

# Reviving the Flames of Excellence: Igniting a System that Learns

How Using Assessment Properly Should Solve New  
Zealand's Education Woes

Michael Absolum, Adrienne Carlisle, Mary Chamberlain

June 2023

## Why have we written this paper?

We are at a time of crisis for New Zealand education.

The authors have written this paper to help put us firmly back on a path to achieving excellence and equity.

The paper begins by briefly summarising our current education woes. It then outlines a learning framework that we believe will deliver effective learning and system improvement.

The paper then analyses the extent to which the key elements in the framework are present across our compulsory education system, and proposes actions that will ensure that our education system becomes a system that delivers real value for all learners.

## The Education Woes

Recent articles (for example [The Education Hub, 2022<sup>\[1\]</sup>](#)) have documented the country's declining primary and secondary school educational performance. It seems incontrovertible that the data that these reports are based on do show declines in educational performance over the last 20 years that the system is finding difficult to turn around, thus impeding the ability of our young to extract real value from our compulsory education system.

We, the adults in education, have held students and their parents accountable for young people's compulsory attendance at school since the passing of *The Education Act 1877*, but we haven't met our social contract by guaranteeing all of them quality learning experiences when they are there.

Urgent action is now required to address this. However, given past and recent performance, we have little hope that improvement will happen unless fundamental changes are made. For the last 20 years successive governments and publications from the Ministry of Education have expressed the need for urgent improvement. In our analysis all attempts at improvement have left critical issues untouched or touched impotently.

Clarence Beeby, esteemed Director-General of Education from 1940 to 1960, wrote in his 1992 "Biography of an Idea": "*all persons, whatever their ability, rich or poor, whether they live in town or country, have a right as citizens to a free education of the kind for which they are best fitted and to the fullest extent of their powers.*" There is a promise in those words that has never been kept. Instead, there remain deep-seated cultural, gender and socioeconomic inequalities manifest within our society and our education system. As a nation we have (loudly) espoused the importance of equitable, inclusive education for all but, as time goes by, all we largely achieve every decade or two are new, aspirational policies. This is not without merit, but by itself it is not enough. The Ministry of Education currently declares its purpose to be: "*...shape an education system that delivers equitable and excellent outcomes.*" This is exactly the right purpose for a central educational agency. If this were really happening, young people would be emerging into adult society with a profound sense of belonging and with the ability to go out into the world with the skills and knowledge to make it a better place. An excellent and equitable education for all offers hope to our children's generation

and to their children's generation. It should be one of the levers that we use to assist in addressing inequalities. Instead, it becomes another of the inequalities.

We see politicians and commentators engaging in polarising debate and argument rather than collaborating using the methodologies of science and technology to solve problems. Each side of the debate decries the other, and we have 'literacy wars' and 'assessment wars' and 'knowledge vs competencies wars' based on different ideologies, rather than shared problem solving.

As we change governments, we change education policies. And then we change them back again. Different governments want broadly similar outcomes but have different priorities and different approaches to achieving those outcomes. The contest of ideas is often about 'how' to achieve valued outcomes, but the efficacy of the 'how' is often not evaluated beyond pilots, so there is a knee jerk from one initiative to another and teachers become exhausted under the weight of them.

A range of worthy policies has emerged over the last two decades but the work has not been done to provide ongoing effective implementation and evaluation of the policy ideas. If there had been ongoing evaluation and feedback loops in place following the release of the widely acclaimed 2007 curriculum, for example, it would have quickly become clear that teachers needed clearer expectations, more detail about progressions and more focused support to use progressions to ensure more equitable learning opportunities and more equitable learning outcomes.

Other examples include the various initiatives aimed at improving collaboration across the system, such as Extending High Standards Across Schools, ICT Clusters, and more recently kāhui ako. While initial evaluations showed promising results for these programmes, there has been a lack of ongoing monitoring and adjustments made to improve their effectiveness at increasing collaboration and addressing inequities over time.

When understood and used properly assessment can drive improvement in learning capability across the system and improve learning outcomes for all students. Assessment, in all its broad applications, can make a genuine difference by enabling those working at every level of the educational enterprise to use quality information to clarify what is to be learnt, evaluate progress and revise practice or policy to ensure continuing improvement.

