Exploring the Underlying Traits of High-Performing Schools

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About the Education Quality and Accountability Office

The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) is an independent provincial agency funded by the Government of Ontario. EQAO’s mandate is to conduct province-wide tests at key points in every student’s primary, junior and secondary education and report the results to educators, parents and the public.

EQAO acts as a catalyst for increasing the success of Ontario students by measuring their achievement in reading, writing and mathematics in relation to Ontario Curriculum expectations. The resulting data provide a gauge of quality and accountability in the Ontario education system.

The objective and reliable assessment results are evidence that adds to current knowledge about student learning and serves as an important tool for improvement at all levels: for individual students, schools, boards and the province.

About EQAO Research

EQAO undertakes research for two main purposes:

• to maintain best-of-class practices and to ensure that the agency remains at the forefront of large-scale assessment and
• to promote the use of EQAO data for improved student achievement through the investigation of means to inform policy directions and decisions made by educators, parents and the government.

EQAO research projects delve into the factors that influence student achievement and education quality, and examine the statistical and psychometric processes that result in high-quality assessment data.
Abstract

There is a considerable body of evidence from research, notably the School Effectiveness Research (SER) and the School Improvement Research (SIR), that has identified key aspects of effective schools and presented educators with important ideas for enhancing school improvement efforts. This article presents an overview of the research emanating from Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, with an emphasis on information that is deemed to be of immediate and practical interest to school principals.

This review will likely reflect information that is familiar to many of you, provide support for some of your schools’ current practices and beliefs, and present new ideas and strategies that you may want to consider addressing in your own unique local contexts.
School Effectiveness

The emphasis in the Ontario context on ensuring that the needs of a diverse student body are accommodated is in keeping with the writings of Stoll and Fink (1996), who characterized an effective school as

- one that promotes progress for all of its pupils beyond what one would expect given its intake;
- one that ensures every pupil achieves at his/her highest standard possible;
- one that enhances all aspects of pupil achievement and development; and
- one that continues to improve from year to year. (p. 28)

An excellent review of the SER and SIR efforts over the last 25 years is provided by Teddlie and Stringfield (2007). The following are some of the key findings from this review, including eight major correlates of school effectiveness:

In response to the now-famous Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1966), which suggested that student achievement was largely a function of socio-economic status (SES), the early studies of effective schools focused on schools in low-SES areas. These studies systematically demonstrated not only that “school matters” but identified process variables in schools that contributed to positive learning outcomes. The work of Edmonds, Brookover and Lezotte (Brookover, Beady, Flood, Schweitzer & Wisenbaker, 1979; Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Edmonds, 1979) was particularly influential in the identification of a set of five correlates of effective schools that continue to be recognized today:

- strong instructional leadership from the principal,
- a pervasive and broadly understood instructional focus,
- a safe and orderly school learning environment (or “climate”),
- high expectations for achievement from all students, and
- the use of student achievement test data for evaluating program and school success. (Teddlie & Stringfield, 2007, p. 138)

Further work in SER conducted in the 1980s and 1990s resulted in the identification of additional effective-school correlates by Reynolds and Teddlie (2000) and Teddlie and Stringfield (2007). The expansion of the correlates was based on work conducted independently in the United States and the United Kingdom and from studies of teacher as well as school effectiveness. Also of importance is recent SER research that examined schools in different contexts with different effective-school characteristics. The research conducted in recent years also allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the school-based practices associated with each of the correlates. In the Canadian context, the work of Willms (2004) analyzing data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has demonstrated the unequivocal impact that schools have on student achievement and served to identify some of the school practices associated with enhanced student achievement.
Table 1 provides a summary of eight effective-school correlates and associated processes, adapted from the work of Reynolds and Teddlie (2000) and Teddlie and Stringfield (2007). Each of the correlates and associated process details are described in the body of this article, with an emphasis on providing real-life examples based on case studies of effective schools. These case studies consider some of the more than 200 schools in Ontario that have been profiled as “success stories” by EQAO (2010) as well as a recent in-depth examination of 20 outstanding schools in the United Kingdom (Ofsted, 2009).

