

INTERPARENTS

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A camel is a horse designed by a committee

Parents' participation in the governance of the ES

The European Schools are a system sui generis first set up by parents in 1953 and subsequently endorsed by the member states of the European Union for its citizens.

Since their inception, the parents have made a significant contribution to both the formulation of policy and governance; a contribution which they believe has been not only positive, but has also contributed to improved and more coherent policy. In their mind, the project that is The European Schools is above all a partnership in education. It is a partnership between the directors, teachers, administrative staff, and the pupils, as well as being a partnership between the Member States, the European Communities, and the parents.

Currently the rules of the system provide for parents' participation on all levels. The outcome of the High Level discussions suggest a reduced role of the parents, limited basically to participation at the local level and attendance of the meetings of the Board of Governors.

In view of the complexity of the system today, parents' participation is even more crucial than in the past, as the director-general of the Commission's Directorate General Administration has just recently confirmed in a letter to his staff. Parents experience the results of the policies of the system in all their aspects whereas the views of all other parties involved are limited by the task set to them by their employers.

Members of the Board of Governors complain that parents use channels other than those foreseen for parents' participation in the Convention defining Statute of the European Schools for influencing the decision-making process in the Board of Governors. This lobbying is said to disrupt the work of - and to unduly occupy resources in - ministries and Commission for dealing with their grievances. Looking back at the major causes that have raised protest over the past years, it has to be stated that such disruptions have occurred when (members of) the Board of Governors deliberately choose to ignore the statutory voice of parents in the Board of Governors and its preparatory committees. The school fees and the admission policy for Category 3 students, the imposed closure of language

sections, the imposition of the distribution of pupils over several schools in the same city are the examples that all members of the Board of Governors will continue to associate with passionate protest of parents.

Alternative approaches to the problems have been proposed to the members of the Board of Governors in documents crafted and drafted by parents. Unfortunately, they have often simply been ignored.

At local level, experience over the past years shows that where directors actively involve parents in the running of the schools and manage to create within the school community a 'corporate identity', disturbance caused by protest and complaints is reduced to a minimum.

Parents' participation in working groups at system level is often seen by members of these groups as enriching the work process. Minutes of several working groups prove this assertion.

The complexity of the system of the ES requires that a variety of points of view on the system are taken into account in the process of decision-making. Such variety can only be achieved by implying all partners; a merely technical view has to be avoided. Computational, schematic models of the system and for decision-making are not sufficient for the European Schools because they do not take into account the complexity, the uniqueness of the system's features.

The independent view of parents as partners is needed just as well as the technical points of view that the teaching, administrative and ancillary staff, directors, inspectors, financial and administrative experts provide. Only considering all points of view, dynamic governance will be achieved and thus the perceived crisis will be overcome.

Information to parents and involvement of parents at all levels creates understanding for the functioning of the system and produces identification with the system as opposed to perceiving it as a service to be consumed or, even worse, a privilege parents are entitled to.

The participation of the parents in the governance, both locally as well as system wide, increases transparency, acknowledgment and understanding of the system and eases acceptance of the implementation of decisions at local level.

Such continuous and reciprocal participation, communication and exchange is even more important in a multicultural context where expatriated parents (as well as teachers and directors) still have in mind their national system as a reference, and struggle to understand the European Schools' uniqueness and complexity.

Continued inclusion of parents' views in working groups, preparatory committees and the Board of Governors will enhance the reform process of the system and help it move away from its current static perception to a dynamic and future-oriented model of education fit to respond to the growing demand in all of Europe.

The perceived crisis in governance is nothing but the struggle to maintain in a changing environment a system sui generis which has proved its usefulness to a united Europe. Stripping the system of its unique features would leave over just

another horse whereas the Board of Governors' intention from the beginning has been to design a camel and to keep it in good health for current pupils and future generations.



