



PRIMOKIZ PRATTELN

“I benefited enormously from Primokiz, especially when my work was most intense”

When Pratteln became involved in Primokiz, the town was already in the midst of a pilot project related to early childhood education. Primokiz expertise played a particularly important role in helping the community define its task, explains Manuela Hofbauer, formerly project manager and now head of the Early Childhood Department.

In Pratteln, which is located in the canton of Basel-Landschaft and has a population of approximately 16,000, six percent of residents are welfare recipients. “This is a place where many migrants come, and we have a large number of families of low socioeconomic status,” says Roger Schneider, a member of the town council with responsibility for issues of education, youth, sports and culture. Under Switzerland’s federal “urban projects” neighborhood development program, close attention had already been paid to certain problematic neighborhoods in Pratteln. In preschools and schools, there was considerable demand for instruction in German as a second language (GSL). More and more children were entering preschool with minimal or no knowledge of German, and it was nearly impossible for them to overcome that deficit.

A situational analysis showed that numerous early childhood programs were available—playgroups, daycare centers, private daycare providers, parent-child meetings, mother-child exercise classes, counseling for mothers, and advice on health and parenting issues—but that these programs were not adequately coordinated and had little contact with preschools. Moreover, in many cases programs had failed to reach needy families.

Accordingly, even before joining Primokiz the community had invested some 370,000 Swiss francs in a four-year pilot project that included a home-visit program for families with young children—which is still being run by the Swiss Red Cross—and a 40-percent position for an expert in early childhood education. Manuela Hofbauer was chosen to fill that position.

Her tasks included the following: coordinating early childhood programs and staff; introducing new, easily accessible programs (such as parent-child meetings in every neighborhood); and finding parents, offering them information, and raising their awareness of early childhood issues. This also meant having a presence at neighborhood festivals, school events, and newcomer events. In addition, Hofbauer was charged with finding 20 young children from families that speak a foreign language at home to participate in the first home-visit program. “It was a big job, and it was exhausting work,” Manuela Hofbauer recalls.

Primokiz, and in particular its expert advice, were an enormous help. The experts examined Prattler’s existing strategy and identified potential difficulties, which included the wide range of tasks to be accomplished and the broad definition of the target group. “They helped me eliminate certain items— without feeling guilty about it. It was very helpful to clarify my role.” The Primokiz experts played an essential part in evaluating the pilot project, she says, adding that “in my case, it was a matter of evaluating myself.”

She found networking meetings with other Primokiz communities to be equally valuable. The meetings included presentations on a wide variety of topics, such as developmental psychology and data protection. As Manuela Hofbauer explains, “That support was invaluable for the groundbreaking work we were doing in our communities.” Learning more about the situations in other towns was also very helpful. She was particularly interested in learning more about communities in the French-speaking region of Switzerland, where early childhood education has long been taken for granted—much more so than in our part of the country.

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Obviously, policymakers would like to see benefits from early childhood education: “It would be best of all, of course, if early childhood programs could reduce the high costs of GSL instruction in preschools and schools,” says town council member Roger Schneider. Children who spend at least 8 hours per week in a playgroup, daycare center, or private daycare prior to entering preschool have been shown to have more advanced language skills than otherwise similar children.

For Manuela Hofbauer, the greatest challenge is still a lack of time. Overall, however, her attitude is very positive: “For me, it is worthwhile to make the effort to help every child. Every child who grows up in better health and with a more positive attitude, thanks to solid support for development and language skills in the first few years of life, will make a positive contribution to tomorrow’s society.”

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