

Perceptions of Fairness in the Montenegrin Education System: Between Formal Rules and Informal Influences

A survey of perceptions among parents, students and pupils

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AUTHOR: Ana Nenezić

EDITOR: Boris Marić

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INTRODUCTION

The way an education system functions has a profound impact on perceptions of fairness and equal opportunity in society. Education is not merely a mechanism for the transfer of knowledge and the development of competencies; it is also a space in which people form fundamental expectations about whether a society rewards effort, knowledge and hard work, or whether privilege and informal influence determine outcomes. For this reason, the integrity of the education system carries broader social implications, shaping citizens' trust in institutions and in the principles underpinning the social order.

In contemporary democratic societies, the education system is frequently regarded as a key instrument of social mobility. The idea that educational success depends primarily on ability, effort and achievement is one of the foundational assumptions of social justice. When citizens begin to doubt the consistent application of rules or the equal treatment of pupils and students, however, trust in this function of education can be seriously undermined.

In the context of Montenegro, questions of educational integrity take on additional significance in the context of institutional reform and European integration. Standards of transparency, accountability and equal opportunity stemming from European policy frameworks require the continuous strengthening of integrity across public institutions, including the education sector.

The perception that some pupils or students may enjoy a more favourable position due to personal connections, gifts or other informal factors is particularly sensitive because it directly calls into question the principle of equal opportunity. Even in situations where such practices are not systematically widespread, the mere suspicion of their existence can significantly influence how citizens interpret educational outcomes.

In contemporary policy literature, perception-based research on corruption and institutional integrity is regarded as a valuable complement to formal administrative data. Such research provides insight into the views and experiences of those in daily contact with the system, whose voices often remain invisible in official statistics.

This policy paper aims to provide precisely such insight through an analysis of the attitudes and experiences of respondents in direct contact with the education system in Montenegro. Particular attention is paid to perceptions of meritocracy, equal treatment of pupils and students, transparency of grading criteria, and perceptions of informal practices that may influence educational outcomes.

The findings presented in this paper are based on a survey involving a total of 82 respondents, collected through a combination of an online questionnaire and face-to-face interviews. This policy paper forms part of a broader research cycle focused on analysing perceptions of integrity in Montenegro's education system.

1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1.1 Research objectives and framework

The aim of this research was to identify the perceptions and experiences of citizens in relation to integrity in Montenegro's education system, with a particular focus on parents, pupils and students. Unlike formal administrative data — which typically captures only reported cases of irregularities — perception-based research provides broader insight into how citizens experience the functioning of institutions in everyday practice.

The research was designed as a descriptive perception study. This approach is grounded in the assumption that citizens' perceptions of institutional functioning carry independent analytical value: they shape the behaviour of actors within the system, influence the motivation of pupils and students, and determine the level of trust in educational institutions — regardless of whether they correspond to formally documented cases of misconduct.

1.2 Data collection method

Data were collected using two methods: an anonymous online survey questionnaire and direct face-to-face interviewing. The decision to use two methods was motivated by methodological considerations. The online questionnaire afforded greater perceived anonymity for respondents — particularly important when researching sensitive topics such as corruption, where social desirability bias has been identified as a systematic source of distortion.

It is important to note that the two methods were applied to different parts of the sample, not to the same respondents. Data collected online and face-to-face were analysed together in the final analysis. The questionnaire was structured and included questions on a five-point Likert agreement scale, multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions.

1.3 Sample composition

The total number of survey respondents is **82**. Three target groups participated in the research, all of whom have direct contact with the education system:

- **Parents or guardians** of pupils and students — the largest share of the sample
- **Students** in higher education institutions
- **Secondary school pupils**

The largest part of the sample consists of parents, who observe the education system from the perspective of service users and through the experience of following their children's progress. Survey questions covered perceptions of meritocracy in education, equal treatment of pupils and students, transparency in grading, and experiences of irregularities.

1.4 Research limitations

Sample representativeness. A sample of 82 respondents is not representative at the national level and cannot be used to generalise findings to the overall population. Results should be treated as indicative and exploratory.

Self-selection. A convenience sample carries the risk of self-selection — it is likely that participants with already-formed and stronger views on corruption were more inclined to take part, which may lead to a degree of overestimation of negative perceptions.

Perception as subject matter, not as evidence. This research measures perceptions, not objective conditions. A high level of negative perceptions does not prove that corruption is widespread, but neither does it rule it out. Perceptions carry real behavioural consequences regardless of their factual basis.

