

School Governance Models and School Boards: Educational and Administrative Aspects

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Abstract Through adoption of the democratic system in the 1980s and the 1990s, the countries of South-East Europe began decentralizing their school systems and introduced the school board as the governing body which, in co-operation with the principal, is responsible for the functioning of the school. In most countries of the region, the role of school boards has not been defined with sufficient clarity and, although school boards are responsible for the management and development of schools, their role is in practice frequently unclear, and they are often ineffective. Consequently, aiming to improve their quality of work, better defining their roles and enhancing the competencies of school board members are imperative, both in the professional and pedagogical field, and in the decision-making processes.

1 INTRODUCTION

Efficiency and quality of educational systems have become a prevalent topic over the last several decades. Social changes caused by globalisation and computerisation of society and the new economic environment have significantly influenced re-evaluation of the efficiency of the teaching process and accounted for a kind of confrontation between educational paradigms. This clash of paradigms at the level of curriculum

design and re-evaluation of the quality of knowledge and skills which students need to acquire through education, was demonstrated by revisions and, subsequently, organisation of the teaching process. Instead of the traditional paradigm focused on memorisation and reproduction of content outlined in the curriculum, a new, innovative, creative and co-constructivist paradigm of education was accepted, one that promoted teaching focused on students instead of teaching focused on lecturer delivery of pre-defined content. (Brooks & Brooks, 1999; Tan, 2009; Pivac, 2009; McKenzie & Santiago, 2005). In addition, a competence-focused approach to learning and teaching was accepted, as well as the importance of the quality of the educational environment, characterised by democratic leadership, as well as the responsibility and participation of all the stakeholders in the educational process. In addition to the perception of the teacher as a moderator and a reflexive action-oriented practitioner, and the perception of the student as an active rather than a passive participant in the educational process, the role of parents as important stakeholders, who can contribute to the quality of school work, was also acknowledged (Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications, 2010; Initial Teacher Education: Criteria and Guidelines for Programme Providers, 2011; Donnell & Harper, 2005; Ostorga, 2006). Consequently, we note that positive and significant changes have occurred at the level of the organization of the educational process. Irrespective of this progress, it has been recognized lately that positive changes in the classroom are not sufficient for the achievement of the quality of overall performance in the educational process and school as an institution which promotes the co-constructivist approach. The quality of a school as a supportive community is therefore increasingly analysed in theory and practice, which has, along with the definition of the new role of teachers, students and parents, intensified the re-examination of the role of principals and school boards. Efficient schools are defined as those which, in addition to furnishing a positive environment, education focused on active learning, a competence-based approach and parental participation, also have efficient governance. (Mitchell & Tucker, 1992; Melvin, Saskatchewan, & Thompson, 2004; Salazar, 2013). Nevertheless, while it is possible in most educational systems to generalise indicators of quality of the educational process at the organ-

isational level, and define efficient strategies of learning and teaching, as well as the quality of a supportive and democratic environment, school governance is considered a much more complex issue. Indeed, school governance is, to a considerably greater degree, compared with the didactic structuring of the classroom work, related to the socio-political, social, historical and ideological influences of society and the school system in which it operates, as is evident also from the fact that there currently are several hundred definitions of school governance (Land, 2002; Williams-Boyd, 2002; Lutz & Gresson, 1980). Subsequently, there are also multiple models of school governance. These include, for example, the community governance model, which emphasizes the relevance of family-school partnerships in community development, the business model that promotes the relevance of school efficiency and productivity, and the executive and stakeholder-scrutiny model that advocates the accountability of the executive team governing the school to the wider stakeholder group (McCrone, Southcott, & George, 2011). Each model has its scientific, social and educational foundations. In spite of mutual differences, the common characteristic shared by the abovementioned models of school governance is the recognition of school boards and principals as relevant factors which can contribute to the academic achievement of students and the improved work of schools because they promote effective governance and school-community partnerships (OECD, 2008; Smoley, 1999; Salazar, 2013; Williams-Boyd, 2002). However, to implement specific models, the most important factor appears to be for each country to implement models of efficient school governance which best address its specific needs by respecting its socio-political, economic and historical influences.

The importance of this principle can best be shown in the example of school decentralisation. Namely, over the last several decades, the system of education has been liberalised worldwide (Hill, 2006; Fredriksson, 2009; Larusdottir, 2014), which has significantly affected school decentralisation. On the one hand, some countries consider school decentralisation as financial autonomy from relevant ministerial bodies and some as greater autonomy in the sense of school governance, that is, decision-making, while some states accept both types of school decentralisation.

