

## Parents as partners

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### **Parent involvement: a partnership is desirable, but not yet the practice**

The Education Council was asked by Parliament to give its opinion on various aspects of parental involvement in education. The involvement of parents in schools and in the education they provide is important, not just because it lightens the load on the school, allows for coordination of child-rearing and supports the learning process, but also because it is an expression of citizenship and a means towards cultural integration.

In its recommendations, the Education Council makes a distinction between three different types of relationship between parents and schools. Firstly, there is an *individual, legal relationship* (defined rights and obligations). Secondly, parents are *partners* when it comes to the education of their children and the learning process. Finally, all parents are part of an informal parental *community*. This approach is no longer directly concerned with the interests and needs of the children, but rather with those of the parent group of a class, a group, a year, or the school as a whole. If the parent group functions well, this will also benefit the class and the school. The main thrust of these recommendations is that the policy should place less emphasis on the first (legal) type, and more on the second and third types (partnership and membership of the parent community, respectively).

In theory, schools and parents broadly endorse the fact that parents will be involved in the school and that there is a partnership between the parents and the school. The way in which parents are actually involved in practice, as partners, depends on the vision and commitment of the school, and there are clear differences between the various education sectors: all primary schools are working on it and engage parents, yet schools offering senior secondary vocational education (MBO) tend to lose sight of the parents. But the effort (time) put in by parents also plays an important role. This commitment varies with the age of the child and also depends on the level of educational attainment of the parents, as well as the existence of any educational or learning difficulties.

The monitor of parental involvement (2009) indicates that a partnership does not yet exist. Most schools have committed their vision to paper in order to promote parental involvement, and virtually all schools have formulated policies on the influence that parents can exert -- through the participation council -- on the decision-making process. This makes sense given the statutory requirement to do so, but the interpretation of the concept of 'partnership' currently rarely extends beyond the provision of information and calling on parents as a helping hand as and when required. The monitor also indicates that schools consider the role of parents to be primarily one in which they provide support to their own child. Parents, in turn, are not particularly eager. The Education Monitor 2008 (Onderwijsmeter 2008) indicates that significantly fewer parents lay the responsibility for their involvement in the school at their own door than in the previous year. This seems to suggest that parents harbour the view that involvement is useful and necessary, but that the school should organise it.

### **Basic principle: parents have a strong legal position and are well-informed ....**

In recent years, parents have acquired various rights. The principle of the policy is that under compulsory education legislation parents also have a certain right to learning for their children (a minimum guarantee of a basic quality of education). They also have the right to good information: about their child (the pupil's file) and about the performance of schools, but also about their rights to support and assistance or their right to make a complaint.

### **... but no further legalisation of relationships**

The opinion of the Education Council is that the legal framework is complete: another 'education tribunal' within the court system or as a separate body offers no added value. Research also shows that the vast majority of parents are not keen on more formal involvement in decision-making or responsibilities for governance. The Education Council takes the view that schools and government should focus more intently on facilitating the partnership between parents and schools and on forming parent communities around classes, groups, years or schools as a whole. These parental relationships are about mutual contact and cooperation; the school is always there, but the role it plays will be determined by its circumstances.

### **Working towards an active willingness to partnership**

The Education Council considers the task of organising parental involvement to be self-evident. In this sense, the Education Council also considers it obvious that primary schools should dedicate a section of their school plan to parental involvement in addition to the mandatory elements of educational policy, staffing policy and quality management. This would make the expectations of both sides clear and explicit. It would also mean that parents know their duties and would accept their responsibilities in terms of education and upbringing. Parents must ensure they give their school-age children the best possible starting position. This ranges from making sure their primary-age children attend school clean, well-rested and fed, to providing a stimulating home environment and parental support as their children in general secondary education and senior secondary vocational education develop their knowledge and social skills. And it demands a certain level of respect and understanding from parents for the role and the duties of teachers. It would be necessary and useful if this attitude and these responsibilities were highlighted for both parties, for example, in the form of a written agreement (as previously recommended by the Education Council). Concrete activities, such as home visits, may then give the school a clearer picture of the background of parents and pupils.

