

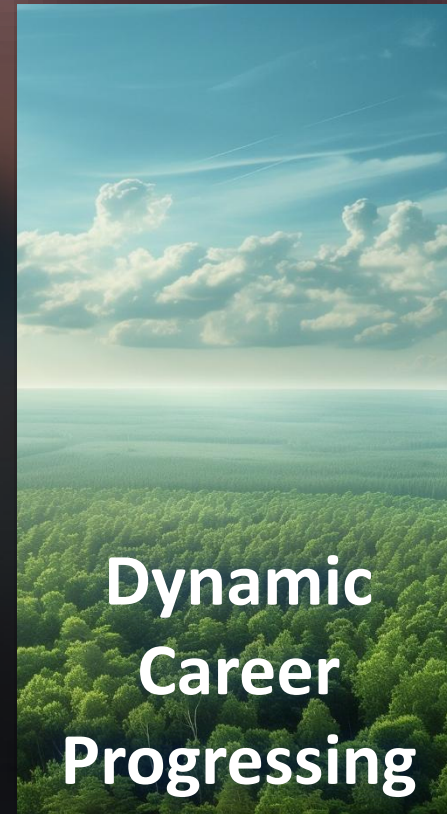
Dynamic Career Pathways of Aspiring Principals in Primary Sector

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STORY LINE

Story line



“...to become a **Māori role model**- this was a huge drive to get into the profession”

“She’s[principal] on sabbatical this term, and there could have been an opportunity for me to step up and have some experience, and unfortunately that didn’t happen... I need support to **prepare me**”



“The community actually do **look up to the Principal**. When I turn up to an event, everyone is like, wow the principal’s here”

“The journey needs to start with someone who has that **spark and passion earlier on**, so they are not tipping 50 by the time it happens”

Aspiring principal career milestones

**Beginning
teacher**

First time
regular
teacher

**Middle
Manage-
ment**

First time holding
unit allowance
i.e., Literacy leader

**Senior
leadership**

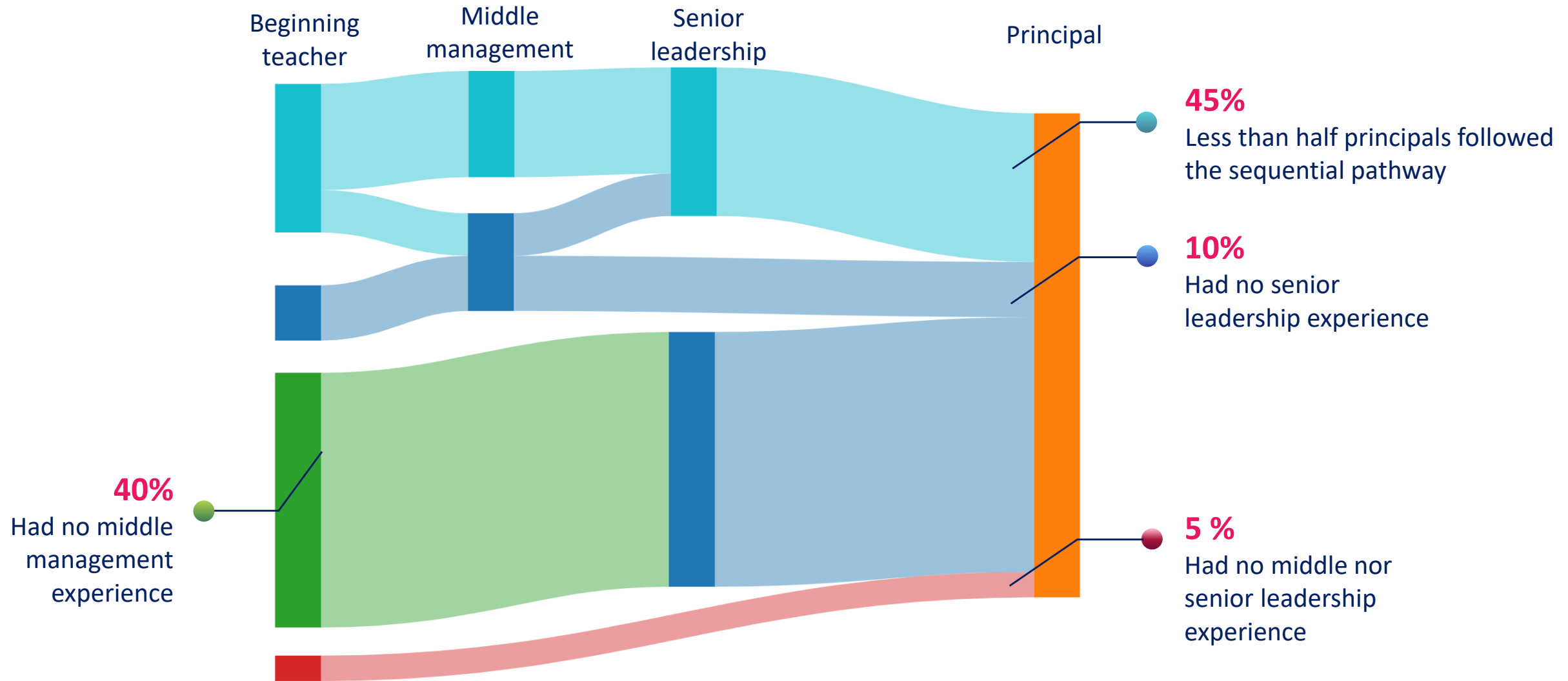
First time holding
senior leadership
position
i.e., Deputy
Principal

Principal

First-time
Principals

For the first time, we trace the complex journey of New Zealand's primary school principals—from beginning teachers, through middle management and senior leadership, to first principalship. Drawing on ten years of career data, with a spotlight in 2022–2024, it highlights emerging trends that challenge traditional assumptions about leadership development.

