” to signify distinct decile-related differences, although occasionally there is some overlap between decile bands. Similarly, we describe the data as “increasing to” to signify graduated increases from one point to another. We occasionally report larger groupings, such as deciles 5–10, where there is consistency across a larger grouping of deciles.

This overview report covers key aspects of secondary school experiences and perspectives.

Some key findings

Transition to secondary school

Most secondary schools had deliberate strategies to build their Years 9 and 10 students' sense of belonging in their school, but less than half thought they had good information about their incoming students' strengths and needs. The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) was playing an increasing part in Years 9 and 10 classes, with 40% of teachers giving practice exams.

Learning to learn and the key competencies

We found that little progress had been made since 2012 in equipping students with the ability to *learn to learn*—a key principle in *The New Zealand curriculum* (NZC)¹—and in inclusion of the key competencies in students' learning opportunities. Heavy workloads, lack of time for collaborative curriculum planning and NCEA were the main barriers to teachers making changes to what they taught.

NCEA

Support for NCEA was stable, perceptions about its credibility in the wider community had continued to improve and recognition that NCEA can help with inclusion had increased. Schools were paying more attention to students' pathways choices and looking to NCEA's flexibility to help design courses that meet most students' needs. However, half the teachers thought that NCEA pressures impacted negatively on student wellbeing, and the NCEA workload for teachers was cited by more than half of principals and teachers as a major issue facing their school.

Learning with digital technology

Government provision to strengthen schools' digital technology infrastructure in the past few years had a positive impact, with improvements in its adequacy and Internet access. However, this is not yet universal, with decile 1–2 schools having less adequate access. Teachers and principals were generally positive about the gains for students' learning with digital technology. Teachers' comments showed also that they wanted more professional learning and time to practise and experiment with digital technology to make the best use of it in their classes. The reported uptake of online opportunities for student participation in distance learning or e-learning was relatively low.

Most schools (62%) had bring your own device (BYOD) policies, with more than half the schools relying on parent provision of digital devices. Students in low-decile schools had more restricted access to digital technology for learning and usually worked with school-owned devices, making these students less digitally connected. Parents' and whānau electronic access to school information about their child increased with school decile, resulting in unequal use of this information source.

Student wellbeing

Overall, there was some evidence of improvement since 2012 in the way secondary schools are supporting students' wellbeing. Most teachers reported teaching their students strategies to manage their social and emotional wellbeing.

Student behaviour was much less of an issue in 2015 than it had been in 2009, and fewer teachers had their teaching often seriously disrupted, or felt unsafe in their classroom or school. Student behaviour continued to be an issue for teachers in decile 1–2 schools. Overall, this indicates some gains from the Ministry's support for schools through the Positive Behaviour for Learning (PB4L) strategy.

1 Ministry of Education. (2007). *The New Zealand curriculum*. Wellington: Learning Media.

However, secondary schools continued to have difficulty accessing mental health support for their students, and Child, Youth and Family (CYF) support and wraparound support for individual students with complex and challenging needs.

Teachers' role

Teachers were generally feeling more positive about their work than in 2012, when the alignment of NCEA and NZC was at its most demanding. Morale and enjoyment levels had lifted, and workload manageability showed some improvement, back to 2009 levels. School-based professional learning opportunities had also improved. Teachers continued to want more time to work together, reduce their administration and paperwork and their assessment workload.

The principal role

Secondary principals' morale and optimism levels had slipped since 2012. While they generally enjoyed their role, work hours and stress levels remained high. Only 30% felt they could schedule enough time for the educational leadership part of their role. Just over half would like more career options beyond the principal role—these are limited in the New Zealand system, unlike many others. Thirty percent of the secondary schools had been led by three or more principals in the past 10 years. Schools with more stable school leadership were more likely to improve their Education Review Office (ERO) report status. New principals were more likely to be heading schools in the most challenging situations. Support for ongoing principal development including useful annual performance reviews had not improved since 2012.

Trustee perspectives

Secondary school trustees, parents and principals all identified the provision of strategic direction for the school as the main key element in the school board role, followed by supporting school staff and the principal. Employment of the principal did not feature highly. Most trustees thought the responsibility asked of them was about right, though 29% of board chairs thought it was too much; a third of the board chairs gave at least 6 hours a week to their role.

Most trustees and principals were positive about how their board was doing, and about the relationships between the board chair and the principal. However, around a third of the principals saw their board as needing a lot of support from the school staff.

Twenty percent of the trustees said their board had all the expertise it needed. Experience or skills that were lacking ranged widely, again indicating particular local contexts and board composition. More trustees in 2015 than in 2012 mentioned a lack of expertise in strategic planning, community consultation, understanding achievement data, links with local employers and property.

