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A Successful School Innovation and the Potentials Inherent in Free School Choice

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Even when it was introduced in 1985, it was clear that free school choice would not be a real option for everyone. In communities that have only one school, choice is difficult. Since schools cannot admit everyone without limit, there will inevitably be some who cannot get into the school of their choice. It also became clear soon that a significant number of parents are not even aware of the possibilities offered by this law, or are unable to exercise this right, probably because they are not familiar with the schools' environment. However, parents with a stronger capability to assert interests have recognised the potential of the law to enrol their children in their chosen institution along with other parents like them (Berényi 2016).

It was first in the early 2000s that more and more people began to realise that this was leading to the rise of segregated schools – a growing problem in much of the country – but by then it was so deeply entrenched that no government committed itself to abolishing it. Various bureaucratic measures have been tried to mitigate its effects, with only partial results (Hricsovinyi–Józsa 2018).

Following the 2010 elections, the system, which had been relatively unchanged until then, was completely overhauled. The Act one hundred and ninety (CXC) of 2011 on National Public Education started the process of centralisation, nationalising

education and abolishing municipal maintenance, but free school choice was maintained. Today, especially in the larger cities, public institutions are increasingly facing the challenge of providing secure enrolment due to financial constraints, declining numbers of children and the presence of competing church and foundation schools with substantial financial backing (Ercse 2019).

In the course of my research, I am looking for examples of implemented and feasible changes that could have helped to make school enrolment successful in a specific example, King Mathias Rex Primary School, in King Mathias Rex Street, Pécs when renewing the external image and the internal, content-related work. I used a questionnaire to find out which factors influence parents when choosing a school and which were the most important innovations for them in the case of the institution concerned. The results are instructive in a number of ways and could be useful for other public institutions in similar situation facing difficulties in enrolment.

The idea behind the survey is that it can be based on the opinions of parents who are currently involved in school choice. Therefore, I targeted my questionnaire to parents whose child was preparing for school as a pre-school group kindergartener, with the help of kindergartens.

95.7% of respondents were aware of the possibility to choose their school.

55.9% of them would not enrol their child in a district school, 25.8% are still looking for a suitable school, so they are not necessarily considering a district school either.

Only 18.3% considers this. As regards the maintainer of the school, the majority 53.38% consider a school district school, 12.7% consider a foundation-run school, 18.6% considers a university-run school, and 15.2% consider a church school.

With this question, the questionnaire did not give only one choice, that is why a higher proportion of respondents mentioned foundation-run schools as a possible alternative. If we do not look at percentages, 94 out of 138 respondents would send their child to a foundation-run school, which in percentage terms already represents 68.1%, which is over two thirds of them. This is the basis for the expectation that it is possible for state schools to break out of the seemingly insoluble and hopeless situation they find themselves in, in contrast to the more favourable situation of church- and foundation-run schools.

According to parental feedback, the most influential source of information was the personal conversation. Forms of this included direct communication with teachers, school management, open days, classroom visits, school visits. In line with these expectations, we gave parents the opportunity to ask us questions and to contact us if they were unsure. We started with the school fair, where we welcomed interested parents. We explained the characteristics of our school and introduced our future teachers. This was followed by open days and introductory sessions to assist orientation. We are constantly developing and shaping these elements, which are typical of all schools, so that parents feel a sense of immediacy, a cooperative and helpful spirit in order to ask and receive answers to their questions.

Another important strategic factor was parents' expectations of the school. It was increasingly apparent to us, and my research confirmed this, that there was a significant shift in parents' perceptions of the alleged or real values of the school. Of course, the eternal dilemma of the choice of teacher is still dominant today, but alongside it have emerged aspects that can significantly influence the positioning priorities of schools. These include its (real) child-centredness, safe environment, atmosphere, spirit, good community. The expectations of the past – maths classes,

further education indicators – have fallen far short of these needs, and old attitudes are losing their appeal. The responses show that, though not decisively, friends, acquaintances, other parents and kindergarten teachers influence parents' choices.

