

Action for Inclusion in Europe City Working Groups

Migrant Parental
Involvement in Education

Extending the City's
'Parents' Day' to Secondary
Schools in Antwerp

Pat Kussé
October 2016
[Updated March 2017]

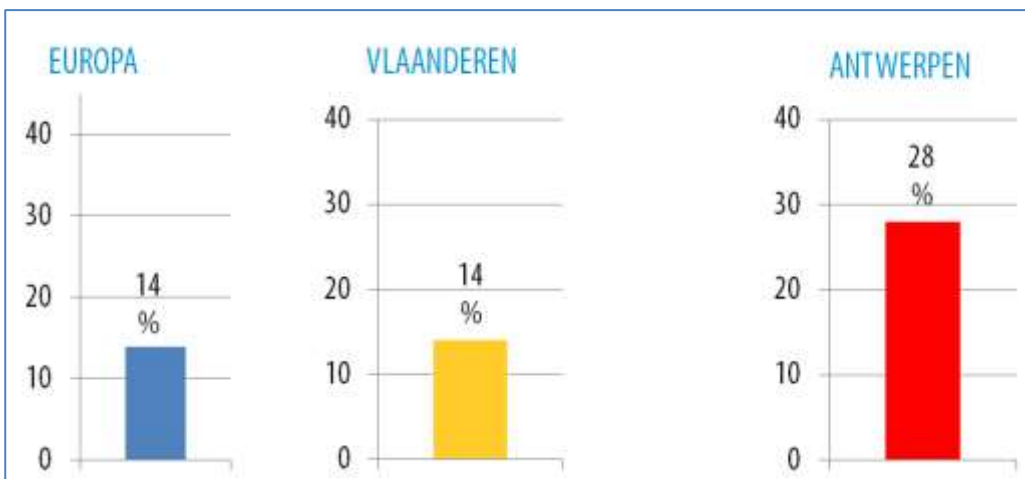
Plan Summary

Context: the city of Antwerp

Antwerp is a harbour city with 516,000 inhabitants. Over 50 % of the approximately 61,000 children in primary schools are non-native (Dutch) speakers. At home they speak languages of more than 170 different nationalities. The largest ethnic community in Antwerp is Moroccan Berber families, but the city also hosts large Turkish, Polish, African and Jewish communities. Antwerp is facing two major educational challenges:

- There is an increasing birth rate in the city, which while offering many opportunities, also has challenging consequences including a shortage of teachers and school buildings. Increasing the capacity of the educational system is therefore an important goal of the city.
- The average educational results of the city are poor when compared to the Flemish average: for instance 28 % of Antwerp's youngsters are early school leavers whereas the Flemish average is 14 % (fig. 1). Reducing drop-out and unqualified school leaving as well as improving school retention is therefore another important issue. However there have been noticeable improvements according to the most recent Antwerp data.

Figure 1: Early School Leaving in Europe, Flanders & Antwerp



The Antwerp approach to Early School Leaving (ESL) is based on a network approach. It is city wide, whereby schools, together with key partners from a range of different fields (pupil guidance centres, welfare, social work, police, justice department) offer a range of different services (including physiological support and guidance) actively and positively participate in a structured yet collaborative approach to tackling ESL. There is a clear view that a collaborative approach to ESL, focusing on prevention and early detection of problems is the most efficient and only way to tackle ESL across the city of Antwerp.

Within the City of Antwerp, the Education Policy Division has been given responsibility for coordinating the approach. The Division is responsible for designing and managing cross-association activities and projects aimed at ensuring all youngsters in Antwerp leave education with a qualification that gives them access to higher education or to the labour market.

The education policy division of the city considers parental involvement as one of the key means of reducing early school leaving. Educational development work and especially that around parental involvement has a long history in Antwerp. The first initiatives started in the early 1990s; currently, a variety of actions aimed at involving parents and establishing collaborative working arrangements between schools, education organisations or stakeholders, and parents are offered in Antwerp. This is mainly through an organisation called De schoolbrug (The School Bridge) which is financed by the city.