Annex

Activities of the Parents' Associations and Interparents

Next to their statutory role and the tasks imparted upon them by the General Rules, parents contribute to the success of the schools in a wide variety of areas. All of the work is done on a voluntary basis in the free time of the individuals and involves taking responsibilities, including the financial and administrative aspects and responsibilities of all activities organised. The annual turnover of the parents' associations varies from 10.000€ to several millions of €; the number of employees of the parents' associations varies from none up to 80. All parents' associations are registered according to local law. Interparents is registered as an asbl in Luxembourg.

In the Convention defining Statute of the European Schools it is laid down that the parents are member of the Board of Governors with restricted voting rights. Article 23 is the basis for the recognition of the Parents' Associations of the schools. Article 19 defines that parents are members of the Administrative Boards of the Schools. The Rules of Procedure of the Board of Governors instate the Teaching Committees and the Administrative and Financial Committee as the Preparatory Committees of the Board of Governors.

In the General Rules, Chapter V, the participation of parents at local level is defined, especially in the Education Committees of the schools. Article 39 defines the responsibilities of parents and directors with regard to school canteens and school transport, articles 5 and 39 define the responsibilities of parents and directors with regard to extra-curricular activities.

Board of Governors, its Preparatory Committees and working groups

Each parents' association elects two representatives to Interparents, the umbrella organisation of the associations. Interparents elects amongst these representatives the representatives of the parents in the meetings of the Board of Governors and its preparatory committees and working groups.

Administrative Boards

Each parents' association elects two representatives of parents for the Administrative Boards of the schools.

Depending on local circumstances, the **school canteens** are organised and managed, in accordance with article 39 of the General Rules, by the parents' associations in close liaison with the director and the local canteen committees. **School transport** is organised by the parents in accordance with article 39 of the General Rules including bus services and car-sharing facilitation.

A wide variety of **extra-curricular activities** is organised by the parents' associations with the directors of the school in accordance with articles 5 and 39 of the General Rules. These activities comprise music lessons, language lessons including the host country language and conversation groups for practising LII for children of all ages, computer courses, theatre groups, chess, painting, cookery, pottery, woodwork, bicycle and motor cycle courses and sports activities of all kinds for pupils of all ages. Professionals are employed for these courses that take place outside school hours on the premises of the schools or off-site.

In several schools, parents organise **child-minding services and homework classes, holiday camps** including sailing and ski trips, summer schools and student exchanges between European Schools.

In all schools, parents are actively involved in **libraries and resource centres** providing funds and volunteers as the resources attributed to libraries by the Board of Governors continue to be scarce.

The most important role of the parents' associations in the schools is that of **communicator** between individual parents, class representatives and the school management and inspectors for a wide variety of issues concerning all aspects of school life. Regular meetings are held in each school between the direction and the parents' associations. Inspectors visiting the schools meet the parents' associations and class representatives.

All parents' associations work closely with the elected parents' **class representatives** and organise regular meetings for the exchange of information and efficient communication.

For enhanced exchange of information about all kinds of activities in the schools, all parents' associations regularly publish **newsletters and magazines** and run websites.

In many schools, parents' associations are actively participating in the **drafting of policies** and other documents for internal and external purposes of their school communities, bullying policies, health policies etc., and communications to local and national authorities.

Parents' associations establish and maintain **contacts with local, regional and national authorities** for a variety of purposes regarding the school community. This includes traffic issues around the schools. They are also involved in public relations work in order to inform about the existence of the schools and the attraction of companies interested in the educational services offered by the schools for expatriates.

Many parents' associations are involved in the ordering and purchase of **school books** for the students and almost all of them organise second hand book markets.

Parents' associations facilitate and co-fund all kinds of **school events** and festivities in the schools including the bacalaureate ceremonies and the edition of year books.

Parents' associations financially **support school trips**, cultural activities, student exchanges, Eurosport, the European Schools Science Symposium and Model European Parliament/Council.

Fringe activities relating to school life are organised in a wide variety including informal parents meetings like drop-in mornings for interested parents, cultural activities and host country language courses for parents and film clubs for parents and pupils.

The major sources for the funds of the parents' associations are the annual contributions of the families and the organisation of one or more major fundraisers in the form of markets or fêtes.