

# Community schools in Flanders and Brussels

## A framework for development

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Under the authority of the Minister for Work, Education and Training

In co-operation with the Minister for Culture, Youth and Sport and the Minister for Welfare, Public Health and Family and the chairman of the Board of the Flemish Community Commission, responsible for education

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# Table of Contents

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## **Community schools – realising it together**

introduction

### **1 The chemistry of connections**

the reference framework for a Community school

### **3 Becoming wordly-wise**

the broad development of children and youngsters

### **3 A range of possibilities**

a broad learning and living environment for children and youngsters

### **4 Getting to (net)work**

the organisation of a Community school

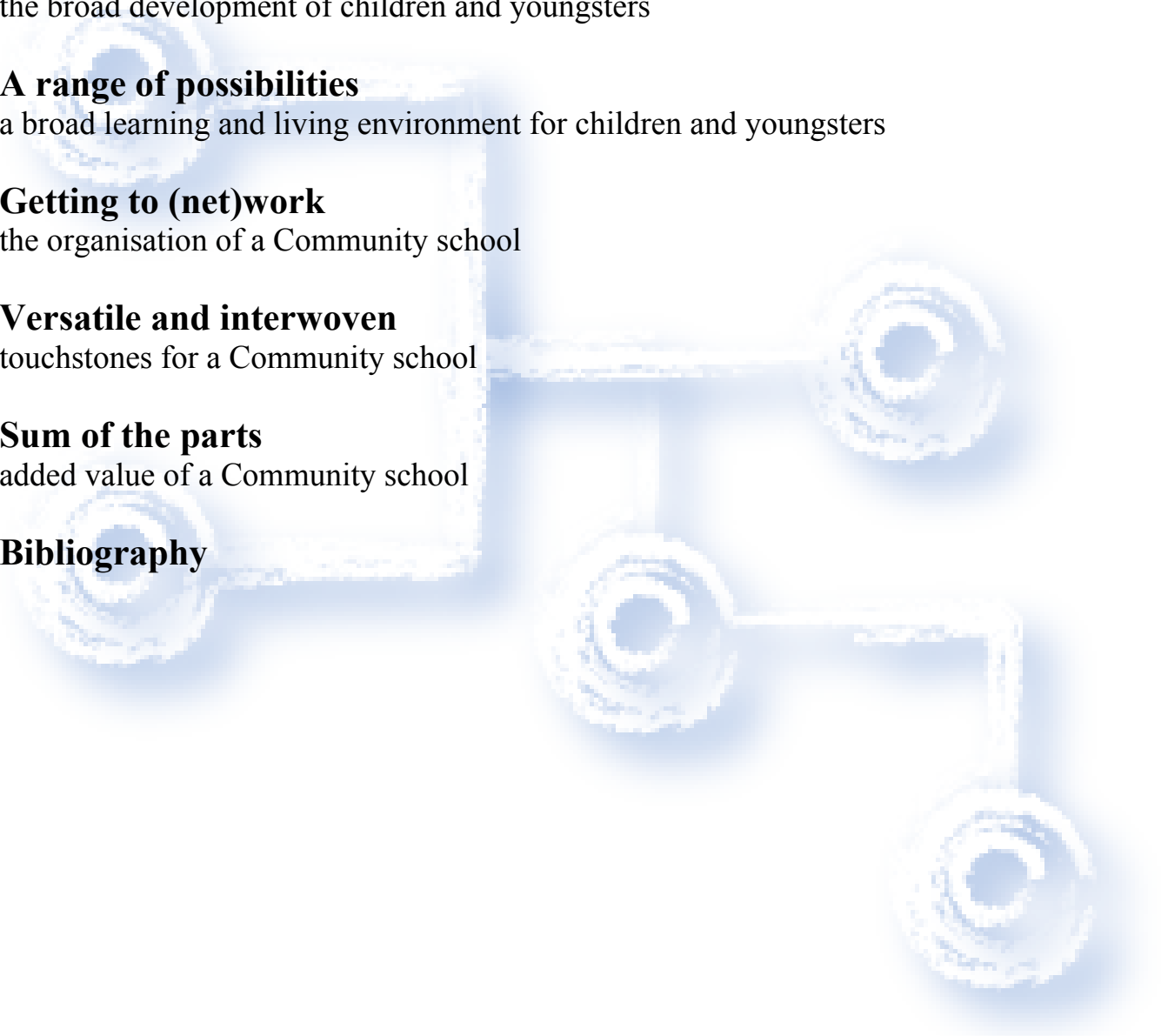
### **5 Versatile and interwoven**

touchstones for a Community school

### **6 Sum of the parts**

added value of a Community school

### **7 Bibliography**



# **Community schools – realising it together**

## introduction

How does the neighbourhood or district become an environment allowing children and youngsters to become worldly-wise? How to develop the collaboration of school, family, and local, formal and informal organisations in such a way that it results in a Community school? That is a School with a capital letter, where children and youngsters feel safe and inspired to develop their competencies in several domains? We submitted this question to the people who have been thinking about this for years. We asked pacesetters from all sectors of Culture, Youth and Sport, Welfare and Education about their experiences, ideas and concerns, in personal conversations and during forum discussions. The result is this text, a broadly supported vision on Community school in Flanders.

## **work in progress**

However, Community school cannot stay a theoretical concept. This text is a starting point, a first guideline that must be refined, supplemented and adjusted, in interaction with the policy, the people working in the field in general and in the Community school pilot projects in particular. We consciously decided to not yet present any concrete actions or practical tips for the organisation of a Community school. It is not up to a vision text to present any pre-arranged plans, nor to be a straitjacket. Community school should grow at the local level, from the individuality of a neighbourhood, of the people living there, and of the schools and organisations operating there. We shall compile all knowledge and experiences we acquired and shall acquire in 'Community school in practice' files and dossiers, and make them accessible to anyone who is looking for specific information or needs inspiration. Some of the themes that are discussed only in general terms in this vision text, will be elaborated upon, concretized and provided with examples in 'Community school in practice'. For instance: parents, the network, the direction, finance, regulations, infrastructure, the link with the neighbourhood, ...

