



Characteristics of High-Performing Schools

Insights for improving the educational environment

This Quick Insight examines the characteristics that make schools high-performing amid the complex challenges facing educational institutions. Drawing from a unique evidence-based framework, it highlights four critical factors—Quality of School Management, Quality of Internal Organization, Quality of Teachers and Staff and Quality of Educational Approach—that contribute to sustained excellence in both teaching and organizational practices. The study’s findings, based on data collected at three Dutch schools, offer valuable guidance for school leaders and policymakers aiming to enhance school performance and foster a culture of continuous improvement.

Quick Insight based on: de Waal, A., Goossens, P., Bos, M. and Jeurissen, N. (2024), "Characteristics of the High Performing School".



Management Summary

This Quick Insight reveals what truly makes a school high-performing, offering a transformative understanding to empower schools to reach new levels of excellence. In the face of challenges like teacher shortages, large class sizes, and organizational changes disrupting staff engagement, some schools stand out as examples of resilience and high achievement. These high-performing schools (HPS) not only set ambitious goals but foster a culture of growth, collaboration, and continuous improvement that impacts everyone from students to staff. Our research pinpoints four essential factors, aligned with the broader High-Performing Organization (HPO) principles, that define these exceptional schools. Unlike traditional research into school teaching quality, our framework moves beyond teaching methods to focus on a school's organizational quality, an area critical to sustainable success.

The four pillars of a high-performing school are:

- 1. Quality of School Management:** School leaders who provide clear direction, motivate their teams, and promote an environment of constant improvement and innovation.
- 2. Quality of Internal Organization:** A robust foundation consisting of a school operating with a clear mission, strategic goals, streamlined processes, ample resources, and a safe, supportive atmosphere that values learning and collaboration.
- 3. Quality of Teachers and Staff:** Teachers and supporting staff who are not only highly skilled but also receive support for continuous growth, fostering professionalism and collegiality.
- 4. Quality of Educational Approach:** A school with a compelling educational vision that actively engages with students, parents/guardians, and the community, creating a thriving learning ecosystem.

Through a detailed survey conducted at three Dutch schools, we confirmed that these factors are strongly linked to improved performance, offering a validated framework that school leaders can use to inspire high performance and long-lasting quality improvements. This Quick Insight provides essential guidance for schools aspiring to build a high-performing culture that endures.



1. Introduction

A nation's economic growth and societal well-being are inseparable from the strength of its human capital. With over 60% of national wealth tied to this resource, the World Bank underscores the fundamental role of education in building a prosperous society. Schools are central to this mission—they not only cultivate critical skills, foster technological advancement, and promote global awareness but also uphold values like social tolerance. In short, the quality of schools is a key predictor of a country's future success.

Yet, schools face significant challenges: shortages of qualified teachers, large class sizes, and organizational changes are straining educational quality. The complex demands of today's society require teachers to develop new skills, but staff development in essential 21st-century competencies often lags. Rapidly succeeding structural changes, such as school mergers and curriculum reforms, have also reduced teacher and staff involvement in decision-making, creating a disconnect between staff and school management. Many teachers feel undervalued, impacting their ability to drive student outcomes.

Despite these obstacles, some schools are thriving, balancing high expectations with a supportive, dynamic environment. These high-performing schools (HPS) have a clear educational vision, set ambitious goals, and prioritize quality assurance, professional development, and supportive management. They create safe, well-resourced spaces where teachers are empowered to focus on student learning, not just administrative tasks.

While teaching quality has been widely studied, there is limited research on the impact of internal organization quality and management quality on achieving high performance. Our study aims to bridge this gap, identifying the characteristics that define high-performing schools and linking them to the principles of the High-Performing Organization (HPO) framework.



