

NEW ZEALAND CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS PRINCIPALS' CHECK-IN SURVEY

A Thematic Analysis Report

Prepared for the NZ Catholic Primary Principals' Association (NZCPPA) Executive
100 responses across six Dioceses: Auckland, Hamilton, Palmerston North, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin

July 2026

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1. Introduction & Methodology

This report analyses the NZ Catholic Primary Schools Check-in survey, conducted by the New Zealand Catholic Primary Principals' Association (NZCPPA) Executive. The survey invited principals to reflect on their Catholic Special Character and on their school community more generally, covering what is going well, the challenges being faced, and how NZCPPA might advocate for or support them.

One hundred principals responded, representing all six New Zealand Catholic dioceses:

Diocese	Responses	Share of total
Wellington	20	20%
Auckland	19	19%
Palmerston North	19	19%
Hamilton	15	15%
Christchurch	15	15%
Dunedin	12	12%

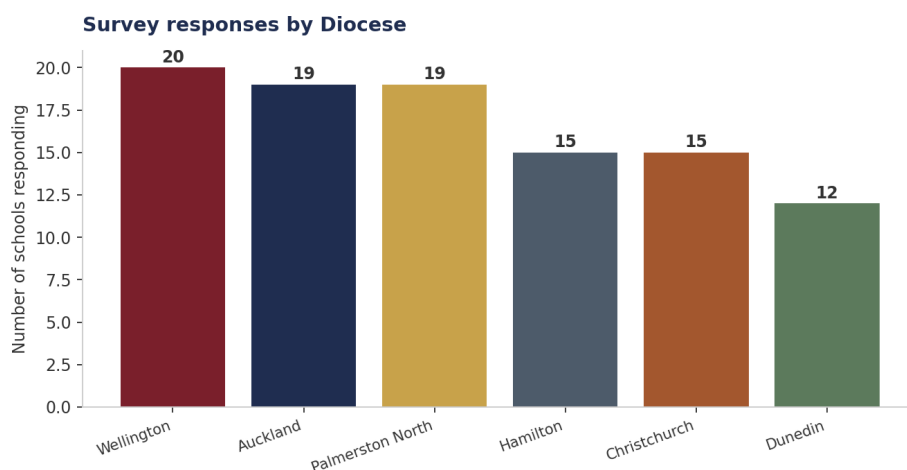


Figure 1. Number of survey responses by Diocese (n = 100).

Five open-text questions were asked of every school:

- What is going well from a Special Character perspective?
- What is going well in the school community in general?
- What are the challenges being faced from a Special Character perspective?
- What are the challenges being faced in general?
- Are there any ways NZCPPA can advocate for and/or support the school?

Because these are free-text, qualitative responses, this report uses thematic coding: each response was read and tagged against a set of recurring themes identified across the dataset (a response can, and often does, touch on more than one theme). Percentages reflect the share of the 100 responding schools whose answer touched on a given theme, not a share of all comments made — so figures across a chart will not sum to 100%. Diocese-level figures are shown as a percentage of that diocese's own respondents, to allow fair comparison between dioceses of different sizes (from 12 responses in Dunedin to 20 in Wellington). Given the smaller number of responses in some dioceses, diocese-level percentages should be read as indicative patterns rather than precise measurements.

2. Executive Summary

Across all six dioceses, a strikingly consistent national picture emerges.

What's working

- Catholic Special Character is genuinely alive in classrooms: prayer, liturgy and Mass life were raised by 38% of schools as a strength, and the lived charism/values by 30%.
- The new Religious Education curriculum, Tō Tātou Whakapono, is landing well — 23% of schools specifically praised its content, integration or delivery, even while (see below) its workload sits among the top challenges.
- School communities report strong whānau connection and belonging (52%), positive student wellbeing and behaviour (20%), and healthy roll growth in many areas (14%).

What's under pressure

- Staffing is the single largest general challenge nationally (40% of schools) — finding, and keeping, quality teachers (especially 'tagged' Catholic-teacher positions) and relievers, particularly outside main centres.
- The pace of curriculum, assessment and reporting change (32%) and its flow-on effect on staff wellbeing and workload (17%) dominate the general challenges, closely mirrored in the Special Character space by the time and cost pressure of RE study, papers and certification (27%).
- Funding and cost-of-living pressure — attendance dues, poverty, and stretched operational budgets — was raised by 24% of schools.
- Parish and priest relationships are a recurring fault line for Special Character: 27% of schools describe distance from the parish church, priest availability, or a strained school–parish relationship as a live challenge.