## **couleur locale**

Community school in Flanders does not appear out of nothingness. We can benefit from experiences acquired abroad. Community schools have been built in the Netherlands since the mid-nineties. The Community school name was taken over in Flanders, and the concept already has Flemish followers in several places. However, in the meantime the northern neighbours have appeared to be pioneers rather than guides we follow unconditionally. In this vision text, we make our own choices and we strike out on our own courses, based on the Flemish context and experiences. No fixed models, but principles and starting points are the touchstones for every individual Community school. Flemish Community schools will therefore not only differ from their Dutch counterparts, but will also be mutually very divergent.

## **the position of the school**

Within a Community school, school is often a prominent partner. Children and youngsters spend much of their time at school. As a consequence, school plays an undeniable role in their life and their environment. However, this does not mean that school is allotted a greater or more central task than the other partners. The weight or the importance of one or more schools, and of the other partners in a Community school, is determined by the local context. In some cases, the educational partners will take the initiative and take on the co-ordination, whereas in other places, partners from the youth, sport, culture or welfare domains will

take the lead. In principle, this vision starts from equality and reciprocity of all partners. Community school therefore fundamentally restores the original meaning of the word 'school', for the ancient Greek word 'scholè' means in fact 'time for interests and study'.

## **equal opportunities**

Community school does not want to stigmatize underprivileged groups or keep them in their deprived situation. It is exactly the mix and exchange of experiences, visions and ideas that create enrichment. That is why a broad target group is deliberately aimed at, that is all children and youngsters. This gives every child and every youngster the opportunity to supplement his/her own experiences and views with those of others, and to take up new challenges. Community school therefore also widens the outlook of children and youngsters from well-to-do and sheltered environments. Everyone thus contributes to a rich exchange and helps to build bridges and close gaps.

