

A JOURNEY TOWARD THE “SCHOOL OF THE FUTURE”.

CASE STUDY: TALLINNA MAHTRA PÕHIKOOL

Tallinna Mahtra Põhikool, a basic school in Tallinn, Estonia, has become an eloquent case study in institutional transformation, managing to profoundly reshape its organizational culture through its participation in the “Future School” program initiated by Tallinn University. This strategic collaboration laid the foundations for change based on evidence, distributed leadership, and a renewed focus on students’ competences.

Authentic transformation:

Tallinna Mahtra Põhikool, a community school with a diverse student population (predominantly Russian-speaking students), adopted an ambitious vision: to become a “caring school community that develops socio-emotional skills, where the student is able to make connections with everyday life, values different cultures, and is a responsible member of society.”

To achieve this vision, the school identified the need for a deep cultural shift focused on:

1. Developing general competences and implementing phenomenon-based learning.
2. Integrating formal and non-formal learning to support the development of learning and social skills.
3. Creating a culture of trust and strong relationships among students, teachers, and parents.

An external evaluation revealed weak results across all assessed areas. Among the research questions examined were: students’ understanding of why they learn, whether they have choices in the learning process, questions related to student relationships, and the level of collaboration among teachers.

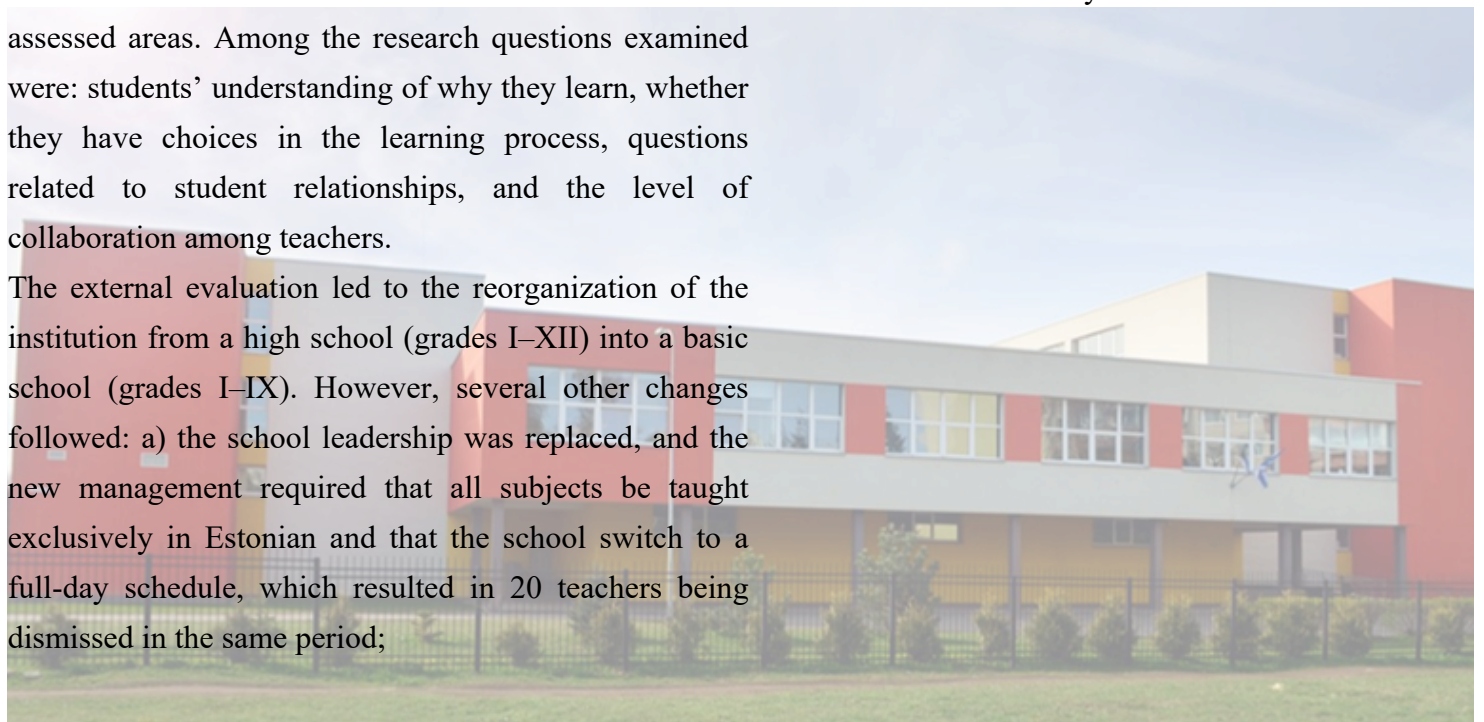
The external evaluation led to the reorganization of the institution from a high school (grades I–XII) into a basic school (grades I–IX). However, several other changes followed: a) the school leadership was replaced, and the new management required that all subjects be taught exclusively in Estonian and that the school switch to a full-day schedule, which resulted in 20 teachers being dismissed in the same period;

