

Brief Overview



FUND FOR AN OPEN SOCIETY - SERBIA

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Parental Involvement in South East European Schools Principals' Views



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2009

**Open Society Institute - Education Support Program Initiative
Advancing Education Inclusion and Quality in South East Europe**

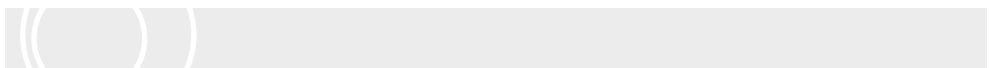
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The full report is available at the South East Europe Education Cooperation Network (SEE-ECN) webpage: <http://www.see-educoop.net/aeiq/documents/raport-full.pdf>

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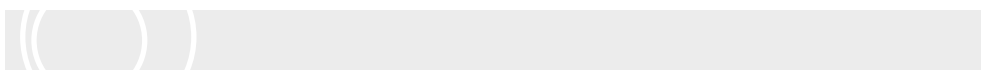


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In my opinion, the attitude towards the educational curriculum is a positive one. Now, the focus is more on the child's abilities, skills, and capacities. I think, this direction will make us closer to the European standards. The educational process should be more democratic.

A principal in Moldova

Introduction

The importance of school leadership cannot be underestimated, considering the enormity of its effect on the learning environment of schools, and the impact it ultimately has on student achievement. Principals of schools set the tone in regards to school culture and guide the intellectual energy of school faculty towards providing a valuable education to their students, either effectively or ineffectively.

In most schools, the principals have the greatest influence on school-based governance structures. As a result, they have the authority and responsibility to provide an inclusive and fair environment for all children to learn in. In this unprecedented 2008 **Cross-National Survey of Principals in South East Europe (SEE)**, principals were surveyed and interviewed thoroughly in order to obtain insights into the interaction schools have with the parents of students across this region. This study marks an important step for the Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality of South East Europe initiative, which is funded by the Education Support Program of the Open Society Institute and jointly implemented with CEPS (University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Education), as it reveals the prevailing thoughts and practices of this region's school leaders with evidence-based research.

This study was primarily conducted to better understand the opportunities created by school leadership for parents to participate in school life and to assess the extent to which equal opportunity for parental participation in school life is promoted. **Despite the considerable improvements made in national legislation among the surveyed countries, the evidence of insufficient parental participation in school life raises concerns about the extent to which equity may be achieved in schools in the newly developed education systems in the SEE region.**

The progress these countries have made in their education systems is notable, considering the tremendous changes they experienced with the arrival of market economies and representative democracy. However, if the eight SEE countries surveyed

are to continue developing and become more competitive in the global economy, the need to make changes in their educational system - in some cases slight and in other cases more systemic - is urgent.

School principals in the following countries participated in this survey: **Albania; Bosnia and Herzegovina; Kosovo; Macedonia; Montenegro; Republic of Moldova; Romania; and Serbia.** In 2008, a total of 2,273 hour-long, face-to-face interviews principals of primary schools (attended by students aged 6 to 15) were conducted with school principals in the aforementioned countries. Surveying was preceded by the following: 16 focus group meetings with school principals; a pilot survey of the final survey instrument; and one large-scale coordination meeting with researchers in each of the eight participating countries.

This survey yielded interesting and insightful data. Most notably, this cross-national survey revealed the overwhelming willingness of principals in all eight countries surveyed to include parents in school life and documented their belief of the potential that parental engagement has for student learning and school culture. Nevertheless, this research survey also discovered the dearth of meaningful opportunities that parents from these eight countries are actually given to become more involved in school life and governance. As an elementary school principal in Bosnia Herzegovina stated, **“The fact is without the support and collaboration of families, schools cannot succeed.”**

Accessibility to education is intrinsically linked to the quality of school-level governance. **When school-level governance is inclusive**, wherein parents are given opportunities to participate in shaping school policies, **numerous studies have demonstrated the positive impact this has on school climate and student learning.**

This summary report is organized into three sections. First, the report shares key findings on the opportunities parents have to engage in school and class activities. Next, the report assesses what opportunities are given to parents to engage in school life and the obstacles they face; at the same time, it illustrates the current role parents have in school governance issues and the barriers that prevent schools and parents from working together more actively. Finally, the report provides recommendations for school principals and policymakers to better guarantee the accessibility to education for all students.

A companion document containing the “Cross-National Survey of School Principals” is available at the South East Europe Cooperation Network (SEE-ECN) website: <http://www.see-educoop.net/aeiq/documents/raport-full.pdf>

Findings on Parent Involvement in Schools

Remarkably, principals in all eight countries perceived parent involvement in schools favorably. Creating opportunities for parents to support school activities is recognized as the most beneficial way of engaging parents in school life. According to the interviews and surveys conducted, the following results are notable:

- Requesting parents to participate in the organization of **school ceremonies** is a common practice among schools in all eight surveyed countries. Schools generally invite parents to engage in such activities on a quarterly or semester basis.
- However, school principals report that a **considerable proportion of schools in most countries have not requested parents to sponsor or help plan school activities.**
- Furthermore, in each country, parents are not given any or much opportunity to support school-based teaching activities (e.g., sharing their ethnic traditions or culture during geography lessons). Compared to the frequency of inviting parents to participate in organizing school ceremonies or social activities, parents are nearly or completely excluded from providing any substantive teaching support. Moreover, invitations to school functions usually occur only on a semester basis.

