

Primary Principal Sabbatical Report

Geoff Lovegrove

Lytton Street School

Feilding

Term Three 2011

To explore how school leaders are influencing change in their schools, particularly in decision making at board and school level, and raising achievement standards through ethical leadership.

INTRODUCTION: In embarking on my Sabbatical Leave during Term Three 2011, I chose the above topic to investigate, as it is becoming increasingly important, and there has not been a lot of work carried out in this area in New Zealand.

There have been many issues for boards to deal with, including the implementation of National Standards, but that is not the only issue, and it was important to embrace a broader range of topics and issues, and investigate the role of principal in the BoT decision-making process.

I was also particularly interested in the general format of Board Meetings, the input of professional staff, and the issues BoTs and Principals have dealt with.

INVESTIGATION: I decided to investigate a range of connected topics, including:

- 1 **Issues being discussed by Boards, and the advisory role of the principal**
- 2 **How Principals report to their Boards, and the processes involved in actioning resolutions proposed by the principal**
- 3 **The role of the principal as "Adviser, Initiator, Servant, Employee, Board Member".**
- 4 **The format and process for BoT meetings**

Having been fortunate to travel and visit many principals in their schools in Australia, Ireland, Canada, the UK and Singapore, I believe the New Zealand school leadership role is unique in the world. No other country has embraced anything resembling the New Zealand model of Self-Management. Our approach brings special responsibilities. So how do principals handle that?

QUESTIONNAIRE: A survey was formulated and sent out to a range of principals in urban, rural and provincial schools, encompassing a cross section of smaller and larger schools, and across the decile spectrum (details below)

The survey sought to establish the role of the principal as ethical leader, in schools where a range of issues required discussion and debate. The responses revealed a wide range of practices within and across boards of trustees in the way they practise the craft of school governance, and their approach to the board meeting. I am grateful to the principals who replied, and provided detailed responses, at a busy time in the school term. The original Questionnaire Survey appears as an appendix at the end of this report. A summary of results follows:

RESPONSES REFLECTING A CROSS SECTION OF NEW ZEALAND SCHOOLS:

The 20 responses received are not quite an accurate reflection of the range of New Zealand Primary Schools, but that there is a sufficient accuracy to warrant inclusion of all responses. The "Urban / Rural / Provincial" split is very close to the New Zealand reality, as is the Roll Size / U-Grade and Decile split

GEOGRAPHIC BREAK-DOWN: URBAN 40% PROVINCIAL 25% RURAL: 35%

ROLL: 21-112: 30% 155-317: 30% 324-680: 40%

U-GRADE:	1-2:	15%
	3:	25%
	4:	15%
	5:	30%
	6:	15%

DECILE:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	-	5%	15%	15%	5%	15%	10%	5%	25%	5%

BOARD MEETING PRACTICES:

1 Frequency of BoT Meetings:

28% of BoTs hold 11 meetings each year

33% of BoTs hold 10 meetings each year

22% of BoTs hold 9 meetings each year

17% of BoTs hold 8 meetings each year

There is an increasing trend to hold BoT meetings twice each term, often in Week 3 and Week 8, or Week 4 and Week 9

2 Length of BoT Meetings:

Most BoT Meetings run for 1-2 hours (61%)

33% of BoT Meetings run for 2-3 hours

6% of BoT Meetings run for less than 1 hour

3 Meeting Time: Two thirds (67%) of boards meet in the evenings from 7.00 or 7.30pm. One third (33%) of boards meet in the early evening: (4.15 to 6.00pm). Most BoTs do not include a meal with their meeting; however, a number often include snacks

4 Principal's Report: Most principals spend several hours preparing their report to the Board of Trustees. The delivery of the report to the board varies from 5-10 minutes (28%) to 20-30 minutes (44%) to 45 minutes (11%) to an hour or more (16%). In nearly all schools, Principal Reports to BoTs are sent home with the "Board Meeting Package" prior to the meeting.

