# From strain to partnership: How governance can safeguard principal wellbeing in rural schools

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In rural, small New Zealand schools, principals are stretched by governance gaps that blur the lines between strategic oversight and day-to-day management. Where board members lack training in education and have a limited understanding of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, well-intentioned involvement can slide into operational interference. The result is predictable: intensified workload, less time for leading learning, and increased stress for those at the heart of their schools. The evidence suggests that principal wellbeing in rural schools is, fundamentally, a governance issue, and that targeted board capability, cultural competence, and role clarity are the fastest and most cost-effective levers for change (Education Review Office [ERO], 2021; Wylie, 2012).

New Zealand's self-managing model gives boards of trustees wide reaching autonomy. In practice, the absence of shared understanding about what belongs to governance versus management often sees principals absorb operational responsibilities that should sit elsewhere. In small rural schools, where principals may also teach, this misalignment is amplified. The same person is expected to lead learning, manage property, handle compliance, meet community expectations, and respond to well-meaning board requests that drift into day-to-day directions. National evidence has long linked unclear board leadership roles to high stress and diminished time for instructional leadership (Hodgen & Wylie, 2005; Wylie, 2012). More recently, sector polling indicates that a significant proportion of principals attribute ongoing stress directly to board–leadership dynamics and workloads that are difficult to sustain (NZEI Te Riu Roa, 2023). These patterns are not simply "personality clashes" or isolated misunderstandings; they are predictable outcomes of a system that depends on lay governance without consistently providing the capability support that lay governance requires.

Governance quality is not just about policies and budgets; it is also about cultural understanding and partnership. Boards that are confident in Te Ao Māori, uphold Te Tiriti partnership, and know their local context create conditions in which principals can pursue culturally sustaining practice with real backing (ERO, 2021). In November 2025, the Government signalled a significant change: removing the statutory requirement for school boards to "give effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi" in Section 127, while retaining expectations to seek equitable outcomes for Māori learners, reflect Aotearoa New Zealand's cultural diversity, and provide for teaching and learning in te reo Māori when requested (Ensor, 2025). The Government's position is that Treaty obligations rest with the Crown

rather than parent-led boards; the legislation also elevates a paramount objective of raising educational achievement and explicitly requires boards to take all reasonable steps to ensure attendance.

This change does not remove the moral or educational imperative to partner well with Māori whānau and mana whenua. However, it may reduce statutory clarity for boards, especially in small rural settings, about the mandate and expectations for Te Tiriti-aligned governance. In practice, variability is likely to increase: some boards will maintain strong commitments through local policy and partnerships; others may de-prioritise culturally sustaining practice unless leaders make the case. For principals, especially teaching principals, the risk is a greater role conflict and advocacy load to sustain reo, tikanga, and local histories within the curriculum. Conversely, a clear local Governance–Management Charter and purposeful board development can preserve the benefits of culturally responsive schooling while meeting the bill's sharpened focus on attendance and achievement. And as concurrent statements about closing the equity gap make clear, any policy reset will still be judged by whether Māori learners experience fair, high-quality outcomes (Morgan, 2025).

Representation matters. Who sits at the governance table shapes what is understood as "good schooling." Boards that reflect the cultural identities and aspirations of their communities tend to make better, more legitimate decisions (Tomorrow's Schools Taskforce, 2019). Yet Māori and Pasifika perspectives remain underrepresented on many rural boards. Without that representation, principals, especially Māori principals, can find themselves bridging gaps between community aspiration, classroom reality, and board expectations, often at personal cost. Under the new settings, the presence or absence of Māori voice on each board will likely influence how consistently schools continue to prioritise te reo Māori, tikanga, and local histories within teaching and learning.

The cumulative effect of these governance gaps, unclear roles, insufficient cultural competence, and thin representation is chronic overload and moral distress for principals. Media coverage and national surveys describe widespread fatigue and burnout among school leaders, with rural principals disproportionately affected due to multi-level teaching, recruitment challenges, and limited support roles (New Zealand Herald, 2021; NZEI Te Riu Roa, 2023). Earlier research already identified stress levels as "high or extremely high" for a substantial share of principals, with smaller schools reporting intensified pressures (Hodgen & Wylie, 2005). This is not an individual resilience problem. It is a system design problem that produces foreseeable strain. When governance functions well, anchored in trust, cultural partnership, clear roles, and capability, principal wellbeing improves and so does the quality of teaching and learning (ERO, 2021). When it does not, even the most dedicated principals face a narrowing margin for effective leadership.

The fastest route to stabilising principal wellbeing in rural and remote schools is targeted support for governance capability and clarity, with explicit attention to cultural partnership. This does not require large budgets; it requires discipline and focus. Begin with induction. Every new trustee should complete governance-versus-management training within three months, clarifying strategic roles, delegations, and the principal's professional responsibilities (ERO, 2021). The New Zealand School Boards Association (NZSBA, formerly NZSTA) already offers employment advice, a governance helpline, policy templates, and PLD modules; these should be used and uptake made visible and

expected. At present, there is no public, system-level monitoring or dataset that shows which trustees complete training or how board capability grows over time, which leaves an accountability gap. Locally, boards can close this by setting a non-negotiable induction window, reporting trustee PLD completion in board minutes, and assigning a trustee PLD lead. Further, Te Tiriti and cultural competence can be embedded through board learning co-designed with mana whenua, focused on local histories, tikanga, and how partnership principles shape governance decisions, even without a statutory "give effect" clause. These are feasible steps for volunteer boards that pay dividends in clarity and trust.

