

Local logics versus centralisation: A possible dilemma for the boards of trustees of New Zealand's small primary schools

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Abstract

This article reports the findings of a study into the boards of trustees of two small primary schools in New Zealand, the boards of which had been deemed by the Ministry of Education to be “at risk”. Both boards also fitted into a broad band of schools identified by the Ministry of Education as most likely to have difficulty gaining a competent board. The study found that, while there were some issues about the understanding of the board’s governance role by individual trustees, the key concern appeared to be a conflict in the perceptions about the board’s role between the localised views held by the parent trustees and the centralised views held by the government and its advisors. The study also found that the centralising policies of the government had placed increasing compliance and regulations on the boards which were too complex for non-professional educators to adequately fulfil. Therefore, the article suggests that the government’s centralising policy initiatives are a key factor behind the growing number of boards of small primary schools being declared ineffective. The article also suggests that those policy initiatives are having an especially negative impact on boards where there are few parents available for the board or there is a small pool of parental expertise.

Keywords: *Boards of trustees; lay governance; board effectiveness; compliance; centralising policies; primary schools*

Introduction

Since the inception of the self-managed school concept in New Zealand in 1989, all schools have had a lay board of trustees made up of elected or co-opted parents and, in some cases, other community people. The broad role of these boards is, as was described in the Education Act 1989, “except to the extent that any enactment or general law of New Zealand provides otherwise, a school board has complete discretion to control the management of the school as it sees fit” (New Zealand Government, 1989). The purpose of this particular change in the system of school management was to ensure that schools would be more capable of responding to localised needs by altering “the balance of power between the providers and clients of education” (Education Review Office, 1994, p. 5).

However, figures obtained from a study by Morrison (2013) into primary school principal appointments in New Zealand showed that the number of interventions in schools by the Ministry of Education (MoE) has increased substantially over the decade up to 2013. Those figures also showed that the schools most likely to be seen by the MoE as requiring an intervention were small rural primary schools or low decile schools that served lower socio-economic areas. Therefore, the question has to be asked whether that shift in the balance of power still exists and whether the increasing centralisation of the education system in New Zealand has resulted in the gradual loss of the capacity of schools and boards to be locally responsive. The question also has to be asked whether the move towards centralisation has placed increasingly exact effectiveness demands on boards and that is the reason why more boards of trustees are being identified as ineffective or “at risk” by both the MoE and by the Education Review Office (ERO), the government watch-dog for education.

Blackmore (1995) pointed out that the concept of lay governance introduced in 1989 was always going to be undermined by a system she described as, “centralised decentralisation” (p. 45). Court and O’Neill (2011) also argued that, despite the continuation of the lay governance system in New Zealand, the MoE is actually very

much in charge of schools, albeit at arms-length, through the National Administrative Guidelines (NAGs) and the National Education Guidelines (NEGs). They also argued that there has been a trend, over the last decade, for education officials to be focused on ensuring the enactment of the centralising policies of the government by seeking to impose on schools and boards a system of school leadership based on the principles of market-managerialism and a business model of continuous improvement.

As a consequence, as Court and O'Neill (2011) pointed out, there has also been a tendency for the government and its advisors to downplay the localised views communities and parents have of schools and possibly discount the reasons why parents become trustees. This was a view shared by Morrison (2013) and Wylie (2012). They found that parents, and especially the parents of primary school children, tended to base their view of the school on their understanding of what was being experienced by their children and therefore believed the school should be primarily responsive to the needs of their children and the community. This explains why, as Morrison (2013) maintained, parents of primary schools tend to join boards for altruistic reasons rather than for school leadership reasons. It could also explain why, as Robinson and Ward (2004) pointed out, that in the main, parents on the boards of primary schools have not bought into the market-management, business model of school leadership espoused by the government and why the parents of primary school children tend not to see the school, or themselves, as agents of government's policies.

Therefore, some of the concerns by the MoE and ERO about the growing ineffectiveness of boards could possibly lie in an unappreciated conflict between the way parents of primary school children view their school and the government's policy imperatives. It could also be that small primary schools and those serving lower-socio-economic areas experience this dissonance of viewpoint more strongly as there is frequently a small pool of parents or a lack of parental expertise in those schools. It could also be that small schools which serve a remote rural area or a lower socio-economic area with a particular ethnic character would be less inclined to accept a generic form of school leadership and purpose because it was remote from their daily reality. If this were the case, this is a serious concern for education in New Zealand. Figures obtained from the Ministry of Education (2016) show that, as at 1 July 2015, 40% of all schools in New Zealand had rolls of less than 150 students and could therefore be designated "small". More worrying, that data also indicated that a substantial number of those small primary schools are in areas of high Maori population.