What principals are asking for

- Many principals (21%) simply value NZCPPA's ongoing presence, connection and 'being on the end of the phone' — this was the single most common response to the advocacy question.
- Where a specific ask was made, it centred on national advocacy on the pace of curriculum change and workload (15%), easing the time/cost burden of RE certification (9%), funding support for transport and attendance dues (11%), and flexibility in preference and tagged-teacher settings (7%).

The sections that follow set out the national themes in more depth, before turning to how the picture varies — and where it is strikingly similar — across the six dioceses.

3. National Picture — What's Going Well

3.1 Special Character

Principals describe Special Character as visibly and consistently lived rather than aspirational. Prayer and liturgical life, the depth of charism, and confident, faith-filled staff (often anchored by a strong Director of Religious Studies, DRS) were the most frequently cited strengths.

What's going well — Special Character perspective

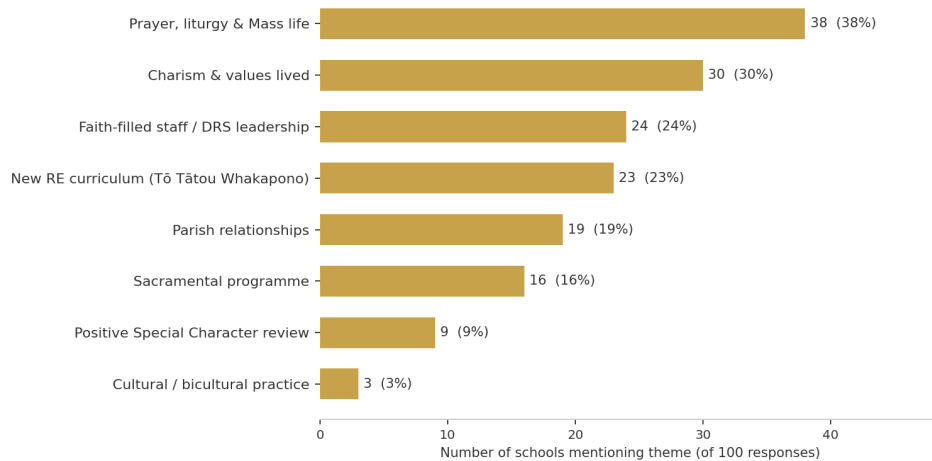


Figure 2. Special Character themes raised as 'going well' (% of 100 responses).

“Our Catholic Special Character continues to be a significant strength of our school and remains visible in the way we live, learn and grow together as a faith community.” — Auckland principal

“We have fantastic engagement from our ākonga and community in school-wide prayer spaces. The integration of our school values and charism is clearly evident in daily classroom practices.” — Dunedin principal

“New curriculum is great and has really enthused and enlivened the teaching of RE. A real triumph.” — Palmerston North principal

3.2 General School Community

Beyond faith life, principals point overwhelmingly to community connection and belonging as the standout strength — supportive whānau, engaged families, and a strong sense of shared identity. Positive student behaviour/wellbeing, cultural diversity being embraced, and roll growth also feature strongly.