**Table 1. Correlates of effective schools (adapted from Teddlie and Stringfield, 2007, p. 143)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correlate of effective schools</th>
<th>Process details</th>
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| 1. Providing strong and effective principal leadership | a. Being firm and purposeful  
b. Involving others in the process  
c. Exhibiting instructional leadership  
d. Frequent personal monitoring of staff performance  
e. Maintaining and recruiting talented staff  
f. Providing sustainable leadership |
| 2. Developing and maintaining a pervasive focus on instruction and learning | a. Focusing on academics  
b. Maximizing school learning time |
| 3. Producing a safe and positive school climate and culture | a. Creating a shared vision  
b. Creating an orderly and supportive environment  
c. Emphasizing positive reinforcement to build a positive pupil culture |
| 4. Creating high (and appropriate) expectations for all | a. For students  
b. For staff |
| 5. Using student achievement data to monitor progress at all levels | a. At the student level  
b. At the classroom and school level |
| 6. The processes of effective teaching | a. Maximizing class time  
b. Effective organization  
c. Providing a broad, balanced, relevant and stimulating curriculum  
d. Setting high standards for teaching |
| 7. Involving parents in productive and appropriate ways | a. Encouraging productive interactions with parents |
| 8. Developing staff skills at the school site | a. Integrating site-based professional development with school priorities  
b. Promoting learning communities |

Note: The list has been adapted based on the current literature review; one correlate identified by Teddlie and Stringfield (2007) has been excluded. Details of the process associated with each correlate have been refined, updated and/or expanded as deemed appropriate based on the author’s review of the literature.
The Eight Correlates: A Detailed Look

1. What Do the Processes of Strong Principal Leadership Look Like?

Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins (2008, p. 28), following an extensive review of the leadership literature, conclude that “school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning.” They point out that principals can have an impact on pupil learning though a positive influence on staff beliefs, values, motivation, skills and knowledge, and ensuring good working conditions in the school, and that these factors all contribute to improved staff performance.

Being firm and purposeful: What drives strong leadership and provides the stimulus for the firm and purposeful behaviour that so many studies have observed? In a recent in-depth look at 20 outstanding primary schools in the United Kingdom, the authors describe the leadership in these schools as “transformational” (Ofsted, 2009, p. 20). While transformational leadership was observed to have many different facets and can be displayed in many different ways, in the context of these 20 outstanding schools what stood out among the leaders who undertook the challenge of taking on very difficult-to-serve schools was their “’moral purpose,’ a fundamental set of values centred on putting children first and faith in what children can achieve and what teachers can do” (ibid, p. 21). These transformational leaders were observed to have the following unswerving beliefs:

- All pupils can achieve high standards, given sufficient time and high-quality support.
- All teachers can teach to high standards, with the right example, conditions and help.
- High expectations and early intervention are essential.
- Teachers need to learn all the time, and they need to be able to articulate what they do, why they do it and how effective it was. (ibid, p. 21)

A strong positive belief system that is rooted in sound educational theory drives the purposeful behaviour of effective school leaders. For Leithwood et al. (2008), this firm and purposeful behaviour is reflected in the principal’s role in building vision and setting directions. “It is about the establishment of shared purpose as a basic stimulant for one’s work. The more specific practices in this category are building a shared vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals and demonstrating high-performance expectations” (ibid., p. 30).

Involving others in the process: This means that effective school principals will share their leadership responsibilities and “that there is real empowerment in terms of true delegation of leadership power (distributed leadership)” (Moos & Huber, 2007, p. 581). Sackney (2007) describes this as “shared and supportive leadership” and suggests that having “a community of leaders” is a basic tenet of a learning community (ibid, p. 172). The leadership teams evidenced in many Ontario schools today are good examples of shared leadership.
**Exhibiting instructional leadership:** In its simplest form, school administrators may demonstrate instructional leadership by leading through example—i.e., by demonstrating the behaviours they expect of others and showing that they themselves are also prepared and able to do what they are asking of their staff. There will be “dedicated interest in and knowledge about what happens during lessons” (Moos & Huber, 2007, p. 581).