If the role of assessment and evaluation in education were properly understood and activated, at every level of the system, it would be possible to learn which policy initiatives really work, which school initiatives really work, and which classroom initiatives really work, so we can achieve our desired outcomes. If we get assessment right across the system, improvement will follow at all levels.

What follows is the most critical framing. Education is about learning, and the role of assessment is best understood within the broader context of the nature of learning.

## A Learning Framework

The authors advance the following seven components as the key elements required for effective learning or improvement. The headings in bold are the components of learning anything, anywhere. For our purposes we have directed the detail (in italics) to classroom learning.

1. **Purpose and motivation.** The ‘why’ of learning – *the learner understands why and how the learning, in general and in its component parts, is important, or interesting or exciting. This knowledge supports their engagement with the learning.*
2. **Content and scope.** The ‘what’ of learning – *the goals of learning and the progressions of learning (the curriculum) are clear to learner and teacher/coach/mentor.*
3. **Conditions for learning.** Teacher/coach/mentor and learner are competent in their respective roles. *The teacher is competent in the role, and ensures that the environment is conducive to learning so that each learner becomes competent as a learner, able to take agency over their learning.*
4. **Co-constructed Assessment.** The co-constructed assessment of current knowledge – *learner and teacher together find out what the learner currently knows and what they need to know next.*
5. **Teaching.** Active instruction – *teacher uses subject knowledge and pedagogical competence, including effective exemplification and feedback, to enable the learner to establish and practise their learning, and gain the knowledge to monitor their own progress.*
6. **Learning.** Active learning – *through active engagement, participation, practice and reflection, the learner is able to show understanding and mastery of the knowledge/skill/disposition in a number of ways and situations. They know what ‘good’ looks like and have the agency to self-monitor and self-correct.*
7. **Co-constructed Next Steps.** The co-constructed assessment of what has been learnt and what to learn next. *Using ‘of the moment’ and at times more formal assessment, teacher and learner work together to determine next steps in learning.*

All seven components overlap and interact as parts of an ongoing learning process. Each component supports the other components. But there is a general directionality to the order of the components, with assessment providing the pivot for the other components.

The framework above is clear about the fundamental importance of both assessment and learner agency. As indicated, teachers and learners work together to co-construct a clear path through the learning in which the learner is active and engaged. Since at least 2006, the proper role of both agency and assessment in learning has been acknowledged<sup>i</sup>, but we can find very little evidence that their real roles have been either widely recognised or robustly applied within classrooms, schools or nationally.

### Learner agency

Our Learning Framework underscores the importance of learner agency<sup>ii</sup>. Effective learners are agentic learners. Learners learn by interacting with their environment and coming to know, to understand, to manage that environment. They can do this actively or passively. When they are

active, we refer to the learner as being 'agentic' or as 'having agency' within the learning environment.

Most learners are naturally agentic about their learning outside of compulsory education. They know what they are wanting to learn and why, they ask questions of their environment or teacher to better understand what they are learning, they try out ways of doing or understanding or performing, they assess their progress, they seek help, they value success, they are curious and inquiring as to how to improve or what next to learn. An agentic learner questions, probes, experiments, tries and tries again, and seeks evidence that they are coming to understand, or to know or to be able to do what they have been trying to learn. They see themselves as largely in control of the learning. A passive learner waits to be told what and how to learn and how well they have learnt; they lack agency.

The problem is that while there is visionary espousal of the virtues of agency, compulsory education has been built on an implicit assumption of passive learners. Students are there to be instructed by teachers in all they need to know in order to eventually become educated members of the adult community. 'To be instructed' fits well with the reality of 'compulsory education'. We doubt that many teachers see their role this way in 2023, but it is not so long ago that we were referring to the 'sage on the stage' and the ghost of the sage is still visible in classrooms when the students are passive and mystified as to what they are meant to be learning and why. PLD facilitators often find teachers still teaching to this model because the shift to teaching approaches that build student agency is not easy to make. Of equal concern are classrooms where the call for learner agency has been misinterpreted. In these classrooms licence can take the place of agency, the role of the teacher as expert in curriculum and its progressions is underrated, emphasis is on student choice, and assessment is often considered inimical to learning, rather than an essential component. When schooling is compulsory and there is a clear curriculum to be learnt, it is irresponsible to give students open choice of **what** to learn. A choice of **how** to learn, including the contexts in which learning can happen, is a different matter.

