

INTERPARENTS

**Alicante Bergen Brussels I, II, III & IV Culham Frankfurt
Karlsruhe Luxembourg Mol München Varese
- The Association of the Parents' Associations of the European Schools -
President**

**Public Hearing at the European Parliament about the European Schools
Thursday, 19 March 2009. 09.00-12.30**

REFORMING THE EUROPEAN SCHOOLS SYSTEM

Madame Chair, Vice President Kallas, Members of the European Parliament, Parents of the European Schools, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I. Introduction

The European School system, was initiated by the parents fifty years ago.

The schools are now at a crisis, and at a turning point. A crisis, because through decades of misattention, all the four largest schools are now overcrowded to bursting point and the situation is getting worse, particularly here in Brussels.

A turning point, because after years of negotiation, the system is on the threshold of significant reform. Recall that the European Parliament's first resolution was in 2002.

I shall submit to you today that the European Schools should be sustained and considerably expanded. With appropriate improvements and investments, they correspond to a growing and important requirement for relevant skills in European society and economy. I urge the Culture and Education Committee to grasp this opportunity to commit the European Institutions to a constructive and ambitious reform of the European Schools.

The parents are those most closely associated with the life of the schools – both their successes and their problems. Our members, through daily experience over long years, know these schools well and contribute to them. When we propose alternatives - and sometimes we do criticise - it is on the basis of this experience, bearing in mind that most of the parents are themselves well educated and have a thorough experience of the European Institutions.

The current Convention of the European Schools was negotiated in 1994 and came into force in 2002. It provides that the Parents are members of, and represented in, the Board of Governors and most related bodies. Interparents' principal *raison d'être* is to consult, coordinate and represent the Parents in the system as a whole. The reform must strengthen the role of the parents in the governance of all the schools in the future.

Interparents is not limited to the agenda of the Board of Governors. Our member Associations undertake substantial administrative functions on behalf of each of the schools. They are voting members of the Administrative Board of each school, and participate in the Education Committees and other school entities. The Parents Associations organise and manage school transport, school refectories and extra-curricular activities.

II. Civil Society and Public Participation

Thus the parents of the European School system represent an historical, organic entity with significant institutional and educational achievements to their credit. This manifestation of collective and individual **public service**, is an exemplar of the contemporary movement towards consultation and participation of all interested parties in public policy, which is increasingly the case in the national, European and global context. The European Parliament and the European Commission respond positively and openly to this growing tendency, which has its roots in two fundamental trends in our society, compared with the mid-twentieth century:

- The much higher level of education of the population, and
- incomparable, immediate access to communications and information, through the Internet.

Thus the past, present and the future relationships between Interparents, our members, and the European Schools system, is a microcosm of a much larger phenomenon.

In the 1950's, stakeholder participation in the European Schools system was very much before its time. Today, however, we should not let the system lag behind whilst the rest of the world moves on. The parents should have parity with other members of the school community, including the governments. Interparents will continue to advocate and exercise full transparency, and effective participation, throughout the system.

III Objectives of the Reform

The reform of the European Schools system was already an objective of the European Parliament and the Board of Governors several years ago. It

is making positive if rather laborious progress. Other contributions to these Hearings will be

elaborating on the current position. Interparents will continue to contribute to this process through our first hand knowledge of the system, our participation in the Board of Governors, the Working Group on Reform, the Working Group on the European Baccalaureate, and by monitoring progress in the existing and new European Schools.

We consider that the following objectives are critically important in the **reform and expansion** of the European Schools system:

- First. Maintaining and improving the **recognition** of the European Baccalaureate throughout European higher education. This can be done, supported by the results of the Bureau van Dijk study and the recommendations of the Cambridge Institute for Education's evaluation. In passing, it is somewhat bizarre that the Secretariat General has not established full recognition for the European Baccalaureate with UCAS, PREPAS, and other university accreditation systems in the Member States.
- Second. Broadening European education to accommodate a **wider range of abilities** - and disabilities - among the schools' pupils. The European Schools do not have a selective intake, nor should they. They are part of public, comprehensive education in Europe and should address the population concerned, as a whole.

Today too many students have to leave the system because they are failing, because they are repeating, or because the schools are unable to offer a curriculum suitable for their abilities. Interparents appreciates the European Parliament's interest and budgetary support for Special Educational Needs. We look forward to the results of the audit currently undertaken by Swedish educational experts.

Decisions as to the future SEN policy should await the results of this audit.

