

**NEW ZEALAND
PRINCIPALSHIP
BEYOND 2020**

Tom Parsons, MNZM
November 2015

NEW ZEALAND PRINCIPALSHIP BEYOND 2020

A great deal has been written in New Zealand and the world about the importance of educational leadership and in particular that of the principal. Suffice to say: “The reputation of the school rests on the shoulders of the professional leader, the day to day manager – embodied in the role of the principal”.¹

A great deal has also been written about the “grey tsunami” of pending principal retirements.² With the advent of a number of new initiatives in New Zealand Education Inc. such as the move away from “Tomorrows Schools” and an increased emphasis upon priority learners, data driven outcomes, IES and better Public Service Outcomes, this pending tsunami of retirements may not be a bad event if managed well.

More critical to the impact on and future success of New Zealand education is that of ensuring a retiring principal is replaced by the best professional leader possible while also ensuring NZ Education Inc. has a transparent, professional and effective appointment process alongside an effective principalship training programme. Resulting effective succession will not only be a success but will provide enhancement and improvement going forward. Without a solid base of succession planning and preparation for the step up the “whole system lift” is unlikely to occur.

There are four levers which, if applied correctly, would enable principal succession to be wholly effective. Each lever is strongly linked to the others but should also be viewed in a stand-alone capacity. They are:

- 1. Recruitment**
- 2. Appointment Process**
- 3. Mentoring/professional support provisions**
- 4. Retention of skillset developed from experience**

¹ NZTSA: Guidelines for Boards of Trustees; Principal Appointment

² NZCEA: Cathy Wylie

1. Recruitment

The only requirement for principalship in New Zealand is to be a registered teacher. This minimum requirement does seem inadequate in the 21st century and could easily lead to a public perception that principalship (and even the teaching profession generally) falls short in New Zealand compared with the more exacting requirements and consequent status bestowed internationally.

In America which lags behind New Zealand in terms of academic achievement, principals are required to have a postgraduate degree in education or business administration and to have completed a principal's internship.

One benefit of the current New Zealand requirements (or lack of them) for recruiting principals does mean there is the potential for a very wide field of applicants for a position. Another benefit is that regardless of qualification in New Zealand, successful principalship is seen and measured by actual results which come from leadership style and on the job experience rather than as a direct result of an academic qualification.

Of course if data came to light clearly identifying that all or most schools undergoing statutory intervention were led by principals without a degree; or alternatively that all schools in the four to five year cycle for Education Review Office review were led by principals with PhD's, then we might have a data based incentive to review the NZ entry requirement for principalship. If we were to do so it would be relatively easy to enforce the pre-requisite of an academic qualification by simply ensuring such a requirement was clearly identified and applied by every appointments panel within their applications and recruitment process.

There is an aspect to be excited about if we can capitalize on it from a recruitment perspective. The Ministry and schools themselves are offering and encouraging options to up skill academically within the teaching profession. There are currently over 300 scholarships for further education available to teachers on the Teach NZ website. It is also reassuring to know that tailored academic programmes which take into account specific and situational context are being offered and in my view are a most desirable way forward not only to potentially add to quality recruitment numbers for principalship but more importantly to provide foundation for longevity in leadership roles within our profession. We just need to develop this aspect with a view to potential principalship.

While it is somewhat reassuring that Boards of Trustees' appointment panels more often than not appoint the best candidate presenting for the position, what is less reassuring is that the choice and variability of the applicants is dependent upon such a variety of factors. Research indicates that status in the profession is often regarded for women as a high decile school or for men by student numbers and the physical size of the school. Rural areas are less attractive than urban due in part to rural areas having reduced employment opportunities for significant others. Urban centres may not appeal to all candidates however for cost of living reasons. Neither of these disincentives are unique to education and with such a wide pool of qualified applicants who we assume are fully aware of what the role entails, successful recruiting for these positions attracting capable personnel should be easy. Unfortunately reality does not demonstrate this. It is the appointments process and the clarity around key performance indicators which are the vital attractors for the best potential candidates and I believe these must come from robust appointments process guidelines.

