

# Parental Involvement in the Life of Schools

## Policy brief for Croatia

### Introduction

The extensive research carried out in the last thirty decades across Europe and North America indicates that parental involvement in their children schooling has positive correlation with the variety of educational outcomes such as: better school achievement and higher grades, better school attendance, less drop-out rates, less behavior problems including drug and alcohol abuse as well as more positive student and parent attitudes toward education (e.g. Eccles & Harold, 1996., Fantuzzo i sur., 1995., Epstein i sur., 1997., Griffith, 1998.). Parents' feedback on their child schooling also has an important role in the school quality assurance process as it can be used as a useful tool for school improvement strategic planning.

Today the goal of improving parent-school co-operation, both on informal and formal basis, receives a general public support and has also become a part of educational legislation in most European countries. The same is true for Croatia where in *the Law on education in primary and secondary schools* (Zakon o odgoju i obrazovanju u osnovnoj i srednjoj školi, Narodne novine br. 87, 2008.) the legal provisions for the parents' participation in the school decision making have been made. Although the legal possibilities have been introduced, it has been also noticed in most of these countries that there still exists a wide gap between declared intentions and real parents' participation in school life. It is still uncertain whether it is because of the parents' or schools' lack of interest and ambiguous attitudes towards participation.

In order to examine the scope and forms of the parents participation in school education of their children the large study has been carried out in Croatia in 2009 as a part of the *Advancing Education Quality and Inclusion in South East Europe (SEE) countries* initiative.<sup>1</sup> The main purpose of the project has been advancing educational quality by promoting partnership between school and parents. In order to learn what is the role of parents in the public education in the SEE countries as well as to learn about parents' needs, expectations and experiences regarding their influence on school life the extensive survey has been carried out. In this report the main findings of the Croatian survey on parents of primary school children will be presented with the key recommendations for the improvement of the quality of school-parent cooperation in our country.

### Methodology

The study has been carried out in two phases. The main survey has been preceded by 6 focus group (FG) meetings. Data collected in focus groups provided central research team (CRT) with material for the development of the main **instruments** in the project: Questionnaire for parents (as a basis for the standardized interview) and Questionnaire for principals (as a base for the standardized

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<sup>1</sup> The study has been funded by Education Support Program of Open Society Institute and implemented in cooperation with Center for Education Policy Studies (CEPS, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Education). The materials and information related to the project are available at [www.see-educoop.net/aeiq/outputs.htm](http://www.see-educoop.net/aeiq/outputs.htm).

interview). Procedures for FG panels and questionnaire development can be found on internet site <http://www.see-educoop.net/aeiq/>.

The main survey was conducted by specialized agency in the autumn of 2009. The interviews were conducted with 1122 parents of primary school children from 32 schools across whole Croatia (random stratified sample). The parent sample consisted of three subsamples: mainstream parents N= 994, parents representative in school bodies (N=144), and parents from marginalized groups (Roma) (N= 60). Parents were interviewed in their homes. Principals from the schools in the sample (30 from mainstream schools and 2 from schools with larger number of Roma children) were interviewed in their schools.

In order to conduct the survey a questionnaire was developed covering following topics:

- socio-demographic data on the child's family
- information on the parent participation in school life: communication with school (class-meetings and individual communication), parents support to child learning at home, volunteering in school life, decision making, co-operation with community and reports on school invitation for parents cooperation
- parents ratings of their motivation to participate, beliefs about parent-school roles, perception of parent competence for participation and perception of school openness and satisfaction with parent representatives
- self-assessment of satisfaction of the parents with their child's well being and progress in school, the communication with the school and with the influence the parent can exert.

## **Main findings**

### **1. Parents**

Most of the parents tend to keep traditional approach to the cooperation with school where school is seen as responsible for education and parents do not want to interfere if not specifically asked. Parents mostly expect initiative from the school and then they are willing to respond. They mostly see school as the safe place for their child, even if the child has difficulties in school, or does not understand the language (some Roma children). When they are not satisfied with school, it is not because the school does not accept their initiative to participate in school – life, but because they want some specific services which the school should offer them (e. g. written information).

Although parents are mostly satisfied with the way of teachers' communicate with them, still they would like to have more information on their child achievement and more opportunity to express their opinions regarding some important decision concerning their child education. For instance, 91% of parents have never been asked for opinion on management the school finances, 44% have never been asked for the opinion on organization of school events, 68% have never been asked for opinion on extracurricular activities, 69% have never been asked for opinion on health and safety issues, 90% have never been asked for opinion on the overall school management, 83% have never been asked for opinion on educational matters (curriculum, textbooks, student workload), 71% have never been asked for opinion on solving problems pupils' violence and discipline.

Parents largely believe the school should, ask for their opinion on the most of the mentioned issues, except on matters of school finances.

Parents, members of the school bodies, somewhat differ from mainstream parents in perception of parent involvement. In accordance with their role of parent representatives they are more partnership oriented than other parents and more readily get involved in different school activities .

