

Senior school assessment and qualification changes

A research perspective: Why, what and how?

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Introduction – a broader, research perspective



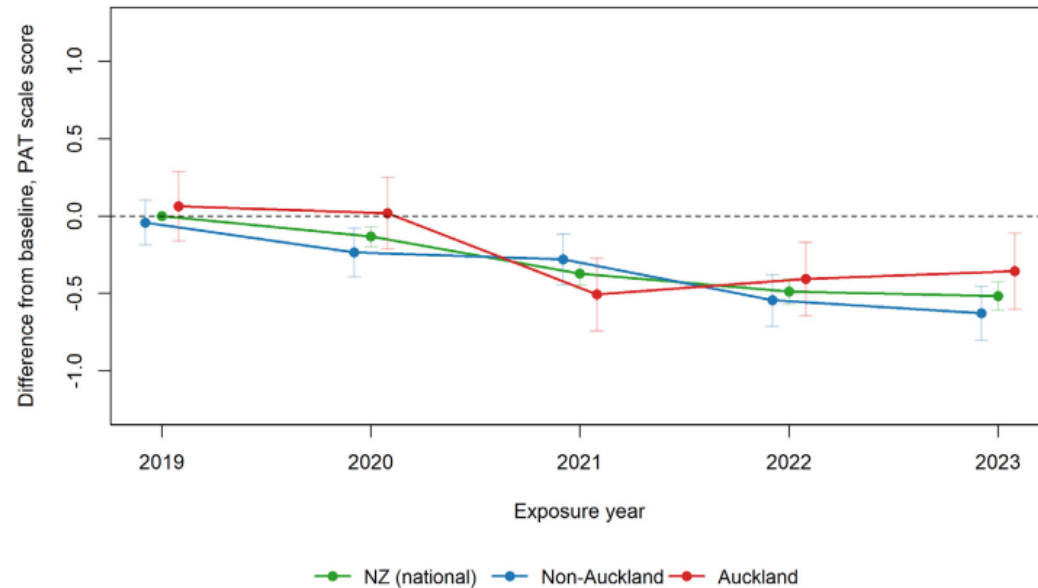
1. **Why** the changes?
2. **What's** the purpose?
3. **How** do we make them work for our rangatahi?

Why change?

1. Patterns of declining achievement
2. NCEA credibility in schools
3. International influences
4. Global changes in society affecting school curriculum

NZ PAT, NMSSA and CIPS data

FIGURE 12: Change in PAT scale scores relative to baseline by region, 2019–2022 (PAT: Reading Comprehension)



Source: Colbentz, (2026, p.28)

Percentages of Year 8 students **meeting or exceeding** expectations are:

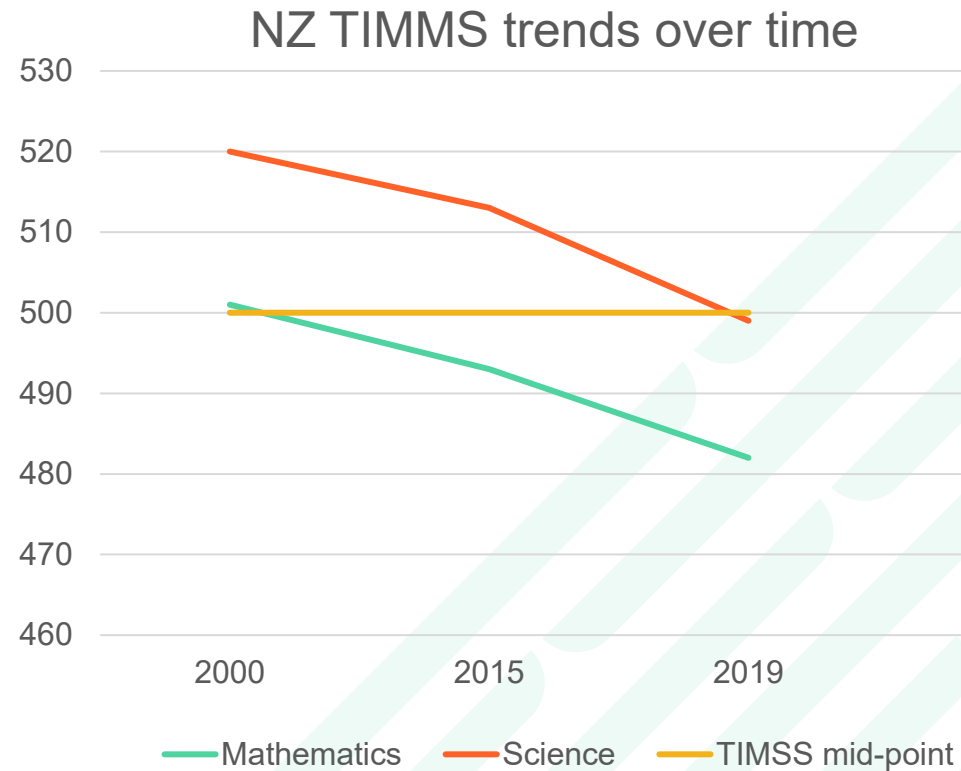
Pānui (Reading Comprehension)	45%
Tuhituihi (Writing)	28%
Pāngarau (Mathematics)	24%
Pūtaiao (Science)	20%