There is no prescribed format for these reports, but 40% of principals adopt a "NAGs-Based" approach, and 60% adopt a "Traditional" format. 85% of principal reports include "Motions" or "Recommendations" for BoT consideration.

It is clear that the principal's report to the Board of Trustees is seen as a critical part of the meeting, with 95% of principals' recommendations being "always or nearly always approved". The report most often includes a report on student achievement and progress, and this is clearly an important element of the principal's reporting responsibility.

HOW PRINCIPALS SEE THEIR ROLE: When provided with a list of roles principals see themselves carrying out for their BoT, most placed emphasis on their **professional advisory** role. They distributed their various roles as follows:

90% Professional Adviser

65% Chief Executive Officer

50% School Manager

40% One of a Team of Equals

ISSUES DISCUSSED BY BOARDS: During the 12 months prior to August 2011, the issue of National Standards, Charter Compliance and Strategic Planning featured most prominently in BoT discussions. This comes as no surprise, as the implementation of Government Policy on national Standards was a major issue for many schools, struggling to establish a credible alignment between the proposed standards and other established criteria. Many boards held additional meetings on this issue, and also on the re-drafting of their charters and strategic planning to reflect the new requirements. Major issues discussed at Board Meetings included:

95% of BoTs: **Student Achievement**

90% of BoTs: **National Standards**

65% of BoTs: **Charter Compliance**

65% of BoTs: **Enrolment Schemes / Roll Management**

30% of BoTs: **Class Size**

25% of BoTs: **Ethnic Issues (including consultation with Maori / Pasifika)**

25% of BoTs: **Marketing and Promotion of the School**

ETHICAL ISSUES AND THE PRINCIPAL'S ROLE: Principals were very willing to share stories of discussions on ethical issues. Although no numerical evidence can be gathered, it is worth noting some of the issues causing concern:

- (a) **Integrated Schools:** Sometimes BoT Members need to be reminded that decisions are made in keeping with the special character of the school
- (b) Similarly, BoT Members often need reminding about the need for **confidentiality**, and that decisions made are for the common good (ie **no personal agendas!**)
- (c) The need for **full and frank discussions** between the Principal and BoT Chair before meetings, and for decisions to be seen as "Fair"
- (d) **Regular emails between** principal and BoT Members perform a very useful function. In addition to the BoT Meeting report, BoT Members are kept informed on issues as they arise, current events and snippets from the principal, and general comments on emerging issues
- (e) Many schools reported the **dilemma faced by principals who had an ethical problem with implementing National Standards, and BoTs who simply wished to comply with government orders**. Many Boards have struggled with this issue, and over time have made the decision to be seen to comply, while maintaining assessment and reporting practices proven to be more credible and accurate. The principal has often also struggled with this issue, and many have worked hard to present all sides, in order for BoTs to make informed decisions
- (f) The **role of the BoT Chair** is absolutely critical, as is the need for an open, honest and trusting relationship with the principal
- (g) A clear understanding of **roles and responsibilities** needs to be regularly reinforced. Some examples include:

