

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.

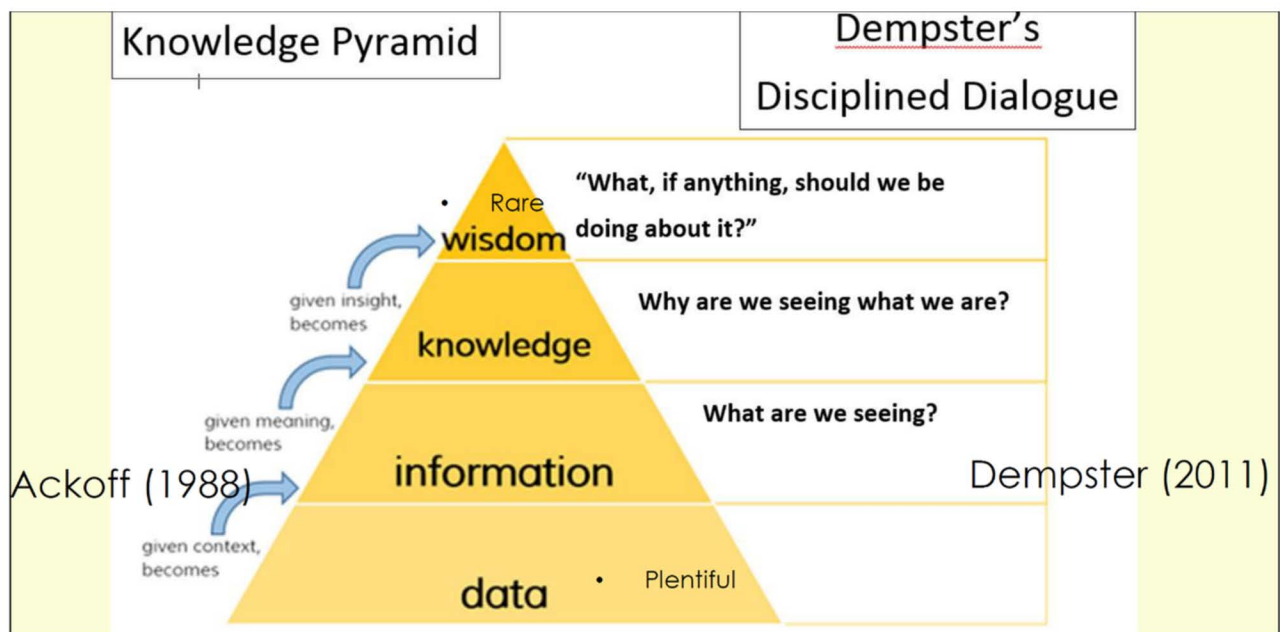
The first step was reframing the intent of assessment conversations to be professional reflections focused on improving student learning. Leaders consistently emphasised they were not about appraising teacher performance, creating space for more open and analytical conversations.

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?