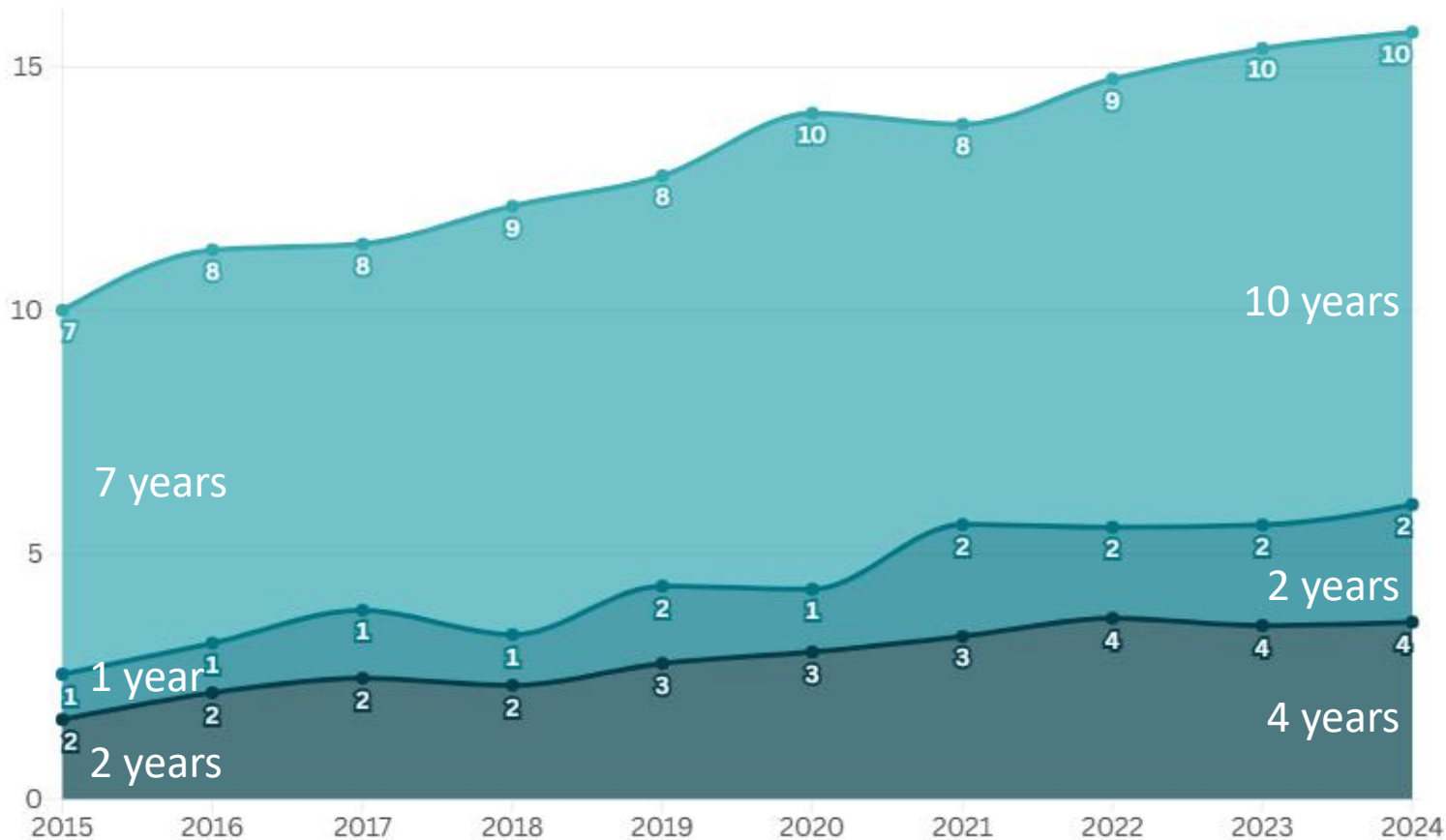
Beyond the Traditional Pathway: a complex, non-linear leadership pathway



