



## Country Background Report Italy

### 1. Background

School leadership is increasingly moving away from the pure work of a school principal in past decades and years, in as much as hierarchical top-down implementation of instructions by centralised authorities are being replaced by autonomously organised schools with the goal of an autonomous and formative development of each individual school. In this regard, it should be stated that the most important findings of research in the school sector show that quality in schools cannot be prescribed centrally, but has to be developed locally, in each individual classroom as a result of the collaboration between teaching personnel and students.

The school leader encounters new challenges. Creating school instead of (only) administrating requires management skills as well as system competence in highly complex situations and “change management”.

Furthermore, an ability of balance is requested to keep the balance within the pendulum movement of the system between the stimulus of autonomy and the regularly upcoming central guidelines. It has not always been like this.

From its beginnings up to the end of the last century, even up to the turn of the millennium, the Italian school system was traditionally organised centralistically in contrast to these current views and findings, especially after the reform of the school system by Mussolini's first education secretary Giovanni Gentile.

For many decades teachers could become principals after holding civil servant status for five years and having had no complaints filed in that period. The selection process also included a written essay and an oral exam in front of a commission. Having passed these exams the principals to be were entered in a ranking, according to which they could choose their place of work. School leadership by the principal was defined in articles 10 and 11 of the Royal Decree No. 965 of April 30th, 1924<sup>6</sup> as follows (excerpt translated freely):

<sup>6</sup> <http://guide.supereva.it/diritto/interventi/2001/11/75978.shtml>

*The principal monitors good didactical, education progress and the good administration of his school ... He implements and instructs the implementation of legal guidelines, rules and regulations by the superior authorities ... He corresponds with the Ministry through the head of the education authority ... keeps in contact with the families and supervises the teachers in the correct fulfilment of their duties, informed by visiting their classes.*

In the 1970s the political climate changed: Teachers were given "collegial decision power" in various areas (e. g. grading/evaluation) and basically any determining influence was taken from the position of the "principal staff" (this was the new term for principals - until then only the male grammatical form had been used) and organisational and coordinating duties were given instead. Article 3 of the Presidential Decree No. 416 of 31 May 1974<sup>7</sup> states as follows (excerpt translated freely):

"The principal staff promotes and coordinates the activities of the school (...) makes sure the decisions of the collegial bodies<sup>8</sup> are implemented ... carries out administrative tasks, except those regarding accounting.

In more detail: The principal staff represents the school externally, chairs the meetings of the teaching staff, the disciplinary council for students

[http://www.italgiure.giustizia.it/nir/lexs/1924/lexs\\_61238.html](http://www.italgiure.giustizia.it/nir/lexs/1924/lexs_61238.html)

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.edscuola.it/archivio/norme/decreti/dpr416\\_74.html](http://www.edscuola.it/archivio/norme/decreti/dpr416_74.html)

<sup>8</sup> The following three examples serve to better explain the term "collegial bodies":

- In the School Council, that is chaired by a parent governor and consists of 6 teachers, 6 parent governors, the principal and the head of the secretariat, the principal is one out of 14.

- With regard to the topic teachers' training, the principal can put this as an item on the agenda of the teachers' council but it is up to the council to determine the needs of the teaching staff, develop a training plan and determine the quality of target achievement, if such objectives are implemented.

- The teacher evaluation committee consists of three members with equal voting power: the principal and two teachers elected by the teaching staff.

and the teachers' evaluation committee, class councils as well as the group that prepares the meetings of the school council. (...) Other tasks include the formation of classes, the assignment of teachers to the classes [said teachers have chosen the school they work at themselves, the school has not chosen them] and creates the curriculum according to the criteria determined by the co-determining bodies (...) Within the framework of academic freedom the principal staff promotes and coordinates the didactic activities, projects and trials in collaboration with the teaching staff (...) Should a teacher not adhere to or violate his/her duties, the principal staff takes the adequate measures or suggests such measures be taken (...) keeps in contact with the central and local school authorities as well as official authorities, specialists in the medical and socio-psycho-pedagogical fields and makes sure that legal and administrative standards regarding students and teachers are followed."

## 2. Context

Following a national law (No. 59/1997)<sup>9</sup> for increasing the efficiency of public administration (Up until then Schools were regulated by approx. 20,000 laws, regulations and provisions ...) schools were consolidated to a minimum number of 500 students, and in a rather surprising educational-political turnaround the central government decreed them to be "autonomous" in the following areas: " in the areas of didactics, organisation, research, school development, school trials, administration and finance" (however, without any organisational freedom with regard to staffing ...).

