Accelerating the Progress of Priority Learners in Primary Schools

May 2013
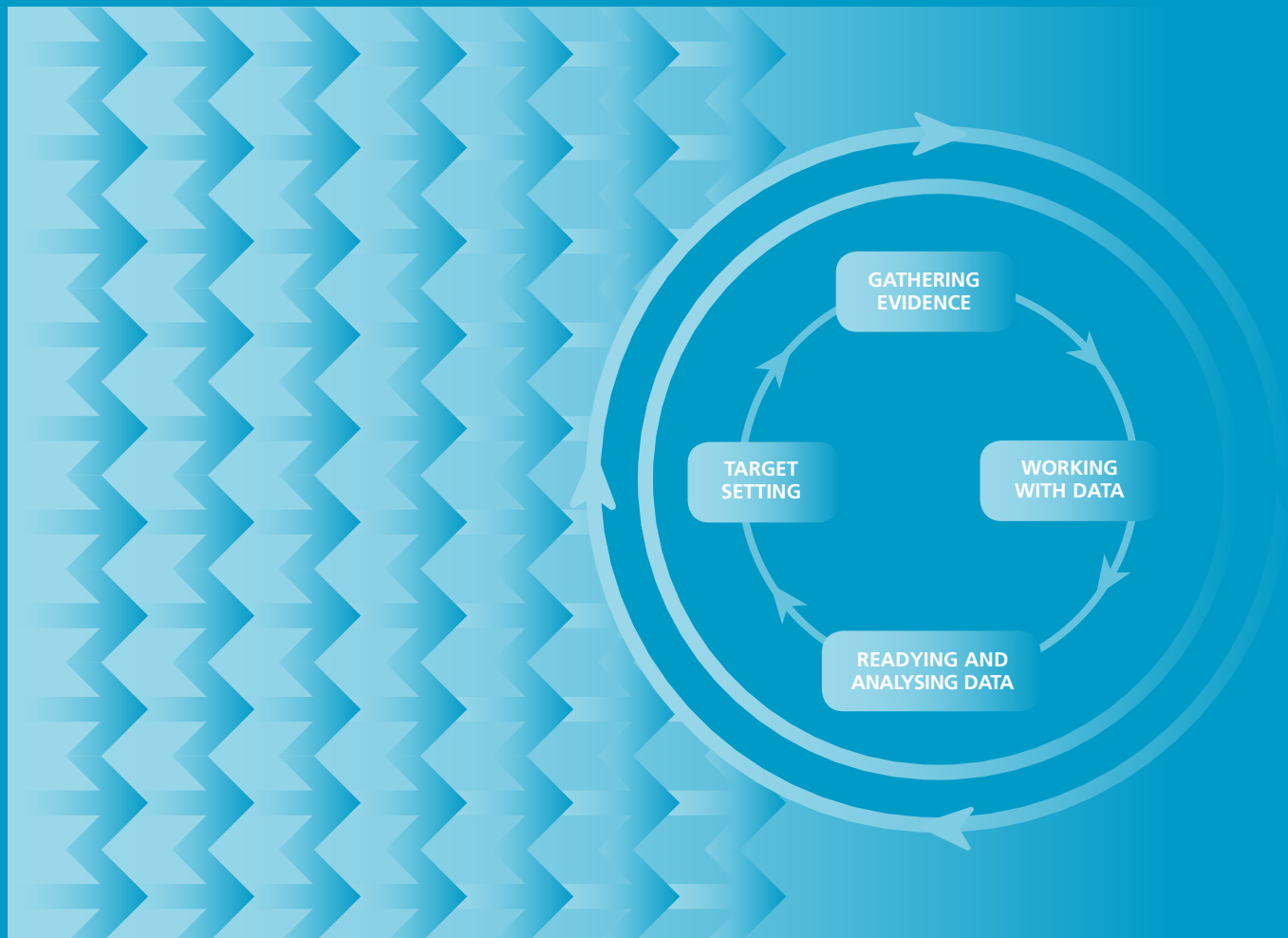
GATHERING EVIDENCE

WORKING WITH DATA

READYING AND ANALYSING DATA

TARGET SETTING

Ko te Tamaiti te Pūtake o te Kaupapa
The Child – the Heart of the Matter

Foreword

The Education Review Office (ERO) is an independent government department that reviews the performance of New Zealand's schools and early childhood services, and reports publicly on what it finds.

The whakataukī of ERO demonstrates the importance we place on the educational achievement of our children and young people:

Ko te Tamaiti te Pūtake o te Kaupapa
The Child – the Heart of the Matter

In our daily work we have the privilege of going into early childhood services and schools, giving us a current picture of what is happening throughout the country. We collate and analyse this information so that it can be used to benefit the education sector and, therefore, the children in our education system. ERO's reports contribute sound information for work undertaken to support the Government's policies.

In this evaluation ERO looked at the extent to which primary schools were using effective strategies to improve outcomes for priority groups of learners. The findings show that most schools had yet to develop an effective approach to accelerating learning. The report outlines the features of schools with highly effective practices and shows how teachers, leaders and trustees all contributed. There are several recommendations for school leaders, trustees, teachers, and the Ministry of Education.

Successful delivery in education relies on many people and organisations across the community working together for the benefit of children and young people. We trust the information in ERO's evaluations will help them in their work.

Diana Anderson
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Education Review Office

May 2013

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Overview

The Government has a goal to increase the number of students achieving National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) Level 2 qualifications. Primary schools have a significant role in contributing to this goal by ensuring that students leaving their schools are achieving at a level that enables them to succeed at secondary school. The Ministry of Education (the Ministry) has established a goal to increase the proportion of learners achieving at or above national literacy and numeracy standards. To achieve this goal, outcomes must improve for key priority groups, including Māori students that are not achieving well, Pacific students who are not achieving success, special needs students and those from low income families.

In this evaluation ERO examined the extent to which 176 primary schools[1] (Years 1-8) were using effective strategies to improve outcomes for priority groups of learners. Many schools had some deliberate actions intended to accelerate the progress of priority learners. However, only 23 percent of schools' actions demonstrated the use of highly effective practices the students needed to catch up with their peers. Of the remainder, 62 percent had some effective practices, and a further 12 percent were using ineffective practices. Three percent of schools were not using the National Standards. Many schools lacked robust self-review processes that focused on determining the impact of their actions for priority learners.

Most teachers were taking some actions intended to accelerate students' learning. However, only just over one-quarter of the schools were able to show that these actions were highly effective. This indicates a need for ongoing teacher professional development to build teachers' confidence and understanding of strategies they could use. Some teachers demonstrated a lack of ownership of their role in helping students to catch up, instead relying on an out-of-class 'expert' or intervention.

The role of the principal was vital in schools that were successfully accelerating learning. Leaders in these schools communicated a clear vision that all students were able to succeed and shared with trustees and staff a good understanding of what constitutes accelerated progress. They promoted an inquiry-based teaching and learning approach. Leaders accessed and facilitated relevant professional learning development designed to focus on teaching practices that needed to improve for students not succeeding. These principals coordinated a cohesive approach where boards, leaders and teachers worked collaboratively for the benefit of these students.

Leaders in the less successful schools had not developed a coherent team approach to responding to children who were not achieving well. The lack of clear expectations and

1 See Appendix 1 for a breakdown of the characteristics of the schools visited.

commitment to priority learners resulted in inconsistency and variability of practice across their schools. School charter targets lacked specific details and were not directly related to priority learners. Analysed achievement data was rarely used as a basis for decisions about what worked for these students and what should be changed.

