
14. Principal careers, wellbeing, and support

Principals are key to the strength of their school and its students' learning. They are key to developing the leadership a school needs at all levels. The importance of leadership in our schools is underlined by the Leadership Strategy for the teaching profession of Aotearoa New Zealand, launched by the then Education Council in 2018, and the recommendations made to bolster school leadership and its support by the Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce, which have been taken into the Government work programme.⁴⁶

The national survey has provided an ongoing picture of principal careers, workload, morale and wellbeing, and the support they have for their role for many years.

In 2019, 145 principals of the 350 schools in our sample took part in the primary national survey, a 41% response rate. They provide a largely representative response in terms of their school characteristics. We analysed responses in relation to school decile, but, with two exceptions, found no relationships—what we report here is common for principals across different deciles. The margin of error for the figures reported here is 8.1%.

Sixty-six percent of the principals taking part in the 2019 national survey were female, and 34% male. Eighty-six percent identified as NZ European / Pākehā; 12% identified as Māori, 1% each as Samoan, Cook Island Māori, Niuean, Chinese or Indian, and 4% as Other.

We start this section looking at principal careers: their pathway, years of experience overall and in their current school, and career plans. Then we turn to principals' workload and wellbeing. We end this chapter by looking at support principals have for their role.

⁴⁶ The Leadership Strategy, including the Educational Leadership Capability Framework, can be found at <https://teachingcouncil.nz/content/leadership-strategy>. The Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce's final report section *Supporting school leadership* can be found at https://conversation-space.s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/Tomorrows+Schools+FINAL+Report_WEB.pdf, pp. 32–37.

Most, but not all, have school leadership experience before they become principals

Fifty-eight percent of the principals responding had been deputy principals before they first became a principal, much the same as the 60% in 2016, and not significantly different from the 51% in 2013 and 54% in the 2010 national surveys. Some came from an assistant principal role (11%), some from being a Scale A teacher with management units, which are given for some school-wide responsibility (6%), or being a syndicate leader (6%). The most recent role for 13% had been a Scale A teacher without receiving a management unit. This is much the same as the 11% in 2016, and not significantly different from 2013 or 2010, when 19% first started in the role without a management unit.

Most principals' experience in education had only been in schools (83%). Others have (also) worked as college of education or university lecturers (6%), consultants (5%), and PLD providers (3%). Just two principals had come from a Ministry of Education regional or local office, and one from being an ERO reviewer.

Only half the principals felt well prepared for their first principalship

Only half of the principals thought they were well prepared for their first principalship: 13% thought they were very well prepared, and 37%, well prepared. Thirty-two percent thought they were not well prepared, and 17%, not at all well prepared.

Fewer principals have spent more than 15 years in the role

There was a wide range of length of experience in the principal role (see Table 12).

TABLE 12 Years as principal 2010–2019

Years as principal	2010 (n = 210) %	2013 (n = 180) %	2016 (n = 200) %	2019 (n = 145) %
Under 3 years	19	12	18	20
3–5 years	22	18	12	20
6–10 years	16	18	21	19
11–15 years	11	19	19	14
16+ years	33	31	31	26

Forty-four percent had been principal at their current school for under 3 years; at the other end of the spectrum, 12% had been at their school for more than 15 years.

TABLE 13 Principals' years leading their current school

Number of years	2019 (n = 145) %
Less than 1 year	15
1–3 years	29
4–5 years	15
6–10 years	19
11–15 years	10
15+ years	12

Most principals have led only one or two schools

There has been an increase since 2010 and 2013 in the proportion of principals who have led only one or two schools, from 67% in 2010 to 77% in 2019. Just under a fifth have experience of leading four to five schools.

TABLE 14 Number of schools that principals have led 2010–2019

Number of schools	2010 (n = 210) %	2013 (n = 180) %	2016 (n = 200) %	2019 (n = 145) %
1	41	44	50	49
2	26	22	25	28
3	13	13	14	6
4	7	10	6	9
5+	11	7	5	8

High principal turnover is evident in 14% of schools

Most schools have had just one or two principals in the last 10 years, indicating a desirable stability. High levels of principal turnover (four or more principals in 10 years) occurred in 14% of the schools, a figure that has not improved since 2010, as Table 15 shows.

TABLE 15 **Principal turnover 2010–2019**

Number of principals at school over 10 years	2010 (n = 210) %	2013 (n = 180) %	2016 (n = 200) %	2019 (n = 145) %
1	22	33	32	27
2	45	43	39	44
3	21	12	17	15
4	5	6	5	6
5+	6	5	7	8

Most principals want to remain as principals, but there is increased interest in other roles in education

Where do principals see themselves in the next 5 years? Many principals gave more than one answer here, indicating openness to opportunities as they arose.