2. RESEARCH FINDINGS

2.1 Meritocracy and perceptions of the role of connections in education

One of the key questions in the survey concerned perceptions of meritocracy in the education system — specifically, the extent to which respondents believe that student success depends primarily on knowledge and effort, and the extent to which connections or other informal factors may play a role.

The findings point to a degree of ambivalence among respondents. In the online sample, around **one third** agreed with the statement that student success depends more on personal connections than on knowledge and effort, while approximately the same proportion expressed disagreement. A significant share of respondents took a neutral position.

This distribution of responses suggests that there is no clear, uniform conviction among respondents that the education system operates exclusively on the basis of merit. For this reason, perceptions of meritocracy represent an important indicator of trust in educational institutions.

A system in which citizens hold a clear conviction that the rules are the same for everyone and that success depends on knowledge and effort has a greater potential to generate trust and motivation among pupils and students.

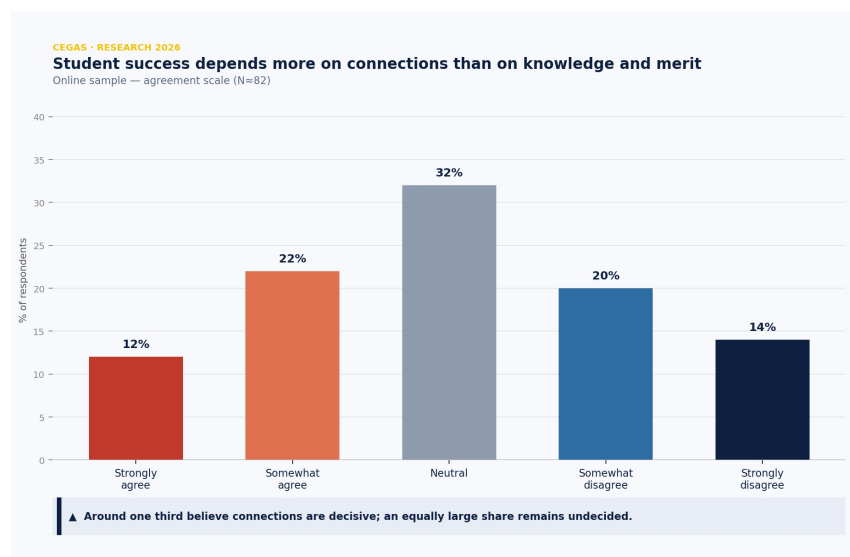


Figure 1: Student success depends more on connections than on knowledge and merit

2.2 Equal treatment of pupils and students

One of the questions that generated the strongest level of agreement in the survey concerned perceptions of equal treatment. On the statement that teachers and professors do not treat all pupils and students equally, nearly **two thirds** of respondents in the online sample said they mostly or fully agreed.

Perceptions of unequal treatment can take many forms — from the application of different grading criteria to preferential treatment of certain pupils, or to the belief that some individuals enjoy a more favourable position due to personal connections or social status. Trust in equal treatment is one of the fundamental prerequisites for the education system to function as a mechanism of social mobility.

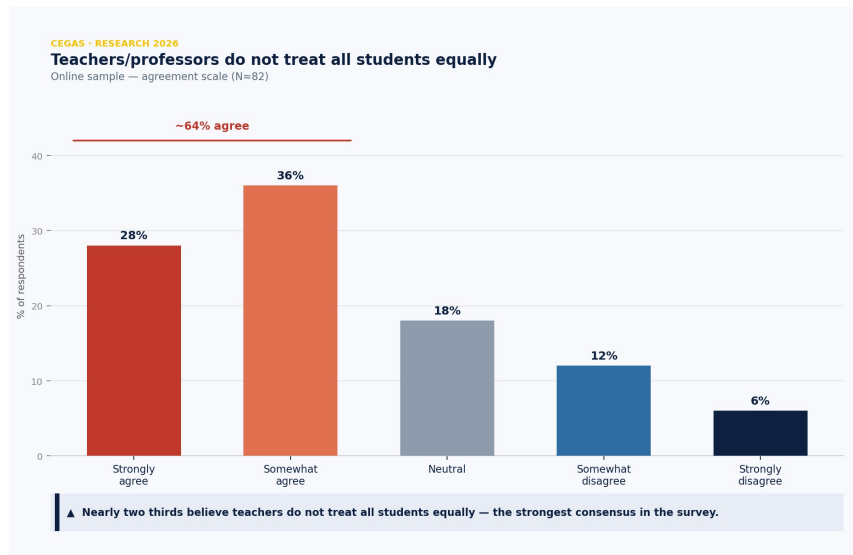


Figure 2: Teachers/professors do not treat all pupils and students equally

2.3 Gifts and informal influences in education

The survey also examined perceptions of the influence of gifts or so-called 'tokens of appreciation' on the relationship between teachers and their pupils or students. The findings indicate that **more than half of respondents** believe that gifts can influence how teachers and professors treat pupils and students.