### **Co-construction and assessment**

The co-construction and assessment components within the framework are about the ownership and use of assessment. Simply put, classroom assessment is the act of determining what is known so that next steps for further learning can be determined. It is integral to learning. We assert that assessment is **primarily** for learning, by learners<sup>1</sup>.

Since the inception of compulsory education, assessment has been seen as the evaluative device that is used by teachers, not learners, to determine how much learning has been done, and what standard the learner has achieved. Learners are assumed to be largely the passive recipients of teacher wisdom and knowledge. Teachers manage the assessment process and determine the next steps of learning. For example, Progressive Achievement Tests (PATs) were originally designed to be used by teachers to gather normative information for teachers and schools about the standards of achievement. It is only within the last 20 or so years that they have been redesigned to provide superb and easily accessible information for the learners as well.

What we have done in compulsory education, and continue to do with the best of intentions, is to inadvertently corrupt these three components of natural and powerful learning processes: agency, co-construction and assessment. We have done so by locating responsibility for assessment only with

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<sup>1</sup> Assessment for credentialling is a separate issue, and not addressed here.

teachers rather than always as a co-constructed process between learner and teacher, where both exercise agency. In doing so we have also caused our education system as a whole to fail to learn or to improve. It is an out-of-date command and control model of compulsory education, not a learning model.

As educators we have clung to a model of compulsory education framed as Teach, Learn, Assess (TLA), where the teacher drives the process. Our view is that assessment always proceeds teaching and learning, and that it is a co-constructed process between learner and teacher: Assess, Teach, Learn (ATL). Assessment precedes both teaching and learning. Neither learner nor teacher can sensibly proceed with their tasks unless they explore together what is known already.

The Teach, Learn, Assess model goes like this:

*“We adults know what is best for you. We know that you need to learn some things in order to take your place in society. We require your attendance at school. It will take you at least 10 years to learn what you need to know. Your teacher will **teach** you. You will **learn**. Your teacher will **assess** what you have learnt, make a judgement about how good that learning has been, allocate a grade or mark, and then make a judgement about your progress and what you still have to learn. Your parents will be informed.”*

This TLA model has value in that it requires adults to know what the young need to learn. The problem with the model is that it locates responsibility for having learnt with the learner, but it does not locate the agency for learning with the learner.

In this model it is implicit that the learner is a passive recipient of teacher wisdom. Learners experience assessment as tests, examinations and tasks set, marked, and judged by the teacher. Their task is to sit, watch, listen, complete the assessment.

This approach to teaching and learning makes it very difficult for most learners to retain agency at school. Just sit, watch, listen and learn. As best you can. And hope for the best. It doesn't really matter what you understand about the learning or what you think you have learnt, what matters is what the teacher thinks you have learnt.

This creates a paradox. We espouse compulsory schooling where learners emerge with a sense of agency, but we too often teach and assess in ways that restrict the development of learner agency. This paradox is replicated across layers of the education system. School leaders feel their agency is constrained by the Ministry, and teachers feel their agency is constrained by their school leaders.

In total, not only do we have a situation where many students are not learning enough, but we have a system where many of the adults are also not learning or improving. All lack agency in areas of their lives where they need it most.

The system that we have is not a system that learns. There is a tacit clinging to command-and-control models of educational management. We want ATL, not TLA.

To really achieve the student outcomes we say we want requires a system in which all who are actively a part of it see that agency is a critically important component and outcome of compulsory education and are willing to work hard to achieve it. If we are to achieve it, we must ensure that all of the seven conditions of learning are present throughout the system, for ourselves as learners and for the system as a whole as a learning system. We need to be clear about what achieving the goal of agency would look like, and be clear about how to measure progress towards achieving it.

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Leaders at all levels of the system must be active learners, modelling what this means and looks like to students. It must start at the top of each tier of the system. One of the most visible aspects of 'agency as a learner' is in the use of assessment information. Learning is much impeded if assessment information is not owned and at least co-constructively under the control of the learner. The best learners are constantly testing themselves to check on progress, just as an agentic student would:

*"I think I understand these ideas now, but I do need to find out if I really do. I think it is time I had an e-asTTle test to see if I really do understand them."*

Or as an agentic teacher-learner who is learning to promote agency in their students:

*"I think I have supported all of my students so that they are now confident to tell me when they don't understand, but I need to check with the ones who I think were less confident."*

### **Who needs assessment information?**

Picture an 'assessment hierarchy' as an inverted pyramid, in terms of who in the system needs assessment information and why. At the top of the hierarchy, we have students who need to know where they are with their learning, in collaboration with their teacher. At the bottom of the hierarchy is the Ministry of Education.

