



# ‘Everything Was New’: Preparing and Supporting New Principals:

## A guide for aspiring and new principals

ERO looked at how new principals are doing in their first five years in the role. We found that new principals are not always well prepared, and many are not confident about their new range of responsibilities. This guide looks at the ways that new and aspiring principals can be better set up for success.

This guide:

- gives our ‘big picture’ findings on new principals’ preparedness and confidence
- gives guidance about ways that **aspiring principals** can prepare for the principal role
- offers strategies to all **new principals**, as well as new small school principals and new Māori principals, to help with growing into the role.

### What did ERO do?

ERO looked at how principals move into the role (before being appointed), as well as their first five years of being principal. We heard from new principals, as well as experts and board chairs/presiding members who work closely with new principals.

### The principal role

The principal role is complex and can differ between schools, particularly between school types and sizes, rural and urban settings, diversity of learners and communities, and more. We asked new principals about their preparedness and confidence in 11 key areas of practice:

- 1) giving effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi throughout the school
- 2) working in partnership with whānau Māori, hapū, and iwi to develop a localised curriculum that is inclusive of mātauranga Māori
- 3) establishing and maintaining a clear shared vision, strategic direction, and goals for the school
- 4) building and maintaining positive, effective relationships with staff and learners
- 5) building and maintaining positive, effective relationships with the school community
- 6) ensuring the delivery of high-quality teaching practice and curriculum across the school
- 7) working with data to monitor and evaluate teaching and learning
- 8) working closely with diverse families and community groups to promote inclusion for all learners
- 9) managing the school’s resources, for example, finances, employment, timetabling, and property
- 10) working effectively with the school’s board members
- 11) ensuring the school complies with all legislative and policy requirements.

## What did we find?

### Pathways to becoming a principal

- 1) New principals are not always well prepared for all aspects of their new role.
- 2) Prior experience in a leadership role is the best pathway. Most, but not all, principals follow this pathway.
- 3) Not all those teachers who have the potential to be principals are encouraged into or aware of the pathways to become principals.

### Development and support for aspiring principals

- 4) Development and support helps aspiring principals prepare.
- 5) Coaching and mentoring, and postgraduate programmes make the most difference.

### Support for new principals once in the role

- 6) Not all new principals have an induction process when they start in the role and where an induction process does occur, it is of variable quality.
- 7) Principals' confidence increases over their time in the role, but there remain key areas where they lack confidence.
- 8) Principals report that connecting with peers and more experienced principals and coaches is most useful.
- 9) School boards are not sufficiently aware of how well their new principals are faring.

### Small schools

- 10) Four in 10 new principals are in small schools, but those who start in small schools are less prepared, less likely to have had prior leadership experience, and have accessed less prior development and support.
- 11) Once in the role, new principals in small schools are less confident, can face barriers accessing the most effective development and support, and report poorer wellbeing.

### Tumuaki Māori – Māori principals

- 12) New tumuaki Māori feel less prepared and are less likely to have had the opportunity to have prior leadership experience.
- 13) Once in the role, new tumuaki Māori are more confident than their peers.

## Are you an aspiring principal? Here are four ways to set yourself up well

### 1) Get school leadership experience

- New principals who enter the role through a leadership pathway, rather than coming straight from teaching, are more than three times more likely to be prepared for the role.
- This could mean holding a senior leadership or middle-management role – roles like deputy principal, assistant principal, syndicate leader, head of department, faculty leader, leader of learning, specialist teacher, special education needs co-ordinator, learning support coordinator, or holding other management units.

“I’d attend board meetings; I’d attend finance meetings. I’d understand and unpack all the finances. I’d attend property meetings. So all of those things, I was kind of prepped before I got into the role.”

NEW PRINCIPAL



### 2) Gain experience across the 11 key areas of practice

Even with leadership experience, the move into principalship can be a big change. We heard that it is particularly useful when new principals have had a range of administrative, legal, leadership, and management experiences. New principals that we spoke with did this by, for example:

- organising school events
- working on property or resourcing projects
- joining the school board as the staff representative
- managing teams of teachers
- working with the Ministry of Education as a Principal Nominee for the school
- observing meetings about finance, staffing, annual reporting, timetabling, etc.

