



Study

Parents as Partners in Education: Successful Participation in Primary Schools

Executive Summary

The foundation for educational success and participation in society is laid in the family. Parents play an important role in the personal development of their children and support their educational careers by providing encouragement at home, communicating values relevant to education and making decisions about education. Immigrant parents, however, who are unfamiliar with the German education system, face enormous challenges and need active support. It is particularly important that parents participate in the school in one form or another, e.g. to get information or advice about learning at home. But how is parent participation at primary schools actually fostered?

This study analyses empirical data on which forms of participation primary schools offer parents in Germany and how appropriate these forms are, i.e. how they are used by parents of different sociocultural backgrounds.

These issues are particularly relevant in view of the reforms made to all-day schools over the last ten years: all-day schools, which have received more than EUR 4 billion in subsidies from the German federal government, have been tasked with improving support particularly for pupils with migration backgrounds and from socially disadvantaged families. The aim is to get parents more involved in shaping the school as a learning and living environment. To date, however, there have been few findings that show whether all-day schools have found other, more suitable forms of participation for parents than half-day schools and, if so, to what extent.

This study first analyses attitudes of parents and school directors from the international 2011 IGLU and TIMSS school achievement studies. Overall, information was provided by 197 school directors and 3,182 parents; 27.7 per cent of these parents had a migration background. To supplement this information, 11 expert interviews were conducted with school directors and pedagogical staff at primary schools throughout Germany. These interviews were used to reconstruct how schools develop forms of participation and what conditions encourage or hinder parents' involvement.

The central finding of the study is that even though parents at primary schools have a wide range of opportunities for participation open to them, e.g. they can help at the school or join a committee, activities, e.g. educational events that could help parents foster their child's learning at home, however, are only offered on an irregular basis. Specifically, the analysis of the IGLU/TIMSS data shows: almost without exception, primary schools offer parents the opportunity, at least once every school year, to



learn about the school's concept (99.6 %) and their child's progress (100 %), to get involved in the school (100 %) and take part in decision-making processes (100 %), e.g. as a parent representative. Compared to other EU countries, Germany is therefore one of the pioneers when it comes to committee work. Deficiencies, however, are evident in participation related to learning which parents, particularly with a migration background or a low level of education, could benefit from. One-quarter of primary schools, for instance, does not offer any in-depth measures to support parents with at-home learning, e.g. parent education (24.3 %) or materials to support learning (25.9 %).

The decisive factor, however, is not the number of opportunities for participation available to parents, but to what extent they actually take advantage of them, which, according to the data, is infrequent. There is evidence that the options for participation are overall not adequately adapted to meet parents' needs, with clear differences between the various types of schools. *Rhythmisierte Ganztagschulen*, or a kind of all-day school with different forms of learning throughout the day including scheduled classes, independent learning, etc., came under more pressure to involve parents with new forms of participation as a result of the far-reaching structural reforms – e.g. homework was eliminated in many places –; they offer more possibilities for in-depth, learning-related participation than other all-day and half-day schools. This is particularly evident in the organisation of educational programmes such as parents' evenings that deal with a particular theme: these kinds of evenings are organised more than three times a year at 32.8 % of the *rhythmic all-day schools*; at other types of schools, they are much less common or not offered at all. In addition, these schools are particularly successful at involving parents of the first generation of immigrants, who are often less proficient in German and therefore not as easily accessible, with low-level opportunities for participation in the school context, e.g. in school projects. All-day schools also work particularly with families in which the children have a potential need for support, for example, in language acquisition.

Children with migration backgrounds and from socially disadvantaged families in particular benefit from a trust-based and well-coordinated partnership between parents and schools. The main responsibility for establishing structures for parent participation at primary schools lies with the school directors. They should ensure that parent participation is an integral part of the school concept and that activities are offered and assessed for effectiveness. A lot is required in these efforts: the school faculty must be committed and further trained; the school administration has to release staff from their regular duties to organise these activities and it needs to acquire funding.

Empowering parents doesn't just affect educational success, it also impacts the child's overall personal development – and thus ultimately the social participation of the next generation. As a result, schools may not be left to establish and further develop opportunities for parent participation on their own. They



should be supported in both structure and content by the government – federal government, *Laender* and municipalities – as well as by actors in civil society like foundations and charitable organisations:

- The school authorities must help primary schools develop concepts, tap into resources and pay special attention to 'good' parent participation during school inspections.
- The *Laender* should earmark part of the school budget for parent participation. The distribution of funds should be linked to proven concepts and a quality assessment.
- A central element of skill development in basic and advanced teacher training must be structuring opportunities for parent participation at schools.
- School social work must become a fixed component of every primary school as a driving force for parent participation.
- Primary schools should form networks in their city district, e.g. forming 'education chains' in which schools, parents and non-school education policy actors strategically collaborate. Municipalities and *Laender* should provide resources for these types of networking projects.