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Public Participation in School Management in Armenia: School Boards

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Executive Summary

The democratization of education is considered one of the most important aspects of educational reform. This includes the democratization of day-to-day activities in educational institutions, the decentralization of school governance, and the organization of work according to the principles of autonomy and the involvement of stakeholder groups in the problem-solving process, including problems related to education funding.

It has been a decade since School Boards (hereinafter referred as SB), or school management collegial bodies, have been introduced in the secondary education system of Armenia as part of the overall reform of the country's educational system management. The main purpose of the reform was to ensure community participation in school governance and to increase the efficient use of the state budget for education by utilizing school governance through the SBs.

However, the rather low level and poor functioning of the SBs is widely accepted by policy-makers, implementers, and experts for reasons stemming from legislative, operational, and cultural-behavioral aspects. Even in the *RA State program for educational development (2008-2015)* Government highlights the need for measures and steps to be taken to increase the effectiveness of educational management.

That is why the studies in the field are of vast importance in terms of understanding the reality, cause-effect mechanisms and improvement strategies in terms of policy development and implementation, and effective decision making. This report presents the results of two studies conducted within the framework of project supported by the CRRC Armenia with a partnership between Carnegie Corporation of New York and Eurasia Foundation Armenia within the 2007 fellowship program and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: *Regional Competence Building for Think Tanks in the South Caucasus and Central Asia* in which with the use of a qualitative approach methodology, it has been tried to analyse main aspects of public participation in secondary education and management, including parents, teachers, principals, as well as representatives of the power structures, such as ministry, regional territorial administration, LSG bodies. More specifically, the legislative base, which defines mechanisms and structures for the participation practices of the main stakeholders in school management procedures, and the issues concerning the participation of the separate stakeholders representing parents' community, in-school representatives, the Local self-Government Bodies, Regional administration agencies, and the Government (Ministry of Education and Science) has been the main focus of the research.

The report will describe the research methodology and implementation in his first chapter. Chapter 2 is to present the process of introducing the SBs in Armenian secondary schools, the

assessments about its effectiveness and SB actual functioning. Chapter 3 includes empirical data collected within the period of March 2007-August 2008 and analyses on the Public Participation in School Management in Armenia: formal mechanisms versus current practices, patterns and behaviour.

Legally, in case of the secondary education management sphere the implementation of the state educational policy is mainly fixed to the regional administrative bodies (mainly the heads), granting them with a wide range of liabilities and unbalanced power. Though it should be stated that the Ministry of Education and Science elaborates and frames the policy, and the Local self-government body supports the implementation. In practice, this is obviously led to the situation that the schools are regarded to be mostly as representatives of the regional power. On the in-school management level, though legally being presented in the SBs, parents and teachers due to their actual behavior and existing public beliefs have not performed a real representation of the whole stakeholder group, and behave finally dependent on Schools Principal. With this, they provide the principal with an unbalanced power in the school decision making process and lowering the significance of the SB as high collegial management body. The main specific character of the regional administration and school is that actually it is mostly like a pyramid, with peak as regional administrative body. Finally, as a conclusion the paper actually argues that in secondary education management public participation actually is not described by the term power balance (we should rather think of it as power distribution), as it is reallocates towards the regional administrative bodies in overall management of the sphere and towards the Principal in case of in-school decision making.

As a final note should be mentioned that both researches mentioned above are policy-oriented and surely, need recommendation part, which is not included in the report yet. The authors seek to engage in multi-dimensional discussions, and debates, do hope to get relevant feedbacks, which in turn would help in developing the final recommendation package of the research.

Chapter 1: Methodology and Implementation

Since 1996, the Government of Armenia started the educational system reforms under the guidance and by crediting of the World Bank, through realization of a credit program: “Education management and financial reforms”, one of the aims of which was the democratization of in-school management and transition to SB governance. The main purpose of the reform was to organize governance of the schools through local SBs to ensure community participation in school governance and to increase the use of budget allocations for education. Because of the shift to democratic school management, communities and parents were expected to become more involved in school management. Thus, SBs have been introduced to the secondary educational system of Armenia as a part of Secondary Education system management reform. Among actors of school management process anticipated by the reform, parents are the only ones who were not included in School Management before. Though parents have had real investments in actual life of school through formal and various other well known informal “shadow” ways, but they had no formal mechanisms and instrument to affect decision making process, and to share the responsibility either. Naturally, this is new for parents themselves to realize and implement the role and they had no experience and skills for that. That is why the research focused on the parent participation issues, such as participation patterns, motivation, hardships and obstacles, need for changes, etc to provide support in designing and implementing effective tools to support real and effective participation.