In this hierarchy, the teacher sits at the level under students. Teachers need to know where they are with their own learning about how to teach better, to find even better ways of enabling and supporting their students to learn. Teachers need, at the very least, disaggregated and aggregated data about the learning/progress/achievement of their students, and data that captures students' views about their engagement and learning. Without this, teachers cannot assess their own performance as teachers.

Teachers, as learners, then need to collaborate with their faculty or syndicate leader to reflect on what the data shows about where they might be able to improve. Teachers need agency in their teaching. This will be impeded if their in-school leader unilaterally makes judgements about how well they have taught rather than collaborating in improvement-oriented inquiries that use data efficiently and effectively.

In a system that learns, this same process of co-constructed learning applies to every role in the education hierarchy, from students, to teachers, to school leaders, regional Ministry personnel, and all national Ministry personnel.

We believe that many issues in Aotearoa New Zealand education can be sourced to poor understanding and application of the context and uses of agency and assessment within and across this assessment hierarchy. We have created problems for students as learners, but we have also created problems for teachers as learners, leaders as learners and the Ministry personnel as learners.

### **What is often missing at classroom level?**

- **Acceptance and understanding of why schooling is important:** School attendance is compulsory for the first 10 years of a student's formal education. We are insufficiently explicit about why it is compulsory. We do not convey to all of our young how important

those 10 years are in equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they will need in order to take their place in society as valued, equally important members. We spend a lot of time as a nation discussing, shaping and publishing the aspirational goals of free education, but we are not clear enough with our young and their parents and whānau about why our aspirational goals are the point of compulsory education.

- **Clarity about what we want students to learn:** The current (2007) curriculum was developed as a high-level conceptual document outlining the big ideas that were seen then as providing all students with the knowledge, skills, understandings, and dispositions that they would need in order to take their place within a modern, equitable, Te Tiriti-honouring, liberal democracy. It was successful at this. What it did not do, and what has not happened nationally until now with the Curriculum Refresh, was expand on this high-level document to make it clear to all just what needed to be learnt, by when and in what sequence. As a consequence, many schools, ERO officers, the Ministry, teachers, parents and whānau, and students, had no real idea of what to do to realise the vision of the curriculum, let alone how to validly and reliably assess learner progress over the course of the 10 compulsory years. Schools have worked hard to fill in the details from the broad learning outcomes of the curriculum, but this has led to divergent understandings and inconsistencies in the interpretation of the learning that cannot be left to chance.

It is not surprising that we have failed to emphasise how important it is that students attend school. Although we understand that learning is critical, we are not clear about exactly what it is that is so critical. Consequently, many students are inevitably unclear about what they are to learn, why it is important to learn, how they will know when they have learnt it, the time frame within which they should learn it, and what their next steps are. As adults we ought to be embarrassed, if not very ashamed. We require attendance at school for 10 years, but do not know what students are to learn or why. Here's hoping that the curriculum refresh does adequately address this issue.

- **Excellent curriculum knowledge:** Some teachers have not been adequately supported to gain the knowledge and skills of the curriculum that they are hired to teach. Consequently they cannot expertly teach what they do not know, let alone monitor the learning closely using 'of-the-moment' assessment and other formative tools effectively enough to recognise and respond to signs of student struggle and disengagement. As the Year 1 – 10 literacy and numeracy progressions have been rolled out and improved over the last eight or so years, many teachers have talked about how much they have learnt themselves about the nature of literacy and numeracy development, how useful the progressions are for them, their students, and their students' whānau.
- **Pedagogical knowledge and capability based on current research-based understanding of what works:** In the classroom, the research-based pedagogical approach known as assessment-for-learning is not yet being enacted by every teacher. The cornerstone of assessment-for-learning is the activation and strengthening of learner agency. Agentic learners are motivated learners who attend school and engage with the curriculum.



