

ARISE

Action for Reducing Inequalities in Education

Policy Road Map Strengthening Parent and Community Involvement for a Quality, Inclusive and Equitable Education

Republic of Albania

Tirana, 2023

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Policy Road Map: Strengthening Parent and Community
Involvement for a Quality, Inclusive and Equitable Education

Publisher

Children Are the Future Albania
Ibrahim Kodra Street, 1019 Tirana
contact@cafalbania.org
www.cafalbania.org

For the publisher

Rozeta Hoxhallari

Authors

Rozeta Hoxhallari
Griselda Zisi
Itena Hoxhallari

Methodology

Network of Education Policy Centers
Lana Jurko
Iva Perković

Design

Katarina Velan

This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

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Background

About the project

“Action for Reducing Inequalities in Education” (ARISE) is a regional project, funded by the European Commission/European Union that is being implemented in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey through a partnership between Children Are the Future (CAF) / Fëmijët Janë e Ardhmja (FJA) - Albania, Kosovo Education Center (KEC) - Kosovo, Network of Education Policy Centers (NEPC) - Croatia; Sabancı University Egitim Reformu Girişimi - Turkey; Centre for Education Policy - Serbia; proMENTE social research, Centre for Educational Initiatives Step by Step - Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Foundation for Education and Cultural Initiatives “Step by Step” - North Macedonia.

The project aims to support inclusion of students with low socio-economic status by building national and regional partnerships of civil society organizations from six aforementioned countries.

By engaging in advocacy and constructive policy dialogue with government agencies, it strives to raise awareness among education stakeholders and pilot interventions targeting students of low SES at the school level.

About Children are the Future

Children Are the Future (CAF) / Fëmijët Janë e Ardhmja (FJA) has been working for almost 15 years toward more open, friendly and inclusive schools and a quality, inclusive and equitable education system in Albania. In its education program, CAF/FJA has been highly focused on the improvement of school leadership and teaching quality, development of an inclusive school culture and school policies including School Development Programs, strengthening of inner school structures, active child and youth participation, strengthening of parent involvement and School-Family-Community Partnerships (SFCP's).

Process of Policy Roadmap Development

This Policy Road Map, which has been developed through a participatory consultation process with different stakeholders, has been produced as a result of multiple efforts at local, national and regional levels within the ARISE project.

Those efforts include meetings of the National Policy Coalition, established in the framework of the project with representatives from national and local educational institutions, beneficiary school directorates, Regional Parents Network, Civil Society Organizations, education experts and other important stakeholders, with support from CAF members.

In addition, a national study/report, a Policy brief, and a regional comparison study/report were made preceding the Policy Road Map, as tools for assessing the challenges to be tackled on policy level.

A series of meetings, workshops and consultations with various stakeholders at school, community and national levels were organized.

Other significant regional activities were organized as well, such as: exchange workshops, study visits, Project Steering Committee meetings and Policy Labs.

In this document, we aim to provide recommendations on how to contribute to an inclusive and equitable education system for all, regardless of their Socio-Economic Status or other characteristics, and strengthen a democratic school culture through strengthening of parent involvement and cooperation of school with families and the community focusing on parents and children with low SES.

Who is it for?

The Policy Roadmap is for the project partners, policy coalition, other institutions and organizations working in education, policy makers, project beneficiary schools and other schools not involved in the project, as well as experts and other stakeholders interested in the enhancement of parent and community involvement in the development of a quality, inclusive and equitable education for all.

Importance of Parent Involvement and School-Family-Community Partnership

This Policy Roadmap is highly focused on the importance of parent involvement and SFCP, as one of the key elements of an inclusive and democratic school culture and an inclusive and equitable education that support inclusion, development and success of all children, regardless of their Socio-Economic Status or other background characteristics.

Research conducted during the last four decades and our work experience of more than 15 years with schools in different districts of Albania have shown that parent involvement and cooperation of school with families and the community are key to the success of students and school as a whole.

