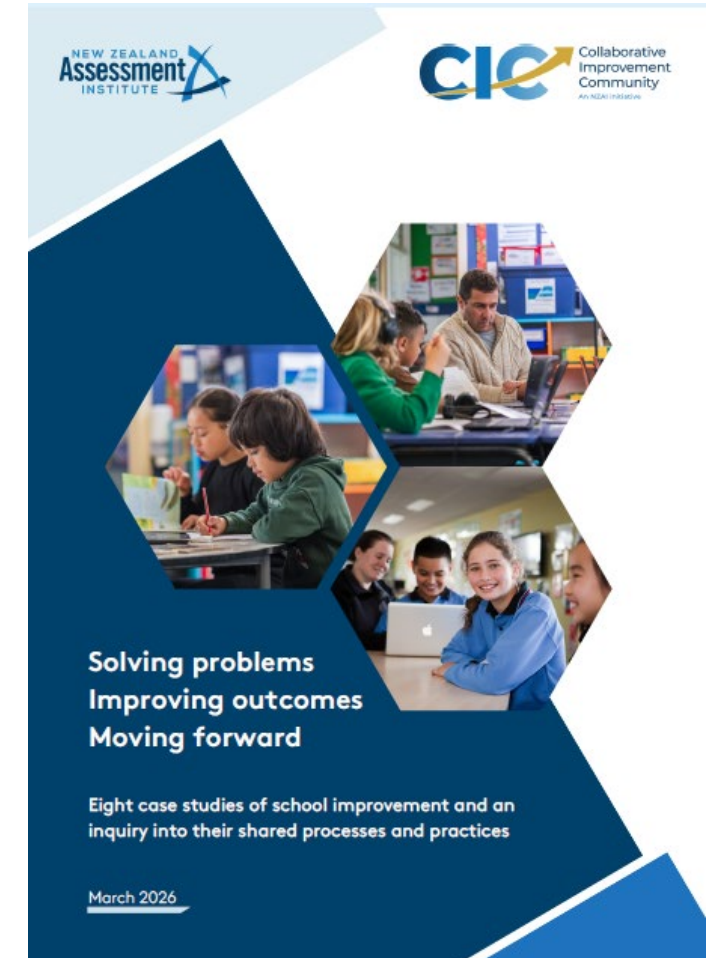




evaluation
associates
Te Huinga Kākākura
Mātauranga

How Schools Improve

Insights from eight school
improvement stories



Mel Atkinson & Michael Absolum

The Collaborative Improvement Community

1

Improvement is happening across Aotearoa — but much of it remains invisible beyond the individual school

2

The CIC makes improvement work visible, connected, and accessible for collective learning

3

This report is the first step in that work — eight stories, one inquiry into what they share



**Have you ever been involved in an
improvement effort that didn't stick?**



“The adoption of innovations is common, but the successful implementation and sustained use of those innovation is far less common”

[Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005). Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, National Implementation Research Network.]

“Many school improvement initiatives fail to sustain beyond initial implementation phases”

Koh, G. A., Askill-Williams, H., & Barr, S. (2023). Sustaining school improvement initiatives: Advice from educational leaders. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 34(2), 298–330.

What we did

8

school improvement stories

Seven from 2025 NZAI conference presentations | One from a formal evaluation report

2

parts to the analysis

Case studies for each school (Part A) |
Cross-story thematic analysis (Part B)

5

recurring themes

Identified through qualitative analysis of what schools did, why, how, and what enabled progress



Eight stories of change

Te Papapa School

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

Sandspit School

A journey to clarity

Stonefields School

Getting it in our DNA

Central Auckland Specialist School

Using evaluation for improvement to strengthen quality practice

Middleton Grange School

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

Weston School

Strategic assessment - strengthening teaching, learning, and schoolwide coherence

Rototuna Senior High School

Teacher learning communities - a journey through improvement

Silverstream School

Collaborative reporting: a holistic view of student progress and achievement



What these stories tell us about school improvement

Structured inquiry was the engine that drove and sustained improvement across all eight schools.



How schools embedded inquiry into everyday practice



Te Papapa School

- Three-weekly PLG cycles
- Teachers brought evidence about focus students, identified next instructional steps and reported on impact.
- Video observation became a powerful lever for reflection as relational trust grew.

Middleton Grange School

- Redesigned annual reporting cycle to involve teams identifying patterns, causes, and next steps, not just describing results.

Stonefields School

- Developed a schoolwide Teaching, Learning, and Assessment model as its inquiry approach.
- Teachers conducted inquiries, and shared these in professional learning sessions.
- The same inquiry questions were applied at leadership and governance levels, creating shared language across the school.