- **Assessment capability:** In recent years, debates over the possibility of compulsory national testing for primary students, national records of primary student learning and the National Standards introduced for students in Years 1-10 have left many in the profession with a negative view of assessment. The consequence has been teachers who are unable or unwilling to unlock the power of formative assessment, or to appreciate the purpose of, and properly use, available assessment tools to measure learner progress. Teachers with assessment capability are able to use assessment, in all its modes, to improve learning.
- **Learning-focused classroom relationships:** Many learners find themselves in classrooms where they are expected to be passive recipients of the learning, lacking agency and engagement. However, when the teacher brings to the classroom the drive to share the learning and an openness to understanding each learner as unique with inherent cultural/social capital, this empowers learner competence, nurtures agency and leads to improvement.
- **A systemic approach to teacher professional development:** The systemic context for teacher professional development lacks a coherent vision and the processes for systematic improvement of teacher and school performance.

### What is largely missing at school and system levels?

At school and system levels the issues are even more complex and intertwined.

- **National curriculum coherence across schools:** The lack of clarity about what is to be taught has meant that even if a school has done the work of being clear about how they interpret the curriculum and what is to be taught, and they have used, or developed their own, assessment tools to monitor for equity and excellence, there is no process whereby they can be sure that other schools see the curriculum in the same way or have the same expectations of progress and standards. There is a resultant divergence between schools as to how the curriculum has been interpreted and therefore what is taught and to what level of excellence.
- **Clarification of the purposes and proper use of system level information:** Summative assessment measures have been contested as to which are appropriate for which purposes, and it is often felt by teachers and schools that national assessments have been used to blame and criticise schools and teachers rather than being used as the basis for further inquiry, learning and improvement. Teachers and schools experience a lack of agency in the application of these assessment tools, in the same way as the learners do in the classroom. The arguments about the National Standards approach from 2009 – 2016 is a prime example. The Standards were designed to provide a tool that would meet both formative and summative needs as well as providing parents with clear information about how well their children were progressing in literacy and numeracy, and national information about changes in student outcomes over time.

The evidence gathered was clearly useful at a national and regional policy level, but fiercely resisted by teacher unions and many principals who felt that it not only undermined their efforts to build the motivation of students who found literacy and numeracy hard to learn, but that it was implicitly and explicitly used to blame the school communities, the teachers and the schools for ‘doing a poor job’, rather than as a tool for system learning at all levels.

- **Regional and national information about student learning:** The Ministry of Education and many schools have been reluctant to clarify their expectations for the quantum of learning that might be expected so that we can be sure that, at the end of 10 years, students have learnt all that we wish for them. A lack of consistent useful aggregate assessment information about student progress in Years 1-10 has left teachers, leaders and boards of trustees, and the Ministry uncertain as to whether they have been successful in helping students to engage and learn and what aspects of their own practice they might usefully adjust for improved outcomes.
- **Explicit, clear information for parents and whānau:** Some parents and whānau feel the information that the school provides about their child’s learning is inadequate and/or unclear. They feel in the dark as to what exactly it is that their child might have been expected to learn over the course of the year, and what progress they should have made. One result of this is that they become unwilling and unable to back up the schools’ insistence that the students must attend and must learn, because they don’t know why either.
- **Availability of long-term trend data.** Very few schools have much information about the extent to which outcomes for students in Years 1 -10 have changed over the years, even in literacy and numeracy. Without a school system for tracking trends and patterns in progress, learning and teaching, we cannot really know what is working and what is not, or what resource or policy changes might be needed. This is not a learning system. This is not a system that uses assessment professionally and efficiently.

These issues at the curriculum, teacher, leader, school, and system levels require effective assessment processes before they can begin to be addressed.

The result of an inadequate assessment approach is a compulsory education system in which the professionals are unsure of where to focus and what to do to ensure educational excellence.

## Re-shaping our view of ourselves

The Education and Training Act 2020 lays out four objectives for school boards. The first is:

*enable students to attain their highest possible standard in educational achievement*

Effective assessment is clearly necessary if we are to give effect to this objective.

The current refresh of the New Zealand Curriculum<sup>iii</sup> aims to achieve three very worthy shifts in our education system:

- realising the intent of Te Tiriti
- broadening our view of what success looks like
- setting high expectations for all

As a society we are very good at setting aspirational visions and goals. What we are not good at is knowing what they actually mean, then resolutely implementing a plan to attain them. Why is this the case?