“[I] would organise ... the school fair, and do the social club. I know they don’t seem like big things, but they all kind of led up to where I am now.”

NEW PRINCIPAL



### 3) Seek development and support opportunities, especially postgraduate programmes and coaching/mentoring

We found that development and support, focused on school leadership or other aspects of the principal role, make a real difference to how prepared principals are when they start. Principals who do not seek out these opportunities are less prepared.

- Postgraduate programmes and coaching/mentoring are the most impactful types of development and support.

“[My mentor] has been the most influential person ... I wouldn't be where I am today without his guidance and support.”

NEW PRINCIPAL

### 4) Access development and support opportunities in key areas of the role

New principals tend to be much less prepared in some key areas. It would be useful to seek targeted development and support around:

- working in partnership with whānau Māori, hapū, and iwi to develop a localised curriculum
- how to manage school resources – things like finances, employment, and timetabling
- understanding legislative and policy requirements for schools.

“What is an analysis of variance? How do you write them? And what are they? Because I got into the job and it's like, 'Oh, this is due'. And I was like, 'Oh, okay. What's that?' 'Oh, you need to do this.' 'Okay... What's that? And how do you go about doing that?' ... The first meeting I had with [Ministry contact] was talking about staffing and funding, and she used all these little acronyms and things. It was like, 'Oh, okay, I'll have to go away and find out what all of those mean.'”

NEW PRINCIPAL

## Are you a new principal? Here are four useful strategies for settling into your role

→ There are additional strategies later in this guide that are specifically for small school principals, and Māori principals.

### 1) Work with the school board around a useful induction process

We heard from principals that high-quality inductions are valuable when starting out in the role but these don't always happen, and they are not always as useful as they could be. Useful inductions begin well before the official start date and involve good conversations with the outgoing principal. Some things that are particularly useful to learn about in an induction are:

- the “nuts and bolts” of the job, including administrative and legal responsibilities – things like key contacts, due dates, ongoing projects, and where to find important documentation
- the school community – especially staff, learners, whānau, hapū, and iwi.

“I think number one is having a really good strong induction ... before you're about to start at the school. Having a really good look through things like finance, your staffing, what your FTE allocation is, how the units are distributed, understanding the reasons why curriculum is the way that it is, how the growth cycle works, projects... When I walked in, I didn't know where anything was ... And the more time you can get with the principal that's exiting, the better.”

NEW PRINCIPAL

“Induction needs to include information about how the school has been connecting with iwi, the quality of that relationship. There is currently a yawning gap in that area of practice, and it is important information.”

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### 2) Seek connections with other principals to help with learning and wellbeing

The principal role is complex, and collegial support is really important. New principals benefit from connecting with others about the job, through groups such as regional collectives, coffee groups, social media, professional learning groups, Kāhui Ako, and mentors or coaches.

“The most powerful support strategy for me as a new principal (in amongst a struggling school, Covid, etc.), is reaching out to other principals. I have my ‘24/7’ group that help me at any time! I meet with each of them regularly for coffee. This mentor group has been phenomenal for my self-preservation, progress, and confidence.”

NEW PRINCIPAL

### 3) Seek development and support in key areas

Principals that we spoke with particularly value coaching and mentoring, collaborative groups, and structured ongoing programmes, for helping to build their confidence on the job.

There are a few areas in which principals tend to be less prepared when they start, and less confident once in the role. It would be particularly useful to access support around:

- working in partnership with whānau Māori, hapū, and iwi to develop a localised curriculum
- giving effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi throughout the school
- how to manage school resources – things like finances, employment, and timetabling
- understanding legislative and policy requirements for schools.

“There is also a need [for new principals] to be culturally competent, and for many this is a huge learning curve in itself.”