Rototuna Senior High School

- Established six cross-curricular Teacher Learning Communities (TLCs), each meeting during Wednesday morning PLD time.
- Within TLCs, teachers identified an area to strengthen, trialled changes, gathered classroom evidence, and reflected on impact.

Inquiry as routine professional practice

SCHEDULED

Built into regular meeting cycles
and timetables

SCAFFOLDED

Structured questions and
protocols that guide discussion

EXPECTED

Collective responsibility across
the school

Common inquiry prompts:

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

SO WHAT

Improvement is not a project; it is a way of working. Inquiry becomes embedded when it is built into the rhythm of the school

Reflect:

What structured routines exist in your school for collective inquiry and are they scheduled, scaffolded, and genuinely expected?

What these stories tell us about school improvement

Structured inquiry was the engine that drove and sustained improvement across all eight schools.

Four conditions made inquiry possible:

1

Clarity of purpose & shared language

A clearly defined focus and shared understanding of what success looks like

2

Evidence-informed improvement

Connecting work to established research, theory, and recognised frameworks

3

Evidence that supports action

Using data collectively to interpret patterns and inform teaching decisions

4

Adult learning, culture & partnership

Ongoing professional learning, relational trust, and distributed ownership



Starting with a clear focus

Clearly defined problem or focus

Improvement was anchored in a clearly articulated focus — not a broad aspiration, but a specific problem or gap.

Understanding of what success will look like

Schools invested time in describing what success would look like in practice, not just in outcomes data.

Use of shared language

Common language across classrooms and teams reduced ambiguity, aligned expectations, and supported consistency.

In practice

Sandspit Road

Full audit of assessment tools identified where coherence had fragmented. This was the starting point for rebuilding shared practice.

Weston School

A lengthy strategic plan replaced with a concise one-page framework helped create clarity.

CASS

Working through a cycle of noticing, investigating, and collaborative sense-making created a good understanding of the problem to be addressed.

SO WHAT

Clarity did not emerge by chance, it was build through deliberate conversations and visible scaffolding.

Reflect:

How clearly can you articulate what you are trying to improve, and what success would look like?

Evidence-informed improvement

Schools deliberately connected their work to established research and theory to anchor and stabilise improvement efforts.

Research as coherence builder

Frameworks offered 'something to hang our hats on'

Assessment for Learning as anchor

AfL principles ran through nearly all eight stories

Adapted, not applied wholesale

Schools translated frameworks into locally meaningful language. The principle mattered; the local application was theirs.

Researchers & frameworks referenced

- Dylan Wiliam
- John Hattie
- Michael Absolum
- Julia Atkin
- Victorian high impact teaching strategies
- Michael Fullan
- ERO evaluation model
- Jacqui Patuawa
- Victoria Bernhardt

SO WHAT

Research functions as a coherence builder. Its value lies not in being cited, but in how deeply staff understand and can apply its principles to their own context.

Reflect:

What research or frameworks are currently shaping your improvement work and how deeply do your staff understand the principles behind them?

Evidence that supports action

Reporting results



Interpreting patterns and causes

Individual data holders



Collective sensemaking

End-of-year summaries



Timely feedback loops that inform teaching

Improvement is not driven by data itself. It is driven by the conversations and shared interpretation around that data.

SO WHAT

The value of evidence lies not in having it, but in how it is used collectively. Evidence becomes a driver of improvement when it is interpreted together and connected to action.

Reflect:

In your school, do data conversations consistently lead to informed action? Or do they more often produce reporting?

Adult learning, culture & partnership

Ongoing adult learning

Iterative cycles of trialling, observing, reflecting, and refining are woven into the work

Relational trust

Safe environments where teachers feel able to surface uncertainty and examine their practice

External expertise as a catalyst

In nearly all schools, external support introduced new thinking, provided structure, and maintained focus. With the goal of building internal capability, not creating dependency.

Distributed leadership

Middle leaders as leaders of practice. Improvement cannot be reliant on a small group at the top

SO WHAT

Improvement is not sustained by systems or frameworks. It is sustained by people and the conditions that support them to learn, trust each other, and take collective responsibility.

Reflect:

What aspects of your school culture most strongly enables or constrains the kind of adult learning and collective ownership that improvement requires?

What does this mean for your school?

Which of these conditions is least developed in your context and what impact does that have on your improvement work?

Clarity of purpose

Evidence that
supports action

Inquiry as routine

Research-informed
improvement

Adult learning &
culture

90 seconds to think individually, then share with someone nearby

**90
sec**



The Collaborative Improvement Community

Where to from here?

- Continue sharing school improvement stories
- Expand the number and diversity of schools in the community
- Strengthen cross-story analysis and sector connections
- Schools interested in contributing are encouraged to get involved