Some of the answers lie in the way we tend to cling to our TLA view of teaching. Students are the ones who are there to learn and improve. Adults teach, manage and lead. We write our curriculum, develop resources, create reporting structures, give lessons, set assessments, declare which students have learnt and which haven't. Job done. We are the managers, the teachers and the assessors; students are the learners and the assessed. We don't see ourselves as learners. Consequently, we strongly resist inquiring into our own performance. That is not us, we are the managers and the teachers. We maintain this deep-seated view of ourselves, irrespective of how much research indicates the necessity and utility of learning-oriented inquiry.

More than this, we have a fear of feedback about our performance that perhaps harks back to our own schooling experience as students, where so often feedback was solely critical of what we had done, and was not learning oriented. If anything, it was humiliating. We didn't want it. We still don't. Appraisal is feedback. Who wants that, even if it is called 'professional growth'?

In order to move forward we need to reshape our view of ourselves in order to become full-time learners and skilled collaborative problem-solvers with those who we are charged with leading and improving. We have to change our view of what it is to be both a learner and a teacher. And we have to change how we think about and use assessment. All of this involves re-engineering our concepts of what it is to be a teacher and of the role of assessment. The relatively newly refreshed Standards for the Teaching Profession can provide some guidance.

There are three professional standards that have implications for how assessment needs to be viewed. These standards also tacitly endorse a shift in the thinking about student and teacher agency:

- Use inquiry, collaborative problem-solving and professional learning to improve professional capability **to impact on the learning and achievement of all learners.**
- Design learning based on curriculum and pedagogical knowledge, **assessment information** and an understanding of each learner's strengths, interests, needs, identities, languages, and cultures.
- Teach and respond to learners in a knowledgeable and adaptive way to progress their learning **at an appropriate depth and pace.**

It is not credible to claim that most teachers meet these standards currently. If this were the case, it is highly likely that the international studies would show we are now trending back towards excellence. To meet these standards requires high expectations for the learning of each and every

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student, a deep knowledge of the full curriculum that is taught, including the progressions of learning inherent in it, a rich understanding of formative and summative methodologies for assessing where each and every student is with their learning, how students understand their own assessment of their progress, and a cohesive picture of the overall depth and pace of learning of the whole class.

With these capabilities, teachers are then in a position to engage in appropriate evaluation of their own teaching and identify aspects that might be improved. It may well be that they will seek support from their team leader or principal to assist with their personal evaluation and for planning their growth goals for the year. But all of it requires embracing a sophisticated and numerate approach to assessment and an immunity to any concerns about being 'judged' by others if aggregate class results need improvement. It requires embracing the same learning-focussed relationship between themselves and their professional leader as we wish between student and teacher.

School leaders need to assume the same responsibilities for their staff as they expect their teachers to have towards their students. Consequently, they need to ensure that they have a sophisticated and numerate understanding of school wide expectations for school performance and student achievement. They need to be courageous in comparing their own school results with schools like theirs, seeing poor results as evidence of the need for learning and improvement. They need to be able to evaluate their own performance as leaders in addressing and solving school-wide learning issues and enhancing school standards. It may well be that they seek support from colleagues, mentors, coaches to help with their own and school evaluation.

ERO must be a part of this. Across all of this, data about school and personal performance must be used for growth and improvement. Not shying away from what is inadequate, but seeing it only as a marker of the need for improvement, not for shaming. To achieve all this requires that teachers and leaders become agentic in their own roles and eager for good quality assessment data that they can use to evaluate how well they themselves have performed, and where their next steps might lie.

## A learning-oriented approach to education system improvement

Irrespective of where you find yourself within the compulsory education system, good assessment information is critical if you wish to learn and improve. This is obviously true if you are a student, but it is just as true if you are a teacher, a school leader, a staff member of one of the central education agencies, or a professional development facilitator. If you don't know where you are now in your own particular learning or improvement endeavour, you cannot know what to do next to make further progress.

What is true for individuals within the wider system is also true for the organisations. Schools, kāhui ako, Ministry, ERO, and PLD providers, should all have systems for evaluating what has worked in what they themselves have been charged with achieving, what progress has been made and what still needs to be improved. Schools and kāhui ako do have goals, strategic plans, and evaluations, some of which are sent to the Ministry of Education, but often this is perceived as an exercise in output accountability, rather than an opportunity for feedback, learning and ongoing improvement for schools, kāhui ako and Ministry.