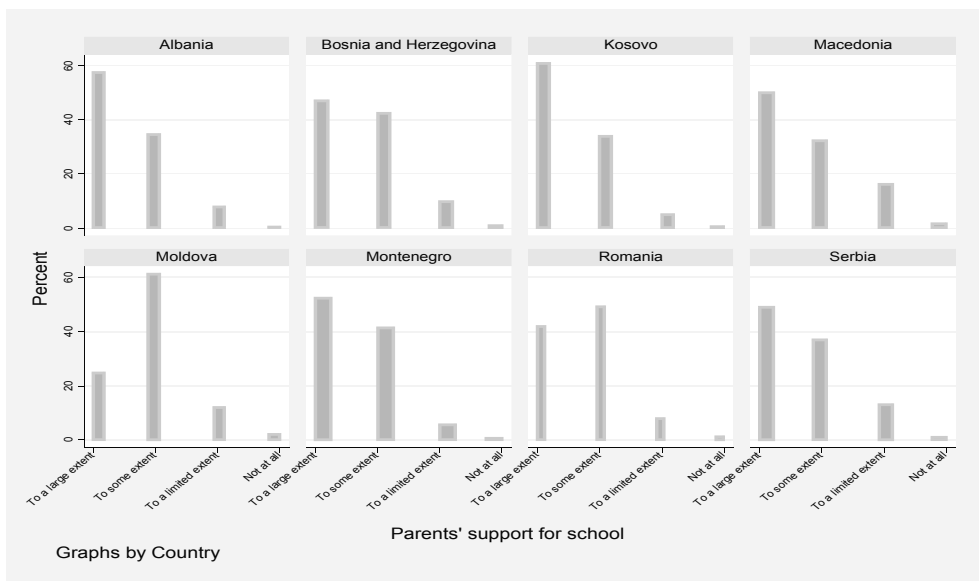


Figure 1 - Perceived benefits of parental participation for overall support to school

According to the responses provided in the surveys, principals believe that the closer the relationship between parents and the school, the higher the educational attainment levels of pupils. Anecdotal and research-based evidence often identifies the impact of parent involvement on student learning.

When parents are plugged in to their child’s school life, they are more aware of their child’s academic and social progress as well as any difficulties he/she is experiencing at school. This awareness leads parents to play a more active role in their child’s education, which often results in positive student progress.

Although parents in the eight countries studied are occasionally invited to participate in school ceremonies and school activities (e.g. field trips), they are either **never or infrequently** asked to contribute to teaching activities (i.e. providing homework help; participating in seminars about their jobs/careers.) In contrast, in countries such as Scotland, Denmark, and Latvia, parents are asked to participate in class activities on a periodic basis, in addition to assisting teachers during field trips and special school events.

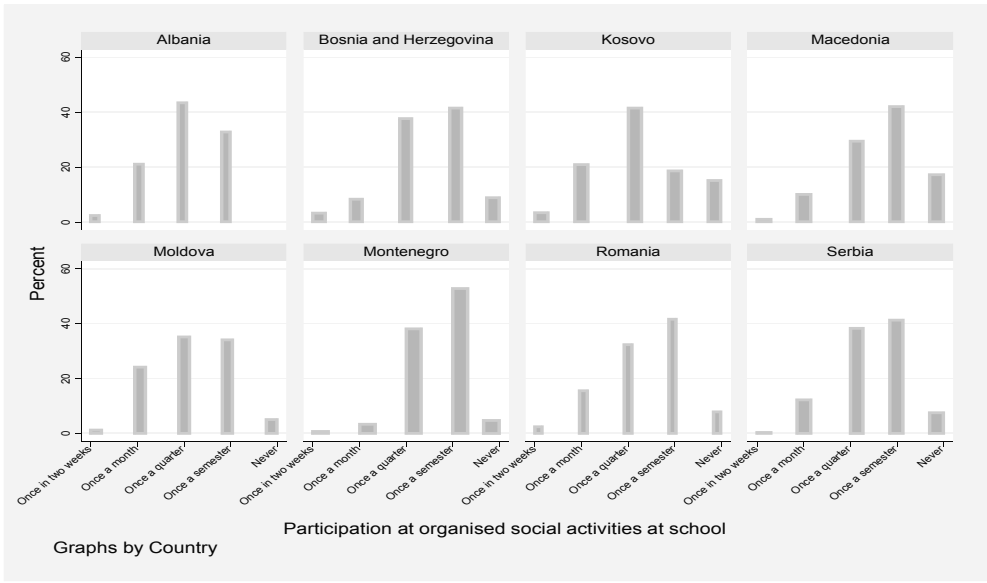


Figure 2 - Parents invited to organize social activities at school

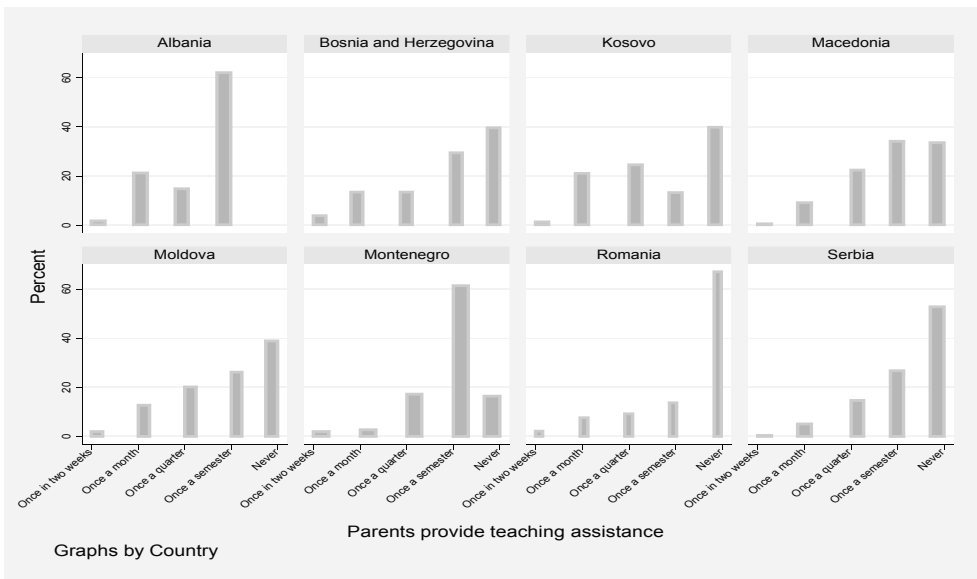


Figure 3 - Invitation of parents to provide teaching assistance

As seen in the above graphs, opportunities for parents to support teaching activities are sharply lower in comparison to the robust number of schools inviting parents to participate in the organization of school ceremonies or social activities. Impressively, 83% of Montenegrin schools reportedly invited parents to provide teaching assistance in the previous academic year, the highest percentage indicated on the above graph. Parent involvement may seem high at first glance, but upon further inspection, it is negated by the fact that their invitations for parents to participate in classroom activities occur once a semester, at most.

