



A NEW
DIRECTION
FOR
SUCCESS

Evaluation of an
Innovative Project to
Foster Cooperation
Between Schools
and Communities

SUMMARY

1999-2000

 Programme de soutien à l'école montréalaise



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Coordination of project evaluation	GILBERT MOISAN Direction de la recherche
Research, writing and analysis	NINON DUGAS Researcher
Research assistance	SYLVIE BRASSARD Researcher
English translation	Direction de la production en langue anglaise Service à la communauté anglophone

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The full text of this research report is available in French upon request.

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This study is an evaluation of the implementation and impact of the "Liaison Officer" measure of the Supporting Montréal Schools program. Its goal is to assess the overall performance of this measure, to compile and evaluate the activities carried out by the liaison officers and to determine the impact of their presence and actions on the schools and communities where they work.

Almost all of the groups involved in the implementation of this measure participated in the study, specifically 15 out of 16 liaison officers, 15 out of 16 school administrators, the 16 community organization representatives, the chairperson of a round table and the two coordinators of the training program for liaison officers at the Cégep du Vieux-Montréal. Data was collected using an objective questionnaire, as well as a semi-structured qualitative interview. The qualitative data were subjected to systematic analysis. In terms of the objective data, the answers to the questionnaire were compiled in the form of average indicators and percentages.

Observations

Despite certain difficulties at the outset and some ongoing challenges, implementation of the liaison officer measure is well advanced in its ninth month. Certain observations were made based on the evaluation, particularly with respect to the measure's objectives, management and impact, and the training program.

Objectives of the Measure

The study revealed that the measure's general objectives, as defined by the Ministère, are well known and shared by the vast majority of participants, even though the liaison officers and, to a lesser extent, the community organization representatives feel that they lack accuracy and definition. These players also indicated that they find the objectives to be too general and difficult to translate into specific objectives that can be concretely implemented in the day-to-day performance of their tasks.

The Work of the Liaison Officers

The work carried out by the liaison officers is generally appreciated and they have undertaken and completed some very dynamic and innovative projects. All of the officers are involved in activities that fall within their job profile, but close to half of them have also

carried out, or are carrying out, tasks that fall outside their professional role. Some also employ intervention methods that are not suitable to their mandate. In fact, a number of liaison officers, community organization representatives and school administrators do not have a clear understanding of the role, tasks, mandate and modes of intervention specific to the liaison officers.

While work planning for the liaison officers got off to a slow start in some cases, most of the officers now have an action plan in place that has met with their partners' approval. Several types of planning were developed, ranging from a structured group approach to individual (the officer alone) and even improvised planning. Follow-up of planning—in terms of regularity and formal organization—by the two supervisors (a school administrator and community organization representative) varies from one community to the other, and is an area that could be improved. Lastly, this measure has been particularly successful in terms of the officers' integration into their respective communities and schools. They are, nevertheless, encountering obstacles and resistance in implementing the measure, due primarily to the fact that schools and communities are very different normative worlds. This situation hinders the officers' efforts to foster cooperation between the two milieus.

Training Program

Certain elements of the training program enjoy the support of the great majority of players, such as the principle of work-study rotation (despite the high demands of this formula) and the fact that credits are earned for participation in the program. Some reservations, however, have been expressed with regard to other dimensions of the program. Many of the respondents point to the disparity in the officers' previous training as a source of disruption and resistance, which in turn has an impact on the officers' participation and performance during training. Many of the officers are also critical of the relevance of the course content and teaching methods, which they view as too theoretical, not concrete enough and largely unrelated to their job and professional context. They would also like to benefit from better pedagogical support from their respective schools. The program could be slightly modified to better reflect the officers' professional reality and to provide them with improved support.

Management of the Measure

In terms of management of the measure, the current model of administrative management and the allocation of financial and human resources are relatively well suited to the present

situation and objectives. That said, the liaison officers have expressed reservations about their access to human and material resources, and their partners' effective use of financial resources.