Principals have told us that the Ministry does not always provide comments on their school's analysis of variance, or provide advice or coaching for schools or kāhui ako that are struggling to meet their planned goals. In a system that learns, the Ministry would collate information from all the analyses of variance and the other reports it receives, use it to help evaluate its own performance in supporting school improvement, and then plan regionally and nationally for changes to policy to better achieve national aspirations.

### **So, what to do?**

We need to take agency and assessment seriously at all levels if we want a learning, improving system in which all players demonstrate improvement in performance over time. This is how we could do it.

The Learning Framework outlined in this paper is a starting point because all of the components of this framework are integral to all learning by all students and all adults.

The key to achieving this goal is for the agencies responsible for supporting the education system to model the learning and improvement they wish to see in the schools they support. This modelling should extend to principals, who should also demonstrate the learning they expect from their heads of department or syndicate leaders.

At all levels of the system, it is crucial to collect information about student learning outcomes to continuously improve equity and excellence in education. However, the specific configuration of this information will depend on the level of the hierarchy.

### **The Answers**

Simply, the answer is that all of us, as adults in education, irrespective of our role in the system, must learn to become models of agentic learning, of engaging in cycles of inquiry that demonstrate that we get better and better at playing our part in improving outcomes of excellence and equity for students. All of us. Modelling and demonstrating self-evaluation and improvement.

To do this requires: espousal of the purpose of compulsory education; clarity of what we want children to learn; clarity of improvement goals/targets/aims of education that will achieve excellence and equity; assessment tools that can deliver fit for purpose information at every level of the system; agentic adult learners who model learning; and collaborative problem-solving.

#### **Answer One: Justify why we make education compulsory for 10 years of a child's life.**

We need every student in compulsory education to know that education is compulsory because what they will learn over those 10 years is fundamental to becoming an adult. They need to know that their parents and whānau and community understand that all students need to turn up to school every day and that the adults will ensure that they do. We need to grow and nourish thriving individuals and communities for our future. As an education system we need to monitor to ensure that the message is being heard and supported by our whole community. Student motivation will not be left to chance.

#### **Answer Two: Develop progressions across all of the compulsory curriculum.**

We need progressions of learning across the whole curriculum, not just restricted to literacy and numeracy. We need greater clarity about the whole curriculum and what is to be taught. We must ensure that this becomes the case. Students must be clear about how they are progressing across the entire curriculum. Teachers must be clear about the learning progressions in each curriculum area. This is crucial and means that the curriculum should be supported by clarification of each high-level achievement objective and supplemented with assessment and teaching resources for each transition point. We understand that it is intended that this will happen with the curriculum refresh. If this is the case, we applaud it. Alongside this clarity must go a very clear rationale as to why each part of the curriculum is important so students are more likely to understand and be motivated to learn what they need in order to take their place in society.

**Answer Three: Explicitly articulate expected rates of progress and standards.**

We also need clarity about what to reasonably expect students to know after 10 years of schooling and after each year or transition point of schooling. Without this, we have no way of knowing:

- a) whether our aspirations for our children are comparable to those of other countries. It is not conscionable to set standards of attainment that are not internationally competitive.
- b) how reasonable any child's learning progress is. Parents and whānau, and students, expect good answers to the questions: "What has been learnt this year? Has enough been learnt?" Is my eight-year-old at the standard of an eight-year-old, give or take?" As a student, "Have I learnt enough this year so that things will be okay next year. If I want to be a doctor, or a plumber, am I on the right path?" These are not trivial questions and they cannot be ignored. Every seriously agentic student and their parents and whānau will demand a convincing answer. And also to the follow-up questions of "If not, why not, what now?"

Some learners will learn quickly and go beyond any outcome set. Others will learn more slowly, and some will not learn what we would hope for them. All will shine in learning some aspects of the curriculum more than in others. What is critical is that they all continue to see themselves as learners, as respected citizens of Aotearoa New Zealand whose capacities and capabilities are unique to them and valued. And that they have the evidence of their school reports to validate their view of their whole selves.

Students and their parents and whānau deserve good answers to questions about progress. As professionals, teachers and school leaders need to be able to give those answers in ways that are compelling, do not destroy the motivation of the student, that leave the student just as motivated to return to school the next day, and the next. A written report to parents and whānau that essentially contains just information that a student has not achieved is not at all useful in maintaining student motivation. Teachers need much better guidance, exemplars and PLD on how to do this well.