By definition, this focus requires particular and permanent attention to deprived groups and groups with learning difficulties. The starting points and touchstones of this vision on Community school as well as the focus on local individuality guarantee this. The development of a Community school indeed requires a good analysis of the local context and a clear view on the present underprivileged groups and their needs. The best guides are and stay the leading figures in this story: the children and youngsters themselves. Their individuality as both a group and a person is the starting point for a Community school where all children and youngsters get learning opportunities.

We want to thank everyone who shared their views with us and was prepared to buckle down to the Community school project. We also want to thank our closest colleagues who provided expert comments and who have not been mentioned by name.

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# 1 The chemistry of connections

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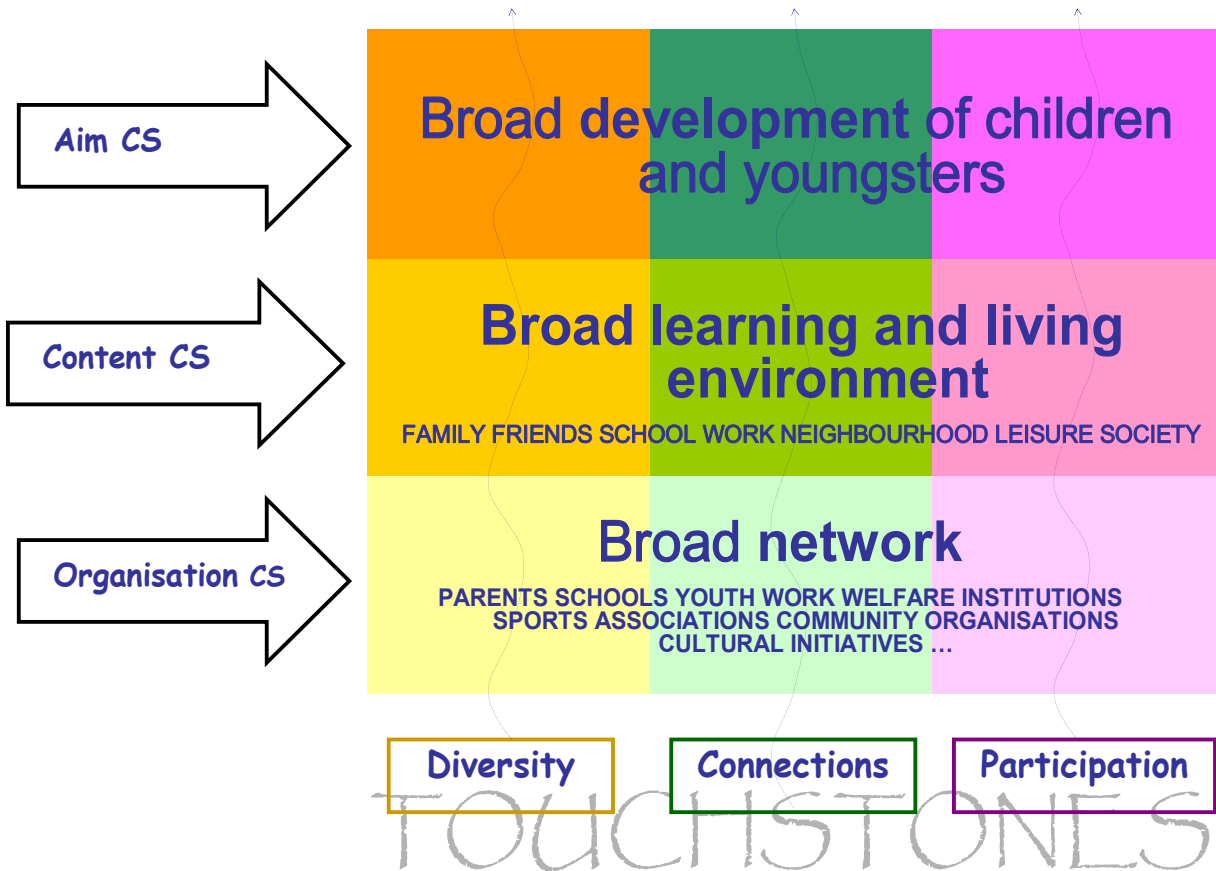
a reference framework for the development of Community schools

What exactly are Community schools? The text boxes below contain a summary of the Community school starting points and touchstones. They make out the Community school reference framework and the connecting thread in this vision text. The combined action of partners, aim, contents and organisation in Community schools is visualised on the next page. The grey zone in this scheme represents the mutual relations.