Also, the issues concerning the participation of the separate stakeholders representing the Local self-Government Bodies, Regional administration agencies, and the Government (Ministry of Education and Science) is of significant importance in terms of power balance and the effective development of the SBs and democratic governance in Armenian secondary education. The research by the implementation of qualitative methods focused on several specific issues, such as a) What opportunities are formally defined (legislation, strategic papers, etc.) for the effective participations of all stakeholders to achieve good governance of secondary education?; b)How these formal mechanisms are brought into play by the main actors: RA Government (Ministry of Education and Science, Regional administration bodies (“Marzpetaran”-s)), Local Self-Government bodies, School principles, teachers, parents, etc.?; c)What specific measures, changes could support the improvement of the SB functioning and good governance in Secondary Education in Armenia?

The whole research combined both primary and secondary data collection methods, including field -work visits and expert interviews, Desk review of legislative documents and analyses of already existing research findings on the theme.

Main primary data have been collected in the form of fieldwork visits to the rural and urban (central and suburb) communities by the researchers. Specifically, there has been chosen Yerevan, the capital city, and four regions representing southern and northern parts of the Republic. According to the qualitative approach of the study, the Typical case sampling technique has been used to decide the field work sites. Specifically, the schools and communities inside Yerevan has been chosen to represent both central and suburb areas of the city. Similarly, within the regions (so named “Marzes” in Armenia), central and peripheral cities, as well as villages located nearby the main roads and in remote places have been chosen. The primary data was collected via preliminary designed data collection tools through in-depth interviews (combined with observation technique) with SB member and non-member parents and teachers, School principles and vice presidents, as well as Representatives of Ministry of Education and Science, Regional Administration agencies, LSG agencies¹.

Additionally, expert interviews both preceding and following the fieldwork have been conducted with the representatives of agencies included in the reform preparation and implementation process. Additionally, key informants from NGO-s, and other institutions dealing with education, community mobilization, and school renovation projects such as Union of Communities in Armenia, Social Investment Fund, RA, Save the Children-Armenia, The National Association of the Parents Boards (Armenian Caritas NGO project), etc..

Along with primary data collection methods, secondary data have been included in the research. Particularly, Desk review of the legislative documents on Governmental Policy, namely laws, aderees, orders, strategic papers, etc, and Local, school-level, namely Charters, Protocol notes of Board meetings and other related school documents has been conducted prior to the field work practice.

Additionally, throughout the whole research and report development process a range of printed and on-line materials has been reviewed, which are presented in the Bibliography section of the report.

¹ The names of the residences are not mentioned in the report to provide the anonymity, which has been important to get honest and objective data from the officials and from the schools. This has been stressed even more by case of representatives of rural residences and urban communities, where there are only one or very few schools.

Chapter 2: School Boards in Armenia: Situational Analyses & Historical Background

2.1 School Boards: Historical Background

Armenia declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. In place of the centralized economy of the Soviet system, Armenia adopted a new socio-political system based on the principles of democracy and a market-regulated economy. Despite this change, however, the over-centralized governmental system of the Soviet Union, along with its uni-central culture of governance, was still in use for a long period both legislatively and through an already formed culture and tradition in Armenia. This was also true with regard to the education system, which still functioned on the state administrative level, retaining the centralized-administrative form of management, the system of vertical subordination, and the former system of financing.²

The initial phase of reforms, which included the creation of a legal foundation, began in 1996. At that time, the government of Armenia instituted the education system reforms under the guidance and funding of the World Bank, and through the Education Management and Financial Reforms program, which along with several other intentions aimed at further decentralization of, and improvement of normative-legislative basis for state secondary school system management. Simultaneously, with introducing a new funding principle, increase efficiency of budget funds utilization the reform intended to achieve the democratization of in-school management and transition to SB governance (Armenian State Program for Educational Development (2001-2005), p.9). Since 2003, the structural reforms have been further fortified and reforms in content have commenced. A relevant legal base for the introduction of reform was also created and qualification trainings were organized for school principals and SB members.

“The Armenian Education Development State Program of 2001-2005” stipulates that the public education system would be fully transitioned into a new form of financing and governance (i.e. financed from the state budget according to the number of pupils and governed through the SBs) by 2005. In the second governmental project, that is to say, “The Armenian Educational Development State Program of 2008-

² During the decades-long period of Soviet rule, Armenia’s secondary school administration was under the direct control of the Ministry of Enlightenment and its regional departments of national education, which were also responsible for school staff recruitment. The schools were financed by the state budget on the basis of the coequality principle; the school principal was considered to be the central figure related to interschool issues. The strictly centralized management of the education sector, bureaucracy, authoritarian methods of administration, and instructions from above left no room for any genuine independence of the schools.

