

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.

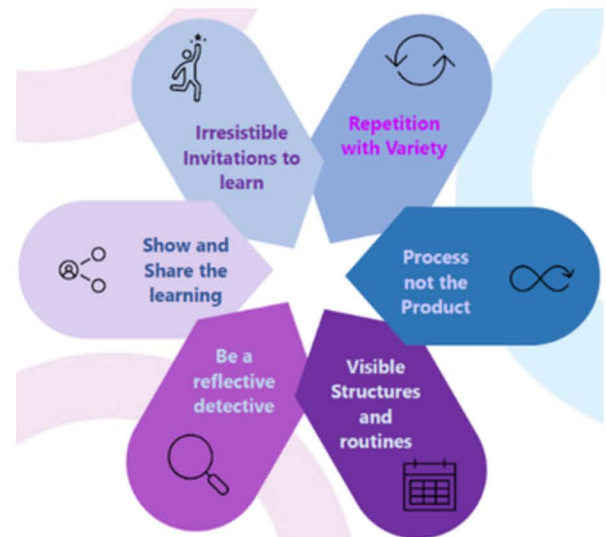
The improvement story

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?