

# 7.

## Principals' perspectives on their work

### Principals' achievements

**We asked principals what their main achievements had been over the past 3 years. Our aim was to find out what they have focused on, and what results they see from their work. The items we include cover some key responsibilities of the principal's role; policy emphases, such as the stronger focus on improving Māori student performance; and what we know from research about effective leadership and school processes. Looking back to 2009 allows us to see what has changed over time in the national picture of what secondary principals focus on and what they think they achieve.**

The first set of items in Table 21 cover some key aspects of school wellbeing and viability. Most secondary principals have been paying attention to their school reputation, often supporting that with an increased focus on strengths-based school culture and their senior leadership team, and offering a good range of co-curricular activities. Stable trends over time in responses to items about school roll stability and the quality of school property indicate that around a third of principals at any one time find these hard to influence. A stable trend is also evident in the proportion of principals who encounter and successfully manage a crisis in their school: just over a third of principals can expect to deal with a crisis in their school over a 3-year period (and perhaps more than one, since we did not ask about the number of crises).<sup>57</sup> More principals have managed to find new funding for new initiatives in the past 3 years, but still only 29% could do so. Fewer principals in 2015 had needed to bring their school back from a deficit than in 2012.

<sup>57</sup> This figure may not include principals whose schools were knocked back by a crisis.

TABLE 21 Secondary principals' main school-related achievements in the past 3 years (2009, 2012 and 2015)

Achievement	2009 (n = 187) %	2012 (n = 177) %	2015 (n = 182) %
School reputation remained good or improved	74	79	87
Retained/built a strengths-based school culture	*	55	65
School senior leadership team remained strong or got stronger	*	55	65
Roll remained stable or grew in a manageable way	65	61	63
Offered a good range of co-curricular activities	47	57	62
Building/grounds quality stayed good or improved	63	59	62
I remained optimistic	63	64	62
Strengthened processes for working with and consulting with parent/ whānau community	n/a	n/a	51
A crisis we experienced did not overwhelm us	34	38	39
Kept the ship afloat	39	31	31
Found new revenue to support new initiatives	24	22	29
Got school back into the black from a deficit	21	34	23

\*Not asked

In 2015, more decile 9–10 school principals noted improvements in buildings or grounds (83%). Fewer decile 1–2 and 3–4 school principals noted a strong senior leadership team (60% each, compared with 86% of decile 9–10 principals). Keeping the ship afloat was an accomplishment for decile 1–2 school principals (50%), more so than for the 12% of decile 7–8 school principals who noted this achievement, and 25% of the decile 9–10 school principals.

A prime responsibility of principals is to build and sustain a strong professional teaching culture. Table 22 shows that many secondary principals were now more focused on providing leadership opportunities for teachers, and building inquiry cultures. These inquiry cultures may be making more use of student assessment data to plan learning (79% of principals thought this was good or had improved over the past 3 years) than focusing on pedagogy—how to engage students best in good learning (62% of the principals thought they had achieved a more focused approach here in the past 3 years, a decrease since 2012). As we saw in *Chapter 3: Working with NCEA*, and in *Chapter 6: Teachers' perspectives on their work*, and will see in *Chapter 11: Issues facing secondary schools in 2015*, assessment was seen by principals and teachers as a dominating force in secondary teaching and learning.

Sixty-nine percent of the principals thought they had been able to keep the overall quality of teaching staff high or improved in 2015, an increase since 2012. This seems to be due to an increase in the recruitment of effective teachers, rather than retaining or building effective teachers, an area of principal achievement which had declined since 2012. The information in Table 22 raises some intriguing questions about the development of secondary school teaching capability.

