

# Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in SEE

## Focus Group Report

### ROMANIA

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#### Methodological Issues

The report reveals the conclusions of two focus groups attended by principles or deputy principles of Bucharest secondary schools. The discussions took place on the 24<sup>th</sup> and the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 2008 at the main office of *Centre Education 2000+* from Bucharest and they were attended by 17 people – 8 at the first debate and 9 at the second one.

As far as the structure of the first group is concerned, seven of the eight participants were women and one was a man. Four of them were principles and the other four were deputy principles. The debate lasted for approximately 90 minutes – the introduction, including project and methodology description, took 15 minutes. The second group was made of three men and six women, namely four principles and five deputy principles. The discussions lasted for about 80 minutes, including 15 minutes of introduction just like for the first focus group.

The interview topics and guidelines were the ones previously set by the main research team. The topics approached are divided into four sections: current state of the education system, education system reform, community involvement in school life, parents' participation. We must stress that the topic choice was influenced by the research background that will be discussed in the next chapter of the report.

On the whole, the participants were open and nobody refused to engage in the debate or to freely express their point of view on a certain matter. There are no reasons to believe that the participants articulated dishonest opinions.

The report summarizes the conclusions drawn by the focus groups based on audio recordings and on the facilitator's notes. Whenever possible, the remarks are backed up by quotes from participants' interventions (in some cases, it is impossible to single out quotes from the discussions as they are more of a dialogue or, in other cases, the approval or rejection of an idea was showed by gestures or facial expression). These quotes are all in Italics, either between brackets or introduced by clear explanations. When several quotes underline the same idea, they are separated by semi-colon.

## Research Background

Before moving on to the results, it is very important to indicate the research background. At the end of 2007, the Ministry of Education proposed a block of new education laws to be subject to public consultations: Undergraduate Education Law, Higher Education Law, and Teacher's Statutes. After the winter holidays, in January 2008, the legislative drafts were subject to public consultations which took place in schools. Each county inspectorate or the Bucharest inspectorate was in charge of organizing these consultations with the school principle and of inviting teachers, parents, students and other local community members to take part. The participants' remarks and comments were brought together and sent to the ministerial department responsible for bill drafting.

In Bucharest, most of the consultations were carried out in the last two weeks of January. All focus group participants had already taken part in such a debate or were about to. In both cases, they were at least familiar with the overall issues of the new laws and some of them even knew them in detail.

One of the main changes that the new law wants to make is to continue the decentralization process of the education system by granting more decision-making autonomy to schools. This means that school principles would be appointed by the Local Council based on the proposals made by the school's Board of Trustees, that the Trustees would be elected based on a new rule, the school principle would be separated from the Board of Trustees (the principle will no longer be a Trustee in the Board of Trustees), that schools would be granted more human resources decision-making autonomy and some financial autonomy (but not full financial autonomy).

These changes came up during the discussions in a constant and natural manner. Even if the participants were asked to talk more about the current system, quite spontaneously the provisions of the new laws guided the discussions. This can be both a setback because it somehow restricts the information about how things are right now and an important benefit to the future project stages because if these laws are approved pretty much as they look like today, the whole project setting will change.

## Participants' Views on the Current State of the Education System

The first part of each of the two focus groups concerned the overall state of the existing education system. Although, according to initial plans, the main goal of this part was to get the participants in the debate mood and to get them ready for the next topics, due to the latest experience in bills public consultations, the participants were very active and they diagnosed the education system and its development.

In both focus groups, the participants agreed on two negative assessments of the education system:

1. At the present, the Romanian school has poor results.
2. The evolution in time is downward and things are getting worse and worse.

One of the participants described the situation very metaphorically as follows: *The Romanian education system is hibernating. It works on stockpiles and it gets worse and worse.*

When asked about the main symptoms of the education system's bad shape, the participants pointed out a series of broad problems, such as:

- The overall training of students gets worse from one generation to another (they all agreed on this either in a harsh way – *the students are less and less prepared from one generation to another* – or in a moderate way – *they could be better, much better*);
- Students' and parents' interest in high quality education has dropped; all they want is a degree (this issue will be discussed later on, in the next chapters of the report);
- The school doesn't develop the student's civic spirit (*we don't teach our students how to be good citizens; we are educating the children on this duality: we think something – we say something else, we say something – we do something else*);
- The human resources (the teachers) are less well-trained (*there are some problems with the younger generations of teachers; the initial teaching training from universities is unsatisfying*).