To determine whether that dissonance of viewpoint existed was the reason for the study. Its aim was to identify the understanding individual trustees of small primary schools had of the board's role. It also sought to identify the degree to which the centralising policies of the government were impacting on the boards of such schools or whether there were other issues at play. To achieve this insight, the activities of the boards of two small primary schools were examined. One school was a small rural primary school with a roll of approximately 20 students. The other was a small intermediate, or middle school, serving a lower socio-economic area with a roll of approximately 120. Both boards of trustees had been identified by the MoE as "at risk". Both schools also fitted into a broad category of schools, identified as most likely to have difficulty in gaining a competent board by ERO (2007), Fiske and Ladd (2000), and the New Zealand School Trustees Association (NZSTA) (2008), an organisation with the role of providing professional advice to school boards.

Before undertaking the study, however, it was felt to be important that some of the broader issues within the lay governance system in New Zealand be examined.

Lay governance in New Zealand

There is little doubt that the original concept of lay governance in the "first generation policy reforms" (Court & O'Neill, 2011, p. 120) of Tomorrow's Schools represented a relatively unrealistic socio-democratic ideal (Wylie, 2012). Those reforms in 1989 had as a key aim the creation of a system of self-managed schools in New Zealand. However, the belief that schools could be self-managed was also largely

based on an optimistic assumption about the capacity of parents to understand how schools, as well as teaching and learning, worked (Wylie, 2012). The level of devolution within the new education system created in the 1989 reforms also did not help. Those reforms meant even the smallest school had to have its own board of trustees. It was therefore a model that was bound, from its inception, to negatively affect boards where there was a small pool of parental expertise or small number of parents (Fiske & Ladd, 2000).

However, issues about board effectiveness have not been confined to schools where there is a small pool of parental expertise. In 2007, ERO identified that approximately 40% of the 673 boards they had surveyed were of concern, with a further 10% requiring direct intervention or support (ERO, 2007). There has also been an increase in interventions under Section 78k of the Education Act 1989 across all schools (Morrison, 2013). Therefore, the issue of board ineffectiveness could possibly be due to broader problems within the system of lay governance other than the failure of some parents to understand school governance.

Without a doubt, one of the issues has to be the growing complexity of the performance expectations being imposed on boards over the last decade. Wylie (2012) described the role of boards as being more prescribed but also increasingly complex. Robinson and Ward (2004) also pointed out that the new reporting demands on boards of trustees under the Education Standards Act (2001) have meant parents now have to come to terms with the specialised language of schools and with a need to understand the teaching and learning process. Morrison (2013) and Robinson and Ward (2004) also identified that the new expectations on boards have exacerbated the conflict, identified by ERO (2007) and by NZSTA (2008), between the centralised views of school organisation and purpose held by education professionals and the more localised views held by parents. Both ERO (2007) and NZSTA (2008) also pointed out that parents of primary school children tended to be involved with a school for altruistic reasons. As a consequence, when parents became trustees they tended to view the role of the board as being supportive of the current school rather than as the leaders for the improvement of a small business. Morrison (2013) also pointed out that the parents of primary school children tend to have a view of how the school works based on their intimate knowledge of the school and on their children's satisfaction. Therefore, they generally have a limited understanding of the education process but a high level of localised awareness. This means primary school parents tend to equate school and board effectiveness with the ongoing well-being of their children rather than administrative efficiency or national education outcomes (Robinson & Ward, 2004).

This apparent conflict of perception as well as the increased complexity of the role may also provide an explanation of why anecdotal evidence indicates there is diminished interest by parents in New Zealand in being school trustees. That same anecdotal evidence also suggests that parents, in general, are not keen to be involved in a system which contains high levels of personal accountabilities and the chances of being judged negatively by education officials. This fall-off of parent interest has, without a doubt, been felt most keenly in schools where there has always been a small pool of parental expertise or a small group of parents. Yet, despite the warnings this trend should have given the government and its advisors, there has been no reduction in the complexity of the compliance or effectiveness expectations being imposed on boards. If anything, the expectations have become more exacting through legislation such as the Education Standards Act (2001) which requires boards to produce a strategic plan and to report on student achievement to the MoE. There has also been the imposition of National Standards for primary schools in 2009 (Ministry of Education, 2009) which has meant primary school boards have to ensure the school meets mandated national achievement criteria. At the same time, there has also been a raft of legislation for trustees to enact to do with health and safety, financial management and other marginally educational issues. Court and O'Neill (2011) suggested that these requirements have been the result of the

government's aim to "reconstitute traditional forms of educational administration and leadership to a more effective technology of central control" (p.121).