On the whole the picture is much the same as it has been since 2010, with the exception of a much greater interest in changing to a different role in education. There was less thought in 2019 of taking on a Kāhui Ako leadership role than in 2016.

Where principals see themselves in the next 5 years:

- continuing as principal of their current school: 55%
- applying for sabbatical or study award: 33%
- leading another school: 33%
- retiring: 23% (8 percent of the principals responding were aged 65 or more, and 20% were aged 60–64)⁴⁷
- taking a Community of Learning | Kāhui Ako leadership role: 7%, down from 12% in 2016
- taking on a different role in education: 17%, up from 8% in 2016.
- retraining or changing to a different career: 8%
- returning to classroom teaching: 5%
- 15% were unsure, much the same as in 2016, and up from 5% in 2013.

Figure 62 shows that 58% of the principals responding would like more career options beyond the principal role, not significantly different from 50% in 2016, and 36% sometimes feel stuck in the role because there are no further local educational career options for them, up from 26% in 2016.

As noted in the previous section, we asked teachers if they were interested in becoming a principal: 11% were, with a further 19% unsure. This is much the same as in 2016.

⁴⁷ A third of the principals responding were aged 40–49, and another third, aged 50–59. Four percent were younger than 40.

Principals continue to work long hours

Few principals can carry out their role in 50 hours a week or fewer, with the proportion who could do so halving since 2013. Around two-thirds of principals worked 56 or more hours a week in 2019, much the same since 2013. There has been a slight but not statistically significant increase in the proportion putting in 66 hours a week or more—from 17% in 2010, to 22% in 2019.

TABLE 16 Principals' work hours per week⁴⁸ 2010–2019

Hours per week	2010 (n = 207) %	2013 (n = 180) %	2016 (n = 200) %	2019 (n = 145) %
41–50	12	14	9	7
51–55	22	24	23	22
56–60	33	29	30	33
61–65	14	12	15	14
66–70	12	13	13	15
71–80	4	4	5	6
81+	1	1	3	1

Principals are optimistic and enjoy their jobs, but few think their workload is sustainable

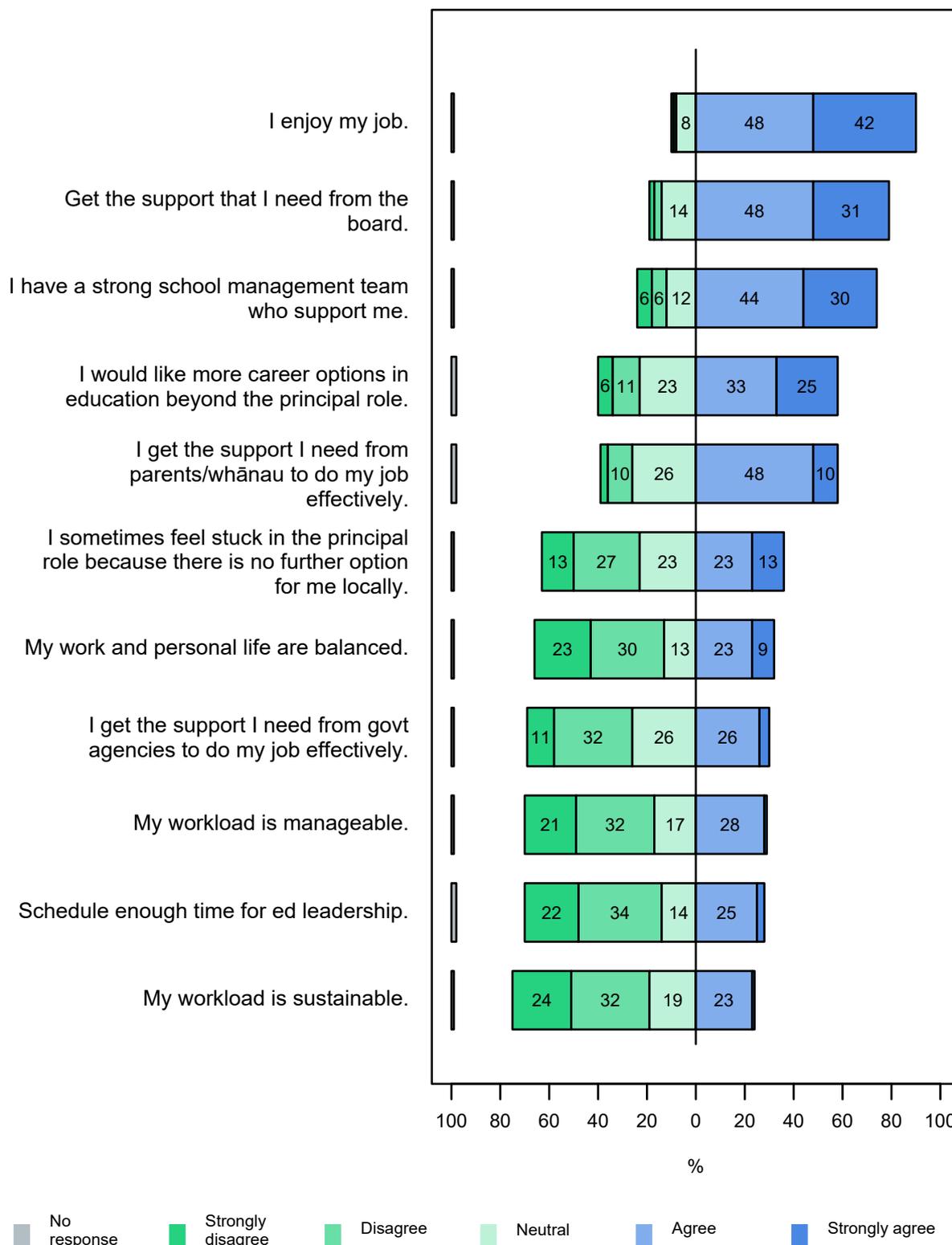
Principals' optimism tends to be high: 12% said that they were always optimistic, and 59% said they were mostly optimistic about their life and role as a school principal over the past week. Twenty-seven percent were occasionally optimistic, and 1%, never. The 71% who were always or mostly optimistic in 2019 is much the same as the 65% who reported this in 2016, and the 73% in 2013, but lower than the 79% in 2010.