This law, that schools are still trying to breathe life into, was taken over by the province of Bolzano-South Tyrol on June 29th, 2000 in the form of the provincial law No. 12<sup>10</sup> and further amended.

The principal of this new, highly complex organisational body, which is also a legal entity (and might combine six, seven, eight or even nine schools in different locations and of varying levels) and now lacks a hierarchical super-

structure, is meant to be supported by authorities and other official entities and was given the new title of "school leader" by the quoted law. The school leader has been given the following tasks and duties, however, without adjusting the rules and regulations regarding the co-determining bodies and without giving the school leader concrete decision possibilities or power. Excerpts from the quoted law:

### 13. (Position and competences of a school leader)

*(1) Simultaneously with the individual schools' attainment of a legal personality and autonomy the respective principals, who have completed the legally designated training course, are categorised as executives, so called school leaders. (...)*

*(2) The principal ensures a consistent management of the school and is its legal representative. (...)*

*(3) The principal takes measures to secure the quality of educational processes and to optimise the general conditions influencing learning. He / She promotes the co-operation of cultural, vocational, social and economic offerings at the school and its environment, as well as the exercise of the students' right of education, the right of academic freedom, which is also understood as the freedom of research and methodical and didactical innovation and the primary right of education of the families.*

*(4) While respecting the competences of the collegial bodies of the school, the principal has autonomous management and co-ordination competences as well as the task to deploy the staff resources of the school in an optimal way. In accordance with the school's programme, the pertinent laws and regulations as well as the principles and criteria determined in the collective treaty the principal assigns the school staff their duties.*

*(5) Based on the general criteria determined by the school council the principal determines the duty roster of the school, opening hours to the public and the allocation of the working hours for the school staff corresponding to the collective treaty and the needs of the school and local community.*

*(6) The principal organises the activities of the school following the criteria of efficient and effective education. He/she is responsible for the achieved results, which are evaluated considering the complexity and character of the tasks involved.*

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.fps.cisl.it/leggi/lex99/11\\_99.htm](http://www.fps.cisl.it/leggi/lex99/11_99.htm)

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.provinz.bz.it/schulamt/schulrecht/388.asp?redas=yes&389\\_cate\\_id=9235](http://www.provinz.bz.it/schulamt/schulrecht/388.asp?redas=yes&389_cate_id=9235)

(7) *The principal takes on administrative and accounting duties (...).*

(8) *The principal is responsible for authorising the use of school premises for extracurricular purposes (...).*

Leadership in current times means that a large part of the working time of a school executive is spent on the enormous challenge of combining personal ideas of "school" in an increasingly pluralistic world and the representation of many parties (approx. 60 to 120 teachers, 500 to 900 students and their respective parents/guardians) into a mission statement and then to develop a school programme and organisational schedule that can be implemented in a way that, at least with regard to basics, provides a common line of action so that a sense of community can develop, with the ultimate goal of achieving and securing a level of functional and educational quality, that meets greatly varying, partly predetermined standards.

In December 2008 the national evaluation institute INVALSI<sup>11</sup> published a notable suggestion for a "system for measuring student performance and for the evaluation of schools: objectives and methodological aspects"<sup>12</sup>, in which (among other reasons due to the low ranking of Italy in the Programme for International Student Assessment – PISA) a standardised quality system for the improvement and elevation of teaching performance (advertised as the "best programme presently available in international comparison" ...) was presented to the Ministry of Education. Teachers (of which more than a few, despite modern views and reformatory targets, still declare:

"Faccio come mi pare, gli studenti sono miei" ("I do as I please, the students are mine.") and school leaders would need to get the appropriate "instruments" and "adequate material and human resources" in order to achieve precisely defined

<sup>11</sup> Istituto nazionale per la valutazione del sistema educativo di istruzione e di formazione – <http://www.invalsi.it/invalsi/index.php>

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.scuolaefuturo.it/docu/Invalsi\\_proposta\\_valutazione.pdf](http://www.scuolaefuturo.it/docu/Invalsi_proposta_valutazione.pdf)

goals<sup>13</sup>. The reaching or not-reaching of said goals should be (financially) remunerated or be "punished" even with "removal from the workplace".