These changes have also been accompanied by increasingly specialised, business-orientated descriptions of board effectiveness from ERO. For instance, in a NZSTA publication (STA News, May 2016) ERO described board effectiveness as the capacity to, "interrogate the data" or to have in place, "defensible identification of priorities and target" (p. 3). As Robinson and Ward (2004) pointed out, for trustees to even get close to that skill level they would need to be able to engage in sophisticated educational discourse.

Therefore, the issue appears to be that, since its inception, the original lay governance concept has been changed from localised responsibility to the need for boards to be obedient to a generic management system based on business principles of leadership and centralised responsiveness. In so doing, the initial socio-democratic idealism (Court & O'Neill, 2011) in which boards were accorded a measure of freedom of action has been gradually superseded by a complex and prescribed governance model, requiring sophisticated governance skills. The overall effect has been to develop a form of, "neo-liberal educational Darwinism" (Morrison, 2013, p. 42), in which board effectiveness is dependent on trustees having a particular set of governance skills and understandings.

The study

Methodology

The study used two methods to gather its data. The first method was the observations of both boards in action over the course of several months. These observations were supported by post-meeting discussion sessions with each board in which the boards were asked to reflect on the meeting, as well as their individual actions and responses. The observations and discussion sessions focused on finding the answers to three broad questions:

1. On what activities did the boards mostly focus?
2. What major factors influenced the decision-making processes of the individual trustees?
3. What concerns did the individual trustees have?

To ensure complete understanding, the researcher also engaged in a series of semi-structured interviews with individual trustees.

The second method was a small questionnaire which all board members were asked to complete. It was assumed during the design phase of this study that gaining a full insight into the attitudes of individual trustees by observation alone could be problematic. Therefore, an aim of the questionnaire was to provide an opportunity for the parent trustees and the principals to make considered comments about their understanding of the board's role, board effectiveness, and the issues they felt impacted on them as trustees.

The questionnaire was divided into three parts. In the first part, trustees were asked to identify their board experience and to give the main reasons why they opted for being on the board. In the second part, the researcher provided a list of eleven descriptors about the role of boards gleaned from the literature on boards from the MoE, ERO and the training manuals of the NZSTA (NZSTA, 2013) The trustees were asked to rank these in order of importance. For analysis, the effectiveness statements were also assigned three broad categories: relational (1-4), task-orientation (5-7 and 10), and values (8, 9 and 11) (See Figure 1). In the third part of the questionnaire, participants were asked to list any concerns they had while being on the board.

The questionnaire was issued to 15 board members, 13 of whom responded (86%). Of those completing the questionnaire, two were principals, one was a board chairperson and one was a staff representative. The rest were either elected or co-opted parent representatives.

1. Maintaining good relationships with the staff and the principal
 2. Relates well to its community
 3. Has effective and positive meetings
 4. Is good at getting tasks or compliance done
 5. Has a full set of policies and procedure in place
 6. Acknowledges different cultural values within the board and the school
 7. Understands and monitors the school's finances and property
 8. Understands and monitors student achievement
 9. Is clear about its values and expectations
 10. Is able to link its policies to its expectations
 11. Has in place a robust performance management system
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Figure 1: List of effectiveness statements

Results

Observations, discussion sessions and interviews

One of the key findings from this first phase of the study was that both boards indulged in significant task avoidance. Even when tasks were completed, those tasks were often undertaken with little effort to identify their educational implications. When questioned about this way of operating, several trustees explained that their focus was on good relationships within the board and between the board and the school rather than on doing tasks. Trustees also pointed to some tasks being too complex or irrelevant to their experience and because of that they felt they could only perform the task in a formulaic or perfunctory way: 'I find some of the things we are asked to do quite confusing, so I just agree.'

