

OPEN CURRICULUM AND ELECTIVE COURSES CHANCE FOR GREATER PARENTS AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL LIFE -policy brief-

Educational reform puts forward partnership in education

Montenegro undertook an extensive primary and secondary education reform from 2000 to 2009. The reform strategic objectives are extremely ambitious as they are developmental in nature and make an integral part of Montenegro's social, political and economic transition within a broader context of global changes. One of important factors, even recognised as new approach to the education, is *partnership*. Cooperation is treated as modern approach to overall system functioning and as one of dominants that would overcome traditionalist concept of separation and divisions. Now the education system recognises the need to share the responsibility and resources related to efforts to make pupils successful in school, happy in school, motivated to learn, but also to intervene and support pupils when they face problems.

Ideally, partnership between school and parents could be defined as interaction based on equality, continuity, mutual respect towards each other, open two-way communication and joint benefit. Each school's annual plan foresees cooperation with parents which often turns out to be sporadic communication initiated by principles or teachers. Schools' organisational capacities are bringing to them initial responsibility for development and quality of partnership with parents. However, partnership is not necessarily predefining **teachers as initiators** and **parents as recipients** of established forms and content of cooperation that schools are offering. True partnership in planning and implementing adopted decisions should be sought in jointly agreed aims and same behavioural norms that apply to all involved.

"Participation of parents, local community and broader social environment in development of school life represents one of the demands of democratic school system."

Ivana Đerić, Institute for pedagogy research, Belgrade

„Key question is if change of parental position in educational discourse can bring the overcoming of existing problems in cooperation of school and family.“

Nikoleta Milosevic, Institute for pedagogy research, Belgrade

Clearly, such changes in education need time to occur and even more to become practice and standard. This policy brief will offer positive examples of occurrence of such changes in paradigm and will recommend some to further advance the issue of

partnership of schools and parents.

The research “Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in SEE” was realized in Montenegro 2008-2009 through several phases investigating the views of primary school principles on parents’ participation in decision making processes and in overall life of schools, as well as consulting with parents on possibilities and obstacles for their involvement. Group interview was organised with principles (findings were used for designing questionnaire for all principles of primary schools in Montenegro). Following this preparatory phase 145 principles (out of 161) have answered on questionnaire in first half of 2009. Same procedure was followed with parents, namely, six group interviews with parents were held in second half of 2009 and findings were used to create questionnaire for parents. Finally, 1156 parents and 32 principles filled the questionnaire at end of 2009.

Parents clearly stated that they could be more involved in decision making about educational issues (57%), while they are bi-polarised around the question of should they be more intensively involved in overall school governance. Very important finding from the research is that 83,2% parents have never alone nor in cooperation with other parents tried to voice out their opinion related to school issues. This finding alone is sufficient proof that educational system need to provide channels and tools for greater parents’ involvement that go beyond adopted legislation that simply allows it.

Following the logic of parents having the most interest to get involved in education of their children it is plausible to conclude that wider community is even less to be expected to initiate partnerships that would advance school life. However, this may not be true always, as principles claim that interest and participation of parents is greater in smaller communities, due to, how they explain it direct communication lines and network of acquaintances between citizens. In those communities school is one of important centres of social life in the community and thus it is by default more linked to the community. Additionally, communities offer a wide range of resources that are valuable to schools and the families they serve.

Parental involvement in the life of schools

There are number of interest groups that influence work of schools and on which schools influence. Parents represent the largest heterogeneous group with very poor liaison among its membership. However this group encompasses diversity and richness of knowledge, skills, values, social relations and personal motivations for cooperating with schools.

Parental involvement occurs when parents actively, critically, resourcefully and responsibly contribute to promoting and developing the well-being of their communities

Family Support America, 2001

There is no universal definition of what parental involvement entails. Some definitions include greater participation in the life of a school, while others focus on increased contributions to an individual child's learning process. Still others incorporate the family into the learning process through adult education, parenting, and after school activities. Some leading schools engage families in the governance and planning processes and in building broad ownership of student achievement goals. Nonetheless, parental involvement occurs when parents actively, critically, resourcefully and responsibly contribute to promoting and developing the well-being of their communities (Family Support America, 2001).