Reynolds and Teddlie (2000) cite four major areas of instructional leadership:

- developing a limited number of well-defined goals and communicating them to all school constituencies;
- managing the educational production function through supervising instruction, allocating and protecting instructional time, coordinating the curriculum and monitoring student progress;
- promoting an academic learning climate involving positive expectations for students, maintaining high personal visibility, providing incentives for teachers and students, and promoting professional development of teachers;
- developing a supportive work environment, involving the creation of a safe and orderly environment, providing opportunities for meaningful student involvement, developing staff collaboration, securing outside resources to support the school and the forging of links between the home and the school. (p. 144)

Leithwood et al. (2008) argue that it is the provision of the supportive work environment, Reynolds and Teddlie’s fourth point above, that is critical to the leadership process—i.e., establishing work conditions that allow teachers to make the most of their “motivations, commitments and capacities” (p. 30).

**Frequent, personal monitoring of staff performance:** Principals may carry out this leadership role in a variety of informal ways. For some, this will involve simply dropping in for classroom visits, chatting with teachers about their day-to-day practice, being on the spot to give advice or to help in decision making and “management by Wandering Around” (Peters & Waterman, 1982). Leithwood et al. (2008) highlight the importance of principals providing individualized support to teachers, fostering intellectual stimulation, and, as already highlighted in the section on instructional leadership, modelling appropriate values and behaviours.

**Maintaining and recruiting talented staff:** Reynolds and Teddlie (2000) suggest that there are two components to having a competent school staff. One aspect is recognizing where weaknesses exist and encouraging weak performers to improve or move on. The second is effectively recruiting good staff. Bradbury (2008) suggests that selection and replacement of staff is one of the most important processes in school management, not only because staffing costs typically represent more than 70% of the school budget but because, “however good your vision and strategic plans may be, they will not be achieved successfully unless you have the right people in post to share and implement them.”
In an EQAO review of successful schools in Ontario (Shulman, 2010), exactly this sentiment was communicated by one school principal as follows: “You can have a plan that looks great, but the only way to make it work is to have talented, capable and fully committed staff” (p. 3).

It is not surprising, then, that attracting and appointing effective staff was also highlighted as a feature of the 20 outstanding schools in the United Kingdom. Given that many of these schools were involved in initial teacher education, principals could often recruit applicants with whom they were familiar. However, key to this process was having a very clear idea of what sort of person was required for the school.

Typically, headteachers and governors have a clear idea of the sort of person they are seeking. In one school, for example, staff are selected explicitly on the basis that they are lively people with ideas. The headteacher does not want ‘yes people’ but those who are willing to exercise autonomy and contribute ideas within a structure. (Ofsted, 2009, p. 20)

**Sustainable leadership:** The topic of sustainable leadership has been given considerable attention in the last five to ten years, most notably by Fullan (2005) and Hargreaves and Fink (2004). Following are some key points for consideration:

Leaders develop sustainability by committing to and protecting deep learning in their schools; by trying to ensure that improvements last over time, especially after they have gone; by distributing leadership and responsibility to others; by considering the impact of their leadership on the schools and communities around them; by sustaining themselves so that they can persist with their vision and avoid burning out; by promoting and perpetuating diverse approaches to reform rather than standardized prescriptions for teaching and learning; and by engaging actively with their environments. (Hargreaves & Fink)

In the same vein, Leithwood et al. (2008) report that one of the most common sources of a school’s failure to progress, despite teachers’ best efforts, is a lack of succession planning. This lack of planning was noted to be particularly detrimental to initiatives focused on improving student achievement.

2. **How Do You Develop and Maintain a Pervasive Focus on Instruction and Learning?**

**Focusing on academics:** This focus may be accomplished in a number of ways. Studies of effective schools (Ofsted, 2009; Reynolds & Teddlie, 2000; Shulman, 2010) have highlighted the following:

- Ensuring regular use of homework with ongoing monitoring by senior school leadership.
- Promoting a student culture in which “academic emulation” is encouraged.
- Committing to the development and mastery of central learning skills, particularly literacy and numeracy; this may involve use of a formal mastery-
learning approach and/or creating blocks of time for literacy and mathematics.

- Ensuring high curriculum coverage or opportunities to learn—research has shown wide variation in curriculum coverage not only among schools but also across subject areas.
- Focusing on maintaining and improving standards of student achievement.

In describing effective-school practices, the Ofsted (2009) study summarized some of these ideas as follows:

They teach children the things they really need to know and show them how to learn for themselves and with others. (p. 6)

Maximize school learning time: A number of studies have highlighted the need to maximize learning time at the school as well as at the classroom level. Research has shown that simply increasing allocated school time does not translate into increased learning time. Rather, as Aronson, Simmerman and Carlos (2005) point out, based on their meta-analysis, what is critical is maximizing the time when students are focused and engaged in learning activities.

