

CONNECTING WITH PRINCIPALS

NEW ZEALAND PRINCIPAL
PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATION
THROUGH COVID-19

DR HEIDI LEESON, SUE DUIGNAN,
DESIREE WEHRLE, JAMES BEAVIS





INTRODUCTION

Lockdown changed us all.

Economic turmoil, drastic reduction in social activity, and widespread massive impacts on wellbeing – and nobody knows this better than New Zealand’s principals.

As the cornerstones of their communities, principals have seen first-hand the havoc that COVID-19 has wrought on their schools, students and communities. Further, they have had to manage rapid and drastic shifts in how students learn, adapting to distance learning on the fly, and looking after their students’ education needs and wellbeing under unprecedented conditions.

As a trusted provider of support to hundreds of principals nationwide, Springboard Trust has been in a privileged position to hear from principals first-hand about their successes, challenges and the future concerns that have come about from the COVID-19 lockdown experience.

Here is what they told us.



KEY FINDINGS

From March 25 to May 20th this year, schools went through varying levels of restrictions, and were thrust into a dramatically different environment – one that they were given 48 hours to prepare for.

Springboard Trust conducted extensive surveys and one-on-one interviews with principals who are working or have worked with us, applying reflexive thematic analysis to the results to discover the true impact of COVID-19 on New Zealand's education sector. This enquiry focused on three umbrella concepts: successes, challenges and concerns for the future.

Principals overwhelmingly perceived the level of engagement that they had established and continued through lockdown as one of their greatest successes – particularly in relation to staff and whānau engagement, where principals found strong two-way relationships.

Staff were highly engaged and supportive of each other, and showed high levels of commitment towards developing digital learning opportunities for their students. Principals reported that whānau also showed high levels of engagement and collaboration and were supportive in establishing a distance learning environment for their children.

Some themes presented as both successes and challenges. For example, technology played a significant role in providing an alternative learning platform, but also became a significant challenge for students whose home circumstances did not support this opportunity. In all cases, the availability of hardware and connectivity was the moderating variable between the perception of technology being a success or challenge. It is proposed that the findings and recommendations from this work will assist SBT's current review of its programmes and services and inform emerging programmes and strategic offerings for Alumni principals.



OUR METHOD

For this research, we surveyed 65 principals who had taken part in the Strategic Leadership for Principals Programme (SLPP) over the last 10 years. They came from across the regions we work in – Northland, Auckland, Waikato, Bay of Plenty, Hawkes Bay, Wairarapa, Wellington and Canterbury.

The survey contained questions focusing on the successes and perceived challenges under COVID-19, and principals concerns for the future, as well as questions around the kind of support they would like to receive from Springboard Trust.

Principals participated in the survey either directly (online form), or over a phone interview with one of our team of Programme Managers, who then filled out the survey. With results compiled, our Head of Research and Evaluation Dr Heidi Leeson, applied reflexive thematic analysis to the results, gleaning more objective results from the qualitative set of data.

From this work, we discovered the following themes under each of the three categories of focus successes, challenges and concerns for the future.

OVERALL, PRINCIPALS IDENTIFIED THE FOLLOWING KEY CONCEPTS OR ACTIONS THAT THEY DEEMED SUCCESSFUL OR CHALLENGING UNDER LOCKDOWN.

SUCCESSSES

Engagement
 Decision-making
 Processes and procedures
 Technology
 Staff
 Communication

CHALLENGES

School culture
 Home environment
 School environment
 Technology
 Staff
 Relationships
 Communication

FUTURE CONCERNS

Transitions
 Strategic planning
 Changes to school
 Wellbeing and safety

A black and white photograph showing several hands of different skin tones gently holding a heart-shaped object with horizontal stripes. The background is dark, making the hands and the heart stand out.

FINDINGS: SUCCESSSES

Success 1: Engagement

Principals had great success engaging their teaching team, students and whānau. This included calls, emails and surveys to check in with everyone and assess a household's ability to support distance learning.

Overwhelmingly, principals reported steady and ongoing two-way communication between themselves and whānau, and strong support for their effort to continue learning under lockdown.

"I'm proud of our connectivity with students and families, and our stronger learning partnerships with whānau"

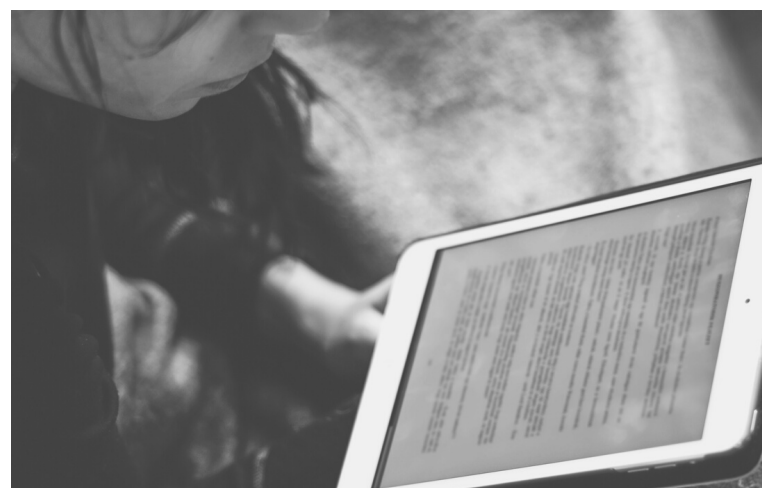
Principals kept up student engagement with themed lessons, new learning structures and a newfound depth of understanding of students, particularly their home life.