2. **Appointment Process**

“It would be irresponsible to underrate the importance of a principal appointment”.³

“Boards have the sole responsibility for the appointment of a principal and when making that appointment shall act independently”.⁴

Boards have been both successful and unsuccessful in the past when appointing principals. They more often than not have little or no experience in appointing principals (CEO's) and have little in depth knowledge of the regulatory requirements and prescriptions set out in the National Education Guidelines (NEGs), National Administrative Guidelines (NAGs) and the National Curriculum statements. Yet, the principal, once appointed, has the complete discretion to manage (as the principal sees fit) the school's day to day administration initially during that appointing Board's tenure but very likely long after that Board is replaced by another through the regulated community voting process. Boards may think or be led to believe they are well positioned to account for the situational context of the appointment they need to make, but are they really? The skillset required for the position is already well known by and vested in experienced principals around New Zealand. It would seem logical to mandatorily include at least one experienced principal as part of an appointments process therefore.

At the present time Boards do have the ability to co-opt 'knowledgeable' others to assist in this specific process. This is not mandatory however and does not occur often enough possibly due to:

- not actually 'knowing' what is required;
- not knowing anyone who may have that expertise to assist them;
- budgetary limitations on employing an expert;

³ OpCit

⁴ OpCit

- being prejudiced by the idea that having attended school as a student makes them sufficiently knowledgeable/experienced to employ someone to manage the school, and
- not understanding or recognizing the step up required from senior management to principalship and not having the confidence to identify the different skillset required from applicants – particularly from first time principals.

We can understand it is difficult for a Board when appointing, to recognize the initial skillset required in the actual context of the appointment (e.g. finance). It is even more difficult for the Board to recognize that strengths in this area may well result in a weakness or failure in the successful applicant's handling of other issues further down the track (e.g. personnel). In addition it is very rare for provision to be made for professional development at that point either financially or time wise to bolster a perceived weakness or lack of skillset of a new principal to the job.

Strengthening Board appointments panels with experienced principals in addition to providing some very clear Ministry directions to cover the vital aspect of principal appointments would tighten up ownership around choosing the right principal and should actively assist the panel in:

- appointing a new principal to replace a successful principal;
- appointing a new principal to replace a failed principal, and hopefully to avoid
- statutory management process if/when they get an appointment wrong.

3. **Mentoring and professional support provisions**

Once a principal has been appointed, irrespective of how robust the process may be, the principal, especially if a first time principal will need support. It is unrealistic to assume an incoming principal will have the skillset of the outgoing principal or (unless an appointment has been made from within the school) to assume he or she will have the contextual knowledge of the school. An ability to recognize the skillset or lack of as mentioned earlier is a big ask of a Board.

It is realistic and quite reasonable however for a Board to assume that if a successful applicant has completed a National Aspiring Principal's Programme (NAPP) that certain vital aspects of managing a school would be known to that applicant. It is of concern that the current programme does not appear to be coming up with the goods. Data shows that of those attending the NAPP a very small minority actually take the step up to a principal position. Of 600 graduates between 2011 and 2013, just 53 were appointed as principals.⁵ It would seem that NAPP, as a recruitment area/training ground for principal appointments needs some innovation to capitalize on an ideal opportunity to enhance, up skill, support and inspire its applicants. In so doing the whole leadership structure within education would be enhanced.

The First Time Principals course (FTP) which is offered following appointment, provides another avenue for strengthening a new principal's skillset. Data from this programme states "for all school types there is some, but not a high level of knowledge by school principals of the National Administrative Guidelines (NAGs)".⁶ NAGs are the guidelines relating to every school's administration – the very way in which the often multimillion dollar business is run. What the

⁵ National Aspiring Principals Programme; Milestone 9, 2014 page 10

⁶ Survey results on technical aspects of principal's role, FTP, May 2013

FTP survey shows is that currently principals are appointed with some but not a high level of ability to administer a school. It is of great concern that there are no apparent measures in place at appointments time to determine strengths and/or weaknesses in this vital area. Unfortunately ability (or lack of it) is only identified after an applicant has been appointed. While a Board might reasonably expect an FTP course to highlight any weaknesses not already known or identified by the Board, it is unlikely under the current system that an FTP would actually solve those. We are presented with a catch 22 situation which brings us back to the need for a strong mentoring structure within the education system which would eliminate weaknesses prior to applications being made.