Emerging trends: Career patterns change significantly over time

Old pattern
2-1-7 years

New pattern
4-2-10 years



Senior leadership

Increased significantly, accounts for 60% of the total teaching experience

Middle management

Slightly trending up

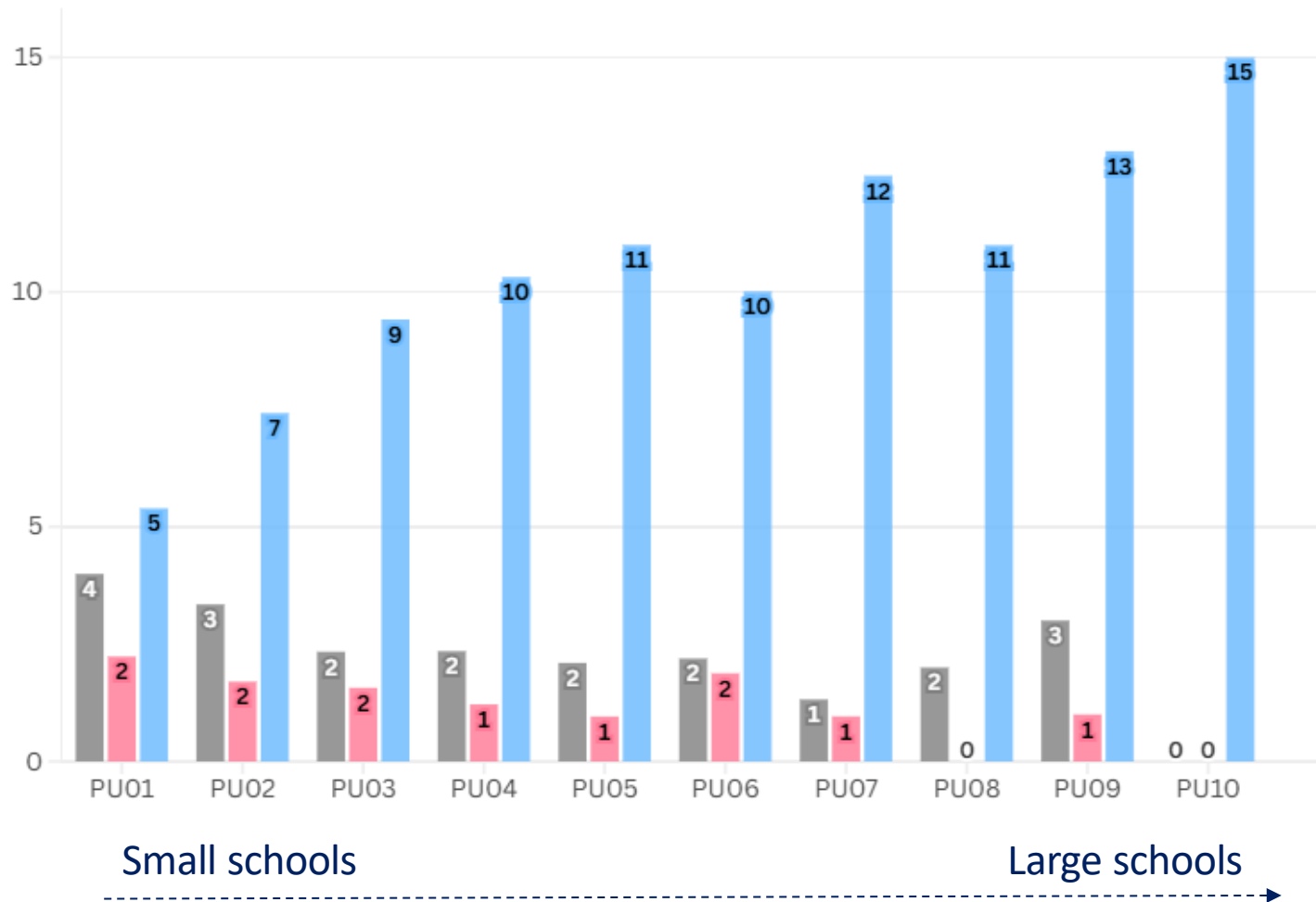
Initial teaching

Changing to 4 years post-COVID

School size significantly influences the principals career patterns

■ Initial teaching ■ Middle management ■ Senior leadership

Years



Senior leadership

- Despite varied paths, senior leadership is the longest and most pivotal stage, averaging 11 years

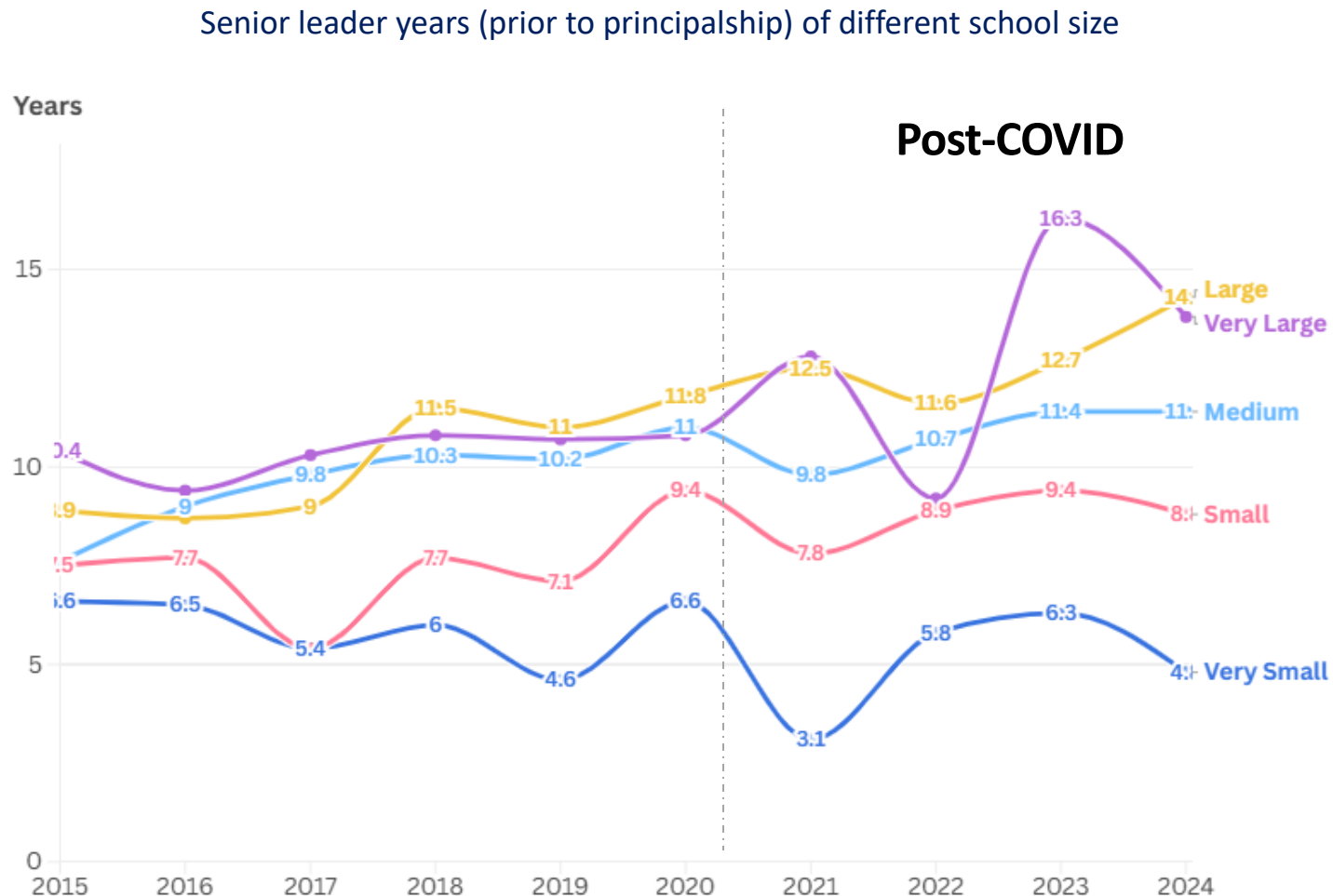
Large schools

- 13-15 years, twice senior leadership** tenure of small schools;
- Reflecting their greater leadership demands and complexity.

Small schools

- Consistently have more **initial teaching** experience (5 years) than those in large schools (3 years);
- Suggesting their greater value on classroom experience

How COVID reshaped senior leadership by school size



Post-COVID

Growing correlation between school size and senior experience

Larger schools tend to appoint principals with more senior leadership experience.

