

Solving problems Improving outcomes Moving forward

Eight case studies of school improvement and an inquiry into their shared processes and practices

March 2026

Acknowledgements

We would like to sincerely thank the following schools for their willingness to share their improvement journeys and contribute to this report. Their openness, reflection, and commitment to improving outcomes for their learners have made this work possible.

Te Papapa School

Sandspit Road School | Te Kura o Rangiaawhea

Stonefields School | Te Kura o ngā Pāraepōhatu

Middleton Grange School

Weston School

Rototuna Senior High School

Central Auckland Specialist School

Silverstream School | Te Kura o Māwaihākona

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Solving problems Improving outcomes Moving forward

Eight case studies of school improvement and an inquiry
into their shared processes and practices

Written by Dr Melanie Atkinson
March 2026



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Across Aotearoa New Zealand, schools are engaged in deliberate efforts to strengthen teaching and learning. Teachers and leaders examine evidence, test new approaches, and adapt their practice in response to what they see in their classrooms and communities. This improvement work is deliberate and grounded in professional inquiry.

Yet much of this work remains largely invisible beyond the individual school. The national conversation about education often focuses on system-level reform, policy change, or national achievement data, while the practical work of improvement within schools is less frequently shared.

The New Zealand Assessment Institute (NZAI) has established the Collaborative Improvement Community (CIC) in response to this gap. Its purpose is to make improvement work more visible, more connected, and more accessible for collective learning. By bringing together accounts from schools willing to share their improvement journeys, the CIC aims to reduce isolation, encourage collaboration, and strengthen motivation for more schools to engage in disciplined improvement work across the sector.

The report represents the first step in that work. It brings together eight school improvement stories. While the initiatives differ in size, setting, and focus, they share a commitment for deliberate problem-solving, evaluative thinking^[1], and strengthening outcomes for their learners.

Together, these stories offer grounded insight into how schools are approaching improvement in practice.



Dr Jenny Poskitt
NZAI President



Michael Absolum ONZM
NZAI Vice President

[1] Evaluative thinking refers to the disciplined use of evidence, inquiry, and reflection to understand what is happening, why it is happening, and what actions are most likely to improve outcomes.

Report structure and purpose

PART A

The first section presents eight case studies that document and celebrate schools' improvement journeys. These accounts describe how schools defined problems or focus areas, designed and implemented change strategies, and gathered emerging evidence of impact.

PART B

The second section synthesises insights across the eight stories. Through cross-story analysis, recurring patterns were identified and synthesised into five themes. These themes highlight practical insights that may inform other schools taking on their own improvement work.

Rather than presenting a single model of improvement, the intention is to offer grounded examples that may prompt reflection and new thinking for others engaged in similar work. The primary audience for this report is school leaders and teachers engaged in improvement work. It may also be of interest to boards, professional learning facilitators, and system-level organisations such as the Ministry of Education and the Education Review Office that are seeking to understand how schools are designing, evaluating, and sustaining improvement.

The report is also intended to support NZAI's ongoing development of the Collaborative Improvement Community and contribute constructively to wider sector conversations about school improvement.



How to use this report

This report is designed to facilitate reflection and conversation about improvement practice in schools. The eight case studies offer examples of how schools have approached improvement in real contexts, while the cross-story themes describe shared patterns and practical insights.

Readers may choose to engage with the report in different ways. Some may wish to read the full report sequentially. Others may prefer to begin with the case studies that feel most relevant to their context.

To support engagement with the material, reflective questions are included at the end of each case study and following each of the key themes to encourage professional dialogue within schools and leadership teams. The report may be useful as a resource for staff discussions, professional learning sessions, or leadership reflection on current improvement priorities.

Approach and methodology

Sources of information

For seven of the schools, the case studies were developed from presentations previously shared at the 2025 NZAI Assessment Conference. This included written transcripts generated from the presentation recordings and copies of the accompanying slides. For the eighth school, a more formal evaluation report of their change initiative was available and used as the primary source material.

Development of the case studies (Part A)

The data sources were used to draft each case study. Draft case studies were shared with participating schools for checking and confirmation of accuracy.



Cross-story analysis (Part B)

The cross-story analysis used a qualitative thematic analysis approach. The source material for each school was analysed using a structured coding framework that examined the:

- nature and focus of improvement
- inquiry and evaluation processes used
- conditions that appeared to enable or constrain progress
- outcomes and learning described.

Patterns across stories were identified and five recurring themes were developed.

Interpreting the stories

The stories in this report draw primarily on presentations shared by schools at the 2025 NZAI Assessment Conference and, in one case a formal evaluation report. The stories reflect the schools' own descriptions and evidence of their improvement work, and the depth of evidence varies across examples. The insights should therefore be read as examples of promising practice rather than as a comprehensive evaluation of school improvement across the sector.



What this report suggests about school improvement

Schools approached improvement in different ways and in different contexts. Despite this variation, several common themes emerged. The five themes below provide an overview of the patterns visible across the stories and are explored in depth in Part B of the report. Across the stories schools commonly:

- 1** Establish clarity of purpose and shared language
Improvement efforts were anchored in a clearly articulated problem of priority, supported by shared language about what success would look like.
- 2** Draw deliberately on research and evidence
Teachers and leaders connected their work to established ideas about learning, assessment, and improvement.
- 3** Embed inquiry as an everyday professional routine
Rather than one-off initiatives, improvement was structured through cycles of inquiry, reflection, and adjustment.
- 4** Use evidence to guide action
Assessment information and other forms of evidence were used to shape decisions about teaching and strategy.
- 5** Strengthen adult learning and organisational capability
Sustained improvement depended on professional learning, collaborative routines, and leadership that supported collective responsibility.



PART A



School improvement case studies

This section presents eight school improvement case studies presented at the NZAI Assessment Conference in 2025. Each case study captures a school's improvement focus, the actions taken, and the learning that has emerged so far. Together they provide grounded examples of how schools are addressing complex challenges and strengthening teaching, learning, and systems in their local contexts.

The case studies are intentionally practical and narrative in style. They are not evaluations of effectiveness or models of change to be replicated. Instead, they offer insight into promising practices and the conditions that appear to support improvement, alongside the tensions schools navigate.

Case studies at a glance

The eight case studies represent a diverse set of improvement journeys. Below is a brief overview of each school's focus before the full case studies are presented.

Te Papapa School

Developing adaptive teachers - challenging, changing, and totally worth it

Te Papapa School focused on strengthening teacher adaptive expertise so that staff could respond more intentionally when learning was not progressing as expected. Through structured professional learning groups, coaching, and structured use of assessment evidence, the school built shared capability in curriculum knowledge, pedagogy, and evaluative capability.

Sandspit School

A journey to clarity

At Sandspit School, leaders revisited beliefs, systems and practice to rebuild coherence in Assessment for Learning^[2]. An audit of assessment practices and tools, combined with professional learning, and strengthened moderation processes helped align beliefs, systems and teaching practice around accelerating learning.

Stonefields School

Getting it in our DNA

Stonefields School set out to strengthen how progress toward its vision could be seen and used to guide improvement. A schoolwide Teaching, Learning, and Assessment (TLA) model provides the inquiry framework. By clarifying success measures and building a live improvement dashboard to make progress visible in real time, leaders connected classroom inquiry, strategic planning, and governance decision making.

[2] 'Assessment for Learning': Assessment for Learning refers to an ongoing process that arises out of the interaction between teaching and learning. It is founded upon the recognition that the primary purpose of assessment is to improve students' learning and teachers' teaching, as both respond to the information it provides. What makes assessment for learning effective is how well the information is used." (<https://newzealandcurriculum.tahurangi.education.govt.nz/principles-of-assessment-for-learning/5637...>)

Middleton Grange School

More than just results - use of summative assessment information in secondary schools

Middleton Grange School focused on strengthening how summative assessment information was interpreted and used across the organisation. Through redesigned reporting processes and structured inquiry-focused conversations about summative assessment, the school shifted from generating data to building shared insight that could inform improvement in teaching and learning.

Weston School

Strategic assessment - strengthening teaching, learning, and schoolwide coherence

Weston School worked to build greater coherence between strategy, professional learning, and classroom practice. By simplifying its strategic direction, distributing leadership through strategic teams, and strengthening the purposeful use of assessment, the school aligned improvement work across governance, leadership, and teaching.

Rototuna Senior High School

Teacher learning communities - a journey through improvement

Rototuna Senior High School renewed its commitment to deep and powerful learning by strengthening teaching practice across the campus. Through cross-curricular Teacher Learning Communities, teachers engaged in structured inquiry cycles supported by protected professional learning time and external facilitation.

Central Auckland Specialist School

Using evaluation for improvement to strengthen quality practice

Central Auckland Specialist School refreshed its Signature Practices to strengthen coherence and quality practice across a complex, multi-site specialist setting. Using an evaluation for improvement approach, leaders built shared language, strengthened coaching, and embedded the practices into everyday systems.

Silverstream School

Collaborative reporting: a holistic view of student progress and achievement

Silverstream School redesigned its reporting approach to create a more holistic and collaborative view of student progress. A live Personalised Education Plan brought together multiple sources of evidence and enabled ongoing dialogue between teachers, students, and whānau about learning.

Te Papapa School

Developing adaptive teachers: challenging, changing, and totally worth it

Te Papapa School made a deliberate commitment to developing adaptive teachers who take responsibility for acceleration. Through structured professional learning groups, coaching, and a strong belief that every learner can achieve at their year level, the school is strengthening teacher expertise and shifting practice in visible ways. The work is challenging, but leaders and teachers are seeing changes.

School context

Te Papapa School is a primary school in Onehunga serving a largely Māori and Pacific community. Many whānau maintain strong connections with the school, and leaders hold a clear conviction that every learner can achieve at or above expectation. Alongside implementing structured literacy and responding to curriculum change, the school has focused on building adaptive expertise across a staff that includes both novice and experienced teachers. Leaders recognised that embedding a consistent approach to acceleration would require strengthening evaluative capability and shared expectations about teaching and learning.

Inquiry emphasis

The work was grounded in the concept of adaptive expertise and a commitment to acceleration. Leaders drew on assessment for learning principles and elements of the science of learning to strengthen clarity about what effective instruction looks like. The framing question was: if learning is not occurring at the expected level, how must teaching adapt?

Professional inquiry was structured to test the impact of instructional decisions using timely assessment evidence. Data was treated as feedback on teaching, and improvement cycles were designed to strengthen teachers' curriculum knowledge, pedagogical skill, and evaluative capability.

Link for video of the full conference presentation on the NZAI website: [Te Papapa School](#)

Why does this story matter?

This case highlights the importance of growing teacher expertise as a pathway to improving student outcomes. It shows how structured inquiry, coaching, and shared beliefs can shift both practice and expectations about what is possible for learners.

Improvement focus

The improvement focus is the deliberate development of adaptive teachers who can effectively combine strong curriculum knowledge, pedagogy, and evaluative thinking. Leaders aim to ensure that teachers notice quickly when learning is not occurring, respond with precision, and check whether their actions are making a difference.

The improvement story

The work was framed around a core belief: if students are not achieving at their year level, adults must adapt. Developing adaptive expertise became the vehicle for living that belief more consistently across the school. Professional learning centred on building three interconnected areas of expertise: curriculum knowledge, pedagogy, and evaluation. Growth in these areas was seen as essential to improving impact.

As structured literacy and curriculum shifts were introduced, leaders revisited these pedagogies. Assessment for learning principles were re-examined, and time was invested in clarifying what acceleration looks like in daily practice. Acceleration was reaffirmed as a guiding principle, with students taught at year level and gaps addressed strategically.

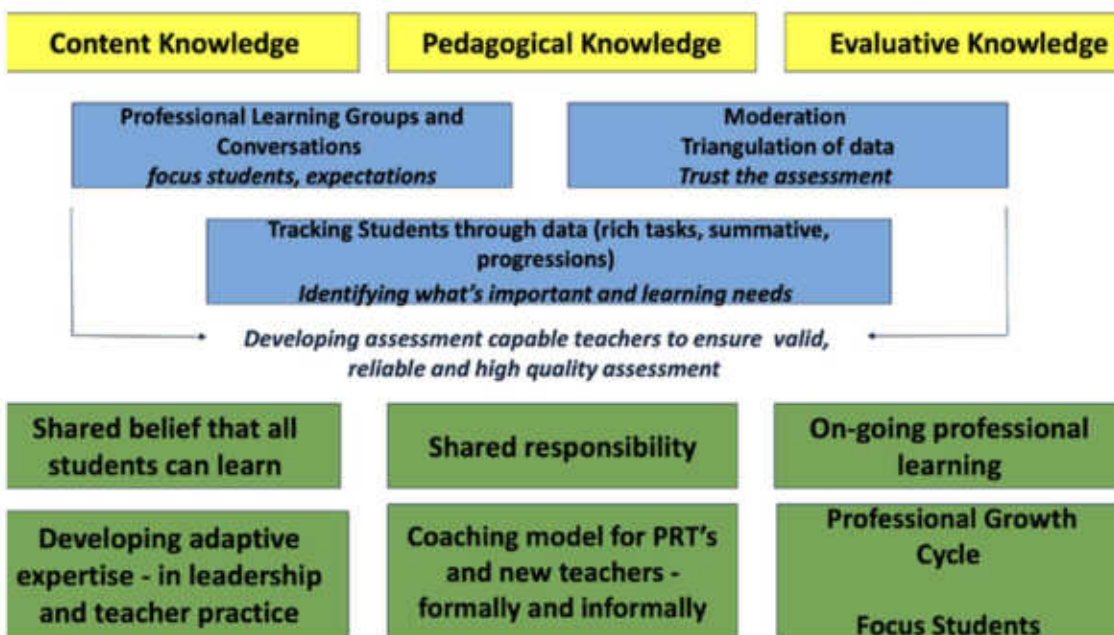


Diagram of the Assessment Framework used at Te Papapa School
(Image taken from school's PowerPoint presentation)

Te Papapa School

Aligning pedagogies and assessment became a deliberate strand of development. Science of learning principles were integrated with formative assessment practices, and teachers explored how structured literacy routines could strengthen clarity and precision while remaining culturally responsive. Assessment systems were reorganised into universal screening, targeted diagnostic assessment, and ongoing progress monitoring, strengthening feedback loops for inquiry.