Parent involvement is important for children's learning, attitudes about school, and aspirations, and children are more successful students at all grade levels if their parents participate at school and encourage education and learning at home, regardless of the educational background or social class of their parents [1].

Furthermore, SFCP, which comprises the highest level of genuine parent and community involvement, *can improve school programs and school climate, provide family services and support, increase parents' skills and leadership, connect families with others in the school and in the community, and help teachers with their work. Above all, they help all youngsters succeed in school and in later life* [2].

[1] Epstein, J. L. (2001). School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools. Westview Press, A Member of the Perseus Books Group

[2] Ibid.

Therefore, enhancement of parent involvement and school-family-community cooperation is essential for effectively addressing the challenges faced by low SES students and any other vulnerable groups, creating an enabling environment for their well-being and success.

However, an active and meaningful involvement of parents and a strong cooperation and partnership between school, families and the community cannot be ensured without a clear vision, a national strategy, a democratic and collaborative school leadership, well-prepared, inclusive teachers and inclusive school-based policies.

In addition to the indispensable role of school leaders, their vision, beliefs, values and practices, teachers are the main agents of change. They play a critical role in the involvement of parents and in the establishment and strengthening of their representative structures in schools, which are the most important institutional mechanisms that can ensure higher levels of participation as real partners.

More specifically, research emphasizes that, when teachers, who have positive attitudes toward parents, make parent involvement part of their regular teaching practice, parents increase their interactions with their children at home, feel more positive about their abilities to help their children, rate teachers more positively, and, above all, students improve their attitudes toward school, and their achievement [3]. In addition, according to Epstein and Dauber (1989) [4], more positive attitudes of teachers toward parent involvement lead to more success in involving hard-to-reach parents.

Therefore, in order to ensure an active and quality involvement of parents in their children's education, especially those from low SES and other vulnerable groups, and a strong SFCP, a strategic approach at national, district and local and school community levels is indispensable, accompanied by direct support and mentoring for development and implementation of comprehensive school-based programs of SFCPs.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Epstein, J. L., and S. L. Dauber. (1989). Teacher attitudes and practices of parent involvement in inner-city elementary and middle schools. CREMS Report No 32. Baltimore: John Hopkins University, Center for Research in Elementary and Middle Schools.

Current Situation and the Main Issues in Albania

As stated in the national report produced in the framework of the ARISE project, there are improvements in education in terms of legal framework and policy development as well as new reform initiatives [4].

A number of reforms have been undertaken aiming at achieving a quality and inclusive education, while national policies have been aligned with European and global objectives. The relatively new framework of competency-based curriculum has been coupled with higher standards for teachers and school leaders.

Currently, the national legal framework and education policies put a special emphasis on parent and community involvement in school life and strengthening of school leadership and inner school structures.

More specifically, the Law on pre-university education system 69/12 with amendments (2015 and 2018) [6], the National Education Strategy (2021 - 2026) [7] and other related policy documents emphasize the importance of parent and community involvement in the school progress, improvement and democratization process.

Parents are the main partners of the educational institution that can and should be actively involved in the school life and contribute to the progress and success of the institution [6]. They can be involved in and represented through the Class and School Parent Council, the School Board and other important structures.

[5] ARISE Action for reducing Inequalities in Education National Report for Albania

[6] Law on Pre-University Education system in the Republic of Albania 69/12 with amendments 56/2015 and 48/2018

[7] Strategjia Kombëtare e Arsimit, 2021 - 2026

Furthermore, together with teachers, school leaders and students, they can also be involved in strategic and school development planning, review and improvement of school-based policies; initiate, introduce and support various school and extra-curricular activities; and contribute to the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning process, hence improvement of student and school achievement [8]. The Law on Pre-university education system also supports involvement of parents in education at regional and national levels through establishment of Regional and National Parent Councils, which, as relatively new structures, need capacity building and continuous professional support.

