

It Takes a Village

In Switzerland, even the tiniest hamlet has its own school.

By Stefan Achermann

In Aargau, a Swiss canton with about 90,000 students, we don't have any school buses. Furthermore, because Aargau has no large cities, our students are distributed among some 230 villages spread out over 550 square miles (about the area of Metropolitan Toronto). Yet somehow, despite the lack of buses, the children all get to school. How?

The answer is that each village has its own kindergarten and primary school (grades 1-5). Even villages with only 70 inhabitants have their own primary schools. In this way, the distance between home and school is kept so small that most pupils can get to school on foot or by bike.

And these are not one-room schoolhouses, either. Every grade has its own class, even if there are only nine or ten pupils. Split grades are very rare, occurring only in a few schools in the Jura hills.

Even the secondary schools (grades 6-9) are located in every other village. Secondary students travel to school by foot, bicycle, small motor-scooter, public bus or train (paid for by parents.)

Every village has its own elected school board to oversee its school(s). Typically seven in number, the trustees are average people with day jobs who earn something like \$1500 a year for their service. They hire the teachers (usually for a four-year term, renewable), validate the teachers' report cards, set the budget, and field parents' complaints.

Surprisingly, the Swiss policy of locating at least one school in every village costs less than the North American policy of huge, consolidated schools. The trick is to minimize the non-classroom expenses. In Switzerland, the goal is to spend almost all the money in the classroom.

To begin with, of course, there are no transportation costs (an expense that eats up almost five percent of the Ontario education budget). Other savings are achieved by ensuring that almost every adult in the school is a classroom teacher. The Swiss don't have principals, secretaries, librarians, enrichment or remedial teachers, lunchroom supervisors (most kids go home for lunch) or crossing guards.

Instead of principals, we have a "rektor" to do the administration and an "inspector" to provide instructional supervision. Both the rektor and the inspector (who comes from another school) continue to teach at least half-time, and both positions are term appointments. Other duties are shared among the teachers.

For example, one teacher prepares the school's timetable every year. Another is responsible for ordering textbooks and supplies, as well as paying the bills. Various teachers take charge of science materials, the library, the gym equipment, French tapes and books, the video cassettes, the musical instruments, and so on. All these appointments are made by the teachers themselves in the course of their meetings. In fact, all major decisions are made by the staff — who teaches which class in what subject, which pupil gets punished how, and so forth. Switzerland is a democracy, you see.

In most schools, the classroom teachers teach most subjects, although the top-stream secondary schools are on a rotary system with subject specialists. Enrichment and remedial teachers are unknown, as it is considered important to keep the primary students at the same level as much as possible.

When the children enter grade 6, they are separated into one of three different streams, although it is possible, and not at all uncommon, for students

to switch streams. Children with special needs (such as blindness, mental disability, etc.) attend inter-cantonal residential schools.

Swiss teachers are very well paid, even more than Canadian teachers, and they are highly respected in their communities. Of course, they work hard (an average 50 hours a week during the school year) and do a highly professional job, as proven by Swiss students' results on international comparisons. Parental satisfaction is evident in the almost total absence of private schools.

Despite the teachers' high pay and the presence of schools in every village, the Swiss educational system actually costs less than its Canadian counterpart, according to the OECD.

If the government threatened to close a small school in one of the villages, I think there would be a revolution. These schools are important to their communities, and vandalism is almost unknown.

Many of the teachers live in the village themselves, and everyone benefits from the personal relationships that develop among parents, teachers and students. Most conflicts are solved at the lowest level, just by communicating with each other. It is this kind of face-to-face accountability that is at the heart of effective teaching.

You know what Hillary Clinton says: "It takes a whole village to raise a child." Well, in Switzerland, we all pitch in to contribute to the well-being of our young people. And it works!

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