This perception points to the existence of a grey zone in which it is sometimes difficult to draw a clear line between socially accepted gestures and practices that may undermine the principle of equal treatment. The finding underscores the importance of clear professional standards and ethical guidelines in education.

In the context of educational integrity, perceptions of informal influence can be just as significant as the actual occurrence of misconduct. Even when real cases of corruption are rare, the belief that certain practices can give individual pupils an advantage is sufficient to erode trust in the fairness of the system.

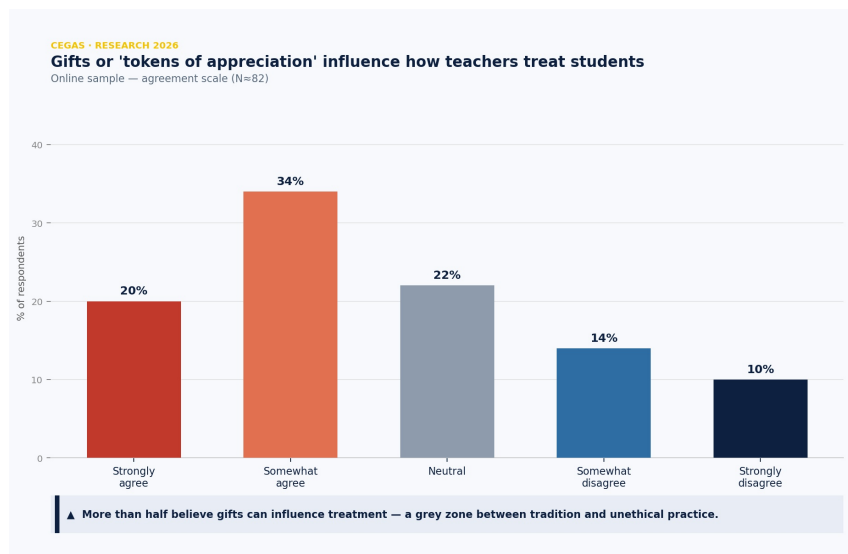


Figure 3: Gifts or 'tokens of appreciation' influence how teachers treat students

2.4 Fairness in grading as a key indicator of trust

One of the most pronounced findings of the research concerns perceptions of fairness in grading. The results show that **seven in ten respondents** believe that grading rules are not applied equally to all students. This finding represents one of the strongest indicators of perceived inequality in the education system.

For pupils and students, grades are often the most visible symbol of the education system's fairness. When there is a belief that grades do not depend exclusively on knowledge and effort, this can negatively affect motivation to learn and the sense of justice within the educational process.

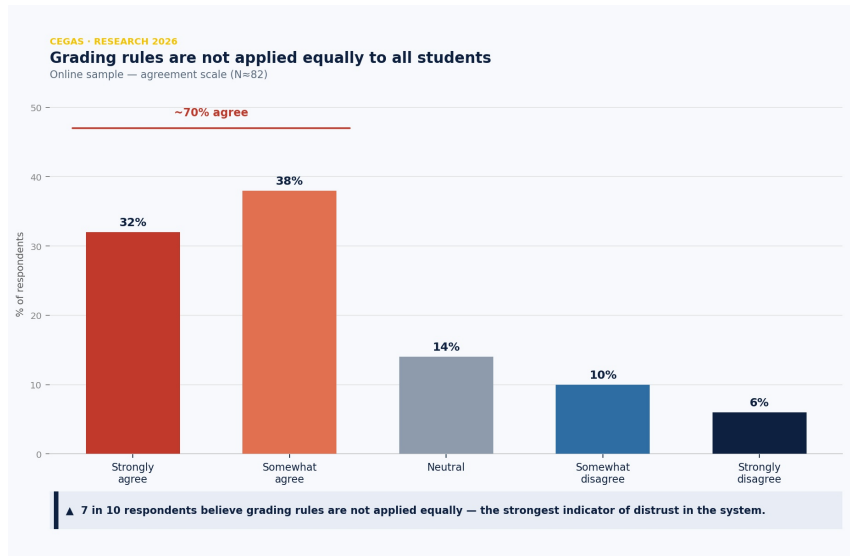


Figure 4: Grading rules are not applied equally to all students

2.5 Personal experiences with irregularities and willingness to report

In addition to perceptions of informal influences, the survey also addressed questions relating to respondents' personal experiences with irregularities in the education system, as well as their willingness to report such situations to the relevant institutions.