This also created insight into equity issues that many highlighted as a continued challenge.

Principals were also very impressed with and proud of their teaching teams, feeling they "rose to the occasion" proactively to support whānau and learners and adopt new ways of learning.

Success 2: Decision-Making

Principals saw themselves as successful decision-makers under lockdown, especially when they had to do so rapidly. They identified themselves as making common-sense decisions, and typically linked this to there being no precedent or "rule book" for lockdown.





FINDINGS: SUCCESSSES

Success 3: Processes and procedures

Principals found that lockdown gave them time to ‘catch up’ on their school processes and procedures – plans, guidelines and ERO reporting in particular. They also found success in creating new procedures relating to a crisis and arranging professional learning and development (PLD) for their own teams, notably around digital capabilities.

Success 4: Technology

Principals saw their use of technology as a big success, both for distance learning and maintaining important connections with their teams, students and community.

Success 5: Staff

Similar to the engagement theme, principals were proud of their staff through lockdown.

They felt teams were confident in the principal’s own leadership, especially related to crisis leadership. Staff were supportive of one another, and achieved great success through collaboration.

“Our school culture has dramatically shifted to one of stronger relationships.”

Success 6: Communication

Generally, principals felt the best communication they had with teachers were clear, consistent and timely. They shared communication styles and strategies with their team, which created a school-wide voice for stakeholder engagement.

In some cases, principals found success with targeted messaging rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. Overall, principals reported that this communication improved the shared home-school relationship around a child’s learning.

FINDINGS: CHALLENGES



Challenge 1: School Culture

Principals found it challenging to keep school culture going when students and teachers were distanced. Efforts to keep culture included online social time and themed school activities, posting visual material from students to social media channels and encouraging families to learn together. Challenges lay in maintaining whānau connection to the school and a comfortable return for students post-lockdown.

Challenge 2: Home environment

Household internet and devices, as well as distractions and competing demands at home, proved a significant challenge for principals – particularly in terms of trying not to add pressure to already stressed families.

Challenge 3: School environment

The return to school from Level 3 onwards was difficult for principals, students, whānau and teachers – especially when it came to safety and wellbeing. Students struggled to reacclimatise to school routine, which schools attempted to address with welcoming people at the gate, rostered playground activity and a focus on wellbeing.

Challenge 4: Technology

Despite Ministry of Education efforts, online learning was not available to many students. Principals were keenly aware of this inequity, and felt challenged to avoid technology access defining distance learning – especially in lower decile schools.

FINDINGS: CHALLENGES



Those that did have most students involved in distance learning also struggled with incompatibilities between platforms and home devices. Phone calls went some way to mitigating these impacts, as did teaching a strengths-based approach and utilising hard copy material.

Challenge 5: Staff

Principals' teams proved both a success and a challenge. Some staff were autonomous to the point of isolation from students and teachers, and principals spent considerable energy supporting their teams without established support of their own. Some principals reported having to coerce some teachers and leaders into returning when restrictions eased.

Challenge 6: Relationships

Principals felt responsible for the wellbeing and security of staff, student and many whānau. Most decisions were made with wellbeing at the fore, and workloads were adjusted according to pressure on students and staff.

Challenge 7: Communication

Our analysis shows that principals faced significant challenges with short-notice changes from the Ministry of Education or wider government, and had little time to communicate with their stakeholder community about what was happening. Principals felt overloaded with incoming and outgoing information, and faced challenges in finding messaging to the community that had to be repeated, or could be open to interpretation.

FINDINGS: FUTURE CONCERNS

While these successes and challenges relate to the lockdown period in New Zealand, there remained many ongoing concerns among principals about how we emerge from this crisis.