The discussion about what has led to such a state was much more intense. In general, the participants tended to blame the decision-makers, those from different administrative hierarchy levels, parents and the community and not the school as the basic level of the system, but they also agreed that the teachers contributed to some extent to the education system downfall.

An issue on which both groups unanimously agreed is that there is a breakdown between political and administrative decisions and the school itself. The principles mentioned communication problems (*the bottom-up communication is not really working*) and the lack of some consultation mechanisms (*Shouldn't they run a survey among us - who die a little every day when we teach - allowing us to speak our mind about how the system is assessed? I have the feeling that these people left teaching years ago and although they are capable human beings, they are out of touch with reality*). They revealed some cases where the comments of the schools on pilot projects were ignored which generated very bad outcomes when the pilot projects were implemented on a larger scale. The latest example is that of the single nationwide semester tests<sup>1</sup> (participant: *When you run a pilot project you need to analyze its result. If you see that the result is terrible, you stop right away. I am talking here about the single nationwide semester tests*; another participant: *Many of our fellow teachers of various subject matters –Romanian language, Mathematics, Geography, History – pointed out that the results were not good at all, and yet the project went on*).

According to those who attended the focus groups, another thing that causes education system problems is no real involvement of the community and of the society as a whole. School principles say that although education has been unanimously declared a national priority, in practice neither politicians, nor community members do anything to make things better in this area. One of the participants portrayed the situation as follows: *Education is perceived in a twofold manner. On one side, it has been decided that it is a national priority, but in reality it is not handled as such. Unfortunately, we are educating the children on this duality: we think something – we say something else, we say something – we do something else [...] No one - parents, the community, and teachers - is innocent*.

The school principles said they were not at all pleased with the relationship with mass-media. They accused the press of becoming tabloid-like and the journalists, who look for breaking news,

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<sup>1</sup> In the Romanian education system, the semester test is an end-of-semester evaluation tool which usually makes for 50% of the final grade in a subject matter. In the autumn of 2007, the Ministry of Education decided to also use this tool for ranking students when passing into the next school level. Thus, the grades of the secondary school semester tests will become a ranking criterion for high school admission. In order to reduce biased test scoring, the Ministry decided that the test topics would be the same all over the country. This decision was highly criticized by teachers and non-governmental organizations because it didn't take into account the local background and it came against the tendency of system decentralization. The Ministry kept its decision, but the result was very controversial. The students' test results differed a lot from their overall average scores and it was suspected that in most schools the teachers either helped the students or they let them cheat in order to get better scores.

of talking exclusively about the negative side of the education system. When someone tries to promote good education results, they hardly find newspaper or broadcast space. One of the participants talked about a bad experience related to out-of-the-context information: *They came to interview us about school refurbishments. A representative of schools administration and a parent were also present. They interviewed all of us and we showed them what had been done and what should still be done. When editing the footage, they left out everything except for what the parent had said and it looked like nothing had been done at all, which was not true.* Another participant spoke about the problems they met when they tried to promote the good results of their school: *I tried to get on TV to talk about our students' good results, to highlight something positive about our children. I am talking here about the results of a step-by-step program. I didn't manage to do it. I was asked if I had any connections or money. As I didn't have any, I couldn't get on TV.* A similar example was given by another participant: *I run a neighborhood school, a good one although we are in a bad neighborhood which has lots of problems. At our school, we organized an art gallery with students' works. A journalist from a national journal came to write an article, which came out very well, but the editorial staff picked this headline: "Art Gallery at Offenders' School".* Given all this, all the participants subscribed to the idea that it would be very useful if either at central level, through the Ministry of Education, or at local level, through county inspectorates, a program would be started to improve school image among people.

The participants agree that there are still some teachers who don't accept the change of paradigm and they thus add up to the problems of the system (*Some teachers are still reluctant to the education quality law. I have seen many teachers get angry because they have to work on the principle that the student is the very core of the teaching process*). Still, the principles think that such cases are merely a minority.

Shifting the discussion from general to specific, when asked about the biggest problem that their school had to deal with at the time, the participants named lack of autonomy and the small range of decisions that they can make. It is very likely that these answers might have somehow been influenced by the above-mentioned background. Still, all the principles who attended the focus groups said that the delayed decentralization process was their school's number one problem.