This suggestion has not yet been discussed with teachers' trade unions. However, in a large representative poll<sup>14</sup> on February 6th, 2009 66% (a surprising majority) of all polled teachers expressed clearly that they could imagine/would wish for a performance-based, salary-effective career model for their profession. The current substantial governing majority could easily and quickly decide on such a fundamental change in legislation.

One can observe the change from the basis (autonomous school) to the political control of the system. It is certainly more noticeable at the intersection of the one time centrally organized schools: the school leaders and the school board. Instead of controlling, one can find a service point and one speaks about advice more often. In the province of Bolzano three school boards interact with their structures (the administration, still responsible for central fields like personnel management together with public officials, experts and inspectors) in a not always clearly defined space between administration/control and service/advice.

Head of these institutions are school board leaders whose not always easy tasks consist in finding an orientation between the local (autonomous) legislation and hectic, sometimes contradictory central laws and therefore setting the autonomous schools a course.

A further challenge in the autonomous Province of Bolzano consists in taking decisions in school politics for the (three) different linguistic groups – whose needs and necessities are somewhat different. So there is a possibility that Italy and

<sup>13</sup> Approximately 97% of the Italian national school budgets are spent on – the rather low – remuneration for teachers. This means that there is practically nothing left for innovation, training, etc But politically it was long – too long – the tactic to rather give little to many, actually too many, teachers (voters ...) and in turn, partly masked as academic freedom, to ask for little performance without proper quality control.

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.anp.it/usr/news/detail.bfr?rec\\_id=898&HP=&dataDa=&dataA=&word=&regione](http://www.anp.it/usr/news/detail.bfr?rec_id=898&HP=&dataDa=&dataA=&word=&regione)

South Tyrol is moving towards times of enormous change in its school system, if a clear educational-political line is followed and maintained for a number of years and not changed, newly assessed or diverted into a new – or old – direction due to a change in political power.

As we know from years of practical experience, the big ocean-liner we call school traditionally reacts slowly, sceptically observant, reluctantly and delayed to new guidelines and requirements. What ultimately counts for school leaders is summarised in the following sentence: "I can only take responsibility to the extent that I can have a formative and decisive influence on my area of responsibility."

### 3. School Leadership concepts and practices

The fields of activity in modern school leadership are organisational, staff and educational development, where the latter undoubtedly takes a central role. The reality of South Tyrolean (and Italian) school leadership, however, looks quite different. Most of the leadership energy is still taken up by administrative tasks. This does not mean that administration is a minor matter, however, often it obstructs the view on the core business of schools: learning and teaching.

#### **The Focus on Teaching and Learning**

The ability of school leaders to influence these core matters, however, is not only constantly inhibited by excessive administrative tasks but also by the sheer size and complexity of school structures that significantly hamper targeted staff and organisational development. Many school structures (especially in the primary and secondary levels), in which a hundred or more teachers are working, are spread over a number of buildings often many kilometres apart. The merger of primary and secondary levels in order to provide for a smoother transition between levels (and also in order to save on staff) has up to now basically only happened on paper and only in a very limited way in the pedagogical and didactical areas. The reality of the two levels differs significantly and the school leader needs competence in two levels. As a result it is common in South Tyrol that the school principal works

mainly on one level and the vice principal is "left" with the other. If there are a number of locations (especially small and very small schools on primary level with about 20 to 50 students and approximately three to seven teachers), they are often lead by so-called location leads. This background makes it clear that human resources management, especially in the form of an organic concept of visits to the class room, assessment- and evaluation discussions, is very difficult and time consuming. The contact between school leaders, who in Italy, due to their higher-ranking function, are not teaching, and teachers is often, for extended periods of time, limited to written communications. This way "Managing by wandering around" becomes "managing by driving around".

Another big obstacle for school leaders to actively get involved in teaching development is, and not to a small extent, their own insecurity in the wide field of the art of didactics. Due to the fact, that school leaders are not actively teaching, many school leaders in South Tyrol/Italy have very little if any direct contact to what is happening in the class rooms. In addition, sometimes the school leaders' knowledge about teaching quality, class management and tuition evaluation is rather poor. Even though school executives are critically pointing their fingers at the burdens of bureaucracy and administration, one could often get the impression that ministerial mailings and decrees of any kind are sometimes taken as a welcome opportunity to avoid the difficult and challenging discussion and argument about tuition problems in the teachers' council. An example is the current, rather controversial discussion about scholastic "standards" that have been introduced by the provincial law Nr. 5 of July, 16th, 2008 "General educational targets and organisation of kindergartens and primary levels".<sup>15</sup> dealing with questions like: "What does tuition geared towards competences look like and what role does the school executive take." However, the fact that school executives in Italy do not teach is rather disadvantageous in this case. The frequently brought forward indication, even accusation is: "We preside over the class, not you" is a pointer to the lack of willingness by some

