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# Model School: Quality and Leadership in Education of the Individuals Having Vision Loss, Multiple Disabilities, and the Individuals who are Deafblind

## Introduction

A Model School is a place of constant search for improvement, a leader in self-assessment and innovation, committed to the revision of practices based on each individual's demand. It is a school with social awareness as they see themselves as a school of reference and support, a training site, a model for other schools.

Educational access in Latin America is influenced by multiple factors, including each child's unique needs, availability of resources in their home communities and the local economy (Unicef, 2021). As a result, children, especially the ones having vision loss, multiple disabilities and/or the ones who are deafblind, often face significant barriers to accessing quality education. Additionally, education systems lack supports

that assure participation and learning and there is a shortage of teachers with adequate training to design and implement educational trajectories for the children having disabilities.

In this context, as well as considering Perkins School for the Blind's 30+ years of work in Latin America in collaboration with governments and civil society organizations, progress continues in elevating the educational oppor-

tunities for children and youth having vision loss, multiple disabilities and/or who are deafblind.

From 2019 to 2022, in Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico, Perkins developed its Model School concept, a replicable strategy that transforms education opportunities, access, and systems for the individuals having vision loss, multiple disabilities and/or who are deafblind. The same project included research that aimed to record the process of change in teachers and students from the participating schools.

This article collects the results and reflections on this experience in 9 schools. Of

### Model of change: general approach

Perkins' Model School approach is fundamentally linked to the concepts of evolution and change. Now, more than ever, schools are asked for flexibility to incorporate social changes (Anijovich, 2007) such as recent heightened awareness around inclusion, diversity, equity, and access. The Model School concept of change relates to each school's responses to current societal, cultural, and community issues. It is individually defined and developed based on each school's unique needs, in context and in response to local conditions.

When put into practice, this Change Model contributes to deep understanding of the unique and varied experiences and internal cultures of different schools. Likewise, it identifies common ground, defining a process that cements the Model School concept as the central axis of change, to ensure a sustained improvement process. Model Schools follow Perkins' core principles on children and education. These are:

- All children can learn;
- All children communicate, and communication is connection;
- All children are unique, so educational plans must be individualized;
- The family/caregivers are essential in the education of children;

these, 8 are public schools, and 1 is a non-profit school recognized by the government. Further, 3 of them are regular schools with inclusive programs, while the other 6 are special education schools. All 9 schools had the potential to become Model Schools due to their strong infrastructure and human resources, and promising practices noted by a Perkins representative during an initial observation session. Additionally, each school was staffed by enthusiastic teachers and administrators who wanted to learn, welcomed evaluations, training, and coaching, and were open to changing their practices in collaboration with education authorities.

- Education should promote social relationships and quality interactions;
- Education should increase autonomy, promote collaboration and support, and be sustained in a pleasant context.

These principles guide our decision-making and actions, guaranteeing a consistent alignment with ongoing global changes in education and disability, and a model that adjusts to accommodate for diversity of cultures. Likewise, these principles promote universal actions for change, while also recognizing the importance of situations that are unique to a particular student or school. As a result, schools can define a unique educational style and method that obtains tangible results. This method recognizes the learning and communication potential of a student with DV/DM/SC from a perspective of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and proposes emancipatory practices for the student that incorporate families as part of the team.

The impact of Perkins' training and support of 9 schools in our project was evident in numerous ways. Changes were observed in the attitudes and values of the team members, in the appropriation of new knowledge resulting in shared best practices, and in the practitioners' reflections and resulting decisions about which actions to prioritize during the change process.