Professional learning groups became the main forum for applying this learning. On a regular cycle, teachers brought evidence about focus students and identified next instructional actions. Teachers discussed how the proposed next steps connected to year level expectations and what adjustments might strengthen acceleration. Over time, these conversations built shared language and sharper instructional reasoning.

Video was introduced as a learning tool to deepen reflection. Teachers analysed short clips together, strengthening collective understanding of effective practice. As trust grew, feedback became more specific and anchored in evidence of student response.

Support was differentiated. Teachers early in their careers engaged in intensive modelling, co-planning, and in-class coaching to build curriculum depth and formative habits. More experienced teachers were supported to examine assumptions about remediation and acceleration, particularly where expectations had drifted below year level. Coaching conversations combined clarity and care, reinforcing shared responsibility for impact.

In the senior school, adaptive expertise was visible through focused inquiries. Following internal professional learning on sentence structure, teachers implemented explicit instruction and analysed subsequent writing samples, noting improvements in accuracy and complexity. Other inquiries integrated culturally connected contexts into literacy and inquiry learning, strengthening engagement and depth of response.

Across the school, professional learning, assessment systems, and shared beliefs became more tightly aligned. Teachers increasingly sought additional knowledge when learning stalled and approached evidence as feedback on their own practice. Adaptive expertise moved from a concept to a lived expectation.



Enablers

- A clear belief that acceleration is an adult responsibility
- Commitment to assessment for learning and culturally responsive practice
- Structured professional learning centred on curriculum knowledge, pedagogy, and evaluation
- Integration of science of learning, and formative assessment
- Growth in relational trust that allowed honest examination of practice
- Differentiated coaching that responded to teacher need



Tensions

- Emotional and cognitive load for leaders associated with sustained improvement work
- Challenging deeply held beliefs about remediation and student capability
- Balancing curriculum change alongside system redesign
- Variable teacher confidence in interpreting assessment data
- Managing discomfort associated with video analysis and public reflection

How challenges were navigated

Leaders combined clarity of expectations with relational trust. Conversations about acceleration were anchored in shared responsibility for student progress, helping staff examine practice without feeling judged.

Support was responsive and sustained. Intensive modelling and coaching were provided where needed and gradually reduced as capability strengthened. When expectations drifted below year level, leaders revisited the school's shared stance on acceleration and worked alongside teachers to realign planning and instruction.

Professional learning remained embedded within inquiry cycles. This ensured that new knowledge, assessment information, and classroom practice developed together rather than as separate initiatives.

Evidence and emerging learning

Leaders and teachers now report visible shifts in teacher practice. Conversations increasingly centre on acceleration and year level expectations, with teachers using assessment evidence more deliberately to guide instructional decisions. Confidence in interpreting progress monitoring data, including tools, has grown across teams.

There are reports of mindset shifts as well as practice changes. Teachers are more likely to treat stalled progress as feedback on teaching and to adjust strategies accordingly. In the junior school, focus students are tracked with greater precision and instructional responses are more tightly aligned to identified needs.

Classroom examples provide further illustration. Following explicit professional learning on sentence structure, writing samples showed increased accuracy and complexity over short timeframes. In senior classes, culturally connected inquiry contexts supported stronger engagement and richer responses. Leaders describe early signs that stronger alignment between belief, pedagogy, and assessment is contributing to more deliberate teaching and growing learner confidence.



Questions for schools to discuss

- How clearly have we articulated what adaptive expertise means in our context?
- How confident are our teachers in interpreting assessment evidence and identifying precise next steps?
- In what ways do we differentiate professional support to meet varying levels of experience and need?
- Which aspects of teacher expertise, if strengthened, might unlock greater progress for learners?

Sandspit Road School

Te Kura o Rangiaawhea

A journey to clarity

Sandspit Road School set out to rebuild clarity around assessment so it could genuinely accelerate learning. By auditing existing practice, investing in professional learning, and resourcing leadership time, the school has developed a more coherent and confident assessment culture that supports acceleration and student agency. Early evidence suggests clearer expectations and improved outcomes for learners.

School context

Sandspit Road School, Te Kura o Rangiaawhea, is a Year 1 to 8 school in Waiuku with approximately 310 students. The school had a long history with Assessment for Learning and a strong commitment to practices that support diverse learners. Over time, changes in leadership and staffing led to variation in how these practices were understood and enacted. When a new principal arrived in 2023, leaders saw a need to rebuild shared clarity about what high-quality assessment practice looked like and how it should support acceleration across classrooms.

Inquiry emphasis

The work was grounded in research on assessment for learning and evidence-informed teaching. Leaders drew on ideas from Dylan Wiliam on instructional adjustment, Hattie's research on visible learning, and Nottingham's focus on learning within the zone of proximal development.

An audit of current assessment practices provided the starting point. This process clarified where assessment was being used deeply and where greater coherence was needed. The emphasis was on strengthening shared language, common expectations, and purposeful use of evidence.

Link for video of the full conference presentation on the NZAI website: [Sandspit School](#)

Sandspit Road School

Why does this story matter?

This case illustrates how revisiting the purpose of assessment can renew its impact. It highlights that effective assessment practice is enhanced by shared understanding, intentional resourcing, and relational trust.

Improvement focus

The focus was to strengthen coherence and consistency in assessment so that all learners experienced clear expectations, responsive teaching, and opportunities for acceleration. Leaders aimed to ensure assessment tools and schedules served learning rather than compliance.

The improvement story

Leaders began by asking whether assessment practices were truly supporting acceleration. Although many tools were in use, the connection between assessment and daily teaching was not always clear. Variation in confidence interpreting data meant that some teachers were using information deeply while others were less certain about how to respond.

The first step was a full audit of assessment tools and schedules. Teachers discussed the purpose of each assessment, how often it was used, and whether it provided useful information for learning. Some tools were streamlined, and clearer rationale was developed to distinguish between system level snapshots and classroom formative practices.

An Assessment for Learning team was formed and release time and leadership units signalled that this work was a priority. Professional learning combined in-house expertise with external support and focused on building assessment literacy for teachers. Leadership development focused on leading adult learning.

Teachers revisited e-asTTle, PAT, and writing moderation processes, clarifying what each tool was designed to show and how it should inform next steps. Practice analysis discussions became more structured, with a focus on how evidence shaped teaching decisions.

Building trust was critical. Leaders were explicit that assessment information would not be used to judge teachers. Observations were co-constructed, and feedback conversations were framed as shared inquiry into student learning. Over time, staff confidence grew and conversations became more focused on impact rather than compliance.

Attention was also given to inclusivity. Teachers considered how assessment conditions could be adjusted so students were set up for success, including appropriate test levels and accommodations where needed. The goal was for assessment to accurately reflect learning rather than create unnecessary barriers.

Partnership with whānau was strengthened through early positive contact, shared goal setting, and clear communication of progress. Assessment results were shared in ways that highlighted growth and next steps rather than simply reporting levels. Collaboration extended beyond the school. Writing moderation with neighbouring schools strengthened consistency and helped refine expectations. This external lens reinforced internal clarity.

Across the school, assessment systems, professional learning, and shared beliefs became more tightly aligned. Teachers reported greater confidence in interpreting evidence and clearer expectations about what acceleration required.



Enablers

- A clear commitment to assessment for learning
- Intentional resourcing of leadership time and professional learning
- Structured audit to create a shared starting point
- Relational trust and explicit non-judgemental stance
- Collaborative moderation within and across schools
- Alignment between assessment tools and instructional decisions



Tensions

- Variation in confidence and familiarity with assessment tools
- Rebuilding coherence during leadership and staffing change
- Balancing depth of inquiry with workload demands
- Ensuring assessment remained inclusive and meaningful for all learners
- Maintaining consistency over time

How challenges were navigated

Leaders paced the work carefully, recognising that sustainable change required time for understanding and ownership. The audit created a common understanding of current practice without positioning variation as deficit. Professional learning was embedded across the year rather than delivered as one-off sessions.

Trust was built by working alongside teachers and ensuring that observations and data discussions were framed as collaborative inquiry. Moderation across schools strengthened shared expectations and reduced isolation. By resourcing leadership time and creating space for structured dialogue, leaders signalled that this work was developmental rather than performative.

Consistency was strengthened through moderation and shared planning processes. These structures reduced ambiguity and supported dependable practice across classrooms.

Evidence and emerging learning

After twelve months, the school reports measurable shifts. e-asTTle reading and writing data shows upward movement across several year levels, alongside a reduction in the tail of underachievement. Effect size analysis indicates accelerated progress in some cohorts, including Māori students, with several groups achieving effect sizes above 0.4 and higher.

Teachers describe greater clarity and confidence in using assessment to guide instruction. Students are increasingly able to articulate what they are learning, why it matters, and how they know they are improving. Leaders' key learning has been that clarity, resourcing, and trust must work together. Assessment practices strengthened when belief, systems, and professional learning were aligned.



Questions for schools to discuss

- How clear are we about the purpose of every assessment tool we use?
- Do our assessment schedules genuinely support acceleration or create compliance load?
- How confident are teachers in interpreting and acting on progress data?
- What structures build relational trust so data is experienced as supportive?
- In what ways does our assessment practice strengthen student agency?
- Where could moderation strengthen shared expectations and consistency?
- How do we ensure that assessment processes are inclusive and meaningful for all learners?

Stonefields School

Te Kura o ngā Pāraepōhatu

Improvement: getting it in our DNA

Stonefields School set out to ensure improvement was not a project but part of everyday practice. A schoolwide Teaching, Learning, and Assessment model provides the inquiry framework that guides teachers and leaders to examine their impact and adapt practice. By clarifying what success looks like and strengthening the tools to measure what they value, including building a live dashboard, the school has aligned vision, inquiry, and evidence to make progress visible in real time.

School context

Stonefields School is a large urban full primary in eastern Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, serving a diverse community. The school's vision emphasises building learning capacity, collaborating, making meaning, and breaking through.

Following the disruption of COVID, leaders paused to reflect on how well their systems were showing progress in the outcomes they valued most. Achievement information was available, but other priorities such as hauora, learner agency, engagement, and parent partnership were harder to see consistently through existing tools and reporting cycles.

Inquiry emphasis

Improvement at Stonefields is anchored in a school-designed Teaching, Learning, and Assessment (TLA) model that guides how teachers inquire into the impact of their practice. The model prompts teachers to notice learner needs, analyse gaps, design deliberate responses, and reflect on impact.

The work draws on Assessment for Learning principles and improvement ideas focused on defined success measures.

Link for video of the full conference presentation on the NZAI website: [Stonefields School](#)

Stonefields School

Why does this story matter?

This case demonstrates how schools can design improvement systems that align vision, inquiry, and evidence. By clarifying what success looks like, embedding a shared inquiry framework for teaching and learning, and making progress visible through accessible data tools, Stonefields strengthened its ability to examine impact and adapt practice over time.

Improvement focus

The focus was to strengthen a coherent, schoolwide approach to improvement that was tightly aligned to the school vision. Leaders aimed to make progress visible across both learning and wider outcomes such as wellbeing, agency, engagement, and partnership. By clarifying these success measures and making evidence for inquiry, strategic planning, and governance conversations, visible in real time, the school aimed to support sustained improvement over time.

The improvement story

Leaders at Stonefields School set out to strengthen the school's overall improvement capability by ensuring that inquiry, evidence, and decision-making were embedded across everyday practice. They focused on creating a coherent approach that linked classroom teaching, professional learning, and strategic planning.

Central to this approach was the development of a 'Teaching, Learning, and Assessment' (TLA) model. The model provides a structured inquiry cycle that guides teachers to examine the impact of their practice. It prompts teachers to ask a sequence of questions: How do I know these learners need this learning now? What actions will I take to cause that learning? What approaches or strategies will I use? And what evidence will show whether the teaching was impactful? This inquiry logic supports both day-to-day instructional decisions and deeper investigations when learning is not progressing as expected.

