

Promises and challenges for effective school and system leadership

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Repositioning school and system leadership was at the heart of the Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce recommendations in 2019 to tackle the longstanding and worsening issues of equity in our schooling system. This commentary traverses the current situation and moves towards improvement, in relation to the continuing challenges to ensure effective and sustainable school leadership in all of the country's 2,306 schools, and government frameworks and support for school leadership.

The current situation of system leadership

Three years have passed since the government responded positively to the recommendations from the independent taskforce it had asked to review Tomorrow's Schools: the self-managing schools system introduced in 1989 that was intended to improve education and make it more responsive and equitable (Ministry of Education, 2019).

'Operations' and 'Policy' have been kept separate since 1989, with the cumulative effect of strained relations, or lack of consistent meaningful relations, between school leaders and the educational government agencies (Wylie, 2012). Schools have also largely kept separate from one another, operating more as competitors for students and additional funding, than as colleagues. The independent taskforce reports (Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce, 2018, 2019) canvassed solid evidence about the cost of this approach for students, teachers, leaders, and the country. Premising educational delivery and improvement around self-managing schools has led to much reinvention of the wheel, without gains for student learning.

Sadly, the government's intentions heralded in its 2019 response, to start the years-long programme needed to reform the Tomorrow's Schools schooling system, have been undercut by the financial and human costs and strains of responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, the major work going into the Curriculum Refresh and changes to the secondary school qualification NCEA (National Certificate of Educational Achievement) is compelling time and resources: drawing attention to the system's prior insufficient development of the capability and capacity needed. This includes the loss of strong curriculum design knowledge in the Ministry of Education as the government agency responsible for the education system. While curriculum working parties and advisory groups allow knowledge outside the Ministry to be temporarily used, the Ministry is still the decisionmaker, and may not be well-placed to make some of the critical decisions needed. The Curriculum Centre recommended by the Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce does exist on paper, but not with the depth envisaged.

Some improvements to the schooling system have been made. Equity funding is replacing the decile-formula, even if equity funding is being applied to operational funding

rather than extending to staffing formulae. The Ministry of Education now has responsibility for school zones, rather than individual schools, which will help dampen down competition between schools.

Te Mahau is the Ministry's version of the Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce local Education Support Agency, set up in October 2021, and intended to have closer and more meaningful relations with individual schools as well as developing collective capability and capacity in an area. There appear to be more principals taking up roles in Te Mahau than they did in the predecessor regional Ministry of Education offices, which should strengthen its work — depending on these roles, their support, and connections. It is too soon to know how well Te Mahau will be realised and work.

School leadership support continues to lag

In relation to school leadership, however, the changes heralded by the government in 2019 are only now beginning:

- The core role of Leadership Advisers working with school principals at the local level across the country has only been funded for 21 positions initially, with the roles to be filled by seconded principals: so, short-term.
- Funding for the Leadership Centre at the Teaching Council was only recently given, so there has been little opportunity to advance a coherent national approach to leadership development and support.

A sobering assessment of school leadership in Aotearoa New Zealand is given in the Educational Review Office's (ERO) 2021-2022 Annual Report:

Just under a third of schools were judged as having effective leadership and processes for capability building. (Education Review Office, 2022, p. 47)

This assessment is based on ERO judgements using their Evaluation Partners' interactions with over 500 schools, and from these schools' own self assessments.¹ One would like to know more about the criteria and processes used for this judgement, of course, and how well the evidence and assessments align with the Teaching Council's Leadership Strategy and Educational Leadership Capabilities: how coherent the 'system's understanding of effective school leadership is.

Overall judgements of capacity for ongoing improvement for half of the 1,582 schools 'onboarded' into the new ERO evaluative approach concluded that 26% could sustain high performance, 54% were 'strengthening' established and embedded systems, processes and practices, and 20% would need 'intensive effort across multiple domains to bring about improved learner outcomes' (Education Review Office, 2022, p. 47).