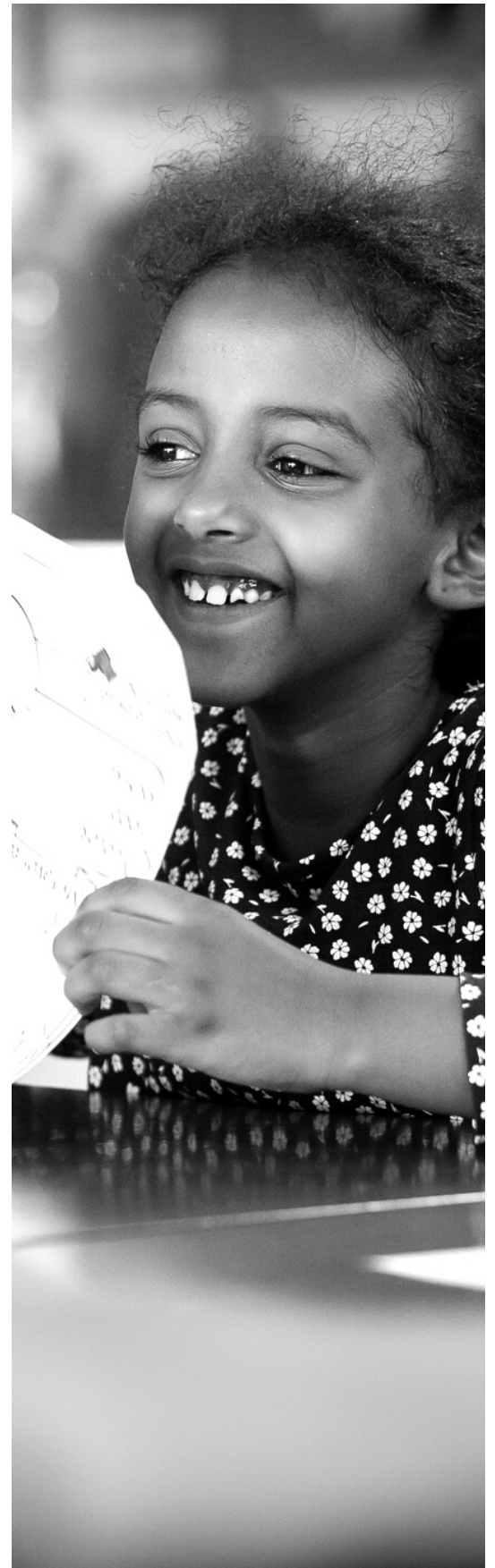
This primarily focused on the transition back to school after such a long period at home, particularly for students who enjoyed the home environment more than school.

There is considerable concern about the progress and relevance of schools' strategic planning, including how to reassess its fitness for purpose and change a strategic plan mid-initiative.

The wider impact of COVID-19 on the lives of students, whānau and communities remains a significant concern. One principal reported that during lockdown, they provided between 350 and 400 lunches to struggling families. A 'wellbeing before achievement' approach has been adopted by many principals, which did result in some reports expressing concern about any government focus on achievement in such a disruptive year.

Finally, there were many incredible successes across respondent principals – but a concern remains about how best to fit lockdown lessons into any 'new normal' that arises.

“It is hard to see past tomorrow”





DISCUSSION

Across all principal responses, three constructs emerged as both a success and a challenge:

- Technology
- Staff
- Communication

Many students, despite best efforts, remained cut off from the same learning opportunities as others due to a technological divide stemming from structural inequity. **In this, COVID-19 has not created new problems, but highlighted long-standing ones.** The other side of this is that technology was a crucial tool in keeping communities together and fostering distance learning for those able to connect.

Principals found the support offered by their teams was invaluable and a huge motivator to support others in turn. However, where that support did not exist, principals had to expend further time and energy motivating team members to return to schooling or collaborate more effectively.

While principals were largely pleased with their own communication with communities, the volume of information received and lack of time to process and act on it created massive challenges in organising school communities.

Much of the post-lockdown discourse has focused on opportunities that have arisen from the crisis, and rightfully so – principals and schools have learned much about how they can work and how they work together. **But many of the challenges and concerns remain without clear solutions – and it is on these issues that efforts should focus in the months ahead.**

THANKS TO YOU ALL

This paper would not have been possible without the honesty and willingness to contribute from all principals who completed our survey. From the bottom of our hearts, thank you.

Thanks must also go to the volunteers, Programme Managers and facilitators who have worked with school leaders under trying conditions, helping them develop and become the best versions of themselves - not to mention providing fantastic support to everyone we work with.

The wider Springboard Trust team has been influential in helping this come together, while our Board of Trustees and partner organisations have provided the support and resources needed to conduct this analysis and create further research in the future.

This work is not yet done - in fact, it's only just started.

Until next time,

Dr Heidi Leeson
Sue Duignan
Desiree Wehrle
James Beavis

Thanks to our Partners

STRATEGIC PARTNERS

ASB



NEXT
FOUNDATION

Joyce
Fisher
Charitable
Trust



AOTEAROA FOUNDATION



MAJOR PARTNERS

AIR NEW ZEALAND

KPMG

ICF
International Coach Federation



iag



SUPPORTING PARTNERS

Russell
McLeagh

BENDALLANDCANT
Chartered Accountants

FUJI XEROX

Sysdoc

WINSBOROUGH