Leaders deliberately applied the same improvement logic across multiple levels of the organisation. The inquiry questions used by teachers also informed leadership discussions and strategic planning. This created a shared language for improvement across the school and ensured that evidence-informed thinking became a part of everyday professional conversations.

Alongside the TLA model, leaders worked to clarify what success should look like for learners. Seeking alignment with the school's vision and values, they identified a broader set of success measures that extended beyond traditional academic outcomes. Alongside progress in core learning areas these measures captured areas such as learner agency, hauora and wellbeing, engagement, and partnership with whānau. For each area, leaders identified what evidence was already available and where new tools were needed. This process helped the school articulate what it valued most for learners and ensured that improvement efforts remained aligned with those priorities.

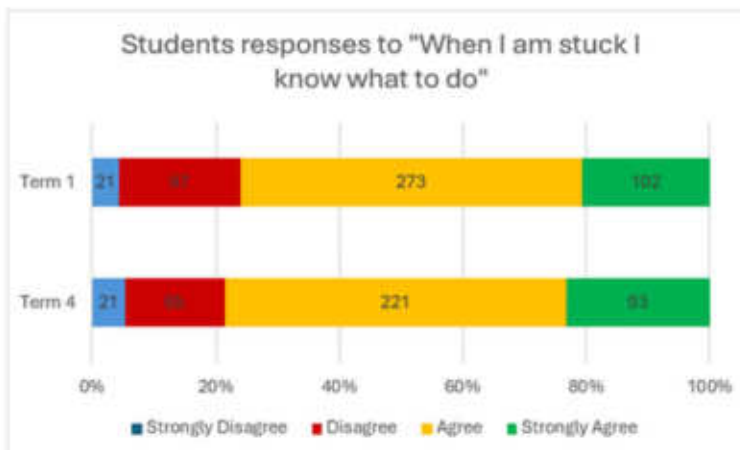
Stonefields School

To support visibility of progress, data from multiple sources was brought together in a live improvement dashboard built in Google Looker Studio. The dashboard enables teachers and leaders to view patterns by cohort or group, examine changes across timepoints, and connect survey information with attendance and achievement patterns. Rather than waiting for end-of-year summaries, teams can review shifts as they occur.

Importantly, the dashboard is not used in isolation. It operates as one tool within a wider improvement system. Evidence gathered through the dashboard feeds into professional conversations, team reflection, and strategic planning. Professional learning strengthened confidence in interpreting evidence and using it to guide inquiry. Playbooks became a key improvement tool. Teachers documented their focus, actions, evidence, and reflections in shared Google slide decks. These were used during professional learning sessions to share impact stories and emerging insights.

Over time, the Teaching, Learning, and Assessment model, dashboard, and playbooks have created greater coherence between classroom practice, strategic planning, and governance oversight. Improvement is increasingly viewed as shared work rather than a leadership task. Stonefields has strengthened the school's ability to ask purposeful questions, examine evidence, and adapt practice in response to what learners need.

Communication with whānau was also refined. Rather than sharing large volumes of dashboard data, leaders used simplified summaries to report progress and next steps. This supported transparency without overwhelming families.



Student survey data
Term 1 vs Term 4
(Image taken from
school's PowerPoint
presentation)



A teacher at Stonefields
School sharing their
impact story.
(Image taken from
school's PowerPoint
presentation)



Enablers

- A clearly articulated vision that guided the definition of success measures
- Strong analytic expertise supporting dashboard development
- Consistent use of a Teaching, Learning, and Assessment framework across levels
- Investment in staff data fluency alongside improved data access
- Structured playbooks that normalised sharing and reflection
- Deliberate triangulation of student, teacher, and whānau perspectives



Tensions

- Managing the cognitive load created by increasing volumes of data
- Balancing national reporting requirements with locally defined measures
- Ensuring dashboards remain accessible rather than overly technical
- Sharing rich evidence with whānau in manageable formats
- Sustaining focus on areas where progress is slower or uneven

How challenges were navigated

Leaders prioritised clarity and usability. Success measures were kept anchored to the vision, and the dashboard was designed to surface patterns quickly without requiring staff to work from raw spreadsheets. Professional learning time was used to strengthen shared understanding of measures, interpretation, and practical next steps.

Where progress was limited, the evidence was kept visible and used to shape the next cycle of inquiry rather than being set aside.

Evidence and emerging learning

Leaders report that improvement processes are becoming more embedded and coherent across the school. Staff demonstrate increased confidence in interpreting evidence and identifying next steps. Data conversations are more common in team meetings and strategic sessions.

Longitudinal achievement patterns indicate strong foundational outcomes for learners who remain across the full primary years. Survey data shows high levels of learner and whānau wellbeing, with targeted initiatives leading to measurable improvements in engagement in some areas. Leaders describe a shift from end-of-year variance reporting toward more continuous review, with decisions increasingly shaped by shared analysis rather than retrospective summaries.



Questions for schools to discuss

- How clearly have we defined what success looks like in our setting, including outcomes beyond achievement?
- What do we currently measure well, and what matters that we do not yet see clearly?
- How easy is it for teachers and leaders to access evidence and use it in real time?
- What routines help us keep inquiry consistent across classrooms and teams?
- How do we share evidence with whānau in ways that are clear and useful?
- What would help improvement become embedded in daily practice rather than driven by initiative cycles?

Middleton Grange School

More than just results - use of summative assessment information in NZ schools

This case study explores how a large area school shifted from being data rich but insight poor, to building a more disciplined and purposeful approach to using summative assessment information. Leaders focused on strengthening culture, dialogue, and collective commitment so that assessment information could drive school improvement and strengthen learning outcomes for students.

School context

This large state integrated area school in Christchurch serves approximately 1,400 students from Years 1 to 13. Like many schools operating within the New Zealand accountability environment, it manages extensive summative assessment information, including NCEA results and annual reporting requirements. Teachers and leaders generated detailed reports and tracked results across year levels, yet the connection between these activities and improvements in teaching and learning was not always clear. Responsibility for assessment and reporting sat with the deputy principal. Informed by his doctoral research into effective data use, he led this schoolwide effort to rethink how summative information was interpreted, discussed and applied.

Inquiry emphasis

The work was grounded in research on data driven decision-making, data literacy, and leadership for learning. It was shaped by a belief that summative assessment can be used formatively when seen as evidence for inquiry rather than a final judgement.

Drawing on Dempster's Leadership for Learning model and the knowledge pyramid, leaders focused on strengthening shared purpose, disciplined sense making, and collective responsibility for action. The intention was to move beyond reporting results toward deeper interpretation and informed improvement.

Link for video of the full conference presentation on the NZAI website: [Middleton Grange School](#)

Why does this story matter?

This case study highlights that strengthening assessment practice requires more than technical expertise. It depends on clarity of purpose, shared commitment to student outcomes, and organisational capability to interpret and act on evidence.

Middleton Grange's experience shows that when summative information becomes part of open, purposeful discussion, it can strengthen shared understanding and shape practical decisions that improve learning.

Improvement focus

The central focus was to move beyond generating summative results toward using assessment information in ways that improve teaching, learning, and whole school coherence. The aim was to use summative data formatively at an organisational level.

The improvement story

The starting point was discomfort. The school invested significant time and effort in analysing NCEA and other summative data, yet it remained uncertain whether this work was changing classroom practice or improving outcomes. Annual reports were lengthy and compliance driven. Data discussions often felt judgemental rather than developmental, which created anxiety and defensiveness among staff.

Leaders approached this challenge as an evaluative inquiry. Insights from national research into how schools used summative data informed the development of a local theory of change. It became clear that the issue was not access to data. The greater challenge lay in strengthening capability, and culture.

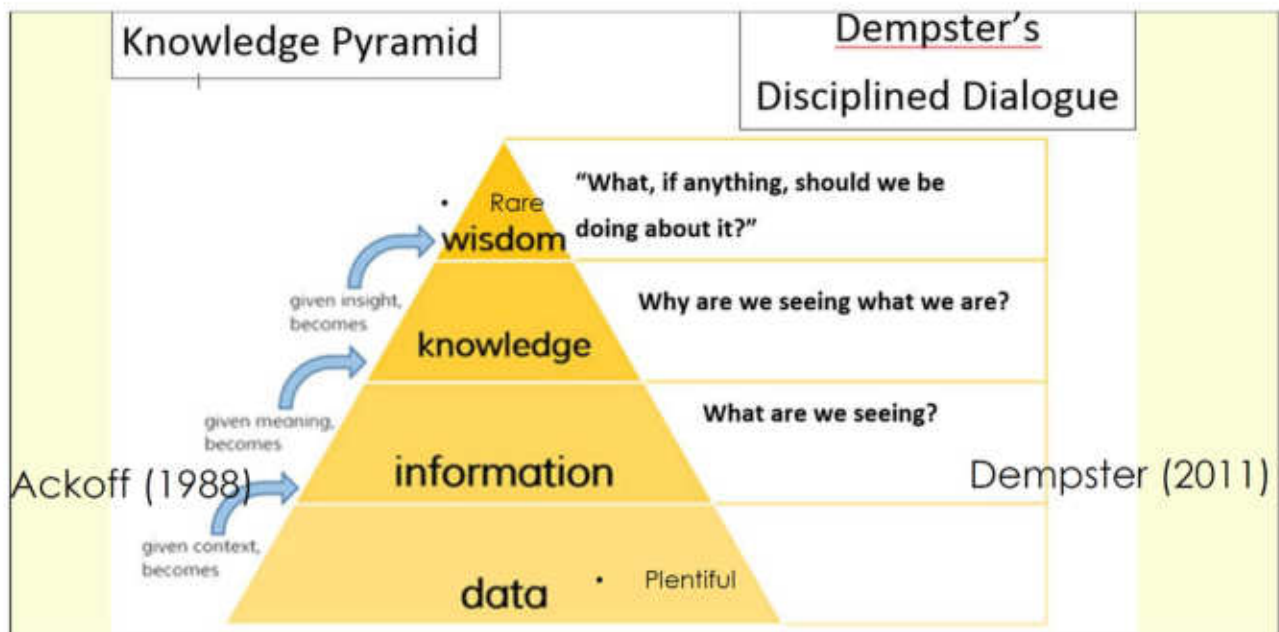
The first step was reframing the intent of assessment conversations to be professional reflections focused on improving student learning. Leaders consistently emphasised they were not about appraising teacher performance, creating space for more open and analytical conversations.

The annual reporting cycle was redesigned to require interpretation as well as description. Teams engaged in guided conversations that focused on patterns, causes, and next steps. Alongside this, leaders supported the development of data literacy, building confidence in interpreting and responding to assessment information. Two distinct report types were developed: accountability reports for board and external requirements, and reflective reports focused on inquiry and improvement.

A simple visual model, (shown on the next page) with conversation prompts was introduced to support sense making, drawing on the knowledge pyramid (from data, to information, to knowledge, to wisdom). The model emphasised moving toward shared interpretation and informed decision making. Dedicated time for this structured dialogue was embedded within the professional learning schedule.

Responsibility for this work was distributed. Senior leaders, heads of department, teachers, and the board each had defined roles in making sense of assessment information.

Over time, the data conversations evolved. Attention shifted toward underlying causes, contextual factors, and practical responses in classrooms and departments within a culture characterised by trust and shared responsibility.



Visual model showing the knowledge pyramid combined with conversation prompts
(Image taken from school's PowerPoint presentation)



Enablers

- Strong leadership commitment to clarifying moral purpose
- Framing assessment conversations as professional inquiry rather than performance judgement
- Use of clear frameworks such as disciplined dialogue and the knowledge pyramid
- Allocation of dedicated PLD time for structured data conversations in teams
- Intentional focus on building a culture of trust and honesty
- Clear differentiation between reporting up and reflective reporting



Tensions

- Persistent time pressures despite scheduled reflection time
- Variable levels of individual data literacy
- Ongoing tension between accountability requirements and professional inquiry
- Limited access to sophisticated analysis tools due to cost

How challenges were navigated

Leaders addressed anxiety and defensiveness by explicitly shaping culture. Data discussions were framed around 'what is happening for our students?' rather than 'how competent are we as teachers?' Trust and openness were intentionally cultivated.

Time constraints were mitigated by embedding structured conversations into the professional learning calendar rather than relying on goodwill. Simple prompts ensured conversations were focused and action oriented.

To address data literacy gaps, leaders provided support in interpreting trends and statistics, while avoiding overreliance on a single 'expert'. The goal was collective capability rather than technical specialisation. Accountability and reflection were separated where possible, reducing the likelihood that improvement conversations were conflated with performance management.

Evidence and emerging learning

Evidence of impact is primarily cultural and organisational at this stage, rather than measurable in student achievement data. Leaders report greater clarity about the purpose of assessment conversations and improved coherence across layers of leadership. Reports increasingly include interpretation and proposed actions rather than descriptive statistics.

