

**Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)
about the**

**SELF-REVIEW TOOL FOR SCHOOLS:
FOCUS ON STUDENTS ACHIEVING BELOW
CURRICULUM EXPECTATIONS IN LITERACY
(YEARS 1 – 8)**

9 March 2011

Completed for:

Ministry of Education

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<http://RealEvaluation.com>

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WHAT WAS THE THINKING BEHIND THIS PROJECT?

The Ministry of Education has been working to implement a set of National Standards for literacy in primary and intermediate schools. National Standards are intended to help lift achievement in literacy (reading and writing) by being clear about what students should achieve and by when. This is intended to help students, their teachers, parents, families and whānau better understand what they need to achieve and what they should focus on next.

Information about student performance against the National Standards will not, by itself, lead to improvement in literacy achievement. In order for literacy performance data to drive improvement, it must be built into a broader inquiry cycle that considers learning needs; learning tasks and experiences; teaching approaches, tools and additional support; analysis of their impact; and use of these insights to inform improvements and then focus further inquiry. Each of these elements appears in the inquiry cycle that is already familiar to many New Zealand educators (see Figure 1).

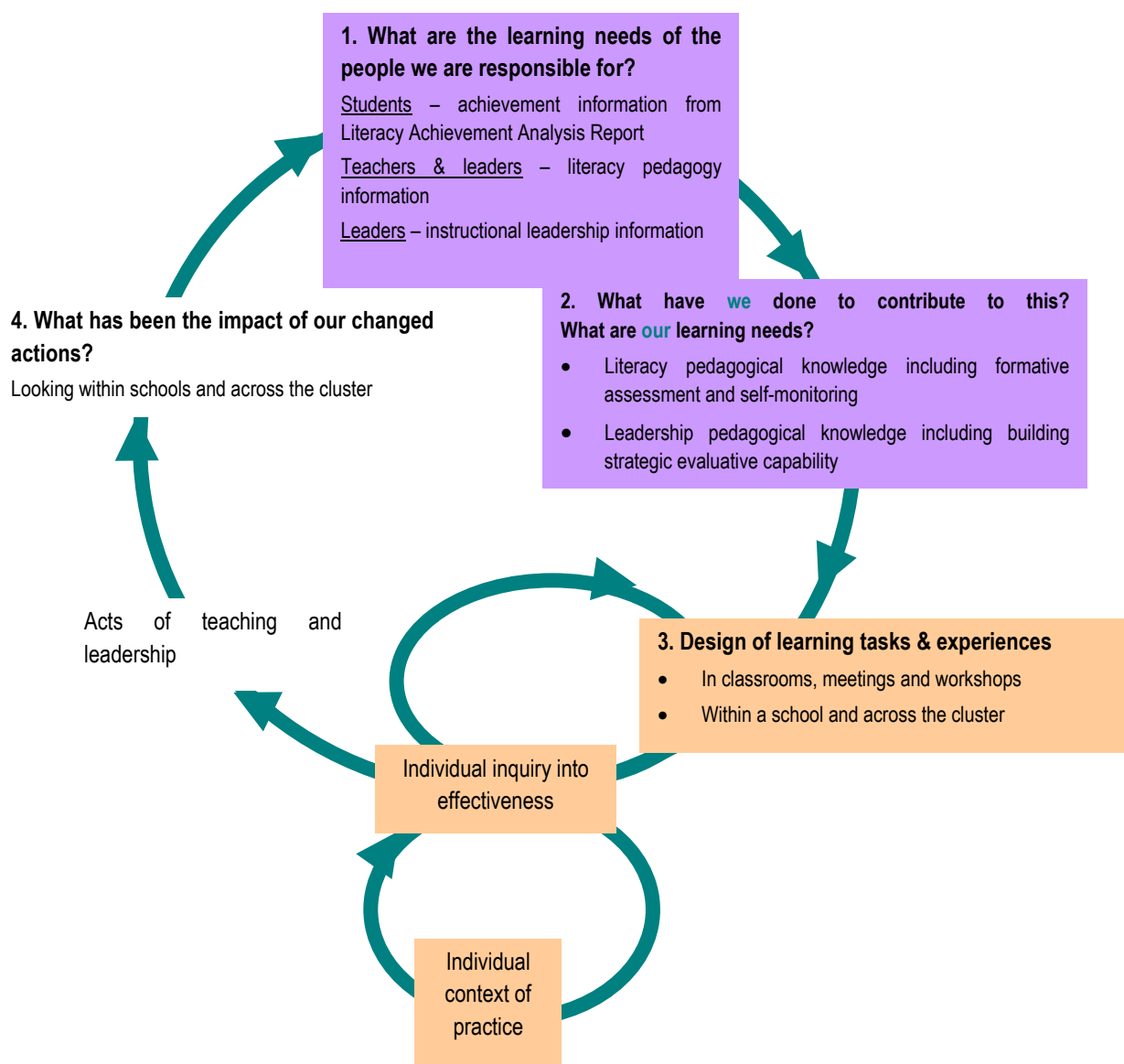


FIGURE 1. ADAPTATION OF THE "TEACHER INQUIRY AND KNOWLEDGE-BUILDING CYCLE"¹

This tool has been designed *for schools to use for themselves* rather than being a Professional Development provider tool. Providers may suggest that schools use this tool and will be able to offer support with the review process where needed.

