

## **Governance by Results in the Québec Educational System: Issues and Challenges**

**Valérie Djédjé**

*Université du Québec en Abitibi - Témiscamingue (UQAT)  
(Canada)*

[valerie.djedje@uqat.ca](mailto:valerie.djedje@uqat.ca)

### **Abstract**

*The objective of this paper is to present the issues and challenges for the Québec education system of what is called "results-based management" (RBM). Indeed, the law on public administration (Law 82, 2000) formalized the adoption of the RBM model, defined as follows: "Results-Based Management is a management approach based on measurable results responding to objectives and targets previously defined according to the services to be provided. It occurs in a context of transparency, accountability and flexibility with regard to the means used to achieve the goals." Thus, following the promulgation of Law 82, all departments, including that of education, were required to publish their "strategic plan," with quantified objectives and mechanisms to evaluate the achievement of these objectives, and on which the minister and his administration would have to report to the legislature. Subsequently, Law 124, adopted in 2002, forced school boards (SB) to publish a "strategic plan" and to report on its implementation in their jurisdiction. Similarly, the state required educational establishments to produce "success plans" to ensure the implementation of their educational projects. In 2008, Law 88 promulgated new provisions.*

*Within the framework of a "partnership agreement," the SB must agree with the department on the measures required to ensure the implementation of their strategic plans, which should appear in the department's strategic plan. RBM is a policy to alter the institutional regulatory procedures within the education system substantially. Schematically, one may contend that it is providing new tools for management (strategic plans) or regulation (contractualization, accountability, indicators and monitoring tools) which should better "align" schools' objectives and functions with contractually fixed targets at "higher" action levels, those of the school board and the Ministry of Education, Recreation and Sport (MERS) in Québec. Therefore, this alignment is oriented towards "results" at different levels of the system. An initial analysis suggests that this is a Québec version of an accountability system and regulatory approaches based on evaluation, contracting, planning, control and managerial monitoring of the actions taken, in conjunction with existing bureaucratic or professional regulations.*

*However, the implementation of RBM involves significant challenges. Québec teachers' and principals' unions maintain that a school is not a private enterprise. Therefore, they reject an accounting approach to student success and are opposed to quantitative targets for success in schools. This paper will contribute to the debate on school governance.*

### **1. Introduction**

This article is comprised of three main sections. The first presents the meaning and the origin of Result Based Management (RBM) in the Québec educational system, the second emphasizes issues related to RBM and the third discusses the challenges in applying RBM.

### **2. What does managing for results in education mean? Where does it come from?**

A quantitative approach to education means better management of education, guaranteeing greater student success. From this perspective, educational results are more important. However, others tend to see it as a travesty of the fundamental mission of education to educate, socialize and qualify the students for their social and professional integration. For these critics, emphasizing numerical targets without regard to the means available, the large-scale use of statistical data for "managing" education, and the use of performance indicators are some of the elements comprising the accounting approach to education which divert attention from the school's primary mission. RBM is a management approach developed in

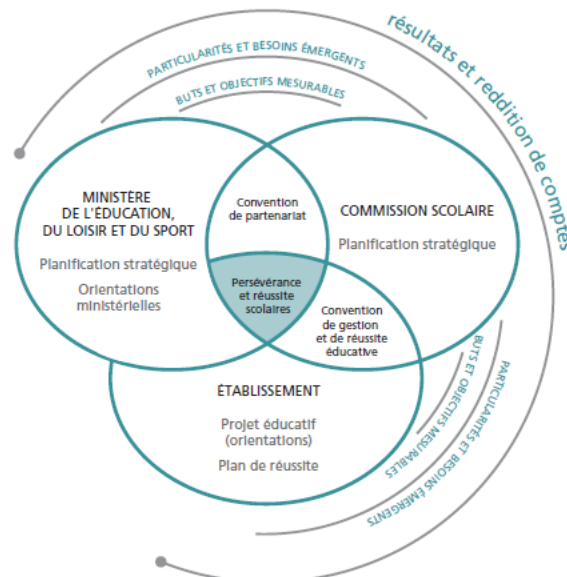
many countries over at least the last two decades. In Québec, it was adopted in the public service and was formalized in the 2000 Law on Public Administration by the Secretariat of the Council of the Treasury Board [7] which seeks to establish a management system focused on the achievement of results in all governmental departments and agencies. Some have referred to this as the emergence of an accounting approach to education. The latter can be defined on the basis of the triple-E: economy, efficiency, and effectiveness.

### 3. Issues raised by results-based management in the Québec educational system

In this context, the new public management system and organizations (and their staff) are responsible for achieving fixed objectives and for publishing their results. This different way of managing the affairs of the state and its organizations was rapidly applied to education. At the Québec Youth Summit of 2000, a consensus was reached on the desirability of ensuring that 100% of Québec youth should be qualified. The Minister of Education, Recreation and Sport at the time hoped to achieve this target by having all schools in Québec implement plans for success, although many saw these as mere imitations of corporate business plans.

In 2008, the government took an additional step toward evaluating schools based on results compelling schools to produce results. With the adoption of Bill No. 88, new amendments to the Law on Public Education were adopted, further extending the establishment of managing based results throughout the schools and school boards. Thus, each school board now has established goals, measurable objectives and targets for graduation rates. A contractual approach with a partnership agreement was established between the department and the school board, and between the school board and its establishments, with agreements on management and success. These conventions specify the contribution of each in achieving their goals, as well as measurable objectives, such as the reduction of delays at the primary level or an improvement in the graduation rate in secondary school, with graduation targets determined by the Ministry of Education, Recreation and Sport (MERS) in Québec [6]. With these new legislative provisions, schools must focus more on results to be achieved than on the means to achieve these results.