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.provinz.bz.it/schulamt/schulrecht/388.asp?redas=yes&389\\_cate\\_id=9235](http://www.provinz.bz.it/schulamt/schulrecht/388.asp?redas=yes&389_cate_id=9235)

teachers to accept tuition development initiatives from the school leader.

Another indicator for the reluctance of school executives to decidedly approach tuition topics is the still low number of internal evaluations, from self evaluations (legally required since the year 2000 for quality assurance) to questions about teaching organisation and teaching effectiveness. Within the internal evaluations there is a clear tendency to avoid topics relating to teaching.

The obligatory document, in which every school puts down its objectives in writing, is called the school programme (article 4 of the quoted provincial decree 12/2000):

*"Every school creates its school programme including all components of the school community. This essential document reflects the cultural identity and profile of the school. The programme includes curricular, extracurricular, educational and organisational planning, which is determined by the individual schools in the framework of their autonomous competences. The school programme corresponds (...) to the predetermined educational goals (...) and considers the needs of the cultural, social and economic environment. (...) The school programme is devised by the teaching staff according to the guidelines decreed by the school council and after hearing the suggestions of the parents meeting. The school programme is approved by the school council and is binding."*

However, the concrete realisation of the programme and the process of creating are as variable as the multifaceted topics, contents and working areas that each school faces. Many school programmes consist of a host of meticulous and comprehensive rules that are often developed by a few of the schools' staff and then agreed by the majority. They are well intentioned, but obviously ignored by numerous teachers. When it comes to questions of instructional design, the field is often left to the so-called "academic freedom". In concrete terms that means the topics are mostly not dealt with. The creation of a school programme that is organised in a way to have an actual influence on instruction and promote (active, innovative) instructional development is a rare exception.

## Restructuring and Re-culturing School Organisations

However, the reasons for this rather critical assessment of the effectiveness of school leadership and school programmes with regard to learning and teaching are not only rooted in the size of schools and the self-conception of school executives. Another big problem is also posed by the lack of a "middle management", which undoubtedly represents an indispensable resource for school development.

It has already been mentioned, that the vice principal often has to take responsibility for either the primary or the secondary level, depending on where the competence of the principal is lower, which is usually rooted in the fact that the school leader him/herself has not previously worked on both levels. Still the deputy of the principal is a privileged point of contact for the principal which represents an opportunity for an exchange of information and ideas in general as well as with regard to specific cases. It depends on the school leader's competence to delegate, how much he/she is prepared to hand over and trust. There is also organisational "models" in which the teaching staff elect a vice principal who is meant to fulfil a "monitoring" rather than a supporting and helping function. In principle it is up to the school leader to appoint the vice principal.

If a school is made up of multiple levels and has more than one location it is often the case that the school leader with the help of the secretariat manages from one location and in the other locations the so-called location leads take on acting and supporting managing functions. They inform and replace absent teachers in unexpected and urgent cases, initiate urgent measures in emergencies and decide and carry out activities that have been delegated to them by the school executive.

Another very heterogeneous potential for participative support of leadership are the so-called "coordinators" (e. g. for school programmes). Their operational areas are regulated by article 13 of the provincial collective treaty<sup>16</sup>. It states generally that coordinators are meant to support the implementation of the

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.provinz.bz.it/verhandlungsagentur/333.asp>

school programme. This rather unspecific formulation (it is just as general as the description of the document itself, whose implementation they are meant to support) leads to greatly varying interpretations of the occupational field of coordinators. In some schools they are actually fulfilling a role in school development, in others they are "used" to cover secondary tasks such as road safety training, IT work etc. It is intended that there is an official application even "candidacy" for this function, but that only happens in the minority of schools. In many cases no teacher applies, since effort and remuneration do not correspond adequately. This makes it difficult for school leaders to find someone willing to fulfil this important role. As a result it happens quite often, that schools resort to the resource "steering group". If the working areas are clearly defined and the school programmes give clear objectives to achieve, these groups are a very useful resource for school development and greatly facilitate the work of school leaders.

