

CASE STUDY

TRUSTEESHIP: A SPECIAL OPPORTUNITY FOR WHĀNAU

LONG-SERVING school trustee Lorraine Kerr remembers her first board meeting like it was yesterday.

In fact, it's been more than 18 years since that chilly Taupō evening in 1989. And a fair bit has changed since then. Now in her 50s, Lorraine (Ngāti Tūwharetoa and Ngāti Awa) has served on three school boards. Last year she became the country's first Māori woman president of the New Zealand School Trustees Association (NZSTA) – an umbrella organisation for almost 2,500 school boards.

"It's hard to believe where I am now when I think back to that first-ever hui. I was a 34-year-old mother of three who didn't really know what I was going to contribute as a board member.

"But I did recognise it was a special opportunity – that I was being given the chance to have a say in my children's education," says Lorraine, looking back. Lorraine had read the government's newly-published Picot report, a hefty document describing the major education reforms known as Tomorrow's Schools.

A central tenet of Tomorrow's Schools was the set up of boards as a way of bringing schools and communities closer together and introducing self-management among schools.

((Now is the time to really make a difference.))

New Zealand School Trustees Association (NZSTA) president
Lorraine Kerr (Ngāti Tūwharetoa,
Ngāti Awa).





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Research published in 2007¹⁴ suggests boards are in good health and have made solid progress towards achieving those primary goals. It also notes boards' priorities and ways of working have changed markedly since their inception. For example, improving student achievement, particularly Māori student achievement, has become more important to secondary schools in the three years since 2003.

Lorraine says these research findings accurately reflect her personal journey as a trustee. And she's not particularly surprised that boards have taken nearly two decades to get to grips with school governance and leadership.

She explains: "Things at the start were very unclear for us. In that first year my board met once a week for four hours at a time. We developed far too many policies – 300 over a two-year period! The paperwork was mind-boggling. And very few of our decisions were based on data. We simply didn't know where to go or how to access it."

Today, however, board members are much clearer about their roles and what they need to bring to them. Being a passionate parent, for example, doesn't immediately qualify someone for the role, says Lorraine.

"It's not enough. Things are different now. We know exactly how complex board responsibilities are. They range from legal and employment responsibilities through to administrative and community responsibilities. We are accountable for everything from student achievement to the careful use and distribution of millions of dollars."

14 *School Governance in New Zealand: How is it Working?* New Zealand Council for Educational Research, (2007).

Having a good blend of skills and knowledge on a school board is crucial, she says.

"Boards need an ability to analyse, understand and tackle complex problems in simple, common-sense ways. Of course, many whānau are ideal for the role."

So, yes, Lorraine is heartened by the gradual increase of Māori school trustees over the past few years. The 2007 elections results¹⁵ show 16.4 percent of the country's parent representatives are Māori.

She's excited about the skills and knowledge they'll bring to board tables and hopeful they'll have the courage to ask the hard questions about students who are struggling.

"These are exciting yet daunting times for trustees in many ways. I believe many boards are in an excellent position to help turn around some of this country's bleakest statistics. We are better informed about excellent governance. Now is the time to really make a difference."

She says boards only need to look at the latest research to see the system is underperforming for Māori learners. A 2006 Education Review Office report, for example, says most schools need to improve the achievement of their Māori learners. And it recommends boards play a key role in helping schools become more responsive to Māori learners.¹⁶

"Not one of us can look away – 80 percent of Māori learners attend mainstream schools. No trustee can refute this picture. It's a fact," she says.

Lorraine concedes there are no easy answers to the thorny issue of underachievement and acknowledges that many Māori

15 *Analysis of the School Board of Trustee Elections: 2007*. A Mill, Data Management Unit. Ministry of Education, (2007).

16 *The Achievement of Māori Students*. Education Review Office, (2006).

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learners are doing extremely well and, in many areas, New Zealand schools are among the world’s top performers.

Each school board has to find the things that will work best for their staff and students, she says.

An effective board will seek outside expertise and delve into the education sector’s growing research and knowledge base when they’re struggling to find answers. Analysing school data is another good approach.

“At my school, for example, we track how our Year 10 Māori boys are doing throughout the year and compare our results with similar schools in the country to better understand our progress and pick up things that aren’t working.”

Students might not be achieving because the board hasn’t allocated resources appropriately, she says. That’s where spending more on whole-school professional development might be the answer.

Feeling concern for all children within a school is vital to being an effective school trustee.

“That’s probably my key piece of advice for mums and dads interested in trusteeship. I’d say that this is a wonderful and important role for whānau. But it’s one that will challenge you to understand and make a contribution to the big picture.

“Your job is about doing what you can to ensure the success and wellbeing of all the tamariki at your school – it’s our responsibility to make sure no student is left behind.”

In July 2007 the government announced a stocktake of New Zealand’s school governance system. The aim is to identify ways to better support boards, ensuring they can focus on improving student achievement. To read the minister’s announcement introducing the stocktake, go to:

- www.beehive.govt.nz