A Community school aims at the **broad development of all children and youngsters** by supporting and/or creating a **broad learning and living environment** in which children and youngsters can gain a wide range of learning and living experiences.

In order to achieve this goal, a **broad network** is established between organisations and authorities from the various sectors that jointly shape and support the learning/living of children and youngsters.

A Community school can only grow and make a difference when there is **diversity, connections and participation**, in the field of the development of children and youngsters as well as in the learning and living environment and within the network.



### **3 Becoming wordly-wise**

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the broad development of children and youngsters

Children and youngsters love to push out frontiers. Their personality only fully develops when they are invited to do so and when a lot is expected from them. Community schools represent this expectant invitation to develop their talents. By providing children and youngsters with a multitude of experiences and encounters, their environment becomes a rich and safe training area for the complex society in which they will have to find their own place later on.

#### **diversity of competencies**

For children and youngsters not to be in the margin of society, they have to develop an enormous amount of competencies. For instance: dealing with information, being able and daring to adopt a critical attitude, problem-solving thinking, sports skills, co-operating, finding a job, communicating fluently, being creative, being able to make choices, expressing their proper ideas and feelings in various ways, enjoying it, ... A Community school stimulates and promotes these competencies. They are a combination of views, skills and attitudes that can be used in concrete situations.

Children and youngsters must not only have many skills, they are also challenged to move in different and ever-changing environments. Participating in a multiform society requires a wide range of competencies that are flexibly deployable in changing socio-cultural contexts. This flexibility can only be acquired when you have the opportunity to develop broadly within and outside school. A Community school essentially aims at providing children and youngsters with a maximum of opportunities and chances to realise such a broad development.

#### **total personality**

In a Community school, the total development of the child's or youngster's personality occupies centre stage. Investments are therefore also being made in the welfare and well-being of the child or youngster. This results in a positive and realistic self-image, empowerment, an openness to new challenges, being able to have fun, feeling connected and treating fellow men respectfully.

In a broad development, emphasis is not on isolated aspects of a person – it is no sum of separate elements – but on the integration thereof. Which means: on the connection between the different aspects of every concrete learning and living experience and between the many learning and living experiences children and youngsters are confronted with every day. Within the same learning and living experience, children and youngsters do not acquire knowledge in the first place and then skills. It happens at the same time and in combination. A child working on a problem also learns to take initiative and to work independently. If a youngster carries out a task in a group, a whole range of social skills are involved as well. Within different living and learning experiences, similar problems occur that require a solution, just like tasks that have to be carried out in a group.

#### **variation in learning and living experiences**

In a Community school, learning and living experiences can be interconnected in very different ways. Emphasis can be put on competencies allowing children and youngsters to benefit from lifelong and life-

wide learning. An alternative consists of developing an active transfer of knowledge and experience from one context to the other. For instance, youngsters learn how to play music in the music academy or in their own rock band. Teachers can actively look for these musical skills and stimulate youngsters to further explore them at school as well. The interaction between different learning and living experiences reinforces the learning process, and motivates children and youngsters. They learn to think along and participate in the sports club, in the organisation of the community feast, as a member of the editorial staff of a community newspaper and during the activities at school.

Diversity is a key element in that respect: a variety of manners, talents, learning styles, interests and needs. Competencies always have an individual aspect as well. The challenge consists of optimally appealing to everyone's talents, and providing the necessary opportunities to recognize, name, broaden, deepen and further develop these talents.