EXPERT

### 4) Develop professional trust with your school board

We found that school boards often overestimate the confidence and wellbeing of new principals, and that new principals are not always comfortable asking their board for the support they need. It's part of the board's role to make sure principals are supported to do their job well. New principals can build successful professional relationships with their board by:

- having conversations that share the principal's and the board's strengths, challenges, and expectations. It might be useful to start with a strength-based focus: hearing from the board why the new principal was selected for the role, and sharing with the board what the new principal is looking forward to about working with the board
- working with the New Zealand School Trustees Association (NZSTA; [www.nzsta.org.nz](http://www.nzsta.org.nz)) to clarify and unpack the roles and responsibilities of both the principal and the board. Keep in mind that NZSTA is there to support principals as well as boards
- sharing ERO's guide for school boards with your board: <https://ero.govt.nz/our-research/preparing-and-supporting-new-principals-a-guide-for-school-boards>. It's designed to set out ways that the board can help set new principals up for success.

“Advocating for my own wellbeing and professional learning, through budget allocation or the board, is hard as a new principal. You feel guilty doing it when the board has just hired you. You feel obliged to live up to your perceived expectations of what they want.”

NEW PRINCIPAL

## Are you a new principal at a small school?

We found that new principals that start in small schools are less prepared when they start. They are also less confident in their role, face barriers accessing the most effective development and support, and report poorer wellbeing.

- If you are starting in a small school, it is especially important that you have access to good supports. If your school is in a rural or isolated area, connecting with the New Zealand Rural and Area Schools Leaders Association ([www.nzrasla.ac.nz](http://www.nzrasla.ac.nz)) is a great place to start. We have also listed a range of other principal networks at the end of this guide, and there may be more in your area, like Kāhui Ako and or regional collectives.
- We heard that collegial supports make a big difference to small school principals' confidence and wellbeing, even if they take place online.

## Are you a new Māori principal?

In our interviews with new Māori principals, we heard that development and support opportunities are most effective for supporting both their practice and their wellbeing when they are culturally relevant to them as Māori, and are inclusive of Māori ways of leading and learning.

“I think the fact that [Māori leadership programme] take their learnings to places like Waitangi and significant [places] or onto the marae - they actually take the learning into a significant place for Māori, so that Māori are comfortable... When you find your own place and sense of belonging, you're able to facilitate that for others as well. And when you're a principal, you're required to do that for all your staff and all your students also.”

TUMUAKI MĀORI

Māori education sector experts echoed this, emphasising the importance of development and support opportunities that are specific to the individual challenges often faced by new Māori principals.

“What about just being able to be Māori in the system and be safe? ... [Development and support needs to help] ground a person in personal, professional, and cultural safety and preparedness.”

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We heard that it's valuable to grow into the role alongside other new and experienced Māori principals. Connecting with Te Akatea, the New Zealand Māori Principals' Association, is a great place to start: [www.teakatea.co.nz](http://www.teakatea.co.nz)

## Check out these links

- ERO's full report, 'Everything was New': *Preparing and Supporting New Principals*: <https://ero.govt.nz/our-research/everything-was-new-preparing-and-supporting-new-principals>
- The *summary* of the report: <https://ero.govt.nz/our-research/everything-was-new-preparing-and-supporting-new-principals-summary>
- A *guide for school boards*, to help them support new principals: <https://ero.govt.nz/our-research/preparing-and-supporting-new-principals-a-guide-for-school-boards>

There are a wide range of associations and groups that support principals in their role. See the links below for some useful websites.

- Te Akatea Māori Principals Association: <https://www.teakatea.co.nz>
- New Zealand Pasifika Principals Association (NZPPA): <https://nzppa.com>
- New Zealand Rural and Area Schools Leadership Association (NZRASLA): <https://www.nzrasla.ac.nz>
- New Zealand Principals' Federation: <http://www.nzpf.ac.nz>
- New Zealand Association of Intermediate and Middle Schooling (NZAIMS): <https://nzaims.co.nz>
- Secondary Principals' Association of New Zealand (SPANZ): <https://www.spanz.school.nz>
- New Zealand School Trustees Association (NZSTA): <https://www.nzsta.org.nz>

*We appreciate the work of all those who supported this work, particularly the new principals and experts who shared with us. Their experiences and insights are at the heart of what we have learnt. You can find the full report on new principals on ERO's website: [www.ero.govt.nz](http://www.ero.govt.nz)*



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