The rubrics are designed to be used alongside the various self-review tools currently available to teachers and schools: <http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/National-Standards/Self-review-tool>. In particular, some schools may need an intensive inquiry process focusing specifically on students achieving below curriculum expectations in literacy and how well they are understanding and meeting their needs; these tools will help facilitate that inquiry.

WHO WAS INVOLVED?

Literacy leaders from four schools in the Auckland region worked with literacy facilitators, evaluation specialists and literacy experts from the Ministry of Education to develop a set of user-friendly tools for evaluative inquiry, conduct some initial field testing and consider what else would need to sit around the tools to make them maximally useful and practical for schools.

WHAT WAS DEVELOPED?

In this exploratory study, a set of 10 user-friendly evaluation rubrics was developed to support the inquiry cycle used by schools, with a specific focus on how effectively their literacy approaches and strategies meet the needs of students achieving below curriculum expectations in literacy.

The rubrics have since been field tested in several schools and refined based on feedback.

¹ Figure 1 is adapted from the "Teacher inquiry and knowledge-building cycle" proposed in the Teacher Professional Learning and Development: Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration (TPLD BES – Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, and Fung, 2007) and presents a cycle and theory of improvement principled on developing effective literacy learning and practices that lead to improvements in teacher practice and student outcomes.

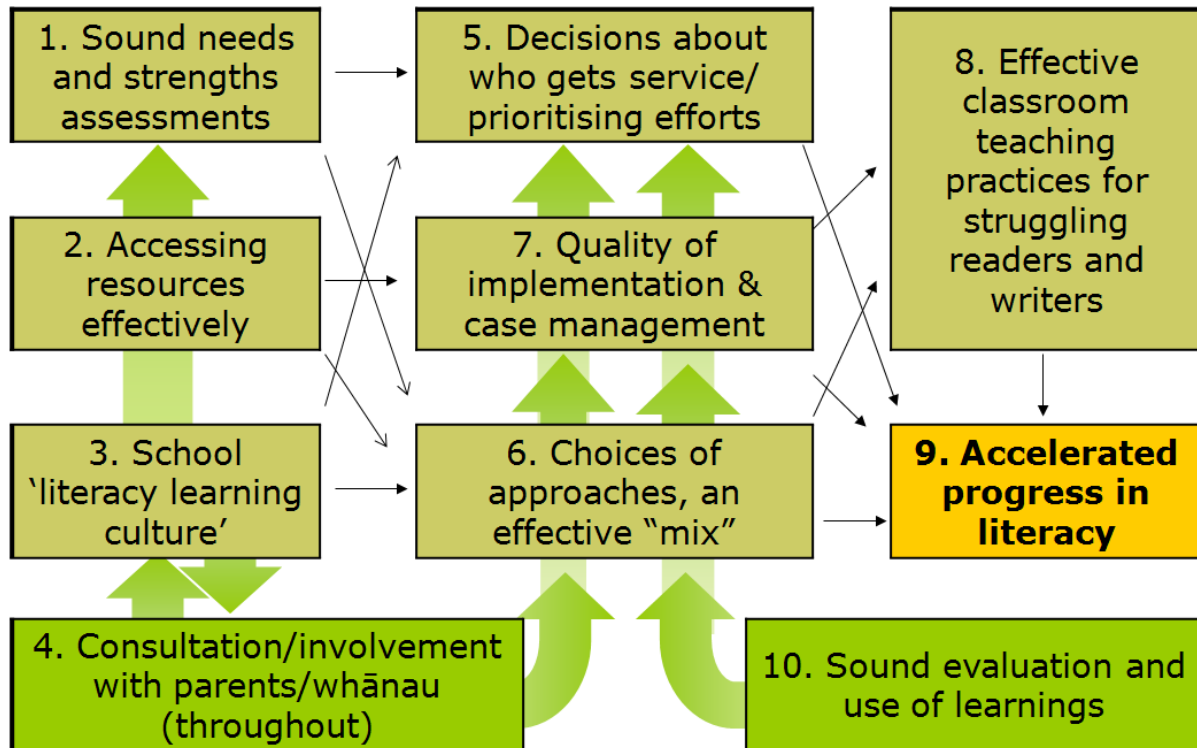
The 10 rubrics help English-medium schools reflect on and use a variety of information sources to answer for themselves the following **evaluative inquiry questions**:

1. How well do we assess and understand the nature and extent of our the strengths and needs of our students achieving below curriculum expectations in literacy? *And, the strengths and needs of our teachers & support staff?*
2. How well do we know about and access appropriate literacy-related resources and resource people?
3. How well have we developed and how well do we continue to support a positive literacy culture in our school (incl. policies, practices, attitudes, values)?
4. How effectively and appropriately do we consult with and involve parents/whānau of students achieving below curriculum expectations in literacy?
5. How well do we make decisions about which students achieving below curriculum expectations in literacy should be served/prioritised? Based on what?
6. How well do we choose the most cost-effective mix of interventions for the students achieving below curriculum expectations in literacy we serve?
7. How effectively do we implement these interventions (including case management of students)?
8. How effective is our classroom teaching practice, specifically for meeting the needs of students achieving below curriculum expectations in literacy?
9. How well do our students achieving below curriculum expectations in literacy make progress thanks to our efforts?
10. How well do we evaluate literacy interventions (both in-class and out-of-class interventions) and use this information to
 - a. improve/tweak interventions or their implementation and
 - b. inform choices about selection and targeting of interventions?

WHAT'S THE CONCEPTUAL CONNECTION AMONG THESE 10 INQUIRY QUESTIONS?

Each of the 10 inquiry questions listed above represents an important component in the mix that schools need to concentrate on in order to accelerate the progress of their students achieving below curriculum expectations in literacy. The relationship among these 10 components is illustrated in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2. MODEL SHOWING THE RELATIONSHIPS AMONG THE 10 COMPONENTS NEEDED TO SUPPORT ACCELERATED PROGRESS FOR STUDENTS ACHIEVING BELOW CURRICULUM EXPECTATIONS IN LITERACY²



WHAT IS A 'RUBRIC'?

A rubric is a description of what performance looks like at different levels of effectiveness.

WHICH RUBRIC(S) SHOULD WE START WITH?

Based on schools' experiences in the development process and pilot testing of the tool, the best place to start with the inquiry questions and rubrics is the following:

- Rubric 9: Accelerated progress in literacy for students achieving below curriculum expectations in literacy

² Numbering is to allow easy matching to the list of inquiry questions on p. 3 and does not indicate any particular temporal order or priority ranking.

In other words, start with the biggest and most important question each school faces in this area: How well are we accelerating our students achieving below curriculum expectations in literacy, really? This will give your school a clear picture of how it's doing overall and how urgent and serious any shortfalls might be. It's probably the most important conversation needed to get the inquiry ball rolling.

A 'Quick Start Guide' is available to help schools get started with Rubric 9. This set of frequently asked questions is intended as a supplement to the Quick Start Guide.

HOW SHOULD WE USE THE RUBRICS?

By far the greatest value for the schools so far has been in the **rich conversations** that the rubrics can help literacy leaders facilitate. As one of the participants in the rubric development process commented during the field testing:

“Just had to drop you a line to say WOW, I have just finished running a leadership meeting with our 10 whānau leaders.³ I discussed the rationale around the rubrics and then gave examples. We unpacked rubric 8 (classroom practice) and each were asked reflect and to identify where they saw themselves. The CONVERSATIONS they had with each other were amazing they are now going away to read through the other 9 rubrics using the questions for whānau leaders and ponder how they might be used with their team. They are going to feedback to me next week. I am so passionate about this, I think little bit might have rubbed off so, if I do say so myself: what an excellent research and set of conversation starters.”

-- Sarah McWilliams, Associate Principal, Baverstock Oaks School

Based on the fieldwork, the advice for schools is: Don't be constrained by the notion that this is a measurement or evaluation exercise. Don't feel that you have to “get through” all 10 rubrics within a particular time frame. Pick the rubrics that matter most (just start with one or two) and use them to start and guide **conversations that matter** in your school. Use them to get literacy – and particularly the needs and progress of students achieving below curriculum expectations in literacy – a higher priority on your school's agenda. Use them to help teachers and leaders **reflect on their own practice**, challenge and change their own assumptions and mental models and support each other better to really make a difference.