## 4. Recruiting and educating school leaders

### Recruiting of leaders

The recruitment of school leaders takes place in the form of official competitions. Depending on the manpower requirements the competition is set on a national level. In the autonomous province of Bolzano-South Tyrol the national competition is followed by a provincial one that follows the general rules and specifications. This process poses two potential issues. Firstly admission standards are set in a way, that normally only senior teachers can participate in the competition. As a result the average age of Italian school leaders is correspondingly high and the readiness for innovation is correspondingly fairly low.

Secondly the competition procedures are very complicated, often take years and lead to appeals and recourses and finally to a lot of insecurity amongst participants. In spring 2009, a new kind of competition was introduced in South Tyrol<sup>17</sup>. Admission requirements were changed in an

effort to also give more junior (younger) teachers a chance, to participate in the strict and selective process that is geared to exactly meet demands. The new procedure consists of two written exams and an oral exam as well as an evaluation of the so-called "titles" (years of service, work as vice principal, military service ...). The winners of the competition can then already choose their place of work and start by September 1st, 2009. While already on the job, they are receiving training for their new tasks. The requirement profile for applicants becomes clear when looking at the topics for the selection process. Candidates have to prove their knowledge in these areas in the written exams and after passing these in the oral exam.

1<sup>st</sup> written exam:

- the current status of innovation processes in the school and education systems in South Tyrol, Italy and Europe
- Educational planning in the light of political, economic, scientific, technological, cultural and social developments in South Tyrol, Italy and Europe
- Quality evaluation of educational offerings: self evaluation and external evaluation
- Special statute for the region Trentino-South Tyrol, national and provincial legislation in the fields of school and education. Public sector employment law for teaching and administrative staff of public schools.

2<sup>nd</sup> written exam:

- The second written exam consists of the concrete solution of a problem with regard to school leadership with special reference to leadership strategies and their concrete implementation in the school environment.
- The oral exam consists of an interdisciplinary colloquium about the topics of the written exams. In addition the candidate's knowledge of IT and communications technologies and conversational abilities with regard to educational topics are examined either in French, English or Spanish (as chosen by the candidate). The knowledge of the Italian language is proven by the certificate of bilingualism (...).

The competition is followed by on-the-job training. The training and internship, completed

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.provinz.bz.it/schulamt/aktuelles/319.asp?redas=yes&369\\_year=2009](http://www.provinz.bz.it/schulamt/aktuelles/319.asp?redas=yes&369_year=2009)

by the winners of the competition, take approximately four months and comprises 100 hours of training.

The aim is to strengthen the competences of the new school leaders in the following areas:

- Analysis of the school environment
- Educational planning
- Relationships between school leaders and internal and external school partners including legal, financial and information technological aspects.

During this time the new school leaders are supported by a tutor appointed by the supervisory school authority, who fulfils a supporting and consulting function during the first working year of the new school leader. This "year of training" concludes with a report to the head of the supervisory school authority.

### Attractiveness of school leadership

A school leader manages the school, does not teach (this can be an advantage as well as a disadvantage) and is largely free to organise his/her own working time. In article 16/1 of the collective treaty for school leaders<sup>18</sup> it is merely stated, that *the average working time for didactic activities comprises a minimum of 38 hours*.

Meaning: In the end of the day, or a school year, the work has to be done and the objectives agreed upon with the supervisory school authority (see below) have to be achieved to a high quality.

The statements of school leaders with regard to work effort vary drastically and range between 40 and 60 or more actual working hours per week during the school year (with didactic activities). This is without the almost never ending mental work that comes with the job.

At this stage it is important to mention that in South Tyrol/Italy the closest co-workers of the school leader are the members of administrative staff. The number of administrative employees (usually between three and six) depends on the size of the school. These secretariat employees

assume a large part of the administrative activities, e. g. budget, teacher's contracts, student transportation, cafeteria, inventory and many more. On a national level in Italy the so called "direttore amministrativo" (administration executive with academic education) assumes a very important role alongside with the pedagogical leader "dirigente" (principal). Final responsibility for all decisions and reporting before the auditors, however, stays with the school leader.

Like in most other countries, school as an organisational structure in Italy has a very flat hierarchy consisting of two groups: 1) teachers and 2) school leader. Despite many announcements and promises with regard to creating a "middle management" (which would be sorely needed due to the complexity of the local school structures), nothing has happened in a concrete way.