Interestingly, the country which has the lowest rates of parent engagement at its schools requests parents and students to fundraise at a higher rate than its neighboring countries. All schools in Albania request parents to raise funds once a semester, compared to the 58% of principals in Romania who reportedly did not require fundraising in the last academic year. This fact raises the question of whether the lack of financial resources is detrimental to student learning in countries like Albania, where parents had the lowest rate of school involvement but were expected to help raise funds for their schools once a semester.

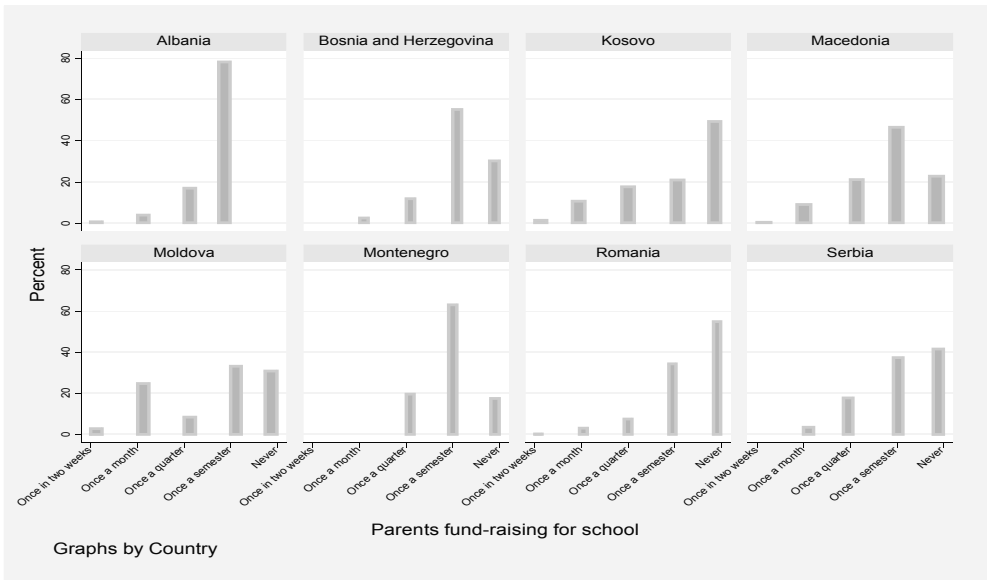


Figure 4 - Asking parents to fundraise for schools

The rates of parental engagement in school and teaching activities are dismally low in most of these countries, but this is not due to any inherent opposition from either the school faculty or parents. Once given the opportunity, the principals report no problems or conflicts in undertaking meaningful communication. **The majority of the principals in the survey report that their teachers are adequately trained to interact with parents and given sufficient time and resources to communicate with parents.**

This is a significant discovery, for it establishes the ability and willingness for schools and parents to enter into a meaningful dialogue aimed at providing a cohesive learning environment where students can thrive.

However, if there is no hesitation to collaborate with parents, this begs the question why more parents do not attend or participate in school events. Some principals have pointed to absentee parents, who have left their children with relatives in order to find work in other countries.

A principal in Moldova states: *“Until now, there was a perception that it has to be a strong partnership between families and schools. Nowadays, due to the high migration rate, around one quarter of our population is working abroad and over 100,000 children are left without their parents and under the care of grandparents or other relatives. Due to this fact, the level of parental involvement has decreased a lot and the school is obliged to fulfill family obligations and responsibilities.”*

Other principals explain that without clear guidelines and parent handbooks which outline the role parents can play, some parents use Parent Councils as the primary venue to air their grievances rather than help their children's school become better. For example, in Montenegro, an elementary school principal describes, *"Some parents thought that the Parent Council was an organization to support the school in all matters including the management of the school. Some thought they had the authority to decide teacher salaries as a Parent Council member."*

These anecdotes demonstrate the need for establishing a clear communication and management strategy for both the schools and families of students. Without a communication strategy, confusion ensues and collaboration is difficult to achieve. In addition, it is important to remember that many parents in the South East European countries were raised under Socialism and may lack the foundation and understanding of democratic organizations like parent councils and school boards. Parent Councils must know what their roles and responsibilities are. School administrations and interested parents should discuss what guidelines will suit their schools and children best. Once these discussions occur, a parent handbook should be made and disseminated to all the families of students.

Parent-School Communication: Opportunities and Barriers

Given the apparent willingness of school principals, teachers, and parents to communicate, it is important to recognize how schools are currently communicating with families of students in the eight SEE countries. The principal survey identified nine possible ways for such communication:

1. meetings between school principals and parents
2. written evaluation sent to parents about the curriculum
3. information provided to parents about the curriculum
4. information provided to parents on school events and activities
5. information provided to parents on school policies and regulations
6. school newsletter sent to parents
7. home visits
8. surveys to understand parent opinions and attitudes
9. school open house events

This report will summarize the results of the above points. It is encouraging to report that the majority of the schools represented in the survey **conduct meetings between principals and parents** at least *annually*. Nonetheless, 9% of schools in Montenegro and 3% of schools in Macedonia report not having organized any such meetings in the previous school year.