- a. The principal, not the BoT, will deal with comments heard on the football sideline and in the car park caucus.
- b. The BoT Chair will meet with new BoT Members and reinforce the issues of Confidentiality, Governance and Management, and clarifying responsibilities
- c. The desirability of having a BoT Member attending all PTA Meetings
- d. The format and contents of meeting minutes
- (h) Many schools have experienced difficulties when a Board Member, sometimes with the support of others, wishes to pursue a **personal agenda**, particularly around Ethnic issues, but often also around Sporting and Cultural involvement
- (i) Some principals expressed concern about the **New Zealand model of school governance**, particularly where a principal is answerable to a number of lay people who may make decisions based on uninformed discussion and little accurate information. Several instances were cited of BoT Members being unwilling to listen to reasonable, informed guidance, even from external advisers including STA Field Officers and professional Advisers
- (j) One principal was on sabbatical leave for the first three months of a newly elected BoT, and the **new Chair had an agenda based on inaccurate information**. Some hard work followed, requiring some serious honesty and procedural practice, to ensure the chairperson became an informed and supportive leader.
- (k) Some respondents mentioned the need for a requirement for a **Code of Conduct** for BoT Members, as this seems to have been lost along the way
- (l) Another ethical question is "**How much influence should a principal have on BoT decision-making?**"
- (m) **Matching ethical considerations with financial realities!** Principals are committed to providing the best possible learning resources for **Special Needs children**, while their BoTs struggle to provide adequate funding for moderate / high needs students, from limited budgets
- (n) Several principals mentioned the value they placed on the establishment and maintenance of an excellent relationship with their BoT, especially the Chair. **Experienced principals have a role to play** in assisting newer principals and BoT Chairs in this area
- (o) Support for Principals: The principal has a responsibility to support and publicly celebrate the work of all staff members. **Who supports, encourages and celebrates the work of the principal?**
- (p) There is no magic formula for a successful school; however, **when every BoT Member and every staff member is committed to the best interests of the children in their care, to fostering achievement and well-being, to the greater benefit of the whole school**, they are away to a fine start!
- (q) Many principals struggle with the unethical actions of their colleagues. There is often a connection with falling rolls, school marketing and promotion. Many smaller schools, initially built for a community that no longer exists, are running buses and soliciting pupils from other school catchments. This often leads to tensions between principals, and unrealistic expectations from school communities. **Principals wanting to maintain a professional stance are**

often caught in the crossfire between an ethical / professional / moral duty to their professional colleagues, and the survival of their school and community. This is likely to be the single most serious ethical issue faced by principals in rural, provincial and urban areas across New Zealand. BoTs appoint and expect principals to raise the profile of their school and increase their roll, and principals are expected to perform. The ethical dilemma arises when Boards want to adopt aggressive marketing strategies to boost their school rolls, while principals have a duty to their profession, to not engage in any action that will disadvantage a colleague.

- (r) This dilemma gains intensity when one principal makes a public statement about another, and the other feels the need to respond in kind. An attitude exists among some principals of **"I will remain professional and ethical, but the moment you act unprofessionally or unethically, then all bets are off."**
- (s) **"SPORTS POACHING"**: Most commonly the domain of some city secondary schools, principals have reported colleagues offering attractive packages to families enrolling skilled students at their school, participating in specific sports programmes. Although not a widespread practice, and not illegal, it is concerning that some principals are prepared to go to these lengths to boost their school image and status through these actions.
- (t) Some principals saw their role as giving professional advice to their boards, with an assumption that BoTs would make good decisions. Mostly, this works well; the difficulties arise when BoTs do not make good decisions
- (u) Some principals are **misusing the staffing allocated for Beginning Teachers and Classroom release**. Teachers are entitled to release time for their professional growth, and there are too many stories of that time being taken away and used for other purposes (eg added to general staffing to create an extra teacher position). An ethical question? Certainly, because beginning teachers are not receiving adequate guidance and support during the critical first two years of their career
- (v) **Nothing beats experience!** Many newer principals told stories of conflict with BoT members with personal agendas, and lessons learned along the way. One principal felt his role included being both peacekeeper and scapegoat. The situation became too difficult for the professional adviser, who suggested the Ministry intervene (this was successful). A key approach for the principal was to remove all emotion from the issue, and to remain professional. Not always as easy as it sounds!
- (w) Some principals have to deal with some BoT Members who have racist views, and are not interested in the achievement of Maori students. Here, **the "educator role" for the principal becomes important, and the "bigger picture for the better good of the nation" takes priority over personal viewpoints**
- (x) Many respondents mentioned the minefield of the implementation of National Standards. **A large number of boards respect the principal's views opposing NS, but want to be seen to be compliant, even if minimally**