Staff engagement with summative data has improved as conversations shift from judgement toward inquiry. Leaders describe a move away from compliance-driven reporting toward a more sustainable evaluative culture. The board, provided with clearer, more interpretable summaries of achievement patterns, were having governance conversations that moved beyond percentages to questions of equity, curriculum, and resourcing.

While large quantifiable gains are not claimed, the redesigned processes are beginning to link summative patterns with concrete actions such as targeted departmental goals and curriculum adjustments. The school is moving from data accumulation toward disciplined, action-focused use of assessment information.



Questions for schools to discuss

- How clear are we about the purpose of our assessment reports?
- Where might accountability requirements be overshadowing professional inquiry?
- Do our data conversations consistently lead to informed action?
- Have we allocated dedicated time for structured conversations about assessment information?
- How are responsibilities for sense making shared across layers of leadership?
- What supports are needed to strengthen collective data literacy?

Weston School

Strategic assessment: Strengthening teaching, learning, and schoolwide coherence

Weston School's journey began with a simple question: how can assessment genuinely strengthen teaching and learning across a school? By clarifying purpose, simplifying strategy, and distributing leadership, Weston has built greater coherence between classroom practice, professional learning, and strategic direction. Over time, assessment has shifted from an activity to a driver of shared responsibility for student progress.

School context

Weston School is a full primary on the outskirts of Ōamaru, with a roll of approximately 250 students serving a mixed rural and semi urban community. The school roll is growing and becoming increasingly diverse, with a rising number of ESOL learners and families moving in and out with seasonal work.

When the principal was appointed in 2019, the school had been through a period of instability. Staff were seen to work largely in isolation, relational trust was low, and curriculum and assessment practices varied significantly between classrooms. A lengthy strategic plan existed, but few teachers saw themselves as connected to it.

Inquiry emphasis

Evaluative thinking was embedded across both strategic and classroom levels. The work drew on Fullan and Quinn's coherence framework to guide leadership decisions and on the New Zealand Curriculum statement about the primary purpose of assessment to anchor purpose. Assessment was seen as an ongoing source of evidence for inquiry. Strategic teams identified intended shifts, clarified what impact would look like, and defined the evidence that would indicate progress. Teachers were supported to interpret patterns, moderate judgements, and connect assessment information directly to next teaching steps.

Link for video of the full conference presentation on the NZAI website: [Weston School](#)

Weston School

Why does this story matter?

This case shows how strategic clarity and deliberate use of assessment can strengthen coherence across a school. Simplifying direction, strengthening collective ownership, and aligning governance, leadership, and classroom practice can steadily build consistency for students.

Improvement focus

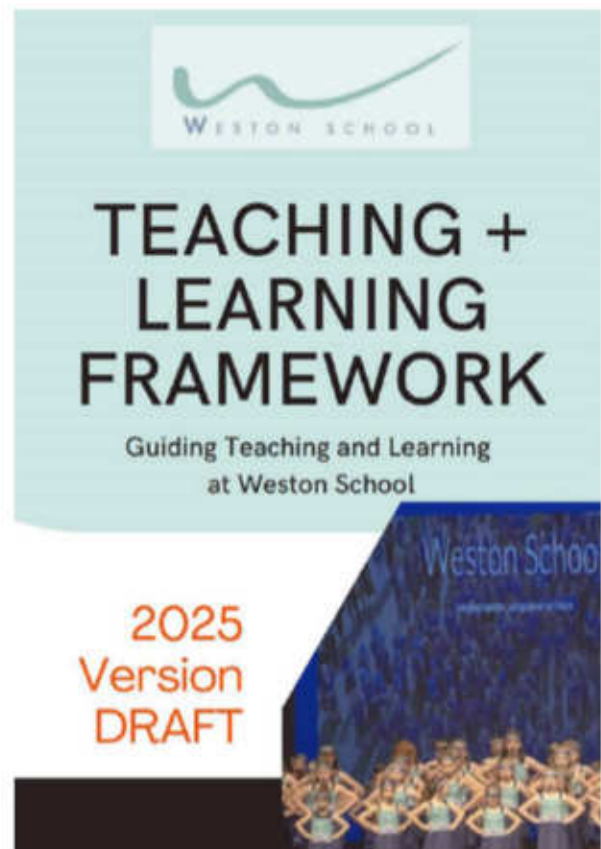
The focus was to develop a more coherent, strategic use of assessment to strengthen teaching, learning, and schoolwide alignment. Leaders sought to clarify the purpose of assessment, establish shared language and expectations across classrooms, and ensure that evidence informed responsive teaching rather than compliance processes drove what happens in the classroom.

The improvement story

Leaders at Weston School set out to build a more coherent and aligned approach to teaching and learning, where assessment clearly supported both teacher decision-making and student progress. Their aim was not to increase activity, but to ensure that strategic direction, classroom practice, and professional learning worked together in a deliberate and consistent way.

To support this shift, the leadership team engaged in external facilitation with Evaluation Associates | Te Huinga Kākākura Mātauranga. This professional learning strengthened leaders' confidence in analysing practice, leading adult learning conversations, and using evidence to guide change. Rather than focusing solely on systems, the work deliberately strengthened how leaders facilitated professional dialogue and supported teacher inquiry.

To address clarity a lengthy strategic plan was replaced with a concise one-page framework that made priorities visible and manageable. Three strands were prioritised: school culture, curriculum and local curriculum development, and assessment for learning.



(Image taken from school's PowerPoint presentation)

Weston School

Distributed leadership became central with improvement work being organised through three strategic teams focused on Positive Behaviour for Learning (PB4L), structured literacy, and Assessment for Learning. Each team included representatives from across teaching teams and was responsible not only for implementing actions, but also for monitoring progress and reflecting on impact. This structure ensured that improvement was not confined to the senior leadership team.

Assessment practices were reviewed and carefully rationalised, ensuring that tools genuinely informed teaching. Analysis of assessment data was supported by the development of reflective prompts to help teachers interpret the patterns and consider teaching implications. Conversations shifted from reporting results to planning targeted responses.

The school deliberately drew on research and established frameworks to guide both teaching practice and change leadership.

The focus on responsive teaching was supported by resources such as Clarity in the Classroom and the Victorian High Impact Teaching Strategies. Peer observations and professional conversations were progressively introduced. Initially supported by team leaders, these evolved into structured peer observations.

Feedback focused on how teachers used learning intentions, success criteria, and assessment information to shape learning.

Moderation processes were introduced at both schoolwide and team levels. Teachers examined student work together, discussed progressions, and strengthened consistency of judgements. Team meetings began with a discussion of 'children of concern', drawing on multiple sources of evidence, including anecdotal and observational information.

Leaders reinforced a clear improvement rhythm of planning, implementing, tracking, and evaluating. They focused on strengthening alignment between strategic planning, professional learning, and classroom practice. Board reporting was aligned with the strategic plan. A simple traffic light system made progress visible and encouraged regular reflection. Strategic teams reviewed impact mid-year and at year end.

Over time, this approach built greater coherence and shared responsibility for student progress. Assessment became more deliberately connected to planning, professional learning, and strategic priorities. Teachers increasingly saw themselves as co-owners of the improvement journey.



Weston School used this framework depicting the archway of teaching and learning capabilities (from Clarity in the Classroom) as their starting point.



Enablers

- Clear and simplified strategic direction
- Distributed leadership through three strategic teams
- Rebuilding relational trust before introducing technical change
- External facilitation that strengthened leadership capability
- A shared evidence-informed language for guiding and discussing teaching and learning
- Alignment between leadership, governance, and classroom expectations



Tensions

- High staff turnover disrupting peer observation cycles
- Increasing student transience and ESOL needs adding complexity to data interpretation
- National curriculum and assessment changes increasing workload
- The ongoing risk of assessment drifting back into compliance rather than a learning focus

How challenges were navigated

Leaders focused first on clarity and consistency. Simplifying the strategic plan and aligning board reporting with classroom expectations reduced ambiguity and supported stability.

Improvement was paced deliberately. Strategic teams were given time to trial ideas, gather feedback, and refine approaches. The establishment of strategic teams ensured representation from across the school so improvement work was collectively owned rather than imposed. This created space for professional voice and shared responsibility.

Assessment conversations were structured and collaborative. Reflective prompts and moderation routines helped shift discussion from compliance to professional inquiry.

Peer observations were introduced progressively. This gradual approach allowed professional confidence and relational safety to grow over time.

Regular reflection cycles helped sustain direction. Annual and mid-year reviews allowed teams to examine impact, celebrate progress, and adjust plans.

Evidence and emerging learning

Evaluative thinking was embedded within both strategic and classroom-level routines. Strategic teams identified intended shifts in practice and student outcomes, specified actions, and defined the evidence that would indicate progress. Team action plans were reviewed at mid and end of year.

At a classroom level, teachers were reported to be increasingly using assessment information diagnostically. Structured prompts supported analysis and moderation processes strengthened shared expectations of quality and progress. Team meetings now draw on multiple sources of evidence, including standardised data, anecdotal notes, and observational insights.

Leaders reported greater consistency in the use of learning intentions and success criteria, stronger alignment of programmes across classrooms, and increased teacher confidence in linking assessment to instructional decisions. Students demonstrated clearer understanding of what they are learning and why.

While achievement outcomes are influenced by multiple factors, leaders attribute improved consistency in literacy practices and more responsive teaching to the strengthened use of assessment for learning. Over time, this approach has become embedded within the school's culture rather than operating as a separate initiative.



Questions for schools to discuss

- How visible are our strategic priorities in everyday classroom practice?
- What evidence do we use to judge whether improvement actions are making a difference?
- How confident are teachers in interpreting assessment information and translating it into next steps planning?
- How aligned are governance, leadership, and classroom expectations in our school?
- What structures support collective ownership of improvement rather than reliance on a small group of leaders?

Rototuna Senior High School

Teacher learning communities - A journey through improvement

At Rototuna Senior High School, leaders responded to rapid growth and post-COVID disruption by renewing their commitment to deep and powerful learning. Through structured Teaching and Learning Communities, the school placed assessment for learning at the centre of classroom practice. This case explores how collaboration, shared beliefs, and protected time for inquiry strengthened coherence and teaching quality across a school.

School context

Rototuna Senior High School in Hamilton, established in 2017, has grown rapidly into a large Year 11 to 13 campus. This growth, combined with significant staff turnover and the disruption to teaching and learning during the COVID years, meant that key aspects of the school's founding vision for deep learning were becoming less visible in day-to-day practice.

In 2020 a new principal brought a renewed focus on critical and creative thinking and on rebuilding a shared why for teaching and learning. This sharpened focus on the need to strengthen the consistency and quality of teaching practice across the school.

Inquiry emphasis

The school placed evaluative thinking at the centre of its improvement approach, embedding structured inquiry cycles within cross-curricular Teaching and Learning Communities (TLCs). Inquiry was grounded in shared beliefs about how learning happens, drawing on research on the science of learning.

Within TLCs, teachers identified specific aspects of practice to strengthen, trialled changes, gathered classroom evidence, and reflected on impact. Peer observation, journalling, student feedback, and collaborative analysis were all used. Protected PLD time and external facilitation ensured that inquiry remained focused on improving classroom practice.

Link for video of the full conference presentation on the NZAI website: [Rototuna Senior High School](#)

Rototuna Senior High School

Why does this story matter?

This case shows how collaborative professional learning structures can support continuous improvement when they are purposeful and well-supported.

Improvement focus

The improvement centred on renewing the school's commitment to deep and powerful learning by strengthening teaching practice across the campus. TLCs were used to embed Assessment for Learning as a shared pedagogical stance and to support sustained professional inquiry.

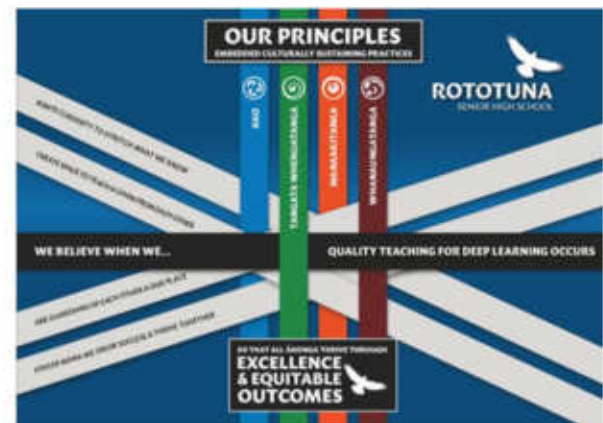
The improvement story

At Rototuna Senior High School, leaders planned a renewed focus on deep, powerful learning through Assessment for Learning practices. Drawing on Julia Atkin's beliefs about learning, staff revisited and clarified what they believed about how learning happens and what kind of teaching best supports it. These beliefs were woven together with the school's principles to create a coherent model linking values, pedagogy, and curriculum decision-making.

To bring these beliefs into daily practice, the school established six cross-curricular Teacher Learning Communities (TLCs). Each TLC was facilitated by a within-school Kāhui Ako lead and met during protected Wednesday morning PLD time. Groups were deliberately mixed across departments and experience levels to strengthen coherence across the school.