Cotten (2000) included the following suggestions for maximizing learning time in schools based on her review of the literature on effective school practices:

- Ensure adequate allocation of time for core subjects.
- Implement appropriate policies to deter lateness, absenteeism and disruptive classroom behaviour.
- Ensure extra learning time is made available outside regular school hours for students who require extra assistance.
- Limit administrative intrusions into classroom learning time.
- Ensure that the school day, classes and other activities start and finish on time.
- Provide staff development as required to assist teachers in managing classrooms and maximizing time-on-task.
- Review proposed new programs and activities to consider their impact on student learning time.

3. How Do You Produce a Positive School Culture?

Creating a shared vision: As suggested previously, strong leadership is reflected in principals’ ability to create a shared vision among staff and to foster the acceptance of group goals. Creating a shared vision is an important aspect of developing a positive school culture (Hopkins et al., 1994; Stoll & Fink, 1994).

The importance of having a shared vision, and associated shared values and goals, is due to the fact that these are the foundation blocks upon which a collaborative learning community is built. Again, research has pointed to the importance of collegiality and
collaboration among staff and shown that consistency in the practice of teachers in schools has a positive impact on student achievement (Reynolds & Teddlie, 2000).

The generation of a learning community amongst staff in which all members share good practice, act as critical friends, and engage in a process of mutual education and re-education is clearly essential in the continuation of a positive school culture over time, as well as in its creation. (p. 148)

Creating an orderly and supportive environment: Both early studies of effective schools (e.g., Lezotte, 1989) and more recent studies (e.g., Ofsted, 2009; Willms 2004) have pointed to the need to create order to allow for learning to take place in a safe and orderly environment. As Reynolds and Teddlie (2000) point out, “without order, discipline and social control at the school level it would be very difficult for staff to attain high levels of student attention and engagement within classrooms” (p. 148).

The Ofsted (2009) study and the more recent EQAO review (Shulman, 2010) further suggest that effective schools do not just create an orderly environment (which may be regarded as the minimum requirement), but rather these schools take the next step to foster a very supportive learning environment: “They provide affection, stability and a purposeful and structured experience” (Ofsted, p. 6). It can be seen that this statement brings together the supportive caring attitude of staff toward their students (affection), the orderly environment (stability) and the focus on academics (the purposeful, structured experience). In his 2004 review of literacy data from the PISA study, Willms found a similar association at the secondary level insofar as students in higher-performing schools reported better teacher-student relations. Evidence of a caring, supportive and orderly school climate was described in the EQAO review (Shulman, 2010) of successful schools as follows:

The profiled schools acknowledged, honoured and respected individual differences. These schools acted as a hub of support for students, instilled self-esteem and confidence, ensured student safety and well-being and provided a nurturing environment. (p. 3)

Emphasizing positive reinforcement to build a positive student culture: Emphasizing positive reinforcement is clearly part and parcel of the process of creating a positive pupil culture where students develop positive attitudes toward learning, the school and school staff. The following have been identified in the literature (Reynolds & Teddlie, 2000) as key practices in providing positive reinforcement to students:

Reinforcement should be
- provided quickly in order to reinforce the behaviour or achievement observed;
- fairly and consistently applied across students;
- specific and
- varied.
The following describes how a positive pupil culture was created in the 20 outstanding schools in the United Kingdom:

- They build – and often rebuild – children’s self-belief. . . .
- They give them opportunities, responsibility and trust in an environment which is both stimulating and humanising.
- They listen to their pupils, value their views and reflect and act on what they say. (Ofsted, 2009, p. 6)

4. How Do You Create High (and Appropriate) Expectations for All?

For students: The importance of developing high expectations and aspirations for students has been one of the most enduring findings in all of the school effectiveness literature. But critical to this process, and sometimes overlooked by those who espouse the importance of high expectations, is the importance of clearly and explicitly communicating expectations for both behaviour and achievement to students and their parents.

The importance of communicating expectations was highlighted in the recent case studies conducted in the both United Kingdom (Ofsted, 2009) and Ontario (Shulman, 2010). Shulman reported that, in the province’s successful schools, “expectations were shared with students and parents; coaches and tutors modelled expected performance, always working toward the highest level” (p. 4).