It is interesting to compare these estimates of overall school capability and capacity with ERO's earlier take in 2016, though without knowing more of the methodology used each time, caution is needed. In 2016, 10% of schools were on the 'sustainable self-improvement path' indicated by a 4-5-year review cycle (Education Review Office, 2017, p. 8), compared with 26% in 2022 judged to be able to sustain high performance, so perhaps things have improved at that end if the methodologies are comparable. On the

¹ email from ERO to author, 19 December 2022.

other hand, 13% were on the 1-2-year review cycle in 2016, and 20% of schools need intensive effort in 2022, indicating deterioration.

The issues that led to the formation of the Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce have not gone away. The questions about how to better grow and support school leadership remain.

School leadership : A complex and time-consuming role

Schools vary widely in roll size, but they are inherently complex organisations, and increasingly so with more diverse student enrolments, and more social issues affecting students and their families, including increases in mental health issues (see, for example, the discussion in *Pūaotanga, Realising the Potential of Every Child*, the 2021 independent review of staffing in primary schools).²

The principal role is multidimensional and hard to perform in less than 50 hours a week: 93% of primary principals in the New Zealand Council for Educational Research's (NZCER) 2019 national English-medium primary school survey worked more than 50 hours a week, and 36%, more than 60 hours a week; 63% of secondary principals worked more than 60 hours a week in the 2018 national English-medium secondary school survey. Only 42% of principals whose schools used the Teaching, School and Principal Leadership survey in 2021 thought their workload was sustainable (Wylie & Coblenz, 2022). Overall, while principals have continued to enjoy their jobs, their sense that they can manage their workloads and overall morale have deteriorated over time.

Right from the early days of Tomorrow's Schools, principals have wanted more time for educational leadership. Policy and research also emphasise educational leadership as an important contributor to student learning. Their peers in business roles are taken aback to find how little support they have for their administrative responsibilities, including financial management, and how open their door must often be.

It is the day-to-day that often dominates. The New Zealand Principals' Federation's (NZPF) most recent poll in its president's weekly newsletter asked, "To what extent was your week a series of disruptions, and 'doing what was needed in the minute' to support others?" 413 replied, of whom 35% said about 75% to 100% of the week, and 42% about 50% to 75%.³

At the time of writing this article, December 2022, collective contract negotiations between the teacher and principal unions, and the Ministry of Education are continuing. The union claims called for salary increases on the basis of workload as well as inflation increases. Both primary and secondary claims also sought new support for principal wellbeing. The Post Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) piloted a coaching and supervision model to support its wellbeing claims. The Ministry's second offer to primary principals after the rejection of its first offer is more around professional support than wellbeing as one might have thought of it more traditionally:

Support for wellbeing

The parties agree to introduce an entitlement of \$5,000 per annum for each principal to access professional coaching and support from the beginning of Term 2, 2023 for the term of the collective agreement. This is intended to support ongoing coaching, professional learning and development and other opportunities that assist with principals' leadership capability.

² [NZEI-Pūaotanga.pdf \(nzeiteriuroa.org.nz\)](https://www.nzcei.org.nz/puaotanga)

³ [New Zealand Principals' Federation eNewsletter \(schoolzineplus.com\)](https://www.schoolzineplus.com/newsletter)

Individualised support for principals was one of the key aspects of the Leadership Advisor role outlined by the Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce: within a deeper context of ongoing improvement and connection. Including a component of this relationship within the collective contract will likely enshrine it, raising some potential issues for the Leadership Advisor role, including that role's funding.

An increase in the number of sabbatical leave positions from 105 to 145 is framed more in the traditional sense of wellbeing, in relation to "mitigating workload and burnout concerns for school leaders," and the requirements relating to its use and reporting will also be reduced.

The letter from the Ministry also makes clear the intention to use secondment to bring principals into Te Mahau and other government education agencies (but not the Teaching Council since it is an independent statutory body). Finally, it notes that "Work is also still being done on the design and functions of Te Mahau and Te Poutāhū, and support provided to the sector will evolve over time with your input" (outlined in <https://www.nzeiteriuroa.org.nz/assets/downloads/PSPA/9-December-FINAL-PSPA-Secretary-for-Education-PPCA-Offer-for-Settlement-NZEI.pdf>)

The secondary principals' claim also called for more support for principals' wellbeing in the form of an allowance, and a requirement for boards of trustees, as their employers, to develop and review wellbeing plans for principals. Secondary principals rejected the Ministry's first offer, and at the time of writing, no information about a revised offer was publically available. One envisages, however, that it will include similar cash entitlements to coaching and support, and coverage of secondments to educational government agencies.

