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Ping Pong

In Lucerne there is a Children's Parliament

Voting rights for 10-year olds

Lucerne's city council has said Yes to Switzerland's first Children's Parliament. Schoolchildren between 9 and 14 have a vote in it.

Isabelle, 13 years old, a sixth-former, is an experienced politician. Since 1993, she has been a member of the City of Lucerne's Children's Parliament which was set up in that year. Sascha

*Beat Bühlmann**

(11) and Moreno (12) are also members. "We children have the right to make our own decisions," says Moreno.

What does a Children's Parliament do? "We do not simply sit around, we take part in activities," says Isabelle. Recently, 120 children were taken in two buses to look at the city's public playgrounds in order to assess them and point out faults to the city gardener who was present. The children succeeded in

newspaper and a children's cabaret. In addition, city detectives survey the streets with the sharpness of a child's eye and evaluate localities by awarding points.

It happened one day, reports Isabelle, children were allowed to climb up onto that throne, put the crown on and make their demands. Their statements were recorded on video and played to the city authorities. What changes did they want? Isabelle wants more green spaces including a leisure park, Sascha wants a real swimming area with a long slide, and Moreno wants more bicycle tracks and Sundays with no cars, "so that we can play in the streets." And he thinks that his school playground, which is full of holes, should be repaired whenever possible.

The Children's Parliament has over 100 members and meets twice or three times a year. The children sit in a circle. The speaker has a big toy animal in his arms and when he is finished hands it on. The youngest ones are given a bell. They use it to interrupt the debate when they don't understand something. At every meeting the responsible city councillor or head official must be present. After every vote, a knotted handkerchief is handed to him. That means he is bound to examine the matter and to undo the knot before the next meeting.

On their own responsibility

"We are not engaged in sandpit exercises," says children's delegate Walti Mathis, who sees the children as citizens with equal rights. "The children must have their own areas of responsibility and be able to make binding decisions. The city council has shown its

great attachment to direct participation by children and young people by deciding that by no later than the year 2001 this pioneer project will be given a financial competence of Sfr. 10,000 a year. The only opposing votes came from the Swiss People's Party (SVP).

In addition, when the city regulations are revised, consideration will be made to giving the Children's Parliament the right to pass on its resolutions. In this way, the children will be able to address their concerns to the city council directly.

Even now the children are becoming involved in adult politics. When the new city president was to be elected in 1996, both Studers – the two candidates had the same surname – had to take questions from the Children's Parliament. "They listened to us and with the knotted handkerchief they promised to renovate the indoor swimming pool," remembers Moreno. And who would they have elected? "Urs, of course," answers the sixth-former immediately, "the other one only wanted more parking spaces."

A prize for the Children's Parliament

Lucerne's pioneering activities in this field have not gone without recognition. The city and its Children's Parliament have been awarded the first "Pestalozzi Prize for a Child-Friendly Habitat". This provides Sfr. 20,000, donated by the Swiss teachers' umbrella organisation, Pro Juventute, Children's Lobby Switzerland, the Swiss Unicef Committee and the World Pestalozzi Foundation. The next thing is for the setting up of this child-friendly institution to be discussed in other Swiss cities. ■

Youth sessions at the federal parliament

In addition to Lucerne's Children's Parliament, there exist about 40 youth parliaments, some at municipal level and others at cantonal level. Although the rules of each differ greatly as do their relationship with the authorities, since 1995 they have been organised in a national umbrella organisation. Their financial competence ranges from Sfr. 700 to Sfr. 40,000 a year. Members of a youth parliament are aged from 13 to 25. The young politicians have been brought to public attention mainly because of the five youth sessions which have been held in the federal parliament. It has not yet been decided when and where the next national youth session will be held.

Further information may be obtained from the Association of Swiss Youth Parliaments. Tel: 41 31 382 54 74.

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The one who holds the toy animal has the right to speak. (Photo: zvg)

having one of the playgrounds transformed as they saw it, to the tune of Sfr. 10,000. They also successfully lobbied for a mobile skateboard installation and the elimination of 20 parking spaces.

40-year old Walti Mathis, up till now the only city delegate for children in Switzerland, was the person who set up Lucerne's Children's Parliament. He organised action groups to interest children in politics. These included a team of reporters writing for a school

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