In practice, lack of autonomy leads to a number of dysfunctions:

- The allocated funds are difficult to spend and the spending depends on several intermediate links (*schools don't have their own budget. Everything is done through a budgetary centre; Even if we have our own income, from rent, for example, the money is not directly collected by the school, but by the budgetary centre, and it cannot be spent directly by us; the school cannot pay those who could take part in school projects. This is a major obstacle.*);
- Schools are not allowed to decide on the teachers they would like to hire and there are constant problems regarding human resources management (*it is very hard for us to keep the good teachers who are not associated teachers at our school; we gave a spare History chair to the inspectorate. There, they split it into three and they sent me three teachers; there are not enough classes and the teachers have to share the working hours, which raises efficiency and communication problems. Some teachers hold classes at two or even three schools and consequently you cannot count on them; there are some very good teachers that you can't keep for the years to come*);
- The procurement and maintenance works are not made according to the school's priority list, but to the list drawn up by the local administration (*The school draws up an investment needs plan that we forward to schools administration. The town hall decides what will be done and, most of the times, the priorities of the town hall don't match those of the school; We sign the contract as beneficiaries and we don't have any saying in this*). One of the participants briefly described the problems met when the

beneficiaries don't have direct control over the works done: *Generally, repairs have been made in every school. However, there is a problem when things are overdone. In Bucharest, a program financed by the European Investment Bank and managed by the Local Council is run using a hard-to-understand logic. They demolish what has been done to redo it although it is not necessary, they use poor quality materials and the contractors are selected based on a series of criteria which are unknown to us. We were not consulted when the projects were drafted or when the suppliers were selected.*

The school principals said that the financial issues are not as big as they used to be some years ago. Some of them think that, at present, schools are granted enough funds to run properly. These comments may be due to the fact that the participants were from capital city schools and that Bucharest is a town with a substantial economic growth that generates substantial income to the local budget. Nevertheless, teachers' salaries, especially those of junior teachers, are still considered a problem. A junior teacher earns a net income of about RON 700 (almost EUR 200), which all the participants find *insufficient, almost shameful, a salary that doesn't provide a decent living.*

## **Views on Education System Reform**

All that talking about decentralization spontaneously led to approaching the matter of education system reform. The participants defined the authorities' successive reform propositions as a *permanent change without a clear direction*. They all agree that the education system had and still needs to change to catch up with the changes of the whole society. Nonetheless, all the participants seemed once more unsatisfied with the way central authorities manage this change.

The main shortcomings of the education reform project or projects that school principals identified are the following:

- Inconstancy - actually each minister came up with their own reform program (*we are going through a constant change, we change the change itself; each minister started a new reform, new experiments*);
- Term - the reform started in 1996 and it hasn't yet reached some stability (*the decentralization hasn't still been finalized; we can't just always change things, we need to become familiar with them as well*);
- Insufficient or even no consultation with local stakeholders – teachers, parents, students (*Shouldn't they run a survey among us - who die a little every day when we teach - allowing us to speak our mind about how the system is assessed? I have the feeling that these people left teaching years ago and although they are capable human beings, they are out of touch with reality.*);
- Lack of clear goals to lead the change (*We still don't know what the goal of the education system is, what we want to make out of the student. And when we seem to know it, someone else comes along the next day and changes everything, so we have to start over again.*).

The participants revealed that some people working in the educational system are for the reform, others are against it. They mentioned conservatism, fear of change and lack of vision as some of the reasons that make teachers or other employees show resistance to the proposed changes. On the other hand, all the principals say that most of those that they got in contact with at their own school or at the inspectorates are aware of the need to set the education system on stable grounds by completing the reform process as soon as possible.

The participants wanted to point out and appreciate the fact that, for the latest block of laws, debates were finally held. One of them summarized everything as follows: *serious talks, at last. Debates were carried out with parents and teachers at every school.* There were conflicting opinions about the content of the new laws which the school principles equally criticized and appreciated. The shared conclusion was that the project could still be improved and that an important step was made by finding out what stakeholders think about it.

Both focus group discussions reached the shared conclusion that full decentralization, including at financial level, must be the final outcome of the educational reform (*decentralization is the best solution to school's problems*). In this context, the principles also started to talk about community participation that they consider *crucial for the good running of the educational process in a decentralized system*. They all think there are still big problems regarding involvement and participation, but this is not an impediment, but more of an additional argument in favor of decentralization (*the school can get the community ready to be involved; responsibility renders people responsible*).