TABLE 22 Secondary principals' main teacher and teaching-related achievements in the past 3 years (2009, 2012 and 2015)

Achievement	2009 (n = 187) %	2012 (n = 177) %	2015 (n = 182) %
Recruited effective teachers	75	64	79
Good/improved use of student assessment data to plan learning	*	76	79
Provided more leadership opportunities for teachers	*	53	74
Created a stronger professional learning and inquiry culture through learning teams	*	*	72
Overall quality of teaching staff stayed high or improved	67	57	69
More focused approach to pedagogy	*	71	62
Retained/built effective teachers	78	75	60
More positive working environment for teachers	*	*	54
Clearer "big picture" or coherence across departments' and year levels' teaching	*	*	51

\*Not asked

Student learning and wellbeing are at the heart of schools, and Table 23 below shows high proportions of principals seeing high or improving levels of student performance and behaviour as a reflection of the attention to these in their leadership role over the past 3 years. This may also reflect government support around behaviour through the PB4L policy and around achievement described in *Chapter 3: Working with NCEA*. Recent policy emphases are evident also in the high proportions who reported high or improving Māori student performance levels and the increase in those who reported an inclusive school culture for students with special needs. However, it is sobering that the marked increase between 2009 and 2012 in the proportion of secondary principals who saw improved or high Māori student performance has not continued: this indicates a need for greater support for schools to grow and share their effective practice for Māori student gains.

The lower proportion reporting high or improving Pasifika student performance levels is likely related to the very uneven spread of Pasifika students among secondary schools (71% have fewer than 7% Pasifika students, compared with only 8% of secondary schools having fewer than 7% Māori students).

The figures also show an increase in the proportion of principals reporting improvement in student attendance from 2009 to 2012, and then a plateau to 2015; principals whose schools already had high attendance were unlikely to have ticked this item. Improvements in student attendance were noted least by decile 9–10 school principals (19%), whose schools have high attendance rates.

TABLE 23 Secondary principals' main student-related achievements in the past 3 years (2009, 2012 and 2015)

Achievement	2009 (n = 187) %	2012 (n = 177) %	2015 (n = 182) %
Student performance levels stayed high or improved	74	75	88
Student behaviour stayed positive or improved	79	70	80
Increased focus on meeting individual students' or targeted groups' needs	*	*	75
Māori student performance levels stayed high or improved	58	71	73
Developed a safe and positive learning environment for students	*	*	67
Retained/built school culture inclusive of students with special needs	*	52	63
Developed student leadership roles	*	*	55
Increased students' ability to feed into decisions	*	*	50
Pasifika student performance levels stayed high or improved	*	*	46
Student attendance improved	27	33	34

\*Not asked

## Pathways to secondary principalship

Secondary principals have considerable experience in schools and classrooms before they take their first principalship. Most secondary principals had come to their role from senior school leadership roles (76% from being a deputy principal, 9% from being an assistant principal, 6% from being an associate principal). Four percent came to the principalship from being a head of faculty or department. A few came from ERO or tertiary institutions. Sixty-eight percent had spent at least 6 years in a senior school leadership role, and 72% had spent more than 15 years teaching in the classroom.

Around a quarter have also gained experience in other educational roles, primarily in PLD, as advisers in the now defunct Schools Support Service (8%) or as a tertiary teacher (5%). Four percent had worked for the Ministry of Education's local office and 2% in its national office; 3% had worked for ERO and 3% for another government agency such as NZQA. A few had worked as consultants.

As in 2009 and 2012, in 2015 many had been principal of only one school: 73%. Twenty percent had been principals of two schools and 5% of three or four schools.

In 2015, 28% of principals were in their first 3 years in the role, rather more than the 14% in 2012, but close to the 24% in 2009. Rural principals were more likely to be new to the role: five of the nine were in their first 3 years.

More principals had spent less than 3 years at their current school: 36%, compared with 22% in 2012 and 30% in 2009. At the other end of the scale, 16% had been principals for more than 15 years, the same as in 2012, but somewhat more than the 10% in 2009. Twenty percent had led their schools for more than a decade, a little less than the 24% in 2012, and much the same as the 18% in 2009.

Stability of school leadership is important, and principal turnover is a reasonable indicator of school health. In 2015, there were fewer schools that had kept their principal for 10 years (23%, compared with

29% in 2012 and 28% in 2009). Forty-seven percent had had two principals in the past decade and 21% had had three principals, both much the same as in 2012 and 2009. However, 9% of the schools had had four or more principals in that time, almost double the 5% in both 2012 and 2009. These schools had a higher proportion of new principals, as did those with three principals over the past decade (46% of principals of these schools had less than 3 years' experience in the role, compared with 20% of the principals in schools that had had more stable leadership, of one or two principals in the past decade).