Within TLCs, teachers worked through inquiry cycles focused on specific aspects of practice.

Teachers identified an area to strengthen, trialled changes in their classrooms, and reflected on what they were noticing. Regular meetings provided opportunities to share experiences, discuss challenges, and learn from one another. Over time these practices normalised observation, peer feedback, and inquiry into practice. Journalling was used for teachers to record what they were trying, what they noticed, and what they would do next.



(Image taken from school's PowerPoint presentation)

Research-informed content was curated carefully and supported through PLD provided by an external provider. Themes included thinking routines, discursive practices, teaching and leading to the northeast, cognitive load theory, and the science of learning. Teachers developed personal playbooks of strategies to support lesson design that made learning intentions explicit, strengthened feedback loops, and increased student engagement.

2026 is seeing the introduction of learning walks to track learner agency across the school with this data used to inform TLC content and strategic direction.



Enablers

- A clear narrative linking deep and powerful learning to Assessment for Learning
- Distributed leadership from the deputy principal, supported by a specialist classroom teacher and Kāhui Ako leads
- Protected PLD time embedded within the school timetable
- A structured TLC routine that supported disciplined professional inquiry
- Carefully curated research that connected theory to classroom application
- A strong emphasis on whanaungatanga which developed trust within the groups
- A culture of improving not proving



Tensions

- Time pressure within session when new learning reduced reflection time
- Facilitator confidence in bringing rigour in professional dialogue
- Habits formed during COVID, including over-reliance on devices

How challenges were navigated

Leaders provided ongoing coaching and support for TLC facilitators, strengthening their confidence in guiding inquiry and maintaining alignment with Assessment for Learning principles.

Language was deliberately shaped to reinforce learning and impact rather than compliance. For example, observation was framed as collaborative lesson study. Inquiry was framed as design and impact, helping teachers see assessment for learning as a way of shaping learning rather than checking it.

End-of-year teacher case studies created supportive accountability. Teachers documented how their use of Assessment for Learning strategies had shifted classroom practice and influenced learner engagement.

Evidence and emerging learning

Evaluative thinking was embedded within the TLC cycle. Teachers trialled strategies aligned with Assessment for Learning, gathered classroom evidence, and analysed student work and feedback.

Indicators of success were defined early. These included increased teacher collaboration, visible use of Assessment for Learning strategies in classrooms, strengthened student engagement, and shifts in achievement patterns.

Evidence of success at the end of 2025 included nearly all teaching staff (95%) having had a lesson observed by a colleague and received feedforward, and 96% of staff gathered feedback from their students about the learning in their classes.

Teacher case studies documented clearer articulation of learning intentions, stronger sequencing of learning, more responsive feedback, and increased student engagement. Student voice suggested that clearer learning intentions supported motivation and understanding of purpose.

Measures of student achievement provided further evidence of impact. Improved results included:

- Level 2 achievement above national and EQI
- Māori Level 3 achievement above national and EQI and increased endorsement rates at Excellence
- Māori University Entrance attainment above national and EQI and above national and EQI for UE in general
- Students staying at school for longer.

While multiple factors contribute to these outcomes, leaders identified stronger consistency in Assessment for Learning practice as a key contributor.





Questions for schools to discuss

- How clearly is Assessment for Learning understood as a pedagogical stance in our school?
- Where is it visible in classroom routines, language, and feedback practices?
- How do we protect structured time for collaborative inquiry into practice?
- What indicators would show that Assessment for Learning is strengthening deep and powerful learning?
- How do we ensure improvement work remains about impact rather than compliance?



Central Auckland Specialist School

Using evaluation for improvement to strengthen quality practice

Central Auckland Specialist School (CASS) took on the refresh of its Signature Practices as a real-world way to strengthen coherence and build evaluative capability across a complex, multi-site specialist setting. Over two years, leaders and staff developed shared language, strengthened coaching and peer learning, and embedded the practices into everyday systems that shape teaching, therapy, and support. Early evidence suggests calmer learning environments and improved student engagement and regulation, alongside a reduction from 2024 to 2025 in recorded behaviour incidents.

School context

Central Auckland Specialist School (CASS) is a large specialist school serving a highly complex and diverse group of learners through a base school and satellite classes located in local primary, intermediate, and secondary schools. Teaching, therapy, and support roles work closely together to deliver quality learning programmes tailored to the individual students aged 5 to 21 years of age. Following the amalgamation of two specialist schools in 2018, CASS developed a set of Signature Practices to articulate a shared, evidence-informed model of high-quality teaching and therapeutic practice. While the practices were widely valued, leaders identified significant staff growth had contributed variability in understanding, application, and system-level reinforcement.

Inquiry emphasis

The work was guided by ERO's Internal Evaluation for Improvement model, with deliberate attention to noticing, investigating, collaborative sensemaking, prioritising action, and monitoring impact. Leaders positioned the refresh of the Signature Practices as the central improvement priority through which evaluative thinking could be strengthened.

A Theory of Change and a monitoring and evaluation approach were co-constructed early to clarify intended shifts in practice, expected outcomes for learners, and practical indicators of progress. This helped the team stay focused on what mattered most.

Why does this story matter?

This case shows how sustained professional learning and evaluative capability building can strengthen coherence, quality practice and improvement capability over time across a complex, multi-site specialist school.

Improvement focus

Refreshing and embedding the Signature Practices to strengthen coherence, consistency, and quality of practice across the school. The focus was on building shared understanding, increasing consistent application of the practices across all aspects of teaching and learning, and strengthening evaluative capability across the organisation.

The improvement story

Across 2024 and 2025, CASS participated in a structured programme of professional learning and development with Evaluation Associates | Te Huinga Kākākura Mātauranga. The programme was intentionally designed to strengthen evaluative thinking and support a more coherent, systematic approach to school improvement, while progressing a real and meaningful change priority for the school.

Rather than treating evaluation as a separate activity, the leadership team chose to use the refresh of the Signature Practices as the central improvement focus through which evaluative capability could be built.

The work was guided by ERO's Internal Evaluation for Improvement model, with deliberate attention to noticing, investigating, collaborative sensemaking, prioritising action, and monitoring impact.

With eight sessions over two years, early sessions focused on noticing patterns and tensions in current practice. Leaders recognised that although there was strong commitment to students and widespread endorsement of the Signature Practices, understanding and application varied across roles and settings. New staff often lacked clarity about 'the CASS way', and existing systems were not consistently reinforcing shared expectations.



CASS Signature Practices

Leaders resisted the urge to move quickly to solutions. Instead, they co-constructed a Theory of Change and a monitoring, evaluation, and learning approach to clarify intended shifts in practice, anticipated outcomes for learners, and practical indicators of progress. This helped ensure inquiry remained disciplined and focused, rather than reactive.

As the programme progressed, the emphasis shifted from planning to embedding. Staff meetings were used to build shared understanding of what the Signature Practices look like in action. Teachers set goals linked to the practices through their professional growth cycles. Induction processes were strengthened, and practice-based learning approaches were introduced, including peer walkthroughs, observations, and coaching conversations.

A key shift was the development of Deans as leaders of practice. With ongoing support, Deans moved from observation into coaching, using a shared Signature Practices lens to guide professional dialogue. Therapists adapted the same lens into a peer review processes, strengthening coherence across teaching and therapeutic practice.

Across the programme, leaders worked to balance urgency with sustainability. With a large staff spread across multiple sites, the focus was on pacing the work, embedding practices into existing systems, and progressively building distributed ownership beyond the senior leadership team.



ERO's internal evaluation for improvement model





Enablers

- Use of ERO's Internal Evaluation for Improvement model to guide inquiry and decision-making
- A clearly articulated Theory of Change that supported shared understanding of how change was expected to occur
- Deliberate development of Deans as leaders of practice
- Practice-based professional learning through walkthroughs, peer review, and coaching
- Framing the work as professional learning and inquiry rather than compliance
- Sustained external facilitation that provided structure, challenge, and accountability



Tensions

- Time pressures and role complexity within a large, multi-site organisation
- Variation in readiness and confidence across staff groups
- Some tools and processes requiring adaptation to fit different roles, particularly outreach and enrichment contexts
- Ongoing need to clarify leadership and support pathways for newer staff

How challenges were navigated

Leaders and facilitators paid close attention to pace and sustainability. With staff spread across multiple sites and roles, the approach was deliberately adaptive, with regular check-ins to review emerging evidence, refine tools, and decide what could be simplified or integrated into existing routines.

Variation in readiness was treated as a support need rather than a compliance issue. Leaders used an invitational stance to reduce defensiveness, and prioritised modelling, walkthroughs, and coaching so staff could see what the Signature Practices look like in action.

Evidence and emerging learning

CASS used a mixed-methods approach to examine progress and impact, drawing on staff surveys, teacher walkthrough and observation data, therapist peer reviews, leadership reflections, and behaviour incident data. Evidence was triangulated and interpreted collaboratively using an agreed rubric, supporting shared sensemaking rather than top-down judgement.

Survey data showed increases in staff understanding of the Signature Practices, supported by qualitative evidence of stronger and more explicit shared language across roles. Walkthroughs and coaching conversations indicated clearer routines, stronger focus on process over product, more intentional responses to engagement and behaviour, and increased confidence adapting practice.

Systems integration emerged as a particular strength. The Signature Practices were embedded within behaviour support, professional learning and coaching, interdisciplinary meetings, curriculum and assessment, reporting, and transitions into CASS. In these systems, the practices functioned as a shared lens for noticing, problem-solving, and decision-making.

Early indicators of student outcomes were also positive. Behaviour incident data showed a sustained reduction across 2025 compared with 2024, particularly during free choice, group activities, and transitions. Leadership reflections aligned with this data, describing calmer learning environments, improved regulation, stronger relationships, and increased student agency. While these outcomes are early indicators rather than long-term impacts, the consistency of evidence supports confidence that the Signature Practices are contributing to improved student experience.



Questions for schools to discuss

- What improvement focus could anchor both professional learning and evaluation in our context?
- Which systems most strongly reinforce shared practice, and where are gaps?
- How are middle leaders supported to coach practice and lead inquiry?
- What early indicators would help us notice whether changes are improving student experience?

Silverstream School

Te Kura o Māwaihākona

Collaborative reporting: a holistic view of student progress and achievement

This case study explores how one primary school redesigned its reporting system to strengthen coherence, partnership, and shared understanding of student progress. By moving from traditional twice-yearly reports to a live, collaborative Personalised Education Plan, the school aligned multiple sources of evidence and worked alongside whānau to create a more authentic and responsive picture of learning.

School context

This Year 1 to 6 primary school in Upper Hutt serves approximately 500 students and has been part of its local community for over a century. Leaders sought to strengthen how it reported student progress and achievement to whānau. Existing twice-yearly reporting was seen as insufficient for supporting ongoing dialogue and shared understanding about learning. There was a growing belief that reporting should reflect the whole child and strengthen partnership, rather than function as a transactional exchange of information.

Inquiry emphasis

The work is grounded in Victoria Bernhardt's Multiple Measures framework, which positions student learning data alongside school processes, perceptions, and demographic information. Leaders used this model to challenge the tendency to privilege achievement data alone and instead adopt a more holistic view of progress.

Inquiry was reframed as disciplined sense-making about the whole learner. Teachers were encouraged to ask, 'What might be influencing this learner's progress?' This shifted attention to identity, attendance, wellbeing, classroom conditions, and family context as valuable sources of evidence.

The framework strengthened evaluative thinking across the school. It provided a shared language for analysis. In doing so, it positioned inquiry as a collaborative, evidence-informed process.

Link for video of full conference presentation on the NZAI website: [Silverstream School](#)

Why does this story matter?

This case shows how redesigning reporting systems can strengthen partnership, coherence, and continuity for learners. It highlights how engaging whānau as genuine partners can create a more holistic and responsive approach to student progress.

The improvement story

Leaders set out to redesign reporting so that it genuinely supported learning, partnership, and decision-making. Rather than producing traditional stand-alone reports, they wanted a system that made progress visible in real time and enabled shared responsibility for next steps. The process was driven by a series of guiding questions developed with staff. These questions challenged existing assumptions about reporting, asking how progress beyond literacy and numeracy could be captured, how whānau could meaningfully contribute, and how reporting could become iterative and relational.