2. High Performance in Schools

What makes a school truly high-performing? To answer this question, we conducted a literature review to uncover the unique qualities that set exceptional schools apart. From 63 studies on education and high performance, we identified 37 characteristics that focused specifically on internal school quality. These can be categorized into four central HPS pillars:

1. **Quality of School Management:** Exceptional management is at the heart of a high-performing school. Leaders who coach, inspire, and communicate effectively create a positive ripple effect, encouraging continuous improvement and innovation. These leaders don't just manage—they elevate the entire school environment, fostering a culture in which both staff and students thrive.
2. **Quality of Internal Organization and Operations:** A high-performing school has more than just a mission; it shares a vision and strategy that everyone from teachers to support staff can rally behind. An HPS sets ambitious goals and supports these with structured processes, adequate resources, and a safe, orderly environment. Quality management systems and benchmarking practices help it stay on track, fostering an atmosphere of collaboration and growth.
3. **Quality of Teachers and Support Staff:** The HPS recognizes that a dedicated, professional staff is fundamental. It prioritizes recruiting teachers and support staff who are not only skilled but also committed to ongoing personal and organizational development and teamwork. This focus on collegiality and continuous improvement among staff creates a vibrant, high-energy environment conducive to student success.
4. **Quality of Educational Approach:** An HPS has a strong, clear vision for education, grounded in effective curricula and teaching methodologies. The school is not static in this; it actively seeks ways to improve, maintaining strong, meaningful connections with students, parents/guardians, and the wider community. This dynamic approach ensures that students are at the center of all initiatives, fueling both academic and personal growth.

Together, the HPS pillars create a framework that school leaders can use to guide their institutions; the characteristics are outlined on the next page.



HPS characteristics

Below, you will find the 37 characteristics of a high-performing school. These characteristics provide a clear framework for evaluating and improving your school's quality and performance. Additionally, two questions are included to assess current school satisfaction and student outcomes.

Quality of Internal Organization

1. Our school has a clear school goal, mission, vision, and strategy.
2. The mission, vision, and strategy of our school are shared and supported by the staff.
3. Our school has ambitious, long-term goals.
4. Our school adheres to clear frameworks within which people can and are allowed to act.
5. Our school has sufficient and good organizational facilities.
6. Our school has adequate resources.
7. There is a safe and orderly school environment.
8. Our school has well-planned and coordinated work processes and routines.
9. Our school regularly assesses the performance of students and teachers to monitor their progress/growth.
10. Our school has implemented quality systems.
11. Our school has a learning culture.
12. There is good collaboration within our school.
13. Our school provides good support to its staff.
14. Our school strives for excellent results.

Quality of School Management

15. Our school leaders provide good support to their staff.
16. Our school leaders inspire their staff.
17. Our school leaders promote the development of their staff.
18. Our school leaders are effective in achieving their goals.



- 19. Our school leaders encourage improvement and innovation within the school.
- 20. Our school leaders regularly engage in conversations with their staff.

Quality of Teachers and Staff

- 21. The staff working within our school are carefully selected.
- 22. Our school has a teaching team with diverse specializations (e.g., language coordinators, math coordinators, culture coordinators).
- 23. There is a focus on regularly developing staff members.
- 24. Our staff act professionally in their interactions (with colleagues, students, and families).
- 25. Our staff are collegial toward each other.
- 26. Our school has a clear vision of education (curriculum, teaching methods, educational objectives).

Quality of Educational Approach

- 27. Our school has a clear learning curriculum.
- 28. Clear teaching methods and instructions are applied within our school.
- 29. There is significant attention within our school to improving education.
- 30. Regular quality control of education takes place within our school.
- 31. The learning strategies applied within our school are effective.
- 32. Our school has high expectations of its students.
- 33. Student diversity is supported with various teaching approaches.
- 34. There is significant attention within our school to the well-being of students.
- 35. There is good collaboration and connection between our school and the community.
- 36. There is good collaboration and connection between our school and the parents/guardians of students.
- 37. There is substantial collaboration and connection between our school and external parties (such as educational advisory services, speech therapists, partnerships, etc.).



Statements about your school's current performance

1. I am very satisfied with the quality of our school.
2. I am very satisfied with the performance of our students.

3. Practical insights and action steps for building High-Performing Schools

Based on our research into HPS factors and the practical application of the framework in three diverse schools, we identified core characteristics that drive school success. These characteristics, supported by both theoretical insights and empirical data, form the foundation for actionable recommendations. By focusing on these insights, school leaders can implement targeted strategies to foster sustainable high performance within their schools. Below, we outline recommendations and practical steps to help school leaders translate these insights into meaningful actions.

