



Research Report: Parents, families and whānau and their information needs

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Executive summary and conclusions

The research is exploratory in nature and focuses on identifying parents', families' and whānau's information and communication needs when:

- selecting a school for their child
- seeking information about their child's school so they can assess and compare their child's learning progress and achievement with other students at the same level, and know how to ask appropriate questions
- determining their individual child's learning, progress, achievement, next learning steps and wellbeing.

Context

Within this research, parents want their child to progress, achieve and be happy. However, parents' involvement varies on a spectrum from:

- student learning and progress being a partnership approach between school management, teachers, students and parents (parents want to and can be actively involved although may experience barriers)
- to student learning being the primary responsibility of the school management and teachers (parents do not need to be actively involved and the teacher is the expert).

This viewpoint in turn drives the extent of communication and information that parents seek or want to receive from schools and teachers. Parents, families and whānau will sit somewhere on a continuum from high demand for school information and indepth, regular communication and information to relatively low demand.

Contextually, it is also apparent from the comments in this research made by parents, families and whānau that school management, boards of trustees and individual teachers vary considerably in how well they communicate with and inform their parent community on learning progress, achievement, next steps and wellbeing. There are examples of schools and teachers being very proactive, frequent, innovative (in terms of communication channels), welcoming, inclusive and comprehensive in their communication and information approach, while others are less so.

School selection

There are a number of factors that parents, families and whānau consider in school selection. Those factors can be considered in light of:

- the relative importance of factors on their child's learning progress and achievement, such as teaching quality versus relatively unimportant factors on learning progress, such as cost.
- the ease of accessing and assessing school-selection factors.

Some factors play a critical role in their child's learning, but are difficult to assess. Assessment of these factors requires a deliberate and active school selection, going beyond word of mouth, impressions of the school from visits and the school website. Some parents source data from independent sources, such as ERO (Education Review Office), the media and NZQA (New Zealand Qualifications Authority). Parents, who have accessed and understood this data, state that it is useful input into their decision-making. There was little or no mention of the Ministry of Education as a source of information for school selection. It is perceived that information provided independently gives an objective, balanced view, while school-provided information is likely to err to the positive only.

A second set of factors, which are also considered important in their child's learning, are easier to access and assess. Examples of these are school leadership and passion, peer influence and school composition. Parents believe they can rely on and value word-of-mouth recommendations, their own child's opinion (at Year 9), school visits or open days and school websites for most of this information.

There is a third set of factors which are actually relatively unimportant in their child' learning and yet are easy to access and assess. These might include cost and geographical limitations, school proximity to home and work, school's facilities and resources and extra-curricular activities. Many parents in this research are not particularly deliberate or wide-searching in their school selection and are swayed by practicalities, such as proximity to home and work, school zoning and cost considerations.

When selecting a school, it appears that school-provided information and word of mouth may have become default sources, because independent third party data and information lack profile (or parents' awareness is low), accessibility, availability and ease of understanding. When prompted, it appears that parents, families and whānau have quite a high demand for independent information about some factors that are more difficult to gauge, eg, student learning achievement, wellbeing, school management, school culture, teaching quality and communication with parents, families and whānau. However, any compilation and supply of independent school selection information would need to strongly address the issues of parents' awareness, accessibility, availability and understanding. It would also need to be objective and independent.

School-wide information

Newsletters, school websites, assemblies and photos with success stories in local newspapers currently inform parents of what is happening in the school. However, there is a perception that school management and boards of trustees will tend to only inform their parent communities of successes (or how they are addressing high profile major issues).

It seems that parents, families and whānau do not currently have access to school-wide reports on learning progress and achievement (or they do not know or avail themselves of it).

Parents, families and whānau value school-wide information about students' learning so that they can be confident that achievement is high or improving, and they can ask appropriate questions if it is not. The other key value to parents, families and whānau is that they can assess and compare their child's learning progress and achievement with other students at the same level. Again, this gives them confidence and/or they know what questions to ask about how teachers, students and parents, families and whānau can work together to address any issues.

Student learning, progress, achievement, next learning steps and wellbeing

Not surprisingly, regular and proactive communication between teachers, students, parents, families and whānau is highly valued by most. This is so that parents, families and whānau (and students) have an accurate and frequent sense of how the child's learning progress is tracking and whether they are going to achieve at the expected levels and/or to their highest ability. This regular communication between home and school also alerts both parties (parents and teachers) if there are any wellbeing issues. Parents, families and whānau want their children to have productive and happy relationships with their peers and teachers and strongly link this to their child's learning progress. They would like reassurance that their child is happy and learning, as well as being alerted to any problems.

Currently, the baseline standard in home/teacher communication is reports and parent/teacher interviews and meetings (with some schools encouraging student input and leadership into these). There is a varying response to both the reports and interviews that schools provide. Some parents, families and whānau value and understand the information that reports contain and the discussion generated at meetings, while others find reports too generic, lacking detail or being difficult to understand with the discussions too brief.

It would appear that some schools offer a great deal more technology-driven or frequent communication and conversations, eg, by phone, email, text, online portfolios, community meetings, online assessment outcomes and face-to-face. The parents, families and whānau who have been involved in frequent communication highly value it and most (not all) of those who have not, express this as an unmet need. Some parents, families and whānau who are confident, assertive and articulate will initiate contact, while others who are less confident or who defer to the teacher as ‘expert’ need teacher-initiated contact.

Parents, families and whānau in this research vary in the extent they consider it is their child’s responsibility for their own attitude, behaviour, learning progress and wellbeing or whether it is the teacher’s responsibility (or some combination of both). Parents also vary in the extent they perceive they have responsibility for, and can or should have, input into their child’s attitude, behaviour, learning and wellbeing at school. Parents’ philosophy about responsibility tends to drive the questions they have about their child’s learning and the expected response from teachers and school management.

It seems that schools provide strongest reporting or communication about learning progress, with less emphasis on achievement (albeit parents want to know that their child is on track and ‘achieving’). Communication and discussion about ‘next learning steps’ or what needs to be done to achieve, appears to be relatively weak or not well understood by parents, families and whānau. Discussions about wellbeing also appear to be relatively weak, unless there is a particular problem. Admittedly, some parents are satisfied with the ‘no news is good news’ approach to communication and are cautious about overloading teachers when it is not necessary.

Demographic observations

Note that these observations are not based on a large sample or a quantitative approach that could signal statistically significant differences. However, there are some apparent differences that the researchers feel confident to comment on.

- At Years 1 to 8 communication between school and home is easier just by virtue of parents being at the school and able to go into classrooms for face-to-face observation and discussion. However, there was also mention of a barrier when the school relies on the child to be the ‘channel’, eg, notes and newsletters not making it home to parents.
- There are barriers to observation and face-to-face contact at Years 9 to 13 with parents not feeling able to go into classrooms or talk to teachers before or after school (teenagers also put up barriers to their parents’ involvement). In many ways, parents of Years 9 to 13 students are very reliant on schools finding ways to keep them informed and up-to-date via multiple channels.
- Māori parents and whānau particularly value bicultural or multicultural visibility and inclusion as part of the ethos of the school’s learning and teaching. Te Reo Māori spoken and used is also highly valued. Many Pakeha parents value Māori culture, Te Reo and multiculturalism as well.
- Pasifika parents and families also value multicultural (Pasifika) visibility and an inclusive, welcoming culture that is conscious that some parents and children have English as a second language. Schools seem to vary in the extent they encourage Pasifika parents to be involved, ask questions and break down cultural barriers of not questioning the teacher. There is also a strong connection between Pasifika

families and Catholic schools which, aside from religion, also seem to have an approach that is valued by Pasifika parents.

- Pasifika and Māori parents in particular mentioned a sense of community and whānau in their children attending the same school they had. However, this also perpetuates a pre-existing status or power structure (especially when the same teachers are still at the school) making it difficult for parents to question the teacher.
- There are examples of some low decile schools particularly focusing on communicating with and involving their parent communities (perhaps more so than high decile schools), eg, schools helping parents understand National Standards, National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), etc.

Overall conclusions

The following chart outlines the factors that parents, families and whānau in this research consider relatively important or relatively unimportant contributors to their child's ultimate learning progress, achievement and wellbeing. It also outlines whether these factors are relatively easy or difficult for parents, families and whānau to access and assess. There are some factors that are relatively important and relatively easy to access, so we can conclude that parents, families and whānau are well served in terms of this information. There is some information that is relatively easy to access, but actually does not have a very important impact on their child's learning progress and achievement.

The key focus needs to be on the factors that parents, families and whānau think are important in their child's learning outcomes but, for a variety of reasons, are difficult to access and assess. These factors are the:

- teaching quality
- school culture, particularly responsiveness to multicultural or bicultural needs
- assessment of whether their child is progressing and achieving
- social and individual development of their child (wellbeing) and support.

Parents do not tend to be well served by information about these factors, either because it is not provided, it is seemingly difficult to provide, they do not know where and how to access it, it is infrequent, they do not understand the information provided or there are poor relationships and communication between teacher, student and parents, families and whānau.

Considered relatively important to progress and achievement	
Relatively easy to access and assess	Relatively difficult to access and assess
2	1
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School leadership and passion • Influence of peers • School composition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching quality • School culture • Responsive to bicultural/multicultural needs • Students' learning achievement (individual and school-wide) • Student wellbeing and support
3	4
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost and geographical limitations • School proximity to home and work • School facilities, resources and extracurricular activities 	
Considered relatively unimportant to progress and achievement	

Parents need to be able to access and assess the information and schools (and third parties) can help by providing information that:

- is proactive and anticipates needs
- is high profile (so that parents, families and whānau know where to find it)
- is easy to access
- is easy to understand (parent-friendly language used rather than jargon or education language)
- is frequently updated
- utilise a range of channels, eg, text, email, phone, online, hard copy, face-to-face
- involves and partners with parents, families, whānau and students.

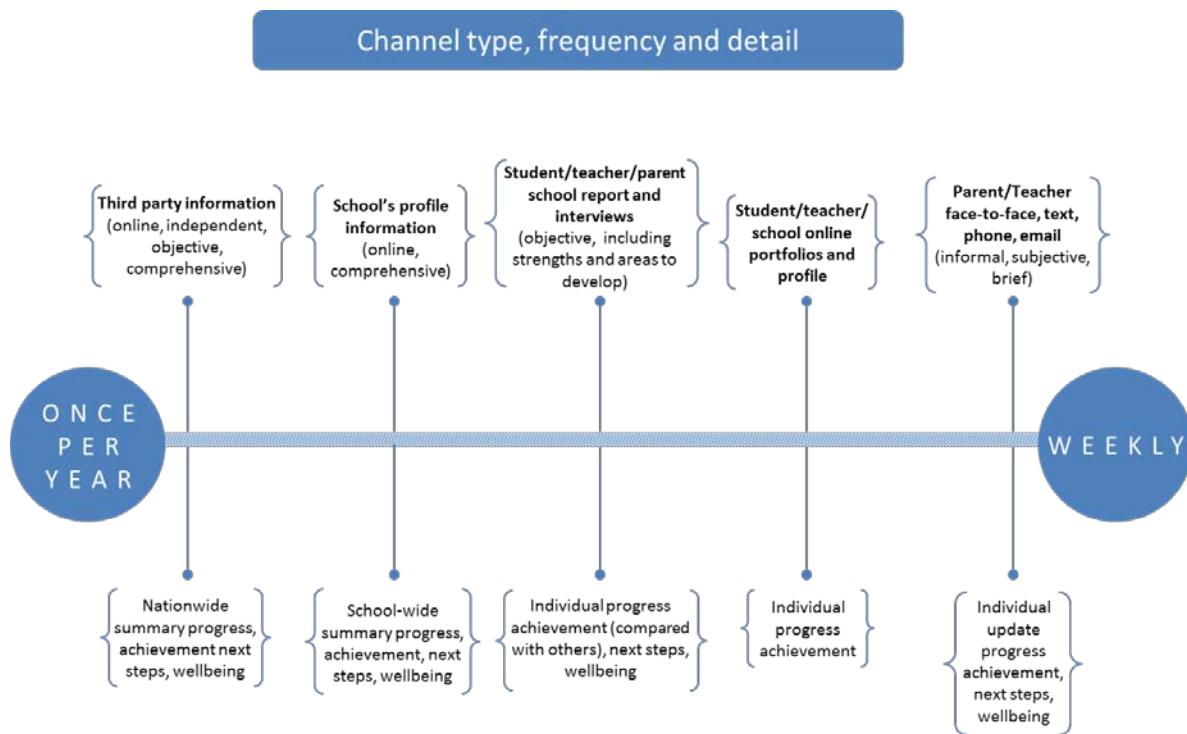
In terms of content, parents, families and whānau want information and communication about their child that is:

- specific to their child (but also provides comparisons)
- comprehensive (strengths and areas to develop)
- objective
- balanced
- gives them an excellent insight into their child's learning progress, achievement, next steps and wellbeing.

While the above factors are the end goals for communication and information, parents, families and whānau do not want these to compromise teaching and learning by increasing teacher workload. This means that there needs to be a trade-off approach, eg, communication that is frequent does not always need to be comprehensive; it can be a quick and informal through email.

The following chart summarises the channel types, frequency and detail of communications channels. Many parents would like frequent updates face-to-face, by text, phone and email and recognise that these will be relatively informal, brief and subjective. At the other end of the scale, they would like more comprehensive,

independent and objective reviews of school-wide achievement (provided by both the school and third parties) and recognise that these will be less frequent, eg, once per year. The current reports and interviews/meetings sit somewhere between the two spectrums in terms of frequency and content and should be objective (ie, they contain strengths and weaknesses/areas to develop). Parents suggest the introduction of online portfolios and displays of an individual child's work that their parents can access at any time. This needs to be added to regularly when major learning topics are completed.



Background and objectives

The Ministry of Education has a requirement to provide policy advice to government on how to better support parents, families and whānau to make informed decisions about:

- school selection for their child
- school-wide information about children's learning and wellbeing
- their child's learning progress, achievement, next steps and wellbeing.

The scope is all parents, families and whānau with Years 1 to 8 and Years 9 to 13 children, with a particular focus on reaching the priority group of Māori and Pasifika students whose progress and achievement is below the national cohort.