Sources: CIPS, (2026); MOE, (2021).

TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics & Science)

Data for Yr 8 students show a steady decline:

- Mathematics
- Science



PISA: 15 year old science, reading and maths

What trends do you notice:

- Across subjects?
- Over time?

Science		Reading		Maths	
OECD (2018) av 489		OECD (2018) av 487		OECD (2018) av 489	
2006	530	2000	529	2003	523
2015	515	2015	509	2015	495
2018	508	2018	506	2018	494
2022	504	2022	501	2022	479

NZ School leaver highest attainment

What trends do you notice
between 2014 and 2024?

NB: UE data includes IB, Cambridge
International.

Percentage school leaver highest attainment 2014-2024		
Year	< NCEA L1	≥L2 +UE
2014	11.2%	79.4%
2016	10.0%	81.6%
2018	10.1%	81.5%
2020	10.6%	82.2% *LRC
2022	14.3%	76.1%
2024	15.8%	76.1%

Data Source: Education Counts

<https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/school-leavers>

**Curriculum & Assessment
Roadshow for Leaders**

Supporting you to lead change

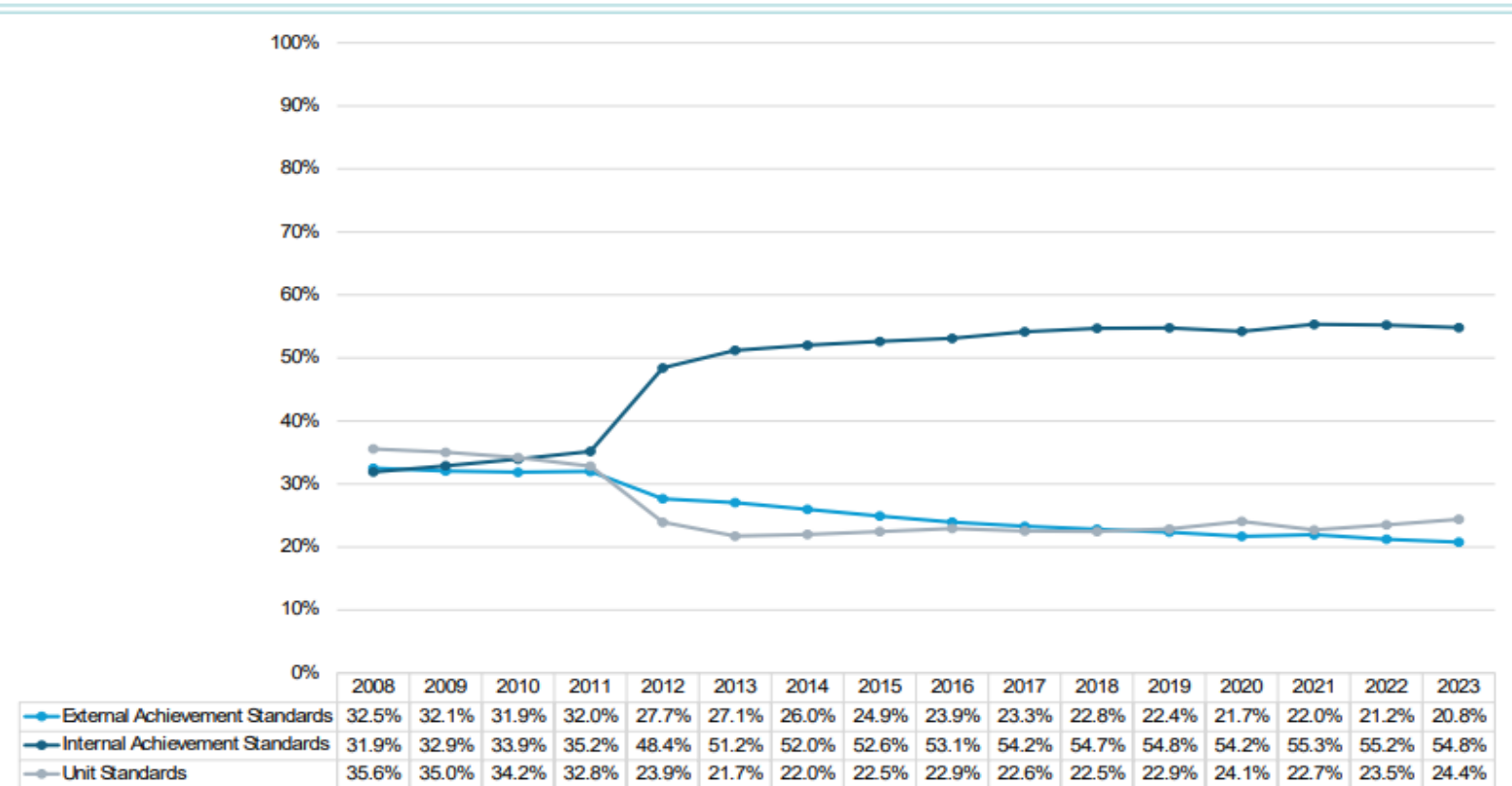


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NCEA results by standard type 2008-2023

- What do you notice about the proportion of:
 - internal
 - external
 achievement standards?

Figure 6: Proportion of results by standard type for Year 12 Level 2 Achievers, 2008-2023.

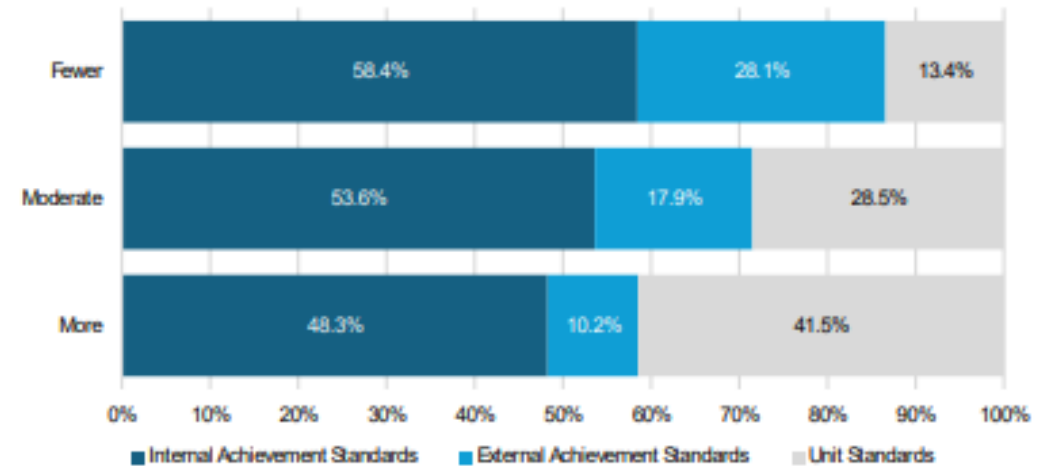


Data source: NZQA (2024, p.5)

Socio-economic effects

- What tensions might be implicit here between learning achievement, and being credentialled?
- What might be the implications for future study pathways for students with more SES barriers?

Figure 8: Proportion of results by type for Year 12 Level 2 Achievers, by socio-economic barriers to attainment, 2023.



