

Sabbatical Report 2018

Topic:

“To investigate professional isolation – impact on principals – looking especially at a correlation with geographic isolation.”

By:

John Auld, Principal of Lawrence Area School, Lawrence, Otago

Acknowledgements:

I am appreciative of the Board of Trustees of Lawrence Area School for allowing me the time to take a sabbatical to complete this research. I am likewise appreciative of the Ministry of Education through TeachNZ and NZEI/PPTA for this opportunity.

I especially want to thank Mrs Pauline Taylor, Acting Principal, for the excellent way in which she led the school in my absence. Thanks is extended to all staff for taking on additional responsibilities.

Grateful thanks is extended to my Area School principal colleagues from throughout New Zealand who willingly gave time and shared so positively their experiences with me. To those of you in Northland thank you for inviting me into your school.

Purpose:

The purpose of this sabbatical is to gain feedback from principals on professional isolation, how it effects their work and the strategies they use to minimise the impact of both geographic and professional isolation.

Rationale and Background Information:

Area Schools are composite schools accommodating students from Yr0 – 15.

The Area Schools collective employment agreements cover 107 schools, including state, integrated and private schools in rural and urban settings.

Of these schools 45 are members of the New Zealand Area Schools Association. Most of these schools were formerly district high schools, renamed as area schools in 1975. The principals of these 45 schools are the foci of this research.

The association constitution has the following definition: ***'An Area School is a state school in a rural and often isolated setting which provides learning programmes based on the New Zealand Curriculum to students from years 1 to 15.'***

Membership is not exclusive and composite schools who have a commitment to the aims and objectives of the association can opt to become associate members.

The association has a number of functions: through an executive it is represented on many educationally significant consultative forums; the executive organise an annual conference; student excellence awards are acknowledged annually; a national sports tournament and a national student leadership course are held annually.

Area Schools also have a regional structure: NASA – Northland; CNI – Central North Island; TOSI – Nelson, Marlborough, West Coast; CASA – Canterbury; SOSI- Otago, Southland.

The majority of schools in each of these regions are geographically isolated. Distance and time are barriers for the day to day functioning of a school, more so in matters of urgency when external help is needed.

The theme of the 2018 New Zealand Area Schools Conference was 'Oranga Hauora' wellbeing for all. The focus of this research, professional isolation – impact on principals, aligns well with the theme of wellbeing.

Methodology:

In the first instance I spent time undertaking professional reading: reviewing teacher and principal sabbatical reports; reviewing ERO research reports; reviewing past and present training and support provisions for beginning and experienced principals; reviewing New Zealand Primary School Principals Occupational Health and Wellbeing Survey 2016 and similar publications.

I then prepared a multi-faceted online survey to gain demographic and professional information. This survey was sent to 44 area school principals and at the time of writing 33 responses have been received. This is a 75% response rate.

To complete the inquiry side of this research I meet with area school principals from Northland, visiting schools and gaining an invaluable insight into the functioning of each school and the role played by school leaders.

Summary:

The professional readings reinforced my thinking around the role of school principals in New Zealand.

The job of a principal is dynamic, and increasingly challenging in its complexity. The principal not only leads learning in their school but is responsible for finance, property, personnel, health and wellbeing of staff and students, as well as an ever increasing social welfare role.

Each of these responsibilities is demanding in terms of time, intellect and emotion.

The survey was therefore designed to have principals provide information as to how they handle the demands of the job and have them identify 'resources' that help them successfully carry out their role.

Section A: General Information

This section sought general demographic information. Of interest:

- For twenty of the thirty-three respondents the position they are currently in is their first as principal.
- Principal experience ranges from 0 to 30 years, the median being 11.5 years.
- Tenure in current position ranges from 0 to 20 years, the median being 3 years.
- Time and distance to nearest MOE office; 2 to 450kms, median 120km; 2 minutes to 6 hours of travel time, median 1 hour 40 minutes. **A fair indication of the isolation of area schools**
- Roll size ranged from 82 to 1000, median 230 students. **Statistics slightly impacted by 'outlier'**
- Staffing allocation ranged from 8.9 to 66, median 18 FTTE
- 75% of responding schools are members of a CoL. **The fact that in 2018 involvement is one of primary supports provided by**

the MOE for principals it is a concern that over a quarter of the respondents are not in a CoL.

- 36% of respondents have a teaching role with a weekly mean of five and a half hours' class contact time. Size of school is not always the dictate as to why the principal is teaching. Other local factors come into play e.g. the principal being the only subject specialist
- 20 of the 33 respondents were primary trained

Section B: Principal Training; support and resources

This section sought specific information around principal training and support.

Question 1. What formal support have you received for principal training?

- 23 of the 33 respondents received formal principal training through; National Aspiring Principals' Programme and/or First Time Principal Induction and/or Beginning Principal Support
- 2 received rural advisor training, 1 support from the Principal Development and Planning Centre
- 5 had no support
- Others additionally used mentors, appraisers and 1 accessed Ako Panuku

Question 2. What resources do you use to support you in your role as principal? (online and publication)

- The majority of respondent's read online and journal resources on a termly basis.

Question 3. What educationally focussed groups do you link with?

- All respondents have forged links to at least one group: local schools; CoL; provincial principals (primary); provincial principals (secondary); special character associations; area school regional groups
- 23 meet termly or more frequently at a local school principals level; 19 likewise with an area school regional group; 9 likewise with a provincial grouping of primary school principals; 20 at its secondary equivalent; 20 meet with their CoL colleagues; 7 within a special character principal group.
- Respondents are also a part of other principal groupings: mentoring and peer groups, online groups, as well as Maori principal forums.

Question 4. What other avenues of support do you access?

- Respondents make extensive use of other avenues of support identifying on average six to seven agents of support: Management team 94%; Board Chair 85%; Fellow principal 78%; Staff 60%; MOE liaison 55%; Mentor 50%; Appraiser 48%; NZSTA 48%; Principal association 38%; Parents 28%; Students 25%

Section C: Professional Isolation

This section sought self-assessment from principals on professional isolation in their current position.

Question 1. Within your role how often have you felt professionally isolated?

- 11 of the 33 respondents stated that professional isolation was a weekly occurrence
- 13 stated that professional was a monthly occurrence
- 9 stated that they seldom felt professionally isolated

Question 2. Which of the following do you feel contributes to your professional isolation?

- 22 of the 33 respondents stated that work overload – being busy and time poor – contributed significantly to their sense of professional isolation
- 13 stated that time and distance to get face to face help contributed significantly to their sense of professional isolation

Question 3. In which of the following situations, that you have experienced, would you have appreciated greater support to handle?

- 22 of the 30 respondents would have appreciated greater support in dealing with staff competency
- 19 with school property issues
- 12 with conflict with a staff member
- 11 with challenging parents
- 9 with traumatic incident
- 9 with student discipline
- 9 with school finances
- 7 with finding a principal appraiser
- 5 with conflict with BOT

Question 4. What strategies do you use to overcome professional isolation?

- 31 responded to this question
- The majority of responses whilst anecdotal are positive and encouraging, well grounded in common sense.

Question 5. If you had one piece of advice to offer a colleague in relation to professional isolation what would it be?

- 30 responded to this question
- These anecdotal responses are by and large quite personal, the underlying theme being 'develop a collegial support network'

In conclusion:

My intention is to share the findings of this report, including anecdotal responses with Area School principals at the 2019 NZASA conference in Wellington. I have discussed this with and gained approval to do so from the NZASA executive.

John Auld