It seems that joint supervision is difficult to implement given that it is an approach not commonly used in the schools and communities. Liaison officers are benefiting, at least partially, from other modes of supervision that have been implemented. It should be pointed out that interpersonal relations are generally free of any serious conflict or problems related to the hierarchical relations among the three players in the triad. The supervisors' roles, however, could be better defined and implementation of formal frameworks and mechanisms for joint supervision could be improved. Communication and conflict resolution methods among the three players would also benefit from greater definition.

Finally, all players agreed that everyone's roles and responsibilities should be more clearly defined, and that information should be more abundant, targeted and effectively circulated and pooled among all the partners. We also suggest that the Ministère increase its efforts to improve planning, follow-up and support with regard to the measure.

Impact of the Measure

Almost all of the respondents stressed that the measure has been beneficial, particularly in terms of schools' greater openness to the community and the increased participation of organizations in school life. To a lesser extent, the project has also contributed to strengthening and creating interactive networks. Educational success is more difficult to assess in the short term. For the moment, the positive impact is indirect but perhaps with time the benefits will become more apparent.

On the basis of these observations, we have formulated a number of recommendations designed to help achieve the measure's objectives. The main recommendations of the report submitted to the Ministère are cited below. For a more exhaustive list, please consult the full report.

Recommendations

Objectives of the Measure

It is recommended:

- That the Ministère translate the current general objectives into specific objectives that are likely to be implemented and concretized according to procedures specific to each milieu;
- That information regarding the measure's objectives be re-circulated by means of meetings with the three groups of players (liaison officers, school administrators and representatives of local organizations) as well as through the production and distribution, among these same groups, of more detailed information on this question.

Profile and Actions of the Liaison Officers

It is recommended:

- That the Ministère produce a ministerial document specifying in greater detail and more concretely the nature of the liaison officer's role, the specific mandate established in terms of predetermined general and specific objectives, the exact functions and specific tasks defined as "professional acts," as well as intervention methods appropriate to their role and mandate; furthermore, that the Ministère more accurately delimit the liaison officer's tasks and roles as well as the areas of intervention in relation to those of the cultural liaison officer; that it disseminate this information among school administrators;
- That all liaison officers and their partners adopt a more structured approach to planning in the form of an action plan. Reduced or occasional planning should not be the method of choice; that decisions in the area of planning be made in consultation with the three players and with their support;
- That there be discussion and agreement, prior to meeting with the liaison officer, between the school administrator and the organization representative with regard to expectations, respective needs and the mandates to be accorded the officer; that the liaison officer's planning and actions, both past and present, be the object of regular follow-up and ongoing evaluation within the framework of supervision;
- That school administrators and organization representatives help to receive and integrate liaison officers into the community by distributing information at the beginning of the project to school and community organization staff, prior to the officers' arrival, and then on an ongoing basis over the course of the year by introducing the liaison officers to the community and involving them in various activities and meetings of interest;
- That school administrators promote the importance of the liaison officer's work to the school staff, parents and students at the school, so that the officer becomes a recognized and significant professional in the school;
- That, if the project is expanded to other schools and communities, two days a week be set aside for recently hired liaison officers to introduce them to their functions over the course of three consecutive weeks prior to the beginning of the intensive summer training session. During this training, officers will receive necessary information pertaining to the measure's objectives, the nature of their tasks and the specificity as well as limits of their professional role in relation to other partners (community officers, liaison officers, etc.). During these three weeks, three days of the week could be devoted to familiarizing officers with the communities and schools in which they will be working;
- That training include a greater or improved component on culture and the organizational functioning of the school and, above all, the community organizations, since there seems to be persistent shortcomings in this area among certain liaison officers.