On the other hand school leadership of course possesses a certain "basic attractiveness" in terms of career advancement.

The financial component of school leadership can hardly be described in a few words. Representing an exception in the field of European civil service salary law, the remuneration of a school executive consists of three salary elements: 1st) the largest part is the base salary based mostly on seniority 2nd) a "complexity supplement" based on the size and characteristics of the school and 3rd) a salary based on "results", meaning this portion is paid – at the moment only in a small part – staggered according to the evaluation of the achievement of the targets agreed on with the head of the school authority. The combination of these three variables determines the total income of a school leader. Simplified this means that more senior school executives who lead large schools are paid well (approximately up to 30 - 50% more than teachers with the same degree of seniority), while younger school executives in smaller schools are getting a distinctly less favourable deal. South Tyrolean school leaders earn more than their colleagues in the rest of Italy due to their provincial collective treaty.

Other factors influencing the attractiveness of this occupational profile result from the normative part of said treaty. In this context it must be stated

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.provinz.bz.it/verhandlungsagentur/333.asp>  
<http://www.provinz.bz.it/verhandlungsagentur/service/vertraege.asp>

that overall the provisions, e. g. the current regulation about parental leave are not very favourable especially for young women. Other elements of the treaty that are less favourable in comparison with the regulations for teachers are the regulation about sick leave and the possibility of taking a sabbatical. However, the fact that working times can be managed flexibly must be emphasised as a plus.

### **National (and local) structures of pre-service, induction and in-service education of school leaders**

Except for temporary single initiatives with clearly positive effects, in principle for many years there was no national or local educational offering for school leaders. For decades there was no training at all and in the past few years "training" happened more in the form of on-the-job training in connection with the competition (see earlier). Only recently a training offering for school leaders has been created through collaboration between universities, ANP<sup>19</sup> (the most important and biggest trade union for Italian school leaders) and CRUI<sup>20</sup> („Conferenza dei Rettori delle Università italiane“= conference of university principals. This offering called MUNDIS<sup>21</sup> in short (= Master Universitario Nazionale per la Dirigenza degli Istituti Scolastici = National Master for school leadership) is meant to close this gap and serve as an advantage in competitions.

The focus is set to training offerings organised at various universities covering the topics "Management" and "Educational Leadership"<sup>22</sup>. To what extent school executives are going to take advantage of the offering cannot be estimated yet. Locally people are making due with on-the-job training offerings, which are mostly<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.anp.it/usr/index.bfr>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.cruui.it/>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.fondazionecruui.it/mundis/>  
[http://www.unicam.it/laureati/formazione/master/master\\_2008\\_2009/Mundis/bando.pdf](http://www.unicam.it/laureati/formazione/master/master_2008_2009/Mundis/bando.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.fondazionecruui.it/mundis/HomePage.aspx?ref=1616>

<sup>23</sup> Contents of the course offering for school executives in the school year 2008/09: Working with Outlook and Palm, Power Point for school executives, Coaching, English for heads, legal basis for executives, and time tables with Da Vinci.

one-or two-day-courses or the so-called principal meetings (see below).

### **Support and Coaching**

School executives in the autonomous school are largely operating independently... at least that is what is required by law. The often mentioned paradigm shift from top-down steering to "live autonomy" has only partly happened. In reality leadership of South Tyrolean principals is characterised by a very inconsistent attitude. Some are actually striving to use the legal scope of action autonomously in collaboration with their co-workers, while others are still stuck in the old "administrative mentality".

The legal background defining the sphere of action for school leaders is highly complex and marked by a plurality of national and local provisions that ultimately make every day activities unclear. In addition there is an annually increasing (political) innovation pressure in the field of school that often leads to a frenzy of new school regulations. Within these time and again chaotic -national- conditions, which occasionally seem to be almost insurmountable, even for the school authority, leadership really becomes an enormous challenge and the prevailing mood uniting all school executives in South Tyrol is dominated by a high sense of insecurity. With this in mind, a support system for school leaders gains even more importance.

In this context the school authority has a central role, since by its own definition it wants to act as a "service point". However, the dialogue between school authority and school executives tends to be difficult, since on one hand the school authority has not fully implemented the change from an "instructing, superior instance" to a consulting service for autonomous schools and on the other hand, the attitude of the school executives is, as mentioned before, quite ambivalent. While some insistently call for specific instructions from "above" like they were used to, others feel that any remark from the school authority represents a limitation of their own "autonomy". Help and support in this difficult situation is provided by institutions which facilitate communication and dialogue.