The schools that effectively accelerated students' progress fully used school-wide data to determine the specific extra teaching that individual students needed. Leaders in these schools collated teachers' analysed data that identified individual student's specific strengths and next learning steps. Leaders also looked for achievement trends over time to establish how well their systems and programmes were working.

In contrast, schools where leaders mostly aggregated the numbers of students achieving below or well below the standards lacked the information to decide on their school-wide professional development or resourcing needs. Issues with the validity, reliability and sufficiency of assessment data in the less effective schools meant leaders had difficulties identifying which students needed additional support and the specific concepts they needed to master to make progress.

Few schools effectively identified and targeted the full range of priority learners. They were likely to identify students who were achieving below the National Standards in literacy and numeracy and target their needs. Māori and Pacific students were often subsumed into the more general group of under-achieving students. Only a few schools identified Māori and Pacific students as a focus group within the larger group of students achieving below the standards. These schools were still less likely to develop specific strategies to respond to the individual strengths, needs and interests of students in this group.

Many boards allocated resources for programmes to 'catch up' learners. However, only 17 percent of boards had processes to show trustees how effectively their resourcing was accelerating students' progress. Many boards needed more extensive and robustly analysed achievement information from the principal. Trustees often lacked an understanding that they could request this or use their data for decision-making.

NEXT STEPS

ERO recommends that the Ministry of Education supports schools to:

- improve their assessment practices to more effectively identify the student's next teaching steps and to monitor how well their interventions or strategies have accelerated the progress of priority learners
- access and use research findings, such as those in the Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) publications, particularly the BES exemplars, to introduce different teaching practices that have been shown to accelerate learners' progress in New Zealand schools.

ERO recommends that school trustees, leaders and teachers:

- seek improved achievement information reports that clearly identify the reoccurring achievement needs across the school
- use achievement information provided to them to evaluate the effectiveness of specific initiatives, programmes, interventions and additional staffing, such as teacher aides, in accelerating the progress of priority learners.

ERO recommends that leaders and teachers:

- improve the aggregation and use of their achievement data to ensure it identifies the reoccurring achievement needs for all groups of priority learners
- collate and analyse achievement information to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching practices in accelerating the progress of priority learners
- increase their understanding of approaches that have strong evidence of accelerating progress for priority learners
- introduce new practices known to accelerate progress for priority learners and review the impact on their students
- extend opportunities for families and whānau to be involved in understanding and contributing solutions to school-wide achievement challenges.

Introduction

The *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (PIRLS) shows that New Zealand Year 5 students, although above the international mean, were ranked significantly lower than the means for 20 other countries for achievement in reading. *Trends in International Mathematics and Science* (TIMMS) results show that mathematics results for Year 5 students were lower than the means of 29 countries and the international mean. For both literacy and mathematics Māori and Pacific students mean scores were considerably lower than New Zealand students as a whole. This placed the mean for Māori and Pacific students below the international mean for reading and mathematics.

ERO recognises that New Zealand's overall results can be improved by schools reviewing and developing the practices and processes they are using to accelerate priority learners' progress. In this report, priority learners refers to Māori and Pacific students who are not achieving success fully at school; students with special learning needs; and students from low income communities, who are below or well below the literacy and mathematics National Standards.

The Government has a goal to increase the number of students achieving NCEA Level 2 qualifications. In recognising that primary schools have a role in this improvement, the Ministry also set a goal to increase the proportion of learners achieving at or above the literacy and numeracy standards. Students need good literacy and numeracy skills to participate and stay engaged in learning across the whole curriculum. The focus is on improving outcomes for key priority groups by accelerating their progress. Progress is considered to be accelerated when a student moves from well below to below, at, or above the National Standard, or when the student moves from below the National Standard to at or above. This means that these students need to make more than one year's progress in a year in order to achieve at the expected level of acceleration.

ERO's report *Mathematics in Years 4 to 8: Developing a Responsive Curriculum (February 2013)* identified that trustees, leaders and teachers need to know more about:

• the progress and achievement of all learners
• the identification of learning priorities and priority learners
• their capability to bridge the gaps through a responsive curriculum and associated teaching strategies
• and the impact of change for learners.[2]

2   ERO (2013) *Mathematics in Years 4 to 8:* Developing a Responsive Curriculum. Wellington: Education Review Office, p.6

The findings of the ERO mathematics report reflect the findings of other recent ERO evaluations[3] on the need to extend the range and extent of effective practice in classrooms.

Effective leaders ensure that the school is responsive to groups that have historically not been well-served by the education system, in particular Māori and Pacific learners. Leaders build cohesive teams who support each other to implement strategies to use in classrooms to accelerate the progress of individual students. This collaboration requires strong levels of commitment across the school from boards, leaders and teachers.

Successful teachers create contexts for learning where students see that they can safely bring what they know and who they are into the learning relationship. When a school's curriculum fails to connect learners with their wider lives it can limit their opportunities to respond to a particular context, or to engage with and understand the material they are expected to learn.[4]

As identified in earlier ERO reports, effective teachers recognise the cultural resource that Māori and Pacific students bring to the school. They understand the importance of valuing and responding to students' identity, language and culture. Teachers then provide opportunities for these students to share aspects of their culture with others and use this to build the students' confidence to succeed across the curriculum. This does not mean focusing only on the iconic aspects of culture, but understanding and responding to students' personal culture and learning experiences.

The Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) has developed a framework to help leaders and teachers use an approach to teaching and learning that is responsive to the diverse abilities and aspirations of their learners. This framework implies that each school's curriculum is responsive to all students and that some change may be necessary in how the curriculum is designed to ensure that learning tasks, activities and experiences improve outcomes for all of their students.

The BES indicates the following key aspects of high quality practices that were part of ERO's focus in this report:

- The school maintains an 'unrelenting focus on student achievement and learning'
- Whole school alignment is around evidence-based practices
- Teaching is responsive to students' learning processes
- The relevance of the learning is transparent to students with links made to their daily lives
- Teaching builds on students' prior experiences and knowledge

3 ERO (2012) *Evaluation at a Glance: Transitions from Primary to Secondary School.* Wellington: Education Review Office

ERO (2012) *Teaching as Inquiry: Responding to Learners.* Wellington: Education Review Office

ERO (2012) *Literacy and Mathematics: Using Achievement Information to Promote Success.* Wellington: Education Review Office

ERO (2012) *Working with National Standards to Promote Student Progress and Achievement.* Wellington: Education Review Office

ERO (2012) *Evaluation at a Glance: Priority Learners in New Zealand Schools.* Wellington: Education Review Office

4 ERO (2012) *Improving Education Outcomes for Pacific Students.* Wellington: Education Review Office

- Tasks and classroom interactions help students understand each incremental step they need to make progress
- Students receive specific, frequent and positive feedback
- Students have a strong sense of involvement in the process of setting specific learning goals
- Effective school-home partnership practices are focused on student learning
- Teachers collaboratively reflect on practice to improve teaching.

This ERO evaluation took place during the second year that schools were using the National Standards as part of their annual planning and reporting. In 2011 schools were expected to set charter achievement targets. Outcomes related to their targets were reported as part of the school's annual report to their communities in 2012. In 2012 schools set new targets in relation to the National Standards. Schools should be using their data to determine students' progress and the impact of the strategies used in the previous year.