Boards are Crown entities and the legal employer of the principal. That status carries accountability for student success, safety, and staff wellbeing, regardless of trustees being volunteers or lack deep educational expertise. In small rural settings, this can amplify power asymmetries: principals answer to a lay employer for appraisal, workload, and conduct, while simultaneously relying on that same employer for role clarity, resourcing, and culturally sustaining direction. Without assured governance capability and transparent PLD uptake, principals are easily caught between board preferences and professional standards, with predictable impacts on wellbeing and on the coherence of teaching and learning. Clear local expectations, mandatory induction, documented PLD, and explicit partnership commitments protect both governance quality and the principal's ability to lead learning.

It is important to lock in role clarity through a one-page Governance–Management Charter, reviewed annually, that specifies what belongs to the board (strategy, policy, appraisal, assurance) and what belongs to the principal (day-to-day operations, professional leadership, personnel management within policy). NZSBA's templates should be used for policy and assurance cycles but paired with local decision rules and a board calendar that foregrounds two standing priorities at every meeting: student progress/attendance and principal wellbeing (workload signals, release time, resourcing for high-leverage priorities). Before approving any new initiative, boards should apply simple decision filters: Does this improve learner outcomes? What is the workload impact on the principal and staff? What will we de-prioritise to make room?

For teaching principals, it would help to establish a minimum, predictable leadership release and plan relief resourcing annually. We can reduce operational drag by pooling shared services across a cluster of property, finance, policy, and compliance (Wylie, 2012). It is further worthwhile to invest in professional supervision and problem-solving principal networks, because well-being support that is structured and confidential reduces isolation and re-grounds leaders in their core purpose.

It is paramount to strengthen representation and partnership, such as proactively recruiting Māori trustees (co-opted where appropriate) to ensure Māori voice is central to direction setting, not tokenised. Building a regular hui rhythm with mana whenua to align school strategy with local histories and aspirations is advisable, as is to include equity outcomes within principal appraisal goals, developed with community input. We need to keep whānau engaged with purpose: share clear, consistent reporting on student progress that invites insight and collaboration, not just compliance updates. In the current legislative environment, local commitments will do more of the heavy lifting: making them visible, specific, and measurable.

The role of boards should be as sense-makers, not micro-managers. Principals can adopt simple dashboards on student progress (reading, writing, mathematics), attendance, and a few well-being indicators. These can be discussed against agreed targets each term (ERO, 2021). It pays further to track a small set of workload signals (e.g., after-hours email volume, release time taken, sick leave patterns) to catch pressure early and act supportively. I would suggest to run two short evaluation cycles per year where the board checks whether changes are working, focusing on student outcomes and principal workload effects. These routines shift governance energy toward what matters and away from operational detail.

Some will argue that volunteer trustees have limited time, training is hard to organise, and cultural competence is a long journey. All true, and manageable. For this reason, inductions need to be cept short, localised, and practical. Blended online modules with one in-person session, perhaps shared with a neighbouring board, can further support this process. Other measures include to prioritise a small increase in leadership release or a shared services arrangement, removing low-value busywork to unlock time for curriculum, teaching quality, and relationships – the levers that matter. Cultural learning starts with partnership: inviting mana whenua and local Māori leaders helps shape board learning and school direction. Doing this together builds confidence and legitimacy over time. Others will argue that a sharper statutory focus on attendance and achievement is the right priority. It can be, if we acknowledge the evidence that culturally sustaining practice, strong whānau partnerships, and clear role boundaries are not distractions from achievement but drivers of it.

If we want sustainable leadership and equity for learners in rural and remote schools, we must treat governance as a wellbeing intervention, not an administrative formality. Boards that are clear about roles, culturally grounded, and focused on student progress create the conditions for principals to lead learning rather than firefighting. The shift is modest in cost but significant in impact: a short induction cycle, a one-page charter, scheduled attention to principal wellbeing, and purposeful partnership with mana whenua. In a policy environment that now places less explicit Treaty obligation on boards, these local commitments matter even more. They signal to principals and to communities that governance exists to enable great teaching and learning, not to exhaust those charged with delivering it.

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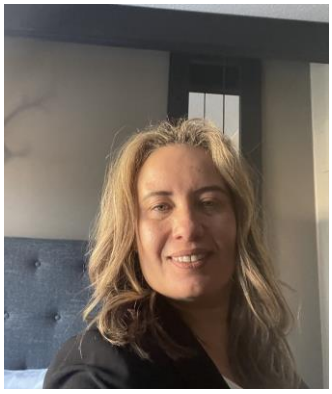

Rodrigues-Tiago holds a Bachelor of Arts in English and Portuguese from PUC Minas, Brazil, and has furthered her education in New Zealand with a Graduate Diploma in Early Childhood Teaching and a Master's in Educational Leadership from Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Additionally, she holds a Graduate Diploma in Primary Teaching from the University of Canterbury. Rodrigues-Tiago is an experienced educator and leader, passionate about fostering inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments. With a deep commitment to curriculum development and community engagement, she led numerous initiatives that integrate sustainability, Mātauranga Māori, and innovative pedagogical practices. Currently pursuing PhD research, her focus lies in bridging global educational models with local contexts to empower diverse learners and communities.

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