

Information project development work - cooperation between home and school

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Introduction

In cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs (KUF), the National Parents' Committee for Primary and Lower Secondary Education (FUG) will carry out a development project to try out a comprehensive system for disseminating information to the parents of children attending primary and lower secondary schools, parent representatives at different levels in the primary and lower secondary school, class teachers and members of school boards.

The project is a stage in the follow-up of Report No. 14 (1997-98) to the Storting concerning parental participation in the primary and lower secondary school (the report on parental participation) and Recommendation S. No. 117 (1997-98) of the Standing Committee.

The purpose of the project is to develop and strengthen the dialogue between home and school by establishing systematic and well planned information and course facilities. A study will be made of the importance for cooperation between home and school of increasing parents' knowledge of the school's objectives, curriculum, structure and distribution of responsibility.

Emphasis will be placed on obtaining and systematizing examples of successful interaction between home and school. During the project period, course plans, newly developed material and good examples of interaction will be made available to schools, municipalities and county authorities throughout the country.

The project will be carried out in two counties (four municipalities in each county) in cooperation with the National Education Office in these counties.

The project will have a duration of three years, starting at the beginning of the new school year in August 1999 and ending at the end of the school year in 2002. Work on planning the project began in October 1998.

Background

On the basis of principles laid down in legislation concerning parents, it is emphasized both in the Curriculum for Primary and Lower Secondary Education (L 97) and in the report on parental participation that parents have the main responsibility for their children's upbringing and education. Close and good cooperation must therefore be developed between home and school. This cooperation must be characterized by good dialogue, interaction and parental participation. Successful home-school cooperation is dependent on the supply of information to parents and on the existence of favourable conditions for participation in the activities of the school.

In the view of the National Parents' Committee, information provided by schools and other arrangements made by schools in relation to parents fail to comply satisfactorily with national guidelines for home-school cooperation. It is therefore necessary to encourage the establishment of local fora in individual schools and municipalities to strengthen the dialogue between home and school and to promote the provision of well structured information to all

parents with children attending primary and lower secondary schools.

The report on parental participation urges the municipalities to develop the school board in such a way as to promote good dialogue and interaction between the various parties involved in the primary and lower secondary school. A course programme for parent representatives and members of the school board will be tried out as part of the project. At the same time an attempt will be made to establish network cooperation between school boards in the municipality.

The report on parental participation stresses that a forum at the municipal level for dialogue concerning matters of mutual interest would be in the interest of both the municipalities and the parents. Courses for parent representatives will also be offered to representatives at the municipal level.

Objectives

The objectives of the information project are as follows:

- try out a comprehensive system for dissemination of information including course facilities for parents, parent representatives at municipal and local levels and class teachers so as to increase their knowledge and insight concerning the rights and obligations involved in cooperation between home and school
- obtain concrete examples of good interaction between home and school at different levels
- hold courses for parent representatives and members of school boards to increase their knowledge and understanding of the school board's role as a forum for dialogue and interaction between the different parties concerned in the primary and lower secondary school
- increase the competence of the members of school boards in relation to the tasks,

obligations and possibilities that accompany their official duties

- encourage network cooperation between school boards in the municipalities
- support and strengthen the work of the existing Municipal Parents' Councils and encourage the setting up of more such councils

Project plans and implementation

The information project is to be implemented as a three-year pilot project in two counties with the participation of four municipalities from each county. All counties were invited to apply to participate in the project. Twelve counties applied, and Nordland and Oppland counties were selected.

On the basis of the applications received, the counties were selected according to the following criteria:

- The National Education Office must include the project in its plans of operations.
- The National Education Office must be willing to take responsibility for the tasks assigned to it in the project description, including appointing a project coordinator.
- The National Education Office must be willing to take an active part in project development both through the project coordinator's participation in the project group and through the activities of the project coordinator in relation to the municipalities concerned.
- In the county there must be four municipalities that wish to take part in the project and are willing to make school-home cooperation main priority areas.
- The choice of municipalities must represent both urban and rural municipalities and they must be of varying size and school structure.
- In large urban municipalities, the project will be implemented in selected urban districts.

The project will be carried out in cooperation between the Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs, the National Parents' Committee for Primary and Lower Secondary Education, the National Education Office and the Municipal Education Departments.

The following measures will be developed and tested in the project:

Training

The following persons will be invited to attend a course or a series of evening topic meetings:

- All parents with children in the first, fifth and eighth classes
- All parent representatives and class teachers
- All members of school boards

Network cooperation for coordination and exchange of ideas and experience

- An annual conference will be held in the municipality for all members of school boards.

Conferences

- A kick-off conference will be held for resource persons, head teachers, municipal representatives, representatives for the National Education Office, the project group and the steering group.
- An annual conference will be held for Parents' Council Working Committees in the municipality.
- An annual conference will be held at county level for all Municipal Parents' Councils and representatives from the municipal education departments. In the case of municipalities where no Municipal Parents' Council has been set up, representatives for the Parents' Council Working Committees will be invited.

Training of local resource persons

- Resource persons in municipalities and counties are invited to attend courses held either at municipality or county level.