This report on priority learners focuses on:

- what schools know about priority learners' achievement
- the impact of schools' actions on accelerating the students' progress
- the actions that boards, leaders and teachers have taken to accelerate the progress of these students
- how the schools' targets and other planning and reporting processes are working for these learners
- the extent to which boards, leaders and teachers were working collaboratively to accelerate the progress of priority groups.

As part of this evaluation ERO investigated links from the school's charter targets to teacher and leader appraisal. Findings about the appraisal links are in ERO's report, *Board Employment Responsibilities: Linking Charter Targets to Appraisal in Primary Schools (February 2013).*

FINDINGS

Findings

This section presents ERO's findings in relation to the effective practices and processes that teachers, leaders and school trustees used to accelerate the progress of students achieving below or well below the National Standards. The coherence of schools' overall response to accelerate these students' progress is also discussed.

Teachers with highly effective practices

When children start school each child's literacy and numeracy experiences and knowledge differs. Some will progress quickly and others may need periods of more deliberate and tailored teaching to accelerate their progress. To do this teachers need to identify the skills and concepts each child needs more practice with and the contexts they could use to maintain the child's interest while reinforcing the skill or concept.

Teachers need extensive knowledge of each of the curriculum areas in which the student needs to accelerate their progress. Teachers need knowledge of:

• the student's strengths, interests and what they have already learnt
• the skills and knowledge that students need to acquire, and the usual patterns of progress learners make with these aspects or concepts
• a range of instructional strategies and processes they could use to teach the student
• relevant contexts for learning
• how well their teaching practices are contributing to the student's achievement and progress.

ERO found that teachers in 28 percent of the schools in this evaluation demonstrated the use of many highly effective strategies to accelerate students' learning (see Table 1). In some schools this use of highly effective practices in classrooms across the school was despite a lack of guidance and support from school leaders.

Table 1: *Teachers' contribution to improved outcomes for priority learners*

The extent to which teachers contributed to improved outcomes for priority learners	Percentage of schools
To a great extent	28
To a some extent	51
To a limited extent	20
Not at all	1

Teachers with many highly effective practices **used assessment data well** to identify those students for whom they needed to accelerate progress. They had good knowledge of their students' strengths and needs. Teachers developed flexible, responsive learning plans for individuals and groups of students. They were reflective practitioners and

followed an inquiry cycle of teaching and learning by using assessment data to review the impact of their teaching, and changing their strategies as necessary.

Teachers in this group **used a range of appropriate teaching strategies.** They were deliberate in their teaching choices to ensure students developed the specific literacy and numeracy skills or knowledge that they required. This teaching included:

- modelling successful approaches, strategies or ways of solving problems that students could apply when working independently and in groups
- opportunities for students to critically talk about what they are learning and how they are learning
- prompting students to remind them of strategies or skills they had successfully used before
- questioning to clarify or expand the students' thinking
- giving feedback about what has been mastered and what the student should focus on next
- explaining the specific details about concepts or skills on which the students needed to focus.

They used these strategies both for individual and group teaching.

These teachers **made judicious use of external support** such as RTLB (Resource Teacher: Learning Support), learning support teacher and reading recovery teacher without ignoring their primary responsibility for accelerating the student's progress. The external specialists suggested appropriate strategies for use in the classroom, or provided some one-to-one teaching that the teacher followed up in their classroom programmes. In a small number of cases teachers supervised teacher aides to support the student in targeted activities that reinforced classroom learning.

Information Communication Technologies (ICT) and associated commercial programmes were used judiciously and were targeted to meet a specific skill or concept, rather than being central to the learner's programme. Teachers were selective in tailoring strategies to reinforce the concepts individuals needed to practise.

The highly effective teachers had a **strong focus on ensuring their students understood how they could apply their learning** in different contexts across the curriculum. They used strategies such as modelling books to make effective literacy and numeracy learning explicit for students, and to identify the next learning steps for individuals and groups. These books also provided a venue for recording and reviewing teachers' reflections. Teachers ensured that students had ready access to child-friendly exemplars or achievement indicators that assisted them to measure their learning and progress. Effective teachers encouraged students to reflect on, and explain, their own learning.

Teachers **developed partnerships with parents and whānau** to support students' learning. Parents joined with students and the teacher in planning the students' next learning steps. Teachers supported and guided parents and whānau by providing them with strategies to continue their child's learning at home through daily notebooks or parent evenings where aspects of the school's learning programmes or assessment processes were shared.

These teachers were **proactive in identifying teaching skills that they needed to develop** and sought out professional learning and development (PLD) to enhance these. They were not satisfied with 'business as usual' and were constantly looking for new and more effective ways of accelerating students' progress.

Principals and trustees had confidence in the assessment-based judgements these teachers made regarding students' strengths and needs. The students which they identified they needed to provide extra support for in the school's charter target corresponded to the students identified in classrooms. The achievement information which teachers provided to leaders showed the specific concepts or skills their students had mastered and those they needed support with next.

Leaders with highly effective practices

Leadership was a key factor in developing the strong cohesive direction that was found in highly effective schools. People who provided leadership in this area included the principal, senior leadership team, lead teachers in literacy and mathematics, learning support teachers and, in some schools, the Special Needs Coordinator (SENCO).

In 29 percent of the schools, ERO identified that leaders were actively promoting improved outcomes for priority learners (see Table 2). Some of the highly effective practices discussed below were also found to some, or to a limited extent in other schools in this evaluation.

Table 2: *Principals' contribution to improved outcomes for priority learners*

The extent to which principals contributed to improved outcomes for priority learners	Percentage of schools
To a great extent	29
To a some extent	37
To a limited extent	33
Not at all	1

Principals **used achievement data effectively** to identify priority groups, to monitor their progress and to evaluate the impact of programmes and systems over time. They drew on the knowledge that their teachers had of individual students in these analysis processes. Leaders benefitted from having information about the specific teaching points

that needed to be reinforced, rather than just knowing the numbers and names of students below the National Standards.

The highly effective principals **supported staff with clear assessment guidelines** and fostered the use of an inquiry-based approach to teaching, learning, and subsequent responsive planning. Leaders identified teachers' professional learning needs and provided relevant development opportunities. In many cases principals drew on the expertise of curriculum leaders within the school to target professional learning for individual staff members to support them in planning to improve individual student's achievement. Leaders provided staff with formative feedback provided by themselves or by other staff with particular expertise. They facilitated a collegial approach for staff to plan tailored actions for students' programmes and to review student progress and the impact of particular strategies.

In this role principals were **often well supported** by SENCOs, learning support teachers and curriculum leaders. In some schools the SENCO took on the role of monitoring the progress of students identified as needing extra support. In one school the SENCO reviewed teacher planning for the students' priorities in the school's targets. Together with learning support teachers, they often worked with teachers to develop and implement appropriate programmes and strategies to teach the concepts they wanted the student to learn. Enthusiastic and capable literacy and mathematics leaders also contributed to this planning and review process.

