



## FROM A SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL TO SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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### Abstract

*The article follows the trends leading to the improvement of quality in education which is offered by educational institutions. The key concepts of these trends become the concepts of successful school and school improvement. Literature introduced the concept of a successful school in the 70ies of the last century. In the 80ies literature finds out the concept of school improvement. The definition of a successful school itself is problematic. Many authors view successful school as a school where pupils reach very good results in elementary skills, measured by corresponding tests. The authors suggest criteria of a successful school on the basis of research. The concept of school improvement is more practically oriented on school. It includes the teacher as a researcher and the process of self-evaluation of a school and school evaluation. At the end of 90ies both concepts interconnect which leads to a lot of wider research. The research of worldwide successful school improvement point out to a range of key principles. These principles offer basic orientation leading to school improvement. It is needed to monitor the quality of offered education. Quality of school, its success and continuous improvement are basic challenge to quality of European education.*

**Key words:** *successful school, school improvement, learning organization, principles of school improvement, student outcomes orientation, process orientation, schools of second millennium, schools of third millennium.*

### Introduction

What will the world be like in 2025? The simple answer is, we do not know. So how we can predict what will be the circumstances in term of education nearly fifteen years away? We might predict that if current trends in technology and the globalization of the economy continue that the world will probably need people that are highly skilled, highly knowledgeable and independent, but interactive thinkers. The world will need people who are able to make decisions, to enable them to adapt to new work, or new techniques, or to be entrepreneurial, when changes in work require changes in workforce. Our next step would be consider how schools might be reconstructed to enable these people to be educated.

### Successful Schools

Foreign literature introduced the concept of a successful school in the 70ies of the last century. The research and study of a successful school are mainly focused on the differences among successful schools (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore a Ouston 1979, Reynolds 1976, Smith a Tomlinson 1989). The research of successful schools was oriented on study results of pupils (Gray et al. 1999). Some research of successful schools between 1980 and 1990 are focused on pupils' results in relation to e.g. subject, different abilities of pupils, size of class, school, social environment, influence of school authorities, school culture. The United States base their research of a successful school upon work of Weber (1971) and Edmonds (1978, 1979a, 1979b, 1981) and Reynolds (1976) and Rutter (1979) in England. The main issue of the research in Germany is the answer to the question what a good school is (Hurrelman 1991, Fischer and Schratz 1997).

The definition of a successful school itself is problematic. Anglo-American literature views successful school as a school where pupils reach very good results in elementary skills, measured by corresponding tests. The authors suggest criteria of a successful school on the basis of research. E.g. Caldwell and Spinks (1991) describe a successful school by 42 criteria in 6 areas (curriculum, decision making, resources, results, headmaster, school climate). J. Macbeath (1999) characterizes a successful school by 10 areas (school climate, interrelations, class climate, support of learning, support of teaching, time and resources, organization and communication, equality of approach to education, record evaluation, relation of a school and family). Each of the areas offers 5 key components. These items arise from the research where all participants of the educational process (teachers, pupils, parents, social partners) choose criteria (Nezvalová, 2002) which they consider typical for the quality of the area.

### School Improvement

In the 80ies literature finds out the concept of school improvement. This concept is more practically oriented on school. It includes “the teacher as a researcher” (Elliott 1980, 1981) and the process of self-evaluation of a school and school evaluation (McMahon, Bolam, Abbott and Holly 1984, Clift and Nuttall 1987). Large number of extensive projects rises. They are focused on school improvement (e.g. Inner London Educational Authority’s Secondary Report on Improving Schools - Hargreaves 1984, International School Improvement Project - Hopkins 1987).

Even defining the term “school improvement” is not explicit. E.g. John Gray (Gray 1999) describes improving school as an effort to create better school environment supporting pupil learning. He describes an improving school as an institution which secures year-on year improvement in the outcomes of successive cohorts of similar pupils. Such a school gradually improves its results. In other words it advances its effectiveness. Peter Mortimore (1998) describes school improvement as a process of improving the way of school organises, promotes and supports learning. It includes changing aims, expectations, organisations, and ways of learning and methods of teaching and organisational culture. Although not inimical, these definitions offer diverse perspectives. To Gray, student outcomes are pre-eminent, to Mortimore is the process vital. While Gray emphasizes the outcomes – pupils’ results, Mortimore emphasizes the process. The process of improving school includes improvement of school outcomes through the incorporated changes and the school ability to manage these changes. At the end of 90ies both concepts interconnect which leads to a lot of wider research projects (e.g. Improving the quality of education for All -Hopkins 1996, School Improvement Project - Reynolds, 1996).

In the latest period the concept of a successful school mainly focused on results connects with the concept of school improvement that includes not only the results but also the process. The research of worldwide successful school improvement point out to a range of key principles (Hopkins, 1996). These principles offer basic orientation leading to school improvement. They are based on the analysis of typical areas of a large number of successful schools. These principles of school improvement are incorporated in the following table:

**Table 1. Principles of school improvement.**

<b>Principles of school improvement</b>	<b>Examples of theoretical, experimental, political or practical influence on school improvement</b>
Achievement orientation	The responsibility from the viewpoint of moral and social justice for improving the results of student learning and increasing effort of teaching quality.