One of the participants described how the new laws-related debates were carried out at the school he was running to emphasize the two main ideas of the discussion, namely that consultations are needed and that parents or other community members can be rendered accountable: *First of all, the latest education bills were expected anyway and, second of all, they opened the way to debates to which we were invited. About a week ago, the inspector came to our school right after we finished our Faculty Board meeting; a day before, the Parents' Board had met. Three quarters of the parents got involved in the discussions. We informed them about it a week before, we even sent a letter to some of them, many had read the law, so, as I was saying, they engaged in the discussions. They said it was the first time they were really consulted. We are expecting a sort of a change to take place at least at this level – parents should understand that they will play a major role and that local community doesn't only mean public administration.*

In the school principles' opinion, financial decentralization is most needed. The relationship with intermediate bodies (schools administration department from the town hall and regional budgetary centers) depends on the quality of the partners and on the principles' personal connections. Consequently, some of the participants complained that their projects were blocked because the allocated money or the funds generated from their independent activities were stuck on the way. Still, others said they had no problems with any network partner, although they admitted that sometimes bureaucracy can be quite annoying. Nevertheless, everyone stated that it would be better if each school had its own self-managed budget. At the same time, the principles believe that the process must wipe out all problems related to lack of competencies.

The financial decentralization project has recently started as a pilot project in several schools across the country. The manager of one of these schools took part in one focus group. He briefly described the process and lessons learnt from the pilot project: *This is our second year in the project. It was good and bad altogether. It was good because we don't have to deal anymore with the financial intermediate body creating all sorts of problems. The transition however was very hard to make. Last year was a real nightmare because, all of a sudden, we were facing a series of problems that we had to solve, decisions that we had to make without delay, and you know how it is, everyone is cautious when it comes to money. I think the process should have been better prepared. We didn't have an accountant and we wasted a lot of time going to the local tax office and HR recruitment companies to find and hire a good one. This was our main problem because neither I nor the deputy principles were trained in accountancy and it is hard to find a good accountant. I think this transition could be better prepared, but, as a whole, I find it a good measure and the results look positive to me. After overcoming initial obstacles, things started to run smoothly.*

## Community Involvement in the School's Life

A major section of each discussion focused on the involvement of other stakeholders from the local community in the school's life. The participants were asked questions on who these stakeholders are, to what extent they take part in the decision-making, school administration and projects thereof, as well as what perspectives and measures could be considered to improve the existing situation. In both groups, the participants rapidly reached a consensus, saying that the involvement of all local stakeholders is not sufficient, which is detrimental to the school. The biggest problems concern the participation of local authorities' representatives. As for parents, there is always an active minority, but most of them lack any involvement. Local companies sometimes offer support for schools, but usually only when they are managed by a parent.

According to the legislation in force, the decisions in schools are made by the Board of Trustees, chaired by the principle. However, the participants indicated that, in practice, the principle is the one who makes most decisions, and the Board of Trustees only formally endorses his/her decisions. The mechanism was artistically depicted by one of the respondents: *Theoretically, the principle is assisted by the Board of Trustees. Practically, there are people and people. Let's be honest, at 12 o'clock, the hours are over, few [of the teachers] are interested in other problems, in what can be done, whether they are part of the Board of Trustees or not [...] The principle is always held accountable, gets all the blame. In theory, we know a school is run by the principle together with the Board of Trustees, that the decisions are made at Board level, but in fact, most of the times, the principle makes the final decision.*

It's not easy to define the causes of this situation. Most participants think it is about repeating a previous pattern (*I have been teaching for over thirty years, it's always been like this, old habits die hard*), backed by a lack of information and training of those involved (*It's useless to tell someone that from tomorrow on they are in the Board [of Trustees], if they don't know what to do*). Also, an important element, as shown in the above-mentioned quote, is that in most cases, the principle is responsible in the relations with other institutions and authorities, whether the decision belongs, in theory, to the entire Board of Trustees or it is just about details that should not concern him/her (*The principle is responsible for everything. For instance, I am in charge with the medical records. Why should a principle do this?*). All participants mentioned the lack of interest that most community members display in their relation with the school.

