



PRIMOKIZ MURI

“We were able to convince the town council that Primokiz would save money in the future”

Muri-Gümligen is a suburban community near Berne where taxes are relatively low. The town council, which attaches great importance to prevention—not least for financial reasons—was instrumental in developing a concept for early childhood education and care. After testing Primokiz in a three-year pilot phase, the council decided to make the project permanent. Today its focus is on promoting networking and cooperation.

“Primokiz was a good fit for our Department for Children and Youth, which has always emphasized prevention,” explains Kaspar Padel, a school social worker who has served for the past five years as project manager for Primokiz Muri. Muri-Gümligen, located in the canton of Berne, has a population of 12,000, and three percent of its residents are welfare recipients. It is a wealthy suburban community that describes itself on its website as an ideal home for families with children. The town attaches great importance to its high-quality schools. So when the council learned that early childhood educators were reporting that increasing numbers of children were entering preschool lacking certain basic skills, it formulated a set of strategic goals: to provide information about early childhood education and care (ECEC) to parents of preschool children, to offer targeted support to disadvantaged families, and to encourage cooperation among the relevant offices, agencies and individuals.

It was against this backdrop that Kaspar Padel's predecessor learned of the Jacobs Foundation's Primokiz project. With the help of the Foundation, she conducted an analysis of the existing situation in Muri. Padel subsequently took over the project and devised a plan. Working with the Primokiz expert was very helpful, he says, allowing him to take a "positive, pragmatic" approach in working with the available tools. Networking meetings with other communities were helpful as well. "We learned a lot from comparing our situation with those of other towns, and we discussed questions that were of interest to all of us," he explains. "It was good to know that we are not alone. Early childhood is an important issue throughout Switzerland and Europe."

The main focus of Primokiz Muri was to coordinate the many programs that were already in place. It also collaborated with various external entities (e.g. playgrounds) and tackled a variety of smaller tasks, such as reorganizing existing parent-child German classes and evening educational events for parents during the first year of preschool. The plan called for staffing amounting to 30 full-time equivalents during a three-year pilot phase. The city council approved the proposal—recognizing, as Kaspar Padel pointed out, that "Primokiz would help to achieve one of the council's strategic goals."

Beat Wegmüller (Social Democratic Party), currently a member of Muri's town council, was not yet in office. "It was definitely helpful that the pilot project had strong support from a center-right member of the council," he remembers.

After joining the council, and as the new member overseeing young people's issues, he devoted considerable attention to this topic. Primokiz had the unanimous support of the education community. Nevertheless, as the Primokiz office was to be made permanent a decision was made to reactivate a committee focusing on issues of children and youth. The committee submitted a report to the town council which, according to Wegmüller, "provided a rationale for the project with a solid basis in policy on children and youth." In addition, the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts was charged with evaluating the pilot project. Both the committee and academic support were major factors in the council's ultimate decision in 2018 to approve the Primokiz Muri project.

The work of the department itself was crucial, too. "Department staff members presented the project to the council, and their expertise was persuasive. They had also provided a great deal of valuable information through the local news," says Wegmüller. The community's favorable financial position was helpful as well, of course, as Beat Wegmüller and Kaspar Padel point out.

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The conclusion drawn by the council member and the head of the department is similar: "We were able to convince the council that Primokiz's preventive work would save significant sums of money in the future," says Beat Wegmüller. To that end, it was important to provide regular, prompt and transparent information to policymakers and an advisory group, which has ties to other organizations (such as the church community).

In the words of Kaspar Padel: "Although Muri is by no means a hotbed of social problems, we have long recognized the value of prevention, particularly in early childhood. And we realize that in introducing Primokiz, we are part of a process that is taking place throughout Switzerland, and in which Muri can play a leading role."

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