So it looks as if secondments are being seen as the way to bridge the divides between individual schools and the government agencies. Certainly a good education system needs circulation of knowledge and understanding, but it also needs some continuity in key roles. As well, will temporary secondment (for one year? Two years?) appeal to or make the most of the many principals who would like more career options beyond the principalship (58% of primary principals in 2019), or the 36% who sometimes felt stuck in their role because there was no further local educational career options for them? (Wylie & MacDonald, 2020, p. 126).

Support to grow and sustain school leadership: An enduring issue

School self-management certainly put the spotlight on school leadership. But the Tomorrow's Schools approach also meant little support for school leaders. It took until 2002 for the government to contract a First Time Principals programme, which was voluntary. It was not until 2009 that there was the first national school leadership strategy, the Ministry of Education's Professional Leadership Plan (Youngs, 2020).

This plan had a promising start, with the first national framework for English-medium school leadership, *Kiwi Leadership for Principals*, coming out of the landmark best evidence synthesis on school leadership (Robinson et al., 2009) and much work with principals, *Tū Rangatira*, for Māori-medium educational leadership, a companion guide for middle school leadership, and new principal standards (Wylie, 2020).

For a few years there was some Ministry of Education funding for principal development programmes. Some 300 principals took part in what was intended to be a large pilot which was never given ongoing funding. This was customised professional development for experienced principals within a national framework by 10 providers

(Pigott-Irvine & Youngs, 2011). The National Aspiring Principals programme ran for years, including both online learning, workshops, and customised learning (Earl & Robertson, 2013). The Ariki project that grew out of voluntary quality learning circles in the 1990s was given some funding (Stewart, 2011). But in 2010 the Ministry of Education, facing a drop of government funding, cut not only these programmes, but also disestablished the small Ministry team focused on leadership development (Youngs, 2020).

The Beginning Principals programme has continued, with the contract moving from the University of Auckland to Evaluation Associates in 2017. Since 2017, almost all new principals (more than 1,400) have taken part in what however still remains a voluntary programme. The current programme uses existing principals and regional hui (<https://www.evaluate.co.nz/support-for-leaders/support-for-principals/leadership-advisor-support-for-beginning-principals>).

The new Leadership Advisor positions within Te Mahau mean changes to this contract, which will be retendered in 2023 (this retendering is also due to whole of government procurement rules that set time limits on government contracts). ‘We want to ensure there is no duplication of roles and functions, and mechanisms of support are clear to the sector’ (*He Pitopito Kōrero*, School Leaders’ Bulletin, 8 November 2022).⁴ Mention of the new Leadership Advisor positions in this context indicates that the Leadership Advisor roles will work with individuals – though there are too few of them to work with many principals. It also raises the question of what their priority will be: it needs to be more than new principals if they are to work effectively with both individuals, and nodally to build up more collective approaches.

What other free or low-cost programmes of leadership professional development are available at a national level? The Springboard trust, funded by philanthropic trusts, provides a well-regarded 10-month programme focused on strategic development (www.springboardtrust.org.nz/what-we-do/strategic-leadership-for-principals-programme). This uses volunteer coaches and partners from business and government. It also offers its ‘alumni’ further programmes building on the understanding and skills developed in the Strategic Leadership for Principals programme. By 2021, it had worked with over 600 principals.

Principals’ representative groups have lobbied for, and secured, some Ministry funding for targeted principals development, and support. Through its PLD section, which contracts professional development and support, Te Akatea, the Māori principals’ organisation, currently has funding to provide two-year Māori Beginning Principals and Emergent Principal programmes.

Ministry of Education funding is also supporting Te Ara Hou – the Māori Achievement Collaborative, which began in 2013, to build and sustain leadership practices committed to Māori student success (<https://www.mac.ac.nz/programs>), and just recently, Tautai o le Moana, a New Zealand Pasifika Principals’ initiative to support inquiry that builds the Pasifika capability of principals (<https://nzppa.com/tautai-o-le-moana-wayfinders-of-ocean/>). These programmes emphasise not only tailored mentoring and support, but connections that aim to create or strengthen communities of principals, some with clear strategic aims related to changing practice to better serve underserved groups, that go beyond the efficacy and wellbeing of individuals, beyond the role of the school principal as ‘management.’