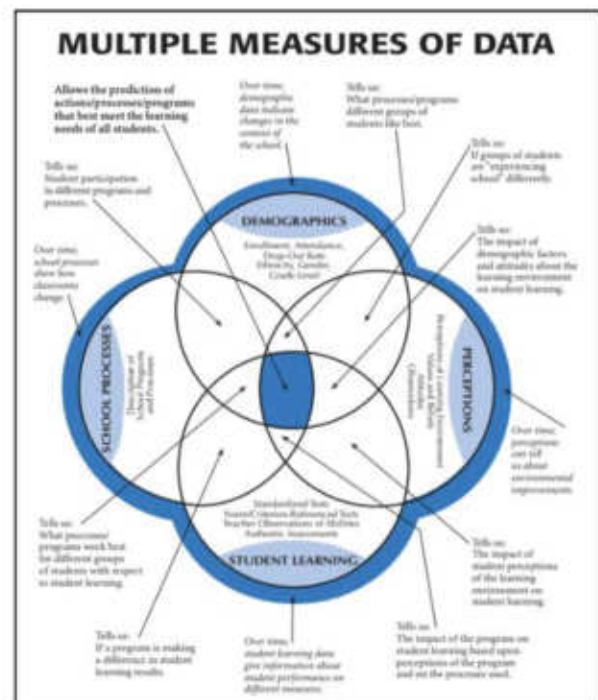
A live Personalised Education Plan (PEP) for each student, maintained as a shared Google Doc, became the new approach. The PEP included contributions from teachers, students, and whānau, with colour coding to indicate different voices.

The document travelled with students over year levels, creating a longitudinal record that strengthened continuity and reduced information loss during transitions. The framework encouraged teachers to draw on multiple sources of evidence. Guided by Bernhardt's (1998) multiple measures model, leaders integrated four dimensions of information:

Improvement focus

Redesigning reporting to provide a holistic, coherent, and ongoing view of student progress. The goal was to shift from reporting to whānau toward reporting with whānau.

1. Learning data: standardised tests, authentic assessments, teacher observations.
2. Perceptions: learning environment, attitudes, values, beliefs, and observations.
3. School processes: participation in interventions, programmes, and supports.
4. Demographics: gender, ethnicity and identity, whānau context, attendance, and wellbeing.



Adapted from: Bernhardt, V.L. (1998). *Data Analysis for Comprehensive Schoolwide Improvement* (p. 15). Eye on Education.

(Image taken from school's PowerPoint presentation)



Enablers

- Clear design stance that reporting should be collaborative rather than transactional
- Use of a recognised framework to guide thinking
- Co-design with a parent working party to ensure relevance and reflect the desire for partnership
- A digital tool that enabled live updating, shared access, and longitudinal continuity
- Strong alignment between reporting, whānau meetings, and ongoing professional conversations



Tensions

- Initial workload concerns from teachers with what was being envisaged
- Managing clarity and consistency in a live document environment
- Ensuring the PEP remained meaningful rather than overly detailed
- Sustaining engagement and quality of contributions over time

How challenges were navigated

Leaders involved whānau early through a working party to build ownership and refine expectations. Clear systems were established for termly meetings and document updates, reinforcing that the PEP was a shared tool rather than a teacher-owned record.

The use of colour coding clarified whose voice was represented, supporting transparency and shared responsibility. Leaders maintained a 'no surprises' expectation, ensuring that written comments reflected prior discussion. By embedding the process into regular reporting rhythms rather than adding it to existing reporting, teachers reported greater efficiency over time.

Evidence and emerging learning

The shift to collaborative reporting strengthened the quality of information available and the depth of partnership with whānau. Reporting moved from a one-directional approach to a shared record of learning, with whānau actively contributing to and shaping the PEP.

Reported outcomes include increased whānau attendance at termly meetings (98%). Teachers reported reduced workload associated with reviewing reports and improved continuity of information during student transitions. The holistic reporting model supported earlier identification of needs across academic and wellbeing areas.

Student and parent voice further illustrates impact, with parents describing the PEP as 'a voice for our son' highlighting how it enables meaningful reflection and goal setting conversations at home. Students' feedback suggests growing learner agency, metacognitive awareness, and motivation for progress.

Leaders describe the system as strengthening understanding of progress and embedding reporting as part of ongoing learning conversations rather than a discrete event.



Questions for schools to discuss

- How well does our reporting system support ongoing dialogue with whānau and students?
- Whose voices are visible in the documentation of student progress?
- How do we integrate multiple sources of evidence to build a holistic view of each learner?
- What structures ensure continuity of information as students transition between year levels?
- Where might reporting be streamlined to strengthen usefulness and reduce unnecessary workload?



PART B



Synthesis of themes from stories of school improvement

INTRODUCTION



This section draws together insights from eight school improvement stories shared through the NZAI Collaborative Improvement Community. Each of the case studies presented in Part A describes a distinct initiative undertaken in a particular context. While the focus of each school varied, thematic analysis of the schools' presentations at the NZAI conference (2025), and in one case a formal evaluation report, revealed common patterns in how improvement was framed and enacted.

The purpose of this synthesis is not to present a single model of school improvement. Rather, it seeks to identify recurring themes in the conditions and practical approaches that support structured, inquiry-driven change. Our aim is to surface insights that may inform and encourage others.

The eight case studies span primary, secondary, specialist, urban, and rural settings. Across these diverse contexts, five recurring themes were evident. While no two schools approached improvement in exactly the same way, the similarities in their thinking and processes are striking. The stories demonstrate that sustained improvement is rarely accidental. It is intentional, evidence-informed, and shaped by strong leadership, collaborative routines, and clarity of purpose.

The themes that follow highlight shared patterns across the stories and draw out practical insights for schools considering their own improvement journeys. The intention is not replication, but reflection.

Theme 1: Clarity of purpose and shared language

Across the eight stories, improvement began with clarity. Leaders invested time in defining what mattered, why it mattered, and what it would look like in practice. In several schools this meant revisiting foundational beliefs about teaching and learning. In others, it involved reviewing and investigating long-standing practices and asking to what extent they were contributing to improvement.

This work often started with noticing incoherence. Schools described environments where data was collected but not well used, plans were written but not owned, and assessment was treated as an event rather than a tool for learning. One leader reflected that despite “incredible data,” there was no alignment or shared language around learning. Another questioned whether their extensive reporting efforts were genuinely making a difference to student achievement. These moments of reflection prompted a return to purpose.

Across contexts, leaders asked fundamental questions: What does effective practice mean in our setting? What do we value? How will we know if we are making a difference?

Making clarity visible

In several case studies, clarity was strengthened through visible frameworks. These included belief statements, practice models, annual plans aligned to strategic priorities, and simple prompts that guided professional conversations.

At Sandspit Road, staff co-constructed a belief statement about learner agency and then articulated the principles and practices that would bring that belief to life. At Rototuna, the call to action centred on deep learning through formative assessment. At Central Auckland Specialist School refreshed Signature Practices provided a shared description of high-quality teaching and therapeutic practice. Stonefields School asked how they could measure what they valued, particularly in areas not traditionally measured.

This shared language reduced fragmentation by aligning classrooms, teams, and leadership around common expectations. It strengthened accountability by clarifying what was being monitored and why. Importantly, it anchored improvements in moral purpose. Several leaders emphasised that if assessment or reporting practices were not connected to student outcomes, they lost their meaning.

Clarity did not emerge by chance, it was built through deliberate conversation, visible frameworks and alignment between belief and action.

Sustaining coherence over time

Clarity also appeared to support sustainability. Where schools had invested time in co-constructing belief statements, defining effective practice, and aligning plans, improvement work was more likely to be visible and sustained over time.

However, this work was not without challenge. Developing shared language required time and repeated discussion. Assumptions had to be surfaced and challenged. In some contexts, leaders discovered that some of their core practices, for example administering assessments, varied widely and required explicit clarification about purpose and process. There was also a risk of framework overload if clarity efforts generated too many models rather than coherence.

Overall, the stories suggest that sustained improvement is strengthened when schools are explicit about their purpose and intentional about building shared language. Coherence did not emerge automatically. It was built through deliberate conversations, visible artefacts, and monitored alignment between belief, strategy, and action.

Why this appears to matter

Across contexts, clarity of purpose appeared to function as a stabiliser. Where beliefs, expectations, and priorities were explicit, schools were better able to align initiatives, avoid distraction, and focus on what mattered most. Shared language reduced ambiguity in professional conversations and strengthened consistency across classrooms.

Clarity also supported sustainability. When improvement work was anchored in clearly articulated principles rather than enthusiasm, it was more likely to endure. In this sense, clarity was not simply a starting point. It was an ongoing discipline that protected coherence over time.





Questions for schools to discuss

- How clearly can we articulate what we are trying to improve and why it matters?
- Do we have a shared language that describes effective practice in our context?
- Are our strategic priorities visible and consistently referenced in daily work?
- How often do we revisit and refine our belief statements and guiding principles?
- How do we know that we have alignment between belief, strategy and action?



Theme 2: Evidence-informed improvement

Across all stories, improvement was positioned as evidence-informed and was driven by deliberate engagement with research, theory, and established frameworks. Schools drew on recognised research and models to guide the design and direction of their improvement efforts, including work on assessment for learning, the science of learning, data-informed decision-making, improvement and leadership frameworks, and culturally responsive teaching practices.

While the focus of improvement varied, the underlying pattern was similar. Leaders and teachers asked: What does the evidence say? What does research suggest? What are we noticing in our own data? What should we do next?

Research-informed improvement was visible in three ways: the use of external frameworks to shape coherence; the embedding of Assessment for Learning principles, and the development of shared capability to interpret and apply research in context.

Research as a coherence builder

Many schools were explicit about the research and frameworks that shaped their improvement journeys. Dylan William, Michael Absolum, John Hattie, James Nottingham, Julia Atkin, Victoria Bernhardt, Michael Fullan, Jacqui Patuawa, Viviane Robinson, and ERO's improvement evaluation approaches were referenced across the stories. These were not cited superficially; they provided conceptual anchors.

Several leaders described frameworks as offering "something to hang our hats on". In an educational landscape characterised by new initiatives and competing demands, research functioned as a stabilising influence. It helped schools clarify what they valued, why it mattered, and how it should look in practice.

Importantly, research was not just slotted in. Schools interpreted and aligned it to their own context. Frameworks were adapted, integrated, and translated into locally meaningful language. Evidence was selected because it reinforced clarity, coherence, and learner-centred improvement.

Assessment for Learning as a pedagogical anchor

Assessment for Learning (AfL) was a particularly strong pedagogical feature across the case studies. Even where it was not named as the central initiative, its principles were visible: clarity of learning intentions, transparent success criteria, timely feedback, responsiveness to evidence, and a focus on acceleration rather than remediation.

In several schools, leaders were explicit that new approaches, such as structured literacy or science of learning strategies, needed to be aligned with these principles. As strategic planning, reporting redesign, and leadership structures evolved, formative practice remained central to classroom teaching. AfL provided continuity within change.

Interpreting and applying research in context

Research-informed improvement required more than referencing theory. Schools needed the capability to interpret and apply them. Several stories highlighted the importance of developing shared understandings across the staff and professional learning was designed to support this. Schools invested in:

- assessment literacy professional learning
- moderation processes
- dedicated time for collaborative reflection
- alignment of assessment tools to clear purposes
- strategic resourcing to support coherent implementation.

These investments strengthened the connection between research principles and classroom practice. Research was not treated as theory alone, but translated into instructional design, assessment choices, and strategic planning decisions.

Evidence was used to inform direction rather than simply validate existing practice.

Why this appears to matter

A research-informed approach appeared to strengthen coherence across initiatives. It aligned pedagogy and assessment, clarified strategic priorities, and supported more consistent expectations across classrooms.

Across diverse school contexts this approach was not presented as an academic exercise. It was described as a way of thinking about improvement that connects research, classroom practice, and organisational decision making. By grounding change in recognised principles, schools strengthened the likelihood that improvement efforts would endure beyond individual leaders or short-term cycles.





Questions for schools to discuss

- What research or frameworks are currently shaping our improvement work?
- Are these aligned or competing?
- How deeply do staff understand the principles behind the frameworks we are using?
- Where do we need to strengthen assessment or research literacy to support better application?



Theme 3: Inquiry as routine professional practice

In all of the case studies, inquiry was not described as an isolated project or compliance requirement. It was established as a routine way of working. Schools embedded structured cycles of noticing, analysing, acting, and reviewing into the everyday life of the organisation.

In some contexts, this was highly visible through formal structures such as Professional Learning Groups (PLGs), Teaching and Learning Communities (TLCs), strategic teams, or improvement dashboards. In others, it was evident in the language leaders used: What are we noticing? Why might this be happening? What will we do next? How will we know if it made a difference?

Structured collaborative routines

Several schools described deliberately designed collaborative routines that created space for collective inquiry. Te Papapa School ran three-weekly PLG cycles focused on learners at risk of not achieving. Teachers brought evidence of student progress, identified next steps, committed to teacher actions, and returned to report on impact. In some cases, this was strengthened through video-based reflection, where teachers shared short clips of practice and engaged in structured discussion. Initially described as “scary”, this process became powerful as relational trust grew.

Rototuna Senior High School described Teaching and Learning Communities that met regularly across departments. These included structured feedback sessions, shared case studies, journaling commitments, and accountability through peer presentations. Teachers were expected to trial strategies and articulate what happened and why.

Strategic teams provided another recurring structure. Rather than improvement being owned by a single leader, responsibility was distributed across teams with defined focus areas. These teams gathered feedback, refined initiatives, monitored impact, and reported back to the wider staff.

Across these examples, inquiry was sustained because it was scheduled, scaffolded, and expected.