Various initiatives have been implemented in primary and secondary schools in Albania with the support of local, national and international organizations, in line with national goals and strategy, along with the School as a Community Center Program, which have had their positive impact.

After almost 15 years of CAF/FJA working with schools and communities, we have realized that there is a higher level of awareness among parents and other school stakeholders on the importance of parent and community involvement to the improvement of school life and education quality, hence students' achievement and success.

Project beneficiary schools have improved methods of parent involvement, inner school structures have been strengthened and community involvement has been increased.

However, there is still "a gap ...between the legal framework....and the actual implementation of the decentralized system" [9] at the national level. Parent Councils and other inner school structures at national level are still weak and not very well recognized, and the level of active parent involvement in school life and school-family-community cooperation is not yet strong.

[Z] NEPC, 2016. Who rules the schools? - Mapping of the current school governance policies in the 10 countries, p.62

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

Research and practice show that, if Parent Councils and other inner school structures are elected through a large participatory and democratic election process, are well trained, mentored and continuously supported, they gain the capacity to involve, represent and support all parents, especially those from vulnerable groups, as well as provide tremendous support to teachers, school administrators and students.

Lately, due to improvement of national legislation and policies, and participation in national or international projects, there are improvements in terms of awareness raising, strengthening of parent representative structures and parents' involvement and role.

However, schools are not yet well prepared for ensuring an active and meaningful involvement of parents through their representative structures and other methods, and do not possess strategic plans or comprehensive school-based policies on SFCPs.

Teachers, on the other hand, are not yet well prepared for encouraging an active involvement of parents and are not all aware of effective methods of parent involvement and an inclusive approach.

Therefore, in order to reach lasting improvements and extend positive practices at national level, more support is needed from local and central education authorities.

Efforts should be put into providing continuous, tailor made professional development and capacity-building opportunities for school leaders, school staff and parent representative structures, achieving better cooperation among schools, and implementing more comprehensive programs of parent involvement and SFCPs.

These measures should be implemented in each school, as an integral part of a school development program and a national strategy of school development and democratization process.

Parents need to increase their awareness and gain a better understanding of their significant role as real partners in school, get introduced to effective parent involvement methods and, above all, receive continuous guidance and support, feel welcome and valued for their contribution.

In addition, schools need a higher level of autonomy and a dedicated budget in order to be able to successfully implement their School-Family-Community Cooperation and Partnership Programs as an integral part of School Development Programs, based on the needs and interests of their unique school communities.

Overall Goal and Specific Objectives

Overall Goal

To ensure policy foundations, institutional mechanisms and competent educators that support and encourage active and meaningful participation of parents in the school community.

To enhance the knowledge and competencies of educators for parent involvement and SFCP.

To increase awareness of parents and other stakeholders on the importance of parental involvement in their children's education and on effective ways of involvement.

Specific Objectives

To strengthen institutional mechanisms at national, regional and school levels for a stronger representation and role of parents.

To initiate development of inclusive national and school-based policies that encourage and support parental involvement and school-family-community cooperation and partnership.

To develop a welcoming and inclusive school environment, where parents and all other stakeholders feel welcome, actively involved, respected and valued.

Specific Objective 1

To strengthen institutional mechanisms at national, regional and school levels for a stronger representation and role of parents.

Action 1: Strengthening of the national institutional mechanisms.

- Increasing the capacity and role of the National Parent Council (NPC) through capacity-building and exchange opportunities
- Strengthening the connection of the NPC to the Regional Parent Councils (RPCs) and School Parent Councils (PCs) through different channels of communication, consultation and cooperation.