*Fig.1. Partnership agreement and success from the MERS in Québec*



#### **4. The challenges**

This accounting vision has negative effects, particularly for schools in disadvantaged areas. In 2009, partnership agreements (between the MERS) and school boards) and management agreements (between school boards and schools) put pressure on teachers. Under these agreements, all school boards must meet predetermined graduation targets. For Québec as a whole, the target was set at having 80% of students graduate before the age of 20 by 2020. This provincial target was determined using variable geometry for each school board.

#### **5. Strong pressure on schools in underprivileged neighbourhoods**

Thus, for Montréal school boards, the MERS requires an increase in the graduation rate of 57% to 70%, and for Samaras, an increase from 56% to 69%, for respective increases of the order of 13%. The situation is quite different for Discoverers and Lester B. Pearson school boards since the efforts required are much more modest. In fact, the former must raise its graduation rate from 84% to 88% and the latter, from 82% to 88%, increases respectively of 4% and 6%. The Discoverers and Lester B. Pearson boards are operating in privileged neighbourhoods. If we look at the socioeconomic index (on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 indicates a very privileged social environment and 10 a socially very disadvantaged environment), we observe that these school boards are working with those from a very privileged background, while the boards of Samaras and Montréal are working with extremely underprivileged students.

#### **6. A control mechanism which requires a lot of energy**

In addition, partnership agreements and management and educational achievement conventions may negatively impact the direction of the entire education system. Already in 2008, one of the Québec specialists in school governance, Brassard [2], stated that the new provisions of the Law on Public Education could result in increased management activity requiring greater expenditure of time and energy for the department, school boards and institutions. Indeed, the implementation of the conventions demanded greater efforts on the part of boards and institutions to develop content, construct indicators to assess the performance of institutions and ensure the accountability demanded by these conventions. Thus, the vice-principals assigned to educational success multiplied in school boards to meet this governmental order.

In a speech to the CSQ Rendez-Vous on Education in February 2012, Brassard [1] addressed the issue of governance in terms of control, i.e., all of the measures needed to determine the functioning of a system and to ensure that it works as expected. In the context of governance in education, this takes the form of more extensive research into effectiveness through continuous improvement. To do this, education systems are turning increasingly towards international tests, the implementation of compulsory education programs with minimum learning levels that must be attained by the students, a substantial increase in ministerial examinations, increased accountability and greater participation of users (parents, in this case). Still, according to Brassard, the effectiveness of results-based management could be enhanced by assessing teachers on the basis of student performance or even making the comparative results of institutions more accessible. However, research increasingly confirms that the culture stemming from the accounting approach to education, with its propensity to always favour improved performance, does not produce the expected results. For example, a meta-analysis of the literature, carried out in the United Kingdom indicates that a learning-centered approach can improve student results, while an approach focused solely on performance may have a negative impact. Children who develop a perspective based on performance rather than on learning tend to need more help. In addition, they adopt less strategic thinking and give more importance to feedback during assessments. Finally, they are more likely to retain strategies which prove ineffective. The children's attitude and behaviour, as well as results, improve when teachers and schools consider it more important to help them learn rather than push to get better results on a given test.

Watkins and Reed [8], stresses two challenges facing schools if they want more students to succeed: 1) recognizing that successful completion of examinations is not the purpose of education; it is, instead, the result of effective learning; and (2) recognizing that the pressure and the adoption of a performance-

centric approach fail to improve student performance. In another example, in Sweden, the results of an investigation by Lindberg and Wilson [5] have similar results. In a recent article, the authors sought to measure the impact on student performance of the adoption of results-based management (in the survey they speak of management by objectives, but this is the same approach) in Swedish secondary schools. Their longitudinal study indicates a lack of correlation between this practice and improvement of educational outcomes, or even a negative effect.

## 7. Caution in the application of an accounting approach in education

Lessard [4], an educational sociologist and now president of the Superior Council of Education in Québec, said in 2010 that it will require "much care in the application of RBM, to avoid the excess and damage observed elsewhere." More recently, a team of researchers in Québec, Brassard, Lusignan and Pelletier [3] investigated the implementation of management agreements in Québec schools. Their conclusions are thought-provoking in many respects. They find that: 1) RBM was a cumbersome process which restricted the flexibility of personnel; (2) RBM quickly led to a drift towards "easily measurable" indicators; (3) almost all school boards assigned additional resources to the implementation and follow-up of the agreements; (4) since RBM led to the implementation of conventions on measurable results, this did not favour the mobilization of personnel; (5) there was pressure on teachers to be "less severe in their corrections" to improve the indicators of success; and (6) the researchers are not certain that RBM implementation "will contribute significantly to improving success and school retention."

In his intervention at CSQ Rendez-Vous on Education in February 2012, Brassard went further by indicating that RBM gives few results and can even have negative consequences. However, he indicated that other approaches are possible, such as that of professional and organizational development. This is a local approach based on professional, individual and collective accountability and is twofold. It includes: 1) a self-assessment that is done as part of a reflexive process, leading to changes in individual and collective practices (ideally in a community of practice); and (2) an identification of the specific situation of each student to prevent problems and tailor the provision of educational services accordingly.

## 8. Conclusion

This paper has presented the issues and challenges of the implementation of RBM in the Québec education system. Is a genuine culture of RBM in Québec public education networks synonymous with good school governance? This paper will help to enrich the debate on RBM in education.

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