b) various innovative projects were promoted; and
c) a process of rethinking and redefining school culture was initiated;

Participation in the “Future School” program forced Tallinna Mahtra Põhikool to step out of traditional patterns and approach change in a collaborative and data-driven way.

The “Future School” program, developed by the Educational Leadership Academy of Tallinn University, is a long-term program (initially one academic year, extended to three years in some cases) that offers schools a structured framework for implementing evidence-based changes.

For this school, the implementation of the program began with meetings and discussions with the administration and teachers, after which the school’s vision was formulated and four core school values were established: **honesty** (based on the idea that only we know what is best for us), **care** (we understand that every action holds a good thought and a personal need), **courage** (there is no fear of making mistakes, only taking responsibility), **patience** (an awareness that we are changing the world for the better through small steps). At present, these values are known and shared by the entire educational community.



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- A decision was made to apply values-based leadership and instructional leadership.
- Teachers committed to an institution-wide professional development program focused on learning from educational theory and from one another. For this purpose, a dedicated timeslot was set at the beginning of each day, while students are having breakfast. Additionally, one day per week was designated for online learning on a secure national platform (accessible to students, teachers, and parents), and teachers use this day exclusively for professional development.
- Based on identified needs, the institution sets a research theme for the entire school year, which all teachers work on. This year's theme focuses on the structure of the lesson. Teachers learn from each other, share practices, and develop pedagogical analysis skills, which contributes to strengthening a collective professional identity.
- The changes started with peer classroom observations, without the participation of the principal, which helped teachers learn how to provide feedback and reflect on their own actions.
- A culture of trust and communication is promoted, involving open dialogue, consultation, and shared responsibility. The school transitioned from informal discussions with the administration to structured discussions, where the leader of each school unit (similar to Methodological Committees and other groups) meets with their team. The aim is for each team to communicate monthly about the activities carried out, current needs, and to receive feedback.
- Program changes include extended school hours, 80-minute lessons, a long lunch break (50 minutes) and outdoor time in the schoolyard (even in rainy or snowy weather), organization of interest-based clubs, defining the school's niche (for this institution – Japanese language study), and the introduction of a Montessori-based class.
- One week in each semester is dedicated to project-based work (which develops students' autonomy in the learning process). During this period, students, supported by teachers, observe, analyze, and meet with various specialists to work on their project topics.
- In grades 1–4, subjects are not taught separately but in an integrated manner.
- The extended-day program model includes two major objectives:
 1. the development of social competences, and
 2. the development of foreign language communication skills.
- Implementation of the Parent Academy project, which consists of monthly meetings with parents organized by homeroom teachers, based on a theme established for the year. Here, parents learn how to support their children in developing social competences and other skills.
- All processes are supported by data-based decisions derived from various types of evaluations and monitoring activities:

September: homeroom teachers gather data on the placement of 9th grade graduates;

October: standardized assessments take place in grades 4 and 7. The heads of school structures (similar to the chairs of methodological committees) analyze the data, present them, and identify improvement strategies;

November: the end of the first semester, when academic results are analyzed and needs are identified;

December: the University administers questionnaires on school development and management aspects, which serve as the basis for a comprehensive research study.