The following is a description of one “outstanding” school’s views and actions with regard to expectations (Ofsted, 2009):

Expectations have to be known, understood and shared to be of value. The school ensured that pupils, parents and the community were constantly reminded of them. The same is true of the challenge of raising aspirations among pupils and parents. This is usually done as a relentless message coming out from the school at every opportunity. It is useful to be able to reinforce the message with role models of successful past pupils. (p. 22)

Whereas the foregoing examples focus on setting and communicating high expectations for student performance, the following description illustrates the importance of establishing and communicating expectations for student behaviour.

The new headteacher’s first priority was to deal with behaviour. He tackled it in two ways. Although the rules of the school were clear, parents, children and staff did not know what they were. So he asked parents and children what they should be and they drew up a code of conduct together. Every child and family had a copy.

The second approach was the tough one—to clamp down on swearing and other anti-social behaviour. He said: “If children infringed, I took them home and
rousted them in front of mum and dad before bringing them immediately back to school”.

You cannot expect good behaviour if there is no understanding of what is and is not acceptable. Several of the schools have involved parents and pupils in drawing up codes of conduct, which consolidated the high standards expected. Two main benefits emerge from such engagement. Families could not dissociate themselves so easily from the school’s values and requirements. Moreover, they could choose whether or not to apply similar expectations at home. Some parents have been admonished by their children for speaking or behaving in socially unacceptable ways, for example swearing or using racist language. (ibid, p. 23)

In addition to establishing and communicating expectations for behaviour, the school processes in the above description clearly reflect strong principal leadership, the creation of a positive school climate and the productive involvement of parents.

For staff: The importance of setting high expectations for teacher performance and for the school itself is a relatively new idea and has not received as much attention as the topic of expectation setting for students. It was originally proposed by Reynolds and Teddlie (2000) in their review of the literature and described as follows:

> It is also highly likely that high expectations for students are associated with a staff group who have themselves high expectations of what it is possible for them to achieve from the principal or headteacher. (p. 149)

Reynolds and Teddlie (2000) also identified the following five expectations for staff that principals may want to address:

- Expecting new teachers to have a good understanding of the school before they arrive
- Expecting a high level of teacher participation in professional development activities
- Expecting detailed monitoring by staff of student activities, including homework
- Expecting staff to make the academic achievement of their students their first priority
- Expecting staff to manage their time effectively to ensure maximum student time on task

5. How Do You Use Student Achievement Data to Monitor Progress at All Levels?

At the student level: The early research on school effectiveness identified frequent monitoring of student progress as a correlate of effective schools, and the use of assessment data continues to be highlighted in more recent research reviews. In practical
terms, it has been observed that student progress in effective schools is monitored and reviewed on an ongoing basis in order to provide differentiated learning experiences to meet individual student needs within or outside the context of the regular school program.

Assessment data may come from a variety of sources, ranging from classroom- to provincial-level assessments and may serve different purposes in the context of promoting achievement. Earl (2009) suggests differentiating between assessment of learning, for learning and as learning. This differentiation may be thought of as follows:

- Clarifying for both students and their teachers what students know and have learned (assessment of learning)
- Clarifying for both students and their teachers what remains to be learned and what the standards for achievement are (assessment for learning)
- Teaching students how to evaluate their own progress and to recognize when further work is required to meet achievement expectations (assessment as learning)

In keeping with the foregoing, assessing and tracking progress with rigour was a prominent feature of the outstanding schools portrayed in the Ofsted study (2009). Specifically, it was noted that “typically, information about pupils’ progress is analysed very carefully and used to identify individuals and groups of pupils who need specific help” (p. 20).

The following description reflects one school’s rigorous approach to assessment and the importance the school placed on teachers’ understanding the different levels of achievement and what is required to move children from one level to the next.