The schools went through the Perkins Quality Improvement Process for becoming Model Schools, which included:

- Selection of schools with the Secretaries and Ministries of Education or municipalities;
- Baseline and yearly evaluations using the Perkins Quality Indicators to score the school on a model program continuum;
- Perkins International Academy training of at least 3 professionals per school (an online or hybrid 3-level training of 120 hours per level);
- Increasing family engagement in their child's education by strengthening teach-

er/parent collaboration, training teachers to support the child's at-home learning, and coaching families on how to become active members of their child's educational team;

- A series of specific trainings based on teachers' needs, with follow-ups and mentorship from specialists in the field;
- The school's self-evaluation using the Perkins indicators, identification of areas in need of improvement, and strategy sessions to map out ways to improve these areas;
- Information exchanges with schools from the same country and among schools from other countries participating in the study.

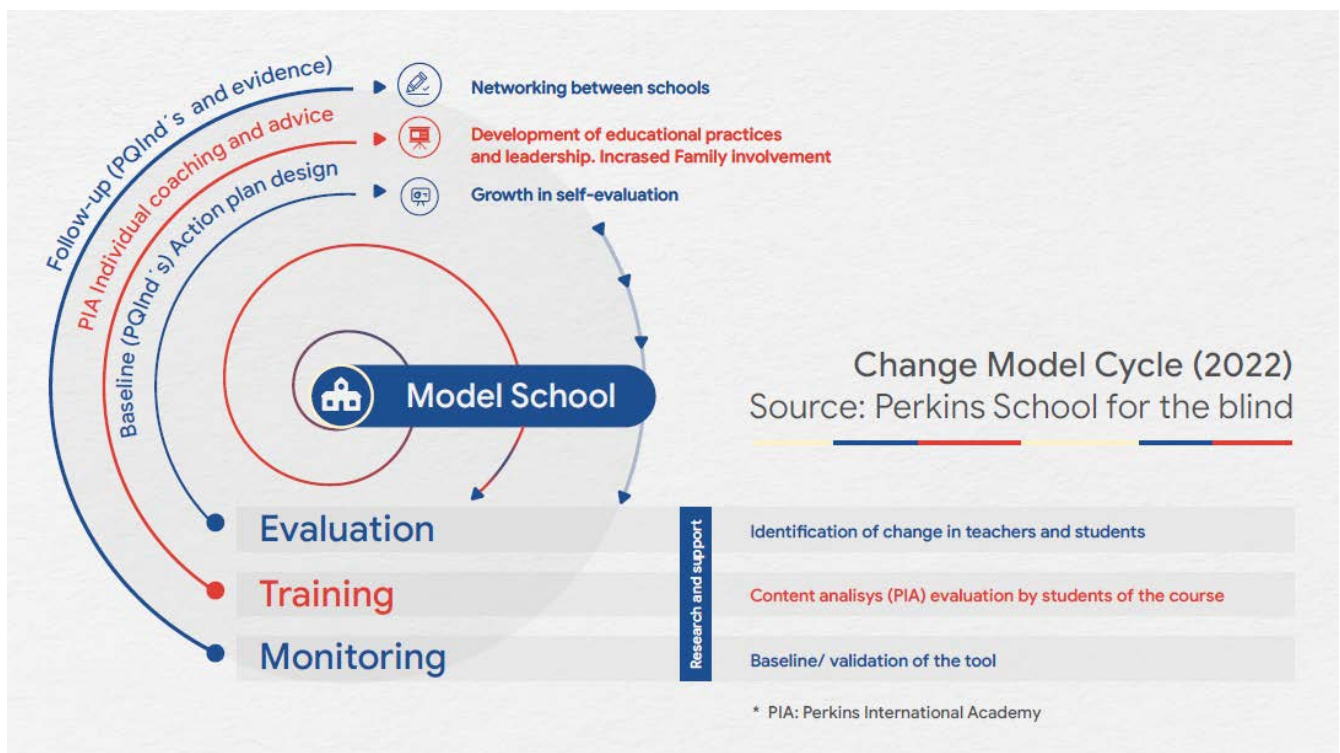


Figure 3. Change Model Cycle (2022). Source: Perkins School for the Blind

Perkins supported the school teams by providing specific training on educating people with DV/DM/SC so that team members could actively participate in the change process. Though this process varied to some extent among the individual schools, it also had shared points that clearly define common stages of change, ranging from simple to complex.