It is surprising – but probably they are also aware of the financial situation of the schools in the school districts – that the condition of the school building and its equipment are not a determining factor in parents' expectations. The least of parents' concerns is the proximity to their home or workplace.

The past period of King Mathias Rex Primary School, in King Mathias Rex Street, Pécs can be instructive for state-run schools in similar situations in a number of ways. One of the aims of my study is to provide some guidance for other schools and their managers following the analysis of the survey.

Of course, each municipality and each school is unique in terms of its situation, state and potentials. It is therefore the responsibility of the management to create and develop its own image and to communicate it to parents. All that can be offered are recommendations and ideas.

The situation of our school became more and more serious after the regime change, as a number of large church schools started in the vicinity, thanks to the reclaimed church properties in the historic city centre. Enrolling problems were growing and threatening its very survival. In 2019, 13 children applied for enrolment for the first grade (the limit was 25, and that number also included the pupils from the district. The first, main and most urgent task was to address the enrolment situation.

Focusing on these, it seemed appropriate to start building from the bottom up.

In defining our overall plan, we have sought to maintain and preserve the values that remain essential to us, but also to renew and enrich our institution with a new approach.

A priority was to keep the family-like atmosphere. In our school of two hundred three (203) pupils, so everyone knows everyone. Today, as the questionnaire shows, parents have increased their expectations of schools that offer a safe environment, a real child-centred approach and a real focus on their children.

We will also continue our long tradition of singing and music education, started by Zoltán Kodály. We have also strengthened our English section, which was launched later.

In 2020, we also launched major content changes. We introduced a morning discussion in the lower grades, which we called 'tune-in period' ('Hangol-óra'). From Monday to Thursday, this is the start of the day for all lower grades. We did not stick to similar programmes we already knew, but by getting to know their themes and methods, my colleagues highlighted what they thought was important and shaped it to their own personalities.

To fit this period in the morning, we had to change the length of the periods. The school board decided to use the option provided by law to make the lessons 40 minutes long.

The research showed that one of the main expectations of parents is the safety of their children. To address this need, we have launched our anti-bullying programme. Families that choose our school are already seeking us out with this in mind. At the beginning of the school year, we reinforce in our children the importance of looking out for each other, helping each other and rejecting all forms of bullying.

Our school building was built in 1722 and is a baroque monument with all its advantages and disadvantages. Education has taken place within its walls for two hundred and seventy years. We started by renovating the lower grades' classrooms, corridors and toilets.

We have created a bean bag room with soft carpeting and large mirrors where we can work in small groups. It has a wide range of uses, and our longer-term plan is to turn it into a Snoezelen room in the future.

As I promised to my colleagues, now they have a relaxation room (with a massage table, rocking chair, indoor bicycle, hammock) that offers them a place for recreation.

Our gym facilities are limited, so we have considered introducing sports that do not require high ceilings and space. We contacted the fencing division of a sports club (PEAC) and introduced fencing, and basketball for the little ones.

The enrolment statistics of recent years have proven that we are on the right track. Our institution is now seen differently in the city. Through various informal channels, the word has spread quickly among parents looking for a school for their child that 'Mátyás' has started a process that is attractive, child-friendly, high quality and offers different opportunities than other schools. Despite declining number of children and other factors that make it difficult to successfully enrol, this year our school again saw an over-enrolment of one and a half times the number of children.

To sum up what has been said

Even today, parents' freedom of choice of school raises many questions. But we must take it into account as part of education policy and as a certainty for a long time to come. We need not only take it into account, but also look at its potential. My research helps to map out how parents can be reached, how schools can appeal to them, what are the preferences that can make an institution attractive to them.

With declining child numbers and increasing supply of schools, enrolment is going to be the biggest challenge for schools in the near future. We are already seeing an increasing number of classes planned but not implemented due to staff shortages in schools. The development of school marketing is inevitable for the management of the institutions, and a thorough understanding of parents' expectations and needs is essential. In the end, however, the thesis seems to be borne out. Free choice of school is creating a competition between institutions, the aim of which is to make them more and more improved and attractive, while at the same time meeting parents' needs and not forgetting education.

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