Ninety percent of principals enjoyed their jobs. However, only 29% thought their workload was manageable, 23% that the workload was sustainable, and 28% that they could schedule enough time for the educational leadership part of their job. These proportions are somewhat lower than in 2016, and much lower than in 2013 or 2010. In 2019, 42% strongly agreed that they enjoyed their job, not significantly different from the 48% in 2016. Only a third felt that their work and personal life were balanced, a decrease from 44% in 2016.

Figure 62 also shows that most principals felt supported by their school board of trustees and a strong management team. Just over half felt supported by parents/whānau, and only 30% felt they got the support they needed from government agencies.

⁴⁸ Our question asked principals: "In total, approximately how many hours a week do you work? (This includes meetings, contact with trustees, and contact with parents and whānau: all the work you do which is for the school.)"

FIGURE 62 Principals' views of their work (n = 145)



Principal morale is lower, stress levels are higher, and tiredness has increased

Principal morale in 2019 was lower than shown in the three previous national surveys since 2010, with a lower proportion reporting their morale was 'very good', and a higher proportion reporting it was 'poor'. Sixteen percent said their overall morale was 'very good' (compared with 27% in 2016), 46% said their morale was 'good', 23% said their morale was 'satisfactory', 12% said their morale was 'poor' (up from 7% in 2016), and 1 percent said their morale was 'very poor'.

Principals have higher stress levels on average than the general population.⁴⁹ Principal stress levels have increased since 2019: Table 17 shows 59% with high or extremely high stress levels, compared with 37% in 2010.

TABLE 17 Principals' typical stress levels 2010–2019

Stress level	2010 (n = 210) %	2013 (n = 180) %	2016 (n = 200) %	2019 (n = 145) %
Extremely high	6	7	5	10
High	31	42	42	49
About average	56	40	45	34
Low	6	9	8	3
Very low	1	1	2	1

The NZEI Occupational Health and Wellbeing survey found that principals' main sources of stress were:

- lack of time to focus on teaching and learning
- sheer quantity of work
- government initiatives, and
- resourcing needs⁵⁰

More principals were reporting in 2019 that tiredness was affecting their performance, or that they were worn out, and fewer reporting that they were 'wide awake and raring to go'. In total, a quarter of principals were experiencing issues with tiredness that impacted on their work, as shown in Table 18.

