



## PRIMOKIZ ZOFINGEN

“In the end, it’s about providing fair opportunities, and this is what Primokiz seeks to do”

**The Primokiz project group worked hard to develop a plan for Zofingen, which received the unanimous support of the town council. However, convincing the council’s legislative body (Einwohnerrat) proved politically difficult. The plan ultimately passed by a slim majority, thanks to the personal commitment of the member of the council with responsibility for educational and social issues.**

Zofingen, which is located in the canton of Aargau and has a population of 11,000, was already involved with the Jacobs Foundation’s Primokiz project and had completed a situational analysis when Livia Lustenberger took over as head of the Department for Children, Youth and Families. The analysis revealed that a number of high-quality programs were already in place in Zofingen, most of them private, but that there was a lack of coordination and networking. Those who provided counseling for mothers and fathers, in particular, wished that they could “do more” in the early childhood sector.

Council member Dominik Gresch (Green Liberal Party), who is responsible for education and social issues, received the analysis shortly before taking office, and it taught him a great deal about early childhood education and care (ECEC). He began to read more about this topic. “I was impressed from the

outset by the approach taken by the Jacobs Foundation. In fact, our mission statement now includes the words that ‘we are investing in the future.’”

A project group was formed to create a plan. It included not only representatives of the early childhood sector (those counseling mothers and fathers, daycare centers, playgroups, etc.), but also the town council member responsible for health issues, the head of the Social Affairs Department, a school principal, the director of the city library and a specialist in working with children and youth.

According to Livia Lustenberger, the department head overseeing the Primokiz project, creating a plan was an intense process. The Primokiz experts were highly competent, and they provided helpful tools. The group also benefited from the experiences of other communities. Yet the constraints on the town’s capacities repeatedly became obvious. “Zofingen is a small town, with limited resources. For us, this kind of academic task was a costly endeavor,” recalls Lustenberger.

And it was a challenge to keep practitioners in the early childhood sector engaged in drawing up a conceptual plan. They soon began to ask questions: “Why do we need these plans? What good will they do us?” So it was important to hold events for stakeholders, as well as to encourage regular communication and answer people’s questions—and, of course, to alleviate their concerns.

The participants in the process had very different needs. “We worked quickly to identify the needs that were shared by all of us,” says Lustenberger. Those included networking, information, quality development and public relations. The first concrete result of the group’s work was a brochure introducing all of the individuals and organizations that are active in the early childhood sector.

A relatively small percentage of families in Zofingen come from a migrant background; teaching German as a foreign language in schools is widely accepted; and the rate of welfare receipt averages only three percent. “Because most people in Zofingen are not suffering, it was not easy to gain political support,” says Dominik Gresch. To avoid jeopardizing the project, the scope of the planned measures was kept quite modest. It was decided that the temporary position in the Department for Youth and Prevention would be made permanent, with a focus on early childhood. The department has since been renamed the Depart-

ment for Early Childhood. Other small-scale measures included networking meetings, an educational program for parents at the beginning of the school year, open access to a gymnasium for young children and their parents during the winter months, and projects developed in cooperation with private providers, such as expanded meetings for parents and children.

“This pragmatic approach was well received, and it made our political work somewhat easier,” Dominik Gresch recalls. It was the legislative arm of Zofingen’s town council that posed the greatest challenge. “It was obvious that people had already made up their minds,” says Gresch. The carefully formulated concept, the informational event featuring an outstanding speaker, background articles in the local newspaper, references to studies, even the “return on investment” argument—none of these things were of interest to the project’s opponents. “The discussion was held on purely ideological grounds, even by the centralist parties,” Gresch says.

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According to Livia Lustenberger, it was only thanks to the personal commitment of Dominik Gresch that the legislative body finally approved the Primokiz Zofingen project. The deciding vote was cast by the president of the council. “I was convinced that it was the right thing to do,” says Gresch. “There was a need for someone with that conviction.”

Has the difficult conceptual work paid off? Absolutely, says Livia Lustenberger. The people involved in this sector now know one another personally, she points out, and that’s a major benefit. She has also found the Primokiz concept to be helpful on many occasions when formulating legislative or annual goals.

Dominik Gresch, too, believes that his commitment to this project was worthwhile: “In the end, it’s about providing fair opportunities, and this is what Primokiz seeks to do.”

*Kathrin Meier-Rust*

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