⁴ <https://bulletins.education.govt.nz/bulletin/he-pitopito-korero/issue/issue-150-8-november-2022/date/2022-11-08#changes-to-support-for-tumuaki-hou-| -beginning-principals->

The Leadership Strategy: Is its time coming?

Renewed focus on supporting school leadership and its development came with the then Education Council's work with leaders, teachers, and those who supported leadership development as professional developers, academics, and researchers, to develop a forward looking Leadership Strategy for the teaching profession of Aotearoa New Zealand (Education Council, 2018). This emphasises leadership as more than the apex role in schools or early childhood education services, and more than a list of management functions, boxes to be ticked.

As the Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce report noted in its endorsement of the Leadership Strategy, 'without broader changes to the system, including strengthened local support for leaders, it will be difficult to translate the Strategy into practice' (Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce, 2019, p. 33). Feedback on the draft Leadership Strategy showed real interest in having some clear guidance about what leadership looked like. So the final Leadership Strategy was accompanied by the Educational Leadership Capability Framework, a set of nine educational leadership capabilities to provide high level guidelines for leadership development for three spheres of influence: leading organisations, leading teams, and expert teacher leadership of curriculum or initiative (Education Council, 2018).

These educational leadership capabilities are based on converging themes across the documents produced through the first national school leadership strategy work, including *Tū Rangatira*, feedback from the profession about the draft Leadership Strategy, ERO's school evaluation indicators, and literature scans of research that had good evidence about leadership and school practices associated with gains for learning and wellbeing.

On the whole, the capabilities have been well received. But how much they are actually used by school leaders in each sphere, by professional developers, by consultants or board chairs undertaking performance review, is unknown. It has not been a requirement within Ministry of Education contracts, for example, that they be used. Principals and aspiring principals also use school or their own funding to access leadership courses at universities, and to employ individual coaches, who may have their own emphases. It is hard to realise the benefits of such a framework if it is not a consistent hallmark.

One key difficulty with implementing the Leadership Strategy, and using the Educational Leadership Capability Framework to guide improvement, is that it needs the Ministry of Education, including Te Mahau and the new Leadership Advisor roles, and the Teaching Council to all use it as a framing document, and act in sync, as well as these bodies having relevant resource to back it.

The Ministry of Education carries the most weight here because it has the most resource and clout. It funds schools, negotiates collective contracts with teacher and principal unions, works on teacher and principal supply, and contracts professional development. On its Educational Leaders webpage headed Leadership programmes, which currently covers just the Beginning Principals programme, the Ministry does at least refer to it:

The Ministry of Education is using the leadership strategy to build system understanding of the leadership capabilities in practice across diverse contexts.
(<https://www.educationallleaders.govt.nz/Leadership-development/Leadership-programmes>)

On the other hand, the recent Ministry of Education briefing note to the Associate Minister of Education about the implementation of Leadership Advisers, and the evolution of the role over time, suggests that a new model may emerge – without any mention of the Leadership Strategy:

The development of roles provides the opportunity in the next few years to explore a leadership model for New Zealand ie. in the context of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, a multicultural society, highly variable school and kura contexts and potentially blend online learning. A leadership model could be built on the ground by and for principals and tumuaki with the Leadership Advisors and connect to other Te Mahau work. (Ministry of Education, 2022, p. 4, paragraph 14)

The collective contracts include the broad professional standards, with no reference to the Educational Leadership Capability Framework.

Is performance review sufficient to sustain and develop school leadership?

Performance reviews of principals are legally school board responsibilities, quite often contracted to consultants. Considerable variability exists in how principals have been reviewed. NZCER's 3-yearly national surveys of English-medium schools showed a need for change – and consistency between schools – if the intent of annual performance review is to provide principals with useful professional dialogue that supports their school's progress and their own growth, and the satisfactory addressing of any issues (Wylie & MacDonald, 2020, p. 134).