⁴⁹ Riley, P. (2017). *New Zealand primary school principals' occupational health and wellbeing survey*. Institute for Positive Psychology and Education, Australian Catholic University. Report prepared for NZEI. p. 13. https://www.nzei.org.nz/documents/Principals%20Health%20and%20Well-Being%20Report_20170120SM.pdf

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 26

TABLE 18 Principals' levels of tiredness 2010–2019

Tiredness level	2010 (n = 210) %	2013 (n = 180) %	2016 (n = 200) %	2019 (n = 145) %
Wide awake and raring to go	24	14	18	4
Some level of tiredness through the days	51	56	53	41
Constant tiredness that does not affect my performance	14	21	20	28
Constant tiredness that affects my performance	7	5	6	17
Absolutely worn out	3	2	2	8

Primary principals continued to have difficulty undertaking regular exercise, which is likely to be related to their workload and activities that often involve evening or weekend engagements as well as work taken home. The pattern has stayed much the same since 2010. At least 62% of primary principals would not meet the recommended Ministry of Health guidelines of 2.5 hours moderate exercise each week. Most would not meet the Heart Foundation's guideline of 30 minutes moderate exercise each day:

- 29% did not do some form of fitness activity of 30 minutes or more within the past week
- 34% had done some form of fitness activity on 1–2 days of the past week
- 27% had done some form of fitness activity on 3–5 days of the past week
- 10% had done some form of fitness activity on 6–7 days of the past week.

Principals seek more time for educational leadership and a balanced life

Consistent with the information on principals' workload, and the doubts about its manageability and sustainability, Table 19 shows that principals continued to seek more time for the essence of their work—educational leadership—and the reflection, reading, and innovation that should go with it. They continued to seek a more balanced life. They also wanted more professional dialogue about their work, a reduction in the human resource management demands of their role, and a more productive relationship with their board chair. Most notable is the almost double increase in the proportion who would like to reduce parents and whānau demands on them. This may indicate the increased emphasis on parents and whānau as partners with the school in their children's learning.

TABLE 19 Principals' desired changes to their work

Desired change	2010 (n = 207) %	2013 (n = 180) %	2016 (n = 200) %	2019 (n = 145) %
More time to focus on educational leadership	62	59	75	79
More time to reflect/read/be innovative	68	68	78	74
Reduce administration/paperwork	60	54	64	66
Have a more balanced life	51	42	54	59
Reduce demands of property management	44	36	45	46
Get advice from Ministry of Education, ERO and Teaching Council that is aligned	*	*	#	43
Reduce external agencies' demands/expectations	40	29	31	38
More professional dialogue about my work	33	28	29	37
Reduce human resource management demands	27	28	23	35
Higher salary	33	26	34	34
Reduce parents' and whānau demands on me	18	18	16	31
More productive relationship with board chair	*	*	9	12

* Not asked.

In 2016, this item about alignment covered Ministry of Education and ERO, and 29% of principals selected it.

Principal use of the NZSTA helpdesk has increased

Almost all principals used some of the Ministry of Education-funded support that they can access without cost. NZSTA advice and professional development around their role as board employees, responsible for managing schools, is the most used, by half to two-thirds of principals. Use of the Educational Leaders website has declined: it was no longer a prime source of information and advice. Around a third of the principals had been through the voluntary First-time Principals' programme in the past 3 years. A fifth had had sabbaticals or study awards, open to experienced principals.

TABLE 20 Ministry of Education-funded support for the principal's role, used by principals over the last 3 years⁵¹

Support	2010	2013	2016	2019
	(n = 207) %	(n = 180) %	(n = 200) %	(n = 145) %
NZSTA Helpdesk (Advice and Support Centre)	49	50	52	67
NZSTA professional development	46	43	48	53
NZSTA HR and industrial relations advisers (HR advisers in 2016)	52	37	42	48
Educational Leaders website	65	43	48	37
First-time Principals' Programme	38	26	28	34
Teach NZ Sabbatical/Study award	*	14	20	21
Nothing	7	8	9	7
Other	6	6	6	7

* Not asked

Participation in the voluntary and free First-time Principals programme was highest among those with less than 3 years' experience as a principal at 76%, somewhat lower than 2016 figures of the 86% of principals with less than 3 years' experience, and 66% of those with 3–5 years' experience.

Use of the Educational Leaders website is lowest among both the new principals (21% of those with 3 years' experience or less, and the most experienced (27% of those with more than 15 years' experience). The most experienced also made less use of the NZSTA HR and industrial advisers (47% compared with 66% of the new principals, and 76% of those with 3 to 15 years' experience as a principal).

Use of NZSTA professional development was lowest among decile 1 and 2 school principals (33%).

