

## EPALE's call for content: Informal and non-formal learning

### Case Study: Volunteer and Parent Mentoring in Schools: Mind the Gap between Learning and Getting Active

#### Background Information

Children's educational and vocational success in Germany depends to a broad extent on socio-economic background and support of their families (PISA; Vodafone 2014). Since the so-called Pisa shock, Germany's system of education has been continuously improving its performance. More children attend kindergartens and schools with fulltime sessions (Ganztagsschulen), the number of students holding the *Abitur* (the highest school-leaving certificate qualifying for university studies) increases. However, the correlation between the social origin and educational choices within the school system remains strong, both in Hamburg (Hamburger Bildungsbericht 2014) and in Germany (Bildungsbericht Bildung in Deutschland 2014). The stand of school-based parent involvement and (adult) volunteering is insufficient in many ways. Schools undertake different measures in order to improve these practices. One of the examples is the Hamburg school development program *23+ Starke Schulen* (*23+ Strong Schools*) launched in 2013 by the provincial School Authority. The *Schulmentoren* project is one of the pillars of this program.

#### Objectives and Target Groups

While almost all parents are interested in their children's achievements, their knowledge of the school system and on how to help their children learn differs distinctively. To increase this knowledge, the *Schulmentoren* project provides training units for **parent mentors** and encourages them to address and support other parents. In our project schools, we also qualify **student mentors** and teach them how to motivate and empower their peers for all school-related issues. Last but not least, we address **adult volunteer mentors** and help them share their knowledge and life experience with students by offering them training units. Besides, our project partner the Hamburg School Authority is responsible for the forth target group - teachers as **project coordinators** in schools.

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## Activities

Our **parent course** *Understanding School in Germany* imparts knowledge on the school system and school-to-work transition to native and foreign-born parents. The course consists of 8 modules ranging from kindergarten and preschool to multilingualism and inclusion to secondary school, vocational training and university. Parents can complete this course on site at any of our 27 project schools or can participate in the blended-learning format and thus complete exercises, discussions and tests on our online platform as well. Equipped with expertise and experience, the parent mentors then host parent cafés and consult other parents on school-related issues at project schools or community facilities.

Our **training program for adult volunteer mentors** encompasses tailor-made units on literacy, adolescence and mentor-mentee-relationships in an intercultural context. Adult volunteers mostly support their mentees in their reading skills and learning abilities. With courses like intercultural communication, violence prevention as well as adolescence and migration, adult volunteers are prepared to accompany their mentees throughout school and beyond. For this target group the project closely cooperates with Mentor.Ring Hamburg e. V., the umbrella organization for Hamburg-based associations, foundations and other socially committed facilities as well as other projects in the Hamburg area. By means of our online platform, we foster the networks within the target groups. Furthermore, we promote the integration of schools with their communities by providing update information on neighborhood-based structures and institutions in the field of education. In 2016, we expanded our project scope by offering trainings and networks for refugees.

## Methodology

Germany's school system is extraordinarily complex. Especially foreign-born parents need comprehensive information to be able to support their children and to get involved at school. Therefore, we create and spread **multilingual and easy-to-read materials** of high quality for immigrants for them to share within their communities. With mutual and voluntary efforts for equal educational opportunities for students coming from challenging  
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circumstances: The project qualifies mentors for schools and communities in social hot spots to support students throughout school and in the school-to-work-transition. Our program encompasses the **train-the-trainer approach** so that participants acquire knowledge and subsequently pass on and multiply the knowledge on school and school-to-work transition to others in their own language. The project is also based on the **peer-to-peer approach**: qualified mentors reach out to mentees and thereby act as role-models. Moreover, the project teams consult schools and assist in installing networks so that the project is interlocked, fixed and established with other academic activities. We successfully implemented an innovative management and steering scheme, which is an extended version **of private-public partnership (PPP)**: school + authority + agency. This way, we face an easier acquisition of schools, a higher acceptance by school teams, more comparable outcomes, a better monitoring and feedback as well as a faster and more sustainable implementation.

## Evaluation

The University of Hamburg conducts both a **formative** and a **summative evaluation**. The formative one assessed the relevance of our trainings and workshops for all our target groups. As these courses have been established for the project, the formative evaluation focusses on whether and how the modules are applicable from a technical and methodical point of view and with regard to the content for qualifying the target groups and which adjustments may have to be made to better address further parent, student and adult volunteer mentors. The results of the summative evaluation are to be published by September 2017.

## Results

So far, we have trained more than 300 parents in our course *Understanding School in Germany* on site at 27 project school as well as in a blended-learning format. Nearly 400 students have participated in courses ranging from how to get started in elementary school, how to pass through middle school up to how to prepare for college. Approx. 550 volunteers have

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participated in our trainings and are now well prepared to attend to their mentees from elementary school to school-to-work transition. As of now, we have 113 parents, 35 volunteers and 42 educational coordinators at 27 project schools on board our online platform for network and exchange.

### **Transferability to other users and contexts**

Qualified mentors act as role models and motivate mentees to get involved at school and to take charge of their educational success. First results were already visible at the end of the first project year which encourages other Hamburg schools to participate in the project. With mutual efforts based on our elaborated mentoring concept we strive for more participation, more diversity-responsive learning environments and better outcomes in Hamburg schools, using heterogeneous cultural and linguistic backgrounds as an asset. The project is a showcase for other schools and can be reproduced in Germany as well as abroad. The project also inspires other countries, e.g. the members of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), especially the European School2Work project. We also welcomed delegations from Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands to introduce the School Mentors concept. In 2015, the municipality of Rotterdam in the Netherlands commissioned a private Dutch agency to implement a “light copy” of our project in several local schools.

### **Lessons Learnt**

For the *Schulmentoren* project, non-formal learning is a proven way to address our target groups, especially parents. By educating adult facilitators in non-formal settings and by providing multilingual easy-to-read materials we set the stage for successful peer-to-peer mentoring for more educational participation in Hamburg’s schools.

**Lesson Learnt I:** When looking at non-formal settings in the context of adult and parent volunteer mentoring, high-quality and tailor-made training is essential but not enough. It’s also about keeping the mentors motivated and creating regular opportunities (occasions) for a volunteer engagement.

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**Lesson Learnt 2:** Even being a provider of excellent courses popular with target groups, one needs partners for disseminating the output and amplifying the impact. Especially in the field of volunteer adult-to-student and parent-to-parent mentoring projects have to cooperate with schools and neighborhoods.

**Lesson Learnt 3:** There is no volunteer mentoring without professional supervision. It is erroneous to believe that well-trained adult volunteers would automatically become active just because they are willing to help. Any kind of social engagement on a voluntarily basis needs a structure, a focal point or at least a person to rely on, to share experience with, to get (re)-motivated when things go wrong, to get further training and advice, to meet peers or – which is especially crucial in this field - to get acknowledgement and appreciation.

**Lesson Learnt 4:** Using new media in non-formal adult training is a valuable addition to traditional courses. However, online learning cannot be a substitute for a live exchange and learning experience for our project.

**Lesson Learnt 5:** Even though the target group of parent mentors is familiar with social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp and although most of them have access to a PC and the internet at home, some are hesitant to contribute to online discussions and prefer classroom communication. In these cases, we stress the fact that online contribution is more important than spelling and grammar and point out online translation and spell-check tools.

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