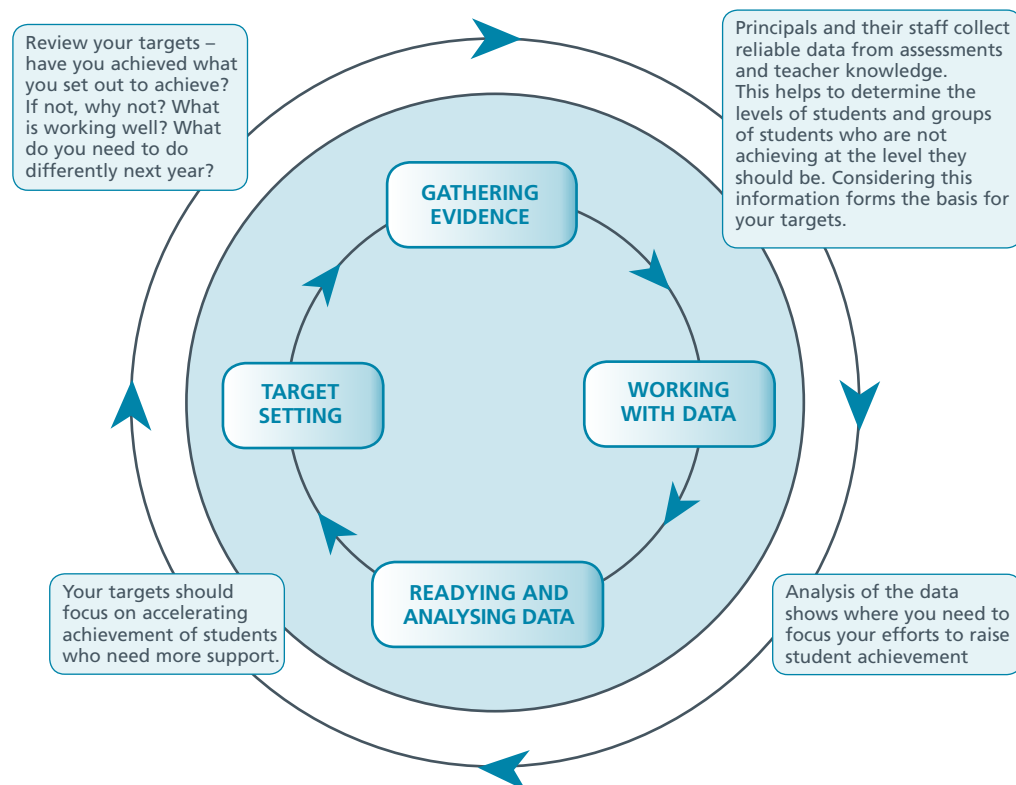## Trustees with highly effective practices

Figure 1 illustrates the cycle of data-based target setting and review which the Ministry of Education suggests boards of trustees should follow. This cycle uses achievement data to identify students needing support to progress, and to set targets related to accelerating their achievement. Boards also need to monitor the progress of these target groups throughout the year to help them evaluate the effectiveness of their initiatives.

Seventeen percent of boards of trustees had processes that enabled them to focus to a great extent on improving outcomes for priority learners (see Table 3). These boards demonstrated all aspects of the above cycle of target setting and review. The boards also regularly monitored progress throughout the year to check that they were on track or whether further resources were needed.

Table 3: *Boards' contribution to improved outcomes for priority learners*

The extent to which boards of trustees contributed to improved outcomes for priority learners	Percentage of schools
To a great extent	17
To a some extent	49
To a limited extent	32
Not at all	2

Figure 1: Board of trustees cycle of target setting and review[5]

Review your targets – have you achieved what you set out to achieve? If not, why not? What is working well? What do you need to do differently next year?

Principals and their staff collect reliable data from assessments and teacher knowledge. This helps to determine the levels of students and groups of students who are not achieving at the level they should be. Considering this information forms the basis for your targets.

GATHERING EVIDENCE

TARGET SETTING

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READYING AND ANALYSING DATA

Your targets should focus on accelerating achievement of students who need more support.

Analysis of the data shows where you need to focus your efforts to raise student achievement

In the boards with effectively used processes, trustees were kept well-informed by the principal about student achievement in general, and received well-considered recommendations for priority learners in particular. Trustees were **committed to raising student achievement**. They were active participants in the charter target-setting process and interrogated achievement data provided by the principal. They allocated appropriate resourcing for programmes to accelerate learning, based on this information.

These boards demonstrated a **high level of accountability** for students needing extra support. They regularly received data that enabled them to monitor the progress of groups included in the school's charter target. They were very dependent on the quality of information provided by the principal. In a few cases trustees asked for more data if they felt they were not adequately informed, or they challenged the validity of the data. Well-established links were evident between achievement targets, the principal's appraisal and, in some cases, teachers' appraisal goals.[6]

5   MOE (2011) *Strengthening Targets: Resource for Boards.* Wellington: Ministry of Education

6   ERO (2013) *Board Employment Responsibilities: Linking Charter Targets to Appraisal in Primary Schools.* Wellington: Education Review Office

An example of a highly effective school

The following example of a full primary school in an urban setting exhibits many of the effective practices discussed above. This school had developed processes and mechanisms that facilitated a collaborative and innovative approach to accelerating their priority learners' progress.

Priority learners are identified by teachers in the first instance. Teachers work in learning hubs with up to 80 children and three teachers. They analyse achievement data together and share and discuss the information about the students. The analysed information about the number of students needing support and the specific skills and concepts they need to focus on is then provided to their senior leadership team. School charter targets reflect these students.

Teachers in the hubs collaboratively plan the learning programmes tailored for the needs and interests of individuals and groups of students. Teachers make specific decisions about how often priority learners need individual or group teaching time and what students need to master next. Teachers in the hubs use 'thinking books' to reflect on their teaching and the students' learning. They frequently consider priority learners' progress and achievement in their reflections to make decisions about what to teach next.

Teachers document the progress of priority learners in school templates. Each of these learners has entries recorded under the following headings:

- *What is the shift that happened?*
- *What intervention/s caused the shift?*
- *Where to next?*

These templates are filled in as part of review and reflection that occurs at staff meetings. Further charts record every student's progress compared to expectations. Teachers move children on the chart as part of staff meetings. The process makes accelerating the progress of priority learners a collective responsibility as well as a collective celebration.

The senior leadership team promotes a belief that 'the system needs to fit the child, not the child fit the system'. There is a culture in the school that teachers contribute too, that 'we make a difference'. Staff are provided with ongoing professional development that has included aspects such as:

- *sessions on why some children make shifts and others don't*

> • *what makes a difference for children's learning*
> • *a parent-led session explaining what it is like to be a parent who has a child finding it difficult at school.*
>
> *A large display on the staffroom wall records the key findings from PLD.*
>
> *The board is well-informed about the achievement and progress of students. Trustees are able to speak about student achievement and progress with confidence, and board decision-making is based on this information. Meeting the achievement targets is included as a goal in the principal's annual appraisal.*
>
> (A decile 9, urban Years 1 to 8 primary school)

The school in the example above demonstrates **highly effective review** and development processes that accelerated the progress of their priority learners. Teachers, leaders and trustees have a **shared responsibility for these students** and know which strategies work for them. They **constantly monitor and celebrate student progress**.

In 2011 the numbers of their students at or above the National Standards in reading and writing improved considerably as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: *For the example school (above) – the percentages of students achieving at or above the National Standards*

Literacy Area	February 2011	June 2011	December 2011
Writing	Data not recorded	67%	71%
Reading	51%	75%	82%

IDENTIFYING PRIORITY LEARNERS

Identifying priority learners

Few schools in this evaluation could show accelerated progress for Māori students that were below the standards. The progress highlighted was not always an outcome of any specific targeted strategy. Few schools were able to show accelerated progress for Pacific students that were below the standards. This was also the case for schools with large numbers of Pacific students.