On the other hand, written **academic evaluation reports**, the most basic and informative form of communication with parents regarding the developmental and educational progress of their children, were not provided or used in the last school year by 14% of schools in Serbia; 12% in Macedonia; 9% in Bosnia and Herzegovina; 9% in Romania; 8% in Kosovo; and 2% in Montenegro. Although the majority of schools provide written evaluation reports, it is disappointing and startling to note the percentages of schools that do not provide any written evaluations.

Parents and students are entitled to know the progress they have made in each quarter or semester as a measurement of their learning. By the same token, evaluation reports demonstrate the teacher's knowledge of a student's academic strengths and areas which need improvement. Every principal, without exception, should require the faculty to produce academic evaluation reports for each student at least every semester. These semester reports would enable students to put more effort in the subject areas where they may be struggling, in addition to providing an invaluable sense of

self-esteem to students by highlighting where they excel. The confidence and self-esteem gained may inspire many students to work more diligently.

On the topic of information provided to parents on the **school curriculum**, important cross-country variations exist. While every principal in Albania and Moldova reported having provided parents with information on the school curriculum during the last academic year, a disconcerting number of schools in the other SEE countries did not provide any information regarding the school curriculum in the past academic year. No information on curriculum was provided to parents as follows: 37% of schools in Macedonia, 35% in Kosovo; 24% in Serbia; 20% in Romania; 10% in Montenegro; and 4% in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A priority should be placed on sharing the school's curriculum through literature (booklets) and a website link, if possible, which may be viewed at the convenience of parents and students.

In regards to school **Open House/Open Days**, which should occur toward the beginning of the school year, parents are invited to attend an evening event where all the classroom teachers are present to share what their children will study and answer any questions or concerns the parents may have. The majority of the surveyed schools report that Open House days have occurred previously. Nonetheless, an alarming percentage of principals report not having organized any Open House days. Nearly one-third of schools in Romania and Kosovo and one-fifth of schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina did not have any Open House days. Impressively, 43% of the principals in Macedonia reported having Open House days once a month

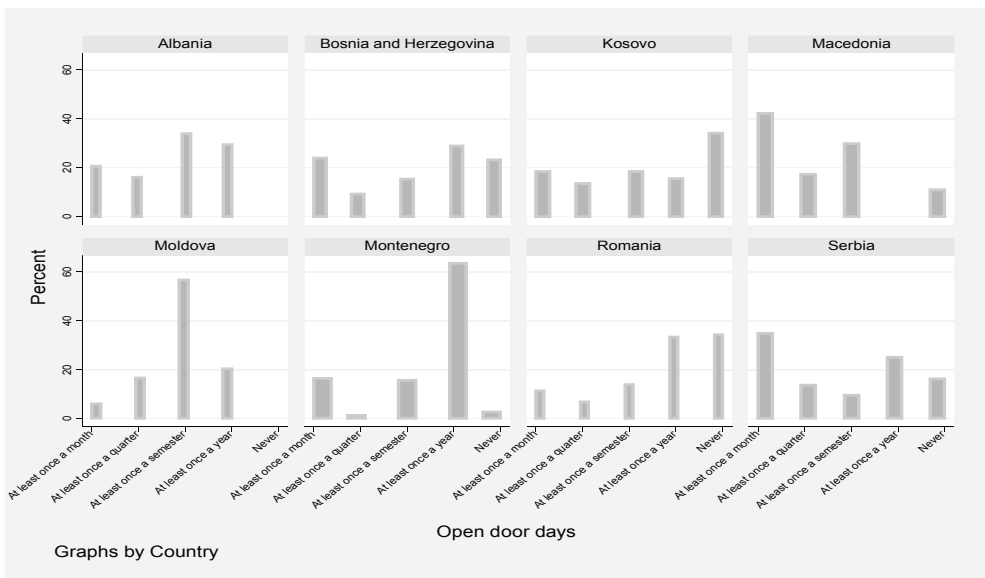


Figure 5 - Frequency of open days

Parent Attendance at School Events

Having investigated what kind of invitations were offered to parents, we now look at how many parents accepted these invitations to school and attended school meetings. First, across the board, principals report that parent attendance rarely exceeds 75%. In fact, parent participation at the aforementioned school meetings ranged between 25% to 50%, according to most of the principals. A larger rate of parent participation was reported in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where parent attendance/participation occurred in the range of 50% to 70%. In contrast, nearly 40% of the principals in Kosovo reported parent participation levels at under 25%.

Along the same lines, meetings between subject teachers and parents are at similar participation levels as parent participation at school-wide meetings. Again, in most of the countries (Albania, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, and Serbia), participation levels are between 25% and 50%, which is far from ideal. Unfortunately, Kosovo has even a lower rate of parent participation (attending meetings with subject teachers), at less than 25%.

Significantly, the eight-country survey report results vary greatly from one another and by topic. Some are excelling where others are struggling, depending on the survey questions and topics. It is, however, important to recognize that all of the eight surveyed nations had less than 75% of their parents attend the (infrequent) meetings offered at their schools. It will be compelling to learn why more parents are not participating in school meetings and events.

School support for parents to assist their children at home

After establishing how often parents attend school functions, it is imperative to understand how schools are currently facilitating parents to become effective supporters in the home learning environment.

A principal in Bosnia-Herzegovina explains how his school tries to support parents by stating, *“We make attempts to educate parents through workshops; we no longer conduct typical parent meetings. We prepare workshops for parents because parents do not read enough about upbringing and [pedagogy]... that is why we initiated some activities for parents to learn through workshops...to get involved as much as possible.”*

Encouragingly, the majority of principals recognize the importance of creating a supportive home learning environment for students to succeed at learning. However, this survey discovered that many schools are not living up to their promise by failing to offer any information sessions for parents. **Despite the positive will of principals**

in providing materials for parents to assist their children in homework, their good intentions are not borne out by their actions.