*Knowing a level when you see it*
Considerable time at William Ford Junior School has been invested in ensuring that teachers in all year groups can assign a National Curriculum level to pupils’ work accurately. Substantial time has also been taken to ensure that teachers understand what is needed to move pupils to the next level: “If it is a 3b, how do we get to a 3a?” Pupils’ progress is analysed carefully. Every teacher meets the headteacher termly to discuss the progress of each pupil in detail. Comprehensive notes are made. Meetings are used to review progress, set targets for the coming term and decide how each child is going to be helped to meet or exceed her or his targets. (Ibid, p. 19)

Similarly, the EQAO study of successful Ontario schools (Shulman, 2010) included the following description of how student assessment was a key to success:

*Profiled schools developed activities and practices strategically to move students from one level to the next, to group students for effective instruction or to implement an early identification and intervention plan. (p. 2)*

**School- and classroom-level progress:** Researchers have also noted the benefit of using achievement and process data to evaluate school- and classroom-level progress (Reynolds and Teddlie, 2000; Teddlie and Stringfield, 2007). Principals of effective schools thus ensure that
both outcome and process data are made available for use by school staff and that assessment data are integral to monitoring the attainment of school goals. At the classroom level, achievement data will clarify for teachers how they may need to alter their teaching practices to accommodate student needs. Most recently, the EQAO review of successful Ontario schools reported the following:

The most common, profound and pervasive catalyst for improvement schools identified was the use of data. . . . School teams systematically identified strengths and challenges at the individual-student, grade and overall-school levels. The information obtained was used to set goals and identify target areas for improvement; it often laid the foundation for the school plan. All decisions about the focus of instructional programs and practices, training needs, resource requirements, intensity of support for student needs and the placement of support staff were grounded in the outcomes of the data analysis.

(Shulman, 2010, p. 2).

6. What Are Some of the Key Processes of Effective Teaching?

Maximizing class time: Reynolds and Teddlie (2000) identified the following as some of the key steps that teachers will want to consider to maximize class time (some have been noted previously in the section on maximizing school time):

a. Ensuring that lessons start and finish on time
b. Minimizing the amount of time that is lost in routine administrative matters, disciplinary interventions or lesson transitions from one topic, subject or activity to another
c. Maximizing the proportion of time that is spent interacting with pupils, including time spent presenting new material
d. Maximizing student time on task

Effective organization: Reynolds and Teddlie (2000) also suggested that effective teaching is characterized by effective classroom organization and identified the following as key contributing factors:

- Advance lesson preparation
- Being clear with students about the purpose of the lesson and what they are to do
- Ensuring curricular material is provided in manageable units (e.g., split units as required)
- Ensuring lessons are structured together with basic skill acquisition

Providing a broad, balanced, relevant and stimulating curriculum: Effective schools provide students with a broad, balanced, relevant and stimulating curriculum based on teachers’ understanding of their students and how curriculum can be shaped and presented to match students’ needs most closely (Ofsted, 2009). This latter study also pointed out the need to pay particular attention to ensuring that students get a good start when they begin school. The United Kingdom has an Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum, which is of particular importance to students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. The following is
a description of how this early years curriculum was applied in one of the outstanding schools in the Ofsted study:

- a strong and explicit focus on play, sociability and enjoyment
- ready access to resources so pupils can choose and take responsibility
- curriculum planning which is closely related to pupils’ interests, so that it motivates them
- explicit encouragement of cooperation between children, promoted by skilled questioning by and support from staff
- plenty of space, including “messy” and “clean” rooms as well as large, accessible, and well-structured outdoor areas
- well-focused speaking and listening activities
- much use of ICT, preparing for a future unknown
- no rush to pursue writing; pupils choose when they wish to start writing; in practice, they all start writing by the end of the reception year. (p. 16)

Ofsted also noted that, while outstanding schools took a variety of approaches to the design and content of the curriculum, they still had in common the overarching principles of ensuring that curriculum and program delivery were both stimulating and matched to the needs of students.

Some organise pupils by ability in the core subjects; others do not. Some cover many of the subjects through themes; others invest a lot of time in the creative curriculum and can demonstrate benefits in writing and other forms of expression. . . . Since all the schools have high standards of attainment, the inference is that an interesting, stimulating, well-taught curriculum through which the school interprets statutory requirements is a fundamental principle for effective schools. . . . Common to all these schools, however, is the way in which they understand the needs of their pupils and shape the curriculum to match them very closely. Outstanding schools have the confidence and imagination to take the statutory curriculum and make it their own.

