

NATIONAL REPORT OF SWITZERLAND (BERN, GENEVA, TICINO, VAUD AND ZURICH)

Structure of the education system and parental participation

Within the Swiss federalist and multilingual organisation, the basic features of the education system are the sovereignty of the cantons regarding education and the decentralised organisation of education. There are 26 cantonal directors of public instruction who are nationally coordinated through the CDIP (*Conférence Suisse des Directeurs Cantonaux de l'Instruction Publique*, Swiss Conference of Cantonal Directors of Public Instruction).

An intercantonal agreement on the synchronisation of compulsory schooling (HarmoS agreement) came into force on the 1st of August 2009. It covers the structure and the objectives of compulsory schooling, which now lasts 11 years, of which two are spent at nursery school, six at primary and three at secondary. This agreement also strengthens the participation of the cantons in the monitoring of the Swiss education system which occurs every four years.

According to the federal office of statistics, a total of 737,219 students were counted for the year 2007, in primary and secondary education for the whole of Switzerland. The total number of students in the five cantons studied reached 343,780. We specify that preschool education is not included in this data, which represents a total of 137,474 students for the whole of Switzerland, of which 68,647 are in the cantons studied.

In terms of the historical evolution of parental participation, the CDIP reminds us that "the Swiss Civil Code requires parents to collaborate with the school" and that more recent texts tend to further involve parents in school life. Participation may take different forms, but "it is especially in schools with independent management that parents are included as an integral part of the school as an organisation". As for the cantonal or federal level, there is no formal structure of participation, as it occurs through parents associations only.

Switzerland is moreover, one of the few countries to vote regularly on its educational reforms, which presupposes a further type of parental participation. On the 26th of May 2006, 86% of the population approved the revision of certain articles of the Constitution in order to develop the Swiss education system, through a synchronisation of public instruction and maintaining cantonal sovereignty over the issue among other things.

In the **canton of Bern**, there has been an evolution of the autonomy granted to municipalities since 1992. Thus the 2004 school law stipulates the right for each

municipality, to provide other forms of collaboration and consultation of parents based on local needs. However, a Bernese model emerges: each class nominates a parent in an assembly of parents who themselves delegate four or five representatives to the School Board.

For the **canton of Geneva**, the 1940 law on public instruction refers to the collaboration between school and family as complementary education. Today, there is a significant legal evolution of parental participation. Since February 2009, parents have been able to put themselves forward as candidates for the School Board of their child's school and vote to elect their representatives. In March 2010, these elections extended to guidance and post-compulsory education.

The **canton of Ticino** gives parents from each school the possibility to create an assembly. In 1992, the conditions for constitution and meeting of this assembly were outlined by law, while the assembly is governed by regulations it has itself adopted, and which have been approved by the Cantonal Board for Public Instruction.

In the **canton of Vaud**, the 1984 education act granted the municipality the authority to name School Commissions. In line with a new distribution of tasks between the canton and municipalities, the Grand Council voted in 2006 for the creation of School Boards which replaced School Commissions and could be assigned different functions depending on local conditions.

Finally, in the **canton of Zurich**, according to the 1899 law, state school completes the educational work of the family; all educational actors, including parents, work together. The 2005 law specifies parental rights of participation: decisions on promotion, imposition, change or termination of special and disciplinary teaching methods. In addition, parents must be consulted when developing the curriculum.

Results

Regarding the indicators relative to international and regional instruments in the field at hand, Switzerland has ratified:

- The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
- The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
- The Convention on the Rights of the Child
- The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women
- The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms
- The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

However, it has not ratified:

- The United Nations Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers
- The Convention against Discrimination in Education
- Protocol n°1 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedom



As far as the existence of rights pertaining to parental participation is concerned, they are not mentioned in the Constitution, since public instruction is the domain of the cantons. It is in fact in cantonal laws that references to parental rights are found, notably on information, appeal and participation.