The research "Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in SEE" findings show that financial issues are mainly closed for parents, while organising excursions and extra-curricular activities are the segments of school life in which parents are mostly involved. All involved stakeholders recognize the benefits of greater parental involvement but are at the same time frustrated by limitations and ineffectiveness of this process in practice. At the same time their views on parental involvement are fairly different.

Schools' Principles are claiming that low participation of parents in educational process in its key aspects is responsibility of parents. They are stating that parents do not understand their role and jurisdiction of Parents Council, that they are mainly passive in this body and expect exposes from Principles and when they initiate topics to be discussed they are of individual nature and considering one's own offspring attending that school. However, apart from lack of interest and time of parents to get involved, principles still do recognise insufficient capacities of school to develop and run programs for parental involvement.

Parents are strongly stating that they do have time and interest to get actively involved in the life of school (74%). However, most parents claim that they are informed about Parents Councils, but at the same time some do not know about its role, jurisdiction and ways to become member. Parents-Representatives in the Council/Board clearly recognise that their contribution is highest in organising events in schools (64,1%), followed by extra-curricular activities,

Role of Parents Council: Principal's view

„Some parents have udnerstood that they need to run the school. Simply, they thought they need to determin even the salries for teachers, their working time. It is a fact and they didn't understand how Parents' Council i very important structre that is supposed to help school. And by helping school they would participate in running the school.“

disciplinary issues, health and security, educational issues and finally overall governing of school. Additionally, parents claim that sometimes they (their representatives in Council and School Board) are silent and do not tackle issues because they are afraid of consequences it may have on their children.

**Role of Parents Council:
Parent's view**

„(Parents') Council should make itself more active... Parents are not aware of the significance of Council. In school we need to create the climate so that parents are aware of their own role.“

General Law on Education (2002) regulates composition and jurisdiction of School Board and Parents Council and leaves regulation of elections to educational institutions. Thus, the Law envisages that Parents Council is, among other things, responsible for choosing representatives in School Board, gives opinions on candidates for Principle and gives opinion on proposal of educational institutions' annual work plan. Already in the Parents Council there is clear possibility for parents to get involved in design of annual work plan.

The same Law regulates School Board composition. However, the law on amendments to the General Law on Education in July of 2010 regulates structure of the

School Board so that instead of two representatives of Ministry now three are envisaged, instead of four representatives of employees now one is envisaged, and Parents' Council is now having one instead of two as it was envisaged in the Law from 2002. Municipal representatives, pupils' and social partners' representatives are no longer envisaged by the Law. Such changes to the law can be interpreted as a re-centralization and endangering the principle of participation. However, as principles are stating, the school boards composition according to the Law from 2002 was not always helpful since „School Boards are highly heterogeneous, due to nature of institutions they represent and their professional identity“. Now, with amendments to the Law, School Boards are certainly more homogenous but with an remaining question of participation of other actors. School Boards are, as Law envisages, adopting development programs, annual work-plan and report on its realisation, and are discussing programs and results of extracurricular activities. Having in mind parents' and principals' assessment about parents being the least involved at all in the financial matters, it is important to note that School boards is responsible for adopting financial plan.

D evelopment of open curriculum and elective courses

ELECTIVE COURSES

Educational system in Montenegro was very centralised and uniform. There were almost no possibilities for pupils or even schools to express own needs and to adequately meet them. Now with the reform of education strategic focus is given to democratisation of educational system. One of key principles is the principle of participation of all interested parties. In practice this is promoted, among other things, through decentralisation of teaching curriculums. With decentralisation reform of education sought the answer for the issue of how to design curriculum to include interests of local community, school and pupils and their parents. And the solution is, as in many other European

countries: *elective courses*. This means that pupils have a choice between at least five courses to elect those that would enable them to express own creativity and meet their specific interests in the amount of five classes per week. Elective courses are assessed and validated in the same way as compulsory ones.

Elective courses are connected to the classes and divided in three groups: Courses that are taught for three years; Courses that are taught for three and two years that can be studied for shorter period; Courses that are taught for one year. There are elective courses that are taught for one year and are not linked to specific grade. Foreign languages are the only three-year courses that can only be chosen in seventh grade and once the pupil elects them he/she needs to study them until the end of primary school. However, other elective courses are not connected to specific grade and can be studied at either VII, VIII or IX grade. Additionally, school can organise optional classes for some subjects (e.g. teaching foreign language since 1st grade). Once the pupil chooses optional class it is becoming compulsory for that year. However, grades from optional classes are not influencing overall pupil's score.