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January: The university presents the preliminary research results, which are analyzed by the entire management team and the extended team of teachers. Data are provided on teachers’ and students’ perceptions regarding the instructional process and the level of engagement of each participant. The full, complex research report is delivered to the school in June.

February: A questionnaire from the ministry is administered, focusing on motivation and other aspects of the educational process; the results are analyzed within the teaching staff.

March: At the end of the second semester, academic results are reviewed. Additionally, a student questionnaire (student satisfaction) is administered, requesting feedback on each teacher who instructs them.

April: A data collection system (“Happy Me”) is used to gather information on teacher satisfaction, including how content teachers are with their work and to what extent they experience professional burnout.

May: A questionnaire on the development of social and emotional competence is administered, including questions about motivation, relationships, school culture, support for student autonomy, learning the Estonian language, perceptions of student autonomy, and more.

June: The comprehensive research report from the university is presented.

- Mahtra Forum – a key element in building a school culture rooted in trust and strong relationships.

The “Mahtra Forum” is listed among several initiatives aimed at strengthening relationships and fostering a culture of trust, such as the “open-door policy,” “co-visions,” monthly meetings, and the “community day.”

The purpose of the Mahtra Forum is to create a platform for open dialogue and collaboration among all key actors of the school community: school staff, students, parents, and possibly external partners. It serves as a democratic space for discussing the school’s strategic direction, sharing successes, and collectively addressing challenges.

The “Mahtra Forum” plays a crucial role in the cultural integration stage of the innovations developed by the change/innovation teams. Here is how:

a) Presentation and public validation of innovations:

The management team or the change team can use the forum to present the results of pilot projects. By sharing concrete data about the success of a new practice (for example, a method that increased student autonomy), the team not only informs but also publicly validates the innovation in front of the entire community.

b) Collecting feedback from all stakeholders:

The Forum provides a unique opportunity to gather direct feedback from parents and students regarding new practices. This feedback is essential for adjusting and improving innovations before scaling them up, ensuring they meet the real needs of the community.

c) Building consensus and support:

By involving parents and students in the discussion, the school transforms change from an internal, administrative process into a community project. When parents understand the “why” behind a new teaching or assessment method, they are more likely to support it at home. This consensus is vital for any practice to become part of the school’s culture.

d) Celebrating success and recognizing effort:

The Forum serves as a public stage for celebrating the achievements of change teams and innovative teachers. This public recognition reinforces the value of innovation and distributed leadership within the school culture, motivating other staff members to get involved as well.



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In essence, the Mahtra Forum acts as a bridge between the innovation generated at the grassroots level (by the change/innovation teams) and community-wide acceptance. It ensures that change is not only implemented, but also understood, accepted, and supported by all those involved, thereby integrating new practices into the school’s permanent culture.

Challenges and Solutions:

Although Tallinna Mahtra Põhikool has achieved a significant cultural transformation through the Future School project, the transition toward a distributed leadership model was not without obstacles. The experience of Estonian schools participating in this program, including Mahtra, highlights common challenges, especially those related to changing mindsets and traditional work structures.