(ibid, p. 17)

Additional features of outstanding curriculum provision noted in the Ofsted study (2009) included the following:

- placing a strong emphasis on, and making exemplary provision, for the basic skills
- strengthening English, mathematics and science through applications in other subjects and areas
- writing for purpose in a variety of transactional styles
- developing language by encouraging pupils to communicate their understanding and evaluate their learning
- activities carefully tailored to widen pupils’ learning and enrich their lives
a vibrant and exciting range of visits and stimulating inputs
planning which tailors activities to individual pupils including the gifted and talented
well-managed homework carefully communicated to pupils and parents. (p. 18)

The need for a stimulating and appropriately challenging curriculum has also been shown to be of importance in a recent Canadian study by Willms, Friesen and Milton (2009), who found that elementary and secondary students (Grades 6–12) were more likely to be engaged in their learning when classrooms and schools offered appropriate intellectual challenge.

Setting high standards for teaching: High teaching standards are also identified as being critical to achieving excellence. But what does excellent teaching look like? The following description of the excellent teaching standards observed in the Ofsted study (2009), while reiterating some of the teaching practices mentioned previously, serves as a useful referent:

- stimulating and enthusiastic teaching which interests, excites and motivates pupils and accelerates their learning . . . .
- consistency in the quality of teaching across the school
- development of good learning habits, with many opportunities for pupils to find things out for themselves
- highly structured approaches to reading, writing and mathematics, with some ability grouping
- well-planned lessons which provide for the differing needs of pupils
- stimulating classroom environment . . . .
- a close check on learning during lessons, with effective marking and assessment. (p. 15)

7. How Do You Involve Parents in Appropriate and Productive Ways?

Encouraging productive interaction with parents: Research has demonstrated that certain types of parental involvement are more productive and beneficial to student success and school effectiveness than others. Thus, for example, parents’ involvement in school work has been identified as a particularly productive form of involvement, whereas parental involvement in extracurricular activities was found to have relatively little effect (Sammons, Hillman and Mortimore, 1995). Specific means of involving parents identified in the research (Ofsted, 2009; Reynolds & Teddlie, 2000; Shulman, 2010) include

- parents helping in the classroom
- parents assisting with field trips
- schools having an “open door” school policy
• parents helping students with homework
• schools holding workshops for parents to support them in coaching their children
• parents and schools sharing information about student progress
• schools involving parents in the setting of learning and behavioural expectations for children

8. How Do You Develop Staff Skills at the School Site?

Integrating site-based professional development with school priorities: Reynolds and Teddlie (2000) found that principals in effective schools promote professional-development opportunities that are practical, integrated with school activities, located at the school and closely synchronized with school-development priorities. Additionally, opportunities that support a staff culture that involves mutual learning, monitoring and a commitment to collaboration contribute to school effectiveness. In contrast, in-service courses unrelated to a school’s core mission were found to be ineffective.

Developing learning communities: Sackney (2007), in his review of school effectiveness and improvement in the Canadian context, notes that there has been an increased emphasis on continuous improvement and the development of learning communities during the last 10–15 years. Effective teachers participate in learning communities that take shared responsibility, along with students, parents and the community, for student outcomes and improved student learning. Within the school, effective learning communities are characterized by collaborative teams and learning networks that work as “communities of practice.” Teachers thus collaborate with, and learn from, each other.

Case studies in both Ontario and the United Kingdom provide illustrative descriptions of how the development of learning communities in schools makes teaching and learning consistently effective. Collaborative planning of effective lessons appears to be one key ingredient. While the exact processes appear to vary among schools, effective schools emphasize that the collaboration contributes both to the high quality of the lessons and the maintenance of consistency in program delivery.

The EQAO review of successful schools in Ontario (Shulman, 2010) provided the following description of this collaborative process:

What distinguished profiled schools was the openness, insight, sharing, growth and support that was generated from a truly collegial, collaborative experience in a professional learning community.