What's going well — General school community

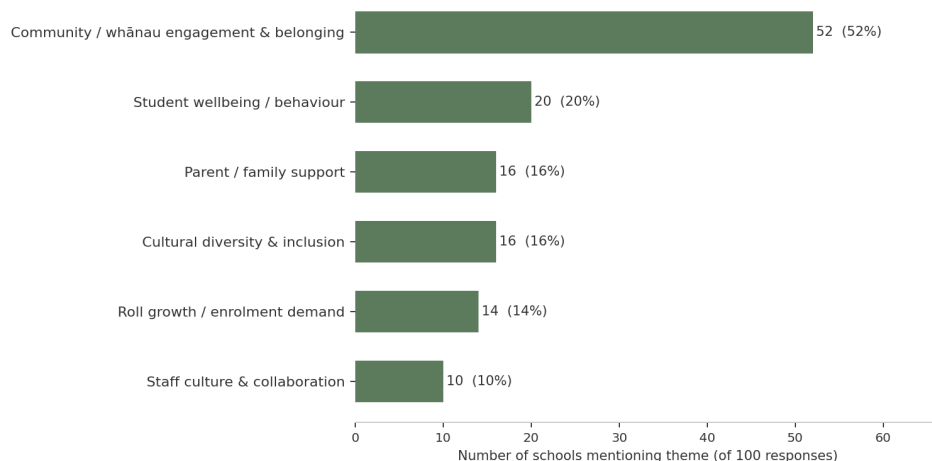


Figure 3. General 'going well' themes (% of 100 responses).

“There is a strong sense of community at our school. Students, staff, whānau, parish, and Board members work together to create a welcoming and supportive environment where everyone feels valued and connected.” — Hamilton principal

“Beautiful children, beautiful families, beautiful staff.” — Palmerston North principal

4. National Picture — Challenges

4.1 Special Character

The two leading Special Character challenges — the time/cost of RE study and certification, and priest/parish relationships — were mentioned equally often (27% each). Facilities (schools without an on-site church or hall) and the tension of protecting Special Character time within an already crowded curriculum are also widely felt.

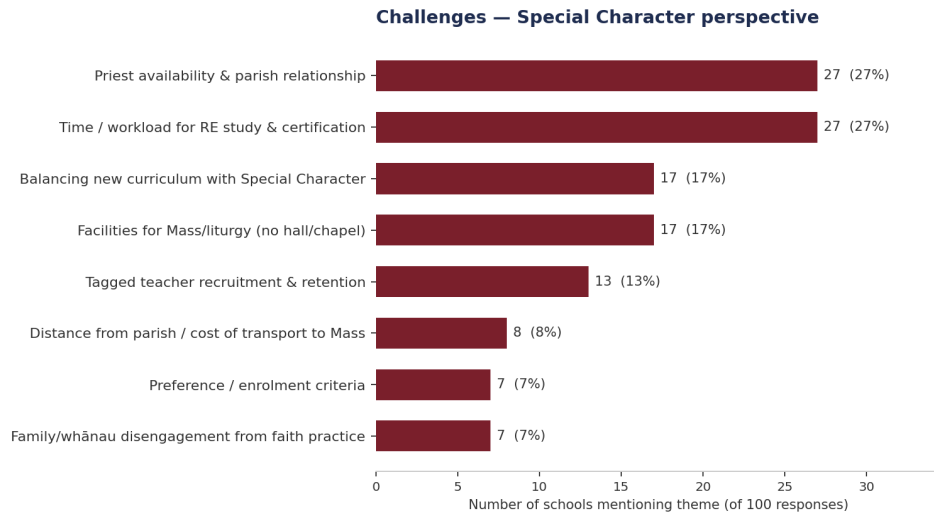


Figure 4. Special Character challenges (% of 100 responses).

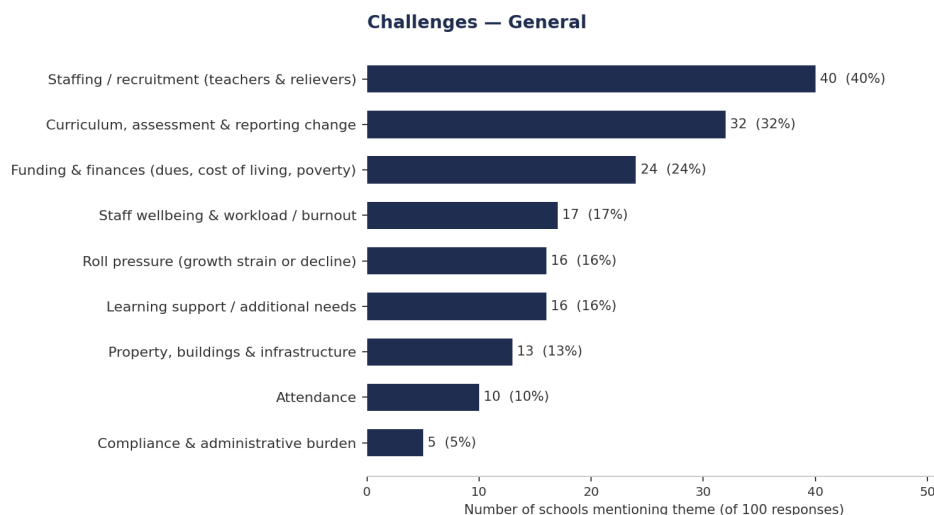
“The hard mandate of daily hours for literacy and numeracy leaves almost no breathing room for Quality Religious Education... the spiritual heart of the school is facing a zero-sum game.” — Wellington principal