Conflict prevention is better than conflict resolution: in particular, by letting parents, pupils, students and participants know in a clear and timely fashion what they can expect from the school, where the (organisational) boundaries lie, and why certain decisions that affect their position must be taken. A school cannot fully compensate for a poor upbringing or a bad home environment, but nor does it have the responsibility to do so. However, the Education Council believes that schools do have a duty of effort to reach out to parents and work on creating good relationships, just as the parents must also be prepared to give their school a helping hand.

### **And help parents connect with each other**

In previous recommendations by the Education Council, parents have been characterised as part of the school and the parent community. Proper involvement of parents with each other, with the class and with the school can even affect the social cohesion within a neighbourhood, village or city. In all education sectors, the way a school is organised can contribute to processes of community building among parents, and between the school and parents. The investment made by parents in their contacts with each other, in parent bodies, pays for itself. Research shows that parents who know each other, also hold each other to account. Parent-to-parent contacts help parents and can therefore also support the school (the teacher). The organization of parent networks promotes the socialisation function of education and the statutory duty that schools have with regard to citizenship education.

### **Recommendations to Parliament**

The recommendations of the Education Council are directed towards a general reorientation of national policy: no further legalisation of the relationship between parents and schools, but an investment in parent networks.

In shaping national policy, the Education Council recommends that Parliament calls for attention for the following five items.

1) In the view of the Education Council, a high-quality agenda for primary education, secondary education, senior secondary vocational education and higher professional education also includes a

section on policy by and for parents. We believe that such a section would have to have a broad approach, not only aimed at involving non-active parents, but also aimed at keeping the active parents engaged. It should be left to schools to decide how they put this into practice (including the question of how written agreements could achieve a better division of responsibilities between parents and schools). The government should be cautious with legislation, but could act as a facilitator (see point 5).

2) Parents of pupils in secondary vocational education and higher professional education are a 'forgotten' group in both national policy and in the policy of institutions. These education sectors could learn from experiences in primary and secondary education. In consultation with the institutions and sector organisations, this point needs to be put on the agenda. Further development will be needed of the ways in which parents can play a role in aspects such as preventing early school-leaving, supporting the education process (e.g. when choosing or continuing a programme of study), or supporting the social life of pupils and students during their school career.

3) What mix of positions of parents as stakeholders, as partners and as members of a parent body is the most suitable, and for what purposes? This is an area where much development work is still needed. Is it purely about the involvement parents and parent groups or are the underlying objectives of greater importance: better cognitive and social achievement by children, lower school dropout and truancy rates, better behaviour at school and a more efficient school organisation thanks to support from parents? Which of these goals is it expected (and based on evidence) that parents will contribute to as members of a parent body, and for which groups of pupils and students? In its recommendations in the report *Partners in Educational Attainment* (2008c) ('Partners in onderwijsopbrengst'), the Education Council already appealed for more parental involvement in terms of attainment and final results. Part of the development work could include an international review to look at the variety of parental contacts for schools and pupils. This would provide an overview of proven effective interventions in this field, as well as new and promising ideas for dissemination among schools.

4) Communication skills and skills in handling information from parents are vital to the proper functioning of parental involvement. Teachers and school leaders could be given better training in these areas. Teacher training colleges should devote attention to this. As teachers meet the statutory requirement to maintain their professional skills, the aspect of communication with parents and parental involvement will need to be dealt with. The legislation regulating professional competence requirements for teachers (Besluit bekwaamheidseisen onderwijspersoneel) offers an opportunity to send a signal to teacher training colleges that communication with parents should be addressed by the curriculum. In secondary vocational and higher professional education, teachers and lecturers can be more sensitive to the significance of parents for their adult students.

5) Parents bodies are important. Stable and predictable contacts between parents strengthen the social texture of a class, group, year or school. Moreover, parent bodies can sift out problems at an earlier stage, reducing the number of pedagogical issues that make it through to the classroom. Parent bodies make it easier to talk to parents when children face problems. Incentive measures could be introduced, which would allow parent groups to apply for a parent budget for the start-up phase of a locally organised parent body for a class or school. The function of the parent body is to facilitate the support and dialogue between and among parents. It could also be an expression of the desire for citizenship education and citizen participation.