Principals draw on support from ex-principals and their representative bodies

All but 9% of principals also drew on other support for their role over the last 3 years. Most notable is their use of former principals who they or their school paid:

- 61% used a private consultant or adviser who had been a principal, as did 55% in 2016
- 48% used NZEI Te Riu Roa
- 42% used NZPF
- 17% used a private consultant or adviser who had not been a principal.
- 14% undertook postgraduate study
- 8% took part in MACS, the Māori Achievement Collaboratives, as did 4% in 2016.

Other support mentioned included working with the non-profit Springboard trust, which provides a leadership development programme and ongoing support for alumni from the programme with strategic innovation at their schools.

⁵¹ In 2010 we asked principals about their use of support in the last 2 years.

Mutual support is important for principals but still limited

Almost all (92%) of the principals took part in non-Ministry of Education-funded principal networks or groups, much the same as in 2016, 2013, and 2010. Most attended regular meetings (such as local principals' associations), and conferences. Attending regular meetings was highest among decile 9 and 10 school principals: 96%. But deeper mutual support for undertaking this complex role, and working with other principals to improve leadership practice, was not common. In 2019, there were fewer professional learning groups (PLGs) that principals facilitated themselves, and less involvement in inquiry projects to improve practice. There was a slight increase in mentoring, or being mentored, and more use of online discussion forums.

TABLE 21 Participation in principal networks or peer learning

Form or purpose	2010 (n = 207) %	2013 (n = 180) %	2016 (n = 200) %	2019 (n = 145) %
Attend regular meetings	74	86	83	77
Attend conference(s)	58	71	80	72
Discuss common issues	58	79	62	58
Provide mutual support	53	75	62	56
Part of a PLG that is externally facilitated	*	*	28	28
Mentor another principal	*	20	21	26
Part of a PLG that we facilitate	*	*	43	25
I am mentored by another principal	*	11	15	20
Critical friendship based on visits to other schools	*	23	17	18
Online discussion forum	*	6	12	17
Part of inquiry project to improve practice	22	20	16	10
Use Twitter to get advice or ideas	*	4	7	7

* = Not asked

Benefits principals gain from their annual principal appraisal remain variable

Performance management should provide principals with useful feedback and discussion that supports ongoing effectiveness and growth. Each school's board of trustees has the responsibility of carrying out the annual appraisal of the principal they employ. Principals must provide evidence in relation to criteria included in collective employment contracts, including evidence related to the three stages within the principal career pathway. The appraisal also looks at evidence in relation to agreed goals relating to school goals, and it identifies goals for the principal's ongoing development. Such annual appraisal is intended to provide both accountability and support. The appraisal may be carried out by the board chair, or, often, by a professional, usually with educational experience. There has been considerable variability in the quality and usefulness of principal appraisal.

There were some marked differences from previous surveys here. On the one hand, there was an increase in these appraisals providing the opportunity for frank discussions of challenges and for joint strategic thinking. On the other, there was some decrease in agreement on goals to move the school or the principal forward. And fewer principals in 2019 felt their contribution to the school received a good acknowledgement in their performance appraisal.

TABLE 22 Gains from principals' most recent performance appraisal

Gain	2010 (n = 207) %	2013 (n = 180) %	2016 (n = 200) %	2019 (n = 145) %
Good acknowledgement of contribution to school	74	78	80	64
Agreement on goals that will move the school forward	57	66	64	57
Opportunity for frank discussion of challenges facing the school and joint strategic thinking	44	39	38	57
Agreement on goals that will move me forward	54	62	65	51
New insight into how I could do things	35	34	40	34
Nothing much*	7	9	6	8

* In 2016 this item read "Nothing, it was not professionally done"

Summary

Top of the list of major issues principals saw as affecting their school in 2019 was that too much was being asked of schools—72% now said this, markedly increased from 53% in 2016, and 42% in 2013.

The effect of this for principals is to intensify their workload, with increases in stress levels, tiredness, and more feeling that they cannot give sufficient time to educational leadership. Only a minority felt supported by government agencies, and only half by parents and whānau.

Government support used by principals was mostly to do with the management aspects of their role. What they were using more for their role as a whole were ex-principals, paid for and chosen by their school or themselves. Their professional organisations were also sources of support. Collegial support was widespread, but not necessarily deep. Only half the principals felt prepared for their first principalship.

It is not that principals did not enjoy their role—most did. Many saw themselves continuing to lead schools over the next 5 years. But there was now more interest in educational roles beyond the principalship.

A real test of the changes arising from the Government's work programme following the Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce recommendations will be whether we see changes in this national survey picture of principals' work and support.