2015” it is mentioned that along it is needed to increase the effectiveness of the education management system, also to develop educational managers' and teachers' capacity.

2.2 School Boards: Facts and Figures

According to legislation of the Republic of Armenia (hereinafter referred as RA) the main tasks of the SBs include: the election of school principals, the definition of terms and order of their remuneration, the confirmation of internal disciplinary rules, the discussion of reports on school's annual budget, the list of staff members, and financial-economic and educational-training activities. The SBs were also empowered to decide the basic use and distribution of school profits. The school principal was to be elected by, and held accountable, to the Board. The school principal would implement the activities of the school on a daily basis and carry out the decisions of the SBs.

According to an Armenian governmental official resolution, SB terms of governance were set at 3-year terms, with meetings held at least once a quarter. The state defined the high governing body of a secondary education institution as a board consisting of seven members representing the teachers' council (two members), parents' council (two members), and the Supreme body (regional administration and local self-administration bodies). Particularly, in regions outside the capital city Yerevan, two out of the 7 members of the SBs are nominated by the heads of regional administrations (*Marzpets*) and one member is nominated by the head of the local self-government bodies (in regions commonly they are villages), upon the consent of the community council, while in Yerevan, it is the mayor of Yerevan to nominate one regional administration body representative. (Ministry of Education and Science, RA, Order No. 981-N, 2006).

It is worth mentioning that in 1996, the government of Armenia adopted a resolution regarding the decentralization of public schools thus changing the situation, when schools were under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and Science or the *Marzes* (regions) or the Municipality of Yerevan. On June 1, 1999, an experimental project was initiated, which became nation-wide in 2005, covering the 1,427 state secondary schools (561 in urban areas and 865 in rural areas).

2.3 School Boards: Assessment of Operation

Experts and representatives in the sphere of education consider the institution of the collegiate method of school management, as well as a gradual rise in the effectiveness of boards' activities as major achievements within the context of assessing the reforms in Armenia. Qualification trainings were

organized for school principals and SB members in order to increase the effectiveness of reform.³ It is believed, that “the principals who participated in the trainings undertook a new type of governance and procedure at their schools.” From a financial standpoint, “the application of a new order of financing according to the number of pupils gives an opportunity not only to make essential savings and use means more efficiently, but also to ensure the control of spending by the community and parents” (Harutyunyan, 2005: pp. 10-31).

In contrast to those achievements, it has also been argued, that the institution of SBs has not yet fully taken root in Armenia, with board members being not active enough and failing to participate adequately in the resolution of the main problems related to school activities. According to some research findings, one of the reasons for this shortcoming is the fact that not all stakeholder groups involved in public education (especially community members) have taken part in the preparatory phases of the reform. As quite typically, it was mentioned in a professional publication “*without conducting explanatory activities among the community members the state leaves the school face to face with parents*” (Education Weekly, March 27, 1999). Particularly, the RA State Program for Educational development (2008-2015) reports the following:” though the formation of SB-s supported the democratization of Education management in Armenia, the SB-s in some cases have nontransparent way of functioning”.

After establishing the boards, the government did not follow through with any measures to assist their activities and reinforce the reforms, leaving much of the work to be carried out by school principals. Activities to raise public awareness were not sufficient either, further adding to the problem. Although several projects have been implemented by some international organizations – directed both at specifically empowering the secondary SBs and at establishing democratic school culture in general - the public education reforms, at least on the level of education management, are still considered inefficient.⁴ More specifically, in the RA State Program for Educational Development (2008-2015) is stated that the process of involving the public into the education management is quite slow. Even state officials commenting on the topic of school management reform have stated that the transition to a new system of governance of schools was more of a pro forma exercise. More specifically, it was noted that “*the boards were active especially during the election of school principals, while during the rest of the time they were either inactive or considered to be the menial of the principal*” (Aravot Daily, 16 February 2007). This is

³ Only the SB members of the first term had the chance to participate in the Qualification trainings organized and held in the scope of the state program. However, the new members of the other two terms of SB-s have not been trained.

⁴ For example, The National Association of the Parents Boards was established within the framework of the Armenian Caritas charity organization’s project entitled “Assistance to the development of the education system by the involvement and participation of the community: empowerment of Parents Boards of schools in Yerevan as well as Shirak and Gegharkunik Marzes.”

obvious even in such a publication that is the “Guidebook for a School Board Member”, Yerevan 2007 funded by the Oxfam GB –Armenia and Transparency International Regional Development Center-Armenia, where the main focus was on the issues of the Principal election procedure and the SB liabilities. The Armenian Minister of Education and Sciences himself mentioned, that “*the boards fail to discharge their main duties, i.e. to take on the responsibility for the future of their schools.*” (Hayastani Hanrapetutyun Daily, February 16, 2007). Furthermore, issues of SB inefficiency and the low level of public awareness regarding and interest in their activities have been explored in several other studies as well.⁵ In public perceptions also the SB function is assessed low and insufficient. This is how some members from a regional city school described the situation about the SB’s functioning: “*By the law the SB holds quite many authorities, but in reality everything is decided by the relationships of the school principal with the Marzpetaran {regional administrative body}, in reality the Board is zero*”.

