

# Principals in Control of their own Development

## Can you develop a principal?

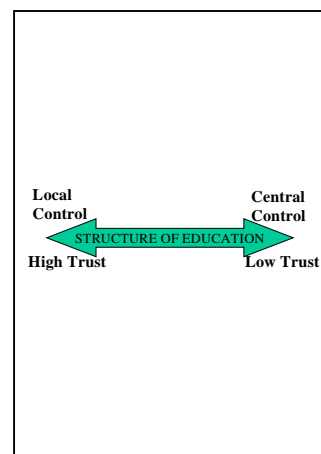
You can find the principals' forté but can you make them think?

*An address to the Auckland Primary Principals' Association 10 June 2004. David Stewart*

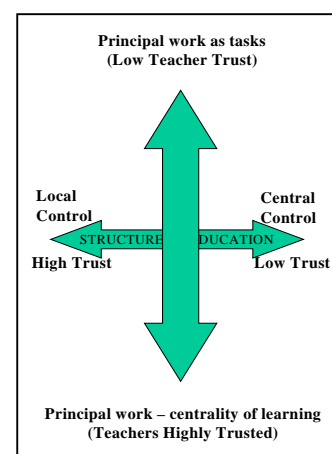
### Introduction

Thank you for inviting me to Auckland to continue the debate of the issue of principal development. As many of you are aware, I have long been an advocate of principals taking control of their own development and it is that aspect of this question that I want to focus on during this time. When we ask the question, "How shall we best develop school leaders?" The answer, to a large degree depends on the way we think about what they do. In other words we need to put the question into context. In the time we have today I would like to locate the discussion within concept of trust.

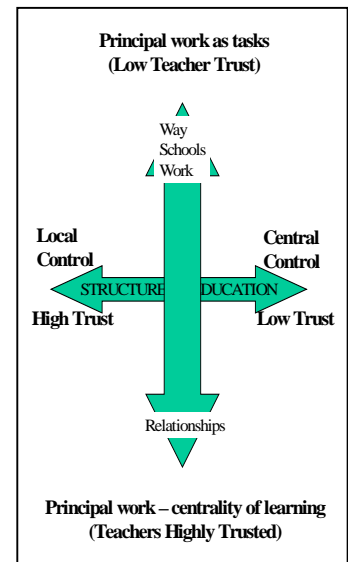
If we think about how education is currently structured in New Zealand we are faced with the considerable tension between local and central control. Schools are governed by local boards but the curriculum, financial support, and overall provision of the infrastructure is a national consideration. In a real sense movement to one end of the continuum or the other signals decreasing or increasing trust.



Across the top of the structural consideration we can place another dimension which represents how an individual school might work. If the school community and the principal think of the work of the school as the teachers and leaders "doing things" as in completing tasks then they are near the top of the page. Alternatively if the work of the school were conceived as "learning" as in constructing meaning, then they would be down to the bottom of the page.



On this vertical dimension, schools with highly specific task environments can be said to be operating a low trust regime, whereas those where relationships and evidence based responsibilities predominate could be said to manage a high trust regime. Having said that, most schools would have elements of both extremes but importantly they would be able to signal their general preference for one end or the other. Thus, as we think about our own schools and about the system generally we can identify the quadrant that we think should dominate. My own preference is for the bottom left hand quadrant. This is where a great deal of leadership effort would be applied to culture development and culture management. We need to think carefully how principal development activities could be devised to support these behaviours.



Now if we wished to encourage principals to move into this bottom left quadrant, along the horizontal dimension, we don't need to provide any training. The central authorities could simply reduce the number of things they currently require principals to do for them. What a dilemma! The Ministry needs every increasing amounts of information in order to maintain the system and to advise the politicians. Principals are so busy supplying these data that the real work of the school is left to others. We would have more effective schools tomorrow if principals got some time back. Some principals might even get some leisure!

### ***Some critical issues with principal development***

Now let us address the specific issue of Development Centres and how best to improve the quality of what principals do. As it is often difficult to separate personal professional development at this level, from school development, I believe that we should focus firstly on the context that principals experience daily. This would mean that school leaders select 'critical incidents' or important elements from the work that they do to explain and illustrate their values and beliefs. Such discussions become the beginning point for further study, constructing new meaning and developing alternative responses. Thus, the curriculum for principal development arises from current work rather than being prescribed by visiting consultants. We have some very good examples of this kind of practice in New Zealand, with the reflective principal courses being an illustration.