The lack of interest is obvious, in the school principles' opinion, with regard to representatives of the Local Council to the school's Board of Trustees. When describing the relations with the Local Council representative, they mentioned permanent absence (*At present, BT doesn't work properly. The Local Council representative never attended; The town hall representative is only on paper; He never shows up; It is just a name, we send notifications a few days ahead, and still does not come.*), as well as active presence (*In our school, the LC representative is present in every meeting, just like the parent's representative*), but most participants said that an active councilor that also attends the meetings is the exception, rather than the rule. The common conclusion was that it greatly depends on the character of those appointed in the Board of Trustees and that unfortunately, most of them fail this test. One of the participants concluded with the example of their own school: *In the first part of this administration, the Local Council was represented in the school's Board of Trustees by a councilor who attended every meeting, was very active, and represented the school in the relation with the town hall. After about two years, he was replaced; I don't know the reasons, maybe something personal, maybe political. The new councilor only came here once, and after that he would not even answer the phone. It depends especially on the people.*

All school principals who attended the discussion said that a representative of the Local Council who is active and interested in the school's problems is a major gain, because they can become the *school's advocate in the relation with the town hall* and can contribute to promoting the school's interests, both in terms of the budget, and other projects.

When asked about the reasons that lead to such a situation, the school's principals present there indicated several possible causes for the low involvement of local stakeholders. Firstly, the general issue of the population's passivity as a whole (*We do not have a community per se, it is not a sufficiently strong community to get involved*). All participants agreed that the entire society is marked by a low level of civic involvement and that there is no reason why we should have different expectations with regard to schools. It must be mentioned that the participants' perceptions coincide with the results from sociological surveys on the Romanian civic culture. Some of the principals present connected the level of involvement with the education and the living standards (*We have a major problem, the local community's level of education depends on the community's financial status*) and agreed that as income increases, the community's interest towards the school will also increase. Other participants didn't agree with this observation, indicating that there are many cases where the income increase did not generate a higher interest. No consensus was reached on this matter.

The partnership with a local agent, a company or non-governmental organization is considered as a solution for developing own projects without the previously mentioned bureaucratic constraints. The participants gave several examples related to possible agreements with third parties, either a company (*there is a company that rented the space and through this company we can develop other projects as well*), or an NGO (*we have the education alternative Step-by-Step, conducting projects in the school*).

The opinions about the students' input at decision level were characterized by the idea that in secondary school, they do not have the necessary age and capacity to get involved in such issues. The school regulations say that the presence of a students' representative in the Board of Trustees is optional and all those present considered that this option is not needed. The principals proved to be reluctant to changing this situation from own initiative, but they might do it if the regulations change (*We were notified that we should get the students involved in the Board of Trustees*). On the other hand, most participants agreed that the students, especially the ones in secondary school, when asked, they do have their own opinions, some significant, some not so significant, and they are ready to express them (*Students are interested in how the school is going, they immediately have opinions on it, they have many opinions*). One of the participants even provided an example of a project that was successfully initiated and implemented by the students in the school she runs: *A year ago, Procter&Gamble launched a competition. Students came up with an idea for the project and we were granted the funding. It was about a project on recycling various materials. We supported them in as much as we could, with ideas, with some help. We rewarded them with books and certificates. This idea was very appealing to them and so we kept them in school, away from other temptations.*

With regard to teachers, the school principals said they represent the main support for the school's good governance. The example of the Faculty Board was presented in this respect, a board that undertakes important tasks related to the teaching content, as well as some administrative matters. The example of class masters and teachers was given to indicate they are in charge with administration and maintenance of the classrooms, being helped by the Parents Board of the class. The principals said that most teachers take part in the "regular" tasks (the Faculty Board meetings, for instance), the majority of them answering positively when asked to get involved in the school's projects, but few have own initiatives. Among the causes that make some teachers not get involved, the major ones are lack of passion and limited time. The participants to the discussions

talked about the *passion to be a teacher, to teach others* as an important element, instrumental for a teacher's results. Some mentioned with concern that, from this point of view, the recruiting system in education is no longer efficient and that fewer and fewer well-trained young people choose this profession (*older teachers get more easily involved, while young teachers finish their class and leave*). However, other participants outlined that it is not a given, as there are also young teachers who have passion. As for time, the problem was directly connected to the appointment system in education, a system that leads to situations where teachers are not appointed to just one school (*There are teachers with classes in two or even three schools, and so you cannot count on them, they are really good people, that you cannot keep in the years to come*). The principles agreed that decentralization will solve these problems, by allowing each school to directly hire their teaching staff.