Data source: NZQA (2024, p.6)

Reduction in NCEA credibility by school sector

Trend

- More schools not offering NCEA L1
 - 13% 2024; 17% 2025 (ERO, 2024; PPTA, 2025)
- More schools switched to dual qualification pathways - IB/Cambridge

Possible factors (PPTA, 2025)

- Workload issues
- Issues with teacher recruitment/supply:
 - Not offering certain subjects or opting for distance learning
 - Staff teaching outside specialist areas

What's happening internationally and why?

- PISA analysis across 27 countries, reveals patterns of decline and greater inequality.
- “Declines in achievement were mostly attributed to falls in average and low-performing students... where there was increasing polarization between the most talented students and the rest” (Parker et al., 2018, p.852)

Why?

- Economic and political changes, OR...?
- Germany and Poland reversed trend.
- Countries that “attend to lower and middle portions of the achievement distribution” increase their average performance.

(Parker et al., 2018, p.853)

Ireland: case study

• Why reform?

- 2009 PISA ‘shock’
- ILSA data -> National Literacy/Numeracy Strategy 2011-2020; **Nat.Strategy to 2033.**

• What change?

- Invested in teacher PLD
- Increased time on reading, maths
- Periodic mandated testing 3 Yr groups

• What impact?

- Excelling in reading; +av maths/science

Structure of the Irish Levels 1 and 2 Senior Cycle Learning Programme						
Curriculum area	Number of modules		Recommended hours/module		Recommended hours over two years	
Level	L1	L2	L1	L2	L1	L2
Numeracy	4	3	40	60	160	180
Communication and Literacy	3	4	60	60	180	240
Personal Care	3	1	60	60	180	60
Electives	5	7	60	60	300	240

Data source: Government of Ireland (2023, p.7)

