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# Leading a School in a Disadvantaged Area: Characteristics of High performing Schools, from scientific research[1]

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(update 2011 of 2008 and 2006 documents)

## Introduction

Several studies have been conducted in order to determine which factors enable certain schools with a low socioeconomic status to fare much better than others in terms of student academic success (high-performing schools). Other studies made it possible to follow non-performing schools in their process to improve performance.

This document briefly outlines the main factors that have emerged from these studies. These are brief examples of the characteristics of efficient schools in disadvantaged areas (several books are published every year on this topic). More in-depth documents have been produced by *A Montreal School for All* - MELS (Archambault, Garon et Harnois, 2011. Archambault, Ouellet et Harnois, 2006).

The objective of these documents is to elicit reflection and understanding of the means necessary for school improvement. This implies ensuring the relevance and the efficacy of pedagogical and management practices and developing procedures to regulate these practices in order to allow for more student learning.

## Factor 1: A Clear and Shared Vision

In a high-performing school, the principal has a strong educational vision that has been presented and discussed with the school team, and that is expressed on a regular basis. The focus of this vision is on learning and it aims at reducing social inequalities. It encourages everyone concerned to be aware of practices that, instead of reducing inequalities can have the opposite effect; furthermore, this vision respects and takes differences into account.

## Factor 2: The School Environment

A high-performing school is a safe place for the children and the adults who spend time in it. In addition, it is a welcoming environment for the students, the personnel, the parents, and the community. It is an environment that aims at responding to the needs and the welfare of everyone. Not only is the principal welcoming but so is the support staff (particularly the secretarial staff) as well as the teachers and other professionals. The respect for diversity is best expressed in a welcoming atmosphere. In such an environment, students, staff and parents feel secure, and feel that they are being taken care of.

## Factor 3: A Strong Focus on Learning

The educational vision leads to goals and a direction focused on student learning. From these goals and the actions that derive from it, is embedded the belief that all students can learn and that high expectations must be maintained for them (not reduced). Considering that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have the same learning capacities as others, lowering expectations for them would mean not taking this factor into account and believing that they are less capable than others. These high expectations are related to what the students already know and are based more on the learning process than on predetermined content. This

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[1] This text was written in the context of a research project with *A Montreal School for All*- MELS

educational vision is embodied in the conviction that the students must be supported in their learning and that we must intervene directly in the learning process.

Furthermore, the principal adopts management practices that influence learning both directly and indirectly. Pedagogical supervision focuses on student learning and on supporting the development of pedagogical practices aimed at improving learning. In addition, in a high-performing school, ongoing assessment takes place in order to support student learning. Finally, great importance is given to the learning of reading.

### Factor 4: A Moral and Ethical Leadership Based on Social Justice

The school principal demonstrates moral and ethical leadership, anchored in social justice. The moral commitment of the principal aims at wanting to make a difference for students. The principal encourages the school team to gain better knowledge of their environment, of social inequalities, and of issues concerning poverty and diversity. A recurring issue consists in rejecting false beliefs and prejudices that could be expressed. Finally, the principal perceives his/her role as that of an agent of change and, as such, shows flexibility and an ability to manage the unexpected. In this role, the principal elicits and cultivates the empowerment of students, teachers, and parents. This helps them gain control of their environment, as well as the capacity to identify and denounce social inequalities; to become agents of social transformation.

### Factor 5: A School Organization that Supports Learning

The organization of a high-performing school is centered on learning. It is therefore flexible and responds to the learning needs of the students. In Québec, components of school organization relate to the coordination of learning cycles, school transportation, scheduling and the school calendar, as well as management of time and space.

### Factor 6: Collaboration and Teamwork

In a high-performing school, there is a spirit of collaboration. Teachers work in teams to prepare, implement and assess learning situations. Teaching and the monitoring of students' progress does not depend on one person. Professional development takes place mainly within a team setting. Moreover, leadership no longer belongs solely to the school principal. It is shared with the teachers and solicits their respective competencies. Accountability is also shared.

### Factor 7: A Relationship with Parents

Parent participation in the school life of their child is essential and it exists within an equal partnership with the school. In a high-performing school, the role of the parents as partners is recognized. In addition, their participation in the school life of their child is encouraged. The welcoming atmosphere, respect and flexibility mentioned above, favour the openness of the school to various and diverse forms of participation.

### Factor 8: A Partnership with the Community

In high-performing schools, the responsibility for education is shared with both the parents and the community. Partnerships are established not only to allow the school to benefit from the community resources, but also for the school to establish itself in the community. It is an opportunity to collaborate and to respond to the educational needs of the students.

### Factor 9: Professional Development

The desire to continuously improve teaching competencies as well as those of the school principal, is the trademark of a high-performing school. The school team finds ways to improve professionally in a climate that is open to change and innovation. Furthermore, knowledge of the school environment and social inequalities must constantly be strived for.

### Factor 10: Using Data to Lead

In a high-performing school, the principal uses existing data, or data the school has already produced, or requests the production of new data to guide decisions regarding the management of the school.

Reference
Archambault, J., Garon, R., Harnois, L., et Ouellet, G. (2011). *Diriger une école en milieu défavorisé. Ce qui ressort des écrits scientifiques et professionnels (mise à jour).* Université de Montréal et Une École montréalaise pour tous (MELS), 14 p.