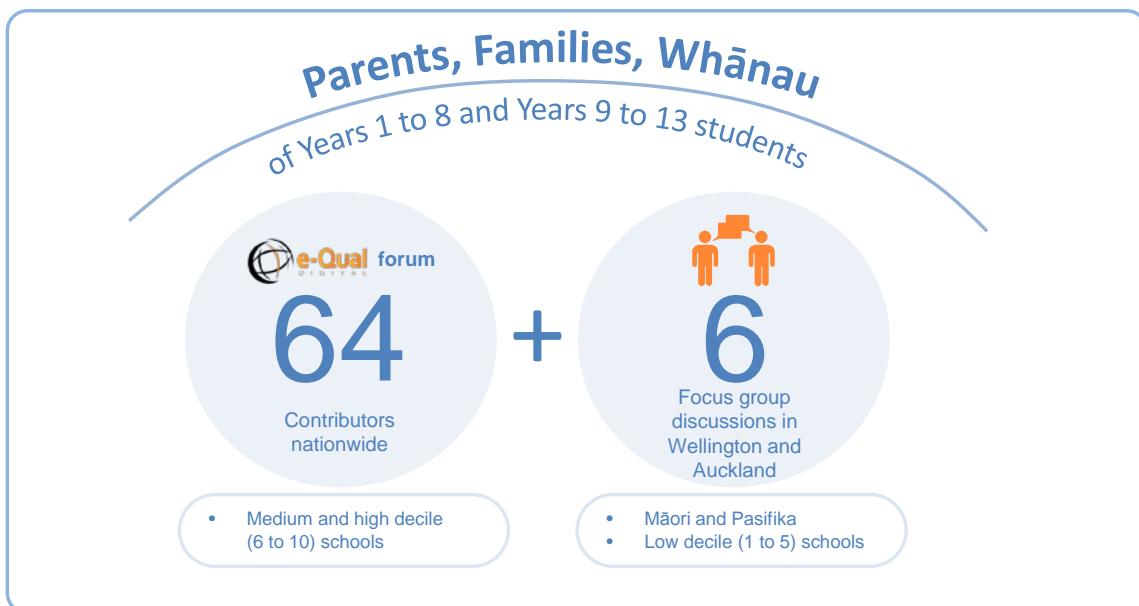
The Ministry contracted Colmar Brunton as a third party to undertake exploratory research that sought the views of a range of parents, families and whānau in relation to their information needs. Capturing the authentic voice was an important part of this research. At this stage no attempt has been made to look at these findings in relation to other research about effective engagement with parents, families and whānau.

Methodology

Overview of the research approach

A qualitative research approach was used to explore and understand the information parents, families and whānau seek about school and individual student information. This approach entailed a mix of an online forum (Colmar Brunton's e-Qual) and focus group discussions.

The diagram below shows an overview of the qualitative approach.



e-Qual methodology

The e-Qual forum is an online tool used to conduct qualitative research. The secure internet site enables selected contributors to log in at least once a day and share their thoughts with other contributors on new posts released daily. Contributors are invited to answer the daily questions and to comment on other contributors' posts. This provides a rich conversation and understanding about the research topic.

For this research, the e-Qual forum was open for three days and had 64 contributors. The contributors were a wide range of parents, families and whānau of children in Years 1 to 8 and Years 9 to 13 from across New Zealand (including urban, provincial and rural). Children of the e-Qual contributors attended medium to high (6-10) decile schools.

Across the sample of parents, families and whānau there are a range of levels of active involvement in children's learning and development and also a range of confidence levels about understanding their children's learning and development at school.

Recruitment of e-Qual contributors

Contributors were recruited using Colmar Brunton's online panel, CBClique. This panel consists of over 16,000 people who have agreed to take part in research, when required. These people are located nationwide and represent a wide range of socio-economic and ethnocultural backgrounds, as well as ages and genders.

Recruitment follows strict principles, whereby potential contributors are sent an online survey with key questions that address the specific research criteria of the project. Contributors are invited to answer the survey, and if they qualify, they are then sent a unique and secure link to the online forum where they register to be able to participate.

Contributors' access to the forum is unlimited during the entire duration of the fieldwork, which enables them to participate as much as required. Upon completion of the forum (ie, all topic areas have been covered in depth by contributors), the forum is closed and contributors cannot access it any longer.

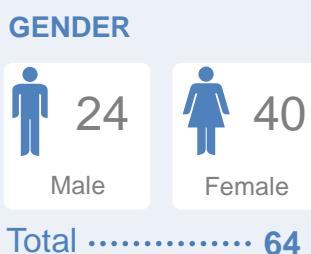
Contributors who have fully participated and answered all topic areas are provided with a gift as a gesture of appreciation for their participation. In this instance, the gift was a pre-agreed number of CBClique points. Senior researchers also awarded a voucher each to the two 'best overall' contributors who have provided insightful comments throughout the forum. Contributors are told about the gifts at the time of the online qualification survey.

Breakdown of contributors to the online forum

The table below details the demographic information of the e-Qual sample.

DEMOGRAPHICS

SCHOOL	Count
Years 1 to 8 (Medium decile)	17
Years 1 to 8 (High decile)	18
Years 9 to 13 (Medium decile)	16
Years 9 to 13 (High decile)	12
Not specified	1
TOTAL	64



ETHNICITY	Count
NZ European	46
NZ Maori	6
Other European	7
Chinese	3
Other	2
Total	64

AGE	Count
25-34	12
35-44	22
45-54	15
55-64	6
NS	9
Total	64

LOCATION	Count
Auckland	16
Christchurch	10
Dunedin	3
Hamilton	4
Invercargill	1
Napier/Hastings	1
Nelson	1
New Plymouth	2
Other South Is.	5
Other North Is.	3
Palmerston North	3
Rotorua	1
Tauranga	2
Wellington	12
Total	64

Focus group discussions

The research approach also included six focus group discussions with parents, families and whānau of Years 1 to 8 and Years 9 to 13 students. Children of the focus group participants attended low (1-5) decile schools. There were a range of male and female parents, families and whānau across the sample.

Recruitment of focus group participants

Focus group participants were recruited using an external recruitment agency. Carefully scripted recruitment scripts were provided in order to recruit parents, families and whānau who matched the required criteria (eg, children attending a specific decile school).

The recruitment process involved a short telephone conversation during which the recruiter asks a set of specific questions to determine if the potential participant meets the required criteria. The telephone conversation also includes information about the research process and what is required of them (eg, if they qualify, they then receive a letter confirming the date/location of the group discussion, and the day prior to the group discussion they receive a reminder call).

Upon completion of the group discussion, participants are provided with a monetary gift as a thank you for their time and effort.

Breakdown of focus groups

The table below shows the composition and location of each focus group discussion.

Group composition	Location
Māori, parents of Years 1 to 8 students	x1 Wellington
	x1 Auckland
Māori, parents of Years 9 to 13 students	x1 Wellington
Pasifika, parents of Years 1 to 8 students	x1 Auckland
Pasifika, parents of Years 9 to 13 students	x1 Wellington
	x1 Auckland
Total	6 group discussions

Each focus group discussion included seven to ten participants.

Analysis

The qualitative research team manually analyses the research data, drawing out common themes and using a range of theoretical frameworks to develop a sound understanding of what parents, families and whānau think, believe and experience in terms of their information needs overall. The research team works together, both during the fieldwork and while completing the analysis, to ensure that individual views on the information are moderated and peer-reviewed by others.

Currently, the following analytic methods make up the core of our process:

- content analysis
- semiotics
- discourse analysis
- analysis of Non-verbal behaviour
- theoretical hypothesis application
- intuitive analysis.

Notes to the reader

As well as a detailed description, any demographic differences (years child has been at school, ethnicity of parent or decile level of school) are provided. The findings of this research are analysed for both groups of students (Years 1-8 and Years 9-13) – findings apply to both groups, unless specified.

There are some areas of information that would warrant a more detailed exploration than was available within the scope of this research. These are noted in particular sections of the report.

Verbatim comments

Verbatim quotes from parents, families and whānau in the qualitative research are used throughout this report to illustrate key findings. They are not intended to show any demographic differences (unless otherwise stated) and have been chosen to most effectively provide examples of the points being made.

Quotes are attributed by:

- parents, families and whānau with children in Years 1 to 8 or with children in Years 9 to 13
- the decile of child's school
- ethnicity
- location.

Terminology

For brevity and for the purposes of this report, parents, families and whānau are also referred to as parents or PFW.

Context

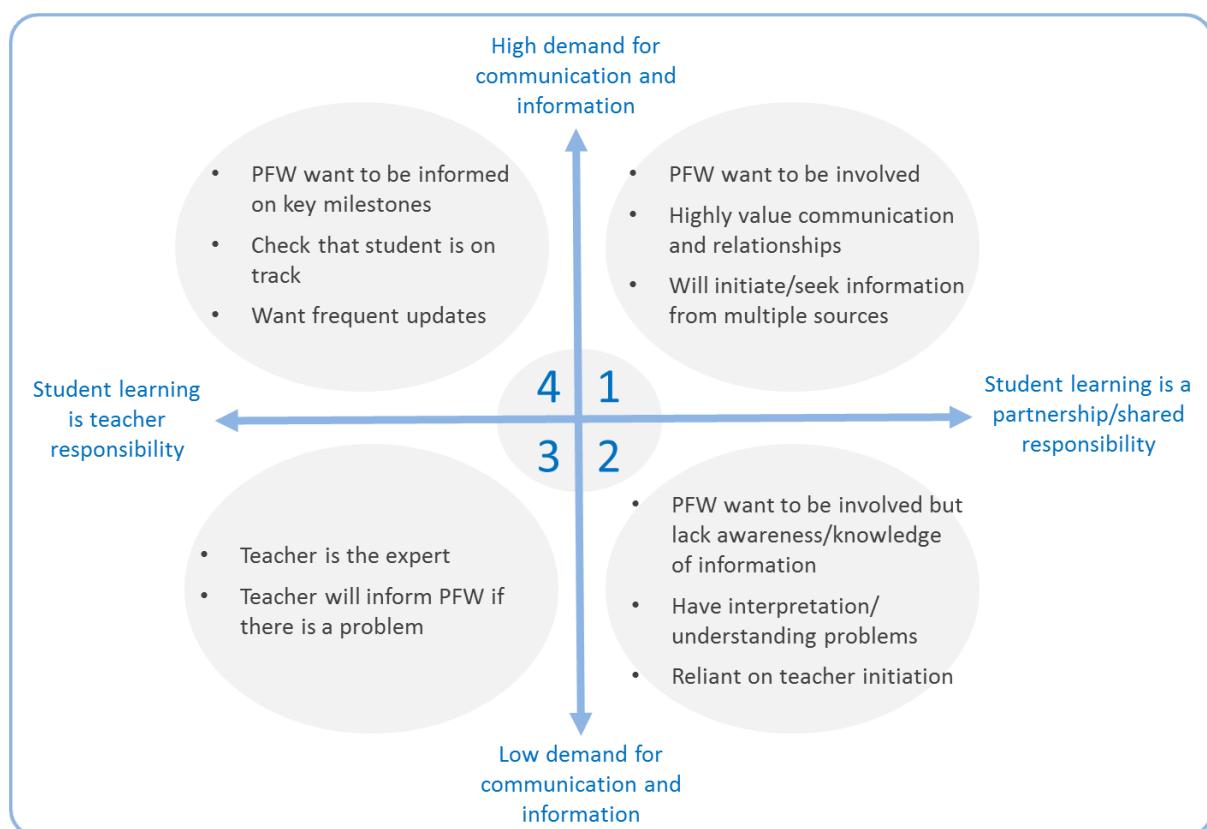
All parents in this research want their child to progress, achieve and be happy. However, parents' involvement varies on a spectrum from:

- student learning and progress being a partnership approach between school management, teachers, students and parents (parents want to and can be actively involved, although they may experience barriers)
- to, student learning being appropriately the primary or sole responsibility of the school management and teachers (parents do not need to be actively involved and the teacher is the expert).

This viewpoint in turn drives the extent of communication and information that parents seek or want to receive from schools and teachers. Parents, families and whānau will sit somewhere on a continuum from:

- high demand for school information and indepth, regular communication and information
- to, relatively low demand.

The following diagram outlines these two continuums and the resulting attitudes and behaviours that tend to drive the findings of this research.



- When parents view student learning as a shared responsibility they often have high demand for information and value communication and relationships with teachers. Parents who are confident, articulate and well resourced tend to seek information from multiple sources and initiate communication and contact.

"We really struggled in terms of making a decision around what primary school would be suitable for our child. We knew about ERO reports, and we explored the idea of her going to school closer to where I work, as well as going to school close to where we live, and we realised there were advantages and disadvantages to both options. We've decided to go ahead with [xxx] school. It does have a lower decile rating of four, and that troubled me initially because I wondered what kind of children that she would be associated with, and what kind of influences they might have on her. In the end we went for a series of visits with them and we were pleasantly surprised to see that the principal would be out on the crossing every day and seemingly knew everybody's name, and I thought that was quite encouraging. It seems to me that the management of the school is quite inclusive. They set a strategic direction every year and they ask parents to be involved, so there is some really good engagement there, which I think is quite important."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

- Other parents value a partnership approach but may lack awareness, knowledge and understanding of information. They may also lack confidence to initiate communication and may rely on teacher-initiated contact. Sometimes parents do not want to 'bother' the teachers.

"Our (selection) is accidental just because I applied there, but it wasn't something we planned for... I think it's a bit hard to put that pressure on teachers to know everyone. The generic report is maybe a necessity to keep them safe? I find it a hard one... You need to trust the system... It's hard to know the truth behind parents' motivation... It's about more involvement... sports, field trips, more parents to come along and learn stuff with your kids... If they are being bullied, we go see the form teacher because she knows her really well."

(Years 9 to 13, low decile school, Pasifika, Auckland)

"We spoke up about things we didn't think were right and we got treated quite badly, so we kept quiet. When we went to school we didn't talk back to teachers. We learnt what your teacher tells you is like the bible."

(Years 9 to 13, low decile school, Pasifika, Auckland)

- Other parents also view student learning (and behaviour) as the school's or teacher's responsibility and have relatively low demand for information. This tends to be because they view the teacher as the expert and believe that 'no news is good news' and that the teacher will contact them if there is a problem and put steps in place to address it. These parents may also be struggling to understand the education system and having difficulty managing their child's behaviour and learning progress.

"My kids' teachers, they call me at home at night. Sometimes it's good, most of the time it's not. I read them [reports] yesterday, I was pretty stoked with their report, all the credits which I didn't understand for a while... Maybe every three months (for parent/teacher interviews). (National Standards?) is that the one with the blue line?... [XXX] has exams this year and he'll be lazy in the mornings and muck around and everything, I'm like 'hurry up we're going to be late, we're going to be late', and it will be five minutes before the bell and we will be just walking out the door and he'll go 'oh Mum, I've got a test this morning'. It's like 'I forgot to tell you', he's so blasé, he doesn't care."

(Years 1 to 8 and 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

4. When parents view student learning as primarily the teacher's responsibility and have high demand for information, it tends to be because they want to be informed of key milestones and to check their child is progressing and achieving as they should be, rather than leaving it to chance.

"If I was sitting with my child's teacher I would like them to show me where my children's achievement level sat at the beginning of each school year and were it was sitting at the end of each term."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Hamilton)

"I would expect the teacher to tell me when my child is having difficulties and what steps they are taking to help, and what steps us as parents can take to help. I would expect to be told at the time, not wait until the report has been issued. This could be too late in the year and, say, six months may have already passed and we have missed out on helping our child."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Auckland)

Objective: Communication and information required for school selection

This section discusses the information that parents, families and whānau seek when selecting primary, intermediate and secondary schools for their children. It also reviews how they access this information and which channels they find most useful and influential.

SUMMARY

Their child's learning and wellbeing are the most important considerations for parents, families and whānau. Some parents are very deliberate in their selection and others are less so. There are a number of factors that may be given some weighting. Some of these factors are relatively easy to assess, while others are less so. For example, students' learning achievement, teaching quality and wellbeing are very important considerations, but difficult to assess. In contrast, factors such as proximity to school and costs have relatively less impact on learning, but they are easy to assess. It could be considered that parents may be defaulting to the easy to assess factors when making a decision.