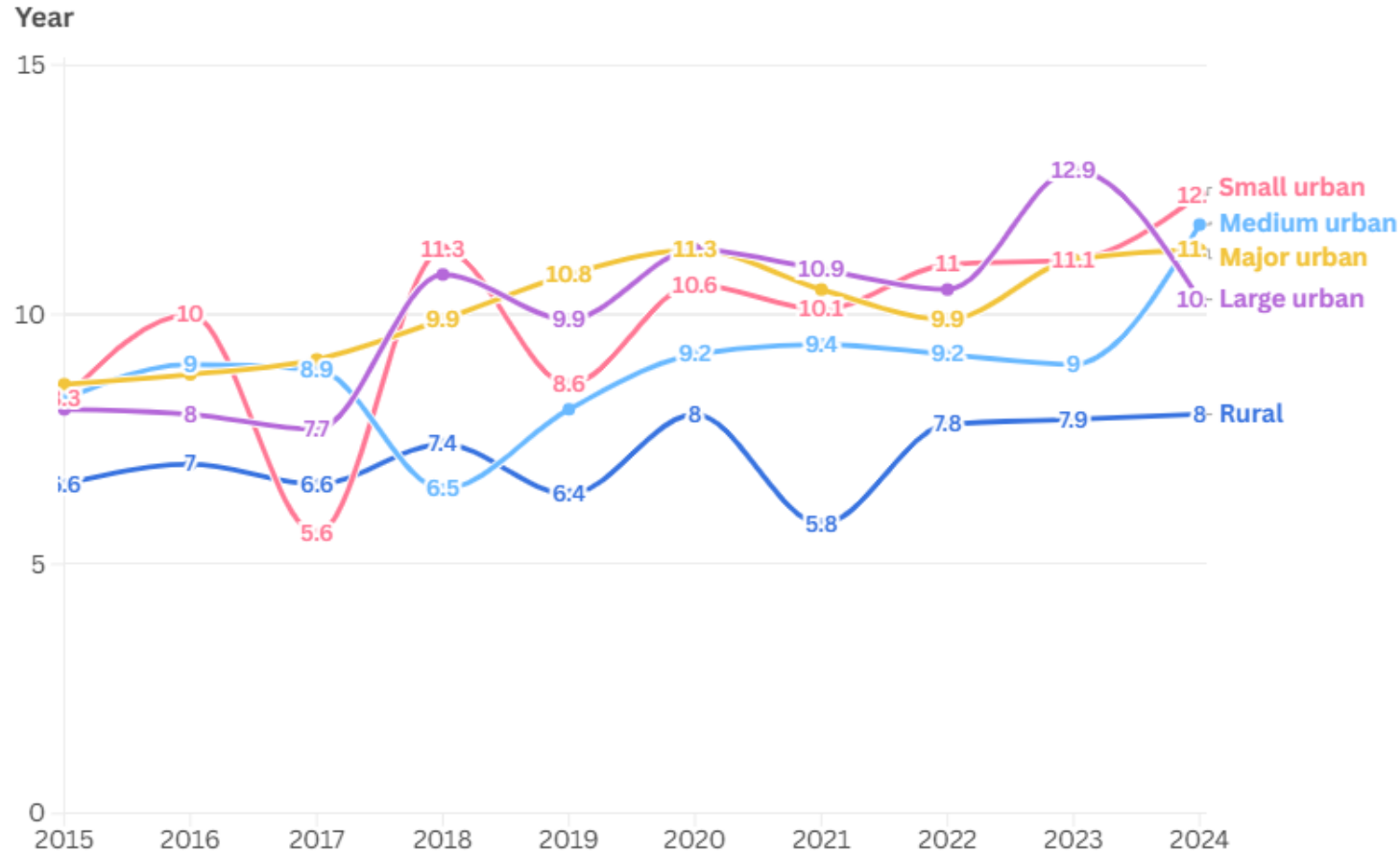
Consistent upward trend over 10 years across all sizes

Reflecting the increasing complexity and demands of leading larger schools, necessitating more experienced candidates.

Notable shifts post-COVID

Dropped significantly in 2021, Conversely, the same year, a marked increase till 2024 back to normal.

Senior leadership experience differs in urban/rural area over time



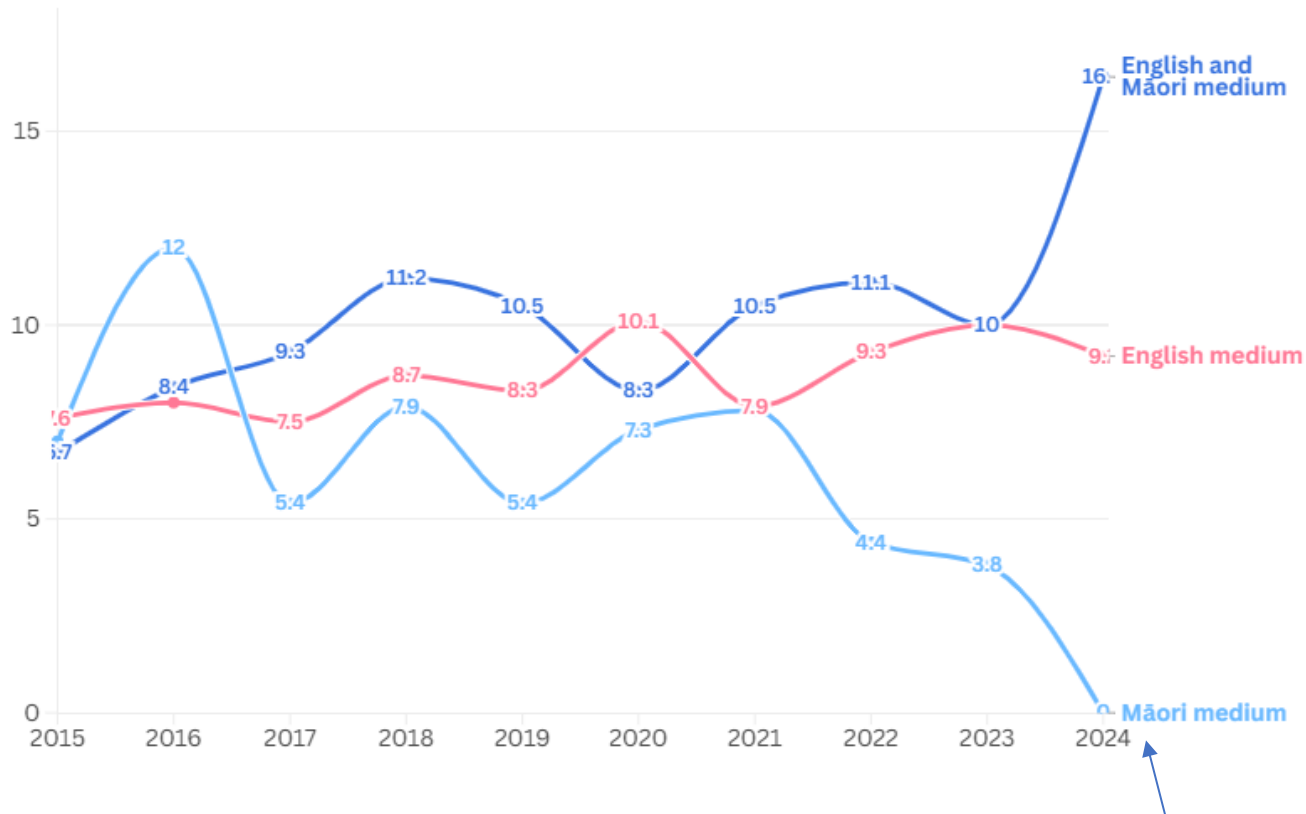
Primary principals from all levels of **Urban areas** were quite alike, steady increased overtime from 8 years in 2015, to 12 years in 2024.