Comments by trustees also provided other reasons for the desire by individual trustees to maintain good relationships. For instance, the trustees on the board of the small rural school had relationships with the other trustees that extended beyond the board into the community. These links were seen by them as an important social factor and as a consequence they needed to preserve them for a whole range of personal and social reasons beyond their board role. As one trustee pointed out, 'We all know and work with each other in the community.' Those community links were also important as they had enabled the trustees to develop some skills in conflict resolution and as a consequence, moments of conflict were fewer and of less duration than on the intermediate school's board. On that board, the trustees also emphasised the need for good relationships, but the reasons given by individual trustees tended more towards forms of personal self-protection and personal self-worth. "I hate conflict" was a common comment. Individual trustees on that board were also aware that previous bad relationships on an earlier board had provoked concerns from the community and the MoE, and criticisms of individual board members by education officials. Therefore, several of those trustees identified an effective board as one where there were "no hidden or personal agendas" or there was "no in-fighting."

Part of the focus on good relationships between the board and the school that were evident in both boards also appeared to arise from the concerns of the principals about the school getting negative publicity. Both principals also identified poor relationships with job stress and therefore saw quality relationships as those where there were no surprises and no threats to them professionally. This concern about publicity by both principals was understandable because of the challenging nature of a principal's work environment. Moreover, both principals were aware of the risks of adverse publicity for the school created by poor board-principal relationships and had discussed with the board the need for a good public image for the school to ensure it maintained its market

share. Both principals also linked having good relationships with the board to their understanding of board effectiveness. They expressed the view that there was less risk of damaging publicity for the school because of board ineffectiveness so long as that ineffectiveness existed within the context of a good board-principal relationship.

Nevertheless, there are many governance tasks which need to be done which could raise the possibility of conflict. By avoiding those tasks, the boards were possibly less effective as school governors. For both boards to become more effective, individual trustees needed greater skills in conflict resolution. These needed to go beyond the simplistic ones identified in the rural school board or the desire to maintain good relationships by not being challenging. This lack of conflict resolution skills meant there were times when good governance practice was sacrificed for "comfortable relationships" (Robinson & Ward, 2004, p. 179). For instance, the trustees tended to avoid questioning information from the principal, or making comments, even when that information should have provoked some discussion. It was most evident in the reaction of the trustees to the requirement that they undertake the principal's appraisal. The trustees on both boards identified this task as being too complex and too specialised for non-professionals. They also saw it as a task which was potentially challenging or critical of the principal. For this reason, some of the trustees refused to participate in this process, preferring, instead, to leave it up to the chairperson or to the principal themselves.

However, the need to preserve good relationships was not the only factor impacting on the way both boards operated. Many of the trustees expressed concerns that they had difficulty in understanding some of the tasks and found it hard to identify a reason for performing them. This was especially evident when it came to the requirements in the Education Standards Act (2001) to monitor the teaching and learning and create a strategic plan. The trustees commented that they felt they lacked the relevant educational expertise and also the language required to perform those tasks. As a consequence, those tasks, which touched on the core function of the school and which were identified by the MoE and ERO as being at the heart of the governance system, tended to be performed by both boards simply to avoid adverse reactions from either the MoE or ERO. As far as the trustees on both boards were concerned, governance was compliance and teaching and learning and governance were in two different worlds.

Therefore, it was arguable that while both these boards were seen as ineffective by the MoE, the reality was that some of the key governance tasks they were being compelled to perform were too complex. Also, the use of words, such as "rigorous," "coherent," "defensible" by ERO (2015) to describe board effectiveness, accorded some of the tasks, such as monitoring student achievement data, an exactitude they possibly did not warrant at board level. More importantly, such language for the parents, few of whom had tertiary qualifications, made the tasks appear more difficult than they possibly were. Also, the use of that language to describe tasks did not sufficiently account for the personal or cultural issues of some of the trustees, such as shyness or their natural tendency to defer to professionals. As one trustee said, "It's not easy to read the data we get. When I don't understand, I feel silly. Besides, if he says it's alright how would I know otherwise? I trust him. He is the principal after all."

The question then arose whether the trustees were being sufficiently supported by the MoE or NZSTA to perform their role. Comments by trustees indicated they felt they were not. This feeling agreed with the findings of Morrison (2013), Robinson and Ward (2004) and Wylie (2012). Brooking (2004) also found that boards were generally left to their own devices and therefore tended to only access support if they were sufficiently aware of their role to identify that they needed support. Without a doubt also, the link between procedural correctness and board effectiveness being drawn by both ERO and the MoE resulted in both boards focussing on being procedurally correct rather than on the educational implications of their role. Consequently, tasks were completed with little explicit consideration of their educational value or even with any understanding of their purpose.

