

MANAGING YOUR SCHOOL

a LeadSpace 'just in time' guide for first-time principals

10. Leading Your School's Learning Environment: Engagement

OVERVIEW

This "just in time guide" supports primary and secondary principals to focus on the presence, engagement, and achievement targets and actions outlined in the [Statement of Intent 2007–2012, Chapter 3](#).

This guide encourages thinking and leadership action about learning engagement in your school context. In particular:

1. Your school, engagement, and NAG 1
2. The culture of learning in your school
3. Engagement levels – students, staff, and parents
4. Creating the new – not just solving the problems

The scenarios encourage discussion and action about engagement settings.

1. YOUR SCHOOL, ENGAGEMENT, AND [NAG 1](#)

The clear directives made in NAG 1 mean that you need to know a lot about your students, the school's engagement culture, your teachers and your community. The directives require you to lead strategies and processes to maximise student engagement in successful learning. How does your school apply NAG 1?

Reflective question

Do your school's teaching and learning strategies maximise opportunities for high levels of student engagement across the whole school? Are the strategies likely to maximise student engagement by enabling more personalised learning? Do they provide clear expectations, boundaries, and directions for students?

Read through the [Pedagogy](#) and [Systems](#) areas of the [Kiwi Leadership for Principals](#) document.

Check to see if the achievement data required is readily available and analysed so that there is a clear picture to use in meeting the requirements of NAG 1 in your school.

Look for in-school variations in the application of the school's teaching and learning strategies and identify what to do about them. (In-school variations may be reflected in achievement levels for different groups of students identified by gender, ethnicity, age, and other groupings relevant to your school. Consider in-school variations that may appear between classes and learning areas.)



Share and discuss data with all teachers. What does the data mean? How is it being used? Is there enough or too much?

Set aside time each term for a stocktake on NAG 1. Here are some suggestions for the stocktake:

- Consider student progress as identified in achievement data.
- What are the in-school variations in achievement?
- Are there reasons for these variations? Are any actions needed – people actions, curriculum action?
- Review the progress of any special programmes – have goals been met? Resource allocation?
- Use an acknowledgement process to praise and support those who have made significant progress.
- Involve other teachers in this process and link it to curriculum implementation.
- Report to your board of trustees on the broad patterns and any specifics as defined in your reporting calendar*.
- Report to the parents, students, and community at large – as defined in your school's reporting calendar*.
- Ensure any summative data or reporting that becomes available is completed and ready for use, and not all left for the end of year.

* You need a balanced reporting process that is not too demanding to you or your staff. Reporting to the board in accordance with parts of the annual plan is a great idea.

REFLECTIVE READINGS

These readings help you to keep a clear picture of what you are trying to do with NAG 1, and keep you focused on community and Ministry of Education expectations and actions.

[A Balanced School Accountability Model](#) by Ken Jones

[How School Leaders Make a Difference](#) by Viviane Robinson

[Ministry of Education Statement of Intent 2007–2012](#) – read the introduction and the statements about action in the schooling sector (pp. 30–35) to sharpen your focus of the big picture.

[NAG 1](#) – Check you are using the latest version of NAG 1.

2. THE CULTURE OF LEARNING IN YOUR SCHOOL

Reflective question

What is your school's learning culture like? Do you understand all elements of your school's culture? Are your decisions enhanced by your appreciation of your school's culture?

Carry out some data gathering on an aspect of school culture that may be impacting on student engagement in learning.



Read [What is Our School Culture Like?](#) in the leadership area of *LeadSpace*. It provides a valuable checklist to help you choose an aspect of school culture.

Explore the data you already have about your school's learning culture. The demographic profile, the school's traditions, and day-to-day practice are just three parts. Remember to tap into the minds of staff, parents, and school supporters. School symbols, displays, school events, and language use all convey elements of culture.

Become an expert on your school's culture. As you are exploring your school system, you will be [developing self](#), adding to your capacity in effectively using these sorts of emotional competencies: political awareness, influence, team leadership, and self-management. Follow this with constant vigilance assessing the impact of school practices and targeting weaknesses or concerns about levels of engagement. Armed with understanding, you will be much more likely to make decisions that are relevant and gain purposeful response from others.

Scenario: Learning culture and NAG 1

A new teacher started this term. Find the induction materials supplied to new teachers and discuss, with the staff member responsible, how the induction process works. Check with the new teacher about the process. Are you happy with the new teacher's introduction to your school's learning culture? Is [coherence](#) being quickly achieved for new staff?

RELATED RESOURCES

Expand your view of school culture and change through these resources:

[Digital story: Linda Tame, Lincoln High School](#) – a focus on teaching culture

[The Roar of Complexity](#) by Kent Peters

3. ENGAGEMENT LEVELS – STUDENTS, STAFF, AND PARENTS

Levels of engagement are the various connections and involvements in student growth and achievement exhibited by students, teachers, and community members. Keep the terms of the school vision and annual plan clearly in your mind as you consider engagement levels.

Students and their levels of engagement are often under scrutiny. There may be comments by teachers about those parents considered to have low levels of engagement with school. There may be comments by school leaders and board members that criticise the levels of teacher engagement. Do present levels of engagement tell you anything about the capacity of students and teachers to perform at high levels of engagement? Is the school [building capability](#)?