Level of implementation: National

Action 2: More autonomy given to schools and providing financial and professional support

- Point national efforts toward decentralization in education and the strengthening of educational institutions.
- Ensuring more professional and financial autonomy of school leaders, teachers and school governance structures to be able to develop and implement SFCPs, as an integral part of School Development Programs, addressing the needs and aspirations of their diverse school communities, and providing equal opportunities for all students.
- Provision of direct financial and technical support to schools for them to successfully implement comprehensive SFCP Programs, integrated into the School Development Programs and Annual Plans that aim at quality, equitable and inclusive education for all children.

Level of Implementation: National

Action 3: Strengthening of the RPC and their cooperation with the NPC and SPC to increase their role in the improvement of school life and education quality.

- Supporting capacity building of Regional Parent Councils and communication and cooperation with School Parent Councils and the National Parent Council.

Level of implementation: Regional

Specific Objective 2

To initiate development of inclusive national and school-based policies that encourage and support parent involvement and school-family cooperation and partnership.

Action 1: Review and revision of the Legal Framework and related national policy documents:

- Review of the main national policies and regulations related to parent and community involvement in education and provision of recommendations.
- Development and adoption of new policies and guidelines on parent involvement, such as: a National Strategy on Parent Involvement and School-based Programs of School-Family-Community Partnerships as strong foundations for a strong school-family-community cooperation and partnership aiming at the development of more open, friendly and inclusive schools, and a quality, inclusive and equitable education for all children, regardless of their socio-economic status, or other backgrounds.

- Develop specific provisions, through intersectoral cooperation, and facilities, through which employers guarantee the time and facilities for employed parents to periodically participate in important activities of their child's school.
- Nationally recognize and integrate **Parents' Day** into national educational documents, in order to encourage and support its implementation in all the schools of Albania.

Level of implementation: National

Action 2: Supporting a national research study on teachers' attitudes, knowledge, beliefs and practices of parent involvement.

- The finding obtained from the study will help improve current professional development courses and develop tailor made courses based on teachers' specific needs.

Level of implementation: National

Action 3: Encouragement and support by Local Education Offices and Regional Education Directorate experts of development of inclusive school-based policies and practices.

- Design and implementation of SFCP Programs in each school
- Development and implementation of various initiatives by schools, NPO's, educational experts and other stakeholders, including awareness-raising and capacity-building activities, as well as research, and publication of support materials (including handbooks for development of SFCP's, Handbook for the functioning of Parent Councils with useful information for parents and Parent Councils at all levels, teachers, school leaders, students, education authorities and other education-related stakeholders).

Level of implementation: Regional

Specific Objective 3

To enhance the knowledge and competencies of educators for parents' involvement and SFCP.

Action 1: Inclusion of courses on parent involvement and SFCP in teacher education

- Reinforcement of development and integration of specific courses (on the strengthening of parent involvement and SFCP) in the Teacher Education Programs of Pedagogical Departments of related Universities/Faculties.

Level of implementation: National

Action 2: Capacity building and professional development of educators on parent involvement and SFCP

- Support professional development courses offered by national and international agencies to strengthen the capacity of RED/LEO experts, school leaders and pedagogical staff on implementing contemporary methods of parent involvement and SFCP.

Level of implementation: National

Action 3: Strengthening of capacity building, exchange, peer learning and cooperation among schools of the same district through the support of LEOs, REDs, NPCs and RPCs, Local Government units, NPOs and other stakeholders.

- REDs/LEOs need to provide their official support to a continuous professional development for school leaders and other school staff.
- REDs/LEOs need to support organization of exchange meetings, workshops and peer-learning events among educational institutions at district level (and even national and other levels) to exchange positive practices and challenges faced and come out with joint future actions toward more sustainable developments.

Level of implementation: Regional

Specific Objective 4

To develop a welcoming and inclusive school environment where parents and all the other stakeholders feel welcome, actively involved, respected and valued.

Action 1: Positioning parental involvement as a central topic in the internal school professional development program.

- School administrators and pedagogical staff share updated information, best practices of parent involvement, as well as challenges faced and lessons learned.
- School leaders invest in teachers' training related to parent involvement and support their efforts.