In an effort to allow pupils to choose classes they would like to attend, the reformed school created another burden for the pupils. Namely, at the end of one school year pupils are offered list of

„School is working in four shifts. Classes are overlapping and we had situations where children had two elective courses at the same time – physics and gymnastics. We have solved that very quickly with the principle. There were also situations when pupils had first class gymnastics and 5th and 6th mathematics. There is no way for them to be attentive on mathematics.“

Parent

elective courses to choose from. Based on those individual choices new educational groups are formed usually consisting of pupils from different classes of the same grade. That is occasionally influencing the schedules for compulsory subjects.

The “Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in SEE” research findings indicate that the parents are worried about educational fluctuation during one day where “more demanding subjects” (although the term is relative in some cases it is very obvious that for majority of cases some subjects are more difficult for pupils than others) should be early in the day, as second, third or fourth class for the day. Parents

also note that it is difficult to create such schedule to respond to all the needs and requirements and at the same time are pointing out that it is unacceptable that beginning of school year may take up to few months before schedule is final.

In terms of participation of parents and community in proposing elective courses and suggesting curriculums that are relevant for local reality, there is no clear data. However, Education Bureau has undertaken research on implementation of reform solutions in primary schools and gymnasiums, which provides some information about elective courses in terms of involvement of different stakeholders in adopting final list of subjects to be offered to pupils. In majority of cases the list was

adopted by Teachers' Council 71,23%, while in 34,25% the list was also reviewed by School Board (25 schools) and in 15,07% (11 schools) by Parents' Council.

OPEN CURRICULUM

Another aspect of decentralisation was envisaged in the development of curriculums. Educational reform foresaw that each subject's curriculum (elective courses included) should be developed in a way to break uniformity and allow each local community to be better represented and its specificities (e.g. cultural) promoted to children and young people. Namely, 80% of the curriculum is obligatory and adopted by Ministry, while remaining 20% are left to schools and local communities to design in the way they find the most relevant. However, this great concept is often described as "the weakest element of educational reform" due to the fact that the schools and respective teachers lack guidelines how to approach this task and are mainly left alone in an effort to design curriculums.

Research on implementation of reform solutions in primary schools and gymnasiums conducted by Education Bureau revealed that teachers are designing open curriculum in consultation with pupils, parents, relevant municipal institutions in 74% of cases or in 55 schools according to their own assessment. Only one school stated that it has such consultations with local community. However, as research is notifying the results of monitoring and inspection service are not consistent with those data.

According to principles, schools were expecting support from local community, specifically from municipality, only to discover that such capacity doesn't exist and that municipalities are not able to offer such support. It is worth noting that principles only recognised municipalities as "local community" and were not referring to non-governmental organisations, associations, clubs, businesses, nor other schools and faculties, nor any other establishment existing in the community that could potentially be resource for the school. Therefore, it is no surprise that schools opt to use own resources and that additional burden is placed on the teachers to develop this part of curriculum without any guidelines or support.

„...so, we have great cooperation and communication and they help us with furnishing, even though it may not be their obligation. But regarding these things, local communities do not have professionally trained people that could assist us in this. Because we have 20% of curriculum to develop, and 80% we get from Ministry, Bureau, State whoever, but this 20% I as a teacher need to create in cooperation with local community. However, there is no one to cooperate with.“

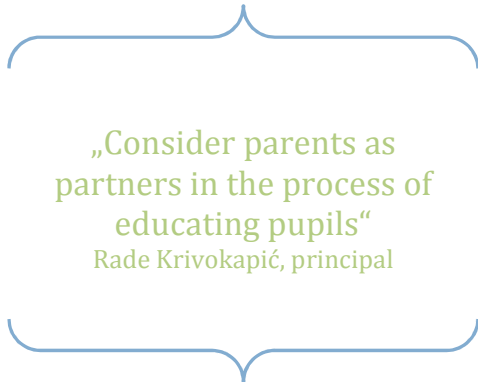
Principal

Findings from research "Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in SEE" clearly indicate that neither parents nor principles are very keen to the idea of greater parental involvement in the development of curriculums. The explanation might be found in the answer to the question: was the concept of 20% locally developed curriculum properly introduced by educational policy makers, even though strategic documents envisage that this part of the program will be realised in the later stage.