*'(...), pikken kinderen overal van alles en nog wat op en doen daar het hunne mee. Stimuleren van hun ontwikkelingskansen betekent daarom: stimuleren van hun eigen vermogen om in alles wat ze meemaken, die momenten en dingen aan te grijpen die hun ontwikkeling vooruithelpen' (Van Oenen, 2004, p.9).*

### **variety of public**

Moreover, the variety of public is important as well. Community schools want to participate in the realisation of a broad development for ALL children and youngsters. However, this does not exclude attention being paid to equal (educational) opportunities, rather on the contrary.

*'Uit de focusgroepen in Vlaanderen is zeer duidelijk naar voren gekomen dat achterstandsbestrijding maar één deelaspect kan zijn van de brede school: deze richt zich op de brede, integrale ontwikkeling van alle kinderen, weliswaar met een bijzondere aandacht voor kansarme en leerbedreigde kinderen.' (Pirard, 2004, p.187).*

From an equal opportunities point of view, it is even essential for the Community school concept to aim at the broad development of children and youngsters. The establishment of a wide and diverse range of social relations plays an important role in preventing children from lagging behind and underachieving. They should also have opportunities to be self-directed and interested in what is happening at school (Bentley). Community school can contribute to this to a large extent.

The essence lies in stimulating children's and youngsters' possibilities and their desire to keep on learning, to discover in various ways and places, to participate and to enjoy it. Children and youngsters themselves play an active and undeniable role in making the most of this diversity. They explore; they are the ultimate designers of their development. A Community school intends to stimulate and support this exploratory attitude.

### **3 A range of possibilities**

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a broad learning and living environment for children and youngsters

Children and youngsters move through a multitude of learning and living domains, and learn within formal as well as informal contexts: school, sports associations, cultural initiatives, youth work, the neighbourhood, the peer group, the family, ... Community schools stimulate and link the experiences and competencies they acquire everywhere.

#### **increasing interaction**

Competencies only develop if children and youngsters can move around in a complex and challenging environment. Community schools want to create and support this environment. In doing so, a Community school is sensitive to initiatives originating within the children and youngsters themselves, and wants to support them while respecting their autonomy. It can also anticipate and sense which contexts might appeal to children and youngsters.

Moreover, the challenge of a Community school lies in increasing the interaction between the different learning and living domains. It thus reacts to and links up with what children and youngsters have lived and learned 'elsewhere'. They experience how to flexibly use it in various situations and contexts.

By allowing children and youngsters to explore or actively participate in different contexts, they consciously or unconsciously experience which competencies are required to function in a given social context. This challenges them to further develop the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to that end. It opens new perspectives and allows them to have fun in various spheres of interest.

#### **varying learning**

Within a broad learning and living environment, children and youngsters acquire experiences that contribute to their well-being and development. They have fun, experience what they like or dislike, discover, experiment, play, practise, participate, put a meaning on things; in short, they live and actually learn at all times and places.

In that respect, living and learning goes beyond learning as it is usually given shape within the school context. Children and youngsters learn both formally and informally, both guided and spontaneously. Whatever children discover themselves in a spontaneous, informal way, for instance by playing together or by practising sports, leads to the development of a wide range of views, skills and attitudes that will complement and reinforce the school experience. A Community school therefore creates and enriches a great diversity of experience possibilities for children and youngsters without pedagogising or trespassing on their leisure time.

#### **learning and living**

Community schools make connections between the different learning and living areas, between the different competencies and between different contexts in which the same competence can be used. Moreover, Community schools also pay attention to the relation between what children and youngsters learn and the practical use thereof, between action and subsequent reflection.

These connections deepen and widen the learning process, make experiences and perceptions meaningful, and encourage youngsters to increasingly learn, discover, face challenges, find and name connections.

This has the same function as the contextualisation of learning at school. This consists of actively linking abstract concepts from language, mathematics, sciences and technology to and applying them in pupils' daily life. The things they learn at school thus do not belong to a 'different world', but result from experiences and views from the childrens' and youngsters' daily life, which they influence in their turn. This is a successful strategy for all learners, also for children and youngsters at risk.