In this context, the following two should be mentioned:



- "Principal meetings": These sessions usually last three days and take place twice a year. They are organised jointly by the school authority and a group of principals.
- "District principal meetings": They take place on a monthly basis or on demand. All the principals of the district meet.

These two meetings provide room for exchange and mutual support and are of great importance for school leaders, who otherwise are mostly left "alone" in their schools. Another important factor are various work groups, mostly built in part by principals and in part by representatives of the school authority, which are doing a lot of preparatory work.

Along with the possibilities for dialogue, that fulfil a crucial function within the system, there are a few more supporting entities for school leaders. Among these are:

- The SDV/ANP/LDL<sup>24</sup> (South Tyrolean Principal's Association: This is the representative body as well as the trade union of the school leaders. Membership is free and the majority (approx. 90%) of all German, Italian and Ladin speaking school leaders in South Tyrol (and Italy) are represented here. The association follows rules of professional conduct, offers support in legal matters and is a contractual partner as well as a sought-after point of contact in matters of school and educational politics.
- The Council of School Leaders: It unites all school leaders of the German schools in South Tyrol and provides orientation through the collectively developed mission statement.
- ASSA (Association of Autonomous Schools in South Tyrol): It unites (most of) the autonomous schools in South Tyrol and represents their interest in dialogue with politics and institutions.
- Finally, for some years there is an offering in further training and coaching for South

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.anp.bz.it/>

Tyrolean school leaders, that can be used individually and in groups and represents a valuable help in difficult situations<sup>25</sup>.

## 5. Challenges, areas of innovation and underlying evidence

The legitimisation and greatest challenge for the actions of school leaders in the future are represented by their own professionalization. Through a clear vision of an autonomous school aimed at combining a national/European educational concept with the local requirements, the tools necessary for the upcoming challenges and tasks must be found.

The guiding principles for the professional identity of school leaders are/will be:

- Professionalism (continuous education and further training as well as self-reflection)
- Action instead of reaction (Show initiative, take responsibility)
- Professional ethics (clear ideas about school and its duties)
- Reporting (Willingness and co-operation for a culture of evaluation)

With this in mind school leaders will start a dialogue with stakeholders and those responsible in the political area, in order to realise their ideas about school in the future. Most colleagues agree that the following points are the cornerstones necessary for change:

- Consolidation of the school's autonomy: Only the objectives should be determined (only a few, clear standards of education) not the ways and means of how to reach them. These should be decided upon by the autonomous schools. The continuous zigzagging between "promises of autonomy" and political and institutional readjustment or steering measures must come to an end.
- "Lean system": The "jungle of regulations" (and the resulting conflicts, into which school leaders are getting more and more entangled), overly dense curricular specifications and the

<sup>25</sup> Examples, records for further training offers can be found at:  
[http://www.schule.suedtirol.it/pi/downloads/FBB\\_2009\\_2010\\_web.pdf](http://www.schule.suedtirol.it/pi/downloads/FBB_2009_2010_web.pdf)

amount of compulsory hours must be reduced.

- A school committed to reporting. The "school system" in its many facets is already being examined internally and externally. Especially school executives in South Tyrol/Italy are being regularly evaluated and reviewed. What is distinctively missing is the reporting duty of that component of the school system, which (rightly so) claims to be the main player in the field of education: the teachers.
- This leads us to the next point: The "downward" levelling (result of the agreements of politics and trade unions in the 1970s) in Italy (and partly in South Tyrol) has led to a "professional attitude" among teachers that is defined by a hard, determined defence of any (even the smallest) professional privileges. A clear consequence of this is a frequent open (or hidden) attitude, aimed at personal welfare rather than the needs and welfare of students. A self-pitying, discontent

and demanding mindset that often leaves little room for teaching professionalism (and its recognition). The system is not aimed at excellence and this has to change. Schools need an intermediary level, a middle management that is recognised (also financially) for performance and professionalism.

- Adequate (school) leadership tools: School leaders must be given a certain space, within the framework of rules, in which they can act, and take the decisions for which legally and factually in everyday school life they already bear responsibility. The collegial bodies (co-determining bodies) have to be urgently reformed and a (regulated) autonomy with regard to staff matters has to be established, so that the so-called "autonomous" school can become a factual autonomous reality.