“We are geographically distant from our Parish Church... whole school Mass opportunities are limited each year too, and they are expensive as we need about 7 buses to get our school up to Mass.” — Auckland principal

“Finding suitable tagged teachers is always difficult.” — Auckland principal

4.2 General

Staffing dominates the general challenges — recruiting and retaining quality teachers and relievers, especially in rural and provincial areas. This sits alongside the relentless pace of curriculum, assessment and reporting change, and its direct impact on staff wellbeing and workload. Funding pressure (attendance dues, cost of living, operating budgets) and rising learning-support need were also widely raised.



“Staffing! At all levels — relief as well as fulltime teachers. We are struggling to find capable staff due to the rural location of our school.” — Palmerston North principal

“Change! So much, so rapid, and not enough time to feel we are doing one thing really well right now.” — Hamilton principal

5. Requests for Advocacy & Support

Asked directly how NZCPPA could help, the largest single group of principals said, in effect, 'keep doing what you're doing' — valuing the existing network, hui, and knowing support is a phone call away. Around a fifth of schools said they had no specific ask at this time. Where a specific request was made, four themes recur:

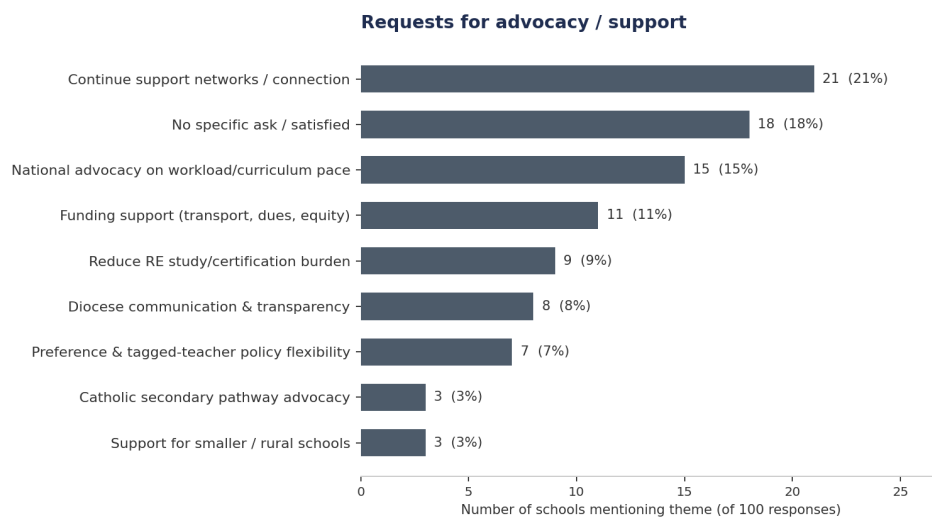


Figure 6. Themes raised in response to the advocacy/support question (% of 100 responses).

- National advocacy on the pace and volume of curriculum, assessment and compliance change — a call for realism about workload.
- Relief from the time and cost burden of RE study, papers, and certification requirements for tagged and non-tagged staff alike.
- Funding support — particularly transport costs to Mass for schools without an on-site church, and fairness in the treatment of attendance dues and the equity index.
- Flexibility in preference and tagged-teacher settings, given how hard some schools find it to recruit into tagged positions.

“Give teachers and Principals time to become familiar and confident with the new Curriculum, without the expectation of Papers and Assignments.” — Auckland principal

“A great support for all schools not close to the Parish Church would be looking at funding transport for schools to get to churches.” — Wellington principal

“Small schools need more support.” — Palmerston North principal

“We would welcome advocacy for greater autonomy for Catholic schools to authentically deliver their mission and Special Character.” — Hamilton principal

6. Diocese-by-Diocese Comparison

The core challenges are shared nationally, but their relative weight shifts from diocese to diocese. The charts below compare the top general and Special Character challenges as a percentage of each diocese's own respondents.