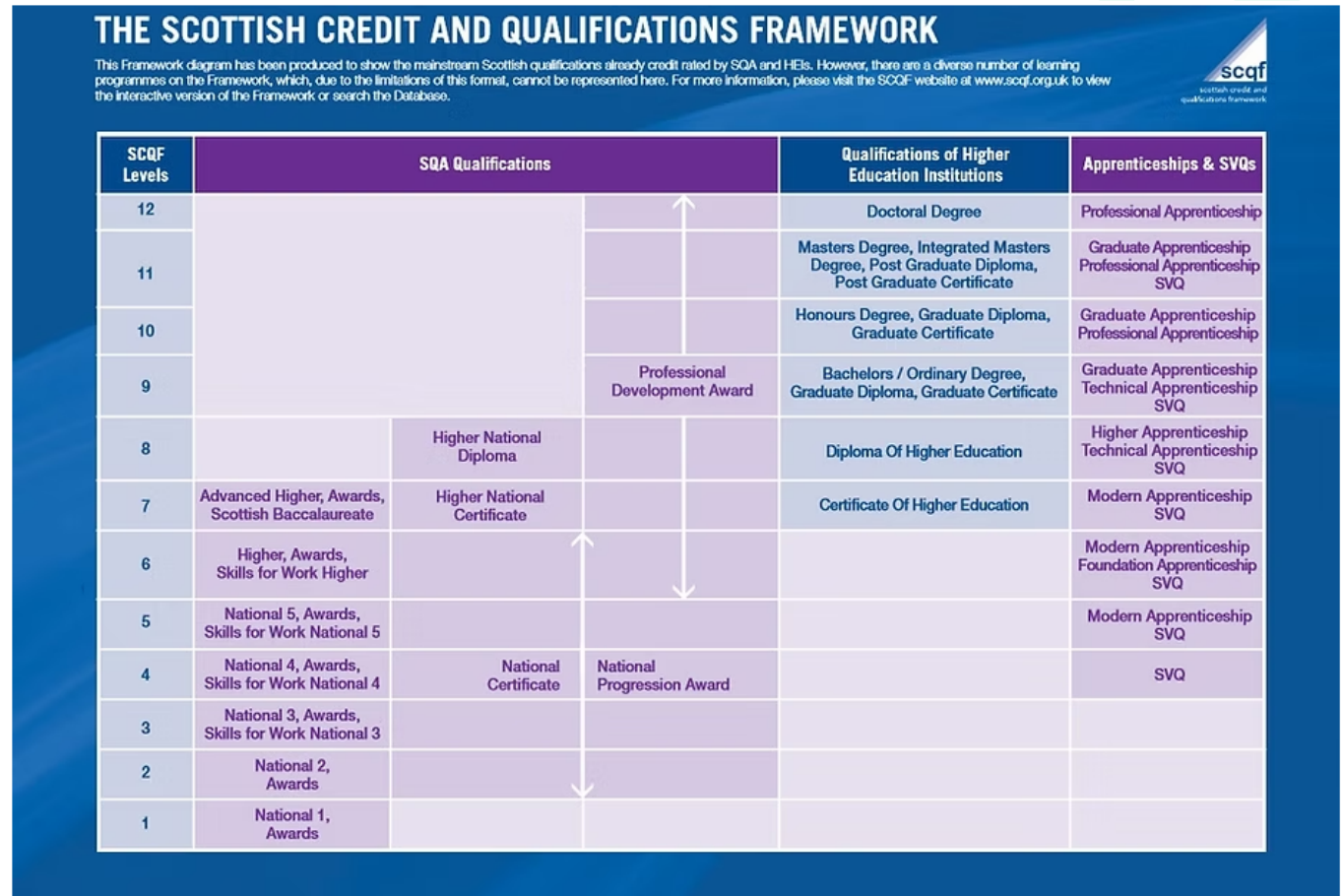


Scotland: case study

Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)

Broad education to the end of S3

- S4 – National 4/or 5
- S5 – 3-5 Higher Exams (entry to Uni)
- S6 – 1-3 Advanced Higher Exams
- Few exams
- High levels of equity; fewer high performers



Wales: case study

Curriculum for Wales

- Moved from centralized to local community curriculum
- Principles and progression-based
- Four purposes:
 - **ambitious**, capable learners
 - **creative** contributors
 - **ethical**, informed citizens
 - **confident**, healthy individuals



Data source: Welsh Government (2025).
<https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/14-to-16-learning-guidance/>.

OECD (2026) senior secondary credentials

Almost all upper secondary certificates are **comprised of multiple assessment tasks**:

- *Examinations or tests* (59/71) – efficient, and effective large body skills/knowledge **C**
- *Assessments determined by teachers* (38/71) – promote validity (tailored, relevant) **R**
- *Practical activities and performances* (39/71); projects/portfolios (32/71) **R**
- Most use mix of external and internal assessments (57/71)
- Most offer academic and vocational pathways

Principles for sustainable national certificates:

1. **Relevance/validity**
2. **Credibility/consistency**
3. **Fairness –equal value of vocational knowledge and skills**
4. **Ease of interpretation for all users**
5. **Manageability**

Aotearoa New Zealand reforms

- **Why?**
 - Achievement declines, persistent inequity
- **What?**
 - Towards centralized, consistent curriculum
 - More structured, year-by-year sequence
 - More systematic testing and feedback loops
 - General education (lit, num, science Yr 11)
 - Greater choice/specialization Yrs 12-13
 - Including academic and vocational options



What's the point (purpose)?

- What's the:
 - purpose of education?
 - point of assessment?
 - purpose of credentials?

What's the purpose of schooling?

- **Human capacity building** – empowering people to be successful in what matters for them, their culture and society
- allow all students to experience the joy of learning
- encourage all students to construct, integrate and apply their knowledge
- to think critically, and invent solutions to problems
- and to respond creatively to unforeseeable issues that will confront them in the complex world of tomorrow. (Boykin, 2014, p.511).

NZ MOE view on the purpose of schooling?

“The main purpose of schooling is to support all students to gain the knowledge and skills they need to be lifelong learners, experience success, and to fully participate in jobs and careers, society, and their communities”

(MOE, *Te Mātaiaho*, 2025)

Capabilities	Learning areas
• Communication • Relating to others • Self-management and self-regulation • Problem-solving • Creativity	Years 0-11 • English • Mathematics & Statistics • Science • Social Sciences • Health & PE • Technology & the Arts (Yr8 + some Yrs 9-11) • Learning Languages (yrs 7-11) • Yrs 12-13 greater choice

Meaning and purpose of assessment

Derived from a Latin word:

***Assidere = to sit beside or with,
to guide and support***

Assessment is a relational and
interactive process.