Chapter 3: Power Balance and Public Participation in School Management: Formal mechanisms versus current Practices, Patterns and Behaviour

3.1 Secondary Education Management

Management of the secondary education system in Armenia is implemented on five levels; the national Armenian Government, the Ministry of Education and Science, Regional administration bodies (“Marzpetaran”s and Municipality in Yerevan), Local Self-Government bodies (Communities and municipalities in other cities rather than Yerevan), and the educational agencies. Here is provided an overview of the Armenian system of territorial administration which is important for deep understanding of school management issues. Republic of Armenia is divided into 12 regions (“Marzer”), one of them is the capital city Yerevan, which is governed by the Municipality (and Mayor) –the regional administration body. The other regions are run by a Governor (“Marzpet”) appointed by the central government. The Constitution stipulates that it is the responsibility of the Governors to “implement the government's territorial policy [and] coordinate activities of territorial services of the national executive

⁵ This was clearly shown in the articles of the publication “Secondary Education in Armenia: Problems and Perspectives” issued by the Institute of Civil Society, Yerevan 2003 and in the results of the research in Shirak region secondary schools implemented by the Center for Regional Development/Transparency International Armenia (funded by Oxfam Great Britain) are included in two reports . This was shown also in a series of public debates conducted in several regions of Armenia on the issues of School Management System functioning in the framework of PRSP Revision Participatory Process (October – November, 2006). The issue has also been raised in the following sources: Research conducted by the “Arena of Education” NGO in 2007 on the issue of efficiency of the School Boards in Shirak Marz, “Research Program on Problems of the Health of Mother and Child, Education and Special Education” carried out in 2006 by UNICEF, and the “The Family Institute” research implemented in 2007 by the Armenian Ministry of Labor and Social Issues and sponsored by UNFP. Similarly, low public awareness on SB-s has also been reported in the research report made by “Union of Goris Teachers” NGO with the funding of OSI Armenia in 2005.

bodies. Provincial administrations, however, do possess the authority to supervise and intervene as deemed necessary in the day-to-day life of lower government structures, the Local self-government bodies – the Communities (“Hamaynkner”), that are located in their provinces. Under the Armenian Constitution, all cities, villages, and the 12 Districts of Yerevan have the status of a Community and are governed by a locally elected Community Chief and a legislative body called the Council of Elders (“Avakani”). In cities (rather than Yerevan), Community Chiefs hold the title of Mayor.

The frame for functioning of the above-mentioned units is provided by the corresponding legislation developed and passed to serve also for the reformation of the management in secondary education. Thus, according to current legislation, RA Government ensures state educational policy implementation. The state authorized body in education, The Ministry of Education and Sciences elaborating and supervising the State program for education, the implementation and development of the state educational credentials, participates in the management process mainly by elaborating sample charters of public educational institutions.

The legislation defines also the subordination and interaction patterns between secondary schools, Ministry of Education and Sciences, and regional administrative bodies. Particularly, it was defined that the head of the regional administrative body (“Marzpet”); a) should provide the implementation of state educational policy in the territory of the region (“Marz”), b) control over the performance of the RA legislation on education by schools, c) ensures the realization of learning and educational programs in accordance with the state educational criteria. Also, the Marzpet should ensure the construction, exploitation and maintenance of the school buildings.

By the RA law on local self-government adopted in 1996, the head of community on obligatory power supports the implementation of the state educational policy within the territory of the community.

Thus, as referring to the secondary education management sphere, it should be stated that the Ministry of Education and Science elaborates, and the Local self-government body supports the implementation of the state educational policy being implemented mainly by the regional state administrative bodies. That is to say, the key actors and so called “independent variables” are regional administrative bodies-“Marzpetarans” in the regions and Municipality in Yerevan.

3.2 School Board Functioning and Stakeholders' Representation

3.2.1 Regional Administrative Body

The head of the regional administrative body (“Marzpet”) appoints two out of the seven members in the SB. The thing is that the legislation has not provided any criteria or limitations for the candidates, and the Marzpets are mainly free to decide on the certain members usually loyal to him/her and consequently

each region has its individual profile in terms of these representatives. However, it is a common practice to appoint as SB members among own staff, mainly the managerial staff- members. Additionally they may be entrepreneurs or construction business holders. In rural areas, it has considered as convenient to appoint such members who are directly from the certain village or live nearby to provide their participation and inclusion. However, in some villages (mainly in small and/or remote) sometimes it has been reported to be hard to find an adequate candidate for the SB membership⁶.