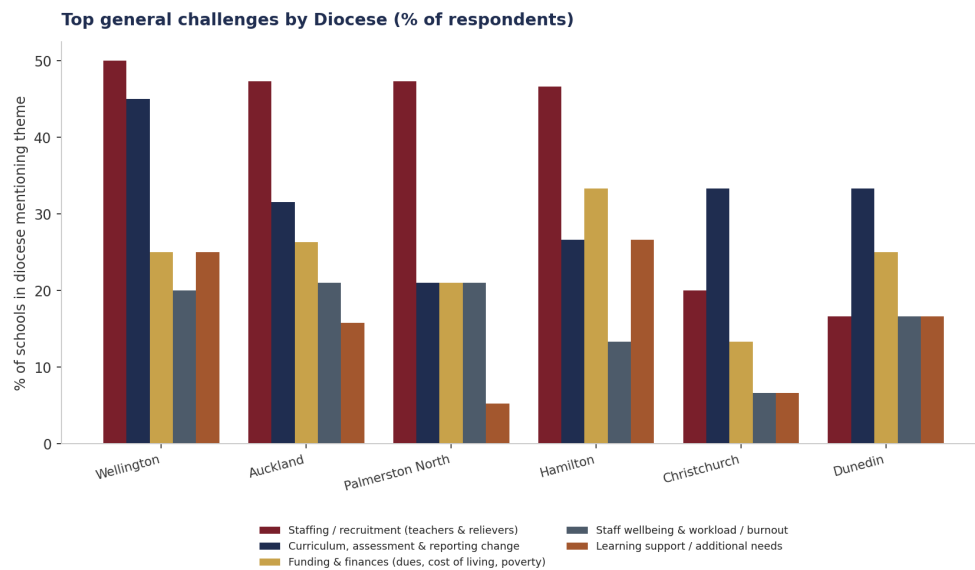


Figure 7. Top five general challenge themes, by Diocese (% of that diocese's respondents).

Staffing is the top or equal-top challenge in every diocese except Christchurch, where it is more moderate; Auckland and Palmerston North report it especially strongly. Funding and finances weigh a little more heavily in Wellington and Palmerston North responses, consistent with cost-of-living comments referencing attendance dues and family hardship.

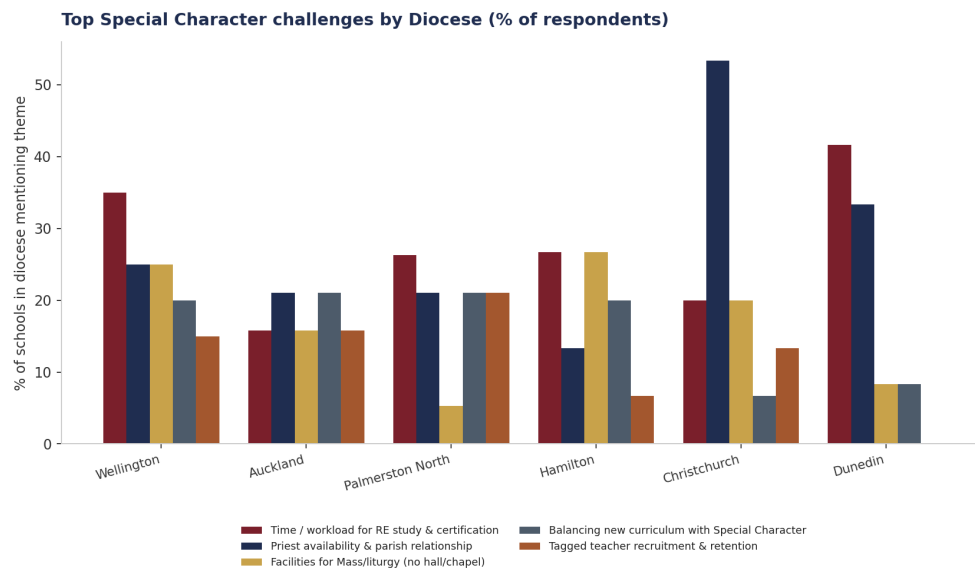


Figure 8. Top five Special Character challenge themes, by Diocese (% of that diocese's respondents).