## **challenging environment**

How can a Community school project create such a challenging environment? In what way can a broad learning and living environment take shape across various learning and living areas? Once again, the key word is diversity. Children and youngsters should not only have access to a great variety in terms of content, but should also have the opportunity to participate therein in various ways. This may range from 'devising and participating' over 'getting acquainted with and meeting' to 'practising and trying'. (Van Oenen, 2004).

**Creating and participating:** children and youngsters themselves organise activities in a given social context, or are allowed to participate therein.

The children and youngsters are responsible for (part of) the activity and contribute to its process and results. They co-influence that activity and the social context. They do not only draw on the interconnection of their competencies but also link them to a meaningful social context. They do so by acting themselves within that context and by meaning something to the stakeholders therein.

*For instance:*

- a music lover who is a choir member
- a sports association that organises a sports event for children from the neighbourhood
- a pupil from a school who completes a work placement in a company
- a pupil of the art academy who contributes to the illustration of the neighbourhood newsletter
- the organisation of activities in the youth centre in order to finance an international exchange
- a future user who joins in the youth movement's thinking process about the construction of the local play area, and afterwards in the construction itself
- a member of the youth council who co-develops a safe cycling plan
- a student of the urban academy who organises an exhibition on the lives of the residents of the rest home.
- the organisation of a local pop concert in order to enhance the contacts between the local residents
- local residents who create, together with the children of the neighbours, a show on unicycles for the neighbourhood party
- a pupil from vocational secondary education (fashion) who designs made-to-measure clothes for children with a physical disability from Special Education

**Meeting:** children and youngsters themselves take the initiative or are allowed to get acquainted with all kinds of people, situations, professions, activities and working/living situations.

This form of participation allows children and youngsters to form an image by gaining an impression, taking part in things, exchanging experiences and views and thoughts. They also explore competencies in mutual relation to one another and connect them to a concrete social context.

*For instance:*

- attending a concert
- paying a visit to a company/institution/...
- getting to know local residents within the framework of a project "our school in our neighbourhood"
- inviting an alderman to amplify on the local youth policy plan
- getting in contact with different languages during after-school child care
- playing with other children in a play street
- attending the neighbourhood breakfast
- maintaining the playground in collaboration with the local garbage collectors

**Practising:** children and youngsters themselves take the initiative or are allowed to practise a specific competence in a concrete social context.

*For instance:*

- learning to ride a bike during the playground activities
- playing soccer in a local competition between residents
- helping the day care mother to bake cookies
- being a majorette in the annual procession of the neighbourhood
- practising specific competencies within a school context: examining trees and subsoil in the woods, making architecture walks in town, experiencing physics by conducting experiments, baking bread at the baker's, behaving safely in traffic by going out on the street, helping to set up the platform in the theatre of the local academy, dressing the windows of the local shops, minding the shop specialized in recycled goods, a student from vocational secondary education (care) who accompanies the local rest home residents to the nearby cultural centre
- shooting and editing a promotional film for a local company
- ...

Within a given activity, one way of participating may be central or occur in combination with the other ways of participating.

These different forms of participation create the opportunity of organising activities for children and youngsters across the various areas of learning and living, and of naming and mapping out the existing activities. Within a Community school, it is then possible to check whether there are any gaps, which possibilities can be enriched and which opportunities can be created. Mapping out these activities also creates the opportunity to make divergent competencies visible to oneself and others. This may widen the outlook of all partners on the capacities of the children and youngsters: 'look what they can do!' It may also raise the expectations of children and youngsters for themselves as well as for others, and result in new challenges. This is a prerequisite for learning anyhow.

In all of this, a Community school leaves as much scope as possible for children and youngsters to shape their own development process and enjoy it. Questions and initiatives from children and youngsters are stimulated and taken seriously. It must be kept in mind that children and youngsters also need some free time

and space to explore unaccompanied. A Community school therefore makes absolutely sure that sufficient time and place are provided for children and youngsters to take the helm.



