

Advancing Inclusion and Quality in South East Europe
National survey of school directors in Romania
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Prepared by Ovidiu Voicu (ovoicu@soros.ro)

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1.

Summary

Context

Stimulating parents' involvement in school life is one of the common objectives of the educational policies designed and implemented in Romania in the last twelve years. But the results were not the expected ones. The participation levels have dropped yearly and there are no signs that this tendency will change in the near future.

There are multiple reasons that explain why the parents' lack of interest. The cultural background is an important factor: Romanians level of participation in any kind of voluntary activity are among the lowest in the European Union, with only 5% of the population doing it. In addition, the school and the community had separate paths in the past, both before the Second World War and during the communist regime. The people were taught rather not to interfere with the education system than to take an active role. The idea of partnership is quite new and it will take some time for the mentalities to change. Last, but not least, the school itself was not prepared for a closer partnership with the local community. However, the decentralization process advances slowly in education and it is becoming imperative to enable a closer relation between school and community by stimulating parents to take a more important role in school life.

In this context, the project *Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in South East Europe* proposes an international comparative research measuring principals' opinions about parents' involvement in school activities and how the current situation may be improved. The project is financially supported by *Open Society Institute* and it is implemented by a consortium of NGOs from eight South European Countries. The Romanian partner is *Center Education 2000+*. This report presents the findings of the research.

Methodology

The research undertaken in Romania consisted of two phases: preliminary qualitative research (two focus-groups) and quantitative research (survey). The results of the qualitative part

were used to calibrate the instruments of the quantitative research. The decisions on sampling universe, sampling design, and questionnaire design were made by the central (international) research team.

The two focus groups were attended by principals or deputy principals of Bucharest secondary schools. The discussions took place on the 24th and the 25th 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. 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. The report summarizing the conclusions drawn by the focus groups is included in Annex 1.

The survey used a random monostadial stratified sample consisting of 670 principals from schools with grades I-VIII. It is representative for target population (6.135 schools with grades I-VIII) with an error margin of +/- 3% at 95% confidence level. The interviews were carried out by professional operators using face-to-face method between May 5th and May 25th. Data gathering and data entry were provided by a professional company, *IMAS – Marketing and Surveys Institute*. The questionnaire is included in Annex 2.

Findings of the survey

The majority of school principals (85%) say they have a strategy to communicate with all parents. However, when asked about the components of the strategy under 10% are able to provide concrete and solid examples. The majority – two thirds of the ones that have a strategy – are mentioning various activities that involved communicating with parents: meetings, written notes, home visits etc. About 18% are not able to indicate any component of the strategy were they refused to answer.

The main characteristics of the school-parents communication are the ones suggested by the answers to the simple questions mentioned above. The parents play a passive role and communication is mostly limited to subjects such as pupils' results and discipline issues. The most frequent methods of communication are reactive, place parents in a passive role, and they do not address all parents: meetings (mainly when the parents are called) and written notes;

home visits come third, and other tools such as opinion polls or newsletters are used in a lesser degree.

The participation at principal-parents meetings is quite high, the principals say. In average, more than 50% of the parents are attending them but it is not clear if the reference is the total number of parents in school or the number of invited parents. Only 40% of the schools use at least two communication instruments monthly but in their cases the number of parents attending the meetings is significantly increasing. The content of the discussions revolves around the pupils' problems and results. 71% of the principals mention as the most frequent subject either pupils' results (40%) or disciplinary problems (31%). Discipline, order and violence represent a topic of discussion mentioned in the first three by 92% of the principals, which makes it the most important one.

Asked about obstacles to relevant communication the principals are placing the problems in the parents' backyard. Parents lack interest, skills, and time to get involved in school life, principals say. They are reluctant to consider other reasons that may involve school or teacher responsibility. Similar answers were given to the questions about what categories of parents are harder to interact with. Parents with low levels of education and/or marginal status are mentioned in the first place 42% of the respondents, 37% of the principals are referring to parents living abroad on temporary basis, 32% at parents and tutors of children coming from disorganized or large families, 20% mention ethnic minorities (in the first place Roma). As expected, the answers correlates with the social situation in the community: migrants are more frequent mentioned in communities with high migrations rates, Roma parents were there are Roma communities, etc.

Romanian schools offer limited opportunities for parents to support school activities. Parents' involvement in school life is in most cases limited to social and cultural events and rarely in educational activities. Two thirds of the respondents have said in their schools the parents have never been asked to offer advice to teachers but in 97% of the schools the parents are asked to organize a school ceremony and in 95% they are invited to participate at organizing social event at least once each semester.

The principals think that the students' results will improve if the school will conduct parental counseling activities. The survey has tested principal's reactions to several suggestions about counseling services (organized sessions to help parents assist their children with homework,

materials helping to assist children with homework, materials helping to monitor their children's homework, information on creating a home learning environment, counseling service, parent issue-based support groups). For each of them at least two out of three principals have agreed that it will contribute to improving pupils' performance. But only half of schools are putting in practice at least two of the activities at least once a semester and one third of the schools have never organized support groups and they have never tried to teach parents how to monitor their children homework.

Parents' involvement in decision making at school level it is another two-side story. In 94% of the schools the parents are represented in the Council of Administration, which sounds good but it raises a question mark because by the law the parents' representatives should be a part of the CA in every school. Generally, the principals are satisfied with parents' participation at CA meeting, say 87% of them. In most schools the members of the Parents' Committee have good opportunities to give their input when important decisions are discussed and to initiate new policies and regulations. Three out of four principals think that parents' implication in decision making in general is important but when asked about specific domains we find again the same distinction: the parents should be involved in organizing social activities and not in deciding on content of education.

Similar answers were given to the questions about how influential the parents are. Speaking about members of the Parents' Committee, the principals think they have great influence in helping pupils to value education and the planning of extracurricular activities but little if any influence when discussing pedagogical methods used by teachers or content of lessons (only 4% of the principals think parents can influence content of lessons). The results are coherent when compared with the answers principals give when asked about the extent of influence of parents in general.

Recommendations

The general picture shows a growing divide between school and community. Principals accuse lack of interest from parents' side but in the same time they do little to involve parents in school life. In the majority of cases principals say they are in favor of parents' involvement in decision making but when asked about concrete domains they would like to keep the parents away from important decisions on the content of education, human resources management and

budget. The area where the parents are welcome to participate are social and cultural activities and imposing school regulations. Most principals claim that they have a school strategy but are not able to give concrete answers about its components. The communication tools used are placing the parents in a passive role.

These are the general trends shown by the statistical analyses. It has to be taken into consideration the particular design of the sampling universe: 73% of the schools with grades I-VIII are localized in rural areas and they are rather small schools. Data suggests that situation in urban areas and with bigger schools is different. Also, it is important to mention that there are schools that are doing better than others in terms of communications and parents' involvement.

Based on the findings of the research several policy recommendations were made. They are now only general ideas but they are worth following:

- continuing research to add the perspective of the other stakeholders: parents, pupils, local authorities, NGOs, other community actors
- increasing school capacity to interact with the community and to adapt itself to the community
- designing and implementing communication strategies for the national education system and each school
- creating a collection of good practices and disseminating it nation wide
- including parental counseling in curricula and allocating resources for it