In general, primary principals from **Rural area had 3 years less** leadership experience before their principalship.

How's Māori medium principals differ from English medium, overtime?

Significant Trends and Patterns:

Senior leadership experience in different school medium



Only 2 first-time principals,
both had no senior experience

Māori Medium principals stepping into leadership earlier

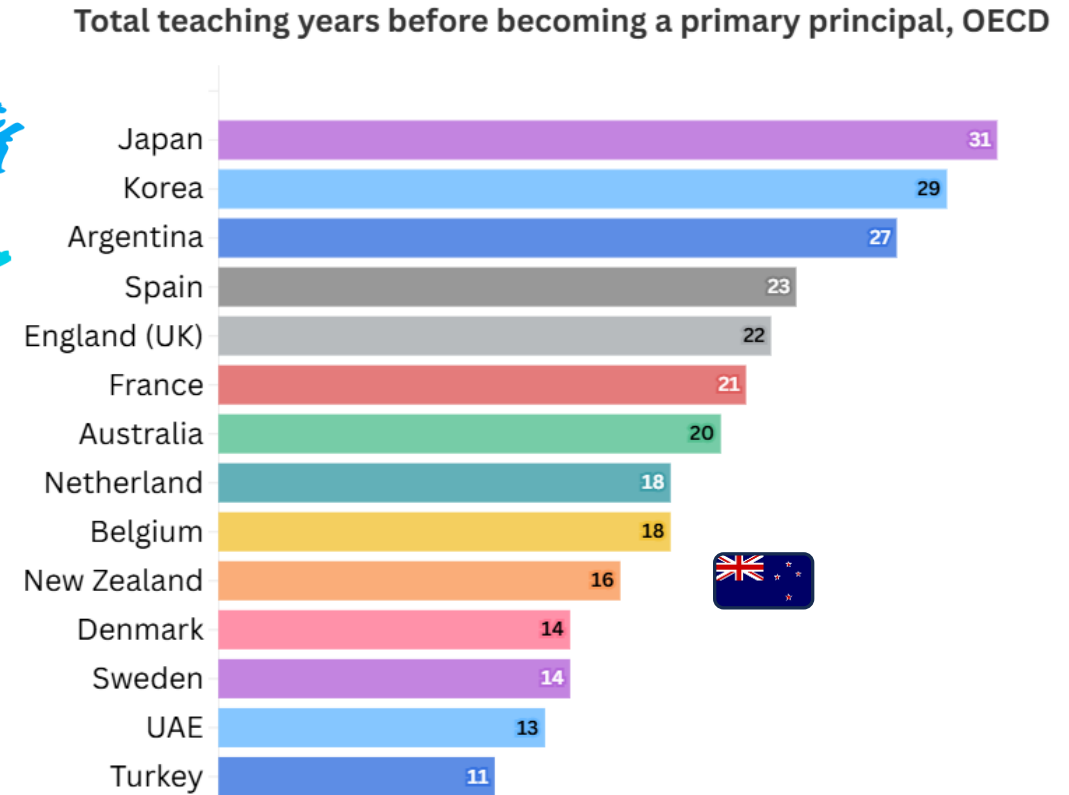
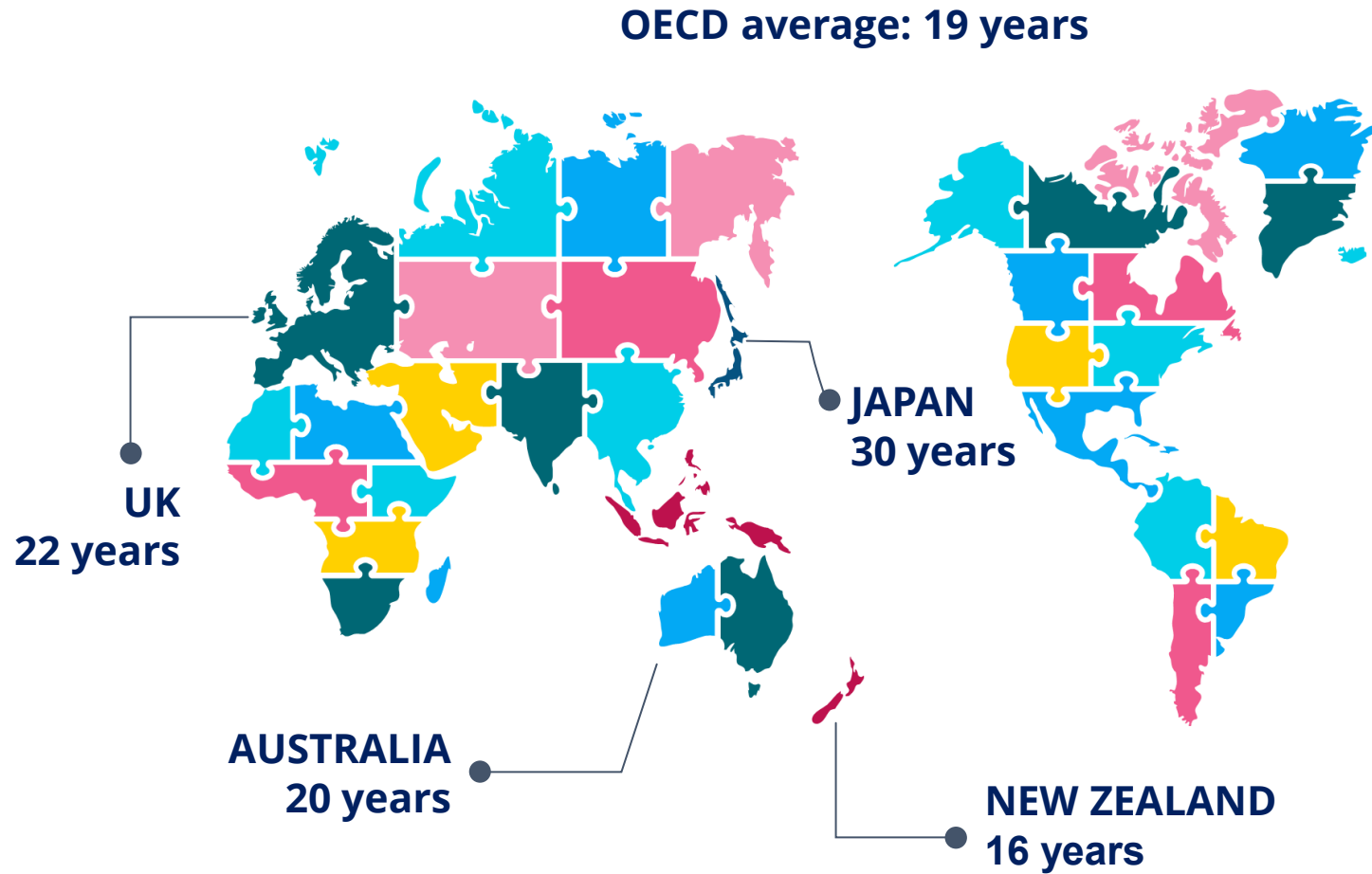
often with 2–4 years less senior
experience

Difference is widening

Earlier-stage Kaupapa specific support

Faster, good? Or well-prepared?
suggesting a clear opportunity to design
Māori medium aspiring principal
support.

