

School Governing Board in the Time of Transition

A case study

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FOREWORD

NEPC Policy Labs are biannual events based on the comparative policy analysis conducted by NEPC members on a burning policy issue. It gathers policy makers, policy analysts and practitioners and consist of learning session where the results of the comparative policy analysis are presented and a policy solution generating session where through interaction and other thinking methods participants generate policy solutions and recommendations for their national education system.

The following publication is conceived as one of the “follow up” features of the Policy Lab

that took place in Moscow in February 2017 dedicated to school governance, hosted by the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences, with a focus on three countries: Azerbaijan, Kirgizstan and Russia.

This report by Marina Moiseeva, school principal, is dedicated to the analysis of the Moscow Gymnasium # 1540 case with the aim of identifying challenges in Russian school governance and propose reflections beyond the policy lab completion.

CASE STUDY

School governing board is a relatively new notion in existing system of a secondary education in Russia. Legislatively it is a body of a state-public management of the school in charge for the following:

- determination of the main directions (programs) of the school development and the content and specific features of its educational program;
- increase of the efficiency of financial and economic activities of the school;
- assistance in creating optimal conditions and forms of organization of the educational process;
- monitoring the observance of the healthy and safe conditions for teaching and learning.

The current situation in Russian system of education with regard to the management of the system could be called transitional. Strengthening the administrative “vertical of power” and the dominating authoritative business style based on commands and micromanagement contradicts the key idea of the state-public management, i.e. democratic approach to decision-making and bearing joint responsibility for the decisions regarding the school and education in general. The high power distance¹ could hardly form a reliable base for the democratization of schools in Russia and raise of the self-organization and state-public management. The existing tradition of the delegation of authority in decision making “to someone else” and hyper responsibility of a school principal for everything in the school do not answer the newly coming need for sharing responsibility, cooperative work, trust, transparency and wide involvement of different members of the society into the management of the city at all institutional levels.

The governing boards in Moscow schools were established in 2012-2014 as a part of a general schools reform. It came along with the reforming of the teacher salary system, implementation of the key performance indicators (KPI) to evaluate the effectiveness of schools and educators, and the dramatic schools merge. In 2013, there were about 3000 secondary schools in Moscow, 5000 kindergartens, and more than 300 colleges, vocational schools and educational state-funded centers for supplementary and continuing education. Each of the educational organizations had its governing board, which had an independent governing history for less than a couple of years. In 2017, when the process of the schools merge was finished, there were only 670 schools left, and not a single kindergarten survived as a legal entity. The total number of students in each of the new educational complexes varies from 1000 to 5000-6500 students in 3-5 to 15-20 buildings compactly located in one of the Moscow districts or widely disseminated through different Moscow districts. In fact, most of the “schools” in Moscow today could be hardly called regular schools because each of them comprises various educational organizations from kindergartens to secondary and high schools, and in some cases – vocational schools, schools for children with special needs, and continuing education schools. What has happened to the school governing boards in those schools, which survived the merge? The evidence is that there were two possible ways of restructuring the school governing board after the several educational organizations had been merged into one.

The first one is the organization of the school governing board on the basis of a geographical approach. Each of the merged organization continues to have its own governing board, which takes all the decisions for their local educational organization (school, kindergarten, etc.). Representatives of these local governing boards form the joint governing board of the “educational complex”. The positive feature of this governing board structure is the preservation of the existing local governing boards, and their interests regarding the educational organization they link most closely with. The negative feature is too complicated two level system of decision making regarding any problem that occurs, not mentioning the possible projected conflict of interests between different units of the newly built educational complex.

The second model of restructuring the school governing board after the school merge happens is the total restructuring and re-election of the local governing boards with one united governing board created as a representative organization in charge for the development of entire educational complex. This model is more difficult to be built, but more effective in the future in terms of operating and decision-making. The newly created educational complex could include ten and more former schools, kindergartens and vocational schools, and they could be quite different from one another in existing business culture, traditions and history, dominating methods of teaching, and etc. It would be very difficult to form a team of like-minded people for the school governing board, who would be ready to take responsibilities for the future of the entire educational complex and learn more about other units of the complex. The most negative outcome could be the conflict of interests between units and disruption of negotiations regarding any change which could be done in this or that unit inside the complex.