## **4 Getting to (net)work**

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### the organisation of a Community school

Different sectors, organisations, partners – parents, children and youngsters themselves, education, culture, youth, sport, welfare, environment, neighbourhood, employment - play their own specific role in the different areas of living - family, school, friends, leisure time, neighbourhood, work, society, care facilities - of children and youngsters. In a Community school, partners equally collaborate with a common goal in a broad network.

### **looking for opportunities**

Within a Community school, partners from different organisations and sectors who are willing to commit themselves, start actively looking for possible connections and opportunities, common goals, shared concerns and joint actions, in order to realise a broad and qualitative support of children's and youngsters' development. A variety of partners thus add their expertise and individuality to the network and allow the Community school to grow along with the evolutions within the different social sectors. The main partners in that respect are the children and youngsters themselves, as well as their parents because they know their children best. In any case, parents play a key role in the learning and life of their children and in their relations with the environment and other partners.

### **added value for all partners**

The broad network reinforces the key activities of the partners involved, increases the effectiveness of their own activities or role, and improves the quality of provision as a whole. Community schools require a content-wise and organisational commitment from all parties involved, but also create an added value: the improved or more efficient realisation of the own goals, the increased extent to which the target group is reached, the provision of and demand for support. The prerequisite is that this collaboration takes place in an atmosphere of equality, reciprocity, consultation, involvement and participation. This does not always have to be formal: pleasant informal moments reinforce collaboration and enthuse.

### **local dynamics**

A Community school in general and a broad network in particular cannot but take shape at the local level: a network grows from the local possibilities and responds to the local opportunities, dynamics, needs and requirements. This movement can also be instigated top down. Municipalities and/or organisations that are active at the supralocal or meso levels may play an inspiring, stimulating role and be the instigator and/or coach of the local dynamics.

### **flexible yet sustainable**

A broad network is meant to be sustainable. It transcends one-off actions and aims at supporting the broad development of children and youngsters in the long term. The growth process of a Community school implies a flexible response to the local dynamics as well as a search for a constant which keeps the network intact and can contribute to the development of children and youngsters in the longer term. This may be a forum where partners keep finding each other or a few key persons who take the initiative time and again and actively enter into contact with others.

## 5 Versatile and interwoven

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### touchstones for a Community school

Not every project working on the development of children and youngsters is a Community school. Not every partnership is a Community school. When can we call it a Community school? Which impulses can help a project to grow into a qualitative Community school? A Community school makes the difference as attention is being paid to the three touchstones: diversity, connections and participation.

Diversity, connections and participation in all fields contribute to the strength of a Community school. They must be intrinsic to both the goals, content and organisation of a Community school. However, this diversity exactly allows them to take shape in various ways and thus respond to the local complexity a Community school represents and must deal with.

The touchstones serve as three impulses to help a Community school grow in terms of goals, content and organisation. Although some aspects have already been dealt with in the previous chapters, they are once more systematically summarized below.

#### **Diversity**

- A Community school tends to make maximum use of diversity in order to increase and enrich the development opportunities of children and youngsters, and focuses on a wide range of views, skills and attitudes.
- A Community school intends to actively increase the richness and diversity of the different spheres of life of children and youngsters – family, school, neighbourhood, friends, work, leisure time, society – and make full use of the individuality, the differences and the richness of every domain. In other words, it wants to make the environment children and youngsters move in, grow into a broad and strong learning and living environment where they get in touch with a wide variety of practices, reference frameworks and perspectives, and feel good about it. The use of and active response to the diversity among children and youngsters also plays an essential role.
- Finally, a Community school strives for a greater diversity within its network. Different sectors, organisations, partners, individuals play their own specific role in the different areas of living and learning of children and youngsters. The different partners involved can add their expertise, reference frameworks and practices to the network and allow a community school to grow along with the evolutions within the different areas of living and social sectors.