How is New Zealand positioned in the OECD Context? (total teaching, primary)



Across OECD countries, only the total teaching years before becoming a principal are available, rather than detailed data on each career stage (e.g. initial teaching, middle management, senior leadership). This limits comparisons to the overall pathway of total teaching years.

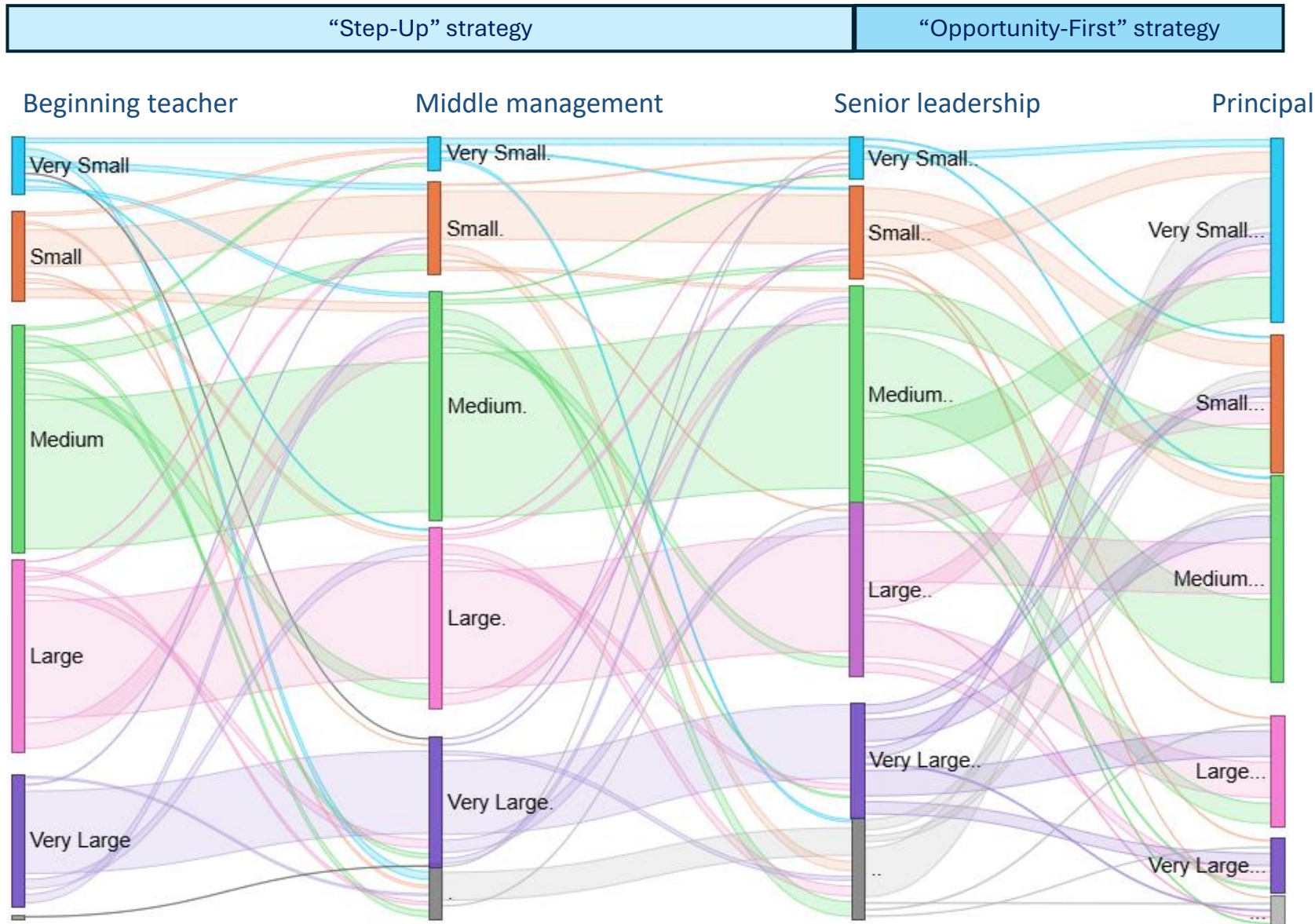
Two distinct career strategies emerged



Early stage: Only **20%** change their settings (urban/rural, school size) as they progress to middle management and senior leadership roles.

Final stage: **50–70%** of senior leaders are willing to shift settings, prioritising principalship opportunities.