While different ethnicities were recognised, little was done to show that their identity language and culture was valued and responded to. As schools develop their curriculum they should take into account the cultures, language, interests and potential of all their students. Māori and Pacific students below the standards were often subsumed into the more general group of under-achieving students, with no recognition of their particular identity, and no implementation of strategies likely to build on their cultural capital and promote success.

Effective self review involves leaders looking across their data to find reoccurring skills or concepts with which their students are having difficulty. This involves more than knowing how many students are achieving below a standard. Leaders need more fine-grain information about what concepts or skills the students are most commonly finding difficult to master. The highly effective schools then use data about reoccurring achievement challenges to develop a collective response from the board, leaders and teachers. The information is used to make decisions about:

• the provision of, and funding for, professional development which teachers need
• short term additional programmes for individuals or groups of students
• how to involve their families and whānau in their learning.

The PIRLs data shows achievement disparities for Māori and Pacific students are evident in many schools across New Zealand. This suggests that in most schools some teachers may have a range of effective teaching practices to increase priority learners' progress and others will not be as confident with different teaching approaches.

Leaders play a key role in helping teachers own the responsibility for reducing achievement disparities in their classrooms and across the school. Leaders can identify the professional development which individual teachers require through observing teaching practice and their careful analysis of achievement data. Highly effective leaders also use achievement information to recognise the teachers who are making the most difference for priority learners and enable them to share their successful practices with other teachers in the school.

Three Ministry of Education strategies emphasise the importance of the family and whānau in raising achievement for priority learners.

Ka Hikitia: The Māori Education Strategy 2008 – 2012 has a vision for Māori to enjoy and achieve education success as Māori. *Ka Hikitia* highlights the critical role parents, whānau and iwi play in supporting the learning of their tamariki and rangatahi. The strategy stresses that 'while high quality teaching has the biggest influence on Māori student success, learning is more effective when whānau and iwi are valued partners in the learning process and when educators, whānau and iwi are open to learning from and with one another'.

Similarly, the *Pasifika Education Plan 2013 – 2017* has a focus on 'more informed and demanding parents, families and communities supporting and championing their children's learning and achievements'.

The *Success for All* strategy has a vision to create a fully inclusive education system. An aim of the policy is to have confident parents that know they are partners in their child's education. Parents of children with special needs should see themselves as an important member of the multi-agency team that supports their child at school and at home.

Communities play a vital role in raising achievement for priority learners. ERO's report *Partners in Learning: Schools' Engagement with Parents, Whānau and Communities (May 2008)* outlines how highly effective schools do not work in isolation - they work with their communities sharing information about achievement and valuing the expertise and contribution parents and whānau bring with their child.

Schools can really engage their communities when leaders and teachers are clear about what their students need to master to be successful. ERO's report *Partners in Learning: Parents' Voices (September 2008)* explains the importance of schools having a shared understanding about what each party can expect of each other. One parent's comments highlight the benefits for her child when a school creates an environment where whānau and the school work together:

> *"I need to know exactly what is happening, which initiatives are available and the information that supports my child. When this happens there is a positive impact on my engagement with the school and with my child's learning." Māori parent*

Developing community and school-wide approaches to accelerating progress for students achieving below the standards enables everyone to take a shared role in improving achievement. Māori and Pacific families in the community can only play a full part in

contributing to improvements when they have a shared understanding about the most important things that should be done at home or at school to improve their child's success.

ERO found that few schools were successfully engaging their communities in developing, implementing and reviewing school and community-wide strategies that could further improve outcomes for priority learners. Approximately 18 percent of the schools identified Māori students that were achieving below the standards as a group they should focus on, and 12 percent had seen that they should develop strategies for Pacific student target groups. However, even these schools were less likely to develop specific strategies to meet the students' particular needs. Just a few schools had taken some specific steps to improve outcomes for these groups.

Here is an example of a school where everyone had worked together to improve outcomes for a group of priority learners:

Analysis of achievement information helped leaders to recognise the need to develop systems to engage, excite and nurture Māori learners and boys. They developed a formal Māori education plan to promote Māori student success as Māori. This plan is aligned to the strategic plan, professional learning and development, and performance management systems.

Achievement data is used to set specific targets for individuals and groups. Regular syndicate and staff meetings focus on analysing data. Teachers have accessed external professional support to improve writing programmes and the school's curriculum design and strategic planning. The board and leaders set up a 'change team', which includes leaders, teachers and trustees to monitor the progress of targeted students. Staff held parents' workshops to build home-school partnerships in learning.

As a result of these actions priority learners have shown accelerated progress in reading, writing and, to some extent, mathematics.
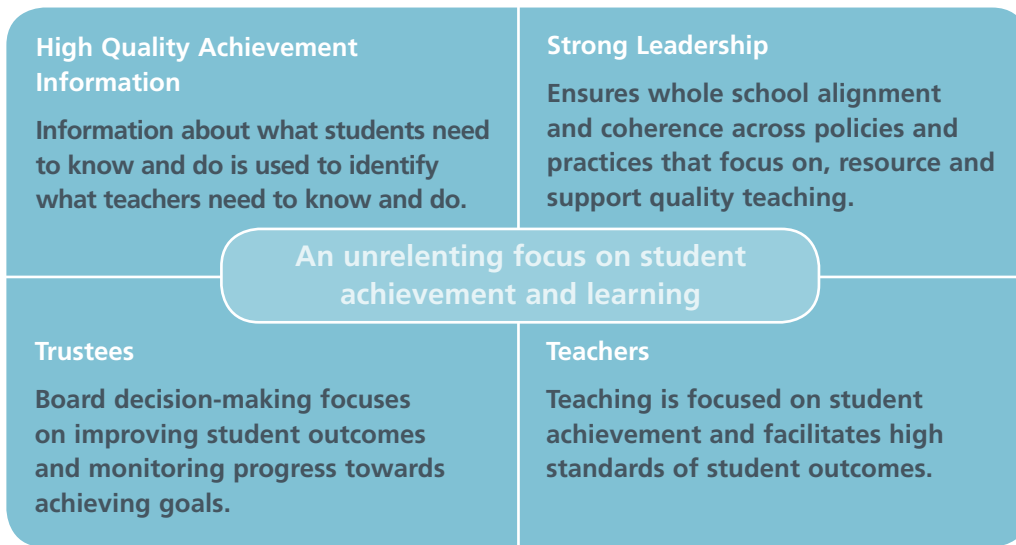
(A low decile, medium-size contributing primary school)

SCHOOL-WIDE APPROACHES FOR PRIORITY LEARNERS

In schools with a whole-school approach the trustees, principal and teachers share high expectations for accelerating student progress. Trustees seek a high degree of accountability for themselves, leaders and teachers throughout the cycle and expect regular reporting and review from the principal. Teachers are supported by the principal and board to develop and widen their range of strategies and teaching skills that accelerate student achievement. Highly informative student achievement data is used to identify students' needs and monitor their progress.

Figure 2 illustrates the key components of a whole-school approach to addressing the needs of priority learners, resulting in '*an unrelenting focus on student achievement and learning*'.

Figure 2: Effective teamwork[7]

High Quality Achievement Information

Information about what students need to know and do is used to identify what teachers need to know and do.

Strong Leadership

Ensures whole school alignment and coherence across policies and practices that focus on, resource and support quality teaching.

An unrelenting focus on student achievement and learning

Trustees

Board decision-making focuses on improving student outcomes and monitoring progress towards achieving goals.