Examples of successful partnerships

Here are some specific ways that schools can engage more parents, families, and communities in life of schools that are shared by three principles, **Marijana Papic** - principle of “Pavle Rovinski” primary school; **Rade Krivokapic** – principle of “Radoje Cizmovic” primary school; and **Vukic Konjevic** – principle of “Oktoih” primary school.

- “Consider parents as partners in the process of educating pupils to extend until it does not threaten their personal interests.”
- Use the school resources to support parents’ initiatives.
School “Oktoih” in Podgorica sends out circular letters and public appeals with the ideas/initiatives started by Parents’ Council.
- Organise education for adults in schools premises and position school as centre of communal activities.
School “Radoje Cizmovic” in Niksic organises courses on IT literacy for adults that mainly attracts young adults and parents of marginalised Roma ethnicity living in Niksic.
- Encourage Parents’ Councils to formalize their existence and register as NGO.
Parents’ Council of “Pavle Rovinski” school in Podgorica has registered as NGO and is thus eligible to apply for funds at local and national level, as well as to foreign donors, and in that way provide greater support to school.
- “Recognise NGOs as potential partners and direct initiatives towards them while at the same time opening the doors for their initiatives.”
- Actively engage teaching staff in trainings and capacity building programs that can advance their capacity to teach on different subjects, use new approaches and technologies and engage resources from community.
School “Pavle Rovinski” claims that they do not have nor they could have redundancy due to the fact that teachers are offered opportunities to adapt to interests of pupils and offer the most attractive elective courses. They present elective courses at the end of year to pupils and engage experts from local community to give lectures on certain topics (e.g. Doctors from Institute for public health are giving lectures and answering to pupils questions during elective course “Healthy lifestyles”).
- “Do not oversee and be sceptical to use non-formal links with parents and within community – those can work for the benefit of school and pupils”



„Consider parents as partners in the process of educating pupils“
Rade Krivokapić, principal

Recommendations

Degree of parental involvement in the life of school is determined by many factors: their own demanding schedules and lack of extra time to volunteer or even attend school activities, comprehensiveness and timing of information provided by schools on possibilities to get involved, communication skills of parents and teachers, parents feeling that they can't influence anything anyhow, etc. However, one is specifically vital and is singled out as the one that policy makers can efficiently tackle and get effective results – **the support system that school and local community provide for families**. In order to build sustainable system of support it is essential to create a framework that would allow:

- Development of atmosphere of support and cooperation between parents and school as a standard in societal terms
- Awareness raising of parents, teachers, NGO activists, municipal officers, local entrepreneurs on the benefits of cooperation for the pupils advancement and growth
- Capacity building of teachers and other professionals in education process to engage parents and resources from local community, and actively promote cooperation as school's *way of life*
- Motivation of all involved parties to search for alternative ways of cooperation beyond formalised and prescribed ones.



Photo: Forum MNE, Project "Model of sustainable pupils participation – Youth Worker in School", Primary school "Oktoih"

There are several concrete measures that can be undertaken by relevant policymakers and decision makers to advance parents and community involvement in school life and thus advance pupils success rate, quality of learning and general growth into conscious, responsible and competent adults. Recommended measures are directed to central education institutions and schools:

Ministry of Education and Sport and Education Bureau

- **Develop a state-wide network to support teacher preparation for advancing cooperation and developing partnership with parents and local community.**

The parental involvement, and even less participation of community in the life of school can't be expected to just occur nor should be taken lightly. Since the resources lies in schools and competences are in principals and teachers – that is logical first step. It is necessary to provide teachers with guidelines and examples of good practice of involving parents and local community. However, it is crucial to sustain such efforts through support network that would involve teachers and other education professional.
- **Provide professional development and technical assistance to local communities (municipalities and local clusters (MZ)) and schools on how to develop open curriculums in participative manner.**

Extraordinary opportunity for participation and building lasting partnerships between schools, parents and local community lies in the possibility to create up to the 20% of curriculum. Each community has an opportunity to represent its specificities in an structured manner and to inform and attract pupils to explore more. Such possibility should be advocated to municipalities and local communities in general. At the same time teachers and schools should be provided with the tools to advocate the issue but also to efficiently involve resources and capacities from the community to jointly develop curriculums.
- **Create additional educational tools for parents, teachers, principals, as well as for Parents' Councils and School Boards.**