The forerunner of the School Bridge started in the 1990s. Its main objective is to create links between schools, parents and pupils, with a special focus on socially vulnerable families. The School Bridge offers a whole range of actions for both primary and secondary schools, and currently employs 20 educational development workers.

Within the School bridge model, a number of smaller, individual projects are proposed to schools.

Some example projects or initiatives are provided below:



- The **Kaap project** aims at improving communication between parents and schools. It provides Dutch lessons to parents from non-Flemish origin and supports parents connections with the school, e.g. by supporting them in reading/understanding communications such as letters sent home from school, and engaging them in school activities and their children’s education.
- **Making School Together (Samen School Maken)** is focused on supporting schools to establish and organise a parents meeting group. Parents come together on a regular basis (meetings are 6-weekly or monthly) and the focus of the topic is at the discretion of the parents. An example of a topic covered might include support in helping children with their homework. Volunteers offer babysitting services to enable parents to attend meetings.
- **The little pupil (De Kleine Scholier)** targets parents with children in the last year of kindergarten as well as teams in schools. The objective is to raise awareness among parents about the importance of kindergarten, and provides broader tips and tools to support their children at home. As part of this project, schools are also sensitised to the importance of transition from kindergarten to primary, and to the importance of engaging parents.
- **The Learning train (De Leertrein)** is a project which targets both parents with children in the last year of kindergarten and future teachers. The objective is to raise awareness by parents about the importance of play and of a play-based approach, and to help them to create an educationally supportive home environment. As regards students in teachers’ training courses, the objective is to help them understand and deal with children from vulnerable families, and to raise awareness about cultural diversity. Individual interns visit pupils and parents at their home, play with children and support parents in developing ways of supporting their children’s education.
- **The Choose Well (Kies Raak)** project explores with parents, kids and teachers of the 5th and 6th year of primary education the different tracks available to young people when they enter lower-secondary education. The project also provide advice and guidance on the different branches kids may wish to explore in secondary education – e.g. general secondary route and the

technical/artistic/vocational routes together with advice on the scope to move between the different routes.

Other work the city has been involved in include:

Prevent: The City of Antwerp was involved in a EU-funded project (2012-2015: Urbact – PREVENT: parents against drop out) bringing together ten European cities to find ways to prevent ESL through better parental involvement. Under the Prevent project we created:



- **Local support group:** The Antwerp stakeholders work together on 'parental involvement' through meetings. Members are: social services, school networks, parental organisations, advisor of the alderman education, the Schoolbridge, representatives from the integration service and education policy.
- **Local action plan:** 'involved parents, strong schools': The support group completed in 2015 an action plan on parental involvement as the result of both the local and international cooperation. The local support group launched a more structured organisation of the schools' open doors days' and focus groups with parents, with a specific launch of a 'Parents' day'.

It is from this context that the Action for Inclusion work action plan develops, aiming to build on the successful existing structures and ideas that were developed in the Prevent project.

Brief description of the action plan

As part of the Prevent work, the city developed an initiative of holding a Parents' Day in the city of Antwerp, as an opportunity for schools to say thank you to parents for supporting their children in their school career, using the event to create a warm and welcome atmosphere in the school. The approach was successfully applied in primary schools, but through the Action Plan for this project, our aim was **to engage more secondary schools for the second edition of Parents' Day.**

The 'Parents' Day' is a city wide, annual event which now will involve inviting every primary and secondary school in Antwerp to take part. The review by Caroline Oliver (2016:14-15) 'Migrant Parental Involvement in Schools' highlights the importance of the school as an open and welcome environment. The development of a genuine open-door policy where the head teacher and the senior staff make time to see parents face-to-face pay enormous dividends for socially excluded families. This positive effect was also stressed in the lecture of Prof W.H. Jeynes on May 25th 2016 at Antwerp University. This research evidence suggests that an event such as Parents' Day might have the potential to contribute to help forming better partnerships between parents, children and teachers.