To select a school, parents, families and whānau (and older children) primarily use word of mouth reputation and heavily rely on it. They also use other trusted sources: school visits, open days/evenings and school's written information, such as brochures, enrolment packs and information on the school's website. Parents appear to be relatively satisfied with school-provided information, but acknowledge that schools will put a 'positive spin' on what they provide. There appears to be relatively low awareness of independent third party sources, such as ERO, NZQA and Ministry of Education. Those who have used these third party sources tend to report that the information is relatively difficult to understand. Those who have not used these sources tend to believe that they would provide objective, independent information that would be useful. Some parents have accessed comparative school data from newspapers and highly value the profile information, the comparisons and assessments of student achievement they provide.

Content of communication and information for school selection

All parents, families and whānau want their children to be happy and to 'do well' at school, but they vary in how they go about determining this. Parents differ in their approaches. For example:

- some weigh up a number of factors and actively seek out information from a wide variety of authoritative sources,
- while others rely more on a general 'sense' of the school, gained from what they can observe, experience themselves (eg, through open days) and from word of mouth.

However, parents, families and whānau are also subject to some constraints that they have to consider in their decision set. Cost and geographical limitations are key, as well as the child's preference to be with their peers (at secondary school).

Two key criteria influence parents' decision in selecting a school:

- a combination of subjective and objective factors that parents weigh as relatively important or unimportant contributors to their child's learning
- the ease or difficulty in accessing information on these factors and assessing them

The diagram below provides a summary of the factors that parents take into consideration, organised according to the relative importance and the ease of accessing and assessing the information.



The following sections provide further detail about the factors listed in each of the quadrants in the above diagram. Examples are provided in the form of verbatim comments

1. Important contributors to learning (yet relatively difficult to access and assess)

Teaching quality

Teaching quality is considered important for students' learning outcomes, but it is relatively difficult for parents to assess. Parents believe that high quality teaching, interactions, communications and relationships between the teacher and students provide their child with good learning opportunities and achievement. They also believe the opposite is true, ie, poor teaching and interactions result in their child disengaging from learning and having low achievement.

Parents attempt to gauge teaching quality by considering:

- teacher reputation (word of mouth from other parents, whānau, students and older siblings)

- teacher profile, eg, years of experience, age, gender, ethnicity, schools they have taught at and qualifications
- how well the teacher interacts and communicates with the parents and with their child (observed by parents at Years 1 to 8 and reported back to parents by students at all levels)
- teacher turnover
- overall student achievement (eg, NCEA achievement of the school).

"I'd like to know what the teacher turnover is at schools. If there's a lot, do you want to take your kids there? Because if there's a lot of turnover... My son would have a different teacher every year. And that makes it really hard, makes it a lot harder. If the teachers are happy, the students are happy too, to a degree."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

"My son will say, 'oh, that teacher's dumb, doesn't know anything and we just sit there and do nothing', compared to another teacher he says, 'oh, I like her. She really is teaching us something'."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Wellington)

"You find that when a new teacher comes to college they will have a newsletter with the teacher, a photo of him and a brief history of where he's come from, where he's taught, where he was trained... Just a simple thing like that."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Wellington)

"Need more Pacific Islander teachers. Making sure the teachers are appropriate to the culture... No offence, but you get some new entrant teachers coming in and not knowing the culture... Understanding the culture you're going to be teaching."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Auckland)

"Strong teaching and intelligent, caring management (our daughter went to a school with these characteristics and achieved more than what she set out to, so we wanted same for our son)."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Other European, Wellington)

School culture

Parents perceive that a positive school culture and environment will contribute to their child's learning achievement and wellbeing outcomes. However, some of these factors are relatively difficult to assess until their child is at the school. The school's culture is gauged by perceptions of whether it:

- is inclusive and accepting of a diverse range of people, eg, a range of ethnicities, cultures, socio-economic backgrounds and students with special education needs
- is supportive, encouraging and respectful
- fosters pride in the school and community spirit, especially through sports, music and drama at secondary school
- is religious, particularly whether it is Catholic, which is important for some Pasifika parents (religious affiliation is also considered to indicate a culture of respect and discipline)
- is traditional or not in philosophy (eg, whether it has a uniform or not at secondary school)
- is academic, sports, music, drama and/or arts orientated
- has a range of extra-curricular activities (sports, music, drama and cultural groups such as Polyfest and Kapa haka are the main activities mentioned).

- is low, medium or high decile (decile level is considered an indication of student learning achievement and is also used as a cultural, social and behavioural indicator).

"Nationality of school pupils (to make sure our kids were going to a multicultural school that reflected New Zealand culture well)"

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Other Upper North Island location)

"We looked for a culture of inclusion and encouragement, and an intolerance of bullying and 'isms'."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Other Upper North Island location)

"I liked the multicultural aspect of the school. Many different nationalities attending the school. Has a Sommerville satellite unit there (for children with learning disabilities, such as autism, down syndrome), so thought it important that my children interact with others who they might normally shy away from."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Auckland)

"A school that had a positive encouraging atmosphere, because having a positive encouraging atmosphere creates an environment where children are accepted and encouraged, and this leads to a greater sense of wellbeing about themselves and others, and often has a flow-on effect on their performance at school and other places. Also, where the environment is discouraging or negative or disparaging, this is not pleasant or healthy, especially for the child, and results in kids disengaging from learning, from the school environment, and really doesn't achieve anything positive."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Hamilton)

"My husband and I wanted our children to attend a public co-educational school to come into contact with a wide variety of people from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Christchurch)

"A Christian school with excellent teachers and ability to discipline the child."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Hamilton)

"The third option was a Catholic school with a much greater reputation. Although we are not a religious family, we went for the Catholic school as there seemed to be greater opportunities for him with his sports and the school had a better reputation. He has already travelled overseas twice for school and various other trips around New Zealand, which he wouldn't have got from the lower decile school. And, although I wasn't keen on the religious aspect, it is not as bad as I imagined, as it also teaches the kids values and respecting others."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Wellington)

"This left us with two [schools] to choose from: one Catholic that covered Years 1 to 8 and one non-Catholic that covered Years 1 to 6. I visited each to get an idea on what each school had to offer and get some insight into the kind of 'vibe' they gave. I decided that the religious aspects incorporated within the learning were a bit too much for my liking at the Catholic school and decided that the non-Catholic school would therefore be my best option. This was important as I want my children to be open to religion and spirituality, but I want them to make their own decisions. I felt that the religion was too influential at the Catholic school. My husband and I are not particularly religious, so weren't overly comfortable with this approach."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Wellington)

"Broadly accessible after-school/lunchtime activities like music or gym (little opportunity to do much but soccer, swimming and scouts before this)."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Wellington)

"By the school's reputation I meant whether or not it was seen positively in the community and did not have bullying issues and was considered to provide a positive atmosphere for students."
(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Dunedin)

Responsiveness to bicultural and multicultural needs

The bicultural or multicultural nature of the school is important to many parents but is particularly important to Māori and Pasifika parents, families and whānau. As with wider school culture, the school's responsiveness to bicultural or multicultural needs can be difficult to assess from outside the school. Considerations are:

- transitioning from Māori full immersion into English medium (particularly at Year 9)
- how the school responds to and incorporates English as a second language (particularly Pasifika)
- school ethnic and cultural composition and pride
- cultural diversity respect and celebration (cultural activities and events)
- Te Reo Māori opportunities
- Māori and Pasifika teachers who understand the cultural background of students and their parents, families and whānau
- achievement of Māori and Pasifika students.

"We've looked at the ERO report and the achievement rates are above average and Māori students are achieving as well, and it's a big deal. I thought that was really encouraging, just to see Māori students actually doing well, we're Māori and we really would like her to succeed."

(Years 1 to 8, Māori, low decile school, Wellington)

"Culture and language. He wasn't raised Māori. I was and I failed to teach him when he was young, Māori language and everything. I could see that school wasn't up there in the Māori culture and activities. I want him to learn Māori as much as possible and I think it's actually a little disappointing that there isn't as much in schools. There are sections in schools, but it was a big part of my life growing up so I felt I was quite close, that connection was really strong with me at my school, so I thought it was really important."

(Years 1 to 8, Māori, low decile school, Wellington)

"School size, majority of Pacific Island students, we wanted them to go to school where they weren't the minority."

(Years 1 to 9 parent, Pasifika, low decile school, Auckland)

"We just looked at the achievement, always, because we know that they are cross-cultural, so they really focus on all cultures, Samoan you know all cultures are one... They'll have Samoan week and they'll celebrate just a whole range."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, Māori, low decile school, Wellington)

Students' learning achievement

Parents want to assess how their child's individual needs will be met and how the school will support their child. This is particularly important for parents of children who have:

- been assessed as gifted or talented
- specific learning difficulties
- been identified as having 'below average' learning progress and achievement

- behavioural issues
- English as a second language
- special education needs.

"Our daughter went through reading recovery. It was identified and so that was put in place for her. It was great, and it wasn't even us that picked up on it. They approached us, falling a bit behind."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

"When we made contact with [xxx] school. We said 'look we'd like to have our daughter along there' and they said 'well, you can have a maximum of five visits, you can work that out to one visit a week leading up to when she starts school'. And, in those visits I got a really good feel for the place. I noticed that there were two autistic, so special needs children there, and there was always somebody with them and I suppose that's the normal practice."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

"The main factor was that the school would accept and welcome my child, who has Asperger's disorder."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Auckland)

"I had a special needs son and two other mainstream kids. I wanted a school that was a good fit for all three children."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Auckland)

"I've asked about ESOL tuition, and generally the integration of non-native speakers in class. My kids were born in New Zealand and we're bilingual at home (none of the two languages being English). However, we more or less have avoided exposure to English until school age, so the kids came into a real new world on their fifth birthday. It was crucial that the school supported that transition."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Other European, Wellington)

Parents also want information on school-wide learning achievement, particularly at Years 9 to 13. (Note this is also discussed in more detail later in the report.)

"My child has a good brain, and he has learnt just to get by over the years. Because schools have failed to adequately provide enough challenges, and it is important that he learns how to rise to a challenge, and how to work hard at something. And, if his brain is being engaged and challenged, he is a much happier child, like us all!"

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Hamilton)

"In our decision to purchase a property, the college and its reputation for academic performance [were] very important to us and helped us in our choice of school."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, high decile school, other ethnicity, Wellington)

Learning achievement information is relatively difficult to assess. The information provided by the media (eg, NCEA achievement) is highly valued by parents, because it provides some insight into student achievement at the school, as well as comparisons between schools.

"That piece of [news]paper I saved that for years, it was just one newspaper with everything to know and straightaway, so [xxx] is like the highest rating. I kept that newspaper because I thought that was so important, it had every school."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

Parents would also like some information about how schools are tracking over time. Parents of children at secondary schools with lower than average achievement levels tend to have accepted this (sometimes they have no choice, because other factors have outweighed their decision, eg, zoning, proximity and cost). However, they would like some indications of whether NCEA achievement is static, improving or worsening.

Note that until recently (with the introduction of National Standards) parents have only had a gauge of NCEA achievement at Years 11 to 13, and have not had a measurement of learning achievement at Years 1 to 8. There was some mention of National Standards in terms of their individual child's learning (and this is discussed in a subsequent section in this report).

Students' wellbeing and support

Parents want to know that their child will be happy and safe at school. There were extensive comments about bullying. Parents want information about processes and policies to prevent and address bullying (while children are travelling to and from school and also bullying via text messages, Facebook or YouTube). Parents can usually access some information about policies and processes, but it is quite difficult to assess whether their child will be happy, safe and well-supported and how issues will actually be addressed.

"The school has a zero tolerance for bullying policy, which gives parents peace of mind."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Māori, Rotorua)

"I chose that school, because he was actually being bullied at another school... I was just disappointed with how the school handled the situation, they didn't advise me a lot of the things that were happening, so when I chose the school he's at now I spoke to the principal about their bullying protocols and everything, so it swayed my decision."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

"It is known to be a school that has [a] low level of bullying."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Dunedin)

At Years 9 to 13 pastoral (emotional and behavioural) student support services may be important, eg, health, social workers, counsellors, deans and policies for dealing with absenteeism, depression, suicide, drugs and bullying. Student support services are relatively easy to assess.

"Knowing where to access social help, like social worker, counselling and stuff like that. My kids are not angels and if there are issues that the school can deal with..."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Wellington)

"I was looking for male mentors for my son at the time, so I went to a meeting with the dean and just asked what they had for him, because I was trying to choose which college was going to be right. Because at the time he was being a bit naughty in that age group, so it was a strong male mentor that I was looking for."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

As part of student wellbeing, parents want to know how teachers and students will relate to and communicate with one another as this has impact on learning outcomes. Again, this is hard to assess. There is more about this in later sections of the report.

2. Important contributors to learning (and easy to access and assess)

School leadership and passion

Parents want to know that the school they choose for their child is well managed and the leadership team is enthusiastic, passionate and committed to the school's mission, values and purpose. Parents can generally trust their impressions and the information that is available.

"Met principal and she was passionate about school... Principal of other school hardly gave me the time of day and really seemed not to care whether we chose her school or not!"

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Auckland)

"Also, I think the headmaster has a huge impact on the way the school goes."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Auckland)

"I get really passionate about South Auckland... I'm not a South Aucklander, I'm a Westie. I get offended when people say bad things. We might have some lows, but that's everywhere. We actually have more highs than lows, but people don't know. This whole stigma about your kids going to a school in South Auckland. Just because we live in South Auckland doesn't mean we have less than others."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Auckland)

Influence of peers

A school where their child has friends attending is an important consideration when parents (and their children) are choosing a primary/intermediate or secondary school. Secondary school choice by children is heavily influenced by where their peers are going. Whether the student is starting school for the first time or is starting a new school in Year 9, many parents feel it is important for their child to be with friends to help them settle in. Parents want their children to feel supported in a new and unfamiliar environment, and having people around that the child knows can facilitate this. Parents make strong links between the influence of peers and learning outcomes. They also tend to trust their own judgement.

"The school is an extension of the kindergarten and our child had a number of friends attending the school."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Māori, Wellington)

"Friends, we wanted our children to attend a school where they would know a couple of friendly faces from kindergarten, so that when they got there they didn't feel completely alone in a strange new world!!"

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Dunedin)

"My child having friends who attended there... important to make us as parents and my child comfortable about attending."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Dunedin)

Other parents (especially of older children) deliberately select a school that will remove their child from peers they consider a bad influence.

"I think our decision to do that was sort of more trying to put them in a school where they're away from their peers, their usual peers, and that was good."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Wellington)

School composition

The school composition is perceived as important to learning outcomes and of all factors is one of the most factual and therefore easy to access and assess. Parents want to know the:

- school decile
- size of the school roll
- whether it is a co-ed (co-educational) or single/same sex school
- class sizes and teacher/student ratio
- curriculum content and subject choices (at Years 9 to 13)
- whether there are composite classes (Years 1 to 8)
- how new entrant classes are structured
- whether the school has a uniform and the cost of the uniform
- whether it is a full primary (Years 1 to 8) or whether their child will move to an intermediate school.