#### **connections**

- In the development of children and youngsters, a Community school does not focus on isolated aspects of a person, but rather on the integration of and the connection between different competencies. The development of a positive self-image of the child or the youngster cannot be dissociated from his/her linguistic development and the former may reinforce the latter throughout several positive speaking experiences. A ball game spontaneously and informally unites opportunities for motor, social (collaborating), motivational (persevering in order to win) and emotional (dealing with failure or enjoying success together) experiences.
- Within a multitude of – often separate – areas of learning and living, children and youngsters get the opportunity to gain developmental experiences. Making connections and exchanging competencies between different areas contributes to useful and meaningful experiences. The gained insights, skills

and attitudes can thus be used in a flexible way in different areas and in ever new situations. Successfully standing up for yourself in an association is an experience that may be reinforced if sufficient opportunities to do so are provided in school as well. Moreover, bringing different contexts together also provides new learning and living experiences.

- In a Community school, sectors, organisations and partners actively look for connections, for shared or linked opportunities, concerns, goals, problems and joint actions for the children and youngsters. They want to realise a broad and qualitative support of children's and youngsters' development. Connections are thus continuously being made within the network as well.

## **Participation**

- Children and youngsters themselves are the ultimate designers of their development. They have to be given the opportunity to explore and participate in the creation of learning and living areas. A Community school stimulates this exploratory expedition by providing children and youngsters with the necessary space and/or support.
- Children and youngsters also need and are entitled to free space and time allowing them to actively explore without constant accompaniment. A Community school thus does not intend to take the entire range of living areas in which children and youngsters move, under its wings. The creation of the necessary free space can obviously be supported by a Community school. For instance, a Community school may support questions from youngsters for accommodation for their own activities, or meet these wishes in collaboration with the youngsters. A Community school can also see to it that children and youngsters stay the owner of their own projects, even if they are not immediately successful in that way. Failure then is part of a process resulting in new goals and developments.
- Moreover a Community school can also pay attention to increasing children's and youngsters' participation within the more structured areas of life, to increasing opportunities for children and youngsters and their immediate surroundings to contribute and flesh out.
- Finally, participation of all parties involved in a Community school is an important issue. It cannot be sufficiently emphasized that the voices of youngsters themselves and of their parents and educators are crucial in this story. Moreover, within the network as well, everyone is supposed to actively participate on the basis of equality and reciprocity. Obviously the intensity may vary according to the issue on the agenda or the role one assumes in a given context or area.

## **6 Sum of the parts**

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### added value of a Community school

A Community school delivers added value to all parties involved. It may set off many positive things among children and youngsters, but also among parents and local residents, volunteers and professionals from organisations, and in the vision, daily operation and/or policy of organisations.

Experience shows that Community school may bring about many things in neighbourhoods, both among the people living there and in the organisations operating there. In order to take stock for all parties at the end of this vision text, we provide a short yet non-exhaustive survey.

#### **children and youngsters**

Community school increases the chances of a broad development as well as the well-being and involvement of all children and youngsters. Community school optimizes their personal participation in a complex, multiform society that is liable to change. Community school is also essential in promoting equal opportunities for all children and youngsters.

#### **parents and local residents**

It benefits parents and local residents as well. The existing provision becomes more visible and more accessible. The close relations between partners and organisations allow them to enter into more diverse relations, while the network they can rely on, also extends.

That is why Community schools also provide this group with the basic conditions for increased participation and involvement in life in the neighbourhood.

#### **partners and organisations**

A Community school allows partners and organisations to grow. They increase the scope of their own activities and the impact thereof. The image and quality of the organisation may improve as well. The increased job satisfaction that goes with it, is worth mentioning as well.

#### **the entire neighbourhood**

A Community school benefits the entire neighbourhood. It increases the cohesion of the provision and extends the global provision. More opportunities occur to meet with a diversity of questions from children, youngsters, parents and other parties involved. Community school gives the opportunity to share 'burdens' with other partners. There are also possibilities to exchange experiences and methodologies among them.

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