COMMENT: After 23 years of "Tomorrow's Schools", when New Zealand's education reforms took away the ten provincial Education Boards, and replaced them with 2,600 Boards of Trustees, there remains a similar number of conflicts between school communities and their principals. A ballpark figure of 10% of all schools (250-300 struggling schools) was the "rule of thumb" prior to 1989, and it appears that this figure remains steady. If anything, there are slightly more schools in conflict situations now, and it is remarkable that it is not a lot higher. Consider the following:

- 1 There are still no "rules" for Boards of Trustees appointing their new principals (for example, it is still possible for a BoT to appoint a beginning teacher as principal - a recipe for disaster)
- 2 Training for BoT Members is still voluntary, and there is an element of "hit and miss" in this area
- 3 Many principals are caught in the ethical dilemma of having to implement policy (government or local BoT) that goes against everything they believe in with their approach to teaching and learning. They are balancing their "Professional Advisor" role with their "Responsible Leadership and Compliant Servant" roles, and must tread a fine line when reporting to their BoT
- 4 Although there may be some "loose cannons" among professional leaders, there are many more dangerous people elected to BoTs who have no inclination to adhere to the rules of fair play, justice, common sense or the greater good of the school. BoT Chairs must commit to defining the rules of engagement, accepting training and good advice, and building an excellent relationship with their principals. At the same time, principals must also accept that they are also on a learning pathway, that every relationship needs hard work and commitment, and sometimes they need to take a detached, impartial approach, seek advice and act with the same propriety and sound judgement they expect from other players.
- 5 Perhaps there is a need for new level of authority figure to *direct* a BoT or principal. Is there a case for more Commissioners or Statutory Managers to be available, *without any stigma attached*, to give direction to schools that are struggling? The notion of "Self-Management for New Zealand Schools" is admirable, but if BoTs and principals don't know what they don't know, and continue to make decisions that are harmful to their students, then there may be a place for this measure to be strengthened.

BOARD MEETINGS: Some observations arising from the Questionnaire responses:

- 1 Boards do not have to meet every month. It is becoming more common for boards to meet twice each term, often in Weeks 3 & 8, or 4 & 9
- 2 ***Relationships are everything.*** The critical ones are:
 - a. Board Chair and Principal
 - b. Principal and Deputy Principal
 - c. Principal and Staff Trustee (this appears to be often under-valued)
- 3 It is considered good practice for the Staff Trustee to present a report at each board meeting. This may include presenting the Student Achievement Data

- 4 It is seen as highly desirable that the full package of BoT Meeting papers be sent home well before the meeting date (3-4 days at least), with the expectation that all members will have read them prior to the meeting. A lot of time can be lost reading through unnecessary paper at meetings.
- 5 Board Meetings do not need to last 3 hours. It is accepted that in many schools, especially in rural areas, the BoT Meeting also serves as a social get-together, but there are often 2-3 or more staff members present, who must also be ready and fresh for school next day. **A well managed Meeting, with papers sent out well beforehand, including committee reports, should take no longer than one hour.**
- 6 There was a fairly even split between BoT Meeting formats that followed the "NAGs-based" and the "Traditional" approach. **An important consideration is to ensure the most important matters (Issues around STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT) are dealt with early in the meeting.**

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: Despite the stories reported above, most principals in our schools are acting ethically, morally and professionally in their school leadership practice. They have a keen sense of duty to their students, and understand the level of responsibility they hold as school principal. However, there are two areas of concern:

1 Many respondents expressed their outrage at the unethical behaviour of some of their colleagues, and clearly stated their belief that the unprofessional actions of some principals were not because they were acting under instructions from their BoTs, but were initiating these activities themselves. In a self-managing school model, with a self-moderating profession, it is difficult to take action when these practices exist, but it serves no good purpose to the profession of school leadership.

There have been recent moves to adopt a Code Of Ethics for the teaching profession. Perhaps it is time for principals to consider a higher-level organisation to oversee and moderate *their* profession. A glance at the Medical, Legal and Engineering professions might give a lead to a model that could be adapted for principals. A **"New Zealand College of Principals"** or **"Society of School Principals"**, with a clearly defined role, is worthy of consideration. There is no more admirable calling than the profession of SCHOOL LEADERSHIP. It is up to that profession to initiate action to moderate its membership, raise its ethical and professional standards, and project the public image of a fine group of people doing great things for those in its care, and also promoting the highest level of professionalism among its members.