This pattern raises some questions about the availability and selection of school principals. It would seem that boards of more stable schools attract an applicant pool with more experience, or select those with more experience, and boards of schools in challenging circumstances are likely to attract a less experienced pool. One plank of the Investing in Educational Success (IES) policy, the Principal Recruitment Allowance, provides for a substantial addition to principal salaries to attract highly experienced principals to challenging schools. It will be interesting to see what difference this makes to the pattern reported here. What will also be important is to ensure that those who get their first principal role in more challenging contexts get useful support.

## Support for the principal role

Quite a lot of Ministry of Education-funded support for principals over the 3 years 2013–15 actually came through NZSTA, supporting school governance responsibilities, including employment (see Table 24). This reflects the absence of a clear national school leadership strategy, and the loss of local School Support Services leadership advisers (40% used these in 2009; the replacement through Ministry of Education-contracted PLD was only able to be accessed by 17%). Use of the Educational Leaders website has dropped markedly since 2012. The First-Time Principals programme, and to a lesser extent the Aspiring Principals course, remained important contributors to principal development.<sup>58</sup> The proportion taking sabbaticals may indicate the attraction of time out from the school as well as the opportunity to focus on an issue that is relevant to the school's and the principal's development.

TABLE 24 **Secondary principals' Ministry of Education-funded support for their role over past 3 years (2009, 2012 and 2015)**

Support	2009 (n = 187) %	2012 (n = 177) %	2015 (n = 182) %
NZSTA Human Resources and Industrial Relations advisers	68	67	63
Educational Leaders website	71	70	52
NZSTA Helpdesk	*	48	52
First-Time Principals' programme	43	37	40
NZSTA professional development	*	*	31
Sabbatical	*	33	30
Leadership and Assessment professional development	*	17	17
Aspiring Principals course	11	11	11

\*Not asked

<sup>58</sup> The 40% who ticked this item is likely to include most of the 28% who had less than 3 years of being a principal, and some of those who had had 3–5 years of being a principal.

Leadership and Assessment professional development was reported most often by principals of decile 3–4 and 5–6 schools (24% and 28% respectively, compared with 5% of decile 1–2 school principals and 3% of decile 9–10 school principals). Fewer decile 1–2 school principals had sabbaticals (10%). They also took part less in NZSTA professional development (20%) as did decile 9–10 principals (11%).

Most principals also used their own representative organisations, consultants (including former principals) and study to support their role (see Table 25). However, 9% had not used any of these sources of support over the past 3 years.

TABLE 25 Secondary principals' non-Ministry of Education-funded support for their role over past 3 years

Support	2015 (n = 182) %
Secondary Principals' Association of New Zealand (SPANZ)	59
Private consultant/adviser—former principal	44
Private consultant/adviser—not former principal	30
PPTA	30
Postgraduate study	12
Nothing	9

Both groups at either end of the school decile range made less use than other principals of private consultants who were former principals (25% each). Decile 7–10 principals were less likely to have consulted former principals, and more likely to use other consultants).

Most principals (86%) also had contact with other principals. Meeting attendance was most frequent, with discussion of common issues and the provision of mutual support (see Table 26). The national picture was very much the same as in 2012. Closer professional work remained uncommon, and indeed the small proportion of principals working together in inquiry projects halved since 2012. Digital technology was also used by just a few to share and gain professional insight.

TABLE 26 Secondary principals' professional contact together; 2012 and 2015

Contact	2012 (n = 177) %	2015 (n = 182) %
Attend regular meetings	81	75
Attend conference	73	68
Discuss common issues	62	64
Provide mutual support	60	60
Critical friendship based on structured visits to each other's schools	22	19
Mentor another principal	13	13
Mentored by another principal	13	11
Part of an inquiry project to improve practice	13	6
Online discussion forum	*	5
Use Twitter to get advice/ideas	*	4

\* not asked

Decile 1–2 school principals were less likely to have attended conferences (50%, compared with 82% of both decile 7–8 and decile 9–10 principals). Fewer decile 9–10 principals attended regular principal group meetings (69%).