Another factor which impacted on the way both boards operated was the capacity of the principals. Both principals were inexperienced but, because of the level of trust afforded to them as professionals and the emphasis on good relationships within both boards, none of the trustees questioned their advice or sought additional information about tasks. This was despite most of the trustees being aware of the descriptions of the board's tasks on the MoE website, in NZSTA documents, and the training sessions being offered by NZSTA. The training sessions by NZSTA, in particular, were seen as not being explicit enough. Some board members described them as being so generic as to "be of no use at all." Trustees on both boards were also critical of the demands implicit within that advice. As one said, "They seem to think I have the time to work this all out. I have a farm to run." At the same time, several rural trustees expressed concern that the board training sessions run by NZSTA tended to be in the evening and often some distance away.

This failure by trustees to access support was also exacerbated by a broad lack of understanding about the board's role. There seemed to be little general knowledge amongst the trustees about the changes in the roles of boards over the last decade. Instead, most of the trustees tended to base their understanding of the board's role on the time when boards were primarily focused on administrative duties. As a consequence, none of the trustees had been prepared for the compliance demands, the data analysis, and the need for educational discourse, let alone for being in the spotlight of ERO or the MoE. One trustee was quite clear about this: "If I'd known what I had to do I wouldn't have put my name forward." The impression also gained from comments by some trustees was that once they were elected they felt swamped with the requirements and the regulations: "There is just too much work. I have a farm to run."

Questionnaire

The responses to the questionnaire largely confirmed the conclusions and assumptions drawn from the observations, discussions and interviews in the first stage of the study.

The analysis of the questionnaire data was undertaken in two ways. The first method was to identify what the trustees regarded as board effectiveness by examining whether the trustees accorded eleven statements of board effectiveness a high priority (1-3) or a low priority (9-11). Any supporting statements made by the trustees to justify their placements were also analysed. Table 1 shows the percentage responses to each of the effectiveness statements.

The priorities confirmed that, in general, the parent trustees were mostly concerned with maintaining a positive relationship with the school and amongst themselves (Statements 1-3). They were also concerned with maintaining a positive relationship with the community (Statement 2), though less so than with the school.

One assumption drawn from these results was that, in the main, trustees tended to be looking inwards towards the school rather than outwards towards the community. Written comments by trustees indicated this approach to community representation arose from a lack of educational understanding by individual trustees and also their failure to link their activities to the educational aspirations of the community.

However, the good relationships were not so important to the school staff. Both principals and the staff representative assigned data monitoring a higher priority than relationships. One principal also pointed to having a professional obligation to ensure the board and school were compliant. The other principal pointed to the personal and professional concern they had about the reaction of ERO to a failure of the board to monitor the data.

What was interesting was that both the parent trustees and the staff identified monitoring school finances as being more important than monitoring student achievement. A possible reason for that was the perceived emphasis the MoE placed on schools being fiscally neutral. Certainly, both principals equated good financial management with administrative efficiency. To the trustees this juxtaposition seemed to be because the broad

concept of making a surplus or deficit was more relevant to their daily lives. It was also suggested by several trustees that the school and the board were more likely to attract negative community publicity if they did not show good financial management as compared to poor or average educational outcomes. "The community will not be impressed if we are in a list of schools which have made a loss." This, once again, pointed to the trustees tending to regard management imperatives as the more powerful determiner of board effectiveness than educational imperatives.

Table 1. Percentage responses to each of the effectiveness statements

	% Priority 1-3	% Priority 9-11
Relationships with staff	54	15
Relates to community	30	30
Effective meetings	46	23
Task completion	23	23
Sets of policies etc.	23	0
Monitors finance	38	8
Monitors student achievement	30	8
Aware of its values	46	8
Relates its policies to its expectations	23	38
Performance management	23	46
Cultural values	8	46

The trustees also tended to regard broad cultural values as being of low importance. They were aware of the need to maintain their own values (Statement 8) which they linked to their altruism and desire for good relationships but broad cultural values, on the other hand, were dismissed by at least one trustee as being too 'airy-fairy'. This seemed to be because the application of cultural values was not recognised by some as being a specific task in managerial terms. This also seemed to be because of the degree to which managerial-type activities (Statements 4-10) dominated their view of their role. Several trustees stated, as well, that that they had chosen the school for their children on the basis of its values and therefore its values only required an informal monitoring through the feedback of their children.

