Principal Appointments Data Report

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Purpose

The purpose of this study is to provide information tracking principal appointments in New Zealand schools over time, so that six-monthly reports are available from NZCER with updates on appointment trends and patterns.

Data source

NZCER surveys all schools advertising for a principal in the *Education Gazette*. The information provided in this first report comes from survey responses from board chairs in the nine-month period from the beginning of the 2008 school year to the end of September 2008. There were 146 surveys returned from 248 sent out, which is a response rate of 59 percent. Eleven responses were incomplete and excluded from the analysis; 13 responses were from secondary schools, and two were from composite schools. As the responses from secondary schools were so few, this report covers the data from the 120 primary and intermediate schools only, but in our next report in 2009 we will present findings from both the primary and secondary sectors.

Findings

In this first report, findings cover the quantity and quality of applicants short-listed and selected for the primary principalship, information about the decision-making process involved in the selection, and information about principals leaving their positions.

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Reasons for the principal vacancy

There were several reasons why principals left their school and a vacancy was created:

- 34 percent of the exiting principals were moving on to new principal positions
- 22 percent were retiring
- 18 percent were leaving for other reasons such as sick leave, to become full-time mothers, casual work, etc.
- 18 percent were leaving to work in other educational jobs (Ministry of Education, School Support Services, principal consultancy, deputy principal of another school, classroom teacher)
- 4 percent were going to other careers outside education
- 3 percent were going overseas.

Two-thirds of the principals leaving appeared to be leaving the principal career pathway, while only one-third had moved on to further their career as principals.

Profile of applicants and applicants appointed

Table 1 shows the attributes of the pool of 386 applicants who applied for these principal positions and the profiles of the 120 applicants who were appointed.

Table 1 **Profiles of applicants and applicants appointed**

Profile	Applicants (*n* = 386) %	Applicants appointed (*n* = 120) %
Gender		
Male	41	44
Female	59	56
Age		
20–29	3	3
30–39	27	28
40–49	41	43
50+	25	24
Ethnicity		
Pakeha	82	82
Maori	12	13
Pasifika	1	1
Asian	1	0
South African	3	2
Other	3	5
Highest qualification		
Teaching diploma	20	21
Teaching degree	53	47
Postgraduate	19	26
Leadership and management programmes completed		

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First-time principal	27	35
Principals' development	23	20
Aspiring principal	24	26
Other	14	15
Teaching experience		
Less than 4 years	2	3
4–9 years	22	18
10–15 years	33	34
More than 16 years	40	43
Management experience		
Principal	45	44
Deputy principal	40	47
Associate principal	10	15
Senior teacher	25	29

Note: Some columns do not add to 100 percent because of rounding.

As Table 1 shows, the successful applicants were broadly representative of all the applicants. There were a few differences though, such as:

- A slightly higher proportion of men and a slightly lower proportion of women were appointed to principal positions.
- A higher proportion of applicants appointed to principal positions had postgraduate degrees.
- A higher proportion of applicants appointed to principal positions had done the first-time principals course.
- Successful applicants were more likely to have had experience in deputy or associate principal positions or senior teacher experience.

The pool applying for principal positions

Quantity

Table 2 shows the number of applications schools attracted.

Table 2 **Number of applicants schools attracted**

Number of applicants	Schools %
0–2	7
3–5	21
6–9	25
10–12	22
13–19	18
20–27	5

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Two percent of schools did not respond to this question.

Schools applying for principal positions varied in the number of applicants they attracted, with almost three-quarters (70 percent) attracting six or more applicants. The average (mean) number of applicants applying for each school was 9.5, while the average number short-listed was 3.4.

Quality

The overall pool of applicants: Board chairs rated the quality of the pool of applicants applying to be variable, with only 29 percent saying they were "very good/excellent", and nearly half (48 percent) saying they were "all right". Eighteen percent said the quality overall was "patchy" and 4 percent said it was "disappointing".

Fifteen percent of boards have re-advertised in the *Gazette* over this nine-month period. Of the 248 principal positions advertised, 32 schools have re-advertised once, and six schools have re-advertised twice.

The short-listed candidates: Eighty-three percent of boards rated the quality of short-listed candidates as "very good/excellent", 13 percent as "all right", and 3 percent as "patchy". These high ratings are to be expected as boards short-listed the best applicants in the pool.

How boards were assisted in the appointment process

Most boards used some form of external advice to assist with the appointment process. This external assistance refers to following a systematic and fair appointment process, rather than advice about the final selection. Table 3 illustrates which form of advice boards used.

Table 3 **Forms of advice boards took in the appointment process**

Advice taken from	Percentage of boards using advice
Private consultant	53
Another principal	32
Input from staff	20
School Support Services	12
Other form of advice	11
No external advice; or external advice not taken	6
Current principal	4

Most boards (70 percent) used one avenue of assistance, and a quarter of boards (24 percent) used two. Fifty-eight percent said they followed the external advice they were given in the appointment process, and 6 percent said they did not seek advice or did not follow it if given. (Twenty-eight

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percent were not sure or said this question did not apply to them, and 8 percent did not answer the question.[1])

Boards' reasons for choosing applicant

A majority (88 percent) of board chairs said they were "very satisfied" with the appointment they had made.

We wanted to know more about why they were very satisfied, so boards were asked an open response question: "Why did you choose the person you did to be principal?" Two-thirds gave more than one reason, so we coded reasons as listed, in the following table:

[1] We believe that some boards may have interpreted this question as: "Did the adviser advise you ***who*** to appoint?" We have clarified this question in future questionnaires.

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Table 4 **Reasons given for selecting the new principal**

Attributes	Percentage who chose this
Best person for the job/best fit for the school/met the job description	44
Personal attributes (listed as: young, male, energetic, confident, sense of humour, innovative, etc.)	43
General experience (e.g., business, life)	21
Interviewed well/good CV/good references	18
Experience as principal/acting principal	17
Fits into and supported by community	17
Other (e.g., generally positive)	15
Management skills	11
Experience as teacher	11
Knowledge about curriculum and curriculum delivery	8
Leadership skills	8
Passionate about school	8
Concerned about students/student achievement	6
Passionate about position	2

The responses to this open question echo concerns, raised in earlier research (Brooking, 2005),[2] where some board chairs spoke quite candidly about personal qualities which fitted their idea of the ideal principal, but which would not have been part of the stated criteria. Qualities such as being "young" and "male", for example, would not be part of stated criteria by law[3] in New Zealand. One board chair wrote: "He was young and had a lovely wife and five children." It is a concern that some boards are using invalid criteria, but perhaps the most worrying concern is the small number of schools that actually specified "leadership skills", "curriculum knowledge/delivery", and "student achievement" as the main reasons for choosing the principal they did. Hopefully these criteria would have been listed in the job description and assumed to be part of the first category listed in Table 4.

Origins of newly appointed principal

Sixty-six percent of applicants who came from a principal position came from a smaller school, and 21 percent came from a principal position in a similar-sized school. Nearly half (49 percent) who came from senior management positions, came from larger schools, and 71 percent who

[2] Brooking, K. (2005). *New Zealand boards of trustees' selection of primary school principals*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Deakin University, Melbourne.

[3] The Human Rights Act 1993 states it is illegal to discriminate on the basis of age in employment.

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came from teaching positions came from larger schools. Just over a quarter (28 percent) who came from senior management positions came from within the same school, and 24 percent who came from teaching positions came from within the same school.

This illustrates typical career pathways—from senior management positions in a large school, to a first principal position in a small school, and then to principal positions in larger schools.

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