2 We need to consider the position of principals with strong ethical and moral values, who find themselves disagreeing with the actions and decisions of their Boards of Trustees. The recent (and current) issue of Charters, Strategic Planning and National Standards is a case in point. Boards are under pressure to comply; principals see a threat to their position as professional leader; the situation may become untenable. Several of the respondents mentioned this, and the compromises they might feel pressured to make. Realistically, this is a real-life situation, and the politics of school leadership need to be handled carefully.

An emerging guideline to help principals faced with these situations, and other ethical dilemmas, might include:

- (a) **Be true to yourself**
- (b) **Do whatever is right**
- (c) **Your actions and decisions will benefit children, their communities, their society and their planet. Act accordingly.**

The goal of education is the advancement of knowledge and the dissemination of truth. (John F Kennedy)

Education without values, as useful as it is, seems rather to make man a more clever devil. (C S Lewis)

Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world. (Nelson Mandela)

Education is the art of making man ethical. (Georg W F Hegel)

FOOTNOTE: During the Sabbatical Leave I travelled to Canada to attend the ICP Convention in Toronto (the World Conference of Principals). Having attended this convention previously, I appreciated the opportunity to hear some great keynote speakers, and to spend valuable time with colleagues from abroad. Our Canadian and Irish counterparts are faced with many of the same challenges as New Zealanders, and it was great to have time to share experiences (and some solutions) with these colleagues. Principals in Singapore and Finland are celebrating their countries' success in the PIRLS, TIMMS and PISA test results, and it was interesting to hear how highly these principals are valued by their respective nations.

To be among the 2000 participants at the ICP Convention was both a privilege and an exciting opportunity to learn more about the profession of school leadership.

Inspirational speakers included:

Stephen Lewis	Toronto	UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa
Sir Michael Barber	UK	Education Reform for Best Performing Schools
Michael Fullan	Toronto	Leading in a Culture of Change
Jennifer James	Seattle	Innovator, Cultural Anthropologist
Andy Hargreaves	Boston	Educational Change, Sustainable Leadership
Lesra Martin	Vancouver	Overcoming the Odds

THANKS: The Principal Sabbatical Scheme provides a wonderful opportunity for principals to take some time to reflect, explore new study areas, investigate and report on a matter of concern or interest. It is also a time to take a breath, travel, attend a conference, visit colleagues, relax, refresh and recharge the personal batteries.

I wish to express my sincere thanks to the Lytton Street School Board of Trustees, for their support for my Sabbatical Leave, my Senior Staff who "stepped up" in my absence, especially Faye Roberts (Acting Principal). My thanks also to those principals who responded so willingly to the survey questionnaire, and who hosted me in their schools, to discuss some of the issues raised in this report. I appreciated their honesty, and their keenness to raise the professional status of school principals in New Zealand.

Geoff Lovegrove
October 2011

Lytton Street School, Feilding 4702
lovegrove@inspire.net.nz

Appendix 1: Questionnaire to Principals:

BOARD OF TRUSTEES MEETINGS: THE PRINCIPAL'S ROLE

(Please circle the most appropriate answer/s)

1. How many **regular meetings** does your BoT hold each year?

12 11 10 9 8 Other: _____

2. If you held any *additional* BoT meetings during 2010-2011 (Exclude Suspension and Property meetings, and Sub-Committees), what have they been for?