Secondly, we know that talking about their work is a proven mechanism for expanding possibilities and establishing sound practice in professional practice provided the discussion is tightly bounded by agreed and reflective protocols. All participants need to be committed to, and to reinforce these agreed protocols. Many schools use a variety of adaptations of Quality Learning Circles for teacher discussion and the same process can be applied, very successfully to principal groups.

Thirdly, there is substantial support for the notion that such discussions need to be illuminated with 'shared evidence of practice' as they progress. My development of Digital Portfolio was an attempt to facilitate this notion of shared practice.

Fourthly, groups need to establish a procedure for validating the 'shared evidence of practice' and affording participants a means of further exploring ideas of others that interest them. Some schedule of visits can work very well here.

### ***How could this work?***

The mentor groups, which we established through the Principal Centre in collaboration with NZEI and NZPF, came from these kinds of ideas. They still operate across the country, albeit under a different name, and are supported by Moe grants. What we are now talking about is slightly different as the control would be totally in the hands of principal groups. Nevertheless, some liaison could be useful and if funding is sought from Moe then clearly, there would need to be some discussion about relative similarities and differences.

A number of different models are possible but my preference would be to locate the groups – say called Principal Development Initiative – within regional principal organizations. In this case it would be APPA (APPA Principal Development Initiative). Smaller regions could append their association's name and support to this heading.

Within APPA, a subcommittee would be established to oversee this initiative. What could be important is to have, as members of that subcommittee principals who are well qualified, academically in educational leadership and administration. Appointing these people at the beginning of the project would ensure that possible moves to accreditation processes were within the domain of proven and defensible practice. Some independent people could also be invited to participate in this work.

Groups would be composed of 4-6 members who would be required to agree to the protocols as defined by APPA. Facilitation of groups could be shared within the group, with members of the APPA subcommittee perhaps sampling sessions throughout the year. Periodically, say twice a year, all the groups could come together for a plenary session and during this time individuals could volunteer to present a compilation of their work, perhaps as a portfolio, to the session participants. It is easy to see how these kinds of presentations could move to formal accreditation procedures.

It would be critical for participants to be able to demonstrate how this thinking, talking, reading and study, had resulted in improved learning and teaching in their school. Presenters at the plenary could be followed, for example, with a colleague, or two, who had visited their school to validate the evidence they were presenting.

## ***Getting Started***

As this is not a very costly exercise it could begin almost immediately. It may also be possible to attract some commercial sponsorship. Funding from Moe may be more difficult, particularly if you suggested that funds be diverted from existing Moe efforts to establish Principal (Assessment) Centres. I particularly like the thought that something like this could run alongside the Ministry project. We could make some particularly relevant comparative evaluations.

One avenue worth considering would be to add on an 'at a distance' component. This would involve adding a virtual member to some of the groups. Principals in remote locations could take part without the travel component. I am writing in this area currently and have a new book due out before the end of the year that may help this concept get started. Going in this direction with a proportion of the groups might interest communication and hardware companies in supporting the initiative. I am sure, however, that I don't need to remind you that any financial support generally comes with some conditions. This may be an area in which principal groups wish to remain free from any external constraints.

An alternative source of support would be to convince the authorities to invest in a form of sabbatical leave where recipients used their time away from their school to work with these principal development groups as facilitators, mentors, and school visitors. They could be supported in the regional Ministry offices or perhaps with the teacher support services, and spend say six months working in this way. They would likely feel refreshed and, if chosen wisely, the groups they worked with would get a charge of new ideas.

In summary, I think principal development activities should be delivered in a high trust environment. The thinking and new understandings should be grounded in the real work of the school and there should be a general recognition that school leadership is an intellectual activity which is based around the centrality of learning. Schools, in my view, should be viewed as communities where leaders regularly demonstrate their personal commitment to life long learning and critical reflective thought.

## ***Discussion Questions***

1. Where on the horizontal continuum do you think control lies?
2. Where is your school on the vertical dimension?
3. What are the four critical issues I raised?
4. Could the principal group you belong to function in this way?