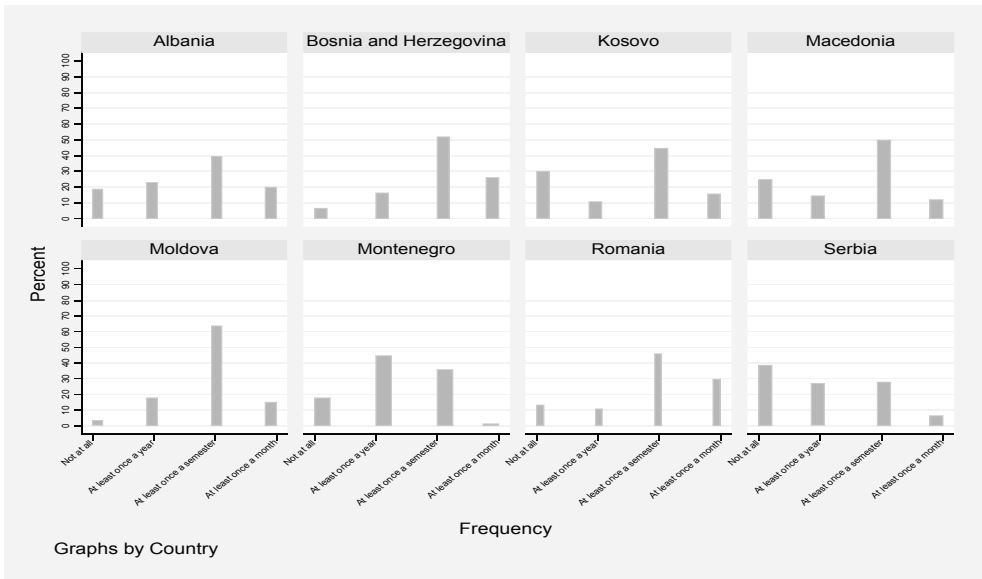


Figure 6 - Sessions Organized to Help Parents

In Kosovo, 71% of principals think information sessions for parents are useful; yet, 73% of schools in Kosovo did **not** offer such activities in the previous academic year. Kosovo is not alone in its inaction. The seven other countries in the study also report a significant percentage of their schools that did **not** provide any parent information sessions regarding homework assistance - 54% of Serbia, 47% in Macedonia. 42% in Albania, 32% in Montenegro, 31% in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

On a positive note, counseling services are offered in a high percentage of schools in the eight survey countries. Again, variation exists among the countries. For instance, 65% of schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina report organizing counseling activities on a monthly basis, while 61% of the schools in Montenegro offered counseling activities only once a year.

While principals generally hold school support services (i.e. homework assistance sessions, counseling services, parent-issue support groups) in high regard, their favorable attitude has not translated to a consistent, widespread delivery of these support services. Unfortunately, in the schools where support services were provided in the previous academic year, they were merely offered once a semester.

Barriers to providing parent support services

Lack of resources is cited as a barrier to providing support services to parents by many schools. For example, 49% of respondents in Albania, 36% in Kosovo, and 30% in Romania, and nearly 80% in Montenegro believe a dearth of funds prevents their schools from developing and running school support services, which principals consider vital to raising student achievement.

In addition to a lack of monetary funds, we recognize that schools need clearly defined methodologies to provide support services and question whether schools may lack an understanding of these methodologies. The findings indicate a mixed picture. Overall, principals in all the countries under study view that the lack of methodologies is a problem only to a limited extent; the majority of principals report that teachers have the skills and sufficient time to run support services to guide parents in their children's education.

If there is sufficient time and a strong willingness to include more parents in school life and thus increase the interest that students and families have in education, very few barriers actually exist in the drive to improve schools and student learning.

Involvement by parents in school governance and the obstacles they face

Participation in decision-making at the school level (school governance) is widely considered one of the most effective ways to influence school management and shape school culture. Principals have an **important role of fostering parental participation in school life as well as in school governance.**

In regards to school principals' perceptions as to the extent of transparency in the school-level budgeting process, the findings indicate a difference in opinion among the countries. Kosovo (77%) and Albania (67%) see parent involvement in school budgeting issues as very or somewhat important. In contrast, 61% of principals in Serbia, 59% in Montenegro, and 52% in Romania take the opposite view, by considering it to be of limited or no importance. In Macedonia, the principals were evenly divided between those in favor and those against parent involvement in school budget discussions.

In recent years, curriculum reform and related public debates on textbook choice have been high on the agenda of the countries under study. As a result of reform measures, schools and teachers recently received the option to choose from an array of textbooks for certain subjects. With this in mind, we asked principals whether they thought parents should also be able to choose textbooks and materials for their children to use.

Principals overwhelmingly did not favor parental involvement in the selection of textbooks. Principals in Albania (47%) and Romania (43%) were most against it, with Montenegro and Romania following closely behind in opposition. Surprisingly, 35% of school principals in Kosovo and 20% in Macedonia consider it very important to involve parents in textbook choice.

A principal in Macedonia, who is possibly better funded than some of his peers, states, “We have gained more with the decentralization, and we have received more financial resources from the municipalities. We cooperate closely with the municipality authorities.”

On the topic of **school governance**, this study asked whether principals thought it important for parents to help **plan** social activities and not merely attend. In a number of countries throughout Europe, it is common for parent volunteers to plan the school-wide social activities. This alleviates the burden teachers and administrators have in planning social events alone and allows them to focus on their more professional duties.

Most principals in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, Moldova, and Romania agree that parent involvement in planning social activities is important; however, 41% in Romania and 30% in Moldova consider such involvement to be only of limited or no importance.

In general, principals in the surveyed countries seem to agree that parents should definitely play a role in school life, but their involvement is best when focused on social activity planning rather than serious school governance matters.