The findings show that a proportion of respondents report having had personal experiences they consider to be corruption or unfair treatment in education. Such experiences, however, rarely lead to formal reporting of irregularities. The reasons are multiple: distrust of institutions, the belief that reporting will not lead to change, and fear of negative consequences.

The research points to a low level of trust in the effectiveness of reporting mechanisms. Only **14% of respondents** believe that reporting corruption would lead to real change, while **72% of respondents** do not know, or only partially know, who they can report irregularities to in the education system.

When citizens believe that reporting irregularities will not lead to change — or that it may result in negative consequences — they are less willing to use existing protection mechanisms. Over time, this dynamic can further erode trust in institutions.

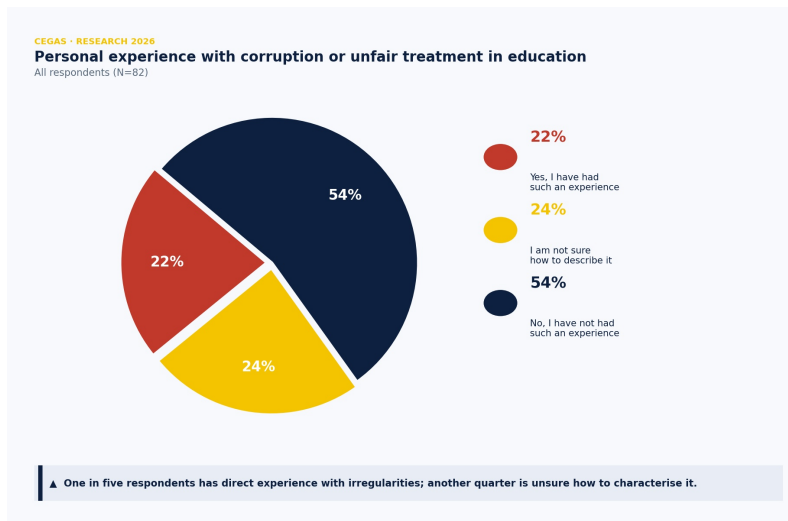


Figure 5: Personal experience with irregularities in education

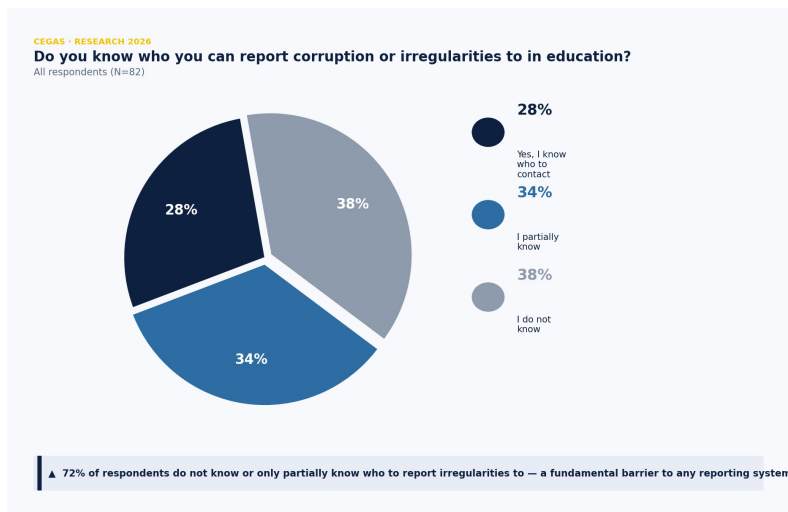


Figure 6: Awareness of who to report corruption to

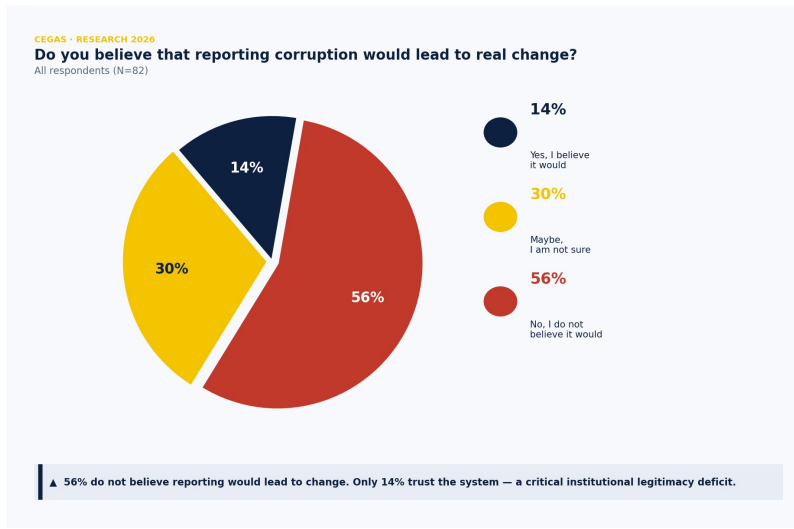


Figure 7: Trust that reporting can lead to change

3. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research point to a systemic, rather than a sporadic, problem. What emerges is a deficit of trust that runs through every key dimension of the educational process — from the way pupils perceive the recognition of their work, to the reasons why neither parents nor pupils themselves make use of the mechanisms the system formally provides.