Annual performance reviews are intended to provide principals with the opportunity to gain important feedback and challenge, to support their ongoing development and the development of the school. Table 27 shows that there is plenty of scope to make more of annual performance reviews, and that there has been little improvement in the usefulness of these since 2009.

TABLE 27 Gains from secondary principals' last annual performance review; 2009, 2012 and 2015

Gain	2009 (n = 187) %	2012 (n = 177) %	2015 (n = 182) %
Good acknowledgement of my contribution to the school	75	73	68
Agreement on goals that will move the school forward	50	58	60
Agreement on goals that will move me forward	47	55	53
Opportunity for frank discussion of challenges facing the school and joint strategic thinking	43	46	39
Opportunity for frank discussion of issues at the school and joint problem solving	37	36	38
New insight into how I could do things	32	31	26
Negative experience	n/a	5	5

Frank discussion of challenges facing the school and joint strategic thinking was experienced least often by decile 1–2 school principals (20%) and most often by decile 9–10 school principals (53%).

## Workload and morale

Only 2% of secondary principals reported working less than 50 hours a week. Thirty percent worked from 50 to 60 hours in an average week, and 18% between 61 to 65 hours a week. Forty-nine percent reported their work week as taking 66 hours or more, up slightly from 44% in 2012 and 45% in 2009. Decile 3–4 school principals had the highest proportion reporting working 66 hours or more a week (69%), and decile 9–10 school principals the lowest proportion (31%).

Stress levels also remained high, and have been much the same since 2009. In 2015, 39% of secondary principals reported high typical stress levels, and 5%, extremely high typical stress levels. Most principals reported some tiredness, but only 8% reported either constant tiredness that affected their performance, or feeling absolutely worn out, about the same as in 2012.

Around two-thirds described themselves as being healthy, and rarely getting sick, again much the same as in 2012. Few principals managed to follow the general fitness guidelines of 30 minutes or more exercise a day: 8% did so on 6 to 7 days during the week in which they did the national survey, 25% did so on 3 to 5 days that week and 45% on 1 or 2 days that week. Twenty-three percent had not undertaken any fitness activity that week.

Morale levels have slipped since 2012 and 2009. Fewer now described their morale as very good (33%, compared with 44% in 2012 and 45% in 2009). Twenty-two percent described their morale as less than good, compared with 19% in 2012 and 14% in 2009. The lowest morale levels were among decile 5–6 school principals (32% described their morale as less than good), and the highest among decile 9–10 school principals (8% described their morale as less than good).

