

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.

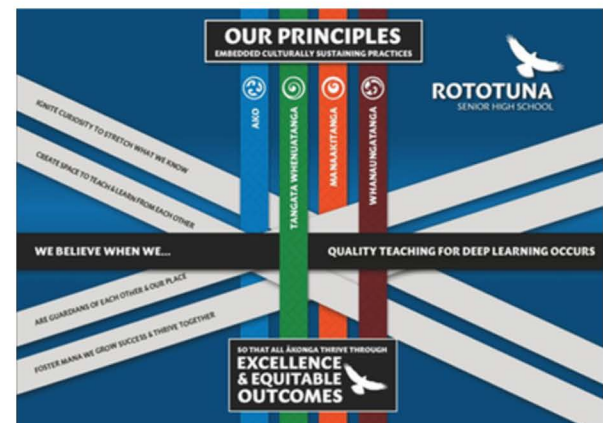
The improvement story

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. Journaling 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?