Teachers

Teaching is focused on student achievement and facilitates high standards of student outcomes.

ERO found that while many teachers and leaders recognised the need to accelerate the progress of priority learners, only 23 percent of schools were employing effective practices across the school to achieve this. A further 62 percent were taking some deliberate actions in an attempt to accelerate the progress of priority learners. However, the extent and effectiveness of their actions varied considerably across the school. Eleven percent of schools had few effective strategies to catch students up.

These findings (shown in Figure 3) indicate a need for ongoing development of teachers' understanding of how to respond to and increase the progress of students who are not achieving well.

Figure 3: Evidence of school-wide practice accelerating progress of priority learners
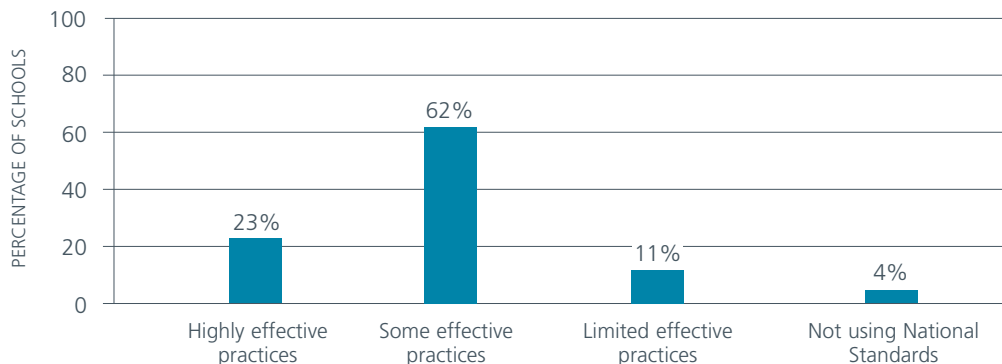
7   This table is based on the BES and ERO's evaluation indicators.

Schools with highly effective practices school wide

The schools with the highly effective practices had a cohesive approach involving boards, leaders and teachers. Principals, in particular, had a pivotal role in communicating a clear vision to trustees and staff that all students were able to succeed. These principals shared with trustees and staff their understanding of what constitutes accelerated progress. They had high and explicit expectations for student achievement. They kept the school community well-informed about charter targets and their actions and progress towards meeting them.

The principal was key in creating a team that worked cooperatively for the benefit of priority learners. The leaders and teaching team collaboratively identified students requiring extra support, with the principal respecting and using the classroom teachers' knowledge of students' specific needs and related strengths. Leaders, in partnership with teachers and trustees, set relevant targets for all groups of priority learners. They developed action plans to achieve these targets and required teachers to develop Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for students highlighted in the charter targets. They kept the board well-informed of all aspects of this process through timely sharing of well-analysed assessment data.

Teachers collaboratively planned strategies and reviewed progress, using an approach that enabled them to share their knowledge and skills. Parents and whānau were involved in the teaching and learning process. Teachers worked in partnership with students and parents when setting individual student's learning goals. Teachers discussed strategies for families and whānau to use at home to increase their child's learning and success.

In the following three examples, actions across the school and community focus on raising achievement for students at risk of not achieving.

There is a reflective culture across the school. School leaders constantly work with teachers to consider how effectively their programmes are meeting the needs of students. Leaders share information about student achievement with parents, including information about the school's charter targets. Leaders and teachers have discussed the Ka Hikitia strategy as part of increasing their understanding of ways they can support Māori students to reach their potential. Leaders effectively use achievement data to identify groups of students at risk of not achieving the National Standards. Leaders identify the school target group and teachers identify their corresponding class target group. Senior leaders effectively monitor the programmes set for meeting the needs of targeted groups of student, providing collegial support for staff as required.

(A medium decile, mid-size contributing primary school)

The school has excellent school-wide systems in place to track how well learners that are included in the school's target are progressing. Teachers are guided to focus on student achievement, particularly concentrating on the achievement of any student who is underachieving. Students included in targets have a differentiated programme in each class with clear goals for achievement documented and agreed. Teachers meet in professional learning groups to look at the achievement of students. These learning groups report outcomes to the board. The principal gives teachers regular, pertinent feedback about their actions for these students as part of the appraisal system. The appraisal feedback is well received and followed through. School leaders continually articulate the belief that all their students can and will achieve.

(A low decile, mid-size contributing primary school)

The principal and senior leaders are focused on developing processes and practices that contribute to accelerating the progress of priority learners. Teachers are fully involved in making decisions about identifying students to include in charter targets along with other students that are at risk of not achieving. Teachers' action plans contain specific, targeted, teaching strategies they will use with priority learners. There are clear expectations for teachers to regularly reflect on the impact of these strategies on student learning. The principal provides tailored workshops for target students. Parents are regularly informed of their child's progress and how they can further support the child's learning. Teachers and leaders discuss the progress and achievement of targeted students at staff meetings. The performance management system includes clear expectations for teachers to ensure priority learners are to the forefront when planning and reviewing class teaching programmes.

(A low decile, mid-size contributing primary school)

Schools with some effective practices

Around two-thirds of schools had some good processes in place to support learners achieving below the National Standards. However, these schools did not have sufficient interventions or teaching strategies to catch up students. Teaching as inquiry practices were not strongly embedded. Although most teachers had some useful information about the achievement and progress of individual students, they were not confident in making judgements about how their students were achieving in relation to the National Standards, or how to specifically teach the concepts they needed to master next.

A more limited range of interventions and teaching strategies were apparent in these schools. Students were less likely to be actively involved in setting goals for their learning. Teacher aide support was not so closely monitored by the teacher, and cross grouping across classes or grouping students by reading age was a frequent strategy used

to cater for student individual learning needs. Research highlights that these strategies are not likely to increase students' self-belief as a learner or ensure they are specifically taught the concept they need to master. Such approaches can limit students' opportunity to catch up with their peers.

While meeting the needs of students was a focus across these schools, processes were more fragmented. Teachers across the school lacked shared expectations for high student achievement or understanding of what constitutes accelerated progress. Charter targets were broad with an emphasis on increasing the percentage of students achieving at the standard without identifying year, gender, ethnic groups or specific concepts or skills to specifically focus on. Teacher and board involvement in the setting of targets was limited. This approach reduced teachers' and trustees' understanding of how to respond to the targets.

These schools lacked robust self review to enable them to check if their strategies, professional development or interventions were having the desired impacts for the students that most needed to progress. Achievement information was often not aggregated, disaggregated and analysed to give teachers, leaders and trustees the bigger picture of progress across the school or for groups of interest. Approximately 60 percent of the schools in this group did not know whether they had been effective in accelerating student progress. For about 25 percent of these schools this was because they did not, as yet, have sufficient, school-wide, baseline data to measure actual progress. The remainder had not considered the impact of their initiatives.

Schools with limited effective practices

Twelve percent of schools (21 schools) had few processes or practices to accelerate learning for students below the National Standards. They were making few efforts to catch up learners who were behind. Leaders and teachers did not analyse the impact of particular teaching strategies on students and did not know whether they were effective in accelerating students.

ERO found issues with the validity, reliability and sufficiency of assessment information in these schools. Assessment tools used were sometimes inappropriate and provided little use for building teachers' confidence in making and moderating judgement about students' achievement in relation to the National Standards.