By accepting the democratic-social order in the 1980s and the 1990s, the countries in South-East Europe have attempted to abandon a long tradition of centralised school systems. A significant shift occurred in the sense of decentralisation of school governance in which important decisions were passed by the local community, principals and boards of specific schools, rather than a ministerial body. The question of decentralisation becomes the question of educational policies and is directly linked with the co-constructivist paradigm, school stakeholders' interests and student academic achievement. The decentralisation of school systems in South-Eastn Europe commenced in the 2000s as horizontal decentralisation. The actual decentralisation process also has financial aspects. These are linked, in most countries of the region, with the provision of additional sources of financing, materials costs, maintenance expenses and student transport. However, in some countries of the region, such as Bulgaria, the school principal, as the school's governing body, even decides teacher salaries.

Irrespective of the model, school decentralisation has contributed to the intensification of the role of school boards in school management. Decentralisation of school governance can decrease school passivity concerning social and economic changes on the one hand, and on the other it can enable schools to meet the specific requirements of their stakeholders and lead them to an acknowledgment of stakeholders' social, economic, local and personal needs, which contribute to school quality and student academic achievement in the long term. Moreover, decentralisation of education, in the sense of each school's accepting responsibility and achieving autonomy, is important for "their performance to generate highly effective schools" (Identifying the impact of educational decentralisation on the quality of education, 2007). Nevertheless, previously conducted research points to different (in)efficiencies of educational policies in the implementation of school decentralisation, even though it has become an increasingly accepted type of governance over the last 30 years under the influence of globalisation (Daun, 2007; McCrone et al., 2011; Galiani, Gertler, & Schargrotsky, 2008). Regardless of various outcomes, school decentralisation has intensified the role of school boards in school governance, which will be further discussed in the next chapter.

Concerning the issue of school decentralisation, the Republic of Croatia has inherited the decades-long experience of a centralised system of education, similar to other countries in South-East Europe. Namely, under the influence of the former social order, the responsible ministerial body made all important decisions regarding school performance and activities. The diversity of schools and the role of school boards and other external stakeholders were not elements to be considered in such a closed system. School activities were carried out according to the same plan and programme, without acknowledging the specificity of each school environment. Upon transitioning to a democratic-pluralistic social order in the 1990s, the educational system in the Republic of Croatia faced significant reforms, one of which was to decrease centralisation of the educational system. However, it was only after the closing of the chapter on education, negotiated with the EU in the pre-accession phase, that this question started to be addressed with greater intensity. Concerning actual practices, real change has only recently started to be implemented. There are still no systematic results of research on relevant indicators of school governance, because they were not of greater interest to the wider public and scientific community. Thus, the Republic of Croatia, in spite of solid legislation on the role of the school boards and stakeholders, still has to define models for implementation of changes in the education system, as well as strengthen the role and the meaning of school boards in school governance.

2 THE ROLE AND THE FUNCTION OF SCHOOL BOARDS: DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

Most current educational policies consider school boards to be the key stakeholders in schools, which can contribute to student academic achievement and overall efficiency and performance. In the Republic of Croatia, for example, the school board is responsible for the advancement of the educational institution (Burcar, 2007) and its governance (Primary and Secondary School Education Act, Official Gazette no. 87, 2008, Article 118). In other words, the board is responsible for a number of highly important segments of school work, which, among others, include appointment of principals and adoption of relevant documents such as statutes, school curricula, annual and financial work plans and internal rules, to name a few. School boards in Croatia consist of seven members who represent different stakeholders in the educational process, of which two represent teachers and expert associates and one represents the workers' council

and parents, while three are nominated by the local and national government (Primary and Secondary School Education Act, 2011). However, in spite of well-defined legislation on the role of school boards in school governance, there are still no systematic results of research on their activities in the Republic of Croatia, nor about the competencies of their members. Similarly, there are no indicators of the contribution of school boards to increased school efficiency. The Republic of Croatia has a long tradition of a centralised education system in which all relevant decisions related to the functioning of schools at the national level were passed by the relevant ministerial body, while all the decisions related to schools at the local level were traditionally made by the principal.

Key Characteristics of School Boards in South-East Europe:

- School boards exist in almost all the countries in the region;
- According to legal statute, school boards are responsible for school governance and school development;
- Objectives and roles of school boards are not well-defined in practice;
- School-board members include parents, teachers and local community representatives; and
- In some countries in the region, parents are represented in school boards equally to other stakeholders.