The questionnaire responses also confirmed that any focus on task completion (Statement 4) did not exist where a task was identified as likely to cause conflict, as in the case of "Performance Management" (Statement 11). One trustee explained, "I'm just not comfortable with appraisal. I'm not a professional. I think he does a great job. It's not a job I could do." Another trustee was more pragmatic, "What would happen if we are too critical and he walks away. The school could close." The principals, on the other hand, had a more personal reason for the low priority given to the board undertaking their appraisal. Both objected to being judged by non-professionals whom they felt "did not understand the job."

Written comments in the questionnaire also confirmed the impact of the principal on how the boards operated. In particular, the attitude of the principal was a key factor in determining whether the trustees adopted a proactive, strategic governance approach or a reactive, managerial and procedurally-focused approach. "I'm

not too sure he listens to us,” was the comment from one trustee. Another mentioned the “slight tendency of the principal to shut down any discussion.” This influence of the principal on the individual trustees re-emphasised the need for the MoE and NZSTA to ensure all principals were trained in school governance. NZSTA, despite its training role, actually provides little specific training for principals and both principals in the study expressed the concern they had been given very little training, as new principals, about working with a board.

The final understanding gained from the questionnaire was that the original altruistic reasons given for joining the board by all the parent trustees did not diminish with time, experience or the increased compliance demands. It was evident in the comments in Section 3 of the questionnaire that school support remained the key motivation for parents. Although several trustees did offer a personal desire to be seen by education officials to be competent, they tended to link their view of competency to task completion rather than educational enhancement or school development. This was evident from one trustee who wrote, “I’m concerned that ERO will ask me questions about the school that I can’t answer and that will make me feel silly.”

Discussion

The study revealed some interesting issues in relation to the views the participants held of the role of the board of trustees and of board effectiveness. However, before there is any discussion of the broader implications of the results, it is important to remember some of the limitations of the study. This was a qualitative study of the boards of two small primary schools and had only 13 participants. Therefore, the inevitable question must arise as to whether the findings can be generalised to the wider population of boards and principals or to the broader school leadership and school governance debate. Also, it was a study of two schools which were in that group of schools identified by other researchers (Fisk & Ladd, 2000; Robinson & Ward, 2004; Morrison, 2013; Wylie, 1997, 1999, 2012), as well as by ERO (2007) and NZSTA (2008), as being the most likely to have trouble getting an effective board. Those understandings, and the fact that few of the trustees had tertiary qualifications or professional experience, could have reduced the confidence and understanding the trustees had of their role.

Nevertheless, many of the findings of the study matched those of other researchers such as Cohen and Ball (1999) and Hodges (1996), who identified that avoiding conflict on a board was common and often came at the price of capacity building, good governance practices and accountability. Court and O’Neill (2011), Morrison (2013), Robinson and Ward (2004) and Wylie (1997, 1999, 2012) also acknowledged the complexity of the board’s role. This suggested that the sample may not have been atypical. Moreover, the findings did reveal some broader issues which could apply to all small primary schools. In particular, they suggested that parents tended to have a different view of school purpose and school leadership from that held by the government and its advisors and this was reflected in their approach to the board. The government and its advisors viewed the school through the lens of a homogenising and centralising philosophy which required obedience to the principles of business management (Robinson & Ward, 2004). In comparison, the parents tended to apply local logics (Brooking, 2004) to their board role and to view the school through a localised and personalised context based on their intimate experience of the school and its impact on the well-being of their children.

Therefore, while the study was small and its results could be tested in further, broader studies, there was good reason to assume some aspects of the findings could have relevance to the national scene. In particular, the study pointed to the need for wider considerations in determining board ineffectiveness than the attribution of a board’s failure to the cognitive ability of some parents. While there clearly would always be boards where there were legitimate concerns about the capacity of some trustees to understand the requirements of school

governance, the study suggested that the governance expectations being placed on boards, and especially the boards of small schools, were an issue. First, they were at odds with the broadly held views of the parents of the board's role. Second, they were, in many cases, too complex for non-educationally trained or governance experienced trustees to adequately fulfil. The reporting requirements required by the MoE are a key example. Such reporting is actually a sophisticated governance strategy for which trustees would need significant training, some governance experience and educational understanding to be able to undertake without support.