Training Program

It is recommended:

- That teachers become familiar with the composition of the class before the courses begin so that they are better able to understand the effects of the students' disparate educational backgrounds on learning methods, intellectual skills, openness to concepts, school motivation and relations between students; to present to the class human or technical resources officers and learning strategies that may be of help to those students with a lower level of schooling. To adopt a more stimulating teaching approach to prevent loss of motivation and interest among students with higher levels of schooling;
- That those in charge of selecting candidates select candidates with an educational background that is compatible with the current training program, namely individuals who have completed Secondary V or the first year of college; in short, that they select a group of students with a homogenous educational background so that the training is better adapted to their needs;
- That the Ministère inform program coordinators and, above all, the teachers at the Cégep du Vieux-Montréal, of the kind of course content that is relevant within the framework of the measure;
- That teachers identify ways to stimulate student interest through active teaching, develop a teaching approach based on andragogical principles by viewing the liaison officers not as youths in post-secondary studies, but as working adults in training, propose concrete and practical activities (meetings with skilled individuals who put into practice the theory being taught in the classroom: speakers, workshops, visits, concrete projects);
- That program coordinators at the Cégep du Vieux-Montréal develop an ongoing practicum program that can be integrated into current training; in terms of pedagogical support, a tutoring service run by the practicum supervisor, who would be well informed about the school and community milieus as well as the reality of the liaison officers, would be a welcome addition and an opportunity to provide individualized support; it is also recommended that the training program coordinators ensure more regular follow-up among the officers and increase their contact with them in order to improve the flow of information and communication;
- That work-study rotation be maintained its current form; that an attempt be made to reduce the liaison officers' workload by proposing, within the framework of their training, more practical exercises assessed and carried out in class, by giving more exams or reducing the scope of the work, or by assigning a greater number of small-scale projects.

Financial, Human and Material Management of the Measure

It is recommended:

- That the Ministère retain, for the second year of the project, the decisions and orientations regarding financial and human resources as they were defined within the framework agreements between the partners;
- That it be clarified for the players, in particular the liaison officers and the organization representatives, how the \$4 000 allocated to the participating organizations should be used;
- That the liaison officers' access to the material and human resources in the schools and communities be fostered by informing those responsible in the various milieus of the importance of this access;
- That the supervisors' roles and tasks be clarified in writing, along with guidelines on how to conduct joint supervision; that the ministerial parameters of quality supervision (frequency of meetings, type of support, planning, follow-up, evaluation methods) be specified;
- That the partners (school administrators and organization representatives) be provided with training in joint supervision at the beginning of the implementation of the measure;

- That the two supervisors develop, in cooperation with the partner in charge of supervision, formal, structured procedures for joint supervision, based on a prior agreement at the first meeting with the liaison officers; ensure commitment to and a clear presence among the liaison officers and support the officers' interventions through regular meetings with them (the two supervisors, alongside the officers, should in principle view it as their responsibility to identify problems and to initiate communication in order to find solutions); identify and develop formal mechanisms for communication as well conflict resolution and problem solving;
- That the Ministère clarify, define and disseminate, by means of written material and information sessions, the nature and limits of partners' roles and responsibilities in terms of all aspects of the measure: planning, joint supervision, information, assistance in integrating the officer, expected benefits to the school and community, the role of the school versus that of the organization; in the event that the liaison officer project is expanded to new schools and communities, to supply this information from the outset of the project;
- That administrative management be continued in its current form;
- That planning of the measure be improved by defining the project well in advance, informing the partners about how it will develop and giving more advance notice of meetings; that the Ministère supply the players with more abundant and detailed information on the overall project;
- That program coordinators at the Cégep du Vieux-Montréal establish communication with all of the partners and regularly supply information on the training program and a training update on the liaison officers;
- That meetings to exchange information between school administrations, organizations representatives and liaison officers be held regularly by the Ministère in collaboration with the Cégep du Vieux-Montréal;
- That the two supervisors and all of the liaison officers make a greater effort to circulate information among all the members of the triad by establishing formal frameworks and regular meetings to promote this information flow;
- That the Ministère ensure better follow-up and more support to the partners and the project; that those in charge of the measure at the Ministère go into the schools and communities to meet with the partners in order to better assess the situation in each milieu and to build more personalized ties with all of the players.