International experiences have also pointed out the importance of the role of school boards in the system of education, in spite of differences existing in their structure and organisation in different countries. For example, in other countries of the European Union, school boards have an important role in school governance (Corner, 2015). Namely, in addition to being responsible for the implementation of educationally relevant legislation, school boards in a large number of countries can also exert influence on methods of teaching, textbook selection and sometimes even the curriculum (Corner, 2015). Furthermore, in the USA, school boards have traditionally governed the public education system (Land, 2002). Mostly comprised of five to seven members, and in some cases a larger number of volunteers, their role greatly depended on the sizes of schools and the municipalities to which the schools belonged (Hess, 2002; Land, 2002; Robinson & Bickers, 1990). The role of school boards

was subject to change over time, which also partially reflects changes in the major challenges which were to be addressed, and which recently have included securing donations, connecting with the local community, which frequently underestimates the work of public schools, and managing an increasingly diverse student body and the more complex problems students face (Carol et al., 1986; Land, 2002; Olson & Bradley, 1992). Certainly, in addition to these new challenges, school boards also need to perform their traditional duties and responsibilities successfully, and sometimes it is difficult to select which of these functions are the most important for the school. Hence, for example, some experts believe that selection and monitoring of the principal should be more significant than other tasks, that is, the task of securing successful school governance (Carol et al., 1986; Goodman, Fulbright, & Zimmerman, 1997). On the other hand, some authors point out that care for students is the crucial aspect of school-board tasks (Land, 2002). Irrespective of divergent views on the hierarchy of task importance, one needs to point out that school board members in a large number of states have a high degree of responsibility and many assigned tasks, and it is therefore important to analyse their possible influence on the overall work of schools.

In general, the importance of school boards within the educational system can also be noticed by the fact that they are considered one of the key factors which contribute to school efficiency, because they consolidate efficient management, promote democratic participation and facilitate the link between the institution and the community (OECD, 2008). It is therefore not surprising that some authors cite that school-board participation in decision-making processes in schools represents one of characteristics of a quality school (Brighouse & Woods, 2000, Jukić & Krznarić, 2010). However, it needs to be highlighted that this conclusion also depends on the efficiency and quality of the school board's work. In this context, previous research reveals that several characteristics of the board are relevant to its efficiency. Among those most frequently mentioned are the primary focus of the board on educational policies and students and their achievement, maintaining good relations with government and other relevant agencies, efficient management, and the continuous specialisation and self-evaluation of the work of school-board members (Land, 2002). Even though some authors believe that the quality of work of school-board members can be decreased by administrative overload, others say that such administration is part of school-board work and should therefore efficiently be integrated with other school-board tasks (Carol et al., 1986; Danzberger et al., 1987).

Furthermore, even though school boards were sometimes considered obstacles to educational reforms (Danzberger et al., 1987; Danzberger, 1994; Kirst, 1994) and were overvalued as stakeholders in the educational system (Corner, 2015), it is important to point out that citizens, parents and representatives of local communities frequently support the work of school boards, which include their representatives (Carol et al., 1986; Land, 2002). This does not come as a surprise if we consider that research has revealed that schools with more efficient governing bodies and school boards have more successful students with better academic performance, a lower dropout rate and who, for the most part, continue their education in higher-education institutions (Goodman et al., 1997; Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000). The work of school boards in such schools is characterised by a high degree of teamwork, good communication between the members and the principal, co-operation with all relevant stakeholders, decentralised governance and frequent meetings and continuous work (Anderson, 1992; Goodman et al., 1997; Iowa Association of School Boards, 2000). Efficient school boards are also characterised by the fact that their members take their responsibilities seriously and the fact that they represent the collective values and interests of the community they represent (Carol et al., 1986; Danzberger, 1992, 1994; Danzberger & Usdan, 1994; McGonagill, 1987). Therefore, they frequently aspire to overcome their personal interests for the purpose of achieving a consensus with other relevant stakeholders (Carol et al., 1986; McGonagill, 1987). In spite of the responsibilities and the complexity of the tasks which have been set before them, such members are also focused on continuous professional specialisation, aiming to improve their work on the boards (Carol et al., 1986). The importance of such a focus for school-board members is also reflected in the fact that in some countries school-board members are even formally encouraged to undergo continuous professional specialisation (Gemberling, Smith, & Villani, 2000). Such recommendations are not a surprise when we consider the previously described role and the potential influence of a school board on the work of its school and student academic achievement.