Moscow State-Funded Gymnasium No 1540 was opened in 1994 within a joint project of Moscow Department of Education and international Jewish organization World ORT. Before the merge with a local school and three kindergartens in 2014 the school occupied one building, with 400 students in grades from 5th to 11th, coming to school from different districts of Moscow. The school mission “to prepare school graduates for the successful life in the polytechnic and multicultural world of the future” was based on the principles of democracy, learner-centered approach to teaching and learning, and “family-like atmosphere”, which made the school successfully competing with other schools in Moscow. The curriculum included two key elements – Jewish education (Hebrew as a second language, Jewish informal education and extra-curriculum activities, etc.) and engineering education (in-depth study of computer science, STEM, 3D and robotics, etc.). The school governing board consists of 11 members - the representatives of teachers, school administration, parents, senior students, co-opted members like graduate students and representatives of the key donor organizations, including the World ORT. It was small in number, close-knit and effectively cooperated with the school administration. This closeness, based on trust, mutual respect and understanding of the mission of the small Jewish school helped the school to survive and save its values within the merge process in 2013-2014.

The school merged to the Gymnasium No 1540 in 2013 was a typical local school with a nice newly built building, but small number of students and low results in learning as regards to the results in national testing and independent assessment of quality. The local school had its own governing board, but the key decisions as well as the leadership in the governing board operation were taken by the school principle and a couple of other key members of

the school administration. The parents of the students were indifferent to the school life, they regularly missed the parental meetings, had no experience in school management or the active participation in the school governing board, being ready for any decisions of the principle, who "takes care of everything". When the Moscow Department of Education ordered the reorganization of the local school in the form of accession to the existing Gymnasium No 1540 the parents reacted extremely negatively to the idea of the merge with a "Jewish school" which was obviously enhanced by the domestic anti-Semitism. Other three participants of the merge were three local area small kindergartens, which had their own governing boards represented mostly by parents and kindergarten senior managers. The attitude to the merge with the Gymnasium was also very negative. The negativism was explained by the lack of the objective information about the total changes in the Russian system of education. The members of the kindergarten governing boards knew nothing about the adoption of the new educational standards for schools and kindergartens, new school economy, built on self-government, and other new key features of the system crucial for the further understanding of the objectives of the merge.

When the legal procedures of the organizations merge were over, the administration of the Gymnasium No 1540 under the support of the governing board of the school took the leadership in further reforming of the joint governing board. The first meeting of the school governing board was organized in a form of the open admission event. All members of the local ex-governing boards were invited. There were more than 50 participants at the meeting, and it lasted for more than four hours. The administration of the Gymnasium No 1540 and the head of the school governing board represented the objective report on the aims, objectives and possible outcomes of the merge of various educational institutions in Moscow, explaining existing threats and possibilities. The next topic for the discussion was the necessity to re-elect the members of the joint school governing board. The representatives from the kindergartens and the merged local school were surprised to hear the long list of duties and responsibilities of the members of the governing board. They understood that this position demanded a lot from the person who took it: education and social literacy, legal literacy, skills in negotiations, decision-making, and what was even more important and difficult – readiness for bearing responsibility for the school. It was a new to the most of the local representatives, who were not ready to take independent decisions and contribute time to the school. The members of the school governing board from the Gymnasium No 1540 were apparently more skilled in self-management, understanding the existing laws, possibilities and limitations of the system of school management. The meeting ended with a decision on re-elections and forming the new team of the governing board with the members ready to contribute to the school further development and take responsibilities for the decision-making.

The next election campaign resulted in the change of the staff of the school governing board and the new chairman elected. We understood that the efficient work of the new governing board depended on the mutual trust and understanding as well as mutual positive expectations regarding the school development. Besides, half a year of transitional period formed a sense of uncertainty. The mix of the different business cultures, changes of the internal school structure (from small educational institution to the complex from kindergarten groups to high school classes), the permanent change of the laws regulating secondary education, and trends, and innovations demand the new understanding of the role and mission of the school governing board. The new approach to state-public governing of the school, and the new

team on the top of that. The school leaders initiated the working group, which planned and developed a one-day seminar organized in a form of a rapid foresight session.