- School leaders provide mentoring to school staff, parent representative structures and other stakeholders, focusing on the roles and responsibilities of parents, the benefits and challenges of parent involvement, effective methods and tools and the legal rights and obligations.

Level of implementation: Local

Action 2: Strengthening of inclusive school-based policies, including development of comprehensive School-Family-Community Partnership Programs

- As parental involvement cannot be successful simply based on sporadic initiatives and practices of individual teachers, it needs to be founded on a comprehensive school-family-community partnership program, where all the six types of parent and community involvement are well incorporated and strategic goals are set to be achieved.
- School directors in cooperation with teachers, parents and students work together on the designing of comprehensive programs of parent involvement and school-family-community partnerships and on their successful implementation, monitoring and reviewing them consistently, having students at the heart of the whole process.

- Developing effective channels of communication with children's parents and families, strengthening a two-way (school-home-school) communication, which is central to the success of parent involvement and school-family cooperation.

Level of implementation: Local

Action 3: Strengthening of Institutional mechanisms at school level.

- School administrators and teachers should support strengthening of the capacity and role of important inner school-parent representative structures, such as: Class and School Parent Councils and School Boards, to encourage increase of parent involvement in the decision-making process and in the school life, giving special attention to parents of children with special needs, low SES, and other vulnerable groups.
- Supporting development of an Open, Inclusive and Democratic Election Process of Class and School Parent Councils that encourages participation and ensures equal opportunities for all parents to elect and be elected, regardless of their educational level, family structure or socio-economic status.
- Organizing informative workshops with classroom teachers on their role in facilitating an open and inclusive election process at class level encouraging parents from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Organizing ToT of elected Parent Council representatives (to be replicated by them with other parents) on issues, such as: A democratic and inclusive school culture; democratic school governance, related legal framework, PC role and responsibilities at class and school level, effective communication and cooperation with different stakeholders; types of parent involvement; importance of the designing and implementation of a PC annual action plan that is in line with the School Development Program, its mission and vision.
- Providing guidance for strengthening cooperation between Class Parent Councils and School Parent Council, as well as Regional and National Parent Councils, encouraging development of initiatives at class, school and community levels in cooperation with other stakeholders to increase their capacity and role in the whole school and community life.

Level of implementation: Local

Action 4: Development of inclusive school practices and school facilities for an active and meaningful involvement of parents and other stakeholders

- Organization of inclusive, Whole-School Events dedicated to parents as real partners, as an integral part of an inclusive school culture, including **“Parents’ Day”**, **“Back to school Day”**, or **“Good Word Day”** each year through a strong cooperation of school leaders, pedagogical staff, Class and School Parent Councils, School Boards, Student Governments, other parents and students and other stakeholders.
- Establishment of **Parents’ Resource Room/hall** or **Parents’ Corner** in each school to help break the barriers of participation of socially excluded parents, help them communicate, work and cooperate with each-other and make them feel welcome and as an important part of the school community.

Level of implementation: Local

Specific Objective 5

Raising awareness at a national, regional, and local level (school/community).

Action 1: Raising awareness through dissemination.

- To increase level of awareness and understanding of the benefits of parental involvement among school staff, parents, students, and the general public, its positive outcomes and impacts, types of parent involvement and good practice, as well as methods, opportunities and channels for sustainable, active and meaningful parent involvement.
- Use of various media to reach out to different audiences, such as television, radio, newspapers, magazines, social media, websites, posters and leaflets, forums, events and campaigns.

- Development and dissemination of materials and resources on parental involvement, such as manuals, brochures, posters, videos, podcasts, newsletters, and webinars.

Level of implementation: National, regional, local

Action 2: National Peer Learning Events.

- events aiming to gather multiple stakeholders with special emphasis on participation of the NPC and RPC representatives and PCs of different schools, as well as representatives from Parents Network.

Level of implementation: National



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