3 THE ROLE AND THE COMPETENCIES OF SCHOOL-BOARD MEMBERS

In the previous part of this chapter, the most common tasks of the school board and its importance in the context of the entire educational system were described, but the significance of specific members of the board was

not particularly highlighted. The existing literature on the roles, tasks, competencies and efficiency of each specific member of a school board is quite modest. Also, there is scant research data on school board members' perception of their tasks and competencies, or their successful realisation. In the Republic of Croatia, for example, where school boards consist of teachers and parents and external stakeholders selected from the local and regional governments, there is no data on the professional competencies required for effectively undertaking board tasks, and there is also no research that focuses on this subject matter. This is actually surprising, since these persons are members of the authority which manages the school and carries a great load of responsibility for its effective governance. An insight into the role, structure and the field of work of school boards provides information about its purpose and membership structure, as well as the activities which they undertake. However, as of yet there is no answer to the question how successfully a school board fulfils its main role and of what its actual contribution to the institutional development of a school consists (Kovač, Staničić, & Buchberger, 2014, p. 400). The fact that there are no success indicators or mechanisms of (self-)evaluation of school board members' performance is also the reason why we have not been provided with an answer to date.

The Main Deficiencies of School Boards in the Countries of South-East Europe:

- Vaguely defined objectives for school-board activities
- Lack of clear criteria for the selection of members
- Insufficient competencies of school-board members
- Lack of transparency in the work of school boards
- Lack of systematic monitoring of the work of school boards
- Lack of external evaluation of school-board work

Based on the results of research which dealt with the perceptions teachers had about educational policies, Kovač, Rafajac, Buchberger and Močibob (2014) stated that teachers in Croatian schools rated the degree of their participation in key decision-making processes with regard to educational policies as rather low. Moreover, it is necessary to create better conditions for the strengthening of their roles in decision-making processes, beginning

at the school level, which can be achieved through their participation in the school board. The authors concluded that teachers, when encouraged, can ensure that better decisions are made, focused on enhancement of educational and teaching achievement. Nevertheless, we can assume that teachers or associates who are appointed by teacher and worker councils possess specific knowledge in the domain of educational legislation and other documents related to the work of schools, since they acquire such knowledge either in their initial training or later during their work experience in schools. However, there is a question concerning the degree to which parents and representatives of the founders are familiar with educational legislation and other documents crucial for the successful performance of the school. There is also a question concerning their competencies for active and useful participation in discussions and decision-making processes on important issues of which the school board is in charge, such as selecting principals, adopting a series of relevant documents such as statutes, school curricula and financial work plans, to name a few. Moreover, it is important to highlight the idea of external stakeholders as members of school boards who are appointed by local and regional governments, which are the founders of primary and secondary schools, as fundamental for ensuring board-member impartiality, implying that they are not employees of the school and can therefore participate in the work of the school and decision-making processes with the aim of increasing the efficiency and quality of work. However, it has been revealed in practice that these school-board members actually ensure informal political influence in schools, a fact also pointed out by Rado (2010). The only minimum legal requirement these members need to meet is to be holders of a bachelor's degree (in any field of study), that is, any kind of undergraduate university study in which 180 ECTS (European Credit and Transfer and Accumulation System) credits have been completed. Fields of work, leadership experience, knowledge of educational practice and legislation related to the work of schools, are not prescribed by any formal act in the process of school-board member selection, nor any other necessary skills and competencies. This certainly brings into question their competencies, and subsequently the competencies of the school boards as governing bodies, which other authors have also pointed out (Danzberger, Kirst, & Usdan, 1992; Wyk, 2007; Kolb & Strauss, 1999). Experiences in the USA have revealed that school boards in most state-owned schools are composed through a process of election, in a way similar to elections for local or regional government, while in 3% of cases they are directly appointed by the city council or mayor (Kolb &

Strauss, 1999). In most cases there are no prerequisite qualifications for school-board members, except some minimum requirements in a few US states.

Concerning the process of electing parents onto school boards, in the Republic of Croatia they are appointed through Parent Advisory Councils, which consist of one parent who is a representative of each class in the school. Since the Parent Councils also give an opinion on the school curriculum, the annual work plan and other matters, it is clear that parents participate in a direct (the school board) or indirect (parent council) way in school governance. Previous research has pointed to a generally great benefit of parental inclusion in school life and work, irrespective of the type of activities, and a large number of positive effects which the partnership between parents and schools has with respect to the development and achievement of students. (Epstein, 2001; Novick, 1999, Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Research into the role of parents on school boards in the Republic of Croatia is very scarce, with the exception of that conducted by Pahić, Miljević-Riđički and Vizek Vidović (2010), which has revealed that both groups of parents, those who participate in the work of school boards, and those from the general parent population, are considered equally competent to take part in decision-making processes relating to school governance, the only difference being that those parents who truly participate in the work of school boards, unlike others, find this more useful for their own children.

