



# Engaging with First Peoples

## Governance through a lens of place and deep time

### **A Metaphor to hold in mind**

The ground beneath the board table holds a story far older than the institution itself.

Every school sits somewhere; not just geographically, but historically and relationally. Long before the first building was constructed, before enrolments were taken and governance structures were put in place, the land on which the school now stands was known, named, and cared for.

That reality does not disappear when an institution is established. It continues alongside it.



In many cases, the school's work proceeds without that deeper story being given much attention. Teaching, governance, and community life develop in ways that appear complete in themselves. Yet the ground remains what it is: unceded, storied, and held within a much longer frame of time and belonging.

Engaging with First Peoples begins, at least in part, with recognising that the institution does not define the place. It participates in it. This characteristic invites boards to consider how that recognition might shape governance: not as an additional responsibility, but as a shift in how authority, time, and relationship are understood.

### **Governance through a lens of place**

For many boards and indeed for many second peoples, this area of understanding can feel very uncertain. There is often goodwill but also sometimes hesitation and equally a concern about getting things wrong. Those responses are understandable.

At the same time, governance always operates with underlying assumptions about place, authority, and history. When those assumptions remain unexamined, they tend to reflect the perspective of the institution itself. This means a concentration on its timelines, its priorities, its definitions of relevance.

Engaging with First Peoples introduces a different starting point. It suggests that the school exists within a context it did not create, and that governance may need to take account of voices, relationships, and histories that sit outside the usual frame of reference.

This does not necessarily require boards to resolve complex historical questions. It does, however invite a different kind of attentiveness to place, to relationship, and to the ways decisions are made in a context that is not neutral.



**The 10 facets of exceptional governance reframed through a place-based lens:**

Facet	What might this facet require us to notice?
<b>Role clarity</b>	How does the board understand its authority in relation to the place on which the school stands? What is the bigger story of our connection to the land we occupy?
<b>Strategic vision</b>	Does our vision acknowledge the history and ongoing presence of First Peoples connected to this place?
<b>Board composition</b>	Are there voices or relationships missing from the table that could reshape how we understand the school's context?
<b>Financial stewardship</b>	Do our resources reflect any commitment to relationship, learning, or partnership with First Peoples?
<b>Risk management</b>	Are there cultural or relational risks that remain outside the board's usual frame of attention?
<b>Succession</b>	How might leadership development include a deeper understanding of place and its significance?
<b>Transparency</b>	How does the school speak about its location and history to its community?
<b>Stakeholder engagement</b>	What relationships exist, or could exist, between the school and local First Peoples?
<b>Community partnership</b>	Are partnerships shaped by mutual respect and listening, or primarily by institutional priorities?
<b>Board effectiveness</b>	Does the board create space to learn about its role in stewarding place, or is this left to other parts of the school?

## Prompted inquiry: for your board conversation

1. What does it mean for this school to exist on this particular piece of land?
2. How often does place, in its deeper sense, enter board conversations?
3. Are there assumptions about authority or ownership that the board has not adequately questioned?
4. What would it look like to take this characteristic seriously over time, rather than as a single initiative?

## Practice: beginning with place

### A brief discipline for deepening awareness of Country:

At the start of a meeting, set aside a few minutes to move beyond acknowledgement into reflection.

After naming the Country on which the meeting takes place, invite board members to consider, silently:

- What might this place have held before the school existed here?
- What kinds of life, movement, or relationship to land may have shaped this ground over time?
- What does it mean to make decisions for an institution that sits within that longer story?

Allow a short pause before continuing. If appropriate, a simple invitation can follow:

- Does anything in that reflection shift how we approach the matters before us today?

This practice does not require detailed historical knowledge. It asks the board to begin from an awareness that the school is part of a story it did not initiate.

## A final question to take into your next meeting

*How might our governance change if we took seriously the fact that this school stands on land whose story the school did not begin?*