Perceptions of unfairness are widespread and mutually consistent. The research reveals a high degree of agreement among respondents on several interconnected propositions: that teachers do not treat all pupils equally; that grading criteria are not applied uniformly to all; and that gifts or informal gestures can influence teachers' attitudes towards pupils. These three findings converge to build a coherent picture of a system in which informal factors occupy a space that formal rules fail to close.

Perceptions of grading are the most critical point. Of all the questions in the survey, the statement that grading rules are not applied equally recorded the strongest consensus — around seven in ten respondents agree. Grading is not merely a pedagogical instrument — it is the primary mechanism through which the education system communicates to young people whether, and how, their efforts are valued. When that mechanism loses legitimacy, so too does the fundamental premise on which motivation for learning rests.

The question of meritocracy remains open, but deeply concerning. Unlike the other questions, views on whether success depends more on connections than on knowledge and effort were more evenly divided. A large number of respondents, however, took a neutral position — and uncertainty about whether the system rewards knowledge equally for all is itself a symptom of eroded trust.

Between experience and reporting lies a wall. Some respondents report having had personal experiences they consider to be corruption or unfair treatment, yet these experiences were almost never formally reported. The reasons are twofold and mutually reinforcing: respondents do not know who to turn to, and they do not believe that reporting would have any effect.

The education system is losing its role as a mechanism of social mobility. When pupils and parents perceive that success does not depend exclusively on knowledge and effort, the education system ceases to function as a space of equal opportunity. Over time, that perception does not remain merely a perception — it changes behaviour. Systems do not change through sudden reversals, but through the gradual erosion of norms — and it is precisely that erosion which this research documents.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings, several recommendations can be identified that have the potential to contribute to strengthening the integrity of the education system and increasing public trust in its mechanisms.

1 Introduce transparency standards for grading as a mandatory element of pedagogical oversight

The Ministry of Education should consider introducing a requirement for every educational institution to publish clear, operationalised grading criteria by subject and year level, made available to parents and pupils in written form. The Education Inspectorate should incorporate the verification of consistent application of these criteria into its regular inspection visits, with particular attention to variability in grades within the same cohort for the same subject content.

2 Establish a functional, visible and secure reporting channel specific to the education sector

The Ministry should consider establishing a dedicated, anonymous channel for reporting irregularities in education — with a clearly defined procedure, a response deadline and a mandatory feedback mechanism for the complainant. It is essential that this channel be actively promoted — through school notice boards, parent meetings and digital platforms — given that 72% of respondents currently do not know who to contact.

3 Develop a code of ethics for teaching staff with operational guidance on gifts and informal practices

The Ministry should develop, in consultation with teaching staff and professional associations, a concrete code of ethics that goes beyond statements of principle to provide clear guidance: which forms of appreciation are acceptable, which are not, how borderline situations should be handled, and what internal reporting mechanisms are available. Introducing ethical guidelines without corresponding training and discussion within school communities will have no effect.

4 Formalise the role of pupil and parent bodies in monitoring the application of rules in schools

Parent councils and pupil councils exist in a formal sense within Montenegro's education system, but their role in monitoring the consistent application of rules remains insufficiently defined. The Ministry should consider clarifying the remit of these bodies with regard to monitoring grading consistency and equal treatment, and should require schools to report annually to parent councils on complaints procedures and their outcomes.

5 Launch periodic, standardised research into perceptions of integrity in the education system

The Ministry should consider adopting an annual or biennial cycle of standardised perception research — with a representative sample, a clear methodology and publicly available results. Such an instrument would give the Ministry its own early-warning mechanism, and would signal to the public that the system is monitoring itself.

6 Ensure that integrity reforms are accompanied by measurable indicators, not merely procedural steps

Each of the recommendations above is meaningful only if accompanied by a concrete indicator of progress. It is not sufficient to adopt a code of ethics — the question is how many teachers have undergone training on it. It is not sufficient to open a reporting channel — the question is how many reports have been received and how many resulted in concrete action.