In the city of Yerevan, most schools are subordinate to the Municipality⁷, which appoints one member in the SB instead of the two appointed in the regions by the head of the regional administrative body, the Marzpet. As representatives of the Municipality civil servants of nearly all ranks and spheres of the Municipality, as well as staff members of the institutions attached to the Municipality.

3.2.2 Local Self-government Body

To provide the local community participation in the school management process, it was defined that one member in the regions, and two members in Yerevan is appointed by the head of the Community by the approval of the Council of Elders (“Avakani”). Due to the current legislation, in those cases when the Chief of Community fails to appoint the member within seven days, the Marzpet (the Mayor in case of Yerevan schools) is to make the appointment. This also seems to be an additional potential power given to the regional administrative bodies taking into consideration the fact, that actually, the Community chiefs mostly behave loyal to the local regional administrative body, and when needed are ready to concede this right too. As to the representative appointment criteria anticipated by the legislation, the situation is the same as in the regions.

Thus, a situation has developed where the schools in the communities operate as representatives of regional power under the jurisdiction of the regional administration body-the “Marzpetaran”. The schools despite the association of the principles of sole governing and autonomy ensured by the legislative documents, de facto find themselves as highly dependent on the Head of the regional administrative body (Marzpet in regions) and Mayor in Yerevan. The latter in turn are the holders of strong lever as well as non-formal power (influence). On the other hand, our fieldwork revealed that

SB members presenting the regional administration are more passive in comparison with the teachers and parents⁸. This seems to be contradictory if taking into consideration that here also the regional body

⁶ Note: The same is true in case of principals and teachers of adequate qualifications. In general, a huge set of problems regarding the Human resource have been revealed for remote village schools with less than 50 pupils.

⁷ Note: In Yerevan 205 schools out of the total 233 are subordinate to the Municipality, the rest, mainly experimental and the schools for children special needs - to the Ministry of Education and Sciences. In these schools the Minsiter of Education and Sciences appoints three members.

⁸ the members themselves tried to justify the practice in this way: “...I am too busy for that, ...they do not invite us to the SB meetings...they do not need us as they already secure the quorum without us...”. Moreover, The principal of schools

should have the key role as a representative of the powerful unit, Marzpetaran. The thing is that de facto in Armenia the SBs have not the functions attached to them by legislation. And in case of in-school management the real power is still in the hands of the Principal (even the SB functioning itself is seen as one more responsibility of him/her by the all stakeholders of the secondary education), who in his/her turn are dependant from the Marzpet in regions and Mayor in Yerevan.

Due to the legislation, the every-day works of the school is governed by the Principal, who is along with other responsibilities and liabilities admits and releases the staff of the school including teachers, composes the job list, expenditure estimations and by the consent of the SB submits for the approval of the Marzpet in regions and Mayor in Yerevan. The final list of the SB also is to be approved by them. These facts also come to support the idea about the total independence and unbalanced power of the regional governors.

3.2.3 Teachers

The legislation anticipates two members to be elected by the teachers' council of the school via confidential voting. Whereas, the field material has shown that the teachers mainly elect those candidates preferred by the principal thus providing on the whole loyal SB members. This becomes quite obvious in the following statement of a LSG official: *“Let's imagine I am a principal and have a preferable candidate to be chosen as SB member from the teacher Council. If someone from the teachers declares something against it, in that case I will wait till the beginning of the next school year and will tell her there is not enough job for her”*. Above all, this kind of power distribution is seen as an administrative nonsense, when the subordinate official is to conduct supervising functions over the head. A project manager working on school renovation projects in Armenia mentioned that it had been quite difficult to clarify issues with school staff rather than the principal. They seemed to be afraid of “jumping over the principal's head (doing something independently). This is quite understandable if taking into consideration that teachers are mainly are above middle-age and afraid to lose the job”.

3.2.4 Parents

The parents' council elects two members by confidential voting. The parent-members can be included in the SB as long as they have a teaching student in the given school. Since 2006 along with other members parents also should hold at least Vocational Education diploma to be allowed being elected in SB. The current legislation does not include any norm forbidding the teacher of a given school to be elected also as a SB parent-member. In many schools, we discovered that it has brought to the common situation that in most cases the parent-members are also teachers in the same school, and as a result they have a SB with over-representation of in-school member. Another phenomenon revealed by the fieldwork is that

sometimes are in difficulty to remember the members of the regional administration because of their insufficient participation, especially those members who live outside the village not nearby.

commonly, parents involved in the SB-s are in good relations with the principal, or teachers, or finally become loyal to them. One of the factors reasoning this can be insufficient and mostly ceremonial elections, and as a result, one can very often recognize parent members as being “chosen” by the principals rather than “elected” by parental community of the given school. (*“While choosing the member-parent we always try to find clever, competent person who is somehow aware of financial issues”*-regional educational official, July, 2008). This is also true for the most part for Yerevan schools.