An engagement checklist

Consider these checkpoints in the light of the need for coherence and the capacity to perform at high levels of engagement:

What are the school-wide expectations for engagement – by students, by teachers, by parents? Can you find written confirmation of them? Are they meaningful? Are they part of the school's strategic plan?

How are the expectations conveyed to school community members? Is there clarity? Who 'walks the talk'?

What is the engagement story in your community of [partnerships and networks](#)?

Before passing judgement or even commenting, try building up a picture of engagement using the views of others. For example, do stakeholders know what is expected? Do they regard the engagement criteria as being the best? Who are the well engaged? Who has low levels of engagement? Why? Who has the opportunity for engagement?

How do teachers encourage and develop student engagement?

Are there two or three long-term engagement issues that need attention?

Scenario: Friday after school

Teacher X, "I'm sick of all this data collection. Who reads it anyway? I spend far too much time recording stuff that I know, see, and act on. I know my kids and their needs. In fact I know their needs better than they do!"

Teacher Y, "Yeah I need to spend all Sunday morning getting my mid-year data sorted and into the system. You know the last two years of data collection has done nothing to reduce the amount of time I waste dealing with disruptive behaviour."

You overhear this. What do you do? Can you use this scenario to help build coherence? Recognise the [importance of relationships](#). Can you strengthen working relationships? Align routines?

REFLECTIVE READINGS

Reading these articles will widen your appreciation of student and teacher engagement. You can get a wider range if you type "**engagement**" into the **Search** engine on the [LeadSpace home page](#).

[Shared Culture: A Consensus of Individual Values](#) by Joan Richardson

[A Collegial Conversation](#) by Holly Holland

[Assessment Through the Student's Eyes](#) by Rick Stiggins

[Engage Me or Enrage Me](#) by Marc Prensky

[Partnering with Families and Communities](#) by Joyce Epstein and Karen Clark Salinas



4. CREATING THE NEW – NOT JUST SOLVING THE PROBLEMS

As a school leader, you will have plenty of opportunities to make choices about engagement issues. If there are engagement issues, remember that if you keep on doing what your school has always done, you are likely to get what your school always has. Are there better ways?

Consider [Leading Change and Problem Solving](#) in these developments.

Engagement reflection followed by actions

Read this again: [How School Leaders Make a Difference](#) by Viviane Robinson.

Reflect on the five key leadership practices outlined in this paper. Using student and teacher engagement as your guide, create a checklist for each practice to confirm to yourself how you want to deal with each one.

For example: *Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment*

Why do I want this?

It allows teachers to focus on teaching, and students to focus on learning.

A simple checklist could be:

- We have clear and consistently enforced social expectations and discipline codes
- We work consistently to ensure that the school community understands and appreciates the reasons for them
- We ensure that teachers are not distracted by external forces (for example, parents, community agencies, non-school activities) during school time
- We work consistently to ensure that destructive staff conflict is quickly and effectively addressed
- We recognise and act on the need that teachers thrive best in a supportive collegial environment
- We appreciate constructive criticism
- We are not burdened by making mistakes, but use them to heighten engagement and further learning
- As a school leader, I strengthen the values that uphold an orderly and supportive environment through regular actions at the individual, whole-school, and community levels

Go through the checklists and highlight the points where there are differences between **what you want** and **what is happening now**. Look at the list, and then prioritise actions you can take immediately, over the next two terms, next year, etc. Come back to this list regularly and make updates.



Scenario: Reflecting on engagement possibilities

You and your senior staff want to inject new possibilities into how your teachers and students engage in learning. Your key question is, “What will we do to develop more enthusiastic engagement by our learners with low levels of engagement, to improve their written work; and, apply higher levels of thinking as they do so?”

How will you get the rest of the staff involved in this reflection and any resulting actions?

Reflective questions

As the leader of learning, your expectations of others will be placing significant demands on their levels of engagement. Teachers and students will be aware of them and should be responding to them.

Can you meet their expectations of [being a learner](#)? What has your engagement been like? Does your prioritising ensure you are usually engaged in learning about and/or doing the right things?

The principal’s engagement checklist

- I have grown into playing a leading role in establishing school-wide goals and expectations.
- I regularly articulate the relevant goals and expectations for our school in a variety of school and community contexts
- I have learned to apply the school’s resourcing (financial, staffing, property) to meet the school’s strategic needs as well as possible
- I reserve time to engage in, in-depth planning on teaching and learning matters
- I constantly reserve time to work for cohesion and coordination of curriculum delivery
- I give priority to fully understanding teaching and learning in our school
- Each term I spend time evaluating our progress as a learning community
- With others, I ensure we take action on engagement issues that need attention
- I am an enthusiast for teacher professional development and enjoy active involvement in it
- I have become an expert in our school’s learning culture and constantly seek more understanding of it
- I enjoy building and maintaining an orderly and supportive learning environment

CONCLUSION

This “just in time” document set out to encourage you to develop an in-depth appreciation of learning engagement in your school. The scenarios encourage you to develop actions and strategies so that, over time, weaknesses or deficits in student engagement are reduced or removed. Teacher and principal engagement are stressed as key elements in this process.





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FEEDBACK AND SUGGESTIONS

Suggested additions, questions or comments on this guide should be emailed to leadership@tki.org.nz.