Influence on School Policies and Finance

To further demonstrate this point, principals were asked if Parent Council members were allowed to initiate the modification of existing school policies. A significant number of principals answered “under no circumstances”. The following countries report their **opposition** to Parent Councils initiating the modification of existing school policies under any circumstances: 25% of school principals in Albania, 17% in Romania, 16% in Serbia, 13% in Moldova, and 11% in Macedonia.

It is no surprise that many schools exclude parents from school finance issues, considering the number of principals who have very little influence or control of their own school’s finances. A principal in Romania states, “*The allocated funds are difficult to spend and the spending depends on several intermediate links. Schools don’t have their own budget. Everything is done through a budgetary centre; even if we have our own income, the money is not directly collected by the school, but by the budgetary centre, and it cannot be spent directly by us. The school cannot pay those who could take part in school projects. This is a major obstacle.*”

In the data set, two groups emerge among the SEE countries: those who unreservedly consider parent representatives as valid participants in school governance issues (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Romania, and Serbia); and those who feel parents should initiate policy changes only when **invited** to do so by school administrators (Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro). **It is notable that there are huge differences in decision-making authority within each country.**

While some school principals are entirely opposed to any interference by Parent Councils regarding school governance issues, a number of principals in the **same country** are quite open to sharing decision-making authority with parent representatives. This identifies the authority and influence principals have as school leaders to either affect positive change or be defenders of the status quo.

Finally, we inquired whether or not Parent Council members have any veto power regarding the adoption of rules with which they disagree. Encouragingly, the majority of the schools in Romania (69%), Moldova (60%) , and Bosnia and Herzegovina (54%) give Parent Council members unconstrained power to prevent the adoption of rules. However, 30% in Kosovo and 24% in Albania do not allow Parent Council members any veto power regarding school policies.

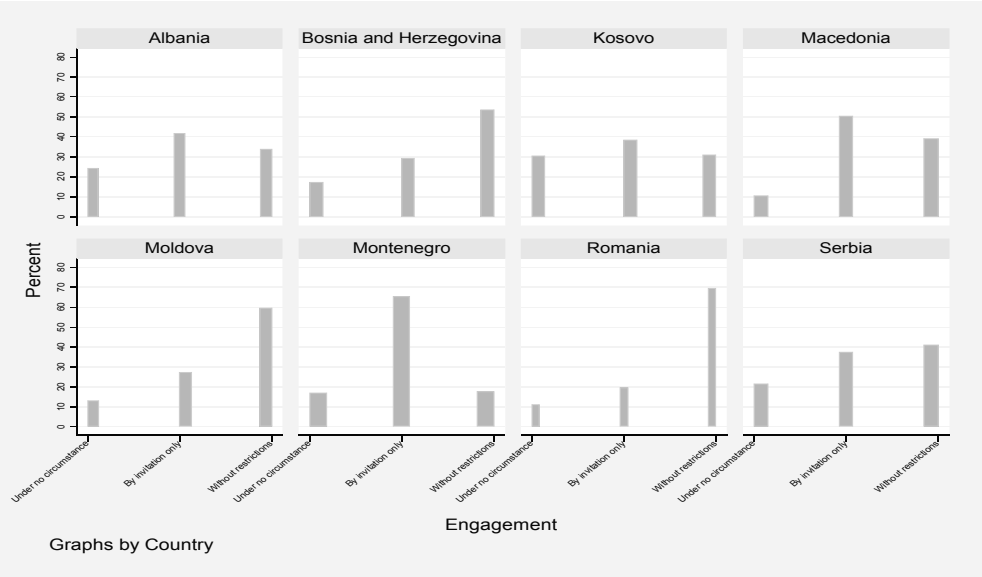


Figure 7 - Parent Council members entitled to veto the adoption of rules they disagree with

Most importantly, we learned that the overwhelming majority of schools throughout the eight countries do not prohibit the participation of parent representatives; on the other hand, we also discovered that the degree of openness to parent involvement in shaping school policies and regulations varies considerably throughout the countries. Clearly, schools enjoy a certain amount of discretion in the ways in which they allow parent representatives to participate in school decision-making but should do more to foster collaborative partnerships with the parents/guardians of its students.

Delving further into the involvement parents may or may not have on school policies, we discovered that they in fact have very little influence in shaping the school budget, as seen in Figure 8, because parents are simply not given the opportunity to participate in school budget discussions.

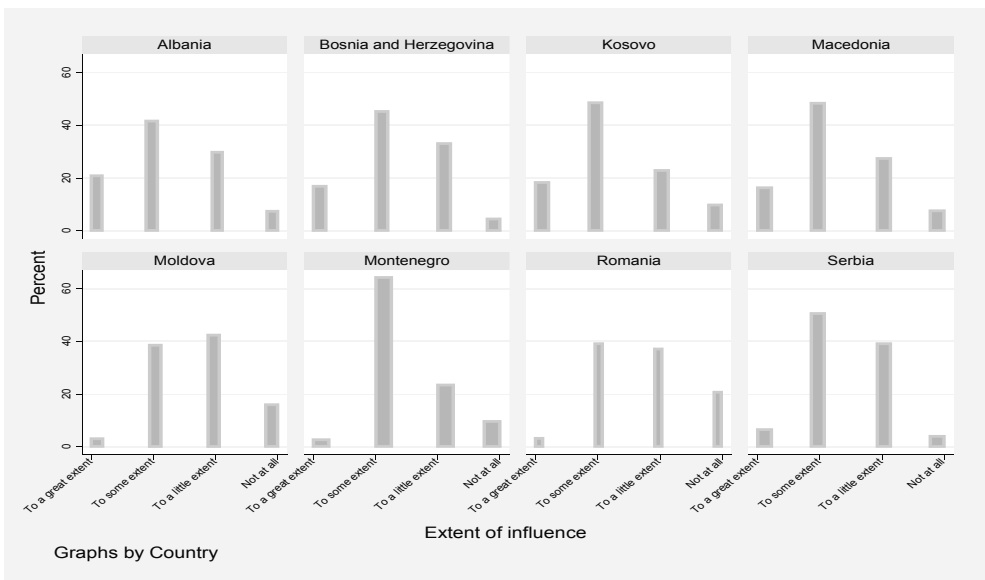


Figure 8 - Parents' influence on social activity planning

The graph (Figure 8) above illustrates the limited influence parents have on setting school budget priorities. Even in Kosovo and Albania, where the majority of their school principals view parent involvement in school budgeting issues as very important, parents have little say in school finances. This may be explained by the financing practices in SEE countries, where many budget line items are earmarked or normative from year to year. On the other hand, some principals explained that they, as school administrators, are given very little opportunity to appropriately manage school funds.

