

Weston School

Strategic assessment: Strengthening teaching, learning, and schoolwide coherence

Weston School's journey began with a simple question: how can assessment genuinely strengthen teaching and learning across a school? By clarifying purpose, simplifying strategy, and distributing leadership, Weston has built greater coherence between classroom practice, professional learning, and strategic direction. Over time, assessment has shifted from an activity to a driver of shared responsibility for student progress.

School context

Weston School is a full primary on the outskirts of Ōamaru, with a roll of approximately 250 students serving a mixed rural and semi urban community. The school roll is growing and becoming increasingly diverse, with a rising number of ESOL learners and families moving in and out with seasonal work.

When the principal was appointed in 2019, the school had been through a period of instability. Staff were seen to work largely in isolation, relational trust was low, and curriculum and assessment practices varied significantly between classrooms. A lengthy strategic plan existed, but few teachers saw themselves as connected to it.

Inquiry emphasis

Evaluative thinking was embedded across both strategic and classroom levels. The work drew on Fullan and Quinn's coherence framework to guide leadership decisions and on the New Zealand Curriculum statement about the primary purpose of assessment to anchor purpose. Assessment was seen as an ongoing source of evidence for inquiry. Strategic teams identified intended shifts, clarified what impact would look like, and defined the evidence that would indicate progress. Teachers were supported to interpret patterns, moderate judgements, and connect assessment information directly to next teaching steps.

Link for video of the full conference presentation on the NZAI website: [Weston School](#)

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Why does this story matter?

This case shows how strategic clarity and deliberate use of assessment can strengthen coherence across a school. Simplifying direction, strengthening collective ownership, and aligning governance, leadership, and classroom practice can steadily build consistency for students.

Improvement focus

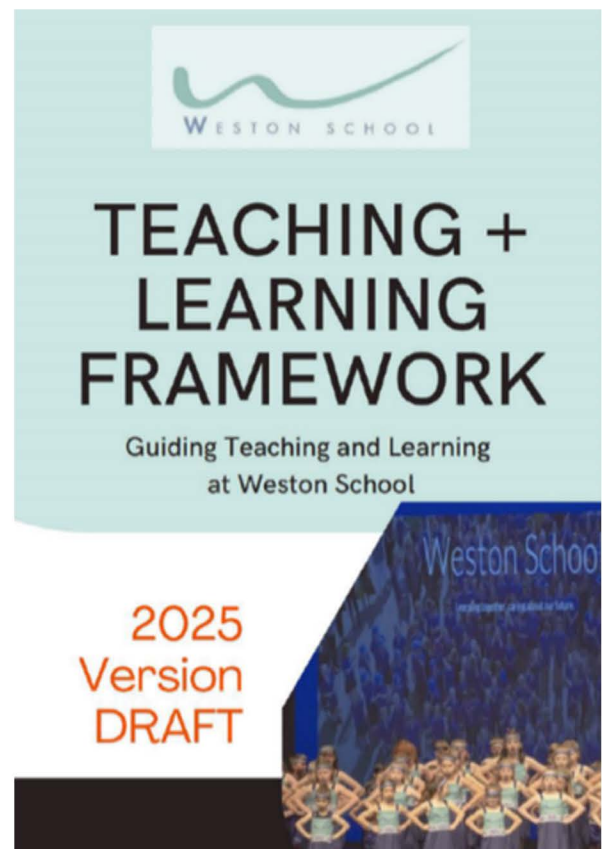
The focus was to develop a more coherent, strategic use of assessment to strengthen teaching, learning, and schoolwide alignment. Leaders sought to clarify the purpose of assessment, establish shared language and expectations across classrooms, and ensure that evidence informed responsive teaching rather than compliance processes drove what happens in the classroom.

The improvement story

Leaders at Weston School set out to build a more coherent and aligned approach to teaching and learning, where assessment clearly supported both teacher decision-making and student progress. Their aim was not to increase activity, but to ensure that strategic direction, classroom practice, and professional learning worked together in a deliberate and consistent way.

To support this shift, the leadership team engaged in external facilitation with Evaluation Associates | Te Huinga Kākākura Mātauranga. This professional learning strengthened leaders' confidence in analysing practice, leading adult learning conversations, and using evidence to guide change. Rather than focusing solely on systems, the work deliberately strengthened how leaders facilitated professional dialogue and supported teacher inquiry.

To address clarity a lengthy strategic plan was replaced with a concise one-page framework that made priorities visible and manageable. Three strands were prioritised: school culture, curriculum and local curriculum development, and assessment for learning.