Note that there are misunderstandings about decile, eg, how it is determined, what it means and how to interpret it. Some parents understand it is socio-economic or funding-related, but others think it is a measure or indicator of achievement, culture of the school and students' behaviour.

"Is it a rating? How intelligent is the school? Is it based on statistics, back then it was School C?"
(Years 1 to 8 parent, low decile school, Māori, Auckland)

"The main reason decile was a factor was due to the fact I am very aware [that] the higher the decile the school, the less government funding they receive and the higher the school fees generally are and the more fundraising, etc that the school has to do to cover the money they do not receive. I know that it is generalised that kids at a higher decile school are of a higher socio-economic level, but that is not always the case and [it] makes it a struggle for parents of less privileged children to afford their local school if it is a high decile school. That and the fact that I have been warned all the little rich kids and their parents tend to dominate schools like that. Happens everywhere apparently. I haven't experienced it first-hand, but was another factor I was aware of."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Other Upper North Island location)

"Fairly high decile, so not as many social problems as some schools."
(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Auckland)

"In all honesty I have to say that the decile, how they rate the school, the decile does come in the Dominion Post every year. I'm human, I want the best for my children and I kind of think that the higher, the better the decile, the better the quality of education."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Wellington)

"My son had checked out several other local high schools and identified that this was the school that most appealed to him."
(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Dunedin)

Parents have differing views on school size. Some parents believe that a small to medium school provides better educational and social opportunities for their child. With fewer students attending the school, parents feel their child will have more personal attention. This tends to be particularly important for parents of Years 1 to 8 children but is also an attitude held by some parents of Years 9 to 13 children.

"The eldest enjoys the smaller groups and the opportunity to excel on her own terms. She is self-motivated and doesn't need internal competition to achieve her best. One benefit of being in a smaller school are the opportunities to participate in leadership positions and develop those skills."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Wellington)

"School size is also a big factor in our thoughts. Our primary school only had a roll of around 400 when they started, so we find that the kids get a fair go. Big schools don't always mean better learning."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Māori, Auckland)

A smaller sized school is also seen by some parents as providing a stronger community feel and allowing their children to more easily make lasting, local friendships. Often parents perceive the smaller schools better meet their child's needs, as they believe it has a more personal and friendly atmosphere.

"We live rurally... I love the fact that we are at a small school. The kids all know each other and really do look out for one another. The school is the glue that holds the wider community."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Other South Island location)

"The one my daughter now attends is the smaller of the two (choices): 400 kids as opposed to 900. And, I think I actually prefer that. The school is big enough to have lots of great opportunities, but not too big to scare her, be impersonal, and make her feel 'just another number'."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Other Upper North Island location)

Some parents prefer larger schools, as they offer more opportunities for children's friendships and more resources (both curriculum and extra-curriculum) because of the class structures (ie, not composite).

"Size. We didn't want our children to feel lost in a massive school where they would be just another number. On the other hand, we didn't want our children to attend a tiny school with only one or two classes, as this would mean that when our youngest started school, they would have been in the same class for a few years and we didn't feel this would work for them."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Dunedin)

"The youngest enjoys the wider curriculum choice and the relative anonymity of the larger classes and school. The larger school means she has been able to find a group of friends with similar interests, something less likely to happen in a smaller school."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Wellington)

When children are starting school (Year 1) and entering a large primary school, parents appreciate a school that caters specifically for new entrants. Providing information about how the school accommodates new entrants is important for parents. Given the unfamiliar environment for a first-time student, and that older children may be frightening for younger children, parents want to know how their child will be made to feel safe.

"Has a separate site for new entrants. As the school is a full primary (i.e. Year 0 to Year 8), having the new entrants physically separate from the 'big kids' was a plus for us."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Wellington)

In selecting a school for their children, some parents want to know if the school is single sex or co-ed. Some parents believe a single sex school will cater better to the specific needs of that gender and there will be fewer distractions than at a co-ed school. Other parents believe their child will perform better in a co-ed environment and this will enable them to comfortably socialise with the opposite sex.

"My son goes to a single sex school. This was important to me, as I feel the learning is more boy orientated, i.e. the choice of books in English to read, the PE program, the topics in History, etc. They also run the 'rite journey' program in year 10, which is a fabulous program for young men transitioning into adulthood."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Other South Island location)

"We wanted him to go to a single sex school as we felt there would be less distraction for him."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, high decile school, Māori, Christchurch)

"Co-ed (I have a son; literature suggests boys perform better at co-ed than single sex schools)."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Christchurch)

"I wanted my son to be in a mixed sex school so he could learn quickly how to mix with both girls and boys. I think this would make it easier later on in life."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Other South Island location)

Parents tend to seek smaller class sizes, as many believe this is beneficial for their child's education. Parents consider that teachers of smaller classes have more time to adequately engage with their child, thereby providing improved learning progress and achievement. Parents also believe that teachers in large classes are sidetracked by disruptive behaviour.

"One teacher to 30 students... The teacher would be under so much pressure and I've heard or seen some teachers in a large classroom and it affects their teaching and the children don't end up learning because they're stressed or they're focusing on a particular group of students who keep on getting all the attention."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Wellington)

"Can they devote any one to one time with the students or are they too stretched across a large class?"

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Other Upper North Island location)

Some parents also feel that having students of similar ability in each class is important for their child's learning progress and achievement. These parents support class streaming and single-year classes (as opposed to composite classes). Some parents perceive class size and structure to also influence their child's social wellbeing.

"School didn't have any composite classes (the other school was smaller and had many composite classes). Having been in composite classes myself growing up, I felt that a better level of attention and development is provided in single year classes. I also felt that as my daughter is a very quiet and shy child, having a smaller group of people in her class of her own year level meant there were less people for her to befriend."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Auckland)

"It was also clearly streamed - so we knew our kids would be in classes of children with similar abilities."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Other European, Christchurch)

A school uniform is considered a practical, cost-effective option by many parents. A uniform is considered to build pride and school community. However, some parents prefer the school not to have a uniform, as it does not allow individual expression.

"They have an excellent uniform that the children wear with pride."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Māori, Rotorua)

"We liked the fact that our school has a uniform, that it is practical, relatively cost effective. It provides great identification especially going to and from school."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Māori, Tauranga)

"We appreciate that it is a non-uniform primary school, as my son can really be himself and we do not need to bear the cost of overpriced uniforms, as we are a low income family."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Other Upper North Island location)

The cost of a uniform is an important factor for many parents, particularly for low socio-economic parents (this is discussed later in this report).

"I didn't like intermediate. I always thought it was so unnecessary. You've just got to buy a whole other uniform too. How do they justify the costs (for the uniform)? Sometimes it's \$20 for a pair of socks, that's not going to affect my son's learning... And then you've got a \$150 blazer."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

By Year 9, parents are also starting to consider:

- subject options at senior levels
- strong performance reputation in the subjects their child is particularly interested in pursuing
- opportunity to achieve scholarship level.

"My daughter is into music and drama, and [xxx] has a reputation for being strong in these areas, as well as academically."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Other South Island location)

"Academic excellence, especially achievement at the top level, since our son has the potential to achieve at scholarship level."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Auckland)

3. Relatively unimportant contributors to learning (that are easy to access and assess)

Cost and geographical limitations

Cost and geographical limitations (such as zoning and travel time) can drive the decision on what school their child will attend and they are easy to assess, but note that these factors are not specifically determining their child's learning outcomes.

"We now live up in Northland and the two local primary schools are zoned, so didn't have much choice in schools, unless we wanted to drive twenty minutes to a smaller rural one."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Other Upper North Island location)

For some families (lower socio-economic), cost is a major and deciding factor in their choice set. In considering the cost of schooling, parents want to know:

- school fees and donations (and a clear breakdown of the two, so that they know what is compulsory and optional)
- stationery costs
- NCEA/NZQA costs

- scholarship availability
- subsidies available for community services cardholders
- uniform costs
- extra-curricular costs
- cost of public transport to and from the school.

“Some people don’t know that for the school fees it’s actually not compulsory. They’re donations. They’re optional. Make it optional so that if you want to pay school fees, not just to have it there thinking that you have to pay it. And then sometimes the parents will want to send their kids to a good school, but it’s really expensive, so they’d rather take their child to the one that’s cheaper or costs nothing so they can afford it. It’s understanding, we all have to pay something to the school and when you go to college you’ve got to pay a lot more than you would in primary school and it’s just understanding what those costs are, because they send you a list with all the subjects and all the money that goes on the books. Sometimes you don’t even know if your daughter’s got that book.”

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Wellington)

“School fees are an issue, so I will put him the best place I can, so for me that is huge, can’t afford the world, can’t afford uniforms.”

(Years 1 to 8 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

“Reasonable fees (it is a public school, but we generally choose to pay the donations requested and other fees, so we considered this).”

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Other European, Wellington)

School proximity to home and work

School proximity to home is a particularly important consideration for parents of Years 1 to 8 students, but is also important for parents of Years 9 to 13 parents, particularly those who live in low socio-economic communities and are concerned about physical safety on the way to and from school. Proximity is an easy assessment, but note that it does not actually determine learning outcomes. In considering proximity, parents think about:

- ease of dropping off and/or picking up children
- ease, distance and time of children walking, cycling or using public transport
- cost of public transport particularly important for low socio-economic parents
- sense of community and maintaining children’s friendships, which is particularly important for parents of Years 1 to 8 children
- ability of children to go to family and whānau homes nearby, which is important for primary/intermediate and secondary schools
- safety of walking/travelling to school, particularly mentioned by low socio-economic parents of Years 1 to 8 students. They are concerned about the physical safety and bullying of their children before and after school.

"It came down firstly to 'which ones can we walk to?' and 'could the kids walk to on their own when they are mature enough?'. This was important to me as I like the idea of kids going to a school close to their home. I think it engenders more of a community feel. I also very much like to encourage them to walk as we seem to constantly get in the car nowadays, even for short journeys, and I think kids should be encouraged to walk, bike or scooter whenever they can, especially when it's only a 15 minute journey. I think it's good for them physically and as they get older it's good for them to learn the responsibility of getting themselves to and from school by themselves. I feel much more at ease with this when their journey takes place within our immediate locality."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Wellington)

"For us, living in a smaller community, with only one local school in the town (however there are several within decent driving distance) it was a simple choice. The school was within walking distance and was a community school where I felt my child could get the best social as well as educational experience. I wanted my children to make friends with the local population and feel part of the community that we live in."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Other South Island location)

"My son had a knife to his throat in the alleyway, this is my college one. It's a big [issue], and it does, it just follows them. He totally changed, he went off the rails, he went extreme the other way. He was a good A student doing what he needed to do, turning up and then something happened and all this bullying kicked in and he went to the other extreme, everything possible that would make a parent upset."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

"My parents are in their 70s and they live near the school."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Auckland)

"Safety as well, how long it takes to get to school. If it's an hour and a half from school, you don't want your daughter catching a bus at 8pm at night."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Auckland)

"Travelling time, being late... Sometimes we got some complaints about the lateness."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Wellington)

School facilities, resources and extra-curricular activities

Parents consider sports' facilities, curriculum resources, information technology (IT), computers and extra-curricular activities. However, some of these are more 'nice to have', rather than absolutely essential to a child's learning. These are also relatively 'factual' and easy to assess.

"Loved that our school has a school pool, which meant swimming is scheduled every day in term one. Other school offered a two-week block course at a swim centre offsite, which meant added cost for pool use, plus bus transport."

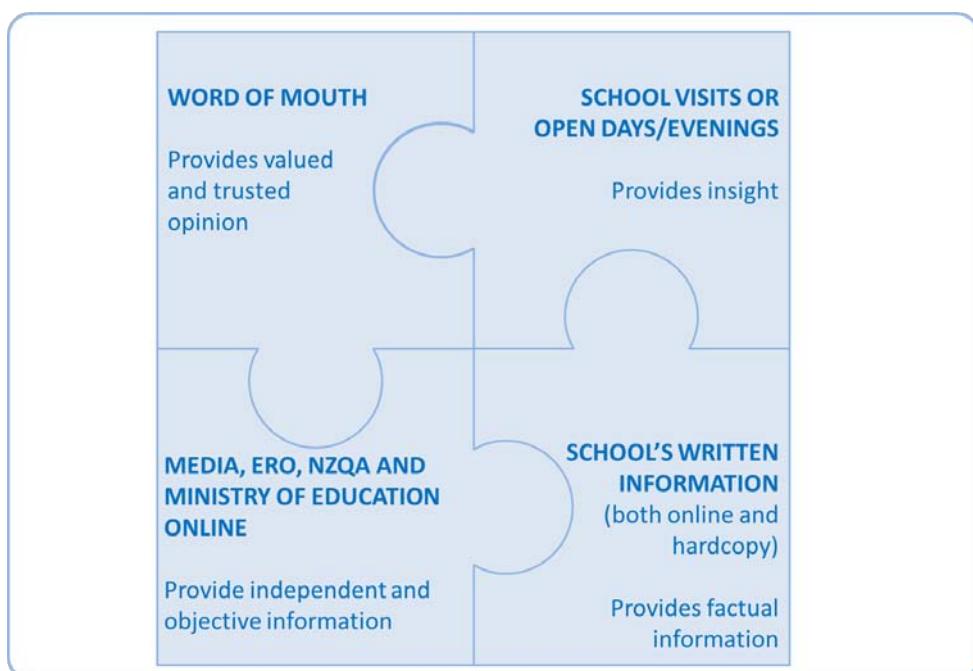
(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Auckland)

"I went to my son's intermediate open day on Monday and the kids couldn't wait to get to this one class, because the whole class just had iPads everywhere, so now he does want to go to that school. That was quite cool, because that is the way of the future, and I don't have one (iPad) so he can learn at school and it's going to complement his learning, big flat screens in every class as well to show them videos and media, that sort of thing."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

Channels of communication and information for school selection

Word-of-mouth reputation and the school itself are currently the most influential and important sources of information for parents, families and whānau. The media is also important because it is perceived to provide an objective overview. Parents would value the combination of word-of-mouth recommendations, school visits, open days/evenings and written information (online and hard copy) from schools and third party sources.



Word-of-mouth provides valued and trusted opinion

Word-of-mouth sources of information are trusted and, therefore, hold prominence in parents' decision-making.

"Referrals from trusted sources are compelling, conversely so are warnings. Does anybody buy from TradeMe traders with lots of bad feedback?"

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Other Upper North Island location)

Word-of-mouth recommendations tend to be sourced from:

- friends (of both parents and child), family and whānau
- colleagues
- neighbours
- current teachers (eg, kindergarten teachers for students about to start Year 1 and primary school teachers for those about to start Year 9)
- other parents

- current and past students of the school.

Parents can also be heavily influenced by what school they went to, with some wanting to uphold a family and whānau tradition and community, while others had poor educational or social experiences at a particular school, and therefore deliberately choose a different school for their children.

School visits and open days/evenings provide insight

School visits (at primary level) and open days/evenings (at secondary level) provide insight for both parents and students. These visits may be open days or evenings, appointments with the principal and teachers or more casual visits (at primary school). Some schools also hold community meetings.