Aspiration reinforcement	Moral imperative of emancipation, increasing of individual responsibility, improving trust in individual abilities.
Based on research and theory	Use the strategies of a learning organization along with empirical support for development of wide spectrum of teaching possibilities and teaching programs or modules.
Specific content	The content focused on learning needs of pupils regarding their qualifications and abilities.
Capacity building	The need to ensure persistence of learning community and establishment of local infrastructures and nets.
Enquiry driven	The use of data to improve school, awareness and to direct dealing. The influence of reflexive practice on further school improvement.
Implementation oriented	The research on management of change, in particulate importance of individual meaning the consistency of classroom effects and the creation of a commitment to active implementation.
Intervention and strategy	The influence of action research and planning on school development.
External support	Emphasis on the networking and external support agencies helping the implementation of changes.
System and structure	This relates to ensure policy coherence horizontally and vertically and the pressure and support to exploit the creativity and synergies within the system.

These principles fulfill several important functions:

- define a particular approach to school improvement,
- can be used to organize theoretical research and practical implications which define school improvement as a field of inquiry,
- provide a set of criteria which can be used to differentiation of wide spectrum of different approaches to school improvement,
- can also be specifically used to support the analysis and defining of individual efforts and programs of school improvement,
- contain series of implications for educational politics which can influence achievement and learning of all students.

Some countries (e.g. England, the USA) focus quality improvement of provided education mainly on the results of students that are regularly checked by standardized national tests. Schools are autonomous in the curriculum design. They create the curriculum by using the goals given by the national curriculum. Students (parents) have an opportunity to choose a

school on the basis of results in national tests. External evaluation of inspection plays major role. This approach can be characterized consequently:

- Explicitly given standards and indicators of achievement (of pupils, teachers, managers);
- Emphasis on inspection, standardized, measurable and published results of a school in defined areas;
- Decentralization of responsibility;
- Competitiveness among schools;
- Increasing the influence of students, parents and social partners;
- Emphasis on effectiveness and productivity.

While some authors (Abbott and Ryan 2000, Bottery 1999, Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach 1999, Hargreaves 1994, Fergusson 1994, Fitz-Gibbon 1996) support these approaches, others criticize them (Smith 1998, Ranson 2000, Darling-Hammond 1995, Joyce, Calhoun and Hopkins 1995). As an alternative they suggest:

- Learning for life (not for tests);
- Emphasis on participation and dialogue;
- Respect to the needs of all students;
- Support of active learning for the development of responsibility and reflection and self-reflection;
- Preparation for lifelong learning;
- Cooperation of all participants.

The following table compares these two trends in terms of some criteria leading to school improvement:

**Table 2. Comparison between trends of criteria leading to school improvement.**

<b>Result orientation</b>	<b>Process orientation</b>
Authoritative headmaster	Cooperating headmaster
Hierarchic decision making (top-down)	Participative decision making
Realization of changes administrated by educational politics, changes managed administratively	Learning organization, professionally lead changes
External evaluation	Self-evaluation of schools
National tests	Teacher evaluation of pupils
Traditional research	Action research
Teacher education given centrally	Teacher education at school

### **Characteristic of schools in second and third millennium**

It is very difficult to mention characteristics of a successful school for further period in quickly changing circumstances. None the less some researchers (Hargreaves 1994, Spender 1997, White 1997, Otero 1998, Creemers, Reynolds, Chrispeels, Mortimore, Murphy, Stringfield, Stoll and Townsend 1998) state in their work that schools will transform from the second millennium institutions to third millennium institutions. It is likely that some schools



have already started this process. The researchers suppose that schools will change on the basis of “inner powers” (learning organization, learning community, self-evaluation, reflection...) as well as “external powers” (government, economical circumstances, market requirements, inspection, external evaluation, audits...). Some changes of current schools generate the oncoming changes. The following table briefly characterizes second millennium and third millennium schools.

**Table 3. Characteristic of schools.**

<b>Second millennium schools</b>	<b>Third millennium schools</b>
The school offers curriculum which has to be completed by students in a certain time;	Education is offered by different sources in time-unlimited interval, one of the sources is school;
The school offers school curriculum preparing students for different life situations;	The school offers curriculum focused on creating key competences;
The role of a teacher is to transfer knowledge and skills they know;	The role of a teacher is to teach on the basis of learning needs of students;
School is community of students where everyone gets help to reach their maximum of abilities;	School is learning community where everyone (students, teachers, parents, administrators) are learners and teachers depending on circumstances;
Everyone gets the same content of education with minimal differentiation based on interest;	Information is accessible on the basis of abilities and interests of students. These information are very different for gaining elementary skills;
Schools keep up minimal contact with community and business;	Community is responsible for quality of offered education of students and adults. Business and industry are active in increasing school quality;
Schools are successful if students assert themselves at employment market, starting from the unqualified to college-educated;	School is successful if all students have the skills to assert themselves and adapt at rapidly changing labour market, social and economic circumstances;
Education is possible to gain only at an educational institution;	Education is possible to gain from many different sources;
Everyone has to learn “elementary” knowledge and skills;	Everyone has to understand the process of learning and has to have elementary study skills;
The learning process is controlled by a teacher;	The learning process is controlled by a learner;
Learning is an individual activity. Success depends on activities of a learner;	Learning is an interactive activity. Success depends on the cooperation of learners in a team;
Formal education prepares students for life;	Formal education is basic for lifelong learning;
The terms education and school mean nearly the same;	School is only one of many possible steps of education;
After graduation student enters the real life;	Education offers wide opportunities of assertion;
The more formal qualifications, the higher	The higher ability and adaptability, the higher