It is worth bearing in mind that many principals lead only one or two schools in their careers. In 2019, 49% of primary principals had led one school in the last decade, and 28%, two schools (Wylie & MacDonald, 2020, p. 125); in 2018, 67% of secondary principals had led one school, and 26%, two schools (Bonne & MacDonald, 2019, p. 84). So performance review should have an important contribution to make to the effectiveness of principals, and their ability to sustain a demanding role. The 2019 national English-medium primary schools survey also showed only half of primary principals felt well prepared for their first principalship (Bonne & MacDonald, 2019, p. 124).

The 2019 collective contract negotiations resulted in an Accord to build a 'high trust environment.' This included the removal of the requirement for individual annual appraisal in relation to the Teaching Standards, which had come to be seen as time-consuming compliance rather than a process supporting ongoing professional improvement.

Can the new Professional Growth Cycle sustain and support school leadership?

The Teaching Council convened cross-sector working groups that designed elements of its replacement, the Professional Growth Cycle (PGC), first for teachers, and coming into effect by February 2023, for principals, tumuaki, and early childhood education professional leaders. Performance review by their employer, the school board of trustees, will be separate, though the two can be combined. The PPTA did include the use of the PGC to replace the school board performance review in the current collective contract negotiations, but the initial response from the Ministry and the New Zealand School Trustees Association was not favourable (<https://www.ppta.org.nz/news-and-media/negotiations-in-full-swing/>).

On the one hand, the PGC is framed within the Leadership Strategy, on the other, it relies on knowledge and capabilities that have been unevenly distributed for too long, relying on voluntary networks to progress understanding and support:

the PGC fully reflects the intention of the Leadership Strategy and the Council's overarching Rauhuia approach to building leadership ... through the recognition of networked leadership ... as a way to foster and share quality practices and leadership knowledge ... designed to promote personalised professional learning ... that recognises the importance of continual learning.' (Teaching Council, 2022, p. 5)

Leaders are 'strongly encouraged to participate within a learning network of peers (locally or using distance technology).' School leaders set their own goals, identify mentors and those who can give feedback on their learning – which could include teachers, students, whānau; an endorser would make a professional judgement about the leader's PCG participation and how well their practice meets the Teaching Standards | Ngā Paereawa. Two individual principals cannot endorse each other.

The NZPF hosted a webinar on the PGC for which they had over 1,000 registrations, and which was also recorded for others to access. The webinar drew on the earlier Ariki's project of principal professional development using close networks of principals who could provide informed critical friendship for each other's inquiries to improve practice (Stewart, 2011). Ariki worked because it provided a sound and supportive framework for principals' inquiries and review: it was not left up to individuals.

Networks of schools have been funded by the Ministry, in the early 2000s in relation to professional development and access to more funding; more recently, in the Communities of Learning, now Kāhui Ako. It has taken some time, but there are signs that Kāhui Ako are yielding gains for school leaders and teachers (Wylie & Coblenz, 2022). These are more formal than the networks envisaged for the PGC, though one can see Kāhui Ako and other self-formed school networks like Kahukura (Education Review Office, 2021) providing good grounds for these networks.

The challenges and opportunities ahead

The NZPF President noted in her newsletter following the NZPF webinar that:

The challenge for the sector is how to systemically develop leaders' mentoring, coaching and professional supervision skillsets, so appraisal systems we are part of are effective in building our individual and collective expertise as leaders of learning. ([New Zealand Principals' Federation eNewsletter \(nzpf.ac.nz\)](#))

This comment acknowledges that these essential skillsets for an approach like the PGC to succeed cannot be taken for granted in a schooling system that has left so much of leadership development and support up to individuals and their situation. The next few years will therefore be critical to its ability to achieve its aims. There will need to be coherence in the work of the government education agencies and the Teaching Council, and any contracts or support related to principal development. There will need to be ongoing evaluation for improvement, bringing all the key players into one setting, and ensuring all the frameworks and new roles are aligned.

The promise now is that school leadership is getting more concerted attention than it has for more than a decade, with a strong evidence base for what effective leadership means and needs in different contexts. Importantly, current policy also uses the strong

evidence about the costs of narrow accountabilities and emphasis on compliance. The challenges lie in turning that attention and knowledge into real support to develop leaders, to make their roles both stretching and sustainable, and weave together schools and the government agencies and Teaching Council, rather than just simply bridge or temporarily cross divides.

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