In these schools many teachers did not plan effectively to build on the strengths and meet the specific needs of students. Little collegial sharing of ideas occurred as teachers did not regularly engage in structured reflective practices as part of a teaching as inquiry cycle. They lacked confidence in their ability to accelerate students' progress and had little understanding of strategies they could use to do this.

Teaching and learning for priority groups was more likely to be 'business as usual', with teachers believing that more intensive use of strategies that had been unsuccessful

to date would make a difference to student progress. They relied on such strategies as whole-class teaching, cross grouping, commercially produced programmes, or having the students work with a teacher aide who was sometimes poorly supervised. Teachers rarely used deliberate acts of teaching to focus on the specific skill or knowledge the individual or group of students needed to learn.

Sometimes a lack of ownership of the responsibility for accelerating the progress for these students was evident in classrooms where teachers relied heavily on the out-of-class 'expert', such as the SENCO, learning support teacher or even the teacher aide. Students and parents were not engaged in planning or supporting the students' next learning steps.

Leaders in these schools provided few expectations about how staff should assist priority learners to catch up. Teacher practice and student progress were not well monitored. A lack of agreed school-wide teaching and learning expectations resulted in considerable inconsistency and variability in teachers' approaches. These leaders had not drawn together a cohesive team of the principal, board, teachers and parents to support these students.

Trustees in these schools should have required more frequent and higher quality achievement information reports from the principal. They lacked an understanding that they could request this or use data for decision-making. Trustees didn't ask questions about the data they did receive or fully understand the senior leaders' recommendations.

Charter targets focused on increasing the number of children meeting the standards and were not specifically related to priority learners. The targets lacked specific details, making it difficult to measure and monitor progress towards meeting them. Trustees and teachers had usually had little involvement in developing school targets. The school's community was not informed about targets or involved in contributing to solutions or improvements for priority learners.

Schools not using National Standards

Seven schools in this evaluation were not using the National Standards to measure students' achievement and progress. In these schools ERO investigated the extent to which trustees, leaders and teachers were working together to accelerate the progress of priority learners. ERO evaluated the impact of their approaches as indicated by any achievement data the schools might have and use.

Three of these schools identified and targeted priority learners. Some tracking of these students' progress over time provided evidence that some students made accelerated progress. While one school appeared to have highly effective processes for accelerating students' learning, it was not possible to measure these students' performance in relation to the standards.

The other four schools lacked reliable and valid, school-wide student achievement data so it was not possible to identify whether students were making progress.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

Nearly one-quarter of the schools in this study demonstrated a well-considered commitment to accelerating learning, by implementing some highly effective practices, particularly in classrooms. For teachers in these schools 'business as usual' was no longer good enough. They were reflective practitioners who were constantly looking for better ways to improve their students' achievements. They understood that when a student was not progressing well their teaching approaches needed to change. A key factor in these schools was the synergy of teamwork from trustees, to the principal and the classroom teachers, working in partnership with students, and parents and whānau. The principal's role in developing and sustaining this cohesive approach was pivotal.

Most schools have yet to develop such an effective approach. The concept of accelerating the learning of students was not fully understood by many teachers, school leaders and trustees. They were committed to improving students' achievement but didn't know how to do this successfully. Leaders lacked the confidence to think outside the square and were anchored in their existing approaches to under-achievers. Teacher aides or commercially developed programmes were seen as magic bullets rather than the teacher realising that the responsibility and expertise rested with them. These schools needed to explore, implement and review a greater range of teaching practices to accelerate students' progress.

Self review and an evaluative, inquiry cycle approach to teaching and learning remain critical areas for development in many schools. These are both dependent on a confident and competent understanding and use of assessment by leaders and teachers. Most schools collate and recognise the numbers and names of students achieving below the National Standards. However, only the most effective schools collate and use the information that teachers collect about the specific strategies, with which individual students need more support.

A lack of aggregation of data about individual's next learning steps means that in many schools students may participate in an intervention that does not teach the concepts and skills they need to accelerate their progress. Students will only increase their progress when their class or small group programmes specifically focus on the skills they need to learn next. It is not enough to group together students that are below a standard. Each of these students is likely to need tailored and deliberate teaching to master different skills or concepts.

The concept of responding to the strengths and needs of priority learners is yet to be fully understood by teachers and leaders, particularly in the case of Māori and Pacific students. One size does not fit all. The *Ka Hikitia*[8] principles of promoting Māori

success as Māori is yet to be embedded in teacher thinking. The same can also be said of success for Pacific students. Many teachers still do not fully understand the concept of cultural capital or the need for a culturally responsive curriculum that takes account of the identity, language and culture of their students.

Improving outcomes for Māori and Pacific students continues to be a challenge. ERO found many schools had collated their achievement data and some had charter targets for these students. However, few had well-considered strategies or fully involved their communities in working with them to reach their targets. Many schools have yet to realise the benefits of seeking and responding to Māori and community aspirations or sharing collated achievement or attendance data with their Māori and Pacific families. Communities that are well-informed can contribute to solutions rather than passively respond to, not understand or discard ideas about what a leader or teacher says is the best action for their child to make extra progress.

Many boards of trustees have yet to fully implement their governance role. School boards allocate considerable funds for additional personnel and programmes to provide extra support for students. They need easily understood and regularly monitored achievement information to assure them that resources are reaching and benefitting the students who need to make the most progress. They are dependent on their principals for such information to allocate and review the impacts of funding provided for PLD, resources and programmes for students achieving below the National Standards. Some trustees were not receiving frequent and high quality self-review information about achievement. They were not confident to proactively seek it out to use it in their governance and accountability roles to benefit students not achieving success.

The challenge for school leaders is to extend the unrelenting focus on priority learners' achievement and learning, evident in a minority of schools. The number of teachers using the 'teaching as inquiry' cycle to reflect on and change their practice has to increase. Some teachers need new approaches and should be supported to trial and review such approaches that are known to accelerate the progress of students previously not achieving success.

A system-wide emphasis on the strategies teachers can use to accelerate progress is needed. All teachers have an ethical responsibility to help those students that need to catch up to their peers. This is essential if we are to raise the achievement of New Zealand students relative to their international counterparts. The disparity that has existed for decades and continues to exist between the achievement of different groups of students within our schools must be removed to ensure all our students can go on to realise their potential.

NEXT STEPS

Next steps

ERO recommends that the Ministry of Education supports schools to:

- improve their assessment practices to more effectively identify the student's next teaching steps and to monitor how well their interventions or strategies have accelerated the progress of priority learners
- access and use research findings, such as those in the Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) publications, particularly the BES exemplars, to introduce different teaching practices that have been shown to accelerate learners' progress in New Zealand schools.

ERO recommends that school trustees, leaders and teachers:

- seek improved achievement information reports that clearly identify the reoccurring achievement needs across the school
- use achievement information provided to them to evaluate the effectiveness of specific initiatives, programmes, interventions and additional staffing, such as teacher aides, in accelerating the progress of priority learners.

ERO recommends that leaders and teachers:

- improve the aggregation and use of their achievement data to ensure it identifies the reoccurring achievement needs for all groups of priority learners
- collate and analyse achievement information to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching practices in accelerating the progress of priority learners
- increase their understanding of approaches that have strong evidence of accelerating progress for priority learners
- introduce new practices known to accelerate progress for priority learners and review the impact on their students
- extend opportunities for families and whānau to be involved in understanding and contributing solutions to school-wide achievement challenges.