How often have we heard principals say “the Board appointed the wrong person”. Yet when countered with “did anyone you mentored or currently mentor apply?” reflective silence prevails. The argument that: it is a successful principal who knows what the job entails, is valid. Sharing that knowledge however is not noticeably encouraged. No actual time provision seems to be made for it to occur on a regular basis and with the busy life of a principal it needs to be. Experienced principals are seldom if ever officially utilized in a mentoring capacity to assist boards and principals (a statutory supervisory capacity being quite a different thing). A repository of skills built over time is already embedded in our longer serving principals. If these skills and this knowledge could be utilized in the appointment process and later in a mentoring role not only would it enable early recognition of skill deficit before appointment, but would pinpoint appropriate professional development following appointment.

Education Review Office could very likely also have a role to play including as part of their review teams, an experienced/newly retired principal who could assist with the monitoring and recording of a professional development/leadership mentoring scheme within a

school recording achievements of senior staff through a succession plan. It would be helpful to have that principal or ex principal team member return to the school (ideally as part of an appointments panel) on or prior to the appointment of a new principal and confidentially provide a list to ERO of possible key performance indicators going forward for that appointee. He or she would also advise the appointing Board on possible professional development directions following appointment.⁷

A principal who has experienced the complete discretion to manage (as the principal thinks fit), the school's day to day administration"⁸ is uniquely situated to understand the on the job requirements of the position. If NZ Education Inc. does not recognize this and does not utilize all the benefits this provides, system lift will be less likely to occur.

4. **Retention of skillset developed from experience**

In light of all that has been mentioned above and subject to availability and sustainability, an ERO (Principal KPI) type role including mentoring of a new principal by an experienced or newly retired principal would be invaluable from both an FTP and a Board perspective. While not all outgoing principals may be candidates for such a role, EDUCANZ as the leader of the profession would be a good place to start as a respected body to oversee this process. Not only would this whole strategy of retention for retiring principals be a money saver for the sector short and long term, it would be of practical use. Executed well it would enhance the stability of any school. Length of tenure in this role might be determined obviously in the first instance by the need, secondly supported by the ERO data gathered and would lastly have a ceiling timeframe of I suggest five years.

⁷ This was a suggestion from a FTP during an interview and which gained ready acceptance and recognition from FTPs and experienced principals throughout my sabbatical and during my role as President of SPANZ.

⁸ OpCit note 1

When a unique skill set, built in the often vexatious arena of principalship is lost on the exit of a principal from the profession the ripple on effect is I believe too great. A principal's performance is measured every year with a Board appraisal. He or she has been held accountable for the school's annual Analysis of Variance as to how and indeed whether or not, he or she has achieved the Annual Plan. That principal has also been subjected to an annual external financial audit and a three yearly ERO report not to mention the variety of other compliance issues such as the Building WOF and Ministry priorities. This foundation skillset/knowledge base/process structure – call it what you like, is being lost in today's educational environment when a principal retires or moves away. In a worst case scenario a whole new skill set needs to be built from scratch all over again. This mindless waste of energy, time and financial outlay can be completely eliminated through a more holistic approach to using what is already stored and available. We need to ask ourselves the question: Why aren't we recycling Principal knowledge/skill sets?

SUMMARY

Succession Plan Scheme supported by ERO

1. A succession planning scheme run by the Principal in the form of leadership development within a school is essential if we are to enhance recruitment quality and quantity of applicants for principalship. It should form part of the skillset required before appointment to principalship. Support from ERO by including checklist requirements as part of annual appraisal of Principals during their three year visits would provide a professional record foundation for this.

Confident well equipped appointments panel

2. A confident, experienced and accountable appointments panel, with a depth of experience covering all aspects of a principal's likely role is essential for the success and overall health and wellbeing of any school.

Ministry input on job description

3. A job description encompassing the role and contextual situation of the appointment must be produced by a board's appointments panel in consultation with the Ministry. Clarity of description and role an essential key to attracting applicants and identifying potential candidates.

Revamp APP and FTP

4. A revamp of Aspiring Principals and First Time Principals course programmes. These programmes to dovetail in with generic aspects of the new job description requirements for boards generated by Ministry. To liaise with Ministry for up to date data as to roles and contextual situation requirements in job applications. To also consult with ERO as to succession plan data. To liaise with mentoring principal representatives to keep up to date with identified common weaknesses in first time principals.

Mentoring Scheme for retiring principals

5. The establishment of a mentor pool (under the auspices of EDUCANZ) for newly retired principals to have an opportunity to offer themselves professionally as mentors for two years following retirement with a ceiling tenure of five years. Specifically designed to assist first time principals in any perceived weaker area with a focus on administration. Flexibility to assist serving principals as circumstances arise.