Content of courses and conferences

A fundamental principle of courses and conferences will be a division of topics relating to dialogue and interaction into three main areas:

1. National guidelines and principles for the activities of the school
Appropriate topics: the Curriculum for Primary and Lower Secondary Education (L97), the Education Act, the report on parental participation, school evaluation, pupil assessment, day-care facilities for schoolchildren, children with special needs
2. School development in individual municipalities
Appropriate topics: The municipalities' follow-up of L97, plans for competence building, guidelines for school evaluation, development projects and development of day-care facilities for schoolchildren
3. School-home cooperation at individual schools
Each school adapts the project to its own priorities, e.g. home-school cooperation in relation to its own activity plans, development of the learning environment, school-based assessment, use of the natural environment for teaching purposes, topic and project work, the school's and the pupils' choices, day-care facilities for schoolchildren, etc.

Municipal education departments and individual schools will be encouraged to take an active part in developing content for parts 2 and 3 of courses and conferences. This will give individual municipalities and schools the freedom to further develop the reform and adapt it to local needs regarding the relationship between home and school.

The National Education Office will have a major role in the project and, with the support of the Ministry, will have responsibility for

- informing the municipalities about the project
- providing advice and guidance to the municipalities in connection with implementation of the project

- helping to train people responsible for holding courses
- holding conferences

Municipal education departments, with the support of the Ministry and the National Education Office, will have the responsibility for

- informing head teachers about the project
- coordinating work on courses, topic evenings, information meetings
- cooperating with parent representatives and/or the Municipal Parents' Council
- helping to train people responsible for holding courses
- holding conferences in the municipality

Material

Development of materials will be a central and principal part of the project. Such materials will relate to topics such as starting school, starting upper secondary school, the rights of the child, school evaluation, different ways of cooperating and good examples of cooperation between home and school. In both structure and content, the material will be developed and adapted to target groups through active participation in the project by municipalities and schools.

Development of materials will also take into consideration their suitability for use in home-school cooperation in the remainder of the country.

Evaluation

Considerable emphasis will be placed on evaluating the effect of the project on the dialogue and interaction between home and school. An examination will also be made of the plausibility of the hypothesis: 'Better home-school cooperation leads to a better classroom environment and better handling of conflicts.' A questionnaire survey will be carried out in 1999, and a final evaluative survey will be made on completion of the project in the spring of 2002. Continuous evaluation will also be carried out

throughout the project period at the municipality, school and class level. The National Education Office will be assigned tasks associated with the evaluation and will assist in developing the evaluation work. The task of evaluating the project has been assigned to the Institute for Norwegian Social Research (NOVA).

The Issues addressed

The issues addressed by this evaluation have been formulated on the basis of the objectives of the project and national guidelines for cooperation between the home and the school. The project's objectives are primarily associated with information and courses for parents, parent representatives and class teachers. This is also reflected by the issues themselves. A further matter of importance for these issues is that cooperation between home and school must not be seen as an end in itself. Ideally, this cooperation should result in improved school facilities for children and young people. It is therefore essential to base the evaluation on issues associated with the pupils' learning environment. In this type of evaluation, it is also necessary to assess what has been carried out in the project and to take into consideration the basic operating conditions of the project. Such factors have relevance for the results attained in the project. On this basis, the following issues have been formulated:

- To what extent do information and courses increase parents' competence concerning cooperation between home and school and the objectives, curriculum and organization of the school?
- To what extent does increasing the competence of the parents have significance for cooperation between home and school?
- Are there connections between the class environments in the school and the cooperation between home and school?
- In what ways do framework conditions and priorities at national and local levels influence cooperation between home and school?

In an evaluation of the cooperation between home and school, it will be important to distinguish between participatory democracy and representational democracy. Both are important in connection with the cooperation between home and school and, in the evaluation, priority will be given to distinguish between these two levels of cooperation. As pointed out in the curriculum for the 10-year compulsory primary and lower secondary school, it is first and foremost by cooperating with individual parents that schools can assist parents in fostering their children's development.

Project management

The day-to-day management of the project will be carried out by a project group consisting of the secretariat of the National Parents' Committee and a project coordinator from each of the two participating counties.

The project's steering group will consist of the National Parents' Committee and representatives from the Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs.

Liaison meetings will be held at national and county level for exchange of information with the organizations. Individual project municipalities are to decide for themselves the form to be taken by cooperation with the organizations.

Funding

The project has been allocated development funds from the budget of the Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs.

The National Education Offices in the counties will be allocated project funds to cover the cost of their involvement in the project, including the pay of a project coordinator (maximum 50% post).

The National Education Office is to have the responsibility for allocation of necessary project funds to the municipalities.

The National Education Office will be expected to undertake to follow up and develop the project in accordance with the project description and the decisions made in the steering group and project group. The National Education Office will be given follow-up and support by the Ministry. All conferences and courses in the project held by the National Education Offices will be financed by project funds.

The municipalities will receive free courses for local resource persons, and all material used in the project will be provided free of charge. The municipalities will receive follow-up, support and guidance from both the Ministry and the National Education Office.

The municipalities must undertake to develop the project in accordance with the project description and incorporate the project in a comprehensive system for home-school cooperation in the municipalities. The municipality will be expected to use its own resources to cover the salaries of employees (head teacher, teaching staff, school office staff) in connection with project work and travel to meetings.

Meetings of the central project group will be financed by project funds, as will evaluation of the project.

Changes in the project

The development of the project will initially follow the project description given above. However, it follows from the project's nature as a development project that it may be necessary to make adjustments and changes in the project framework during both the planning and the implementation phases.