successiveness; Elementary education is financed by state;	successiveness; Elementary education is financed by state as well as by private sources;
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How will successful schools of the following decade be characterized? Will they be in agony (e.g. Spender 1997), will they probably be the same as today (White 1997)? Both possibilities are less than possible. It is more and more influenced by the achievements in the area of ICT which support education not only in content but also in forms and results a great deal. Global economics and communication brings cooperation in education. It comes to comparison of approaches in different fields of education in educationally advanced countries what also brings mutual usage of successful changes on the macro level (e.g. educational politics) and on the school level. The schools cooperate on local, national and international projects and the experience of successful schools is used by other schools. Schools quickly transform and as Townsend, Clark and Ainscow (1999) state it is needed to change them from second millennium institutions to third millennium institutions. Sets of criteria characterizing individual areas of second and third millennium schools and defined as criteria of the second and third generation shows the following table:

**Table 4. Criteria characterizing individual areas of schools.**

Second generation of criteria of second millennium schools	Third generation of criteria of third millennium schools
<i>School control</i> ➤ The autonomy of school improves academic results of pupils	<i>School management</i> ➤ Decision making in teams
<i>Leadership</i> ➤ Headmaster is the key person	<i>Team leading</i> ➤ Headmaster cooperates with teams on the development of shared vision of school
<i>Faculty</i> ➤ Maintenance of low fluctuation	<i>Choice of teachers</i> ➤ Choice of teachers on the basis of needs of curriculum ➤ Emphasis on cooperation and team work
<i>Curriculum and teaching</i> ➤ Clearly defined goals ➤ Emphasis on subject knowledge and elementary skills ➤ Learning styles of pupils ➤ Teacher-led lessons	<i>Teaching and evaluation</i> ➤ Continual curriculum with the emphasis on critical thinking ➤ Multiple intelligence ➤ Block schedule ➤ Pupil-led lessons
<i>Continuing education of teachers</i> ➤ Based on educational needs of teachers	<i>Lifelong learning of teachers</i> ➤ Based on needs of school ➤ Emphasis on team cooperation
<i>Maximum of teaching time</i> ➤ Time according to the goals in subjects ➤ Increasing number of lessons in individual subjects	<i>Flexible schedule</i> ➤ Time intended for learning can change ➤ Increasing time of creative way of teaching ➤ Using ICT



<p><i>Planning</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Teachers and administrators cooperate</li> <li>➤ Emphasis on planning the goals</li> </ul>	<p><i>Participative planning</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Teachers take over different leading roles</li> <li>➤ Each teacher has the leading role</li> <li>➤ Teachers have shared vision</li> <li>➤ Teachers plan and cooperate with community, mainly with parents</li> </ul>
<p><i>Understanding the community</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ School creates community and reduces isolation</li> </ul>	<p><i>Learning community</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Teachers are professionals</li> <li>➤ School is a learning community which maximalizes pupil and adult learning</li> <li>➤ Cooperation with family based on trust and communication</li> </ul>
<p><i>Goals and expectations</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Goals are focused on knowledge in individual subjects</li> </ul>	<p><i>Clear goals and high expectations</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Multiple goals with regard to quickly changing labour market</li> <li>➤ High expectations, pupils are able to reach good results</li> </ul>
<p><i>Rule and discipline</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Emphasis on discipline</li> <li>➤ Defined requirements on good behaviour</li> </ul>	<p><i>Safe environment for learning</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ All participants have the responsibility for safe school</li> <li>➤ Mutual toleration, negotiating skills</li> </ul>

Changes are quickly implemented into schools. Many schools have already realized changes that fulfill the characteristics of a third millennium institution. It is natural that changes implemented by school can be successful, can lead to its improvement, but can also be unsuccessful.

## Conclusion

School has to be able to learn from its own mistakes. This is the only way it can constantly improve. It is natural that increasing decentralization brings big differences among schools – successful and unsuccessful. Therefore it is needed to monitor the quality of offered education. Quality of school, its success and continuous improvement are basic challenge to quality of European education.

Schools are still at the front end of monumental change, and that this is after two decades that have seen more changes in the way in which schools are structured and operated than had occurred in the previous hundred and fifty years put together. But it is almost certain that further change is on the way and it is within this larger framework that future school improvement developments will operate.

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