Inquiry became sustainable when it was scheduled, scaffolded, and expected.

From models to mindset

Schools referenced a range of inquiry and evaluation frameworks: EROs improvement evaluation approach, Teaching as Inquiry, and internally developed cycles. However, the stories suggest that the value was less in selecting a particular model and more in consistency applying a small number of core questions.

Common prompts included:

- What are we seeing?
- Why might this be happening?
- What will we do?
- What evidence will tell us if it worked?
- What next?

In one school, this questioning process was explicitly embedded in both classroom practice and strategic planning. Another school described using annual reports as formative tools for organisational learning. This saw reporting become a mechanism for reflection and refinement, rather than a retrospective summary or compliance task.

Monitoring for impact

Inquiry routines were accompanied by deliberate monitoring processes. These included:

- Peer and leadership observations with agreed focus questions
- Practice analysis conversations
- Moderation processes
- End-of-year strategic team reviews
- Real-time dashboards tracking valued outcomes
- Case study presentations within teacher groups

Several leaders described moving beyond simply analysing summative data towards building ongoing feedback loops. Rather than waiting for end-of-year results, schools sought timely evidence that could inform immediate adjustments.

One leader noted that simply giving data to a mathematically confident staff member did not generate improvement. Organisational change required shared interpretation, dialogue, and cultural work. Data sharing was able to generate rich conversations about practice and impact.



Whole-school ownership

A recurring pattern across stories was the importance of collective ownership for improvement. Inquiry was framed as something done 'with' teachers, not 'to' them. Strategic initiatives were co-constructed. Teachers presented their own impact stories. In some cases, student and whānau voice were integrated into sensemaking processes.

Leaders spoke explicitly about the importance of moving from compliance and accountability towards professional growth. Cultural shifts were described as slow and deliberate. Relational trust was repeatedly named as a prerequisite for inquiry routines to function effectively.

Why this appears to matter

Across diverse school settings, where inquiry was embedded successfully as a routine way of working it appeared to strengthen sustainability. Improvement became less dependent on individual leaders or short-term initiatives and more embedded in organisational habits.

Where inquiry was successfully established, schools described:

- greater openness to examining practice
- clearer alignment between classroom teaching and strategic priorities
- stronger collective ownership of improvement
- more timely and informed next steps.

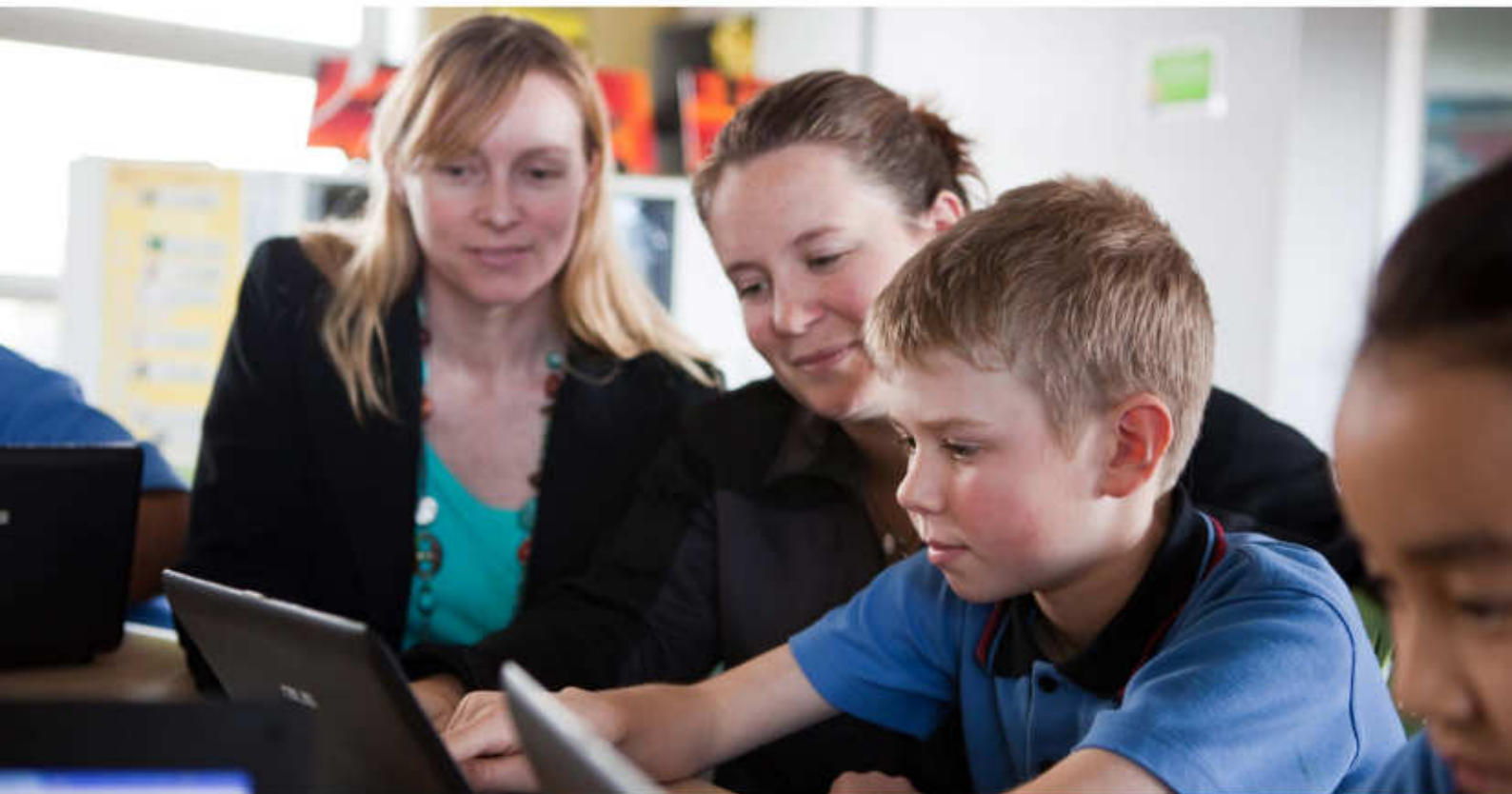
Rather than improvement being a series of projects, these schools were gradually becoming improving organisations. Inquiry was not an event; it was part of how the school thought and acted.





Questions for schools to discuss

- What structured routines exist in our school for collective inquiry?
- Are these routines regular and scaffolded?
- How do we ensure inquiry is developmental rather than judgemental?
- Do our monitoring processes lead to timely adjustments?
- Is ownership of improvement shared across the school?



Theme 4: Evidence that supports action

Across the eight stories, schools were not only implementing change; they were increasingly asking how they would know whether that change was making a difference. This focus on impact moved evaluation beyond compliance reporting and toward sensemaking about outcomes for learners, teachers, and systems. Where this theme was most visible, evaluation was not an end-of-year task. It was embedded within the ongoing work of improvement.

Structured sensemaking and using evidence

Several schools described a shift from collecting extensive data to using it deliberately. Leaders reflected that while information had long been gathered, it was not always connected to clear decisions. The turning point came when evidence was reframed as a tool for action rather than documentation.

At Sandspit School, leaders tracked shifts in e-asTTle data, not only to increase achievement, but to lift the median beyond national benchmarks. They introduced effect sizes to distinguish between expected and accelerated progress and disaggregated data by year level, ethnicity, and gender to understand equity patterns. Schools also compared patterns in their data over time. Evidence was analysed to inform instructional decisions, not simply to report trends.

Weston School described moving beyond entering results into systems toward examining patterns: Which students shifted? Why? What contributed to the movement? At Silverstream School, practical tools such as Venn diagrams were introduced to surface patterns across learning areas and contextual factors, strengthening collaborative analysis of learners. The conversation shifted from recording to analysing.

Multiple forms of impact

Impact was conceptualised broadly across the stories. While achievement data remained important, it was not the only lens. Data about student engagement and regulation, teacher practice shifts, and systems coherence and consistency was also gathered to provide evidence of improvement.

At Rototuna Senior High School, teachers gathered student voice, classroom observation data, and learner agency surveys along with achievement measures. Teachers tracked whether greater clarity about learning intentions improved students' ability to articulate next steps. Stonefields' improvement dashboard aimed to provide 'real-time' insight into valued outcomes. Leaders asked how to measure what they valued, including engagement and clarity for whānau. When survey data revealed gaps, it prompted redesign.

The Central Auckland Specialist School evaluation provides an explicit example of impact evaluation across multiple domains. Behaviour incident data was analysed year-on-year and disaggregated by activity type, revealing reductions in incidents during transitions and group activities. These patterns were triangulated with data from peer teacher observations and leadership reflections.

Capturing early indicators of change

Across the stories, evidence of impact was often visible first in shifts in teacher practice and professional understanding. Leaders described changes in how teachers planned lessons, interpreted assessment information, articulated learning intentions, and responded to student progress. These shifts were treated as meaningful evidence within improvement cycles.

Several schools were explicit that improvements in learner outcomes depend on changes in adult practice and, as a result, they monitored key indicators. In some cases, video analysis, moderation processes, or structured inquiry meetings provided visible markers of strengthened instructional practice.

This reflects a developmental understanding of improvement. Learner achievement shifts may take time to emerge, particularly where the focus is on deepening pedagogy or embedding new systems. These indicators were understood as foundational steps within a broader theory of change. Improvement can be seen as a sequence: strengthened professional practice contributes to improved learner experience, which in turn supports progress and achievement over time.

Building evaluative capability and confidence

Making impact visible required capability. Several stories acknowledged that increasing data literacy was a key part of creating change in their school. Schools invested in building shared understanding of what effect sizes meant and how to interpret trends. At Central Auckland Specialist School, rubric-based evaluative judgements were co-constructed and supported by multiple sources of evidence. This approach strengthened transparency and reliability of findings.

Schools also described the importance of being able to acknowledge when something was 'not shifting'. In these contexts, lack of impact was treated as information rather than failure.

Why this appears to matter

Making impact visible strengthened both accountability and sustainability. Leaders could communicate progress clearly to boards and communities. At the same time, several tensions were evident. Leaders noted the risk of overwhelming stakeholders with excessive data. Stonefields School described the need to 'chunk' information into manageable forms for whānau. Others cautioned against slipping back into compliance-oriented reporting disconnected from practice.

Overall, the stories suggest that improvement deepens when schools deliberately make impact visible and treat evaluation as an ongoing dialogue between strategy, classroom practice, and learner outcomes.

Impact was not treated as an end-of-year verdict, but as ongoing feedback for decision making.



Questions for schools to discuss

- How clearly can we demonstrate the impact of our improvement work?
- Are we disaggregating data in ways that surface equity and acceleration?
- What changes in teacher practice would we expect to see if our improvement strategy is working?
- Do we revisit and refine our impact measures over time?
- How well do we communicate evidence of impact to staff, board, students, and whānau?



Theme 5: Adult learning, culture, and partnership

In all of the eight stories, sustained improvement was consistently linked to shifts in adult learning and professional culture. While each school focused on different improvement priorities, leaders repeatedly emphasised that meaningful change depended on changes in adult thinking, behaviour, and relationships. School improvement was strongly framed as something that was built with and through teachers.

Adult learning as the engine of improvement

Several stories positioned professional training as the central mechanism of change. Teacher Learning Circles, Professional Learning Groups, walkthrough and observation processes, moderation meetings, and leadership forums were described as spaces where practice was examined and strengthened.

In many schools, improvement was framed explicitly as strengthening instructional practice. Leaders described shifts in how teachers planned, clarified learning intentions, interpreted assessment information, and responded to student needs.

Importantly, adult learning was ongoing and cumulative. Rather than attending one-off workshops, teachers engaged in iterative cycles of trialling, observing, reflecting, and refining. Professional growth was embedded in daily work.

Several schools also drew on external professional learning providers or facilitation support to strengthen their improvement efforts. External expertise provided structure and specialist knowledge, particularly in areas such as assessment literacy, evaluative thinking, and instructional practice. In most cases, this support was not positioned as a substitute for internal capability, but as a catalyst. Over time, schools sought to internalise the learning so that improvement routines became embedded and increasingly self-sustaining.

Safe and professional environments

A recurring feature across stories was the deliberate development of trust. Leaders described the importance of creating environments where teachers felt safe to surface uncertainty and share challenges. In several schools, peer observation and inquiry conversations were initially approached with caution. Over time, as relational trust strengthened, these forums became spaces for professional honesty rather than performance management.

Evidence and data were positioned as tools for collective learning rather than judgement. Where this cultural foundation was strong, defensiveness reduced and professional dialogue deepened.

Across the stories, sustained improvement was closely linked to deliberate investment in adult learning.

Distributed leadership

Across contexts, leadership of improvement was increasingly distributed. Middle leaders, within-school leads, and team facilitators were positioned as key drivers of professional learning. Leaders described investing deliberately in growing middle-leader capability so that improvement was not reliant on a small number of individuals.