The results of the study also raised a concern that there was an apparent conflict between the expectations inherent within the government's centralising and homogenising policies and a fundamental tenet of any school lay governance system. The basis of such a system must be a strong, trusting relationship between a school and its board. Therefore, the system should provide boards with the capacity to individualise their operations to the school. In that way trustees would retain the ability to link more closely with their community and to the needs of their school. Any system that is largely focused on creating a centralised and generic model of leadership, will, by that very focus, have difficulty adequately accounting for the many unique issues schools are subject to on a daily basis.

Nevertheless, the possible failure of the government's centralising policy initiatives to account for the uniqueness of each school was not the only issue identified in the study. What was more concerning was the apparent failure of the government and its advisors to fully acknowledge the possible impact of the homogenising viewpoint on almost half of all boards in New Zealand and especially on boards with a small pool of parental expertise. Despite both ERO (2007) and NZSTA (2008) acknowledging that small rural primary schools or primary schools serving lower socio-economic areas were more likely to struggle to meet the government's governance requirements, the study identified no diminishing of the effectiveness expectation on these schools. Nor did it detect the provision of additional support until the boards were identified as "at risk". This lack of proactive support seemed to point to a "sink or swim" attitude by education officials. It also seemed to suggest that the MoE, ERO and NZSTA did not recognise the inherent weakness in a system which was based on the capacity of participants, who were non-professionals and volunteers, to self-review.

Therefore, a key finding of the study was that for some small rural primary schools and small primary schools serving lower socio-economic areas, the centralising policy imperatives of the government were having a significant impact on the school's board. In particular, they were creating some tension by attempting to impose a generic leadership model which went counter to the localised views of parent trustees who simply wanted to be supportive of the school their children went to. While this view might possibly not be quite so true of large urban primary schools or larger secondary schools where there is a greater pool of parental expertise, it would clearly be a possible issue for the many small rural primary schools and those primary schools serving lower-socio-economic areas.

As a consequence, the study raised the question as to whether the broad effectiveness measures being imposed on boards by the government and its advisors were appropriate. It also raised the question whether such demands should be imposed without substantial support for boards. It also questioned whether it is right to place the burden of educational enhancement on parents when it is actually the MoE which is controlling what schools and boards are doing. Equally important is the concern that the procedural correctness focus of education officials may be creating a dissonance between government policies which require boards to be educationally focused and the administrative correctness requirements which are making managerialism the most powerful determiner of board effectiveness. There was certainly no doubting that the trustees in the study could draw no clear links between their "school-based bureaucracy" (Robinson & Ward, 2004, p. 185) and any educational implication for their schools.

Conclusion

This study raised some interesting issues about the current system of lay governance in New Zealand. The system when first postulated was always potentially going to be problematic because of the devolved nature of reforms in which all schools would have the same expectations of lay governance imposed on them. There was also, always a question as to how realistic the initial assumptions were that parents could lead schools. However, recent moves by the government and its advisors to bring all schools into a generic management system seem to have created some additional challenges, especially to the belief that schools should be locally responsive.

The New Zealand educational landscape is populated by a large number of small primary schools, many of which are marked by having either a small pool of parents or a small pool of parental expertise. That fact alone should give the government and its advisors pause to consider the complexity of the expectations being imposed on school boards and the reasons why primary school parents tend to opt to be trustees. This study indicated that, in general, the parents of small primary schools tend to be less interested in broad leadership concepts but become trustees because of their desire to support the school and the needs of their children. Therefore, any board role requirements that do not acknowledge that inclination are bound to create tension. In the same way, so would any system which does not allow for the differences between schools or their daily experiences.

The study, therefore, raised the need for the government and its advisors to more carefully consider the effects of the current centralising policies on the boards of small primary schools. It is recommended, therefore, that education officials reconsider the current concept of school board effectiveness. It also recommended that the government and its advisors question the appropriateness of parents being asked to take on more responsibility or more sophisticated governance tasks. In particular, the study pointed to a need for the government and its advisors to consider the extent to which increasingly complex requirements on boards are contributing to an already existing inequality between those boards which possess high levels of parental expertise and those boards which do not. Unless this inequality is addressed, the whole concept of having a system of school leadership based on localised representation could be at risk.

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