Christchurch stands out for the strength of priest-availability and parish-relationship comments (over half of its respondents raised this), reflecting several accounts of parish mergers, priest shortages, and strained school–parish dynamics in that diocese's responses. Wellington and Dunedin show a relatively even spread across RE study/time pressure, priest/parish relationships and facilities, while Auckland's Special Character challenges are more evenly distributed across recruitment, facilities and curriculum balance.

7. Diocese Snapshots

Wellington (n = 20)

The largest response group (20). Wellington schools are especially vocal about the tension between mandated literacy/numeracy time and space for Quality Religious Education, and about equity — concerns were raised about the equity index and the assumption that Catholic schools serve a wealthier community. Advocacy requests are the most policy-specific of any diocese, including funding transport to Mass for schools without an on-site church.

Auckland (n = 19)

Auckland's 19 responses show strong Special Character (charism, faith-filled staff, curriculum implementation) sitting alongside real strain: distance and cost of transport to parish Masses recur (one school cited a \$3,000 bus bill), tagged-teacher recruitment is difficult in a competitive labour market, and several schools describe roll pressure — either turning families away under preference limits, or falling rolls against nearby state schools. One response noted parents attempting to influence school programmes from a 'right-wing Catholic perspective' — a reminder that Special Character challenges are not only structural.

Palmerston North (n = 19)

The largest and most varied set of responses (19). Alongside strong sacramental and charism themes, Palmerston North schools raise some of the most direct challenges around priest relationships as a barrier to enrolment and sacramental programmes, rural staffing difficulty, and (in one case) a principal's own resignation citing workload and low resilience after twelve years leading their school. Requests for smaller/rural school support and clearer diocesan communication are more prominent here than elsewhere.

Hamilton (n = 15)

Hamilton principals report a settled, faith-filled culture (DRS leadership, strong Mercy/RNDM charism, weekly Mass) but flag regional staffing difficulty and the growing complexity of student needs. Advocacy requests here lean toward practical network support — hui, connection with the diocesan team — alongside a call for greater autonomy to keep Special Character central rather than competing with an expanding compliance list.

Christchurch (n = 15)

Christchurch's Special Character comments are dominated by parish and priest relationships — new or transitioning priests, distance from clergy, and in one case a church closure with a 'major impact' anticipated. Several schools also describe funding pressure for facilities (paying a neighbouring secondary school to use its chapel) and preference/enrolment tension with other local Catholic schools.

Dunedin (n = 12)

The smallest response group (12) but a consistently positive tone: strong sacramental participation, active service initiatives (Caritas, Young Vinnies, community gardens), and warm relationships with the diocesan team were repeatedly mentioned. Challenges centre on the standard national pressures — curriculum change, staffing, and RE study workload — with several Dunedin schools specifically asking for consistency in how preference criteria are applied across the diocese.

8. Conclusion & Considerations for NZCPPA

Read together, the five questions describe a sector that is confident in its faith identity but stretched by system-level pressure common to all New Zealand schools — curriculum reform, staffing, funding and student need — layered with Catholic-specific pressures around tagged staffing, parish relationships, and RE certification workload. Three considerations emerge for the Executive:

- Workload relief for Special Character requirements: multiple principals describe RE study/certification as competing directly with the time needed for the new national curriculum. A unified national message to Proprietors/Bishops on realistic timeframes could relieve pressure felt in every diocese.
- Parish–school relationship support: raised across all six dioceses in different forms (distance, priest shortages, mergers, or strained governance). NZCPPA-facilitated conversation between principals, proprietors and clergy — and, where relevant, funding support for transport to Mass — would directly address a top-two Special Character challenge.
- Continue the connection principals value most: the single most common response to the advocacy question was appreciation for the existing network and a wish for it to continue — a low-cost, high-value signal that regular contact, hui, and visible national advocacy are working and should be sustained, particularly for smaller and rural schools who feel most stretched.

This analysis is based on thematic coding of open-text responses and is intended to complement, not replace, a full reading of the original comments, many of which contain rich detail and nuance beyond what summary themes can capture.