School visits are particularly valuable to gain a sense of the school's overall culture, and at primary school parents can observe how teachers and students interact. It is an important information source for parents on how well their child's wellbeing needs might be met while at the school. At Year 9, parents and students want to gain some knowledge of the subject choices, facilities and resources available.

"I think you can research as much as you need on the internet to get an overall view of what a school has to offer, their overall performance and their mission statement. However, at the end of the day you cannot replace the need to physically go and visit schools and chat with teachers and pupils to get a real feel for a place and its learning environment. It's the little things that you can notice about a place seen only through the naked eye that can make the world of difference."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Other European, Christchurch)

"Visiting the schools gave me a much stronger indication of what the feel of the school would be. I watched the kids around me and how they interacted and I saw how they addressed the adults. It was a much less formal feel, but certainly not unruly. I could see the kids were having fun but at the same time they knew the boundaries. I thought this would be a more comfortable fit with my kids moving from kindy into school."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Wellington)

School's written information provides factual information

Written information is important for accessing facts and data about the school. Schools provide written information through the website, enrolment packs, brochures, prospectus, newsletters and advertising. They tend to provide practical information on:

- the school's mission and goals
- subjects offered (secondary schools)
- extra-curricular activities offered
- uniforms
- all costs associated.

"When searching for a new school, I think info packs are invaluable that outline the school's mission, extra-curricular activities available, uniform option, costs associated, etc. All of this is something that you need to consider when looking at a school."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Christchurch)

"The school provided excellent written information in the form of brochures and information packs, especially related to options available."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Tauranga)

"The websites available gave us a good indication as to what subjects were available."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Auckland)

Third party sources provide independent and objective information

Third party sources include the media (primarily newspapers), ERO, NZQA and Ministry of Education. Parents tend to have low awareness of these sources (particularly apparent among parents with children at low decile schools). These sources are valued for their independent, objective information, but can be difficult to access and/or understand. More detail on each follows.

Education Review Office (ERO)

ERO reports are a source of information about students' learning and wellbeing, the school's decile level and school management and teaching. Parents are polarised in their views about how useful they find the information in the ERO reports and how easy they are to understand. There also seems to be variable levels of awareness of ERO reports, with seemingly lower levels of awareness among lower socio-economic parents. (Note that once they are aware of ERO reports these previously unaware parents are highly interested.)

"ERO report findings (especially how the school was running and the students were doing). This was important, because [I] wanted to make sure that all opportunities were available to her that should be, and that staff and Board had correct training and support necessary to help the school function."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Other Upper North Island location)

"Probably the ERO Reports [had the most influence]. It gives a good overview of the school, everything from the decile rating to the location, how well the school is doing (student, teacher and board-wise), cultural breakdown and its strengths and weaknesses."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Other Upper North Island location)

"We read ERO reports and liked what we read. Some (school's ERO report) that you read they were falling behind in a few things, that they had to pick up on and focus on. Whereas with that one (chosen school) there wasn't as much as some of the other schools. Their rating is just a bit better than some of the other schools that we looked at."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

"There's a website that you can go on, but I think the language can sometimes be a bit of a barrier... Understanding about the school."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Wellington)

"Had a look at the ERO report (however that only provides very limited information and in general not very helpful in the decision making)."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, high decile school, other ethnicity, Wellington)

Media

Some schools will provide their NCEA achievement rates to parents (particularly when these are higher than average and they can celebrate that). For other parents, the media is the sole source of information about NCEA level 1, 2 and 3 achievement statistics. This provides them with statistics about the school and they can

make comparisons across schools. The media also tends to provide decile level ratings. As highlighted in earlier sections, information about decile levels and achievement is highly valued by parents, families and whānau.

Ministry of Education

Pasifika and Māori parents in the focus groups were prompted about the use of the Ministry's website. There appears to be limited awareness of the role of the Ministry and those who have searched the website have reported difficulties finding information. When prompted, they can envisage a role for the Ministry in providing information via an online channel.

"It's not that easy though to find anything on that site (Ministry), I didn't think it was. Not user-friendly."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

There is also some mention of the Ministry's website as the access point for ERO reports. There are some indications that a centralised website providing information about schools' student achievement, school management and teaching and other key variables would be valued by parents, families and whānau.

New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA)

There is some limited mention of NZQA as a source of information about schools' achievement. (It is mostly used by students to access their own results).

Online information is valued

In general, parents indicate the internet is (or would be) a valued source of information.

"Technology is undoubtedly the way of the future, but it cannot replace the need for the physical. Social interaction is paramount in providing a healthy balance between the two."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Other European, Christchurch)

"Selecting a school... I definitely think the way forward is the internet. Most people these days will do a search online at least once before they go looking for anything, and schools are no exception. I think it is important for schools to have an e-presence."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Nelson)

"All this online stuff is wonderful, but I do worry that there are people out there that don't have access to a computer."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Māori, Auckland)

Objective: School-wide information

This section discusses the information parents currently access about school-wide learning progress and achievement and the information they wish to receive. It also reviews the information parents want to know about how the school meets individual needs of particular groups of students (eg, Māori and Pasifika education achievement, students with lower levels of achievement, gifted and talented children and students with special education needs).

Note that parents were least able to express an opinion on this type of information, possibly because they are not aware of what is or what could be available and possibly because they are more interested in how their own child is progressing and achieving rather than other children. The benefit of school-wide information is typically evaluated in terms of how it compares to their own child. Because there is the least input into this objective, the report has combined content and channel.

SUMMARY

It appears that there is limited ongoing, systematic and comprehensive information provided by schools about school-wide learning progress and achievement and wellbeing. Parents, families and whānau indicate interest in this information, because it would enable them to gauge the overall success of the school, identify the trends (increases or decreases) and provide a comparison with their own child's learning progress and achievement. Channels would be similar to the information that is provided for school selection, that is to say online and possibly provided by independent third party sources as well as the school.

Content and channels of communication and information for school-wide information

Most parents, when prompted, indicate an interest in further access to school-wide information (not just the successes). They are interested in this information so they can:

- assess overall school achievement against other schools and compare to previous years
- feel they are involved in the school's progress and achievement, eg, all working together
- evaluate their child's learning progress and achievement compared to other students at the school.

"It is sort of good to know where they are because, like I was sort of, I thought my girl was doing really well with NCEA at the beginning of the year and she was getting her credits or whatever you call them. We were talking about it and I had to educate myself about it, because I had no idea what this business was about. And she came and talked to me about it. But now, you know, she said that some of the kids are getting in their 40s, you know, so many, what are they called, points or ? (Credits). She's about 30 so she's sort of getting behind a bit. So I think just talking to the teachers I've got this picture that she's doing okay but when I look at the figures on the thing maybe she's not doing so well?"

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

The types of information about school-wide learning progress and achievement that parents want to access include:

- comparison of school achievement to the national average (National Standards or NCEA), overall and by subject
- how the school is tracking from year to year
- outcomes of students who have departed the school, eg, how many continue to tertiary education or achieve employment
- how the school ensures students' wellbeing.

"I would ask for league tables that compare my college against some benchmarks, like colleges in the same decile, and the national average, against a range of criteria. I would like to know about what happens to the students who leave, how many go to university, to employment and to other things. I would monitor the hell out of the system."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Wellington)

"I would like to find out how they record and measure overall student wellbeing, not just academic achievement. I believe that we should be assessing and supporting children and young people to develop healthy, productive peer relationships, and assisting them to become well balanced adults."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Dunedin)

"(I would ask) where the school stands at the various years and subjects compared to the national average. By that I would deduce their strengths and weaker areas and be able to compensate for that or choose to not go there. I would also ask the decision criteria for gifted and talented children and the programmes available for them."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Other European, Wellington)

A few parents simply do not feel they need any more school-wide information than they currently receive, because they see little value in it and are more interested in their individual child's progress and achievement. They assume if they really wanted to know this information, they would be able to access it.

"We don't get any information that lets us know how students are performing. I assume if you wanted this info you would research it on the net. To be honest my main concern is how well my children are doing and, as long as they are not falling behind on meeting the expected standard for their year and age, then I'm not too concerned."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Other European, Christchurch)

"I know my child's primary school used to send newsletters home about where the students in general at that particular school fitted against the national average results... And I only found the information useful at the primary school if I knew where my child fitted. Sorry to be selfish, but I think it's nice, if say, 80% of the kids are doing better than the national average, but I want to know that my child is in that 80%."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Palmerston North)

Schools tend to recognise and celebrate individual (or group and team) success (academic, sport, music, drama) and there is some feedback on overall achievement success. This success is generally celebrated via newsletter, website, assemblies and end-of-year prizegiving. Some schools share their ERO reports, while others only mention it if they have a 'good' report.

"They usually skite if they get a good one (ERO report). We don't hear anything if it's not good."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

"I did read something from our son's school a while ago, bit of a newsletter, no, not very often though. Sometimes they tell you at the end of the year, or they say 'oh had such a percentage of sixth form, or they've got bursary'... That would be helpful, wouldn't it, if you had some sort of idea how the best students are doing and the lowest students were doing and you could see, compare where your kids were....We have a graduation at the end of the year at every level so sort of know then where your kid is at."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

"We receive a weekly newsletter and the school is very good at putting information in, such as ERO reports and that kind of thing. They also provide all the normal things such as notable academic and sporting achievement. Our report is generally about eight pages long, so they give us a lot of information compared to other schools, which I think is great and always enjoy reading."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Christchurch)

Schools tend to provide information in a variety of formats, as explained above. However, parents also would like to access information from third parties that they perceive to be more objective (eg, ERO). They comment that they would like to be able to access school-wide information through similar channels that they use when selecting their child's school (eg, independent sources).

Communication and information on how schools address the needs of particular groups of students

This section explores the information that parents would like about how the school addresses the needs of particular groups of students. Parents were prompted to provide comment about gifted and talented students, students with lower levels of literacy and numeracy, lower levels of achievement across the curriculum, Māori and Pasifika students and students with special education needs. However, this was not a key focus of the research so results provide an overview only.

SUMMARY

Parents are broadly interested in information about how the school addresses the needs of particular groups of students, such as Māori and Pasifika students, students with lower levels of literacy and numeracy, students with lower levels of achievement across the curriculum (at all year levels), gifted and talented students (or those who need extension) and students with special education needs. Obviously the importance of this information increases markedly when parents have a child with specific needs and they expect that this information will be tailored and communicated directly and individually.

Content of communication and information on how schools address the needs of particular groups of students

Gifted and talented students

Parents' information needs include how:

- gifted and talented is defined
- students are recognised as being gifted and talented
- the school nurtures, supports and encourages these students
- the school ensures gifted and talented students are continually challenged and kept focused
- the school supports peer interaction
- parents are supported and advised.

"I would be interested in hearing about how the school focuses on gifted and talented children. I would want to know what measures they have in place to be able to spot if a child is gifted, i.e. can they tell whether a child is acting up because he is struggling or because he is bored, as the work is not challenging him enough? Whether they strive to keep them challenged and encourage learning at a higher level in the areas in which they excel. Do they have the ability to offer specialist classes or tutoring to gifted children, i.e. literature groups, maths clubs, other courses or programmes the child can focus on to keep themselves challenged and prevent them from becoming bored and disassociated from the rest of the class or school?"

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Other Upper North Island location)

"Gifted and talented children. My son was part of this group at his previous school. I would like to know what the school is doing to identify and challenge these students in their learning. I would like to know what, if any, courses they are offering these students and what type of support is available."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Auckland)

Students with lower levels of achievement across the curriculum learning areas

Parents feel that if their child's progress and achievement in any areas of the curriculum are very low, the teacher would inform them and put a plan in place to support their child's learning progress. However, parents are concerned that if their child has borderline low achievement at the expected level they may not be informed. Parents want to know how their child's learning progress is supported at any level and they specifically want to know:

- how the teacher is actively addressing students' lower than expected progress and achievement
- what additional learning support they can offer at home to ensure progression.

"I would love to see more work done with children that struggle with any learning. Maybe some sort of system that could give parents access to programmes or something that they could work with children at home, so all extra help needed is not just done at school. Some sort of testing that is done early on in school and done for a number of years."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Auckland)

Students with lower levels of literacy and numeracy

Parents are interested in how the school meets the needs of students with lower levels of literacy and numeracy. Parents' information needs are:

- how students are identified and assessed
- what intervention or support is available
- how teachers are addressing the issues
- what evidence exists of success for literacy and numeracy interventions
- what learning support parents can offer at home.

"In schooling my main concern is for children with lower levels of literacy and numeracy... I would like to know more about what is in place for these students, so they don't fall behind and get lost in the education system."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Christchurch)

"Children with lower literacy/numeracy. I would want information on how children are assessed to identify that they may have a need in this area, what the interventions available are, including the evidence base for these interventions, the frequency and duration of said interventions, and the frequency of assessment to identify the impact of the interventions on children's achievement."

(Years 9 to 13 parents, medium decile school, Pakeha, Dunedin)

Students with Special Education needs

Parents have made comments about a wide variety of students under this heading eg, students with special education needs (with or without Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Scheme/ORRS funding), autism, Asperger's Syndrome, ADHD, ADD and physical disabilities. The information areas expressed by parents include:

- welcome and inclusion by the school and other students
- identification of students with special education needs
- management of differences in learning progress and achievement
- availability of learning support
- funding of learning support
- pastoral support
- management of behavioural issues
- availability of support groups for parents.

"Information I would like to know: how are children with special education needs catered for? Are the children mainstreamed into a normal classroom or are they separated? What special adaptations does the school have to allow for wheelchairs and other disabled access? How are the other children encouraged to include the special needs children? Are separate 'helpers' or extra teachers provided to help the classroom teacher include the special needs children without it being a detriment to the rest of the classroom?"

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Other Upper North Island location)

"Information [I] would like: what's on offer? Any special techniques used? Any special equipment used? Track record? Results?"

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, New Plymouth)

"Students with Asperger's or high-functioning autism, especially those who are academically gifted (because this applies to one of my other children not currently attending the public school, but who might have to if our finances don't allow us to continue paying for private schooling). The public school uses streamed classes so that's a great start. How does the school deal with students who perform very well academically in some subjects or tests, but not so well in some particular subjects or tests due to some form of disability (eg, autism, dyslexia)? Is there any learning support available? How have other children with Asperger's fared in the top streams? What support is there to ensure such children are not socially isolated and to meet their emotional needs? Is there a safe place they can go in case of a meltdown? How does the school respond to behavioural difficulties with autistic students? Is there a support group for parents? Can we meet with individual teachers about potential and actual problems for longer than the standard five-minute parent-teacher interview?"

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Auckland)

"Oh we've got a girl that's like a five year old, even though she's eleven. We just got all funding for her and that took five years."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

Māori and Pasifika students

As outlined in earlier sections, how the school is specifically addressing the needs of Māori and Pasifika children is a factor in school selection for Māori and Pasifika parents. There is interest in how the school:

- is reflecting and has pride in its bicultural or multicultural composition (or of New Zealand society)
- includes Te Reo Māori
- includes English as a second language
- focuses on Māori and Pasifika learning progress and achievement. Note there was not indepth probing of parents', families' and whānau's perceptions of how schools are addressing the underachievement of Māori and Pasifika students.