3. How long do BoT meetings normally take?

3 hr+ **2-3 hrs** **1-2 hrs** **1hr or less**

4. What time does your Board normally meet? _____

5. Do you include a meal? **Yes** **No** **Occasionally**

6. Approximately how much time does your report take? _____

7. Format of Meeting: **Informal** **Semi-Formal** **Formal**

8. Are the agenda and reports sent out prior to each meeting?

Always **Most Often** **Not Often** **Rarely/Seldom**

9. Does the Staff Trustee present a report at each meeting?

Always **Most Often** **Not Often** **Rarely/Seldom**

10. Are reports formally "Adopted" or "Received"? **Yes** **No**

11. What format does your (Principal's) report follow:

"NAGS-Based" **"*Traditional"** **Format Varies**

(Traditional = Headings for Student Achievement, Roll, Staff, Relievers, Property...)

12. Does your report include "Motions", "Resolutions or "Recommendations"? **Yes** **No**

This section looks at proposals you've made to the Board, and the weight they carry:

13. Assuming there may have been some preliminary discussion and debate before your proposals are decided upon, are your proposals **approved**:

Always **Nearly Always** **Most Often** **Fairly Often** **Not Often**

14. How would you describe **YOUR ROLE** at Board Meetings? (Circle any that apply)

Professional Adviser **Chief Executive Officer** **School Manager**
Employee **One of a Team of Equals** _____

15. What are some of the **issues** your Board has discussed in depth in the past year?

(Circle any, and add more)

National Standards	Charter Compliance	Enrolment Schemes
School Roll Decline	Bus Routes/Problems	Class Sizes
Teacher Competence	Student Achievement	Student Poaching
Ethnic Issues	Marketing / Promotion	_____
_____	_____	_____

16. When there are **ETHICAL ISSUES** being discussed and decided, describe your role, and any interesting or difficult situations you have been placed in: _____

Continue on separate paper if necessary

17. Describe any situation where your **ethical views** have clashed with a decision of your BoT: _____

Continue on separate paper if necessary

Additional Comments: _____

Continue on separate paper if necessary

<p><u>About you:</u></p> <p>Name: _____ School: _____</p> <p>School Roll: _____ U-Grade: _____ Decile: _____</p> <p>Email: _____</p> <p>Thank you for your time and the effort you have made with this response. Please email to Geoff Lovegrove (lovegrove@inspire.net.nz or geoff.lovegrove@gmail.com) or post to Geoff Lovegrove, 20 Vista Drive, Feilding 4072</p>
--

Appendix 2: Covering letter to Principals:

31 July 2011

The Principal...

I am embarking on my Sabbatical Leave during Term Three, and I'm beginning to get some traction with my area of study. I'm wondering if you would be willing to help with a small request?

I've chosen the following topic to look at, as it is something I have been interested in, and there is not a lot of work carried out in this area in New Zealand:

"The decision-making process for Boards of Trustees in New Zealand Schools, and the role of the Principal as Ethical Leader".

There have been some issues for boards to deal with, including the implementation of National Standards, but that is not the only issue, and I want the brief to embrace a broader range of topics and issues.

The request is for you to help me with a survey I've constructed, concerning school Board Meetings. I'm particularly interested in the general format, the input of professional staff, and the issues you have dealt with

My small study will be looking at a range of topics, including:

- 1 Issues being discussed by Boards, and the role of the principal in advising the board
- 2 How Principals report to their Boards, and the process for passing resolutions proposed by the principal
- 3 Variations in the decision-making process (ie Immediate, via Sub-Committee, spread across 2+ meetings, or variations on those themes)
- 4 The role of the principal as "Adviser, Initiator, Servant, Employee, Board Member".
- 5 The way principals deal with their special multi-faceted role.

I will be looking more at "Styles of leadership" than the actual content or the issues discussed. I have travelled a little, and visited many principals in their schools in Australia, Ireland, Canada, the UK and Singapore, and I believe our role is unique in the world. No other country has embraced the model of Self-Management that we have. Our approach brings special responsibilities. So how do we handle that?

I am attaching a 2-page survey, covering many of the items mentioned above, and I would be delighted if you would take 15-20 minutes to fill it in and send it back

I will have more specific details once we move to the next stage (ie your permission!)

Regards

Geoff Lovegrove