The objective of the rapid foresight was to develop a long-term plan for the school development "Foresight for the Gymnasium No 1540: 2016 – 2025". The rapid foresight was also used as a perfect team building exercise for the newly formed school governing board, since it incorporated all basic principles for the rapid foresight instruments, enlisted in The UNIDO Technology Foresight Training Manual ", prepared by the international team of UNIDO experts in 2005² :

- Involvement of the various social forces like business, research academic community, government and public organizations, NGOs into discussion and comparison of long-term forecasts, development strategies, developing a more comprehensive vision of the future, reaching consensus and agreeing ways to achieve the future.
- Communication between participants.
- Concentration on the long-term planning.
- Coordination – the science and technology are evaluated in connection with the economic and social achievements.
- Agreement on the scenario of the future development – necessity to collaborative work of business, science, governmental organizations and NGOs.

Each member of the team has a right to contribute to the development of the school, but also each member of the team carried full responsibility for the future of the school, and was ready to negotiate it with the other people from the school community – parents, teachers, students, and representatives of the local community. The idea was very simple: if those people who gathered together because they wanted to guarantee the better future for the school could work together and share the mission and vision of the school, then they could influence positively for the rest of the school community and contribute a lot to the termination of the transitional period in the history of the two schools and thee kindergartens.

People could work together thinking about the future of the school when they were provided with enough information from inside the school and out of school sources of information, and when they trusted each other and the sources of information. Before the day of the face-to-face meeting at the rapid foresight session, the working group provided the members of the governing board and invited experts with the list of the online sources in Russian and English, with the analytical surveys and important data about the future of education and technology forecasts. Besides, we identified the existing school stakeholders and discovered that they could participate in the foresight session as experts in special subject arias like education (universities, vocational training centers, continuing education centers), IT companies, Jewish NGOs, local school districts NGOs and partner organizations, and business companies. We invited representatives from each of the expert groups to join our foresight session since they had a high level of expertise in trends and events, which were crucial for understanding the further trends in education and beyond. Thus, the working group formed the premises for the foresight "from above and from below". The external experts and the school administration contributed the ideas for the school development from above, while school teachers, parents and students – from below.

The foresight resulted in the creation of the key trends map for the period of 2016 – 2025, which forms the basis for the school Program of Development, Educational Program, and the road maps for the key long-term projects (STEM, pre-professional education in senior grades, inclusive education of kids with special needs, etc.). Considering the fact that kids in Moscow are enrolled to the local kindergarten inside the educational complex at the age of 1,5 – 2 Y/O. they are expected to graduate the high school at the age of 17-18 Y/O. So the school needs to have a clear plan of development and road maps for the key initiatives for at least 18-20 years. The key stakeholders and mostly influential “agents of influence” - parents of the students - should clearly understand the leading trends in the development of the system of education and society around it. As soon as the foresight session was completed, the foresight working group shared the Memorandum and the School Program of Development 2016-2025 with all parents and community members.

The openness, transparency of any information regarding the school, as well as involvement of different experts and representatives of the local community into the school planning process became the main factors affecting success of the non-conflict merge of different educational institutions into one. Besides the success was predetermined by the existing leadership skills and organizational strength of the school governing body of Gymnasium No 1540.

In 2017 the school is still among top-rating schools in Moscow (Top-300) and in Russian Federation (Top-500), it saved its Jewish “component of education” as a basic value, and all the students who are enrolled learn Hebrew as a second language from 1st to 7th grade. There are many students from the local area in all classes, but the level of anti-Semitism observed at school and between the parents at the beginning of the merge dropped to almost zero. There are some parents from the former local school and kindergartens in existing school governing board, but the leadership in all school management is still on the side of the Gymnasium No 1540. We observe the raise of activeness of local area parents in self-organization and school management in all school units. They all come to parental meeting, and became more and more included into various school activities. The school fundraising activities resulted in twice more money donated to school from local Jewish charity foundations and NGOs (ORT, Joint, Genesis, etc.), and leading IT companies (IBS, Yandex, etc.). The school signed two agreement on opening the pre-professional classes with two universities – Russian State University of Humanities and the National Technological MESES University. The representatives of all the above-mentioned institutions worked as experts in the rapid foresight session in school in 2015.

(Endnotes)

¹ Geert Hofstede. Culture’s Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations Across Nations. — 2-е изд. — Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications, 2001

² UNIDO Technology Foresight Manual Vienna, 2005. Vol. 1. Organization and Methods p.8-9/