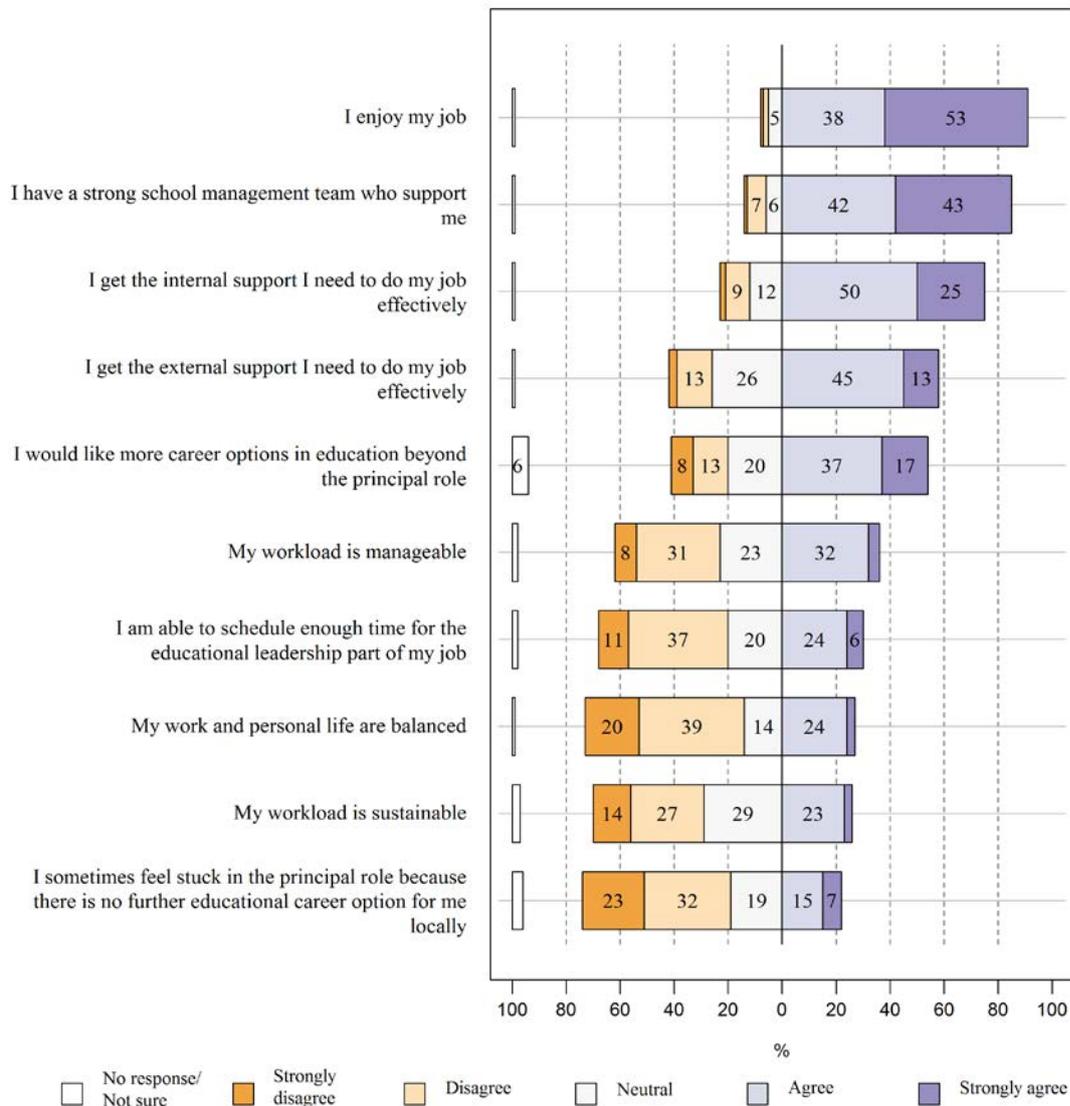
Levels of optimism about life and their role as a school principal have also slipped: only 26% described themselves as very optimistic in 2015, compared with 36% in 2012. Twenty-one percent were (only) occasionally optimistic, compared with 16% in 2012.

Figure 38 shows that secondary principals generally enjoyed their jobs in 2015, though many principals felt that their work and personal life were unbalanced, and 41% felt that their workload was not sustainable. These patterns have remained much the same since 2009. Only 30% thought they could schedule enough time for the educational leadership part of their job, though this has improved since the 19% who thought this in 2009. It was somewhat more than the 27% who thought so in 2012.

Most secondary principals felt supported by strong school management teams, and thought that they had the internal support they need to do their job effectively. Fifty-seven percent thought they had the external support they need.

As in 2009 and 2012, just over half wanted more career options in education beyond the principal role, and 22% felt stuck in the role without such local options. This is one of the costs of a system structured on stand-alone self-managed schools, with no districts or systematic ways of capitalising on principal experience to keep developing professional and school capability.

FIGURE 38 Secondary principals' views of their work (n = 182)



Fewer rural school principals strongly agreed that they enjoyed their job (three of the nine responding), with the same number saying they did not have the internal support they needed to do their job effectively. More decile 1–2 school principals disagreed that they could sustain their workload (60%).

### Changes principals would like in their work

Many secondary principals wanted more time to focus on the core of their role, educational leadership: the aspect that is most productive for student learning. Table 28 shows there was an increase since 2009 in those who sought a more balanced life. Yet there was also some decrease in those who want to reduce other kinds of demand on them. Just over a third wanted more professional dialogue about their work.