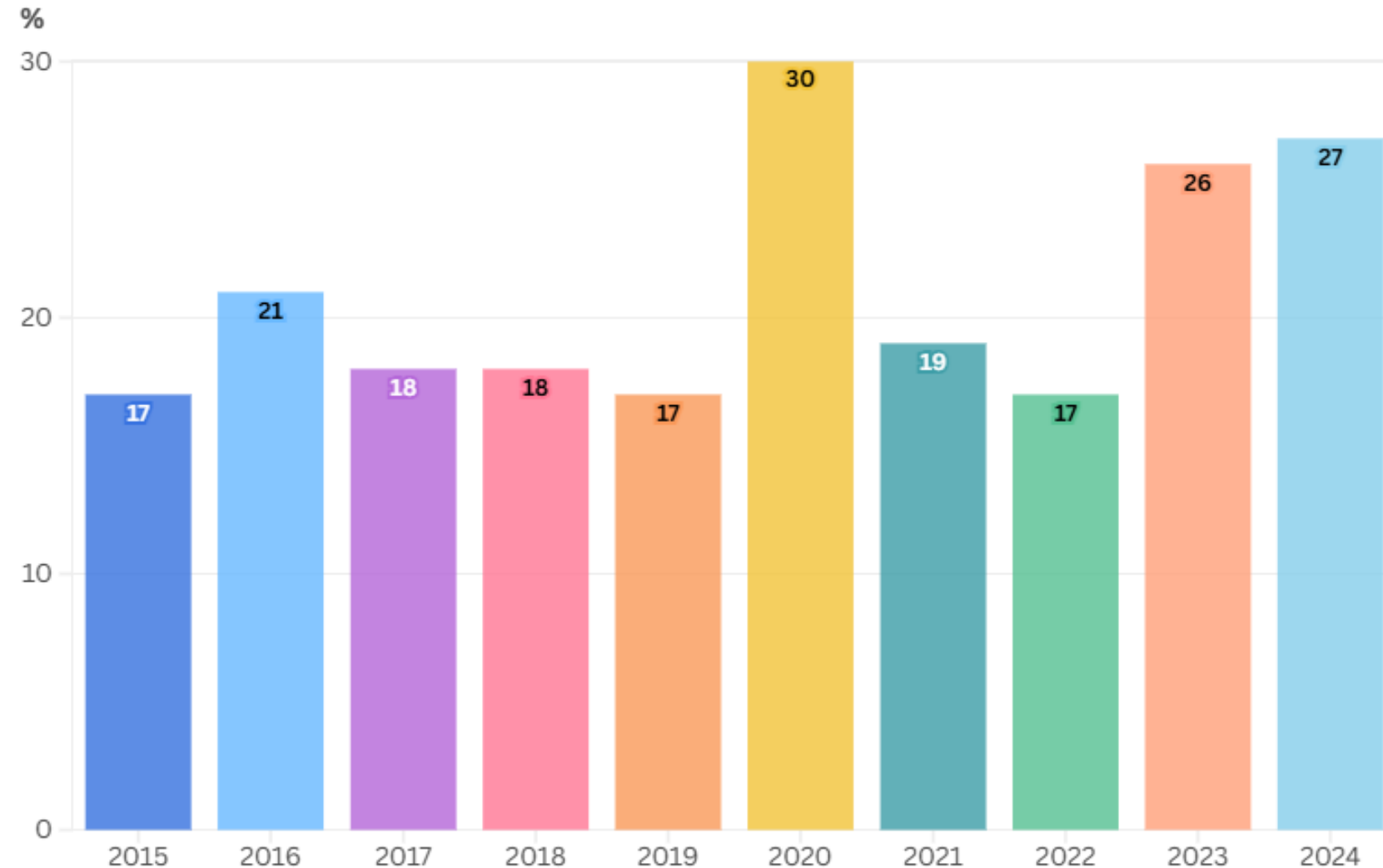
Anecdote “Aspiring principals from rural small school were locked there” is not reliable



- » Over **70%** of new rural small school principals were from more urban environments
- » This suggests that **rural and smaller** schools are not necessarily cultivating leadership from within but instead rely heavily on attracting external talents.
- » It highlights the potential **vulnerability** of schools in rural and isolated areas if external leadership mobility or incentives were to decrease.

Overall trend: strong increase in Internal promotion

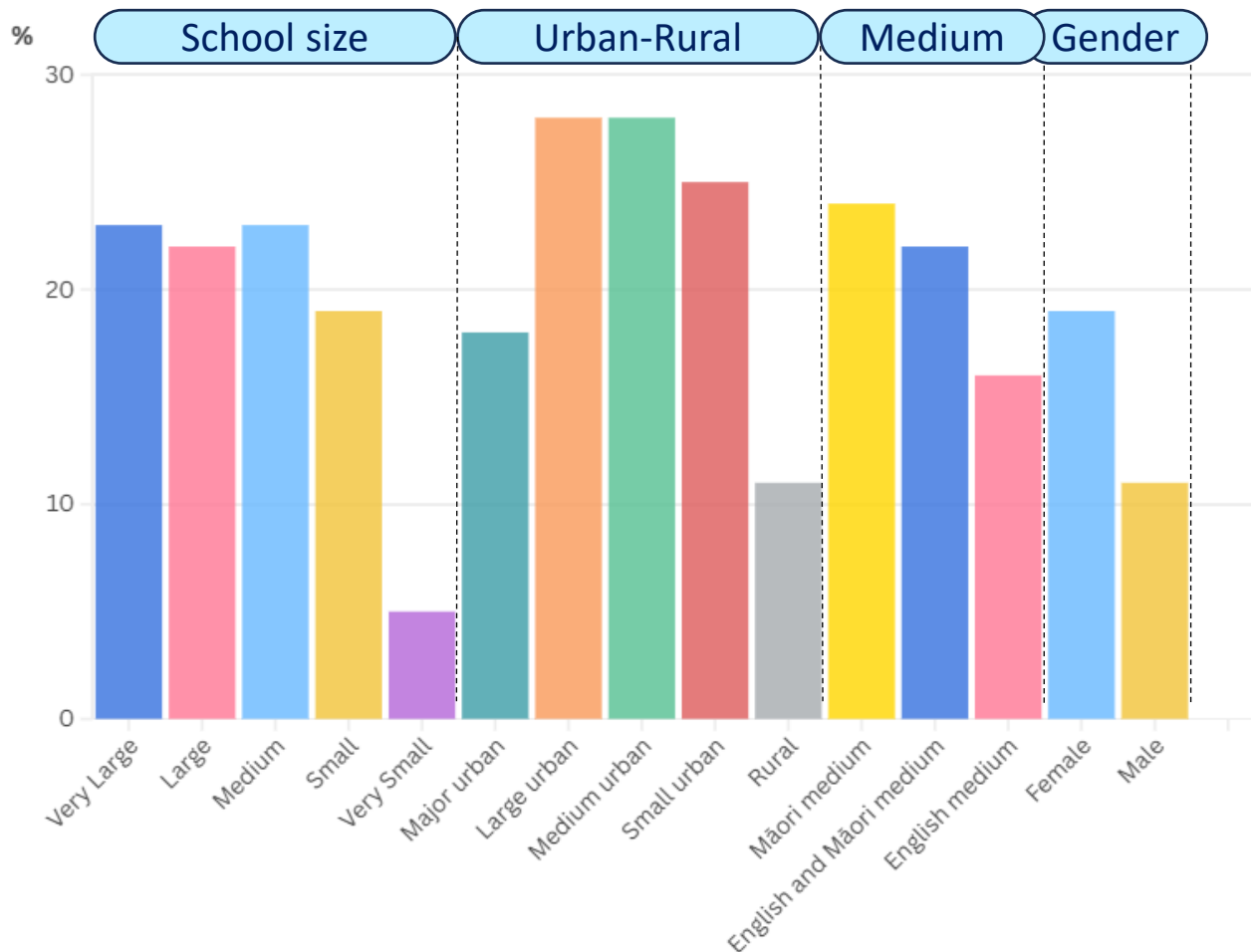
Direct Internal Promotion



New trends shows **stronger** Internal promotion trending up overtime when appointing a new primary principals, from 18% pre-COVID, to 25% post-COVID.