	BE	GE	TI	VD	ZH	CH
Right to information	85	85	85	60	85	80
Right to choose	60	50	60	50	60	56
Right of appeal	100	80	100	100	80	92
Right of participation	32.5	30	30	30	32.5	31
Overall indicator	69	61	69	60	64	65

Right to information

The education laws of the five cantons mention parents, their rights and their duties. There is specific reference to compulsory education and the need for regular attendance, which if not respected, will result in a fine. On the other hand, collaboration between parents and school is emphasised and sometimes even imposed, in particular where the child is experiencing academic difficulties. In addition, all the cantons studied give parents the right to be informed about the results and behaviour of their child, as well as on important events organised in relation to education or the school. As for information received through official websites, this varies depending on the canton.

Despite the apparent lack of results concerning school assessments, the authorities noted that internal assessments existed in different forms and were often the basis for curriculums. In Geneva, feedback is provided through parent representatives; in Zurich parents are directly involved in the assessment process (internal and external); in Ticino, the results of self-assessment are communicated to the partners involved. Both the authorities and teachers consulted however, stressed their desire to prevent data regarding school assessments from appearing publicly. They believe that this information would not reflect the diversity of the situation and the population and would encourage parents to avoid their catchment area in certain cases.



Right to choose

The existence of curriculums within state schools and a significant variety from private schools provides diversity of curriculums.

Parents who choose a school for their child other than that of their catchment area are predominantly responsible for fees. In fact the various laws of the cantons studied warn that a request for exemption from the zone may be refused, and that where it is accepted, a portion of the school fees may be charged to the parents.

Those who choose private education are responsible for all fees. Certain cantons, such as Zurich and Ticino, offer a contribution for school equipment and allow “private” students to enjoy the same benefits in terms of educational and vocational guidance, and the school medical service. Bern meanwhile, offers support for gifted students. Some long-established private schools of appropriate size, which increase the canton’s appeal for the establishment of international enterprises, are partially subsidised. This has little or no effect in terms of choice, as parents must still pay significant amounts.

Right of appeal

Some cantons favour discussion areas above all, meaning appeal is limited, but all offer it as a possibility. The main areas of appeal mentioned by law are assessment, disciplinary measures and admission. Nevertheless, the authorities note that all decisions made by a public service can be appealed.

Right of participation

This right obtained the lowest score in all the cantons studied, due on the one hand, to the weakness of participatory bodies with only advisory powers, and on the other hand, to the lack of such bodies at higher levels.

As for the second indicator, parental representation is generally in the minority, since it is composed equally of parental representatives, teacher representatives, municipal representatives and sometimes school staff or students. In Zurich and Bern however, parents are in the majority, as it is a Parent’s Council in which teachers, school management or a representative from the council also take part.

Different training programmes on diverse themes are in place, either free or at a cost. Discussion areas also exist, and are strongly supported by parents.

Conclusions

This research has highlighted a political choice: to maintain a strong state apparatus in terms of compulsory education.

We saw that a significant effort had been made in terms of communication of information relating to compulsory education. Nevertheless, we consider it important not only to inform parents, but also to hear their opinions on a regular basis. In the same vein, it is necessary to implement an assessment process that involves parents, which is both transparent and easily available.

Regarding choice, we see the introduction of increased school autonomy, especially in terms of setting curriculums. However, diversification of the latter has little meaning for parents who cannot choose the school that corresponds to their philosophy. We think therefore that this diversification is going in the right direction but should be accompanied by real possibility for choice.

Finally, the right of participation, strongly connected to the individual rights of parents, is today experiencing significant growth, especially in terms of the establishment of participatory bodies. In fact, Switzerland has for a long time now offered everyone the opportunity to participate in educational policy through voting and referendums. Today, in many cantons, participatory bodies exist, entitling parents, as well as other educational stakeholders, to give their opinion on certain matters. Nevertheless, this remains insufficient. In fact, if we want to develop a real culture of participation, it is first necessary to provide training on the subject for parents. We note in this regard, that in Switzerland approximately 25% of the population is of foreign origin, coming from very different backgrounds, something which does not simplify the task. Parents must be given more decision-making power by restoring their role of primary responsibility for their children's education. Finally, their participation in formal bodies should also be facilitated by including this in labour law.