The role of parents in school-management authorities is defined differently in diverse European states, but in most cases is recognised as important and useful. According to the Education, Audio-visual and Culture Executive Agency of the European Commission (2012), all European countries except Sweden, Cyprus and Turkey have implemented legislation that insures and promotes an active parental role in school governance. Furthermore, in almost all countries, official regulations and recommendations provide for parent participation at the school level, and in almost two-thirds of countries also at the class level (EACEA, 2012). As members of school governing bodies, parents in Ireland, Portugal and Croatia participate in hiring new teachers, while in Slovenia they can also intervene in their dismissal. France and Slovenia appear to be the countries where parents are generally allocated the most influential role. The official regulations in these countries tend to allocate parents a decision-making role not only in areas that are most commonly within the remit of school governing bodies, but also in the areas usually reserved for higher-level authorities

(EACEA, 2012). In some European countries, there are national programmes intended to foster parent involvement in school activities and governance through targeted training initiatives. The research conducted by Hoffman (Hofman, 1995) highlighted the usefulness of parental involvement in school governing bodies by showing that school boards involving parents are more efficient in school governance with respect to academic achievement, even after controlling for the effects of student and other school characteristics. Shatkin and Gershberg (2007) emphasise the importance of parental involvement in school decision-making processes and education of parents for that role, as well as the role of the principal in facilitating parental involvement. The role of principals seems to be very important when it comes to parental participation in decision-making processes at schools. Principals from South-East European countries think that parents play a significant role in evaluating teachers' work, while, on the other hand, the role of parents in hiring teachers is seen as not particularly or not at all relevant (Pop, Powell, Miljević, & Crighton, 2009). Principals generally considered that higher parental involvement is positively correlated with the student outcomes and a positive school climate, which is least present in Moldova and Romania, and to a greater extent in other countries of the region (Pop et al., 2009). The authors of the study conclude that there is an evident gap between principals' perception of the importance of parents' involvement in school governance on the one hand, and the efforts being made to encourage the involvement of parents on the other. Experiences in South Africa show that, despite the fact that parents account for a majority in school-management bodies, they actually have little influence on the work of the school as a result of several factors: lack of familiarity with the tasks and role of school governance, but also lack of the development of the competencies and skills required for efficient participation in school governance (Wyk, 2007).

Even though international experiences differ significantly, and it is questionable how comparable they are with, for example, Croatian experiences, Kovač, Staničić and Buchenberg (2014) point out that most of the countries report on the relatively weak and mostly advisory role of school boards which consist of principals and the representatives of teachers, parents, the wider community and local government. Considering the insufficient knowledge and skills of board members, the authors from various countries point to a similar problem in the work of school boards (Danzberger et al., 1992; Wyk, 2007), which could be addressed by further education and professional specialisation

of school-board members, aiming to increase efficiency, at both an individual level and in the work of the board in general (Danzberger, 1992; Danzberger, Kirst, & Usdan, 1993; Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000).

Guidelines for the Improvement of the Role of School Boards in the Countries of South-East Europe:

- Increasing competencies of school board members
- Increasing the knowledge and skills required for school-board member participation in decision-making processes
- Arousing interest in membership in school boards
- More clearly defining the role and the extent of the authority of the school board
- Ensuring active participation of all board members in its activities and work
- Improving models of parental participation in school boards
- Improving co-operation between board members and other school stakeholders
- Defining a system for (self-)evaluation of school boards

Even though some authors point out that there is no data about the level of efficiency of various training and specialisation programs for school-board members (Schmidt, 1992), more recent data (Adamson, 2011) reveals a certain efficiency of training for members of the school boards, where a significant connection has been established between training and members' perception of their own performance in six areas of governance and organisational competencies: contextual, educational, interpersonal, analytical, political and strategic. There is normally no data about how much education and training has actually contributed to the actual improvement of the operation and efficiency of schools.

4 CONCLUSION

Over the last thirty years, significant changes have occurred on the level of class governance, although not at the level of school governance. Contemporary theorists point out that, for school efficiency, we need to look beyond the class environment only, and consider a broader quality

framework. Even though all educational systems understand and promote the innovative and creative-humanistic paradigm in the implementation of the educational process, those same educational policies for the organisation of school governance should take into consideration the historical, cultural, social, economic and socio-political heritage of the specific country. This implies that it is acceptable to have a large number of definitions and multiple models of governance. The point is that each school system constructs a specific model of school governance based on humanistic and democratic principles. Furthermore, we should construct and continually re-evaluate the efficiency of the work of school boards, whose successful performance depends on the key competencies of its members in the field of legislation related to education, and primarily in the field of pedagogical theory and practice. However, there are almost no examples of more systematic training of school-board members in the area of school governance. As long as this remains the case, significant changes regarding governance and quality are highly unlikely.

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