Recommendation for school leaders:

1. Foster a Culture of Continuous Improvement:

- Prioritize critical areas such as leadership quality, staff support, and consistent process enhancements.
- Encourage openness and learning by sharing performance data with all staff, using these insights to guide decisions.

2. Align Efforts Around Clear, Ambitious Goals:

- Define and communicate shared goals that align with the school's mission, giving everyone a common purpose.
- Make performance data accessible, enabling teachers and staff to understand their contributions to overall success.



3. Engage and Empower Staff:

- Involve teachers and support staff in the improvement process, fostering a sense of ownership and ensuring collaborative efforts.
- Emphasize both personal and professional growth to create an environment that values accountability and development.

4. Ensure a Safe and Supportive Environment:

- Cultivate an inclusive workplace where mistakes are seen as learning opportunities, fostering growth and resilience.
- Establish clear expectations, with consistent feedback and coaching, to reinforce a culture of improvement.

5. Focus on Reliable Measures:

- Streamline data collection around the most impactful indicators—such as clear organizational goals, effective management, and teacher quality.
- Refine the tools and processes used to gather data, ensuring that the results provide actionable insights for immediate improvements.

6. Increase Staff Awareness and Engagement:

- Share performance data openly with teachers and support staff, ensuring everyone understands how their efforts contribute to overall success.
- Create opportunities for team discussions about performance metrics, fostering alignment with shared goals and encouraging collaborative problem-solving.

Next steps for schools aspiring to High Performance

The study's findings highlight that a holistic, interconnected approach drives sustainable improvement. Schools that adopt comprehensive strategies, actively engage their team, and pursue ambitious, well-defined goals are well-positioned to achieve lasting success and set an example of high performance.



ARE YOU READY TO TRANSFORM YOUR ORGANIZATION INTO AN HPO?

Then insight is essential. Our **HPO diagnosis** (short validated questionnaire and in-depth interviews) provides you with this insight. You will get a clear picture of the current situation within your organization or department and receive practical improvement themes that managers and employees can tackle together. The HPO diagnosis is not just a mirror; it is a compass that guides you in taking crucial steps to achieve your strategic goals and become an HPO. Do you want to elevate your organization to a higher level? The HPO Center can support you in this. We combine over fifteen years of practical experience with hundreds of organizations worldwide with scientific research to provide you with the knowledge and focus that result in demonstrably better performance. HPO is not a project, but a mentality that makes your organization more resilient, flexible, and future-proof. It helps you identify the 'hard nuts' and provides a basis for measuring the effectiveness of the HPO transition. It also strengthens the solidarity within your organization (or part of it) by identifying and addressing shared, supported improvement themes.

- **Customer Focus:** An HPO is invaluable to its customers. The primary goal is to boost customer value and satisfaction.
- **Employee Engagement:** Aiming for high performance re-energizes your team. It leads to increased job satisfaction as HPOs concentrate on what genuinely drives organizational success. It's not a new project; it's a new mindset and approach to work.
- **Adaptability:** An HPO is designed to evolve. It thrives in our ever-changing, competitive world, making your organization more resilient and future-proof. This is achieved through ongoing adjustments, learning, and improvements.



Why choose the HPO Center?

Experience & Credibility

With over 20 years of practical experience combined with rigorous scientific research, the HPO Center is at the global forefront of organizational improvement advice.

Global Knowledge Center

Based in the Netherlands, the HPO Center collaborates with partners, including in emerging markets, with the aim of fulfilling its mission to improve organizations worldwide.

Unmatched Expertise

HPO doesn't stop at diagnosing organizations. We also explore, investigate, and delve deeply into related topics such as High Performance Leadership, Silo-busting, Futurizing, Social Value Creation, and High Performance Business Ecosystems—evidence of our commitment to continually expand the HPO universe.

More than Just an Organization

With a passion for inspiring, stimulating, and networking, the HPO Center is not just an organization; it's a movement. Through scientific and professional publications (all freely available at hpocenter.com and www.hpocenter.nl), books, seminars, and roundtables, we continually disseminate the knowledge of the HPO Framework and unite professionals interested in continuous improvement and excellence.

Considering an HPO transformation?

The HPO Center is ready to support and guide you on your journey toward high performance. Contact us today for an inspiring conversation or to experience an HPO workshop. Together, we'll redefine your performance.

HPO Center

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