*"Don't tell me how bad or slow I am. Tell me how much I have progressed, why you think that is, what my next steps are, and how I might best approach those. And you might need to remind me, and my parents, as to why all this is really important for my future."*

We need to monitor to ensure both the international competitiveness of our educational outcomes and that our students (and their parents and whānau) do hear our messages about where their learning has got to as honest, learning-focussed and helpful.

**Answer Four: Ensure everyone in the system is learning.**

Well-resourced, research-informed, professionally applicable and relevant professional learning is essential for teachers, school leaders, educational agencies, and policy makers.

Effective professional learning should be designed to be responsive to the collective and individual needs of all in the education system, and continually reviewed and informed by evaluative information from all involved <sup>iv</sup>.

Relevant professional learning and development must include research-based effective pedagogy and assessment capability in the use of assessment tools and the statistical analysis and use of data.

No teacher or principal should be a teacher or principal unless they are genuinely curious about how well their students are learning, how he/she might help them to learn better, and the evidence that will tell him/her that 'better' has been achieved. No one in the Ministry of Education or ERO or those facilitating teacher learning should be in these positions unless they are genuinely curious about how they are demonstrably supporting schools and principals to improve.

We need to monitor to ensure we are clear about the things each actor in the system needs to learn, we are clear that they are learning, and the system is progressing. And we need to share our findings with those who need our feedback or our data or our findings in order to further improve.

**Answer Five: Gather and use measures of progress and achievement.**

Government cannot be credible in its administration of our nation's education without good information about how well students are learning. Excellence and equity are key notions here. If we seek excellence, we must have good data about how our students learn in relation to students in other jurisdictions. If we seek equity, we must have good data about how our different gender, ethnic, socio-economic and other groups learn with respect to each other. We need to make sure that assessment tools are of high standard and that results can be aggregated across kāhui ako and nationally, without inadvertently significantly compromising their formative classroom use.

Good data comes from good assessment tools and processes. Any assessment tools used to inform system learning must also be, at the very least, compatible with learning processes at all other levels so that the needs of one level do not compromise the learning at any other level.

We need to ensure that this data is gathered, shared and used well by policy makers.

**Answer Six: Model learning at all levels**

If we have a learning and improving system, the leaders of the system need to model both their personal and system learning. If things go backwards, address it, own it, fix it, learn from it.

There needs to be a publicly available analysis of what has been changed/improved (or not) across the system over the last year, what has been learnt about what might be further improved by the leaders personally and across the system, and what the plans are for the ensuing period. The analysis

needs to show long term performance trends, particularly of learner outcomes, and include evaluations of initiatives designed to improve. And we need to model just the sort of curiosity about personal and system performance that we would expect of every registered teacher and every well-taught young person. ERO is actively engaging in some of this evaluative work<sup>v</sup> but, to go further, more complete and robust information is needed and the modelling needs to be system-wide.

Making these six fundamental and necessary changes will ensure that we all become part of a system that learns, and a system that improves. Nothing gets sustained or embedded unless we all lead, model and follow through.

### Endnote:

The authors have drawn on the New Zealand Assessment Institute publication [Assessment to Improve Learning: Principles, Practices and Proof](#)<sup>vi</sup> to support the arguments for the centrality of assessment and its power to improve learning. The document was written for educators who are seeking clarity about the why, the what, the how, and the ‘what does it look like’ of assessment.

### References

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<sup>ii</sup> <https://theeducationhub.org.nz/agency/>

<sup>iii</sup> Te Mātaiaho | DRAFT FOR TESTING | September 2022, p11

<sup>iv</sup> Coggshall, J., Rasmussen, C., Colton, A., Milton, J., & Jacques, C. (2012). *Generating teaching effectiveness: the role of job-embedded professional learning in teacher evaluation*. US: National Comprehensive Centre for Teacher Quality.

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<sup>v</sup> <https://ero.govt.nz/our-research/collaboration-in-action-lessons-from-a-community-of-practice>

<sup>vi</sup> New Zealand Assessment Institute. (2021). *Assessment to Improve Learning: Principles, Practices and Proof* Retrieved from <https://www.nzai.org.nz/knowledge-centre/assessment-ppp/>