Additionally, to be active and act participatory in regard with the school issues is not a typical and common for a parent in an Armenian public school. As well as the parents commonly seek solutions for problems, individually. From the other hand, the school representatives also do not feel interested in the participation of parents in school management. An LSG –official once told:” the principal prefers to be a monarch in the school, and wants to have the power to make the white black”.

All in all, though legally being presented in the SBs parents and teachers due to their actual behavior and existing public beliefs have not performed a real representation of the whole stakeholder group, and behave finally dependent on Principal. With this, they provide the principal with an unbalanced power in the school decision making process and lowering the significance of the SB as high collegial management body.

3.3 School Subordination: Local Self-government or Regional Government?

3.3.1 The Regional Administrative Body and the School

The main specific character of the regional administration and school is that actually it is mostly like a pyramid, with peak as regional administrative body which in Armenia actually is just represent central administration. The mechanism of this is like the following: the higher authorized body of state governing seeks to have a principal expedient for him and correspondingly “supports” his/her election (in most cases, finally, that candidate is elected). The principal in his/her turn as an adequate reply (gratefulness) to this undertakes to assist or at least not hinder the realization of decisions and desires of the regional administration. In this way, the principal obtains the right and possibility of being proportionally independent in issues inside the school. Principal considers being the responsible person of school’s activity and the bearer of sole authority, according to the viewpoints of the parents and school staff, educational policy makers and state officials of the sphere. Principals of the school outside Yerevan once typically mentioned:” *If the director works bad and is not assisted by the authorities, he could not work under complaints, and if he is assisted by the authorities, even if the parents of the whole school and populated area are against him, he would continue working. ... The boss and owner of the school is the director, since the responsible person it’s me*”. The following fragment about how a parent in a rural school described the situation about the principal “dismissal” strictly shows how parents (or community

members) see the power distribution regarding school management:”, “...*maybe they wanted dismissal of the school principle from somewhere above...maybe he has done something wrong or against...*”. Here one can not notice even a single hint on the fact that the principle cannot be dismissed by someone else from above, and it is the liability of the SB , that is to say with the participation of parents and other stakeholder groups.

3.3.2 The Local Self-government Body and the School

The fieldwork of the research revealed several additional issues connected with the public participation patterns in the school everyday life, which will help to understand the range of the secondary education stakeholders’ interconnections and non-formal relationships and mechanisms. The most interesting is the Local self-government body (The Community or the Chief) and its connections with the School (or the Principal) because legally they do not have to be involved in the school life and management (if not taking into consideration the fact of having their representative in the SBs). Due to the current legislation, the Community takes part in the secondary education life only in terms of voluntary liabilities, which becomes possible only in case of additional financial flows. Generally, in the budget structure a separate line for secondary educational costs is not anticipated (unlike pre-school institutions, which are under direct supervision of the LSG in Armenia), however the activities regarding the schools are financed mainly via the line of “unexpected costs” (it sometimes possible to use the means of the “Community Foundations”). The approval for these costs according to the legislation, is finally made by the Council of Elders in the LSG. There are so called “traditional events” regarding school life, such as September 1 (“Last Bell’ event of the final year pupils), for which the head writes “Appeal” for the first-year students, as well as prepares presents for them. The value of the present is different in the LSG-s particularly depending on the economic characteristics (communal budget), and may include school-bags with the necessary stationary, school-clothing per pupil, or some technical vehicle such as DVD player, TV set and so on.

Particularly, in remote rural residences, where the Community has insufficient budget incomes the possibilities to support school is limited objectively even if they are somehow motivated enough. However even here it is a quite common practice for the LSG body to prepare gift-parcels for the first year pupils, and gift-money for final year pupils. In most places under research this practice has been head – school motivated by the regional administration official.

Another participation of the LSG-s in the school life is seen various size of financial, material support, assistance in renovation or provision of various vehicles or furniture necessary for the school. Advocacy activities for the schools in the community also are part of LSG participation (although not often), namely promoting the issues of a certain school, e.g. renovation, to be included in various projects

either governmental, or business-run. For example, in one of the Yerevan communities the LSG bodies along with the parental community help the school principals to get prepared for winter-season classes. Another cooperation practice, which is common for “active” and “progressive” regarded principals is the one when the LSG head is asked to assist in accomplishing a school project by the principal providing financial investment from the community budget, as in case of RA Social Investment Fund or Save the Children projects.