Image: Ministry of Education

<https://newzealandcurriculum.tahurangi.education.govt.nz/accelerating-learning-in-english-and-maths/5637255598.p>

Functions of assessment

Serve four functions:

1. Support learning (*formative*)
2. Certify achievement or potential (*summative*)
3. Evaluate quality of educational institutions, programmes or curricula (*evaluative*)
4. Selection (*selective*)



Formative/Assessment for learning (AFL)

Using assessment to inform learning has the greatest impact on student learning and achievement of any recorded educational innovation (Davies et al., 2014)

Effect sizes of 0.4-0.7 (McMillan, 2008)

AFL Really? How?

Because:

1. teaching becomes more tailored/targeted
2. teachers notice what, when and how to adjust learning
3. learners grow in capacity to self and co-regulate their learning
4. process reveals what students know and can do, and also their thought processes, logic and understanding
5. feedback equips recipients with why, what and how to learn



Feedback principles

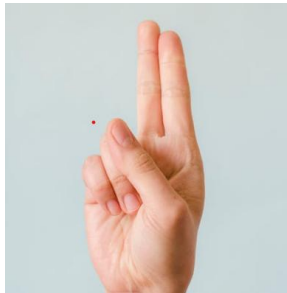
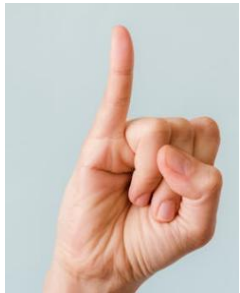
(Wright et al., 2025)

Principle	Guidance
Activate thinking and action	Help students see or work out steps to improve More work for recipient than donor!
Detailed and descriptive	Help students understand their mistakes, why they happened and what to do to avoid them
User-friendly and user-oriented	Positively framed, individualized; move learning forward
Lucid – clear and easy to understand	Clear and easy to understand
Timing	As soon as possible after students complete a task

Keep it smart and simple: ask hinge-point Qs

The process:

- elicit
- interpret
- adjust



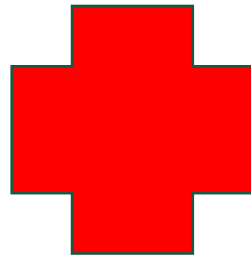
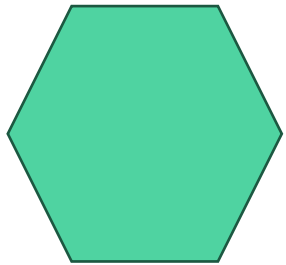
- *What proportion of the water taken in by roots of a lettuce plant is lost through transpiration 10%, 50%, 90%?*



Source: Wiliam (2011)

Mathematics and English examples

- How many lines of symmetry do these shapes have?



- Feedback on writing final draft

At the weekend my friends and I went to the Saturday market
 There was heaps of tables laden with vegetables and you had to walk around
 to check out the prices.
 I found this huge as coliflower and my friend, Jack, found a hugmungous
kumera. The atmosphere at the market was amazing, with buskers singing
waiata, displays of crafts and homemade goods, and people of all ages and
 nationalities.

P

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SD

SD

Purpose of credentials

Signify three things:

- ***Accomplishment and competency*** in a field of study, often related to particular academic or professional skills
- ***Access*** to employment or further education and training
- ***Equal opportunities*** – based on merit not on family or financial advantage

Assurance of equivalence important:

- Individual and societal level
- Opens pathways to international study opportunities and professional exchanges
- Origins UNESCO(1979), Erasmus (1987), led to National Qualification Frameworks.
- Even at secondary school level, comparability with other jurisdictions enable portability.

How do we make it work for our ākonga?

- Leadership in times of liquid change
 - Clarity on who and what matters
 - Invest in your staff
 - Lead ALF
 - Nurture connections/networks

Leadership in times of liquid change (MacKay, 2026)

- *Liquid times* – relentless policy and societal change. Feelings of continuous crisis demands, uncertainty and complexity.
- Risks: anxiety, scrutiny and critique, reactivity.

