

Sustainable educational relations

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The community is important to the performance of schools

The involvement of the community is of crucial importance to the performance of schools. Occupying first place is the involvement of parents and pupils; expanding their involvement is a top priority for many schools. At the same time, the (official) involvement of other bodies around the school is increasing. This involvement may be that of schools that pupils have left or in which they will continue their studies, of special education schools and of the municipality and youth care services, as well as community centres, sports clubs and cultural institutions. Primary and secondary schools have built up a wide variety of relations with their community; the content and intensity of these relations and the choice of partners is often dependent on the local context.

The Minister of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) believes that relations between education institutions and their communities should be more extensive. If schools are able to give the community a better idea of what they do, provide more information, are accountable to the community and allow the community to exert "real influence", the Minister believes that the government would be able to move a step further into the background. With this in mind, the Minister submitted a request for advice to the Education Council: how can schools increase the involvement of the community in their activities and what actions should schools and the Minister take, or not take?

Each different kind of relationship with the community requires its own approach

The Council believes that each different kind of relationship maintained by the school with the community requires its own approach. These relationships can be broadly divided into three categories: relationships aimed at educating pupils; relationships aimed at caring for (special needs) pupils; and relationships aimed at the community (the district or neighbourhood). An example of the first type of relationship is one aimed at realising social work placements, with local businesses, for instance. The second type concerns special education and youth care services as well as relationships within the framework of the educational disadvantage policy. Examples of the third type, aimed at the community, are relationships within the context of neighbourhood projects or increasing safety in the area. In the vision of the Council, every action a school takes must benefit its pupils. This means that the various community relations a school enters into must make a demonstrable contribution to the cognitive, social and moral development of its pupils.

The basic principle underlying the recommendations of the Council is that these different kinds of relations demand different approaches to establish involvement and accountability. Another basic principle is that the involvement of and accountability to the community (horizontal accountability) is not a replacement for vertical supervision and monitoring. If the community is properly involved and accountability to the community is in place, this does not automatically mean that the government can take more distance.

Working towards sustainable relations and optimising experiences

The Council has two general answers to the question of what actions are needed to better involve the community with the school: first, working towards sustainable relations and second, making good use of the complete scale of experiences, without prematurely and unnecessarily formalising these relations. The Council does not believe that the anchoring in law of the obligations to consult and the "public accountability" to institutions with which a school has a relationship is the path to take. Such formalisation would not result in a win-win situation for the parties involved. In many cases, relations with the community are likely to be successful if there is a partnership between the various stakeholders both within and outside the school. A certain balance of power is assumed for such partnerships. The school's purpose is to serve its pupils and the community but the community too should invest in education and in the school (environment). If the parties wish to formalise this relationship they can make arrangements among themselves; for example, by concluding an agreement.

The sustainability of relations comprises several aspects such as reciprocity (the partnership referred to above and reciprocal accountability), pupil-orientation (relations should be of benefit to the pupils: improved education, better special needs support, better social orientation) and sound structure (no fragmented projects and subsidies). In addition, cost efficiency is important (in terms of time and resources spent in relation to outcomes).

The Council is elaborating these two general recommendations separately for each of the three types of relationships.

Recommendations for relations aimed at education

The sustainability of this type of relationship can be realised if schools can set out concrete objectives (such as the target number of social work placements) and make concrete arrangements in this regard, in the form of an agreement with local businesses, for example, or social organisations (health care sector). With a view to sustainability, it is also important that relationships are regularly evaluated. The lessons learned in this way can be brought to the attention of other schools and thus provide impetus to arriving at a practical and cost-efficient approach to educational relations. The Ministry and possibly trade associations could provide (financial) support in this process. In view of community relations too, the Council's opinion is that evidence-based working methods promote effectivity.

Parents and pupils can already officially participate in decision-making as far as relations with pupils are concerned. At this time, the Council sees little need to officially extend the influence of (groups of) parents further (e.g. with the possibility of appeal to the Enterprise Section). Rather, work should be done towards expanding their involvement in the existing decision-making system; offering schooling, for example, or awarding attendance allowances can tempt people into sitting on consultation bodies. In addition, the possibilities for having a voice other than through the participation council could be profiled more highly and used better. The Council notes that there is a lack regarding the possibilities for participation in decision-making for other parties involved in the school community. If participation councils consider it necessary, with the approval of the competent authority, they should have the possibility of coopting representatives from society (from the local business community, for example). These members would then have an advisory vote on a number of matters, such as entering into or breaking off relations with the community. Article 3 of the *Wet medezeggenschap scholen* [Education Participation Act] should include these possible choices. Alongside this amendment to the Act proposed here by the Council, the Minister could support initiatives in this direction by presenting a developments agenda whereby different models taken from practice could be evaluated and shared.

Recommendations for relations aimed at the support of special-needs pupils

Despite the large degree of formalisation of relations, when the support of (special-needs) pupils is concerned, the Council believes that the relations as a whole are not sustainable. Their cost efficiency is not guaranteed due to the bureaucratic obligations (the various consultation structures, the drawing up of individual plans and arbitration rules). Both the Dutch Court of Audit and the Education Inspectorate have already pointed out that the relations are not optimally pupil-oriented either. Further to the recent *Uitwerkingsnotitie over de vernieuwing van de Zorgstructuren* [Detailed memorandum on revising special needs support structures], the Council does not envisage any swift improvements in this regard; the burden of the special needs support plan and the possibility of disputes are more likely to increase. In an earlier recommendation, the Council pointed to special drawing rights for schools in order to emphasise the reciprocity of this type of relationship.

The Education Council proposes that the Minister should seek further advice on special needs support relations from the Council before 2008, in so far as the relations concerned involve special education and relations with youth care services, municipal health services and the like. In many cases, the cooperation between education institutions and the bodies mentioned above still has to take shape so that in many cases no sustainability or formalised accountability exists at present.

As far as combating disadvantage is concerned, a sustainable and in principle reciprocal involvement between schools among themselves, and between schools and the municipality has

been established, in part through anchoring in law. A further evaluation will show whether these relations meet the criteria mentioned earlier regarding pupil-orientation and cost efficiency. The Council does not consider it necessary in this respect to extend the actual influence of the parties involved.

Recommendations for relations aimed at the community

This type of relationship largely involves, for example, neighbourhood projects as well as multifunctional, community schools. Such relationships can be made (more) sustainable by clearly stating what the benefits would be for pupils. Pupil-orientation and reciprocity can be translated concretely into agreements that include an evaluation obligation and that take cost efficiency into account. The use of time and human resources should result in an expansion of learning experiences. The actual influence of the community could be expressed in certain performances to which the school binds itself (such as preventing noise nuisance or reducing littering) but does not need to be further provided for by law.