

**PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE SCHOOL LIFE**

**POLICY BRIEF**

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**Introduction:**

This brief report is prepared based on the findings of a comprehensive study of parents' and school directors' beliefs, attitudes and practices of parent involvement and school-family co-operation, which was conducted with the assistance of the Education Support Program of Open Society Foundations in the framework of the Advancing Education Quality and Inclusion in South East Europe Project.

After a deep analysis of the study results, examination of the current situation in Albania and a deep research literature review, this brief report provides essential information on the importance and effective ways of parent involvement in their children's education. A number of recommendations have also been formulated at policy, school and community level for increasing parent involvement through establishment and strengthening of effective school-family-community co-operation and partnerships. These recommendations are for all educators, local, district and national educational departments and institutions as well as other organizations and individuals who are interested in the improvement of education quality and student achievement.

**Situation analysis and research/literature review:**

Research conducted for more than three decades has shown convincingly that parent involvement is important for children's learning, attitudes about school, and aspirations. Children are more successful students at all grade levels if their parents participate at school and encourage education and learning at home, whatever the educational background or social class of their parents" (Epstein, 2001).

In addition, according to research, schools' programs of school-family-community co-operation/partnership and teachers' practices to involve parents have important positive effects on parents' abilities to help their children across the grades, on parents' ratings of teachers' skills and teaching quality, on teachers' opinions about parents' abilities to help their children with school work at home, and on students' attitudes about school... (Becker and Epstein, 1982; Epstein 2001).

School, family, and community partnerships can improve school programs and school climate, provide family services and support, increase parents' skills and leadership, connect families with others in the school and in the community, and help teachers with their work. However, the main reason to create such partnerships is to help all youngsters succeed in school and in later life. (Epstein, 2001).

In Albania there have been undertaken a number of initiatives and reforms, which have been accompanied by legal provisions. In addition, school-family-community co-operation in the decision-making and school

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improvement has been incorporated as an integral part of the decentralization process in the National Strategy for the Pre-University Education (NSPE) (2009-2013).

However, in spite of various positive changes, the level of parent involvement in the school life and school-family-community co-operation is still very low. In the NSPE (2009-2013) it has been emphasized that the progress of decentralization of responsibilities and decision-making authority from the central to the local level has not been satisfactory mainly due to lack of a strong and functional link between school and community and lack of reliance on the strengths of the family and on the social character of the community.

In order to analyze the root causes of the gap between the goals of the reforms and the actual level of parent involvement and school-family-community co-operation, the study conducted in the framework of Advancing Education Quality and Inclusion Project was focused on parents' and school directors' beliefs, attitudes and practices of parent involvement and school-family co-operation.

The study results show that even though involvement of parents is generally seen as important, schools do not have effective co-operation or partnership programs that ensure active involvement of all parents. Parents who participate in school structures are more involved than other mainstream parents or Roma parents, although in a limited number and scope of activities. Whereas mainstream parents and especially Roma parents are rarely invited by school and feel unable to help their children and school.

Various studies emphasize that schools should not expect parents to create on their own the knowledge needed every year to help their children as students or to connect with school or teachers, but they should inform and involve parents every year through programs of school-family-community partnerships.

Over the years, a framework of six types of involvement (Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at home, Decision making and Collaborating with the community) has been developed from research and field studies. They comprise activities that may be conducted at school, at home, and in the community by teachers, students, parents, administrators, and other actors to improve schools, strengthen families, and increase student success. (Epstein 2001).

Teachers play a critical role in the involvement of parents in schools. In their reasearch study (1989), Epstein and Douber have found that teachers with more positive attitudes toward parent involvement place more importance than others on practices such as holding conferences with all students' parents about school programs, and providing parents with both good and bad reports about their students' progress. More positive attitudes also are positively correlated with more success in involving hard-to-reach parents.

When teachers make parent involvement part of their regular teaching practice, parents increase their interactions with their children at home, feel more positive about their abilities to help their children, rate teachers more positively overall, and students improve their attitudes and achievement (Epstein, 2001).

### **Study objective and methodology:**

**The main objective** of the study was to examine the beliefs and attitudes of parents and school directors toward family-school co-operation and the level of parent involvement in the school life.

### **Methodology:**

This document was prepared based on the data of two surveys.

**The first national survey** with school directors. The data of this survey were collected in two phases through the method of random sampling. In the first phase it was identified the distribution according to regions and strata. Whereas in the second phase it was applied the random sampling. The schools were also selected on an urban/rural distribution basis.

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**The second national survey** with parents. In the first phase it was analyzed the Albanian context regarding parent involvement and the legislation that regulates it, as well as the organization of some Focus Groups with parents from different groups, parents from the group of majority and from the vulnerable groups. In the second phase it was applied the random sampling.

### Sample:

The study population was composed of parents of elementary school children, parents who were members of the School Board or Parent Councils in the same school, or parents who were members of the Parent-Teacher Association, socially-excluded parents and school directors. It was a stratified random sampling and the sample size was as follows:

300 school directors (N=300), who represent 20% of school directors at national level.

30 schools in total (N=30) plus two directors of two schools with socially excluded parents (32 school directors in the whole country). In each school, one School Board member and four members of Parent Councils were randomly selected. 1123 parents in total (N=1123), of whom two samples of 30 socially excluded parents each in two schools (N=60).