The participants said that most times, the initiative to involve other persons belongs to the principle, which they considered normal, given the current system. The regulations in force allow the principle to convene only part of the Board of Trustees, depending on the topics from the agenda. The participants to the discussions thought it was natural, as there are matters of no interest to some people in the Board. One of them gave a concrete example in this respect: *We don't bring in the parent or the town hall representative every time the Board convenes. There are things that would not actually interest them, and it would be a waste of their time. For instance, next week we have a board meeting to discuss the students' grades for conduct. Why should representatives of the parents or the town hall attend this discussion, anyway they are not interested.*

In this context, solutions to stimulate the involvement were also discussed. Most participants think that an additional effort of the school, as institution, to show its openness for collaboration, might attract the community members, as it happened with the recent consultations (*[...] We told them what we are doing a week in advance, we sent them letters at home, many read the law, as I said, they got involved in the discussions. They said it was the first time they were really consulted*). However, the principles wanted to outline that this works only if concrete consequences are to apply and show that those consultations were not just a formality (*if nothing happens, nobody comes the second time around*). Some participants also raised the time issue, given that the principle's agenda is already full, but they did not reject the idea that they might delegate such responsibilities.

As for delegating responsibilities, the principles indicated that it is difficult to motivate other teachers to take part in school projects, because the lack of financial autonomy prevents them from paying them extra (*the school cannot afford to pay the people about to participate in the school's projects. This is a major impediment*). The participants mentioned they agree with the teachers' stand, as salaries are very low anyway, and what would change are the rules, because they feel the need for *incentives, especially monetary incentives, for those taking part in various projects*.

## **Parents' Involvement in the School's Life**

As a discussion topic, the parent's involvement came up in all the sections of the previously mentioned discussions. In this report, we preferred to outline only the context that led to this topic and to group the participants' opinions in this section of the report.

School principles think that most parents are not interested in the school's life, beyond the results of their own child, which is often a disadvantage for the school. In almost all the examples, the parents' involvement led to positive results. Although they did not give a concrete example, some participants mentioned that under certain conditions, the reactions can be adverse. Overall, school principles do not believe that, at the moment, the low involvement of most parents is a stringent problem; they think that completing the decentralization process is more important. As for the activity of the Board of Trustees, the participants said they were satisfied with the involvement of the parents' representatives. During both discussions, the consensus of all present there was reached with regard to the fact that the persons appointed in the Board meet their tasks (*The parents' representatives are interested. Usually, the president of the parents' board is also a person who has time to spare*). The principles also say that in time, the parents' representative might lose interest, so they might be replaced with the help of the Parents' Board (*the principle can ask the Parents' Board to replace their representative in the Board of Trustees*). However, most participants indicated that often it is a passive involvement, a reaction to the principle's request (*every time parents are convened to the Board meetings, they attend*), and the cases where the initiatives come from parents are rather exceptions (*If summoned, parents get involved in extra-curricular activities, but they don't have the initiative*).

The parents' representative in the Board of Trustees is appointed through a system with several levels. First of all, each class sets up a Class Parents' Board, where all parents are included. A president is then elected, and the presidents of all class boards convene in the Parents' Representatives Assembly or the Parents Board of the School. At its turn, this body selects a president, who becomes the parents' representative in the Board of Trustees, with a one or two year term. None of the Boards, the class or the school one, must be a legal entity, according to the law, but the members may choose to (*the parents' board can become legal entities only if they want. They must take care of all the proceedings to become a legal entity*).

Communication from the school management to the parents goes mainly through the same structures – the representative in the Board of Trustees notifies the School Board, then each of the class board presidents notify their colleagues. The principles present for the discussions indicated that in practice, the rule is to have a closer collaboration between the principle and the School Parents Board (*There are meetings of the Parents' Board where they are informed and notified about decisions made or decisions to be debated in the Board of Trustees, and their opinion is considered, whether they agree or not*). This is necessary, as there are meetings of the Board of Trustees that parents do not attend, because it is more efficient (otherwise, the parents' representative would have to vote without having the time to consult with the other parents in the Board), but also because in this way, the most active parents have the opportunity to get involved in the school's projects.

A consequence thereof is that for most parents, the contact with the school is done through the class, through the teacher or the class master. Often times, none of the parties make an additional effort to involve the parents in matters related to school as an institution. This is more visible in large schools, with many students. The school principles considered these aspects through the perspective of their previous experience as teachers or class masters and concluded that *teachers and class masters can have a more important role in stimulating the parents' involvement in the school's life*.