"And you see a lot of Pacific Islanders there, you see a lot of brown faces now... They do value everyone's culture, the language that's spoken, Te Reo and when they do their concerts and things how much of the Māori and Pacific Island stuff is in amongst that... They do that really well."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

"My boy, it was only about a month ago he said something in Te Reo, sort of spun my eyes around 'oh he must be learning that at school'. But just to hear him say a sentence sort of blew me away."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

"With regards [to] Māori education development, we would like to know how our child is achieving rather than just knowing she has taken part in activities, eg, Kapa haka group."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Dunedin)

"If my child is achieving and if they aren't, why not? I also think whether we are moving with the times... I know statistics for Māori students two to three years ago... The students are progressing. They brought in another teacher, support networks... I'd be worried if it was going the other way... Wellbeing, it's a big contributor to the progression, it goes hand in hand."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Auckland)

"My son is Māori and he has been assessed as being in the top 2% for cognitive function. And, we are always having to choose between developing his understanding of tikanga, his Te Reo, his knowledge of matauranga Māori or developing his cognitive/academic abilities. It is deeply frustrating to us that he constantly has to choose between the Māori stream or the academic stream. What I can't understand is why there aren't kaupapa Māori gifted and talented education programmes."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Hamilton)

Channels of communication and information about the needs of particular groups of students

Parents want to access information about how the school responds to the needs of particular groups of students through:

- the school's website
- enrolment packs and prospectus
- the school newsletter
- face-to-face direct communication (when their own child has particular needs).

"It would be good to have an introduction to this material on the school website or in the enrolment pack/prospectus. A copy of policies and procedures available online would be helpful. However more detailed information should be communicated directly with the teachers and principal if a child has been singled out as gifted."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Other Upper North Island location)

"It would be good if the school website profiled each service available to specific groups and what is offered."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, New Plymouth)

Objective: Communication and information about an individual child's learning progress and achievement.

This section discusses:

- the content of communication and information that parents, families and whānau want to access about their child's learning progress and achievement
- how information should be communicated to parents, families and whānau.

Summary

Parents have high demand for comprehensive information about their child's learning progress and achievement. The most important information is their child's strengths and the areas their child needs more help with (which logically also includes next learning steps). Their child's behaviour in class and relationships with teachers and peers are also important because parents perceive that this will impact on their child's learning. There is interest in knowing how their child compares to others (in the class or nationally), so they can gauge whether their child is on track or not. This means that there is interest in National Standards and NCEA comparisons. Parents are interested in knowing the broad content of what their child is learning, so that they can take an interest, engage in conversations and help their child. Māori parents are interested in knowing how Te Reo Māori and/or Māori culture is incorporated into their child's learning. There is similar interest among Pasifika parents for a multicultural focus.

More formal channels of reporting, such as school reports and parent/teacher interviews are highly valued, but it appears that the content and delivery of these vary in terms of how useful they are and how well informed parents feel about the child's learning progress and achievement. Parents would value more informal and frequent communications by email, phone and online to supplement reports and interviews.

Content of communication and information about their child's learning progress and achievement

What are my child's strengths and what areas do they need more help with?

In considering their child's learning progress, all parents want to know:

- whether their child is achieving to their best ability
- their child's strengths and how their child is being extended
- areas their child is weak in or struggles with (and what parents, child and teacher can do/are doing to address this).

Schools vary in the information that they provide and parents vary in their demand for this information eg:

- some parents are satisfied and feel well informed, while others are dissatisfied and do not feel well informed

- some parents have well balanced information about their child's strengths, areas to develop and areas of concern, while others feel that they have not been well informed about areas of concern (until too late)
- some parents are proactive and take a close interest, while others expect the teacher and school will have it 'in hand' and will inform them if there are issues.

"Together with his teaching team, I want to understand how my son is doing relative to his own potential, as best as we can ascertain that. From that basis, we can then figure out what we should keep doing, stop doing or change for him at school and at home."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Other Upper North Island location)

What is my child learning?

Some parents want more information about the work their child is doing in class. This is so they can take a more active interest and have conversations about it with their child and/or be more able to help with homework (particularly at Years 9 to 13).

"If email/online information [was] made available about current academic/curriculum content and classwork and homework being covered, [it] would allow for more informed parent support of child's learning (and gaps), and more specific focus to the parent/teacher meetings. Would have more sense of all being on same page (no nasty surprises...)."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Christchurch)

Parents make links between classroom behaviour, relationships with peers and teachers and learning achievement. Therefore they want information and feedback about:

- attendance (Years 9 to 13)
- engagement with and focus on learning activities and tasks, throughout the day and subject by subject
- interactions and relationships with peers, particularly disruptive behaviour in class or not getting on well with peers
- interactions and relationships with teachers, particularly poor relationships, which impacts on engagement and learning.

"The questions I would ask teachers are things, such as how is his behaviour and focus, particularly in the afternoons when children usually become tired. Does he focus on tasks well? Does he persevere or tend to get frazzled and give up if he finds tasks difficult."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Other Upper North Island location)

"Because I know he's bright enough, I'm more likely to ask questions about his behaviour, for the simple reason, if he's not concentrating well enough, he's not going to be learning to his best ability."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Palmerston North)

What and how is Te Reo Māori and/or Māori culture incorporated for my child?

Some parents (particularly Māori) want to know about their child's cultural and/or language content within the classroom context.

"Does he enjoy the cultural aspects of Māori?"

(Years 1 to 8 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

"Is Te Reo used in normal classroom situations?"
(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

How does my child compare to others?

Parents of younger children (Years 1 to 8) want to know how their child's learning relates to other children's. Note that parents appear to vary in their knowledge and understanding of National Standards (and schools vary in how they are reporting against National Standards).

"How is her achievement in each subject compared with [that of] other children in the class? How is her achievement in each subject compared with [that of] other children in the year?"
(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Wellington)

"How well is our child learning at a particular study compared to other children in the class?"
(Years 1 to 8 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

"Are they achieving at their age level?"
(Years 1 to 8 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

Is my child on track to achieve NCEA?

Increasingly, as children get older (particularly Years 9 to 13), parents also expect that students themselves will take responsibility for their learning and what is required to achieve. Similar to National Standards, parents vary in the extent that they understand NCEA. They want to know what NCEA credits their child has achieved (by subject) and whether they are on track to achieve NCEA overall.

Parents vary in their knowledge about how:

- students can access the NZQA website to keep track of their credits (some parents would also like independent access)
- different subjects have different numbers of credits and some are internally assessed, while others are externally assessed by end-of-year exams
- the minimum requirements for university entrance
- assessment of learning achievement: not achieved (NA), achieved (A), merit (M) or excellence (E); 'E' stands for excellence and is not an 'E' for fail
- students can get merit and excellence endorsements (and what the requirements are)
- students can work towards more than the minimum number of credits.

Parents feel some limitations and frustration from having to rely on their child to know the requirements. They want the teacher's reassurance that their child is on track.

"When I do talk with teachers about my son's progress, I just want to know if he's doing well enough to progress, and this year, get NCEA with reasonable marks."
(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Dunedin)

Channels of communication and information about their child's learning progress and achievement

The current sources of information about their child's individual learning progress and achievement are typically a written school report and face-to-face parent/teacher interviews (that sometimes include the student). Parents' comments indicate that schools' reports and interviews vary in quality and ease of understanding. There is a demand for information on how their child is progressing and achieving compared to others, but schools vary in the how they report on this and the extent of reporting on National Standards and NCEA progress. There is also demand for informal and frequent communication via phone, email, text, face-to-face conversations and on-line access. Again, schools vary in how well they meet this need. The following sections explore the channels of information in more detail.

School reports

It seems that many parents are very reliant on the school reports as the main communication about their child's learning progress and achievement. It appears that the content and usefulness of reports vary between schools. Parents are polarised in terms of how useful and easy to understand school reports are.

Report content that is useful for parents includes:

- their child's learning progress and achievement across all curriculum areas
- what parents can do at home to assist with their child's learning
- their child's attitude, behaviour and wellbeing (as well as learning progress and achievement)
- a measure of how their child is progressing against National Standards
- a measure of how their child is progressing against NCEA credit requirements.

Report content needs to be written in a language that is easy to understand.

"The main information is sent home with their reports twice yearly. This has a good indication of how they are doing, where they are at currently with the National Standards, what the school can do with them to help them improve and what we at home can do to help. There is also an interim assessment sent home after the first six weeks of each year, letting parents know how their children are settling in to their new classroom and how well they are doing."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Other Upper North Island location)

"Our (school's) reporting's quite good, they talk to the parents a lot about what the format is and it's been changed a number of times to what we want. They added in more social sides to it as well, because all we were getting was kind of the mark, this is for this and this is for whatever it was, but we wanted to know how they were fitting in with their peers as well, because if they don't, if there's problems outside in the classroom or they're socially not fitting in, they're not going to be learning. So that was quite important to us."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

However, there are some parents who are less positive about the information they receive in school reports. They find the information lacking detail and too generic. Some parents find it difficult to understand what the report is actually saying about their child's progress and achievement.

"I often find the written reports a little short on information and need the meetings (with teachers) to actually figure out what is going on."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Wellington)

"We receive a 'report' each term that takes the form of [an] A4 sheet that highlights progress in the relevant subjects. It is reasonably useful, but often contains 'teacher speak', rather than what we would perceive as plain English."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Dunedin)

"They have changed it so that it's very PC. They are feeding you the positive things to obviously build up your whole thing of how your child is doing, when actually it's not a true reflection of how the kids are actually going."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Auckland)

Parents have mixed views about how they receive the school reports. Preferences include:

- hardcopy posted in the mail
- hardcopy coming home with the child (although it can get mislaid)
- electronically (more immediate and direct).

Most parents are satisfied with the current frequency of reports, albeit supported by parent/teacher face-to-face interviews and meetings and more frequent informal feedback in between times.

National Standards reporting

Although not a key focus of this research, there is some interesting parent feedback about National Standards and the reporting of their child's progress and achievement against these. Some comments suggest:

- a lack of awareness and/or understanding of National Standards
- parents are influenced by what the school has communicated about National Standards
- variability in the understanding and usefulness of reports that schools provide. For example, there is a comment that since the introduction of National Standards the detail of a child's learning progress and achievement across the curriculum areas has been 'lost' with a limited focus solely on National Standards in literacy and numeracy.

"I like it because it gives a good gauge of where children are at, if a child's fallen behind that's been able to be identified and corrected at an early enough stage, that they're not getting so far behind from the rest of their peers, and if there's a problem it can be corrected or they can get help along the way. A lot of people are opposed to it, but I can't see why anyone would oppose it. If it's in the best interest of your child, I'm all for it."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

"They oppose it, because they're saying 'what are you basing your standards on?' Some children are here and happy, they're fine. At our school we've got a lot of ESOL students, so it's hard to put that into the National Standards when their second language is English, and that's kind of why our school opposes it."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

"I personally think that she's doing quite well. However, it's encouraging for us to know that there is a Standard, and she can be measured and identified. We can identify where she'll be at in that Standard. Not having any other children and not knowing how to measure her, it's good for us. Otherwise, we might think that she's doing really well, when possibly she might not be."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

"Previously we have had mid-year and end-of-year reports, which changed since National Standards was introduced - for the worse. Prior to National Standards we got very interesting reports about all sorts of things that our child was doing, and how they were doing for each subject. Once National Standards was introduced all we got was info on maths, reading, writing, which was very frustrating. There was a lot less information coming home, as it was all about following the requirements for National Standards and a whole lot less about telling us what they were up to in class. Also frustrating was that there was no longer any indication of how they were actually progressing. It was just above the year level and that was it. Well how much above? Has there been any improvement over the year? Yes, they are still above the year level, but are they still above at the same rate or have they just sat at the same ability level all year, being ignored, because they are not part of the underachieving tail? National Standards was so frustrating as a parent, as we got less information about how our child was doing."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Hamilton)

NCEA reporting

Some parents have difficulty understanding NCEA credits and need interpretation information (in reports, NZQA online, school printouts and/or through community meetings), so that they know what credits their child has achieved and what is required.

"We go to the community meetings that they hold for parents, they often hold NCEA nights and a few parents are not sure how the whole process works. They (school) have information evenings where you can go along and learn about it. And they tell you why you need this many credits and what happens if you don't... You can get a printout and see how well they are achieving at school."

(Years 1 to 9 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Auckland)

"If you can understand the reports... Well the way they are set out sometimes you think 'ok, what does number 1 mean and what does number 2 mean?' And 'E' means excellence, because in our day E was a low mark... It's too complicated, it doesn't go into enough depth... It's too general. I think reports are linked up with parent/teacher evenings and you can take the report and say 'what does this mean here?' For example, they might say [xxx] is well mannered and all this, yet her grades are low. The grade has to reflect what the overall summary says. It doesn't make sense, if they say she is doing really well and I am really happy with her progress and yet their marks are low. There is no balance, so you have got to go in and say 'what's going on here, it doesn't make sense to me. Can you explain it to me?'"

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Auckland)

"My daughter, she's a motivated learner herself, so we don't have to be on at her all the time. But then, last year she got all the way to the end of the year and she hadn't got level 3 English and she reads and she's bright, but she knows and her teachers know that she can't get in to uni if you haven't got level 3. And then she said 'oh, it's my fault because I knew I didn't have the credits'."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Māori, Auckland)

Teacher/parent/student interviews and conferences

Schools vary in the way they conduct parent/teacher interviews, with some promoting parent/teacher/student conferences and others using a more formal parent/teacher interview without the student involved. Parents differ in their preferences, eg, some are frustrated by student-led conferences and just want the teacher to tell them about their child's learning, while others welcome student-led goal setting and more of a conference approach. Generally, parents report that parent/teacher interviews provide valuable insight into their child's learning progress and achievement. This forum allows parents to:

- meet and get to know teachers
- follow up on areas of concern in the school reports
- ask specific questions about their child eg, learning, attitude, behaviour, friendships, extra-curricular activities
- identify overall progress and achievement
- explore their child's strengths
- identify and explore the areas their child might be struggling in
- explore how teacher/child/parent can address specific areas the child needs help in.

"Generally, I found the parent/teacher interviews MUCH more useful (than school reports) in understanding how my child was doing and any issues to be addressed. I wonder how parents who don't attend these find out anything useful."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Other European, Christchurch)

"It would be better if we could have more parent/teacher time, as this enables us to ask questions instead of just receiving what the school thinks we want or need."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Napier/Hastings)

Parents' main concern with the parent/teacher interviews is the lack of time allocated. While parents find these forums for discussing their child's progress valuable, they would appreciate slightly longer times with the teacher(s). They feel this important discussion is too rushed.

"The (parent/teacher) meeting provides subjective feedback on actual progress, manners, cultural fit, etc. The meetings are not long enough. Five minutes per subject is inadequate for a decent discussion and these sessions frequently run over time. In my view, they are extremely important and schools should allow teachers more prep and delivery time."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Wellington)

Some parents feel 'daunted' by parent/teacher interviews in that they:

- feel intimidated by the school environment
- do not feel comfortable questioning the teacher
- do not understand the curriculum, National Standards and/or NCEA and do not know the questions to ask
- feel powerless to change ongoing poor learning outcomes or behaviour issues.