Staff described team teaching, team planning, shared action-research projects, mentoring one another and new teachers, workshops and open-door classrooms as ways in which information sharing took place. In these ways teachers assumed a collective responsibility for identifying and understanding student needs and exchanged best practices for addressing them.
The following is a description of the approach of one particular outstanding school in the United Kingdom:

Very close team work within year groups is seen as the key to the high quality and consistency of teaching and learning. Teachers and teaching assistants in each year group form a tight, close team. They plan all their lessons together and all three classes typically work on the same lessons at the same time. Each year group has a day together each term, without pupils, to plan ahead. They also plan together formally once a week and informally almost every day. The outcomes of lessons are reviewed carefully to inform planning. Lesson plans are very detailed and include meticulous plans for teaching assistants. This thorough and detailed collaborative planning is seen as an important way to ensure consistency and equality of opportunity amongst classes. (Ofsted, 2009, p. 14)

School Improvement Research

Armed with information about what characterizes an effective school, our next step is to ask how principals and teachers translate this knowledge into practice. How do they improve on the status quo and sustain school improvements? The literature points to the following as keys to successful change processes:

Local implementation of a reform is key to success—i.e., unless local educators are active participants it is unlikely that the reform will produce the predicted results in the local setting; in addition, principal support and leadership for change strongly influence the local reform effort. Referring to the five-year Rand Agent Change Study, McLaughlin (1990) concluded that the study “demonstrated that the nature, amount, and pace of change at the local level was a product of local factors that were largely beyond the control of higher-level policymakers” (p. 12).

Although policies may set directions and provide a framework for change, they cannot determine outcomes. Implementation tends to predict gains in student achievement.

Successful implementation of projects in the Rand Change Agent Study required mutual adaptation of the reform and the local context (Berman & McLaughlin, 1976), a finding repeated in both SIR and SER over the next 30 years. Principal support was crucial. When teachers perceived that the principal liked a project and actively supported it, the project fared well [italics added]. Although the role of the external change agents was important, the involvement of the principal was even more important to the project’s success.

(Teddlie & Springfield, 2007, p. 135)

Teacher ownership of reforms is not an all-or-nothing concept in the early stages of reform. Rather, ownership of the reform develops through months
and years of engagement as teachers work to implement it. . . \textit{belief and commitment tended to follow successful practice} [italics added], rather than the other way around. (Ibid., p. 136)

Teddlie and Stringfield (2007) identified the following themes or conclusions from their review of the SIR, which has in the last 15 years been referred to more commonly as school restructuring and reform:

- School improvement requires a clearly defined intervention or set of interventions.
- There is no single “right” reform for all schools. “Material resources, human capacities, prior experiences with change, and belief systems all vary across schools, and within schools, over time. In study after study, context matters.”
- The most successful reforms “involved local teachers and administrators in adapting external research and development efforts so that they would work well in the local context.”
- A nearly universal finding in school improvement efforts has been “the need for strong, academically focused principal leadership.”
- Ongoing teacher support and professional development are critical to the change process.
- It is important to monitor processes as well as outcomes when assessing school improvement efforts.
Summary and Conclusions

We are fortunate to have at our disposal a wealth of information about what contributes to effective schooling and what the factors that influence school improvement are. As indicated previously, there is no one formula that can be applied to ensure all schools are effective. Sackney (2007) points out that the current challenge is to create “an infrastructure to enable the knowledge base, with both best practice and research findings to be utilized.” At the same time, it is inspiring to hear about schools that have successfully turned themselves around and met incredible challenges with considerable success. The following are the inspirational conclusions of the Ofsted study (2009), which provide a fitting concluding summary for the current review:

From good to great: The approaches illustrated by the schools in their journey from good (or worse) to outstanding (or better) differ in their details but have a number of common features. They are all well thought out, implemented, and consistently applied. They make the best use of staff expertise. They set out to give children a worthwhile experience at school in a structured, safe and interesting environment. The following principles and priorities emerge clearly, again and again.

a. Restore order and calm so that teaching and learning can take place.
b. Ensure that high expectations are set and that everyone—pupils, parents, staff and governors—is clear what those are.
c. Get the pupils and parents involved, engaged and committed so that they cannot later complain that they “did not know.”
d. Lead by example; demonstrate the behaviours you expect of others and show that you are prepared to do anything you might ask of them.
e. Set and demonstrate high standards for teaching and learning.
f. Look early on at the curriculum, the school day and pupils’ experiences of school.
g. Monitor and evaluate every aspect of the school’s performance.

Above all:
h. Gauge the ability of staff to adopt consistent approaches: in teaching and learning, in applying policies—especially behaviour—and in routines and basic practices. As one chair of governors said: “Staff need to be aboard the bus” when the school embarks on its journey of improvement. (p. 25)
References


Cotton, Kathleen. (2000). The schooling practices that matter most. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.