Also, most schools use to organize, at the end and beginning of the school year, a summary meeting that is open for all parents. On these occasions, the principle presents the short and long term managerial plans (at the school year start), or a progress report (at school year end). These are rather meetings to inform the parents about the school. Although, occasionally, some of the

participants take the floor to ask questions or make recommendations, it is not a debate and no decisions are made.

If with regard to the parents' representative involvement, considered to be the most active and interested of all parents, the school principles are relatively satisfied, the same does not apply to the majority of the parents. In theory, any parent can contact the school, through the principle, the class master or the teacher, in order to be part of the school's life, but in practice, the interest of most parents, if any, is limited to the school results and situation of their own child. Here is how one of the participants described the situation: *Their interest [the parents'] is differentiated. Some only want good grades for their children; they do not care how they get them. Some only want the advantage of not having their child in an aggressive environment. Few are those who in the end, gather up, are interested in what happens in the school, who understand the process. Because it is very important to understand that it is not just a child, which the child does not sit alone in the class or at school, that there is a group and a teacher or principle must see everybody.*

This is often a reactive approach, the parents contact the school when they hear that children are in trouble (*We call them, we send them letters, we summon them*) or around the end of the semester or the school year, when they realize the child's results are not as expected (*Most of them come at the end of the semester to solve potential problems about the school situation*). The principles noticed that, sadly enough, for most parents, the solution to all problems comes down to a money offer, either as a donation for the school, or even by attempting to influence the teacher's decision (*A lot of parents, especially the new rich, who think that by giving money, everything is solved and their duty ends there. And then you just see them show up at the end of the semester*). The participants stated that the widespread idea is that the *[parent] leaves the child at the school's gate, pays some money, and from then on, the school takes on the responsibility and the parent doesn't have to do anything else.*

One consequence of such an approach of the relation with the school from the parents is an ever lower interest as children advance in age. If during the first years in school, parents feel more responsible towards their young children; they become less interested in school as time goes by, as mentioned by one of the participants: *Parents show an interest depending on age. Their interest decreases as the child grows up, although it should be the other way around, because the pressure is higher as the child gets older. But the number of interested parents is very high when the child is little, and then becomes diluted in time.* Another participant formulated the same idea as follows: *In primary school, almost all of them come, for fifth to seventh graders, even for the parents meeting, maybe 15 out of 25 parents show up, for seventh graders, maybe 10, for eighth graders even less, and for the rest of the parents you need to call them home to tell them what the student is doing...*

The low interest shown by most parents towards the school is closely related to a lack of involvement in the lives of their children, as noticed by the principles and teachers. Because they don't have the time or they just ignore them, many parents don't spend enough time with their children – *they have no one to talk to at home, they say, we talk more with you than with our parents*, noticed one of the participants, a statement that all the others agreed with, and even reinforced it: *We noticed that most children prefer it when you talk to them, instead of teaching.*

When asked about the reasons for this low involvement level and the solutions they see in practice, the school principles talked first about a lack of civic culture, limited material resources and an overall low level of education in the society. The words of one participant describe very well the opinion of both groups: *I manage a school at the outskirts of the town, in a poorer neighborhood. At my school, parents get passively and semi-consciously involved because they are involved, or*

*pushed to get involved. It's difficult to get a point of view, a real support, a substantial idea from them. We need to think that most parents in Romania are more like the ones at my school.*

Another participant tried to depict a typology of parents in relation with the school: *There are three categories: the newly rich, let's call them yuppies, then people with a certain degree of culture and not necessarily rich, those who also get involved, and the most numerous category of parents consists of the ones with a low material and socio-cultural level. Often times, the latter, if you don't know how to talk to them, they can become enemies to the school, even if they have their children in that school.* At this point of the discussion, that group reached a consensus around the idea that *the parents' intervention in the neighborhood schools can sometimes be detrimental.* This can happen when the intervention is purely reactive, a delayed answer of the parent to things that build up in time, situation where certain types of people prefer to lay the entire responsibility on the school, refusing to undertake part of it. This is an additional reason to maintain a permanent communication channel with the parents. At this point, the participants returned to the issues related to the school's image, as promoted in the media, mainly a negative one, which does not help at all.