At each stage, the change process started with a member of the educational commu-

nity taking the initiative for improvement in response to training. These stages are:

- Changes in concrete actions, focused on generating alternative actions to improve teaching processes. The actions arise from a diagnostic evaluation process with an objective tool. This results in identification of the school's needs and priorities, with the goal of achieving immediate improvement;

- Changes from shared reflections on student learning processes, defining collective goals, and growing in the autonomy of improvement processes;
- Innovative changes and projections, characterized by the school's conversion into an educational community that promotes the practice of unbiased self-evaluation and constant study to seek and nurture innovation, so that the search for new approaches becomes the norm and not the exception.

In practice, those responsible for the implementation of this Change Model branched into new roles and responsibilities and revealed the diverse work contexts of each school and the extent of their impact.

In 2022, Martins Bruno, P.R., Manager of Special Education, Tocantins, Brazil, said,

The training with the entire team of the School Unit and the greater dialogue with the families of the students was a strength achieved...this also allowed the multiplication of the training for the teachers of the State Network...what Escola Beira Rio received through Perkins, impacted not only the school, but the entire local society in the area of health, for medical referrals and social assistance with the active search program for students who didn't attend the school...we are a school that is working on the vision beyond the walls and fulfilling its social role.

Concrete actions allow transformations that give an immediate response to the students' educational needs, and this inspires other team members to get involved in a process that initially may only seem relevant to a smaller portion of the professional team.

In 2022, Poplar M., Teacher at Arena Institute of Special Education, Cordoba, Argentina, said,

### Conclusion. Model schools as the central axis of change

In practice, the Model Schools were defining a process of change, combining cultural and organizational dimensions in a diversity of Latin American settings. After 4 years of

Being able to make a relationship between behavior and communication helped the entire team of professionals to reflect on ways to address certain challenging and disruptive behaviors...particular situations aroused interest in learning about adjustments that were made in the classroom so that our students can access the information and interact socially.

The coordinated work of the teams grew according to each school's individual rhythm and pace, defining roles and responsibilities, which transformed the way student needs of varying levels are responded to and met.

Vargas Lopez, S.L (2022), Director of the Multiple Attention Center, Morelos, Mexico, said,

The increasingly transdisciplinary work, where the look of the student is shared by all the members of the team. It has made it possible to individualize the attention to all our students at all levels to a greater extent. The work plans...in collaborative construction, more directed to the interests of the students, allowed to apply at all times the spiral learning that is so necessary for students having disabilities...The transformation of the classroom spaces little by little unified the work strategies...

Accompanying this process of change towards the formation of Model Schools has expanded our knowledge about the scope of the schools' achievements and has also allowed for clarification of Perkins' Change Model. The latter allows us to support schools in creating an effective work plan with shared values and principles, and to intensely monitor and evaluate implementation plans. These evaluations reveal the quantity and intensity of change, and the development of leaders who can reach more and more students.

study, we can say that the Model School is an organization committed to flexible and dynamic transformation. The ongoing quest for improvement is the Model School's cen-

tral quality and this translates to a state of constant revision and change. The Model School does not aspire to reach a definitive state or goal, but rather is continuously evolving and searching for enhancement.

The leadership that this concept proposes and that each school develops is linked to classroom management, as well as to institutional management, where the characteristics of the services, the actions of teachers and managers, and the participation of the family are understood.

Guaranteeing equal opportunities requires working towards broad recognition of inclusion as a basic human right. Improving the educational environment for students with DV/DM/SC means maintaining an attitude of ongoing monitoring and self-reflection, and implementing practices that promote student autonomy and independence. Forming teams of professionals trained in developing communication and participation plans for the individuals with DV/DM/SC and their families is a key part of this work.

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