A central intent behind the rubrics is that of school-driven inquiry. Schools may therefore wish to use the rubrics as tools to **guide a particular inquiry cycle** relating to literacy within their school. Start by identifying one or more inquiry questions from the list on p. 4, then use the rubrics to start an initial conversation within the school about how people think the school is doing relative to the rubric, and

³ In this primary school, “whānau leaders” are senior teachers who lead a team of about four teachers; the term “whānau” refers to each team.

why. Ask what evidence people use to support their judgements; ask what evidence would potentially cause them to change their minds.

There is a good list of questions to guide just such a group discussion around any of the rubrics (see the Quick Start Guide). Question 4 in this list pushes the group to test its own views against other evidence and the perspectives of others: “How closely does the evidence/input from classroom teachers and parents/family/whānau align with what the literacy team sees? Where are the areas of disagreement or differences of perspective? Should they result in an adjustment of the school’s rating on this dimension? Why or why not?”

When you’ve gathered the evidence on how you are doing on a rubric of particular interest, the next logical step is to look at the next highest level and ask what needs to be done to get there. Brainstorm ideas, do any additional investigation to work out which ones are feasible and most likely to work well, then plan and implement. As you work through this process, think inquiry again: How will we know if this has worked? Make sure that sound, practical, just-in-time evaluation runs alongside practice.

See also the Quick Start Guide’s *Tips for a successful self-review and inquiry process*.

WHAT EVIDENCE SHOULD BE USED WITH THE RUBRICS? HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

Under the rubrics, suggestions are made for possible data sources and data collection methods that may be used to determine ratings on the rubrics. *Each school should use those sources that are most feasible and valid for its circumstances*. If you have other appropriate sources of data that are not listed here, by all means use those.

Not all of the suggested data sources need to be used for each rubric. However, all ratings should be based on more than one source of data, and preferably contrasting perspectives or sources of data (i.e. they should go beyond the views and experiences of the school’s literacy team, seeking independent confirmation or disconfirmation). This helps ensure that your conclusions are robust (i.e. not overly dependent on just one source of data or perspective, in case that turns out to be questionable).

When you make the rating on each rubric, it is a good idea to jot down a short summary of the evidence that led to that particular rating, rather than the next highest or the next lowest rating. Even two or three sentences can be useful, but you may wish to include more information to reflect the richness of the conversation that happens around each rubric and inquiry question. What you are trying to do here is make sure that you have enough information to be able to make a useful comparison the next time you come to revisit the same rubric (say, in six months’ time). You also need to bear in mind who else you might be reporting the conclusions to – for example, Boards of Trustees or parents/families/whānau – how much supporting evidence do they need (and, of what type) to be convinced that the rating is justified and not just ‘your opinion’?

THE RUBRICS ARE NOT VERY PRECISE ABOUT WHERE THE PERFORMANCE CUT-OFFS ARE – WHY NOT?

As mentioned earlier, the rubrics are deliberately designed for evaluative inquiry and reflective practice by teachers and leaders in schools. As professionals, teachers and school leaders know all too well that simple score cut-offs and precise measurement instruments are frequently unable to capture the rich nuances that we see in teaching, learning and school leadership. These rubrics were developed by and with teachers and literacy professionals, and therefore they purposefully reflect this reality.

In each of the rubrics, you will see certain terms underlined that vary through the performance levels. For example, in Rubric 1 (sound needs and strengths assessment), you will see that the various levels of performance describe a lack of understanding, a basic understanding, a sound basic understanding, a deepening understanding or a deep understanding of the needs and strengths of students relative to the Literacy Learning Progressions. When making a rating on that rubric, your literacy leaders and others should discuss what these terms mean in your school, given the student populations and communities you serve. What does “deep” understanding of their strengths and needs look like?

Doesn't that mean the rubrics are “all just subjective”? It does mean that the rubrics require in-depth discussion and informed judgement from professionals (i.e. teachers and school leaders). But this doesn't mean that the conclusions drawn are unreliable, invalid or arbitrary. In practice, after an evaluative conversation among informed professionals, you will find there is surprisingly little disagreement about ratings on these rubrics. And in any case, even if there is some disagreement about whether a school's literacy efforts are currently performing at a particular level or the one above, the reality is that this is far less important than the rich conversation that has happened along the way and the emerging clarity about what needs most urgent attention to improve.

WHAT IS THE REASONING BEHIND TERMS LIKE “DETRIMENTAL” IN THE RUBRIC RATINGS?