"When they first attended college, the parent/teacher evening, because some of the old teachers are still there and she is like 'is that you [xxx]' and you can't help it, you go 'Yes Miss'."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Auckland)

"I have to say that a lot of parents at our kids' schools they are whakama, they are embarrassed to ask because of the feeling that the person you're asking is going to think you're dumb. So, a lot of us keep quiet and just nod our heads and say 'ok'. You go home and you still don't know any better. So, it's also about getting the strength and the courage to speak up and say 'hey I don't understand, can you explain it please?'."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Auckland)

Some schools have student-led conferences and/or encourage students to attend. This is valued by some parents as it:

- encourages the child to take ownership of their learning
- is an opportunity for their child to showcase their work
- gives the child pride in their progress and effort.

"We have a student-led conference where the child shows the parents some of their chosen work and the child is encouraged to explain why, what and how they went about their work. They show the parents around the classroom and the obvious pride that the children take in their work is inspiring. This is a child-led presentation. The teacher takes a back seat in proceedings. The parents then provide written feedback on what they most liked about the presentation, what they learned and what they were proud of. It's great to see the work they are doing in the classroom and by flicking through the workbooks you can see clearly how they are developing from the beginning of the year."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Auckland)

Some parents, however, would also like the opportunity to meet with their child's teacher without their child present so they can:

- look to the teacher (as the expert) to give an overall appraisal of their child's progress, ie, strengths and weaknesses
- raise and explore any concerns.

"I actually find it's just a waste of time. You go in there and you've got fifteen minutes, you walk in there and it's like the child's doing all the talking, the teacher's sitting there, ok well so what's this all about? The child talks about how far he's got and then she (teacher) just sits there and says and 'how do you feel about that?' I want you (teacher) to tell me."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

There is strong demand for the communication and information that is provided by face-to-face parent/teacher interviews. Many parents would like this extended ie, more frequent and/or longer sessions. This would allow for a more robust and indepth discussion about their child's progress and achievement. Parents whose child attends these forums want to continue to have their child present, but would also appreciate a separate meeting without their child.

Informal and frequent communication

Parents want to be confident that teachers will communicate effectively with them, so they are kept up-to-date and aware of any issues, learning progress and/or behaviour. Parents have a preference for informal, frequent communication (in addition to the more formal reporting, eg, school reports, parent/teacher/child interviews). The regular and informal channels preferred by parents are emails, text, phone conversations and impromptu conversations at pick-up and drop- off (for Years 1 to 8).

"Second and most important, the extent to which the school engaged us as parents both at school and at home, encouraging our informal participation, not just in formal parent/teacher reviews and helping out on field trips, but teacher willingness to participate in an ongoing conversation about how things are going."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Other Upper North Island location)

Parents value the schools that communicate frequently and have a variety of informal channels to communicate children's progress and achievement. There appears to be a high expectation that schools/teachers will be proactive and parents welcome and value this.

"Yes, she is getting better results. I don't know if it's because she is a girl, but I just think it's the school itself, and just getting that involvement in the school and keeping us updated on her learning."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Auckland)

"[XXX] college will ring us if something happens. If they don't have enough credits they will ring, if they're concerned they will ring me."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

Parents indicate disappointment and frustration when the school/teacher does not proactively communicate with them other than through reports and parent/teacher interviews, or only communicate when there is a 'problem'.

"You go in and you ask for something and you give them the emails and your phone numbers and then, if something happens to your child you don't get the phone call, you don't get the email. So, the responsibility, even though we all talk about partnership, it really has to be. We seem to be the one trying to work to get the teachers to respond, and I get it that there are large schools and not everybody can get around to all the children, but when there's something that affects your child, you want something done straightaway."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Wellington).

Some of the options for ongoing, regular communication between teacher, student and parent about individual student progress and achievement include:

- regular emails between teachers and parents
- text messages about learning (not just absence)
- phone calls
- online access to student's work (see more on this in the next section)
- students' work displayed in classrooms
- partnership books containing homework and a space for teachers' and parents' comments
- portfolios displaying examples of the student's work
- homework/home learning diaries showing the homework students are working on, which allows parents to see what their child is doing and how they might help
- weekly or fortnightly scores for student's effort level and/or behaviour (ie, regular provision of scores for parents to understand how much effort their child is putting in to achieving his or her learning outcomes)
- praise postcards and red flag postcards to quickly convey areas where the student is performing well or areas for focus.

"Even if once a week they (child) had to fill in their own sheet. The biggest pet peeve I have is when my son comes home from school, and I say 'what did you learn today at school?' You get 'nothing', five years of nothing... Parents sign in on a school website, access the information just for that week. We don't expect every day with how busy they (teachers) are, but just that regular contact, fortnightly or something, because 'nothing' is just not good enough."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

"I prefer face-to-face with the teacher first and then text or email. Text you know you've got your cell phone on you all the time, even if it's once a week, just something, and email. The activities that are done during the week, general mood of the week might help determine how I'm dealing with him at home, he might be having a hard time at school and I don't know about it. So, if I can find that out, that might help. What I can help at home with to encourage his learning, rewards and punishments that he receives at school, consequences, and is he taking advantage of every opportunity and being encouraged?"

(Years 1 to 8 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

Online access

When prompted about the possibilities of accessing their child's progress and achievements online, most parents welcome this as an additional and valuable source of communication and information. They assume the information would be secure (ie, only authorised people able to access it). They would also like online information, if it is in conjunction with (not a substitute for) face-to-face communication and information. Parents state the benefits of being able to access learning progress and achievement online as:

- an additional avenue of communication and information with relatively easy access at any time
- near real time information about their child's progress and achievement
- early identification of any issues
- less likelihood of their child misplacing information (when it is sent home with them)
- less reliance on the child communicating their progress and achievement
- provides the basis to generate discussions between parent, child and teacher
- both parents in shared custody arrangements can access learning progress and achievement
- families and whānau can access learning progress and achievement
- an opportunity for their child to showcase and share their work and feel proud of their effort.

"Convenient. I work from home, online, so it's at my fingertips. You are also guaranteed to get information instantly, or a lot quicker than snail mail, or an appointment system with the school, or even a child bringing things home (it isn't always reliable, child can forget to tell you there is a notice etc)."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Other South Island location)

"It would be useful to get electronic copies of tests, because my son tends to lose things, which makes it hard to make sense of any feedback when you don't know what the questions were."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Other European, Wellington)

"Online definitely. With a large proportion of blended families and shared custody this would help parents immensely."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Auckland)

"I like the idea of having e-portfolios. This will allow my child to be able to tell me about what they have done and take pride in it. I think that being proud in the work done will encourage them to want to strive further and push themselves. This would also allow grandparents that don't live locally to be able to see how my child is doing."

(Years 1 to 6 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Palmerston North)

"I know with my second boy, if it's not a good assignment I've never seen it, and I want to know. I want to see everything. Test results... Monthly progress on all subjects... How's he done in subjects... NCEA... As parents we want to know well in advance that if our kids are struggling, then we are in a place where we can work together to help and to come up to par again, rather than wait at the last minute. Like some of us have said, our children don't really talk to us and then when we get the report... And then you kind of feel like well 'why didn't you tell me?' and you're waiting around they're saying 'well, your son should have told you'."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Wellington)

Balanced against the demand for more frequent and easy-to-access communication and information is parents' concern about the impact of this on teachers, in that it may be time-consuming and detract from actual teaching quality.

"Online reporting is an excellent and user-friendly tool, but should not be at the expense of time spent teaching children. The best reporting method is the quickest one, so the focus is on teaching and not on reporting."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Other European, Wellington)

"Online portal with anytime updates sounds great, although I'm mindful of the time teachers spend on paperwork (or data entry), so I would hope that it would be a one-entry system, or perhaps be scanned in by clerical staff."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Auckland)

Objective: Communication and information about an individual child's next learning steps

This section discusses the information that parents, families and whānau seek about their child's next learning steps, and how they would like this information to be communicated to them.

SUMMARY

Parents believe that knowing about their child's next learning steps is necessary, either to help them progress in areas they are having difficulty with or to extend them. However, it appears that teachers do not always make these next learning steps explicit, nor do parents ask about it. Next learning steps are not necessarily expected in reporting, except for what is being done to address a specific issue. Most parents expect that teachers will have identified their child's next learning steps and will have them 'in hand'. Frequent, informal communication about what their child is currently learning and what they will be learning next is valued, as it opens up the possibilities for conversations between parent and child. As with learning progress and achievement, parents value information and communication that reassures them that their child is on track.

Content of communication and information about their child's next learning steps

Parents want an accurate gauge, reports and communication of their child's learning progress and achievement. If their child is at the expected level, they are generally more relaxed about next learning steps, albeit they still want to know what the student, teacher and they can focus on, if their child needs a greater challenge, extension or they are progressing to the next level. Parents mostly expect that the teachers will manage this progression appropriately. Some parents seek to understand the teachers' plan for enabling their child to work towards the next goals in more detail, and how teachers, parents and the student can cooperate most effectively to accomplish this. Once they know what the next learning steps are, and therefore the child's focus, parents want to know how they can assist their child at home.

"I would first ensure I had an accurate sense of where [my] child [is] currently placed, then ensure mutually agreed understanding about next steps and how child, teacher, and parent can collectively best facilitate that happening."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Christchurch)

"If they were in the lower percentile, I would like the teacher to say we need to follow this plan to help them improve, or if they were in the upper percentile what can be done to challenge them."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Hamilton)

A few parents feel it would be helpful if information about next learning steps informed them about the topic or unit about to be taught. If they had some pre-warning, parents would be able to begin the conversation at home about that specific topic.

"I would like to know what subjects or units the teacher will plan on delivering next. That would be helpful. Like say, next term we will be looking at electricity and the ways in which having electricity affects our lives (social studies), and how we measure it (maths), and weather patterns producing electricity (science). That sort of thing would be really helpful, as then we could start talking about it at home and finding areas of interest within the topic that appeal to our son and so on and so forth. That would be far more helpful than 'your child needs to work on his times tables'."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Hamilton)

Parents are concerned if their child is struggling with any specific areas and/or not progressing and achieving at the expected level, eg, if they are not on track to achieve at the National Standard level or NCEA credits. Again, parents expect teachers to manage this appropriately, but they expect greater communication and teachers' input to address this. Also, parents generally want to know what they can do to help.

"Sometimes a report is [all] positive, no negatives. When it says my child is progressing really well and is a really good achiever yet the grade is low, it doesn't make sense. It should say 'they are doing well, but more support could be done in these areas'."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Auckland)

"I want to know my child is achieving or if they're not, why not? What can I do?"

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Auckland).

Next learning steps, subject options/choice and credit achievement, merit or excellence also become important in order to pursue a particular study or career path (Years 9 to 13 students).

These parents want to know if their child is studying the subjects that he or she is most likely to succeed in. They would also like the teachers' views about the best next direction for their child, for example, what areas for further education or which career path might their child pursue. They also want to be reassured their child has sufficient credits in specific subjects for tertiary study or their chosen career paths.

"Questions about which subjects he shows the most aptitude in, and the most ability to excel in at senior levels, and which ones might be worth attempting scholarship in. What careers could you imagine him doing, loving and succeeding in?"

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Auckland)

"As my son is in his final year of high school, I would want to know how prepared they feel he is for further education and what their thoughts are regarding his study and work choices."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Christchurch)

"Level 2 kids that go into Year 13 and they are looking beyond that when they want to get into the workforce, and the different trades that they have available. They tell you how many credits you need, and if your child knows what they want. They know 'I need this amount to become an officer or whatever'. So, I think it's a good thing. They can work towards that goal. How many credits they need... It's about being informed... But in a way it's not good, because the kids know they need 60 to pass, so they just get 60 and that's it, when they can actually do more, but they don't."

(Years 1 to 9 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Auckland)

Channels of communication and information about their child's next learning steps

It seems that information and discussion about students' next learning steps are variable between schools, and comments from parents suggest that these types of conversations and information are possibly more common and/or focused at Years 1 to 8 than at Years 9 to 13.

The forums to access information about next learning steps and goals are usually school reports and parent/teacher interviews.

If they know about it, parents of Years 11 to 13 students can also access NCEA updates (via their child) and introduce discussions with their child and/or their child's teacher.

Sometimes parents use homework or portfolios to get an idea about what their child is learning and what the future direction might be. They also communicate with teachers directly or via email, particularly if there are any areas of concern.

Most parents want to be informed about their child's next learning steps, so they can assist their child. Some parents want this information or communication to be more frequent, timely and/or more comprehensive in terms of what the student and teachers are doing at school and what the child and parents can do at home.

"It would be more useful if we were told what the next steps are, or where she is heading more than once or twice a year."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Nelson)

"Next learning steps are written in the reports received twice a year and also how we, as parents, can help them achieve these next steps (which is helpful). But I found, as the reports are written up to six weeks before we receive them, the next steps have often been achieved by the time I read the report! (As was the case with my five year old.)"

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Wellington)

However, some parents are satisfied with the current information and communication from the school. They trust and expect that the school or teacher will ensure their child's learning needs are being met.

"I don't want any more communication, twice a year is fine. I trust the teachers and the school to be constantly teaching that next learning step."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Other European, Nelson)

Objective: Communication and information about an individual child's wellbeing

This section discusses the areas that parents, families and whānau associate with their child's wellbeing, and how they would like to see this information communicated to them.

SUMMARY

Parents consider that their child's wellbeing is critical in its own right and also because wellbeing impacts on their child's learning progress and achievement. Happiness, safety and good/productive relationships with peers and teachers are important, as are the school's processes and systems to ensure these. However, in terms of reporting (either formally or informally), parents feel that wellbeing is an area that is not well addressed by schools. Parents rely heavily on their child's self-reported comments and feedback, with little 'objective' input from their teachers, unless there are very visible, serious and urgent issues.

Content of communication and information about their child's wellbeing

Parents consider receiving information about their child's wellbeing as crucial. In today's environment, with serious concerns about bullying for children of all ages and fears of depression and suicide in teenagers, parents want to know how their child's wellbeing is ensured by the school. Note that in school selection, assessment of children's wellbeing is as critical a factor as learning progress and achievement.

"Now this is the area I feel has the biggest gap and as a parent it is actually the area I am most interested in and want more info."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Auckland)

Parents see wellbeing and positive learning outcomes as interdependent. Therefore, they want to know about factors affecting their child's wellbeing, so they can address these immediately. Wellbeing indicators include:

- happy, settled, confident students who are willing to go to school (not students who are quiet, withdrawn, moody, grumpy, stressed or anxious)
- mental and physical health and safety (no bullying, drugs, depression or suicide)
- friendships with peers
- behaviour in class that is not disruptive, distracted, or off-task
- productive relationships with teachers
- attendance
- progress, achievement and enjoyment in extra-curricular activities, eg, sport, music, drama, Kapa haka.

Is my child happy?

Many parents want to know how their child is dealing with school. Are they happy and confident or are they stressed and anxious? New entrants' parents want comprehensive information about how their child is settling in to the new environment (at both Year 1 and Year 9).