One of the policy objectives of Antwerp city is: 'Parents are informed about, have raised awareness for and are involved in the school career of their children or young person.' This objective, the earmarked budget and the engagement of an advisor of the alderman of education in the Local Support Group means the project is politically well supported.

On October 15th 2015 we launched the first 'Parents' Day' to encourage the collaboration between teachers, parents and pupils during the schoolyear. Schools chose individual means of celebrating the contribution of parents and this was supported by simple branding of leaflets, stickers etc. with the



message, 'this school loves parents'. Besides being a joyful day, the event has a serious and important message to convey: 'Parents: the teachers and the kids need you and we appreciate what you are doing for your kids'. Parents' Day is an excellent opportunity to emphasize the importance of parental involvement and to highlight the efforts of several organisations to support schools and parents. Parents' Day is integrated in a broad range of actions and projects.

In the first edition of Parents' Day in 2015, 180 Antwerp schools participated. However, the initiative was more successful in primary schools than in secondary schools. We know that involved parents are also important for youngsters in secondary education but we saw less interest and fewer initiatives in secondary schools.

Objectives



In 2016, the aim is to achieve the same goals as in 2015, but with more focus on parental involvement in secondary schools. More specifically: we want more secondary schools to be partners in Parents' Day on October 20th 2016.

The idea behind the 2016 campaign is: 'Involved parents, everybody wins'. And by everybody, this means the pupils, the teachers, the parents and the school.

The work has been driven by a two step-approach by the continuation of the Prevent Group's activities:

- **Step 1:** Campaign to encourage schools to register for the initiative (May-June 2016). We have approached schools via several methods, including:
 - Every school has received a 'glossy' envelope with posters, flyers and information about the event and has also been mailed with information about the event;
 - We tried to involve young people in student councils in secondary schools to ask them to convince the principal/the teachers to engage in Parents' Day 2016;
 - We produced an article in the newsletter of the Education Policy Department;
 - Provided information and registration opportunities on the website www.dagvandeouder.be
- **Step 2:** Each school develops and promotes their initiative to the parents. This has been done by:
 - Each school being encouraged to develop and organize something appropriate to them, their school and their families. To support this, the city has published examples of good practices, ideas and tips on the website www.dagvandeouder.be;
 - Schools receiving printed material to promote the school action on October 20th;
 - Schools receiving a present for each of the parents.

Timeline

December 9 th 2015	Prevent group meeting	Discussion: how to involve more secondary schools?
January 14 th 2016	Prevent group meeting	
January 15 th 2016	Creative department	Brainstorm on a campaign for Parent's Day with a focus on involving secondary schools

January 29 th 2016	Focus group held with principals & teachers in secondary schools	What does a secondary school need to be partner in Parents' Day?
March 11 th 2016	Meeting with The Hague (NL) delegation	Parents' Day in The Hague
March 16 th 2016	Focus group with parents	Discussion with parents on disciplinary actions in schools (punishment, school exclusion)
March 23 th 2016	Creative department	First presentation of the promotional campaign Parents' Day
March 24 th 2016	Prevent group meeting	Presentation of the campaign
April 21 st 22 nd 2016	Presentation in Nicosia, Cyprus	Presentation of Parents' Day on a workshop on the CEMR congress 'a local and regional vision on Europe 2030'
May/June 2016	Step 1 of the campaign	Schools register for the second Parent's Day
May 19 th 2016	Prevent group meeting	Update step 1 of the campaign
End of June 2016	Creative Department	Developing promotional campaign for the second step
Sept/Oct 2016	Step 2 of the campaign	School teams will 'invent' an action that matches the ideas of Parents' Day Schools will promote the day and communicate about the initiative with their parents
October 20 th 2016	PARENTS' DAY	

Consultation

Since 2012, the Prevent group have worked together with a range of stakeholders on 'parental involvement', with these partners including:

- Educational Networks;
- The Integration Centre;
- Public Centre for Social Welfare;
- Parents Associations;
- The Schoolbridge;
- Houses of the child;
- Education Policy Department.