As one principal in Albania states, *“The essence of all issues is freedom. Freedom is not reflected in schools. If the teacher is on the front line of all society problems, he should be trusted more. The State should trust them more. The State has placed 1,000 to 2,000 children, the most precious things in the community, in the care of the school principal, but the same person is not trusted to manage the money of a Board!”*

However, the variations among the countries and within countries on the reported levels of influence indicate that different levels of parental involvement are possible. Precisely what factors can lead to such an array should be studied further.

Influence parents have on instruction

We have determined that school principals view parental involvement in school decision-making in a positive manner. In fact, parent representatives in all eight countries participate in school decision-making at some level; albeit, in many cases, by invitation only. Now, we focus on how school principals assess parental involvement in matters of instruction.

On the topic of **pedagogical methods** used in teaching, we observed contrasting opinions regarding the influence Parent Councils have on teaching. Encouragingly, 70% or more of the principals in **Macedonia, Kosovo, and Montenegro** report that there is some or a great deal of influence on the part of Parent Councils. However, the vast majority of the principals in Romania, Moldova, Serbia, and Albania state that the Councils have **little if any influence at all**.

In regards to the **content of lessons**, school principals report that Parent Councils exert even lower levels of influence in this area than the already low levels of influence on pedagogical methods. Interestingly, the majority of the principals agree that Parent Councils have some or a great deal of influence in the attitude students have toward education. Parents are considered to positively influence students towards valuing their education. This discovery perhaps reinforces the notion that many principals in the region have regarding the role of parents: school matters are best left to school administrators, while parents can play a dominant role at home.

In regards to the vital role parents can play in the development of school policies and regulations and school finances, school principals in the eight SEE countries clearly differ in opinion. A minority feel parents have some influence in these matters while the majority of the principals believe that parents have virtually no influence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of the data primarily focused on providing a descriptive analysis in order to inform practitioners and policymakers on ways to expand parental engagement in school life. [A more detailed country-level analysis can be found in each of the eight country reports. Please refer to <http://www.see-educoop.net/aeiq/outputs.htm>] The report establishes the willingness and the open-minded perspective the majority of the school principals surveyed possess toward parental involvement.

This discovery is tremendously important, because it challenges the commonly-held view that school principals are opposed to parental participation in school life and that widening their decision-making authority would lead to a myopic, power-monopolizing group. That is simply not the case. On the other hand, it is apparent that all the countries need to define and fine-tune the roles parents can and should play in school governance issues. The research has shown that some parents are not given meaningful opportunities to engage in their child's education, while in other cases, some parents, without the benefit of clear guidelines, may have behaved in an uncooperative manner with school leadership.

This research should lead to many discussions and opportunities for schools to give parents or guardians a voice in school governance. **Power-sharing will allow the community to invest more emotionally and financially in the education and future of its children and community.**

Recommendations

There are many actions principals in the eight South East Europe countries surveyed countries can take immediately to provide a fair, inclusive educational environment. Below we highlight our recommendations for immediate action, in addition to offering several suggestions for further research.

First and foremost, each school should have a strategy and accompanying action plan for parental involvement. Strategies should be in place at the local, regional, and national level which assure that parents have a voice in all matters important for the creation and implementation of the learning/teaching process and school life. Those plans might include some or all of the following recommendations.

1. **To remedy the lack of attendance and participation in the existing school ceremonies and events, provide parents (and students) information that is relevant to them.**
 - All schools should hold an **Open House** at the beginning of the school year during evening hours, which will enable most parents to attend. Parents should visit their child's classroom to learn what lies ahead in the upcoming school year and what expectations teachers have for their students.
 - All schools should provide written **academic evaluation reports**. It is unfathomable to teach students for an entire school year and not inform parents privately of their child's academic progress through a thorough written evaluation. Such evaluations also serve as an important tool for teachers to be accountable to their students and vice versa. Ideally, these reports should be given quarterly, giving students time to bring their grades up in subjects where they need improvement.
 - Have parents **pick up academic evaluation reports in person** on a non-school day. Set aside a day when parents can visit the teacher to speak privately about their child's academic progress. This way, schools are assured that parents have received the report, which the teacher has diligently prepared, and parents will learn how their child is doing in a private manner.
 - **Print and disseminate** information regarding the **core curriculum** and the **school-based curriculum** to all parents of the school.

2. **Parents or guardians should be viewed as allies, not adversaries. It is the responsibility of the principal to establish an inviting, democratic school environment.**

A number of European countries have worked hard to establish strong school and family partnerships. For example, the Learning and Teaching organization, which is sponsored by the Scottish government, has an excellent website with resources for interested school authorities. This website: <http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/parentsaspartnersinlearning/guidance/annexb/strategy.asp>, indicates that it is an education authority's duties to:

- promote the involvement of parents/guardians in the education provided by the school to their child and to pupils generally at their child's school
- promote the establishment of Parent Councils (at local and national levels)
- give advice and information to Parent Councils and support their operation
- give advice and information to parents generally
- establish a complaints procedure for parents

The Learning and Teaching website also offers a free *Parents as Partners Toolkit*, which includes a step-by-step approach to establishing an excellent Parent Council. This toolkit outlines a communication strategy that will help create a harmonious relationship between families and schools.