In several schools, middle leaders engaged in professional learning focused on leading adult learning. This reflected a recognition that improving instruction requires capability not only in teaching practice, but in facilitating professional growth in others. Investing in leadership development strengthened the quality of coaching conversations, inquiry facilitation, and collaborative dialogue, further embedding improvement beyond senior leadership.

This strengthened collective efficacy. The language of “we” was evident across stories. Teachers in these schools increasingly saw themselves as influencing outcomes through their practice.

Partnership with students and whānau

Improvement culture extended beyond staff. Several schools described deliberate efforts to strengthen partnership with students and whānau. At Silverstream School, reporting shifted from a twice-yearly event to an ongoing, collaborative Personalised Education Plan co-constructed with whānau. The use of colour coding to identify different voices reinforced transparency and shared ownership. Reporting became a shared conversation about progress rather than a transactional exchange of information.

Other schools embedded regular gathering of student voice, learner surveys, or termly check-ins as part of their improvement processes. Students were positioned as active participants in their own learning journeys. These partnership practices strengthened coherence and continuity.

Why this appears to matter

Across the stories, adult learning and relational culture were repeatedly described as key conditions that enabled improvements. Clarity of purpose, research-informed design, inquiry routines, and impact evaluation all depended on professional trust and shared ownership. Where trust was low or change was seen to be imposed, improvement stalled. Where relational culture was strong, schools were more able to navigate tension, sustain momentum, and adapt over time.

Investment in adult learning strengthened sustainability and distributed ownership. Partnership with whānau further strengthened shared understanding of progress and made improvement efforts visible beyond the school. When schools clarified reporting, simplified dashboards, or gathered survey feedback, it ensured that changes were understood and meaningful for whānau.

The stories suggest that improvement is not sustained by frameworks alone. It is sustained by people and their willingness to learn, to collaborate, and to remain collectively committed for better outcomes for learners.



Questions for schools to discuss

- How intentionally do we position adult learning as the core mechanism of improvement?
- Do our professional forums cultivate a sense of safety for honest dialogue?
- In our context how distributed is leadership of improvement?
- In what ways are students and whānau genuine partners in conversations about progress?
- What aspects of our school culture enable, or constrain improvement in our setting?





The eight case studies present grounded accounts of schools working deliberately to improve outcomes for their learners. They illustrate that improvement is neither accidental nor formulaic. It emerges when clarity of purpose, research-informed thinking, structured inquiry, deliberate evaluation, and sustained adult learning work in alignment.

While each school acted within its own context, the recurring patterns across the stories suggest that coherence, capability, and collective ownership are central to sustained progress. These themes do not prescribe a single approach. Rather, they offer practical insights into how schools can design and sustain improvement that translates into stronger teaching and improved learner outcomes.

While the stories in this report describe the work of eight schools, their value ultimately lies in how others respond to the ideas that they raise. Schools may wish to consider how the practices described in these stories relate to their own improvement work and where small next steps might strengthen inquiry, evaluative thinking, or the purposeful use of evidence to guide teaching and learning.

The stories in this report show that improvement journeys often begin with noticing where change may be needed and asking purposeful questions about practice, evidence, and outcomes for learners.

Where to from here for the Collaborative Improvement Community?

The stories in this report demonstrate the value of making school improvement work visible and learning from it collectively. The Collaborative Improvement Community was established with this purpose in mind: to create opportunities for schools to share their improvement journeys, learn from one another, and strengthen improvement capability across the sector.

This report represents the first step in that work. Over the coming years the Collaborative Improvement Community aims to continue gathering and sharing stories of school improvement, building a richer picture of how schools across Aotearoa are addressing challenges and strengthening practice.

Future work will include expanding the number and diversity of school stories, strengthening cross story analysis, and exploring opportunities to connect with other networks and organisations interested in supporting school improvement.

Schools and leaders who are interested in contributing to this growing body of knowledge are encouraged to engage with the Collaborative Improvement Community as it develops.



These resources align with the themes from the improvement stories and offer practical guidance for your next leadership conversations or self-review. All are freely accessible:

1. Clarity of purpose and shared language

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| ERO School improvement Framework | Self-review tool with domains on leadership, curriculum, and learner outcomes. Includes templates for judgement and evidence synthesis. | https://www.ero.govt.nz/how-ero-reviews/how-ero-reviews-schoolskura-english-medium/te-ora-huarau-the-new-approach-to-evaluation/school-improvement-framework |
| ERO: Quality Evidence Guidance | What counts as robust evidence for school self-review using the school improvement framework. | www.ero.govt.nz/sites/default/files/media-documents/2024-07/SIF%20-%20Evidence%20guidance%20for%20schools.pdf |
| Ministry of Education: Self-Review and why it matters | Guidance using self-review as a strategic process of inquiry. | https://www.educationleaders.govt.nz/Managing-your-school/Ongoing-school-self-review/Self-review-and-why-it-matters |
| Ministry of Education: A theory of change | Guidance on why and how to develop a theory of change to support the effectiveness of change initiatives. | https://evaluationhub.education.govt.nz/theory-of-change/a-theory-of-change/ |
| Evaluation Associates: Assessment for learning capabilities matrix | This evaluative matrix, based on Michael Absolum's six assessment for learning capabilities helps schools identify strengths and next steps by describing what effective assessment practice looks like for teachers and students. | https://www.evaluate.co.nz/resources/assessment-for-learning-resources/assessment-for-learning-matrix |

2. Evidence-informed improvement

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| ERO & MOE: Effective school evaluation how to do and use internal evaluation for improvement | A guide focuses on effective internal evaluation – what it involves and how to go about it. Includes case studies that exemplify the use of inquiry processes and evaluative thinking. | https://www.evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/effective-school-evaluation-how-to-do-and-use-internal-evaluation-for-improvement |
| Evaluation Associates blog: Stop fixing, start solving: how Collaborative Complex Problem Solving drives real change | This blog describes the Collaborative Complex Problem Solving approach, a five-stage collaborative inquiry process for addressing complex educational challenge and improving student outcomes. | https://www.evaluate.co.nz/blog/how-collaborative-complex-problem-solving-drives-real-change |
| Evaluation Associates blog: Unlocking the power of evaluation to increase school effectiveness | This blog shares steps to build internal evaluative capability and practices within schools. | https://www.evaluate.co.nz/blog/unlocking-the-power-of-evaluation-to-increase-school-effectiveness |
| ERO: Internal evaluation as a catalyst for change | Shows how schools have used internal evaluation findings to decide “what next: and improve outcomes, with concrete examples. | https://www.evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/internal-evaluation-as-a-catalyst-for-change |
| The Education Hub: The principles of culturally responsive teaching | Research synthesis on culturally responsive teaching principles with actionable classroom strategies to raise achievement. | https://theeducationhub.org.nz/what-is-culturally-responsive-teaching/ |
| Evaluation Associates blog: Māori achieving success as Māori | This article examines how schools can partner with Māori communities to define and support “success as Māori” beyond academic achievement. | https://www.evaluate.co.nz/blog/maori-achieving-success-as-maori |
| Educational Leaders: Evidence-based leadership | This John Hattie video (+text) focuses on using student achievement data and research on “what works” as the basis for leadership decision making, and for building a culture of evaluative thinking. | https://www.educationalleaders.govt.nz/Pedagogy-and-assessment/Pedagogical-leadership/Evidence-based-leadership |
| Donohoo, J., Hattie, J., & Eells, R. (2018). The power of collective efficacy. <i>Educational Leadership</i> , 75(6), 40-44. | Discusses the transformative impact of collective teacher efficacy on student achievement and school culture, offering evidence-based strategies for school leaders to foster collaboration, high expectations, and a focus on student learning outcomes. | https://educacion.udd.cl/files/2021/01/The-Power-of-Collective-Efficacy_Hattie.pdf |

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| NZAI: Assessment to improve learning: principles, practices, and proof | NZ-developed framework that sets out AfL principles, associated classroom practices, and “proofs” that practices are working. Essentially a coherence tool for assessment, pedagogy, and curriculum. Includes supplementary docs focused on secondary settings. | https://www.nzai.org.nz/knowledge-centre/assessment-ppp/ |
| Victoria State Government: High impact teaching strategies – excellence in teaching and learning | The high impact teaching strategies (HITS) are 10 key strategies recognised by the Victorian Department of Education and Training as some of the most reliable teaching strategies for delivery outcomes. | https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/teachers/support/high-impact-teaching-strategies.pdf |
| Koh, G. A., Askill-Williams, H., & Barr, S. (2023). Sustaining school improvement initiatives: advice from educational leaders. <i>School Effectiveness and School Improvement</i> , 34 (3), 298–330. | This article analyses interviews with educational leaders to explore the organisational conditions and leadership practices that support the long-term sustainability of school improvement initiatives. | https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09243453.2023.2190130#abstract |
| 3. Inquiry as routine | | |
| Educational Leaders: Spiral of Inquiry | New Zealand stories and protocols for embedding inquiry in leadership and teaching teams. | https://www.educationleaders.govt.nz/Pedagogy-and-assessment/Evidence-based-leadership/The-spiral-of-inquiry |
| Educational Leaders: Developing a school-wide inquiry | The principal at Newmarket Primary School shares key messages about building inquiry approaches into school practices. | https://www.educationleaders.govt.nz/Leadership-development/Professional-information/Leadership-capability-framework/Evaluating-practices-in-relation-to-outcomes/Developing-school-wide-inquiry |
| The Education Hub: How to undertake teaching as inquiry | An article outlining the what, why, and how of teaching as inquiry. | https://theeducationhub.org.nz/how-to-undertake-teaching-as-inquiry/ |

4. Evidence that supports action

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| ERO Implementing Curriculum Changes: Good Practice Guide | ERO report with tips for implementing change with a specific focus on the English/Maths refresh. | https://www.evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/a-new-chapter-how-well-are-the-changes-to-english-and-maths-going-good-practice-guide |
| MOE: Using evidence for learning | A practical NZC resource on gathering, analysing, and using assessment information so that it becomes evidence for improvement rather than just reporting. | https://newzealandcurriculum.tahurangi.education.govt.nz/using-evidence-for-learning/5637159578.p |
| The Education Hub: Using data for inquiry and improvement | This article provides guidance on collecting, interpreting, and using multiple forms of schools data to inform teaching decisions and support improvement. | https://theeducationhub.org.nz/using-data-for-inquiry-and-improvement/ |
| Ministry of Education: What is evaluative thinking? | Guidance and tools to support increased capability and practices in evaluative thinking (i.e., a disciplined approach to inquiry and reflective practice). | https://evaluationhub.education.govt.nz/evaluative-thinking/ |

5. Adult learning, culture, and partnership

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| NZ RTLB: Professional learning groups | Guidance for school-wide professional learning groups as a tool for sustainable systems change, including planning templates and facilitation tips used by RTLBs to support iterative teacher learning cycles. | https://www.nzrtlb.net.nz/explore-plg |
| The Education Hub: Professional learning communities | Research synthesis on professional learning communities as ongoing, collaborative teacher development, with evidence on building routines for examining practice and improving outcomes. | https://theeducationhub.org.nz/category/school-resources/professional-learning-communities/ |
| ERO | Examples of high-impact PLD that embeds learning in daily work, including external facilitation and internal capability building. | https://www.evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/school-leaders-good-practice-professional-learning-and-development |

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| MOE: Engaging with whānau and the community | Information and examples of ways schools can engage with their communities using digital technologies. This page includes tips for getting started, tools to use, and real-life examples from NZ schools. | https://newzealandcurriculum.tahurangi.education.govt.nz/engaging-with-wh-nau-and-the-community/5637169429.p |
| The Education Hub: from family involvement to partnership | An article reporting the research on family involvement and home-school partnerships. | https://theeducationhub.org.nz/from-family-involvement-to-partnership/ |
| The Education Hub: Leading Improvement in a Time of Change | Webinar with practical strategies for NZ school leaders. | https://theeducationhub.org.nz/leading-improvement/ |
| The Education Hub: Leading through change: Building trust, courage, and clarity in schools | Webinar (+text), Dr Jacqui Patuawa and Karen Spencer from Evaluation Associates focused on the challenges and opportunities of educational leadership in times of change. Drawing on the work of Chris Argyris and Viviane Robinson, they discuss how leadership can move beyond compliance and reaction to embrace purposeful, inquiry-based improvement. | https://theeducationhub.org.nz/leading-through-change-building-trust-courage-and-clarity-in-schools/ |
| Grow Waitaha: Leading sustainable change | This study provides important considerations, best practices, and potential pitfalls for leading change efforts and sustaining those changes, particularly in the context of educational institutions. These insights are based on interviews with 17 school leaders and also draws on relevant literature about change management. | https://www.growwaitaha.co.nz/media/1415/180504-leading-sustainable-change-ff-sf.pdf |
| NZCER: Strengthening schools' supportive systems – the role of assessment and reporting | This study analyses national survey data to examine how school culture, assessment practices and reporting to whānau interact to strengthen systems that support student attendance, wellbeing, and behaviour. | https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/strengthening-schools-supportive-systems-role-assessment-and-reporting |