We also organized also a focus group with teachers and principals of secondary schools (January 29th 2016) and gained some feedback including:

- The need to involve students, since perhaps they know better what is important for their parents;
- Split www.dagvandeouder.be into a separate webpage for primary and secondary schools;
- Publish good practices of secondary schools;

- Explain better the importance of a positive relationship between teacher, school and parents (that ‘everybody wins’) and emphasise that parental involvement is not a ‘fuzzy’ subject, it is a serious and non-nonsense means of trying to reduce early school leaving.

For all of the actions, the groups are also in touch with the Education Council of the city of Antwerp.

Achievements and Experiences

Achievements

The timeline and objectives for Stage 1 have been met; all meetings held, strategy decided upon, branding created and schools engaged. The only difficulty was in Stage 1, of involving student councils, which proved to be a difficult exercise with little result. This was mainly due to the challenge of obtaining contact details of youngsters involved in the student councils of schools because of strict privacy regulations.

Impacts and measuring

Since the event has yet to take place, it is too early to talk about impacts thus far.

However, we will be able to know the numbers and types of schools who seek to be involved since the schools register digitally and in that way we will be able to say exactly which schools are in Parent’s Day 2016.

In 2015 registered schools could put in actions on a digital map. By clicking on an address the activity on the school appeared although not every school used this opportunity.

The impacts and outcomes will be measured using a similar method as in 2015, where we organized a short survey. We learned that school teams were enthusiastic and the event reached many parents. Many schools want to register again in 2016.



Challenges and Modifications

Challenges

- Until now, it has been mainly primary schools who have been convinced of their responsibility to engage parents in the school career of their child. The biggest challenge the action plan faced is to bring this message to secondary school teachers.

We aim to address them by using strong arguments about the association of ‘involved parents’ equalling ‘better school results’, using some of the evidence cited in the review study (Oliver 2016).

- The plan also faced a challenge in identifying what would be an interesting format for Parent’s Day in secondary schools.

In addressing this challenge, the team designed a new campaign for 2016 with a more attractive ‘look and feel’ for secondary schools.

- There is also the challenge that young people in secondary schools feel differently towards parental involvement than younger school children.

We aimed to let young people in secondary schools participate by encouraging teachers and principal to be part of Parent's Day 2016, although this was not as successful as hoped (see earlier) and as a result, we have adopted Plan B of planning a direct mailing to principals. We also aim to organize a focus group with youngsters who will, we hope, produce ideas about how a secondary school can organize a Parent's Day.

Further Plans

- The event is to be held on October 20th 2016, which represents the first milestone, through which the participation of secondary schools will be an important indicator for success.
- Parent's Day will be an annual citywide event on the 3rd Thursday of October each year.
- It is hoped that the Hague will organize their Parents' Day; we will keep in touch with the administration.
- Another goal is for schools outside Antwerp to spontaneously organise Parent's Day and we hope to be able to monitor this better than in 2015.

Progress Update Spring 2017

On October 20th 2016, we organised the second Parents' Day. 180 primary schools and 40 secondary schools were involved and organised initiatives for the parents and the city had a little present for every parent (postcard). The amount of secondary schools that took part doubled.

An impression of October 20th:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLDjtE9LVQCxDIjednDNRijt6WCsna2uJj>

We are brainstorming about October 19th, 2017 the third Parents' Day. The slogan is '*Groeien doe je samen*' (*Growing is our mutual concern*). We'll focus on the message: Child, parents, and teachers all have to cooperate to make a school career successful.