- **Equip parents with helpful tips on how to best provide homework assistance and a supportive home learning environment.** For example, students need a quiet place to study without many interruptions. This sort of information can be provided in print and mailed to every home or delivered in a presentation by a teacher or counselor at a school event (e.g. Open House day).
- For the lower grades, **select or find a "room parent"** for each classroom teacher. These room parents act as a liaison between the teacher and families by planning social activities as well as provide parent volunteers to occasionally assist with class events and activities.
- **Allow parents to occasionally assist with teaching activities.** Room parents can help arrange a rotating schedule of parents to visit their child's class on a periodic basis during a particular subject study. Young students are often proud and delighted to see a parent helping with teaching activities.

3. **To understand why parent participation and attendance is low in some schools, principals must be aware of logistics and atmosphere.** Parents will want to participate more when the school provides opportunities that are mutually beneficial.
 - **Provide an inclusive, democratic environment.** Check if all parents and guardians (of students who are under the care of relatives), especially those from ethnic minorities, are active in school life. If not, find out what prevents them from attending important school events. Provide anonymous surveys for parents to fill out. School administrators and Parent Council members can review these and make improvements for the next gathering. To reiterate, if a guardian is taking care of a child, he/she should be welcomed in the school as a parent.
 - **Allow interested parents the responsibility to help plan school activities.** When parents are allowed to help plan events, they will feel more accountable and thus more engaged and proud to support their children's school. If parents are not involved in planning various meetings and events, they will be less invested and committed to attend and support the school.
4. **If principals truly welcome increased parental engagement, they must encourage parents to have a voice in school governance matters. Democracy starts in schools and parents deserve a say in how their children are educated.**
 - **Give all parents an opportunity to serve on the Parent Council or School Board.** Many schools in Europe hold simple elections and vote for parent council members. Parent volunteers who feel they have the time, energy, and the interest may run for the Parent Council. Parents vote for the representatives who they feel are most qualified to represent them. Also, after establishing Parent Councils at the school level, a Parent Council at the National level can be established.
 - **Seek out organizations that will help to strengthen school and home collaboration.** For example, the National Association of School Parents (Skole og Samfund) of Denmark holds courses throughout Denmark regarding school and home partnerships, parental involvement, school boards, and financial decentralization. This organization's website - <http://www.partners-in-education.com/pages/denmark/skoleogsamfund.html> - offers publications, courses,

and best practices. Seek the help of similar organizations/offices in one's own country. If no such organization exists, contact organizations like Skole og Samfund in neighboring countries.

- **School Boards need to be empowered.** Principals need to discuss important school policy issues with democratically elected school board members and include them in the decision-making process. The boards must have the authority to approve or disapprove major school policies. School boards can provide valuable support and effectively advocate on behalf of schools and families at the local and national levels.

Project Summary

Below you will find the project summary. Currently, researchers have finished conducting national surveys of parents in 10 South East Europe countries. (Bulgaria and Croatia have joined the eight countries which participated in the principal survey.) For more information, please refer to <http://www.see-educoop.net/aeiq/outputs.htm>.

In addition, graduate fellows have been selected to write in-depth reports using the Cross-National Survey of School Principals data set. Once the Cross-National Survey of Parents data set is completely compiled, graduate fellows will again be selected to use this valuable data for further research.

Phase One will identify priorities and provide evidence for the advocacy-oriented second phase. During Phase One, first-hand evidence will be sought about factors that inhibit implementation of equal education opportunity legislation at school level. Activities are divided into several groups:

- a) national surveys of school directors to discover their capabilities, values, attitudes, and practices;
- b) national surveys of parents needs, expectations and experience in regards of school efforts toward their engagement in school life; and
- c) action research to initiate new and document existing community-based initiatives that are successful in improving educational quality and inclusion.

All project activities will be based on a simple, but rigorous, framework that will be the same for all participating countries. A range of stakeholders (community leaders, teachers, students, parents) will be involved both in identifying issues and in taking action to address them.

Throughout the project, particular attention will be given to mobilizing and motivating young people to take an active role in combating education inequity, thus preparing the ground for a national regional youth movement to further the causes of inclusion and quality.

Phase One will end with a regional conference, to present and discuss results and make recommendations for the next phase. The regional conference was held on 23-24 April, 2010 in Becici, Montenegro.

Phase Two will design and carry out targeted programs based on the findings of the first phase, in collaboration with national government and non-government organizations, OSI network programs, and international partners.

The Education Support Program

The Education Support Program (ESP) at the Open Society Institute and its network partners support education reform in countries in transition, combining best practice and policy to strengthen open society values. ESP works to facilitate change in education and national policy development. Support is focused in Central Asia, the Caucasus, Europe, the Middle East, Russia, South Asia and Southern Africa.

The mission of the Education Support Program is to promote justice in education, aiming to strengthen advocacy, innovation and activism in three interconnected areas:

Combating social exclusion: equal access to quality education for low income families; desegregation of children from minority groups; inclusion and adequate care for children with special needs.

Openness and accountability in education systems and education reforms: equitable and efficient state expenditures on education; anticorruption and transparency; accountable governance and management.

Open society values in education: social justice and social action; diversity and pluralism; critical and creative thinking.

The Education Support Program works with a close international network of partner organizations and individual experts to further OSI's mission in education.

More information: <http://www.soros.org/initiatives/esp/about>

Centre for Educational Policy Studies

University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Education

The Centre is active in the field of educational policy studies. It participates in national and international activities in this field, particularly in research, development and consultancy projects. The Centre's activities support study programmes and are aligned with other research at the Faculty of Education. Its members are professors and researchers of the Faculty of Education and some other faculties of the University of Ljubljana and from other institutions.

More information: <http://ceps.pef.uni-lj.si/eng.htm>