Principal interviewee:

- *“Because education is a dynamic science, we’re always moving. We should keep moving and trying to get better. But if you try to move from go to whoa in as fast a time as possible, you’re creating a very unstable work environment. So, you’ve got to try and set it up to get a little bit of improvement every year. Give it four or five years and you’ll look back and realize you’ve come a long way. You look back in 10 years and you’ve got even better.” (p.9).*

Clarity about who and what matters (Thurston et al., 2025)

Who:



What:

1. Create respectful relational conditions:
 - Value people for who they are
 - Allow time for dialogue
 - Enable them to be(come) their best selves
2. Invest in learning
3. Responsive resource allocation - PLD
4. Lead assessment for learning

Invest in your staff

(Kostogirz, 2019; Thurston et al., 2026; Walland & Darlington, 2021)

Foster capacity building in your teams:

- Build their capability in assessment, pedagogy and curriculum knowledge
- Remind them while there are mandated elements, they still have professional autonomy on other aspects

What can we adjust to benefit ākonga?

- Grow teachers' sense of competency, confidence and autonomy to re-gain their positive well-being, and enthusiasm for students, and learning.

- **Enact humanizing values** with other staff (Thurston et al., 2026, p.234):
- Prioritize positive relationships – amongst staff, the student body and within classrooms
- Honour and respond to multifaceted identities of students
- Centre student's strengths, needs, interests and aspirations in instructional learning.

Lead assessment for learning (AFL)

- The OECD (2026 p.7) advise that:

“meaningful student learning and school improvement happen when high-quality data reaches schools, is interpreted collectively, and is supported by PLD and autonomy”.

“System-wide patterns inform policy makers where to target resources, what policies to adjust, and the need to align reforms with school realities”.

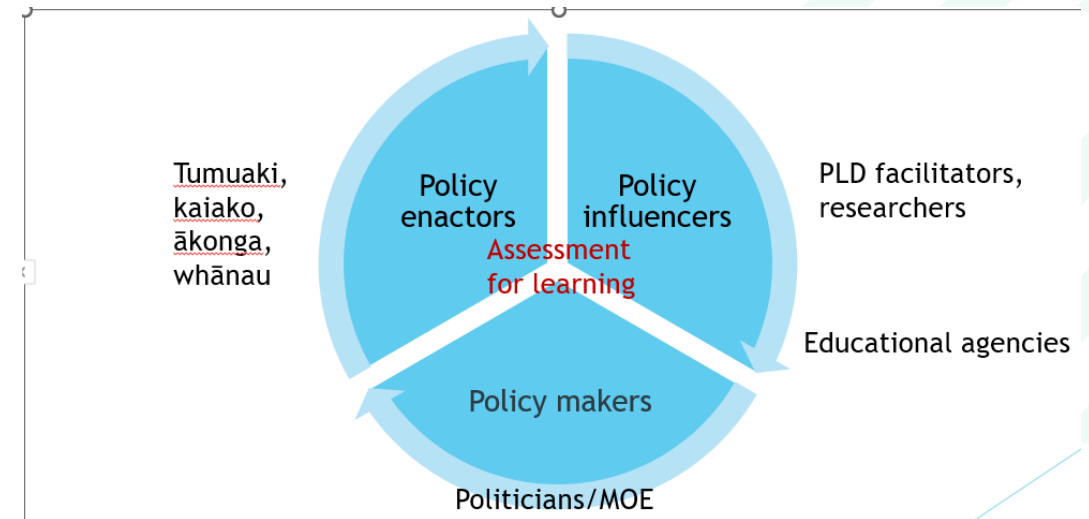
- **Use** assessment:

- for constructive feedback, to support meaningful curriculum redesign and evidence-based improvement.
- to build a culture of openness and continuous learning.
- to inform targeted PLD, peer collaboration, improve instructional practices, teacher-student relationships, and curriculum design
- to stimulate reflection, innovation, and real change.

Success through relationships and networks

“Success [in education] clearly depends on cooperation amongst government agencies, academic researchers and school-based educators”

(Black & Wiliam, 1998, p.148)



NZAI – New Zealand Assessment Institute
(<https://www.nzai.org.nz>)

Conclusion: Thriving during change

- **WHY/WHO:** Students and staff are your priority
- **WHAT:** Keep focus on teaching and learning
- **HOW:** Invest in relationships, ongoing PLD and AFL, time for discussions, adaptations, peer support, and school-wide learning

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Curriculum & Assessment Roadshow for Leaders

Supporting you to lead change

He mea tārai e mātou te mātauranga
kia rangatira ai, kia mana taurite ai ōna huanga.

We shape an education system that delivers
equitable and excellent outcomes.



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