TABLE 28 Changes secondary principals would like in their work (2009, 2012, 2015)

Change	2009 (n = 187) %	2012 (n = 177) %	2015 (n = 182) %
More time to focus on educational leadership	77	72	81
More time to reflect/read/be innovative	*	*	73
More balanced life	55	57	67
Reduce administration/paperwork	59	61	54
Higher salary	35	38	34
More professional dialogue about my work	35	38	34
Reduce property management/development demands	32	34	31
Reduce external agencies' demands/expectations	42	41	30
Reduce human resource management demands	39	35	30
Reduce parents and whānau demands	7	7	9
More productive relationship with board chair	*	*	6

\*Not asked

## Plans for the future

Table 29 shows that many secondary principals intended staying in their current school over the next 5 years. It also shows that if secondary principals felt the need to move on from being a principal, they were more likely to seek a job within education than leave it. Nineteen percent were thinking of retirement—a proportion that has remained much the same since 2009, even though in 2009, 19% were aged 60 or more, compared with 30% of secondary principals in 2015.

 TABLE 29 Likely career plan for secondary principals over next 5 years<sup>59</sup>; 2009, 2012 and 2015

Career plan	2009 (n = 187) %	2012 (n = 177) %	2015 (n = 182) %
Continue as principal of current school	65	65	62
Apply for study award/sabbatical/fellowship	34	36	32
Lead another school	22	14	23
Change to a different role within education	21	17	19
Retire	19	20	19
Take on a Community of Learning <sup>◇</sup> leadership role	*	*	12
Not sure	8	10	8
Retrain/change to a different career	7	5	4
Return to classroom teaching	4	2	2

\* Not asked

◇ We asked about "Community of Schools" role, since that was what they were called when we sent the survey out.

Interest in leading another school was highest among rural principals (six of the nine responding).

59 Just over half the principals gave more than one answer here, indicating they thought several pathways were possible, or that they were thinking of two pathways consecutively over the next 5 years.

### Summary and discussion

Secondary principals reported good levels of enjoyment of their role, but it remained a role with long work hours and high stress levels. Fortunately, principals reported good health, though they did not manage to exercise regularly.

Only 30% felt they could schedule enough time for the educational leadership part of their job: still low, though an improvement since 2009. Morale and optimism levels had slipped somewhat since 2012. Just over half the principals would like more career options beyond the principal role, and 22% felt stuck in the role.

Most secondary principals had experience in senior school leadership roles before they stepped up to the principalship. Most knew what it is like being a principal at only one school. However, there appeared to be fewer secondary schools that had kept the same principal for 10 years or more, and an increase to 9% of schools that had had four principals in the past 10 years. A further 21% of schools had had three or more principals in that period.

New principals were more likely to be heading some of the schools in the most challenging situations: with high principal turnover, and in rural areas. Answers from principals leading decile 1–2 schools also pointed to their having more challenges than others, and accessing somewhat less support.

Fewer principals were accessing Ministry of Education-funded support in 2015 than earlier, reflecting the absence of a clear national leadership strategy and the changes to professional learning and development. Indeed, NZSTA was the source used most. Sabbaticals refreshed 30% of the principals over the past 3 years. Principals also accessed support through their professional organisations and private consultants or advisers. Most also met other principals in meetings or conferences; but only a minority had worked closely with other principals, and the trend here has not improved since 2012. Annual performance reviews had also not improved their usefulness for ongoing principal (and school) development since 2009.

The picture principals painted of their achievements raises some interesting questions that need more exploration. On the one hand, there was work going on to improve senior school leadership and provide more leadership opportunities for teachers, and many thought they had recruited effective teachers. On the other, there was a drop in the number of principals who thought they had been able to retain or build effective teachers. The dominance of assessment that we saw in *Chapter 3: Working with NCEA* and in *Chapter 6: Teachers' perspectives on their work* is evident here too, with more principals recording achievement in using assessment to plan learning than in gaining a more focused approach to pedagogy, or more coherence across the teaching in different departments and year levels. We wonder if the stalling in the proportion of principals who noted improvement in Māori student achievement evident between 2009 and 2012 has something to do with the increased attention going to the use of assessment to plan learning, rather than its use to look at pedagogy, and aspects such as the quality of teacher–student interaction (emphasised in the effective Te Kotahitanga programme) and coherence for students.