Trustees reported getting internal support and information for their role from the principal and other school staff, and each other. They also used written resources from the New Zealand School Trustees Association (NZSTA) (89%), the Ministry of Education (57%) and ERO (51%). Most had had some form of professional development for their trustee role over the past year, mainly through NZSTA-provided and largely government-funded workshops and courses, and through their own paid work (41%). Around a third had also had advice from NZSTA, ERO and the regional office of the Ministry of Education. Almost all who had had some external professional development or advice for their role saw a positive impact in terms of understanding their responsibilities and, for a minority, in terms of important decisions they needed to make.

Many trustees would like to improve their effectiveness, and the main changes they sought were for more guidance and support on matters beyond NZSTA's role, and a better match of time and expectations to what they can achieve.

Parent and whānau perspectives

Most parents and whānau were generally happy with the quality of their child's secondary schooling, and positive about their children's teachers and what their child was gaining from their learning. All but 7% of their children were attending their first choice of secondary school. When parents and whānau chose a school for their youngest child they were more likely to take into account the child's preference, the school's links with family members and whether their child's friends were also going to that school, than to weigh up information about the school's academic track record or the programmes they offered, or use ERO reports, the school's annual report or the Find a School website.

Getting a qualification, preparing for their career or work life and tertiary study topped the list of things that were important to parents and whānau for their child's secondary education.

For many Māori whānau it was important that their child learn te reo Māori at school, though not all of these thought their child's school was doing well at helping their child learn te reo Māori.

In the context of schools' greater attention to tracking students' learning information, more parents thought they were getting good information from the school about their child's progress (74%, compared with 63% in 2012 and 53% in 2009). The proportion of parents who thought the school genuinely consulted them about new directions or issues had increased steadily since 2009 (47% in 2015, 41% in 2012 and 34% of parents in 2009).

Parents were using fewer sources than in 2012 to get education-related information. Friends and other parents, as well as newspapers, tended to be their preferred information sources in 2015. There was a decrease in parents' use of ERO as a source of information about their school and about education in general.

Parental involvement in their child's school increased, particularly in attending sports, and also in attending school performances, going on school trips and fundraising.

One common thread through the different sections of this report are differences associated with school decile, showing that decile 1–2 schools face the deepest challenges in meeting their students' needs.

Resources and support

Only 14% of secondary principals thought their school's government funding was sufficient for their school's needs. However, in 2015 secondary schools appeared to be more successful than previously in keeping their school finances stable, managing their budgets through reducing school spending and relying on non-government funding sources, such as international students, and parental provision of digital devices.

Just under a quarter of principals thought their school's staffing entitlement was enough, with 76% using locally raised funds to hire additional staff. Finding suitable teachers to fill their school's vacancies was a difficulty experienced by 71%, with 31% having difficulty finding te reo Māori teachers. Middle management positions had been hard to fill at 55% of the schools, largely due to workload.

Decile 9–10 schools were in the most stable situation and decile 1–2 schools generally in the most challenging situation with regard to funding, staffing and competing for students. Competition for students appears to have sharpened.

Support and challenge

There were some strengths evident in the support and challenge schools got from government agencies, particularly ERO and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). Interactions with the restructured regional Ministry of Education offices were largely positive by mid-2015. The picture was more varied

when it came to the Ministry of Education national office (responsible for funding and property as well as policy) and the then Teachers' Council (now the Education Council).

Some real gains have been made in secondary schools' access to needed external expertise. However, there are some areas that continue to present problems for minorities of secondary schools, indicating needs that cannot be met by asking schools to source their own advice.

Communities of Learning

Communities of Schools (CoS) (now Communities of Learning (CoL)) were just starting to form in mid-2015. Sixty-five percent of principals were interested in their school joining a CoL, and around a quarter of teachers expressed interest in the new within-school or across-CoS roles. Teachers' views of the new roles included positive views of the purpose of CoLs, but also some scepticism about the ability of CoLs to meet their purpose, and concerns about negative impacts for teachers or schools. Principals' expectations of CoLs were highest in relation to the sharing of useful knowledge for teaching and learning, with just over half thinking the CoLs would bring more traction on tackling issues around student achievement and engagement, and a minority expecting more sharing of resources and access to support. Principals saw somewhat more drawbacks than benefits from working in CoLs.

Issues facing secondary schools

Foremost for principals and teachers in the issues facing their schools was the weight of assessment, and associated with that for teachers, motivating students. Resources were the two prime concerns for trustees: property and funding. Parents were concerned that their school can provide good curriculum options, attract and keep good teachers and about student behaviour. While the adequacy of digital technology and Internet access was less of a concern than in 2012, dealing with the inappropriate use of technology was a shared concern across all four groups in 2015.