(Image taken from school's PowerPoint presentation)

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Distributed leadership became central with improvement work being organised through three strategic teams focused on Positive Behaviour for Learning (PB4L), structured literacy, and Assessment for Learning. Each team included representatives from across teaching teams and was responsible not only for implementing actions, but also for monitoring progress and reflecting on impact. This structure ensured that improvement was not confined to the senior leadership team.

Assessment practices were reviewed and carefully rationalised, ensuring that tools genuinely informed teaching. Analysis of assessment data was supported by the development of reflective prompts to help teachers interpret the patterns and consider teaching implications. Conversations shifted from reporting results to planning targeted responses.

The school deliberately drew on research and established frameworks to guide both teaching practice and change leadership.

The focus on responsive teaching was supported by resources such as Clarity in the Classroom and the Victorian High Impact Teaching Strategies. Peer observations and professional conversations were progressively introduced. Initially supported by team leaders, these evolved into structured peer observations.

Feedback focused on how teachers used learning intentions, success criteria, and assessment information to shape learning.

Moderation processes were introduced at both schoolwide and team levels. Teachers examined student work together, discussed progressions, and strengthened consistency of judgements. Team meetings began with a discussion of 'children of concern', drawing on multiple sources of evidence, including anecdotal and observational information.

Leaders reinforced a clear improvement rhythm of planning, implementing, tracking, and evaluating. They focused on strengthening alignment between strategic planning, professional learning, and classroom practice. Board reporting was aligned with the strategic plan. A simple traffic light system made progress visible and encouraged regular reflection. Strategic teams reviewed impact mid-year and at year end.

Over time, this approach built greater coherence and shared responsibility for student progress. Assessment became more deliberately connected to planning, professional learning, and strategic priorities. Teachers increasingly saw themselves as co-owners of the improvement journey.



Weston School used this framework depicting the archway of teaching and learning capabilities (from Clarity in the Classroom) as their starting point.



Enablers

- Clear and simplified strategic direction
- Distributed leadership through three strategic teams
- Rebuilding relational trust before introducing technical change
- External facilitation that strengthened leadership capability
- A shared evidence-informed language for guiding and discussing teaching and learning
- Alignment between leadership, governance, and classroom expectations



Tensions

- High staff turnover disrupting peer observation cycles
- Increasing student transience and ESOL needs adding complexity to data interpretation
- National curriculum and assessment changes increasing workload
- The ongoing risk of assessment drifting back into compliance rather than a learning focus

How challenges were navigated

Leaders focused first on clarity and consistency. Simplifying the strategic plan and aligning board reporting with classroom expectations reduced ambiguity and supported stability.

Improvement was paced deliberately. Strategic teams were given time to trial ideas, gather feedback, and refine approaches. The establishment of strategic teams ensured representation from across the school so improvement work was collectively owned rather than imposed. This created space for professional voice and shared responsibility.

Assessment conversations were structured and collaborative. Reflective prompts and moderation routines helped shift discussion from compliance to professional inquiry.

Peer observations were introduced progressively. This gradual approach allowed professional confidence and relational safety to grow over time.

Regular reflection cycles helped sustain direction. Annual and mid-year reviews allowed teams to examine impact, celebrate progress, and adjust plans.

Evidence and emerging learning

Evaluative thinking was embedded within both strategic and classroom-level routines. Strategic teams identified intended shifts in practice and student outcomes, specified actions, and defined the evidence that would indicate progress. Team action plans were reviewed at mid and end of year.

At a classroom level, teachers were reported to be increasingly using assessment information diagnostically. Structured prompts supported analysis and moderation processes strengthened shared expectations of quality and progress. Team meetings now draw on multiple sources of evidence, including standardised data, anecdotal notes, and observational insights.

Leaders reported greater consistency in the use of learning intentions and success criteria, stronger alignment of programmes across classrooms, and increased teacher confidence in linking assessment to instructional decisions. Students demonstrated clearer understanding of what they are learning and why.

While achievement outcomes are influenced by multiple factors, leaders attribute improved consistency in literacy practices and more responsive teaching to the strengthened use of assessment for learning. Over time, this approach has become embedded within the school's culture rather than operating as a separate initiative.



Questions for schools to discuss

- How visible are our strategic priorities in everyday classroom practice?
- What evidence do we use to judge whether improvement actions are making a difference?
- How confident are teachers in interpreting assessment information and translating it into next steps planning?
- How aligned are governance, leadership, and classroom expectations in our school?
- What structures support collective ownership of improvement rather than reliance on a small group of leaders?