The study was conducted during 2008 – 2009.

### Main findings

#### Parents:

- There is a significant link between the school results of children and the fact whether their parents are involved or not in the school life.
- Parents who are involved in the school life have more optimistic hopes and aspirations for their children's education, and expect their children to continue university studies. Meanwhile the majority of socially excluded parents tend to provide their children with vocational skills. Almost one third of these parents think that their children will complete only the compulsory education.
- Almost half of the Roma parents state that they have received invitation for meetings with parents three times or less during the last year.
- 25% of Roma children *do not* receive assistance from anyone for their homework. It is interesting that 27% of Roma children are helped with their homework by someone else who is not their parent. Roma fathers are *not* involved at all in helping with homework.
- Parents who participate in school structures are invited more often than other parents to support the improvement of the school infrastructure. 60% of Roma parents are never invited to offer such a support, versus 31% of parents that belong to the majority of the population.
- More than half of the parents in the sample are never asked for their opinion about the management of the school funds.
- When asked whether school has taken into consideration their opinion as parents about the organization of school activities, 44 % of mainstream parents and 45 % of socially excluded parents state that this has *never* happened.
- 60% of Roma parents say that they have *never* been asked during the three last years to become part of the Class or School Parent Council, while 37% of them say that they have been asked only once to become part of the Class Council.
- Roma parents think more frequently than other parents, that they are not able to play such a participatory role in the school structures.
- Only 26% of Roma have the perception that teachers treat them with respect compared to 40% of other parents who think the same.
- 88% of the representing parents think that the school administration is *not* interested in their contribution and that they want them just to support their ideas.

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### **School directors:**

- According to the study, the majority of school directors (72.6 %) organize meetings with parents at least once in three months and 41.5 % organize them at least once a month.
- School directors state that in 62 % of the cases they share with parents information on the school activities once in three months.
- Other aspects such as information on curricula and on school policies are shared with parents more rarely.
- The most frequently discussed issues in the school meetings are discipline/attitudes/behavior (41.6 % of cases) followed by the grades/success (38.2 %).
- In around 20 % of the cases, at least once a month schools organize meetings with the purpose to provide parents with skills for helping their children with homework. In 39 % of cases these meetings are organized at least once a semester. Whereas in 41.1 % of cases such meetings are organized once a year or are not organized at all.
- 43.2 % of school directors think that parents have a certain impact on class-based decisions. 40.3 % of them think that parents have an impact on the decisions made at school level and 34 % of them think that parents have an impact on school policies.
- 31 % of school directors think that parents have an obvious impact on the process of teachers' performance evaluation.
- According to the majority of school directors (60.2 %), members of the Parent Council have the right to participate in meetings where there are made school-based decisions, without any restrictions.
- Around 40 % of school directors think that parents have the right to participate in these meetings only through invitation.

### **Recommendations:**

#### **I. At National Policy Level:**

- Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) in co-operation with specialized institutions should develop well organized training courses for all the school principals and pedagogical staff on the importance of parent involvement and effective methods of strengthening school-family-community co-operation.
- Schools should receive special financial and technical support by the Ministry of Education and Science and Regional Education Departments in order to develop successful programs of school-family-community co-operation and partnerships. Since such programs are an important component of curricular and instructional reform, specific aspects of them can be supported by funds that are targeted for curricular and instructional reform.
- Ministry of Education and Science in collaboration with Pedagogical Departments should reinforce the development and integration into their university program of a specific course/class on the strengthening of parent involvement and school-family-community co-operation.
- Regarding the crucial role of teachers in the involvement of parents in their children's education, it is important to conduct a national research study on teachers' knowledge, beliefs and practices of parent involvement. Its results would help to develop teacher training programs tailored to their specific needs and interests.
- Work with parents must be one of the criteria for the evaluation of teachers' and school directors' performance.

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- Legislation improvements are needed for ensuring a better co-operation with parents.

### II. At school level:

- School directors should invest in teachers' training and professional development related to parent involvement, and should support them with their efforts and initiatives.
- Parent involvement cannot be successful if based on sporadic individual teacher's initiatives and practices. It should be based on a comprehensive school-family-community partnership program, where all the six types of involvement are well incorporated.
- School directors in co-operation with teachers, parents and students should design comprehensive programs of parent involvement and school-family-community co-operation and they should implement, monitor and review them together consistently. Students should receive special attention, as their role is essential to the success of the program.
- Strengthening of a two-way (school-home-school) communication is central to the success of parent involvement and school-family co-operation, and teachers should contact parents not only when their children have problems, but also when they have positive accomplishments in school.
- School directors and teachers should support the establishment of Class and School Parent Councils through a democratic election process that encourages participation and ensures equal opportunities for all parents to elect and be elected, regardless of their educational level, family structure or socio-economic status.
- Establishment of Parents' Room or Corner and organization of participatory events, such as "Back to School Day" or "Parents' Day", will help break the barriers of participation of socially excluded parents, and make them feel welcome and an important part of the school community.

### III. At community level:

- Local Government, community and business representatives should provide their valuable contributions and resources in order to create an enabling environment that strengthens school-family-community co-operation and supports children's growth, education and development.

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