"I would find more info on this subject very useful for myself and my child. How does my son do, compared to classmates socially? Is he on par? Is he happy in class and at school? What can you do about it if unhappy? What can the teacher do about it? Does info get shared with other teachers, so the duty teacher knows who needs a little help on playground?"

(Years 9 to 13 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Auckland)

Is my child mentally and physically safe?

Ensuring their child is mentally and physically healthy and safe is important for parents not only for their child's overall wellbeing, but also to ensure their child's learning progress and achievement are not compromised.

"My child has been bullied in the past, so I try and pay close attention to what is happening at school, as an unhappy child struggles to learn."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Māori, Tauranga)

"I always ask at the parent/teacher interviews, because I know my child doesn't learn if he's stressing about other stuff, or, should I say, learn well."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Palmerston North)

Who are my child's friends?

Parents want to know who their child is interacting with and who their friends are. They want to feel reassured that their child is doing well socially. They would be concerned if their child was unhappy, 'a loner', was 'picked on' by others or equally if their child was being led astray (particularly at secondary school).

"Do they have friends? (Seems like we should know, but the teacher's perception of who the child's friends are, and who they interact with most, doesn't always match up with what the child says). Do they get on with their classmates? Are they happy? If not, what seems to be the problem?"

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Auckland)

"Are my kids applying themselves, behaving well with their schoolmates, avoiding hanging out with the wrong crowd?"

(Years 9 to 13 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Wellington)

How does my child interact with teachers?

Parents recognise that as well as peer influence, the relationships and interactions between their child and teachers also impact on their child's learning progress and achievement. They get anecdotal self-reported comments from their child, eg, they know which teachers their children like and do not like and the reasons why, but they seldom get feedback from the teachers (unless there is an urgent issue). Parents want to know that teachers and child are working well together, that the teachers know and understand their child and that their child feels confident to ask questions and raise issues.

"Does he have any personality clashes with his teachers? Do you (teacher) have time for each child individually?"

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

"Why is the teacher sometimes mean to a child?" Is my child shy in class?"

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Wellington)

What does the school have in place to ensure my child's wellbeing?

Essentially, parents want to know what the school is doing to monitor and ensure their child's wellbeing while at school. Parents want clarity around the school's policies and processes, so they feel confident that issues will be avoided and/or swiftly and appropriately managed when/if they occur. In particular, parents want to know how school management, deans and teachers implement anti-bullying protocols and manage disruptive behaviour in the classroom.

In addition to managing negative behaviour, parents want to know how the school builds and encourages positive behaviour and social interactions, as well as individual attributes like independence.

"I would really like to see a genuine focus on whole person wellbeing; on how the school might take some active initiatives to join with parent and child to prioritise and enhance skills that increase resilience, positive emotion, engagement and meaning."

(Years 9 to 13 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Christchurch)

Channels of communication and information about their child's wellbeing

Parents consider their child's wellbeing to be as critical as learning progress (and the two are closely interrelated) and yet parents feel that schools provide limited and/or infrequent information.

"Wellbeing' is one paragraph every second term. It is useful to get this, but NOT useful to get such little information so infrequently. I would far rather sit down with a teacher - WITHOUT MY CHILD PRESENT - to get a real assessment of their wellbeing."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Pakeha, Wellington)

While parents tend to receive less information about their child's wellbeing relative to other information, some parents feel confident that the school would contact them if there were any concerns.

"I feel that if there is a specific problem then the school will approach me, but in most cases I assume 'no news is good news'."

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Pakeha, Hamilton)

Relative to other types of information, parents are more likely to access information about their child's wellbeing through informal means. For some parents, it can feel a little like they stumble across the information or they have to go specifically seek this information.

Parent-initiated avenues of accessing information about their child's wellbeing include:

- discussions with their child
- observing their child and noting any changes in behaviour

- informal discussions with the teacher, particularly at pick-up and drop-off time for parents of younger children (although some parents can feel it is inappropriate to discuss wellbeing in front of others)
- ‘parent espionage’ (parents telling other parents information)

“We get some information through the others’ feedback. But, this is something the school is not strong on. Some of the more empathetic teachers have talked to us, if there is a problem. Usually we have found out things from other parents or our children and had to raise it with the school.”

(Years 1 to 8 parent, medium decile school, Other European, Wellington)

“We occasionally try some recommendable self-help espionage: peering through the school gate at lunchtime will easily show whom our kids are playing with, what they’re doing, if they’re bullied or isolated. It’s a great start for a later discussion (would you like to invite xxx...?).”

(Years 1 to 8 parent, high decile school, Other European, Wellington)

School/teacher-initiated information about their child’s general wellbeing comes through from more formal channels, such as school reports and parent/teacher interviews. However, school reports tend to lack detail with very small amounts of information or possibly just a ‘tick box’ relating to wellbeing. Parent/teacher interviews are not seen as a very useful way of discussing a student’s wellbeing, especially when the child is present, as this limits the openness of the conversation.

If there are serious concerns about a child’s wellbeing, parents expect that school management, deans and/or teachers will initiate contact with parents by email or telephone and/or arrange face-to-face meetings. The intervention will include:

- what the school and/or teacher is doing to mitigate the issue
- what parents can do to assist.

Likewise, some parents initiate contact with the school to inform them, if there are issues at home that will impact their child’s learning, attitude and behaviour at school.

Parents stress the importance of relationships and communication between student, teachers and parents as key to a child’s learning and wellbeing.

“Show they actually cared and they listened to something I said, that they were willing to build a relationship between the parent and the teacher and the child. And maybe give some negative feedback sometimes so they (child) can learn from it, because that’s part of life, it’s not all roses all the time.”

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Pasifika, Auckland)

“I like it, because they’re approachable, and they ring you for good stuff as well, like all the time.”

(Years 9 to 13 parent, low decile school, Māori, Wellington)

Appendix 1: Summary of discussion guide for e-Qual

Day one – school selection

D1 Q1

Thinking about choosing the school that your child currently attends...

- What were all the factors that you and/or your child considered to help you decide which school he or she would go to?
- Please tell us why these factors were important to you and your child.

D1 Q2

Thinking about all the factors that you and your child took into account when deciding which school he or she would attend...

- How did you find out information about a particular school? What sources of information did you use?
- If your child also used information to help with his or her decision, what sources of information did your child use?

D1 Q3

Of all the sources of information you used...

- Which had the most influence on you and your child's decision?
- What was it about that source or those sources that influenced you and your child most?

Day two – child's progress, achievement, next learning steps and wellbeing

D2 Q1

Let's talk about information about your child's progress and achievement.

- What information do you currently receive or access about your child's progress and achievement?
- How do you receive or access this information?
- In what ways is receiving or accessing this information in this way useful or not useful?
- Imagine if you had an hour with your child's teachers. What are all the questions about your child's progress and achievement that you would like to ask?

D2 Q2

Let's talk about information about your child's next learning steps, that is, what they need to focus on next.

- What information do you currently receive or access about your child's next learning steps?
- How do you receive or access this information?

- In what ways is receiving or accessing this information in this way useful or not useful?
- Again, imagine you were with your child's teachers, what are all the questions about your child's next learning steps that you would like to ask?

D2 Q3

Let's talk about information about your child's wellbeing while at school.

- What information do you currently receive or access about your child's wellbeing?
- How do you receive or access this information?
- In what ways is receiving or accessing this information in this way useful or not useful?
- Again, imagine you were with your child's teachers, what are all the questions about your child's wellbeing that you would like to ask?

Day three – general information about the school

D3 Q1

Over the past couple of days we've been discussing information about choosing a school and information about your individual child's progress, achievement, next learning steps and wellbeing. Let's now focus on information about all students' learning at the school. We don't mean information about each student at the school but rather overall, combined or aggregated information.

- What combined or aggregate information about all students' learning and wellbeing at your child's school do you currently get?
- How do you get this information?
- In what ways is this information useful or not useful?
- If you had an hour with your school's principal or the Board of Trustees, what would you like to ask about what the school is doing to focus on children's learning, progress, achievement, next learning steps and wellbeing?

D3 Q2

Let's think about how your school is being responsive to particular groups of students within the school, for example, Māori education achievement, Pasifika education achievement, gifted or talented children, children with lower levels of literacy and numeracy, and children with special education needs.

Pick one of these specific groups that you would be interested in finding out about and tell us what information you would like about how your school is being responsive to that particular group of students' needs. Remember to identify which particular group of students you are talking about.

And, how would you want to receive or access this information?

D3 Q3

Let's think about everything we've been talking about so far, including information about:

- Selecting a school
- Your child's progress, achievement, next learning steps and wellbeing
- School-wide learning and well-being.

And, let's imagine you can start from scratch and create the ideal way for you to receive and access this information, how would you ideally receive and access this information?

You can create completely new ideas of receiving and accessing information or draw on ideas that already exist. For example, we've heard about how Willowbank school use Facebook and Mission Heights School's development of anytime online reporting and e-portfolios where all students and parents have access to the online reports using an access card. As soon as a student completes an assessment, the teacher puts it online, together with feedback and next learning steps. Students tell parents when a new assessment result is available and they are able to view their child's online report through their own log in.

Appendix 2: Summary of discussion guide for focus groups

SCHOOL SELECTION

Purpose: to address the first objective about school selection: To understand what information and in what formats PFW (and their children) require to help them make informed decisions.

There are a variety of reasons parents and children go to a particular school. Just from the top of your head why did you and/or your children choose the school that they are currently at? And what gave you confidence that you had made the right decision? What, if anything, were you doubtful about? Was there anything, with the benefit of hindsight or experience, you wish you had found out more about?

When **choosing** a primary/secondary school for your child what are all the factors that help you make your decision you take account of or you would like in helping make your decision?

Researcher - Using card sort methodology, write down all the individual factors that are suggested (plus factors that have been mentioned in previous groups). Ask parents to group these individual factors into categories/themes and name the themes. What are our key overall themes and why? Also explore themes that don't have much detail in them – what are these themes made up of?

Now rank the themes from most to least important in choosing a school. What is the reasoning behind why we have put the themes into this order?

If our children were to do this how might their themes and/or ranking be different or similar? At what age or stage do we take account of our children's factors/importance? (Researcher- probe this for transition from year 6 to years 7/8 especially if their child is not at a full primary and also probe transition from year 8 to year 9 and also any other transitions between geographical areas or if the current school is not suiting their child)

How do you currently find information (about the themes), especially the important ones? What about our children – How/where do they get this information?

How easy or difficult is it to find information and make sense of the information? What makes it so?

What sources of information have highest/lowest influence or greatest confidence in with you?

What gives them influence and credibility? Researcher – probe schools' websites, ERO, NZQA, newspaper, Ministry of Education.

In an ideal world if this was being developed from 'scratch' for you, where and how would this information be accessed and what would it contain? How would it meet both parents and children's needs to select the right school for them?

SCHOOL-WIDE INFORMATION THROUGHOUT THE TIME A CHILD IS AT THAT SCHOOL

Purpose: to address the second objective: Information about the school that the child is attending, types of information, format etc.

Once your child is attending a school what overall information about the school do you want to be able to access or receive? How often?

What is most important and useful to you? Why? What is least important and least useful? Why?

In what format do you currently get/access this information and how would you prefer to access it?

Where would this information come from? The individual school or the Ministry of Education? Why? What are the advantages/disadvantages of both as sources of school information?

If not already discussed – what aggregate or combined information about **all students** (at your school) learning, progress, achievement, next steps and wellbeing do you currently get? What would you like to get? In what format? How often? How would you use this information? How would it be of value to you? As above where does/should this information come from?

What information would you like for how the school is addressing the needs and being responsive to particular groups of students within the school? eg Māori and/or Pasifika education achievement? Children with special education needs? Low levels of literacy and numeracy? Gifted and talented?

If not already mentioned – have any of you accessed aggregate information for National Standards (primary) or NCEA (secondary) for their school? How easy/difficult was this to understand? And how was it of value/no value?

INFORMATION SPECIFIC TO THE INDIVIDUAL CHILD'S PROGRESS, ACHIEVEMENT, NEXT LEARNING STEPS AND WELLBEING

Purpose: to address the third objective: information about their child's learning, progress, achievement, next steps and wellbeing.

What is all the information about your **child** you would like to get from your child's school/teacher and how often would you like this? As above, this will be sorted into themes and then ranked. What are the themes and what detail do they have in them? What is the rationale for how we have grouped them and ranked them? How would this be the same or different if your child was seeking information about themselves?

If not already explicitly identified/discussed - There is some current thinking that information about a child's learning **progress, achievement** and **next learning steps** is important for parents, families, whanau and students themselves to have. What are your thoughts on the importance of this information and where this type of information fits in our themes (above)?

If not already explicitly identified/discussed - There is also thinking that information about a child's **wellbeing** is important. What are your thoughts on the importance of information about wellbeing and where this type of information fits in our themes (above)?

How do you think parents, families, whanau and students could access/receive information about learning progress, achievement and next steps? How much of this information do you currently ask for or get? How easy it is to understand? How, if at all do you follow it up with your child's school/teacher and with your child? How, if at all, does the school/teacher follow it up with you/with your child?

In what format is it available? And how easy is it to access and understand? Is there anything in particular that you find easy and useful? Anything in particular you find difficult or not that useful?

What, if anything, do you know about how children are assessed and their progress monitored? What is currently made available to you and your child by the school/teacher? How easy is it to understand?

What is useful/easy about current reporting? Note: we can use report examples from t.k.i as prompts and also ask parents to 'talk to' copies of their child's midyear reports as examples of what is easy/difficult to understand. This is not to go into private details but as a reminder of the types of information that is reported. (For years 1-8) probe how, if at all, their school has reported on their child's progress and next steps against National Standards?

Is your school or any other school you have heard of doing anything particularly innovative and useful in the ways that they are informing parents about the school overall, their child's learning, progress, achievement and next steps? Use examples of online innovation to prompt discussion about what 'might be' e.g.

Willowbank school use of Facebook and Mission Heights School development of anytime online reporting and e-portfolios (<http://assessment.tki.org.nz/Reporting-to-parents-families-and-whānau/School-stories/Mission-Heights-Schools>) - All students and parents have access to the online reports using an access card. As soon as a student completes an assessment, the teacher puts it online, together with feedback and next learning steps. Students tell parents when a new assessment result is available and they are able to view their child's online report through their own log in.

How do parents imagine that internet (websites, email, social media, e-portfolios) might be used to keep parents, families, whānau, students and teachers in touch with the school and specifically with individual student's learning, progress and next steps? How might this work and how would parents, families, whānau and students best utilise it?

For your child's wellbeing, how might you be able to access this type of information? And how would it be the same or different to information about learning progress, achievement and next learning steps?

PFW SUMMARY

Purpose: to encourage and enable PFW to determine how best the different parts of information might come together.

Reflecting back on our conversation over the last 1 ½ hours, what are the stand-outs for you in the really important things you want to know about schools and your individual child? Why are these so important to you? And do you think they will be important to your child? What are the just 'nice to have' and what are really not that important in the scheme of things?

What is the best way of organising the really important information? And what is the best way for you to access this information?

What help do you think you might need in making sense of it and knowing how to use it?

Ideally who would provide the information? Who would help you make sense of it?

How might you use the information to help your child?