

“We owe our kids the very best.”

On the initiative of Lower Saxony, 31 European countries are cooperating to set up better school management – but here at home there are still snags

by Daniel Alexander Schacht

Izmir. Courage was the first thing Enda McGorman needed when he became a head teacher in Dublin, Ireland, “the Celtic Tiger”, was attracting twice as many (im)migrant children as schools like McGorman’s Catholic denominational school could take. The archbishop ordered that Catholic children should simply be given priority. “(Im)migrants, Protestants, Moslems would have been given no chance at all”, says McGorman. “I didn’t want that to happen.” His struggle against denominational selection made him the object of disciplinary procedures, talkshow batters, and parliamentary debates. But, in the end, he pushed through his multicultural school. Now the happy faces of the kids, European, African and Asian, bear witness to the diversity of the younger generations in Europe.

When head teacher Hacı Öztürk saw his vocational school in Izmir/Turkey burn down to the foundations, he was consequently able to prove what good networking can do: in less than six months the school was rebuilt, resplendent in its old glory, with the support of partners in industry who were almost all graduates of the Mihapascha School – the model for all vocational schools in Turkey.

When Kore Moum became a head teacher in Trondheim/Norway, he demonstrated how reform ideas for schools can catch on internationally. He introduced vertical grouping (overlap-age classes), in which the stronger pupils progress swiftly and the challenged ones have more time to do their work – a model he got to know about at the Glocksee School in Hannover through an EU network.

There are fascinating examples of successful schools all over Europe – and many of these were on show on Izmir, where the partners of an EU project were meeting that not only includes all 27 member states, but also welcomes active representatives from Switzerland, Russia, Norway, South Africa and Turkey. The project is entitled “The Making of Leadership in Education” and is coordinated by NiLS, the Lower Saxony Institute for Teacher Education and School Development.

“An OECD report has shown us how important school heads are for the success of reforms – and the EU Commission is now finally placing much higher value on better management in education with its financial support for our project”, says NiLS Project Coordinator Rolf-Peter Berndt. “We want to collate Europe’s knowledge on this topic, because only an international comparison can clearly show us our weaknesses, but also our strengths.”

Alone the successes in Dublin, Izmir and Trondheim reveal that networking outside school, team building inside school and virtues like communicative competence, straightforwardness and openness all play a very important role. It has also become apparent in the first reports from participating countries that even charismatic school heads are not able to compensate for deficits in school organization. “It is disconcerting that, in most countries, school management means really hard work, the assumption of responsibility and a high load of administrative work – but little recognition and respect”, says Prof. Leif Moos from the Danish University of Aarhus, who is an academic consultant for the project. “Almost no-one really likes becoming a head teacher”. And, while in all countries the expectations of the politicians and of society regarding school are increasing, the systematic

further training and support of head teachers is very different: Lower Saxony restricts itself to three-month courses. In Great Britain there is a Master degree programme at “The National School for Leadership in Education” in Nottingham that builds upon the first specialist subject degree. In Ireland, too, a further course of study for head teachers has recently been introduced. “If this support had existed earlier”, says Head Teacher Enda McGorman, thinking back to his struggle with the archbishop, “I would have been spared so many sleepless nights.”

The conference location at Izmir’s Turkish-Turkish Takev School offered the participants the opportunity to study ideal conditions in schools. What school reformers often dream of elsewhere is daily practice there: in addition to Turkish, English and German are classroom languages for even the very young, school canteens in the airy buildings make all-day school possible, the rooms for the Natural Sciences, Music and Information Sciences are all cutting-edge, but there are rooms for the pupils to retreat and even a school psychologist. Eleven-year-olds go off to visit industrial firms, sixteen-year-olds are brought up to speed on 15 different vocations in periods of practical work and staying down a class is practically unknown. “We guarantee the transfer to higher education for more than 90% of our young people”, says School Head Gönül Ketenci, who speaks German, like most of her pupils, with virtually no accent. “We owe our kids the very best.”

The school owes this no less to the parents who are 90% academics and pay 7,000 euros annually in school fees to send their children to the Takev private school. This sum includes lunch, school uniform and the school buses which make the journey to school for these children of Izmir’s more educated and higher-earning circles through the packed streets of the metropolis on the Aegean coast easier.

It will be interesting to see how this EU project finds ways of achieving such successes with less money available. The qualification of school heads is without a doubt decisive, says Kore Moum from Norway, but he doesn’t believe in patent remedies. “As fascinating as the comparative study is – conditions are too different all over Europe to find instant solutions.”

Networking started in Izmir with the setting-up of the website for the 31 countries participating. It will be developed and kept up-and-running by web designers from Lower Saxony’s South African partner province, Eastern Cape, who Rolf-Peter Berndt pointedly describes as “real professionals, creative and affordable.” Above and beyond the website, the South African partners are participating in the project on the content side, says the cosmopolitan NiLS project coordinator, inasmuch as representatives from the Ministry of Education, administering 7,000 schools in the Eastern Cape Province, will be taking part. “The Eastern Cape Minister of Education, the Honourable Mahlubandile Qwase, will be joining us for our next meeting.”



Success with good ideas – and with good financing: School Head Gönül Ketenci



Often a dream in the EU, in Turkey partly reality: The Takev private school offers great opportunities to its pupils from an early age to go on to Higher Education.

FOLLOW-UP

“An Opportunity for Schools”

Lower Saxony is managing the biggest EU educational network. How important do you think the topic of “Leadership in Education” is?



Elisabeth Heister-Neumann, Minister of Education

I am very proud that Lower Saxony was able to acquire the coordination of this project. We will profit considerably ourselves, in my opinion, from this European network in the development of a qualification concept for head teachers.

Head teachers in Lower Saxony are currently prepared for their leadership tasks in three-month courses. Is that sufficient?

In the meantime two thirds of all Lower Saxony’s head teachers have taken part in the qualification programme. The feedback is positive. We will, however, carry on developing the course. We are, for example, thinking of tailor-made personnel development for our school heads. I expect to get further ideas from the international scene in the EU project.

What role will the planned Leadership Academy take in your reform plans, and who will be responsible for setting it up?

We need qualified leadership teams for the autonomous schools in Lower Saxony. We also need to encourage teachers to take up headships – to bring in new blood for senior posts. We accept this challenge and have included the establishment of a leadership academy in our coalition agreement. At present we are working on the concept for such an academy.

Interview: Daniel Alexander Schacht

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(The Hannover Daily Paper is read over the north of Germany)