From the point of view of community part, it is not a big issue to control Principals activities in the scope of the SB functioning, as the principal is generally regarded as a person who will not do that much wrong because that is his image that will be spoilt in such cases. Correspondingly, it is thought that there are not any contradictions between schools and LSG, as the school only gains from the LSG help.

Very often high officials, for instance, head of departments are appointed by the head of the LSG body to be members in the SB-s, who due to their pressure of work are not always able to participate in the meetings. Moreover, sometimes they do not see any necessity *“to go deeper {meaning the participation}, as they are good in their work”*. The representatives of the LSG bodies often noted that they do not feel their participation demanded by the schools claiming the following: *“Even without this participation the SB has the necessary quorum, and they do not want us to be aware from their internal issues, for example the budget”*.

Another typical character of the perceptions about the LSG member participation in the SB-s as well as about their de facto activities, that the participation is described and valued more in terms of financial or some other kind of assistance rather than in terms of included participation and power sharing. This is how the power distribution in the school management was described by representative of LSG body from a remote rural: *“You know, the principal is the boss in his school, and the Gyughapet {the head of the LSG body} is the boss in his village, they are in good relationship with each other, also they are relatives”*.

The most diverse is the connection of Local self-government body (The Community or the Chief) participation and the School (or the Principal). Though legally they do not have to be involved in the school life actually they participate via various interesting patterns such as participation in the important school events and delivery of various presents to the schools and pupils, various size of financial, material support, assistance in renovation or provision of various vehicles or furniture necessary for the school. Though legally, the LSG body participates in the school management via its representative(s) in the SBs, LSG head-school principal most relationships can be described as non-formal, and very often they bypass the mechanism of SB to take part in the school management

3.3.3 The Armenian Case of Choice for School Subordination

The participatory democratic governance, which is one of the ideas of the Armenian secondary educational reforms, means participation of interested parties in decision adoptions and management processes. Rendering educational services to the population of the given area the school should be also in the center of that community, involved in the logical field of community activities. Taking into consideration this notice, according to the RA Government decision, in 2002 the RA schools of general education from community subordination were again passed to regions (“Marzes”) and Ministry of Education and Science subordination. In Armenia, the local self-governing system was put into operation, according to the RA Constitution adopted in 1995. Still non-sufficiently consistence of local self-governing bodies revealed a number of difficulties in management process of schools under the subordination of community. With transactional economy in great parts of country’s populated areas the schools of general education considered to be sole or unique work places implying stable wages. Conditioned by it, it was signified who was assumed the right to appoint and dismiss personnel in that institution, which caused conflicts between the head of local self-governing body and school principal in the populated areas. According to the viewpoints of experts the heads of communities tried to appoint a principal considering “their” representative, delayed the transfer of budgetary financing to school, and etc. At the same time, there are more concealed viewpoints, according to which the pass of schools to community subordination was changed, since the regional state administrations (“Marzpetaran”), which in realty possess levers of more influences, did not want to transfer their powerful supervision functions towards the secondary education. The community, as a main consumer of secondary education services in certain area, was given an opportunity to participate in managing of school having one representative in staff of School Boards. In reality, the election of community representatives is directly conditioned by the nature of relations between the head of community and school principal. In the communities, where the relations between the head of community and school principal are in the same ideological secondary field, the head of community while appointing members in the school managing board often agrees it with the school principal proceeding from either the criterion of members’ trustworthiness or their useful participation in school’s management.

3.4 Parents and School Boards: Participation Issues

To discuss the issues of parental community participation in school management and the SB functioning one background observation seems to be important related to the public perception (consciousness) as social reforms presuppose certain changes in public perception. One of the main problems with education reforms in Armenia is that public perceptions are still based on the values and

ideals of the former socio-political system (transition periods have always been characterized by certain levels of inconsistency between the new realities and people's way of thinking)⁹.

It is very important how the school beneficiary sees the role/function and mission of the board, which according to our research is that the wider parental community of schools is generally unaware about the existence of such a mechanism, or board. This situation seems to be quite reasoned if taking into consideration the fact that in the reform introduction strategy itself had not included serious activities related to the parental community awareness raising and capacity building for the SB –s formation, role, and functioning. The trainings organized by the state agencies included in the project had been organized only by the SB members and the letter dissemination had been left to the members and the school principal¹⁰. Only limited number of so-called “active” parents is included in the SB formation, functioning, and these parents very often turn out to be loyal to the principal, or the school administration. In their turn the principals mainly see the SB as the link supporting the school (or principal) materially, technically or in other ways, from which “*something must be picked*”. “... *what else they can do, they will not add the number of pupils to increase the school budget, won't they?*” [principals] (FM). Hereon, its “mechanism of being the tool of management” is undervalued, considering that “*in case of having governance powers, it also should have obligations to solve the problems created in school activity*”, which in reality are fallen into the sphere of principal's activity. A principal very specifically mentioned that “*if you {SB members} manage only the finance, then dare and come and arrange the other issues*” (FM).