New models and new concepts that are envisaged by reform of education need to be further promoted and presented in comprehensive and practical matter to the actors that need to actively use them. Therefore both teachers and parents would benefit from additional education resources such as models of good practice, joint or separate trainings, guidelines etc. Those should focus particularly on the area of the parent–teacher relationship and cover practical knowledge of didactics, school management, communication tools, community mapping, building effective partnerships, etc.
- **Promote and facilitate school' co-operation with community based organisations, associations, clubs and specialised NGOs or institutions.**

The participation of local community is essential for development of sustainable decentralised schools. This idea needs to be further promoted to principals and teachers highlighting benefits for school and educational advancement of pupils. However, regulation of the area from centralised level (Ministry providing consent for NGOs to get involved in the life of school for each initiative) might hinder the process and compromise the principle of participation and decentralisation. Facilitation from Ministry/education Bureau should be more efficient allowing necessary dynamic of cooperation and partnership building at local level to develop naturally.

Schools

- **Develop an outreach strategy to inform parents, NGOs, businesses, and the community about school and involvement opportunities, policies, and programs.**

It is evident that parents' involvement could be greater and more beneficial for schools if they are better informed about possibilities. Schools may find it rewarding to put extra effort and translate its strategies and policies into shorter and easily comprehensible information specifically targeting different interested parties in the community. Different information channels should be used and even new established using resources existing in the community (e.g. NGO can serve as info-point, public appeals and circular letters should be send through web as well...)
- **Map community and survey both educators and parents, NGOs, businesses to determine needs, interests, and ideas about partnering.**

Schools need to have broader picture and to really have feedback from the interested parties in order to build lasting partnerships. Such survey need not additionally burden school's resources but can be provided by local NGO may they have information that school need it and plans to act on the findings.
- **Evaluate the content and effectiveness of the parental and community involvement each year in consultation with parents/community.**

Reasoning is the same as for the previous recommended action – school need relevant feedback to determine its next steps in this area. Evaluation of content, effectiveness and finally of impact of parental and community involvement can provide crucial insides both for short-term and long-term strategies.
- **Engage NGOs and parents in educating teachers, school staff and principals on how to reach out, communicate and work with parents/community as equal partners.**

Although major and numerous responsibilities are given to the schools in the education process it is necessary to highlight that it is almost impossible for one school to answer to all those relaying solely on own resources. Therefore it is crucial that schools recognise potential in the community and allow engagement of NGOs and parents in educating educators. Such change of roles can only benefit to the relationship of trust that need to be built for the benefit of pupils.
- **Explore and introduce alternative models for parental and community involvement in the life of school.**

There are examples of good practice that allow teachers and parents, schools and NGOs to build stronger and meaningful relationships. Schools should explore models and pilot them to measure the impact. Possible models are: „open doors“ - which allows parents and pupils to participate in joint activities in schools – arts, dancing, fashion workshops, horticulture, open lessons, etc.; or „school for parents“ – an open space where parents and pedagogues can meet and discuss specific topics; or „youth worker in school“ – project that allows professional from youth and educational NGOs to introduce non-formal education setting among interested pupils advancing their participation in the life of school...

Call to Action

Forum MNE believes that significantly more emphasis must be placed on the important roles that parents, families and communities (including NGOs, associations, clubs, businesses, local clusters, municipalities and respective municipal officers, etc) can and must play in advancing pupils' performance, quality of learning process and growth. Forum MNE has long advocated policies to support children and young people development and to place them in the centre of educational and developmental efforts in school and community like wise. Forum MNE believes that amendments to the Law on Education in July 2010 concerning the composition of the school board are not in the spirit of reform. Reform of education system in Montenegro is based on set of values that enhance participation and cooperation of different actors. For those great possibilities to be utilised schools need further support and guidelines in order to find their way in decentralised system and refer to parents and local communities as real partners. Therefore, we urge central educational institution to consider recommended measures and specifically to change the paradigm and explore ways for parents and community to be considered as resource and fully involved in development of 20% of local curriculum. Finally, participation of parents, local community and pupils in school life needs to be significantly better defined by Law regulating the composition of the School Board.



Photo: Forum MNE, event "Festivity in the honour of spring", Kotor

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