The participants do not think that a low involvement from certain cultural group is generated by discrimination. They referred to Roma parents, who are much less interested in what happens at school, but they connected this with the fact that both the education and the income level are lower in the Roma community. One of the participants explained that it is very difficult to work with children from poor environments and a very good method to attract them and their parents alike is to offer them a meal, school supplies and even clothes.

Speaking about concrete examples where the parents' involvement is beneficial, the school principles indicated three major categories: development of school's projects, supporting the school's interests in the relation with other parties, financial support for the school. The last category is self-explanatory, and the principles wanted to specify that these are voluntary contributions.

A concrete example from the first category, the school's projects, was given by one of the participants: *In our school, parents had an initiative and they are taking care of the students after school hours. They even brought in chess and table tennis instructors. The parents are also supervising them.* The problems with such initiatives relate to inclusion – how to get the students whose parents have no input to the project involved, continuity – what happens once the children of those who initiated the project graduate, and a legal form of association to allow for conducting the program, also from the perspective of the costs incurred. As a solution for such problems, parents could establish associations as legal entities, but the legislative framework is not very friendly, as one of the participants indicated: *The school cannot pay the teachers for organizing courses or other extra-curricular activities. Parents could, if they set up an association as a legal entity. There was an attempt in our school, but the costs were very high, accounting, taxes, wasted time. Even if you don't conduct actual operations, you still need to fill in some forms. Eventually, the association was dismantled.*

Another participant described, with the same words, a similar experience: *In a class, one such association was set up. The main thing this association could do was pay for someone who, in the afternoon, would stay with the students for after-school hours. Subsequently, it fell through, because of the additional costs. Nobody else was brave enough to take over this initiative.*

The participants said that the associations are a very useful tool, but *many parents are not ready for such things, don't know how to do them, they find it difficult to undertake responsibilities.* One possible solution would consist of courses to train the parents and the teachers together.

According to all participants, an excellent means to attract students would be to get them involved in after-school projects, and it would certainly be accepted by the parents, maybe some of them would be excited to join in. However, there are legal and financial obstacles, as well as space related obstacles, as one of the participants mentioned: *In my opinion, this type of activities would be really wanted, but we cannot do this. We deal with the consequences of the way the education system was structured. As long as school works as a factory, first shift, second shift, God forgive us, when could you do more activities? I went to a school where until 1 p.m. we were learning, then continued till 5 p.m. When could I do something else? Should I keep the children after 7 p.m.? How could I do this?*

No school among the ones represented at the discussions has tried a PTA model (Parents-Teachers Association), a form of association including teachers and parents. The principles say that such a model could solve the issue of continuity, with the teachers' presence, but the financial problems remain and obstacles related to personnel turnover might also occur. However, if the school is autonomous, the PTA model could become viable.

In a decentralized system and with the parents' help, the issue of differentiated education according to every child's needs could also be solved. The principles agree that special learning needs are not given enough attention (*there has to be education for excellency and centers of excellency, we need to have a differentiated education for children with special educational requirements. Children are different, we must adjust to every one of them*), but they say the centralized system leaves too little decision space to the school.

The parents' involvement can prove to be extremely useful in the relation with the local authorities. One of the participants described the way parents' support proved to be decisive two years ago, at a moment when the school was threatened to be left without a budget for repair works, for political reasons. The school's principle refused to enroll in the political party the mayor supported, therefore his school was written-off the list of investments. The principle called on the Parents' Board and its representatives, who went to the town hall and pushed things, as citizens, forcing the mayor and the local council, thus succeeding in cancelling the previous decision.

A similar example was given by another participant: *We have problems with the people living in the blocks of flats near the school, who used to park their cars on the sidewalk, thus blocking the children's access. We notified the district mayor, the police, but in vain. One of the parents went to the town hall and did not quit until he solved the problem.*

Another way to stimulate the parents' involvement is to create partnerships between schools. The principles gave the example of partnerships with schools from rural areas which resulted in exchange of experience and mutual visits, as well as joint educational projects, thus prompting an active participation of students and parents from both schools. The projects were initiated by the teachers in the schools.

The conclusion of these discussions, for both groups, states that the parents' involvement in the school's life is beneficial. Even if there is a risk of negative reactions, it can be avoided through communication management. Unfortunately, the participation of most parents is low, firstly due to a low level of civic education and to the limited material resources. The situation worsens in time, and this is another problem, as parents and students show an ever decreasing interest. The education system also bears part of the responsibility, its reform being very much delayed.