Overall trend: strong direct internal promotion when appointing first-time principals

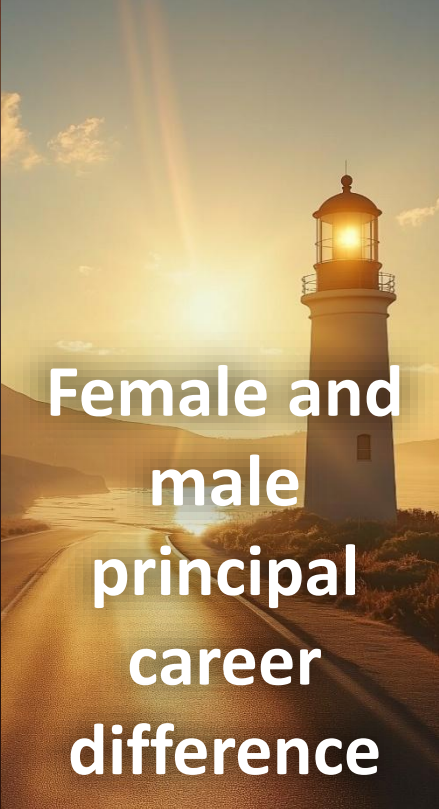
Internal direct promotion when appointing first-time principals
by school size, urban rural location, medium, gender



- » **Larger schools are more likely to promote internally** when appointing first-time principals, while smaller schools tend to appoint externally.
- » **Rural schools have the lowest internal promotion rates**, possibly due to fewer internal candidates with senior leadership experience or a preference for external hires.
- » **Māori medium schools** are more likely to promote from within than English medium schools, likely valuing leadership continuity, alignment with Kaupapa, and strong community ties.
- » **Female** have higher chance of internal promotion than male.

Note. Due to the small number of Māori medium appointments (typically 6–50 annually), their internal promotion rates are more sensitive to year-to-year changes.

What's next



Female and
male
principal
career
difference



Māori and
Pacific
school
leaders

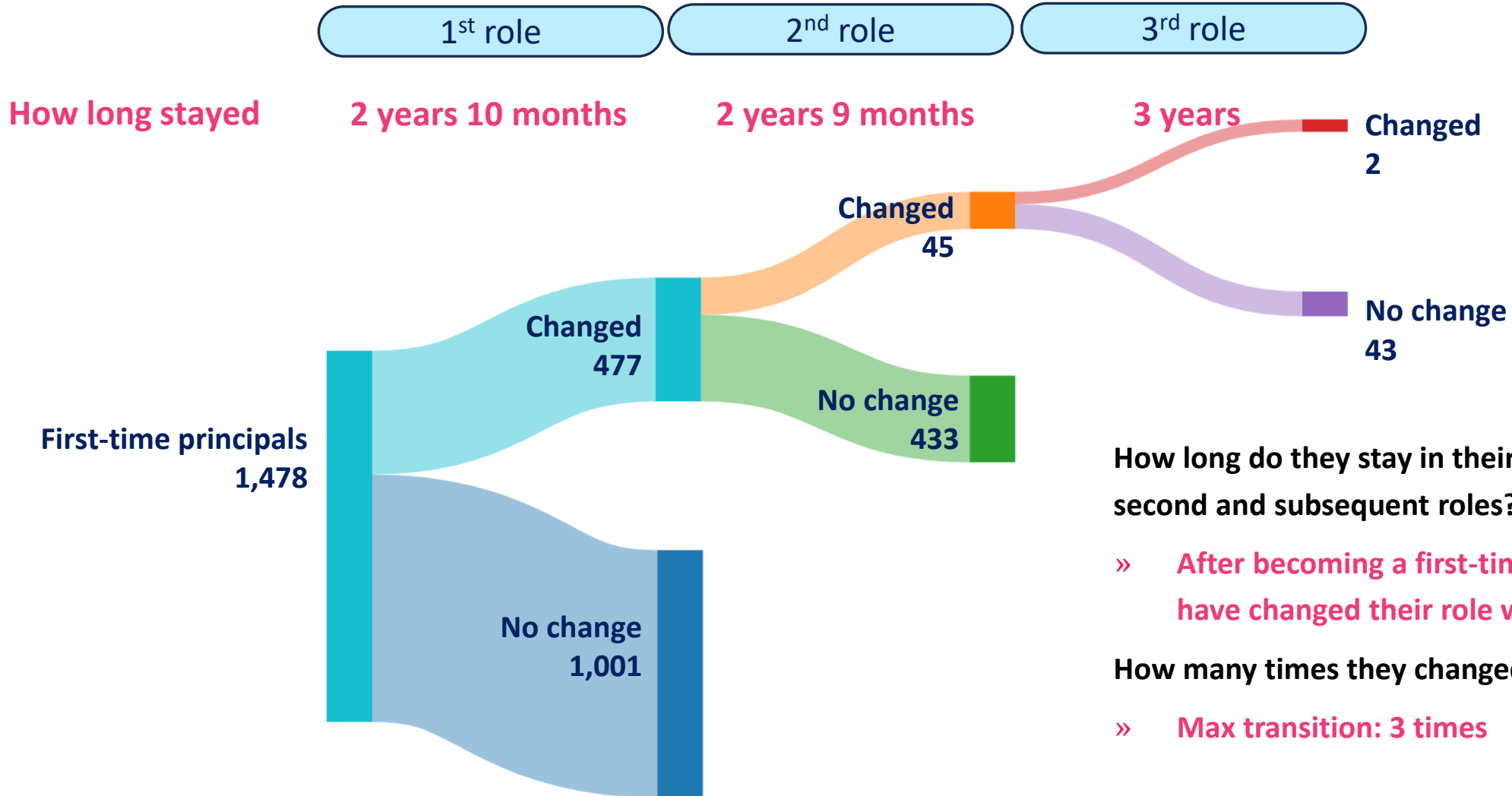


Incorporates
insights into
workforce
strategic
planning



Assumptions
methods
regular
review

What happened after first-time principalship



THANKS



NEW ZEALAND PRINCIPALS' FEDERATION
Ngā Tumūaki o Aotearoa



WELLINGTON

CONFERENCE
8–10 September 2025

TĀKINA TE HAU