The central focus in the development of these rubrics and the process of defining “how good is good” was the needs of students achieving below curriculum expectations in literacy themselves. To help ‘calibrate’ what the levels meant across the rubrics, school literacy leaders involved in the rubric development process considered what the impact of each levels of performance meant for those students.

Performance, practices, beliefs and attitudes that are described as “**ineffective**” were considered to be likely to maintain the status quo, i.e. keep students achieving below curriculum expectations in literacy

about as far behind their peers as they currently are. The group felt it was important that the label for this rating clearly convey the meaning that such performance is “below the bar”, i.e. unacceptable.

“**Detrimental**” was the level used to describe performance, practices, shared understandings, beliefs and attitudes that would *actually do harm* to students achieving below curriculum expectations in literacy. This might mean that they would end up slipping even further behind their peers, or that important problems were missed that were likely to be detrimental to their education and wellbeing if not addressed. Any evidence of detrimental practices, attitudes, or inaction signals that the school needs to take urgent action.

The term “**minimally effective**” refers to minimally acceptable practices (etc) that were likely to contribute to accelerated progress for at least some students achieving below curriculum expectations in literacy. At this level the school is “just OK” but has significant room to make a bigger difference.

The terms “**developing effectiveness**”, “**consolidating effectiveness**” and “**highly effective**” reflect increasingly good practices and outcomes that are likely to result in accelerated progress in literacy for increasingly larger proportions of the school’s students achieving below curriculum expectations in literacy. The group carefully considered each rubric to ensure that the top level represented a serious stretch target for schools, but one that was difficult to reach but certainly doable with sustained effort.

WHY ARE THERE SIX LEVELS IN EACH RUBRIC?

There was an in-depth discussion around this point as part of the rubric development, particularly about whether there needed to be one or two levels between the “minimally effective” and “highly effective” levels. The group felt that six levels of performance were necessary to detect meaningful improvements in school performance with respect to meeting the needs of students achieving below curriculum expectations in literacy. In other words, fewer levels would mean that a school could noticeably improve, but not enough to be able to justify going up a whole level on the rubric. In general, if users of rubrics start seeing justifications to add + or – to their ratings, the instrument may not be sensitive enough and more levels are required.

At the other extreme, a rubric that has too many levels can result in protracted, unfruitful discussions about whether a rating should be at one level or another. Although some initial disagreement and debate is to be expected when drawing on perspectives from different professionals, if consensus or near-consensus is consistently hard to reach, this is a sign either that the rubric wording is unclear or that there are too many levels.

WHAT DO ALL THE TERMS MEAN?

- Accelerated progress = progress that is faster than, i.e. a steeper trajectory than, the expected rate of progress (not just faster than a particular student's previous rate of progress)
- Assessment for learning = a two-phase process that begins with initial or diagnostic assessment prior to starting a topic to identify what a student already knows, as well as any gaps or misconceptions. As the unit progresses, the teacher and student work together to assess the student's knowledge, what she or he needs to learn to improve and extend this knowledge, and how the student can best get to that point (formative assessment). Assessment for learning occurs at all stages of the learning process. (Wikipedia)
- Communities of practice = collaborative networks of teachers who rigorously and transparently examine their instructional techniques in order to raise student achievement
- Evaluation = a systematic process for determining the quality, value or effectiveness of an approach, intervention, programme, policy, service, product or other entity
- PLCs – professional learning communities = an extended learning opportunity to foster collaborative learning among colleagues within a particular work environment or field. It is often used in schools as a way to organize teachers into working groups (Wikipedia). Effective PLCs have a focus on analysing the impact of teaching on learning and support participants to process new understandings and their implications for teaching (BES – Teacher Professional Learning and Development).
- Literacy Learning Progressions = a professional tool that shows what knowledge and skills their students need in order to meet the reading and writing demands of the New Zealand Curriculum <http://www.literacyprogressions.org.nz/>
- National Standards = a set of clear expectations that students need to meet in reading, writing and mathematics in the first eight years at school. The standards describe reference points or signposts of achievement at each year level. Assessing progress and achievement in relation to the standards will be an integral part of teaching and learning across the New Zealand Curriculum from 2010. <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/theMinistry/EducationInitiatives/NationalStandards.aspx>
- Students achieving below curriculum expectations in literacy = Students who are unable to adequately access the curriculum due to being below the reading and writing expectations for their cohort (as laid out in the NZC and the National Standards).
- Transient students = students who change schools frequently and whose schooling is disrupted by this. More specific definitions exist but are varied. Most consider 'frequent' moves as being at least two or more changes in school every year or two.
- The team around the child = the group of parents, teachers, other school staff, extended family and involved professionals who work together to support a child's learning and development