## **2. Principals**

Principals and parents differ in perception of school initiative for parent participation – principals estimate school initiative bigger. On the other hand, parents' estimation about their own participation is bigger than principals'. They estimate their responsiveness for the cooperation higher than principals do.

**There is mutual understanding about the obstacles for better cooperation between parents and schools – both groups say it is the parent factor.** This finding has been revealed both in the focus groups discussions as well as in the main survey. Most parents in focus groups pointed out that it is hard being a parent today and also complained that they were terribly busy (Focus group reports <http://www.see-educoop.net/aeiq/>). In the main survey, when directly asked who is more responsible for the barriers for better cooperation between parents and school, both groups pointed it is the *parent factor* (Items: *Parents are not interested to participate in school activities. Parents do not have time to inform themselves about school activities.*)

Both groups agree that the most common form of parent-school cooperation is through class or group meetings.

## **3. Roma parents**

Roma parents have been rarely invited to cooperate with school and they are less satisfied with their children's achievement. According to the data from focus group, Roma parents would like to participate in the Council of Parents (but they do not because they have not been invited).

Roma parents are more satisfied than other (mainstream) parents with the information they receive from school and their reception in school (they come to school more often, when invited, than other parents). We compared answers of Roma parents and parents of major population for the following categories: quantity of the invitation for the cooperation from school, parents' response, benefit from the cooperation for the child, parents' ability for participation, parents' duty for participation.

The Roma parents as well as the major population parents both declare a small number of school invites but Roma parents declare a higher overall number of turnout to the school invites (invites to come to meeting, to read the written information from school, to participate in volunteering, to help their children with homework and to participate in decision making) compared to other parents. They also have higher estimation of parents' duty to participate but are slightly less convinced than other parents of the actual benefits of participation.

## **Recommendations:**

Based on the findings from this study as well as on the information from other relevant research data and policy documents the following recommendations for promoting parent-school partnership have been formulated:

### *A. National policy level*

1. Ministry of Education, Science and Sport should support the organizations of seminars and workshops seminars for school principals and staff in order to present the data from this survey as well as data from other sources illustrating the positive effects of parents involvement for child academic achievements and socio-emotional well-being . That should sensitize principals and teachers to change their ways of communication with parents and promote parent-school involvement in school life and decision making.

2. The National centre for external evaluation of education should declare parental involvement as one of the quality standards for schools and develop set of indicators for monitoring and assessing the quality of school-parent partnership. One of the examples of good practice could be found in publication “National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs,” developed by the US National Parent Teacher Association (PTA, 1997). In that respect schools should be encouraged to include specific strategies for parental involvement in their schools development plans. The parents should also become the members of the school quality assurance teams participating in all phases of the school improvement process regarding parental involvement.

3. The National agencies which provide expert support to schools should make available relevant information in print as well as using on-line resources offering the examples of best practises on parent, school, and community partnerships. They should also provide schools with consultation, training, and technical assistance in order to establish effective partnership with parents. Special attention should be paid to **education for teachers** to make them aware of importance of the partnership co-operation and parental involvement in the schooling of their children. It is important to make teachers realize that parents are interested to co-operate in school-life but lack initiative, meaning that they would like to receive more school’s invitations for various kinds of co-operation. Teachers are supposed to accept parents' participation as a benefit, not as an additional burden in their work (<http://www.see-educoop.net/aeiq/parents/croatia%20summary%20final.pdf>)

### *b) School level*

1. Schools should offer parents more information about possibilities of participation. They should inform parents of the possible ways of volunteering, their rights and the possibilities of influencing in the process of school’s decision-making.

2. Schools should also develop a parent training and support program that would address parents’ priority concerns and themes. Such training and support will build mutual trust and understanding between parents and teachers The list of important topics should be jointly developed. Parents should be also encouraged to serve as co-facilitators of workshops that interest them the most.

3. The school should also create opportunities for parents networking enabling them to get to know each other in non-threatening relaxed atmosphere. In one of the focus groups there was an interesting proposal: each school should have a *room for parents* - possibility to join other parents, drink coffee with them, and have a box for proposal, board with the information about the activities parents can join as well as with the information on other school activities.  
(<http://www.see-educoop.net/aeiq/outputs.htm>)

In order to strengthen parent volunteering some legal acts should be changed - especially the one that refers to teaching assistants because current law does not permit parents to assist teachers in the classroom activities.

4. The structure and functioning of the Parents' Councils should be also changed in order to become more effective. Parents from focus groups have noted that the Parents' Councils are too large and that they would become more operative if they could be subdivided in two groups (lower and upper grades). So the voice of each parent could be heard at meetings respective of the child developmental and educational needs. The school act should also ensure that the parents from minority population or marginalized groups (parents with child with special needs) have their place on school board and in school council. The parent members of school council should also on regular basis inform other parents about the main decisions as well as consult them on specific issues.

#### **References:**

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7. <http://www.see-educoop.net/aeiq/outputs.htm>:  
Survey Results  
Stakeholder Participation in Schools  
Focus Group Reports  
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