Below is a synthesis of the main challenges and the ways in which the school—supported by the Tallinn University program—managed to overcome them:

Main Challenge	Detailed Description of the Obstacle	Strategy for Overcoming (Solution)
1. Resistance to change and traditional mindset	Teachers accustomed to a hierarchical model may exhibit resistance or reluctance to take on leadership roles. Some principals reported that teachers “do not accept” distributed leadership, preferring instead to focus solely on teaching.	<p><i>The creation of Change Teams and project-based leadership:</i></p> <p><i>The Future School program required the formation of Change Teams (with 5–7 members, including the principal) tasked with working on a specific improvement project. This project-based approach led to leadership being perceived as a functional responsibility (linked to a concrete objective), rather than as a hierarchical position.</i></p>
2. Lack of time and additional workload	Assuming leadership responsibilities (planning, coordination, feedback) is perceived as an additional task that conflicts with teachers’ already limited time.	<p><i>The school integrated Professional Learning Communities and collaborative planning into the work schedule (formalizing time for collaboration and learning). Through co-visions (reciprocal observations), the time spent in the classroom became time for professional development as well, not only for teaching.</i></p>
3. Lack of specific leadership skills	Although teachers excel in teaching, they do not naturally possess leadership skills such as facilitation, change management, or using data to inform decisions.	<p><i>The program provided each school with a university consultant. This consultant offered coaching to the principal on delegating responsibilities and mentoring to the leader of the change team to manage challenges arising during the change process. Additionally, practical tools were provided (whiteboard sessions, goal-visualization methods).</i></p>

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Main Challenge	Detailed Description of the Obstacle	Strategy for Overcoming (Solution)
4. Ensuring coherence and a shared vision	Risk of fragmentation of efforts when multiple leaders act independently, leading to a lack of strategic coherence.	<i>Shared Vision and Continuous Dialogue: The school emphasized the collaborative development of the development plan. A key principle of change was dialogue (“Has it been discussed and agreed upon?”) and meaning (“Is it relevant and understandable for teachers?”), ensuring that all distributed leaders act within a shared vision.</i>
5. Insufficient Use of Data (Evidence-Based Decision Making)	The tendency to make decisions based on intuition or experience rather than concrete evidence, undermining the foundation of evidence-based leadership.	Monitoring and Comparative Reporting: The school used standardized surveys (at the beginning and end of the year) to measure indicators such as distributed leadership and data usage. The fact that each school received a comparative report created positive pressure to use the data as a basis for improvement.

Tallinna Mahtra Põhikool overcame the inherent challenges of transitioning to distributed leadership by transforming leadership responsibilities into collaborative work practices, supported by an external mentoring framework and an internal culture of trust and data use. This approach allowed teachers to become functional leaders without being overwhelmed by administrative tasks, thereby ensuring the sustainability of the cultural change.

Results and Impact: the organizational culture change at Tallinna Mahtra Põhikool, catalyzed by Future School, produced visible results:

Change Indicator	Result	Impact on Organizational Culture
Parental Involvement	32% of parents “strongly agree” that their opinions are taken into account (compared to the national average of 18%).	A culture of trust and active partnership with the community.
Teacher Leadership	Focus on recognizing and celebrating success and innovations (e.g., monthly 1+1 meetings).	A culture that fosters teacher motivation and engagement, transforming them into leaders.
Learning Vision	Transition to a model that integrates general competencies and phenomenon-based learning.	A culture focused on the holistic development of students and the relevance of learning.
Transparency	Implementation of the “open-door” concept and co-visions (collaborative observations).	A culture of openness, constructive feedback, and continuous learning.

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The experience of Tallinna Mahtra Põhikool within Tallinn University’s Future School project represents an exemplary case study of how an educational institution can achieve a sustainable transformation in organizational culture. The school’s success lies not only in adopting new methods but in fundamentally changing how leadership is exercised and how responsibility for learning is defined.

The experience of this institution is not just a success story; it serves as a practical guide for any educational institution seeking to implement authentic cultural change based on trust, collaboration, and concrete evidence. The transformation of Mahtra School illustrates how a strategic partnership between a school and an academic institution (Tallinn University) can catalyze profound institutional evolution, turning the school into a true “School of the Future.”

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