The parental community, as the other main party interested in school governance, does not represent a separate group in the SB; rather, it is inter-mingled with teacher staff or derives from it. This becomes more evident from the process of the selection of SB member parents. When those selections are not “controlled by an employee of the ministry,” they assume a ceremonial nature. Here the nomination of *the candidates to the SB are coming from teachers or the principle and their point of view is usually more determinant*. The traditional authority of teacher and school employee is still expressly preserved (especially in rural localities) and in accordance with this, a need to involve other people like parents in the governance processes of their work is not signified by them. This is very clearly noted in expressions such as the following: “*The village is rich with tradition, and people think, if he is a principal, a teacher, he/she is right*” (FM).

⁹ This issue is discussed in the outcome article titled “School Management Reforms in Armenia: New Reality, Former Beliefs” in the framework of the CRRC publication fellowship 2007. The article has been submitted to Central European University Political Science Journal, Vol. 4, no.1, and the review process is ongoing.

¹⁰ Qualification trainings were conducted in one stage, which gave an opportunity of participation only for the SB members of the first term. Over time, changes took place in the composition of SBs as a result of which some of the members of the present SBs have not been trained.

With the introduction of principles of democratic governance in the schooling system, parents were for the first time formally considered independent and responsive actors. The parents' perceptions and participation in school life and management are relevant in terms of explaining the process of the formation of a public consciousness regarding the issue. Although this is the case, parents did not take up any responsibility with regard to schools (though, as it was mentioned above, recent years were different in this regard). Besides, parents, as they often have reported, avoided "interfering in the schools internal affairs" (this mentality still prevails) and formulated demands and requirements stemming from the fear that as a result, their children would be ill-treated by the principal and teachers, especially in urban areas. Thus, we find that parents were not willing nor did they even try, to evaluate or control the services they received from schools. This might be one of the reasons that the concept of parents' representation in the SBs, that is to say in school management, has been distorted among the public as a status belonging to the authorities or a means of control. This was illustratively mentioned in an interview with a deputy-principal, and board chairman of a regional school: "*the parent feels himself/herself appreciated to work with a state government body representative as a board member*" (FM).

Another hindering factor for parents' adequate participation in the given mechanism of the SB is the acknowledgment that "*the school must give everything*". Especially, in rural and urban-peripheral areas parents define their demand from the school by a formula: "I send my child to school, please, be so kind so as to do everything." Neither the parents nor the principal and teachers recognize the necessity of parents' involvement in the school ("*who is the parent to come to my class?*"). The issue exists also in the attitudes of education sphere officials ("*why have parents come? Don't you have a principal to deal with the issue, I have nothing to speak about with parents!*") (an official at the municipality) (FM).

Despite this reality, the principals admit that under the conditions of self-financing and self-management, the schools need the parents' input. Parents are mostly engaged in technical and other kind of tasks, as well as in the preparation of events and celebrations organized at the schools. However, parents are still considered the group that has the least to do with school management, and their representation is not appreciated, and is mainly seen in terms of "*a translator or an ambassador*" of decisions through which the school administration attempts to transmit information to the other parents more easily and in ways which legitimize their decisions.

We argue that the logic and intensity of the public demand for secondary education is not yet compatible with the decentralized and democratically governed education proposed by the reforms. The fieldwork of the research showed that parents are mainly (more) concerned with the "easy" process of education for their children, or the good-looking environment of the classrooms rather than the quality of the education. While, those parents who appreciate the quality, they have found the solution in so-called

“repetitors” (that is to say, they hire teachers to fill in the gaps of the school education). This is true also in terms of views about need and possibilities for participation in decision making right as was mentioned in the Human Development National Report 2006 for Armenia, “*Armenian schools as well as the Armenian family unit are based mainly on authoritative and traditional principles, and the educational system functions with the logic of a closed society. Correspondingly, when the public context is ignored, the education system loses its connection with the reality of the situation, transforming it into just ceremonial rites.*” (Human Development National Report 2006, pp. 28-29)

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ABBREVIATIONS

FM	Field work materials, collected in urban and rural areas of Armenia in 2007-2008 by Satenik Mkrtchyan and Ruzanna Tsaturyan. Materials are kept in personal archives of the researchers.
LSG	Local self-government
RA	Republic of Armenia
SB	School Boards