Appendix 1: Sample of schools

This evaluation involved 176 schools in which ERO carried out an education review in Terms 2 and 3 of 2012. The types of schools, roll size, school locality (urban or rural) and decile ranges of the schools are shown in Tables 1 to 4 below.

Table 1: School type

School type	Number of schools	Percentage of schools	National percentage of schools with Years 1-8 students[9]
Full primary (Years 1-8)	90	51	49
Contributing primary (Years 1-6)	60	34	35
Intermediate (Years 7-8)	9	5	5
Composite (Years 1-15)	7	4	7
Secondary (Years 7-15)	10	6	4
Total	176	100	100

Table 1 shows that, in comparison to national figures, the sample was representative for school type.[10]

Table 2: Roll size group

Roll size (number of students)	Number of schools	Percentage of schools	National percentage of schools with Years 1-8 students
Very small (1-30 primary, 1-100 secondary)	17	10	10
Small (31-100 primary, 101-400 secondary)	43	24	25
Medium (101-300 primary, 401-800 secondary)	73	41	38
Large (301-500 primary, 801-1500 secondary)	33	19	19
Very large (501+ primary, 1501+ secondary)	10	6	8
Total	176	100	100

Table 2 shows that very large schools were slightly under-represented, and medium schools slightly over-represented, in comparison to national figures. The differences were not statistically significant.

APPENDIX 1

9   The national percentage of each school type is based on the total population of schools as at May 2013. For this study it includes full and contributing primary schools, intermediates, secondary, composite schools with students in Years 18. This applies to roll size, locality and decile in Tables 2, 3 and 4.

10 The differences between observed and expected values in Tables 1-4 were tested using a Chi square test. The level of statistical significance was $p<0.05$.

Table 3: School locality

Locality (population size)	Number of schools	Percentage of schools	National percentage of schools with Years 1-8 students
Main urban area (30,000+)	84	48	51
Secondary urban area (10,000-29,999)	10	6	6
Minor urban area (1000-9999)	26	14	11
Rural (1-999)	56	32	32
Total	176	100	100

Table 3 shows that minor urban schools were over-represented, and main urban schools slightly under-represented. The differences were not statistically significant.

Table 4: School decile range

Decile[11]	Number of schools	Percentage of schools	National percentage of schools with Years 1-8 students
Low (1-3)	46	26	30
Medium (4-7)	74	42	39
High (8-10)	56	32	31
Total	176	100	100

Table 4 shows that low decile schools in the sample were slightly under-represented, and middle decile schools slightly over-represented, in comparison to national figures. The differences were not statistically significant.

11 A school's decile indicates the extent to which a school draws its students from low socio-economic communities. Decile 1 schools are the 10 percent of schools with the highest proportion of students from low socio-economic communities, whereas decile 10 schools are the 10 percent of schools with the lowest proportion of these students.

APPENDIX 2

Appendix 2: A framework for self review

ACCELERATING THE PROGRESS OF PRIORITY LEARNERS

These questions can be used to review the actions of boards, leaders and teachers to accelerate the progress of priority groups of learners. Priority learners refers to those students who are not achieving at or above National Standards.

This framework has been developed from ERO's evaluation indicators.

Self-Review Framework

Board of trustees

To what extent do the board's processes contribute to improved outcomes for learners, particularly for priority learners?

Review: What does the board know about the achievement of students in their school? *What is the usefulness of the information they receive?*

Plan: How has the board used the information they receive to set targets, develop strategic and annual plans, allocate resources, and develop principal performance agreements?

Monitor: How has the board monitored their progress towards achieving targets for priority learners? *Ongoing reporting of achievement data for board monitoring, principal appraisal.*

Review: What does the board know about the impact of their decisions on accelerating the progress of these learners?

School leaders

To what extent are leaders' processes and practices accelerating the progress of priority learners?

Review: What processes are leaders using to determine which groups of students and which learning areas should be targeted? *Assessment processes, target setting – teachers' and trustees' involvement.*

Do targets and processes focus on the students whose progress needs to be accelerated most?

Plan: How are leaders extending teachers' capability to accelerate the progress of the identified priority learners? *Setting teaching expectations, identifying and responding to PLD needs.*

Implement: How are leaders identifying and monitoring the implementation of agreed strategies? *Teacher appraisal, reporting in relation to National Standards and targets, moderation processes.*

Report: How are school leaders helping the school's community to understand and contribute to the actions in place for priority learners? *Promulgation of targets, working in partnership with communities to support learners.*

Review: What does the leader know about the impact of the strategies in place to accelerate the progress of priority learners? *Reporting progress, monitoring, self review, making changes where necessary, outcomes against targets.*

Teachers

To what extent are teachers focused on accelerating the progress of priority learners?

Review: What process do teachers use to identify and monitor the progress of the priority learners?

Are teachers focused on the students that need to make the most progress? Are there any key groups who are not included in the targets?

Are teachers focused on the groups of students, for whom the board has set targets for? If not, why not?

Plan: How are teachers involved in developing, or made aware of, strategies they should use to accelerate progress in relation to the target?

What PLD have teachers had to support them to accelerate the progress of priority learners in their class?

Implement: What do leaders know about how well teachers are implementing any agreed strategies? *Appraisal, moderation, reporting.*

How have teachers involved priority learners in understanding what they need to do to accelerate their progress? *Goal setting, monitoring in relation to National Standards.*

How have teachers involved parents/whānau in supporting their children to progress? *Reporting, learning partnerships.*

Review: What do teachers know about how their interventions or strategies are making a difference for priority learners?

Overall

How effective is this school in accelerating the progress of priority learners in relation to the National Standards?

How relevant are this school's targets for accelerating the progress of priority learners?

How are trustees, leaders, teachers working together to accelerate the progress of these students?

How have these students progressed?

What do trustees, leaders and teachers know about the extent to which these students' progress has been accelerated?

Appendix 3: Methodology

ERO carried out this evaluation in 176 schools[12] during Terms 2 and 3 in 2012 as part of the schools' normal review cycle in the context of the major evaluation question for education reviews in schools:[13]

How effectively does this school's curriculum promote student learning, engagement, progress and achievement?[14]

The evaluation framework for this evaluation focused on the students that were not achieving well, and included the following questions:

- To what extent do the board's processes contribute to improved outcomes for learners, particularly for priority learners?
- To what extent are leaders' processes and practices accelerating the progress of priority learners?
- To what extent are teachers focused on accelerating the progress of priority learners?
- How effective is this school in accelerating the progress of priority learners in relation to the National Standards?

In order to answer these questions ERO investigated:

- how leaders determined school targets, supported teachers to accelerate learners progress, monitored teaching practice and evaluated the impact of strategies
- how effectively teachers identified and monitored students' progress, the range and suitability of teaching strategies they used, and how much they knew about the impact of their strategies
- the extent to which students, parents and whānau of priority learners were involved in the learning process
- what boards knew about student achievement, how they used this information to set targets for priority learners, and how they monitored progress towards meeting those targets
- whether trustees, leaders and teachers were working together to accelerate the progress of priority learners.

All data was collected by review officers in the normal review activities. Indicators to guide review officers were drawn from *ERO's Evaluation Indicators for School Reviews*. This report also draws on the findings of earlier ERO reports as listed in Footnotes 2 and 3.

12 See Appendix 1 for a breakdown of the characteristics of the schools visited.

13 See www.ero.govt.nz >>ReviewProcess>>For Schools and Kura Kaupapa Māori

14 See Appendix 2 for the evaluation framework.

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