- Third: **devolution** of decision-making to the schools themselves. The system is too centralised to be flexible enough to accommodate a larger number of schools throughout the Member States.
- Fourth: Improving **governance** by strengthening participation by **parents**, among other stakeholders, in decisions and management throughout the system. Interparents is concerned that when decision making powers are delegated from the Board of Governors, for instance to the Board of Inspectors, that our representation and voting powers throughout the system be increased accordingly.

The objective of the reform is to permit a **major expansion**. It is not just a question of tagging the last two years of the European Baccalaureate on to bits of the existing national systems. Superficial adjustments to governance and cost-saving for its own sake are hardly worthwhile. The reform process to-date has already been expensive and time-consuming. The original political impetus should now be rewarded by concrete results. The expansion of the system has to be large enough to have a significant impact on the numbers, composition and qualifications of young women and men employed in Europe in the future.

IV. **Obstacles and Missed Opportunities**

It is already evident that implementing the reform continues to be fraught with difficulties. These are some of the obstacles which already confront us:

1. The **financial model** for the European Schools has broken down. In several Member States, particularly here in Belgium, financing, building and equipping the infrastructure is not taking place, in line with the Convention. That

issue lies at the heart of the current crisis. Furthermore, certain Member States have declared that they are no longer willing to send the numbers of teachers required, particularly to teach in the English language. But the schools themselves do not yet have the authority, budgets and resources to recruit the teachers that they need. In these new circumstances, the schools must be able to offer stable, long term professional contracts to the teachers that they require at competitive salaries.

2. The **system is too small** to support the complex and expensive administrative superstructure that has evolved. In addition to the employed staff, there is an elaborate hierarchy of Committees, Working Groups and Study Groups involving most of the Member States and the European Commission, which unduly regulate many details of the present system.

This leads to high unit costs per pupil and *a fortiori* to even higher costs per graduate. Attempts have been made to restrict the system, particularly against non-EU staff children, which by the way flies in the face one of the objectives of the reform.

The result is small schools, small classes, small language sections, which are then eligible to be closed, thus aggravating the problem. Such Malthusian measures fail.

The only way to reduce unit costs significantly is to expand the system; to fill the schools that we have already got; and to create new ones. That, would be consistent with the objective of the reform. Needless to say that the most urgent schools must be where the system is already totally overcrowded, but we certainly should not stop there.

3. I have to say that the initial manifestations of this “**reform**” are **rather disappointing**. Today, we only have a few small proposals to emulate certain aspects of European schooling and the European

Baccalaureate. These are all linked to European or International Agencies in Ireland, Italy, Greece, Finland, France and the Netherlands. All these Agencies are far too small to generate, alone, the demography required to support a European School. Hardly any of the proposed schools are located in a centre which could provide the initial demography required for a viable European School. The only solution is to open the system on a much larger scale.

Furthermore, the so-called Type II and Type III schools would nationalise nearly all the expansion of the system. Thus, depriving those schools and their students of the cardinal benefits of the European Schools. **That is not at all what we had in mind.** No Member State acting alone could reproduce, at home, this educational system. It's essential characteristics are European. To date they have been achieved only through cooperation between the Member States, the European Union and the parents. That must continue, if the reform is to be successful.

4. The **European Baccalaureate** tests experience and knowledge acquired over a decade of education. It will not be possible to teach a credible European Baccalaureate curriculum if it is limited to the last two years of school, as an “add-on” to existing national education systems.

Also, the fixed costs of the Baccalaureate are unnecessarily spread over far too few candidates. The detailed reform of the European Baccalaureate – which, by the way, is only just beginning – will take much time and money. As it is, the fixed costs of setting and marking the European Baccalaureate should be modernised and spread over greater numbers of candidates as soon as possible.

5. Finally, the European schools are only used for half the year. The minimum **school year of 181 days** in class is too short and is often not respected; it is one of the shortest school years in the world. The curriculum is

heavy and elaborate, particularly in the later years. Covering the whole curriculum in such a short time is a challenge for the teachers and a grind for all but the most gifted students. The curriculum should be widened. Access should be broadened to European society as a whole. So, something will have to be done about such a short school year. It cannot be justified.

V. **European Schools, Society and the Economy**

So, today, we must overcome the current crisis and seize the opportunity of the reform. European Schools are an asset which should be deployed throughout the European Union. They support fundamental social and economic objectives: Freedom of Movement, the Internal Market and International Competitiveness. Indeed, as these policies succeed, it would be quite reasonable for our educational policies to keep up. The European economy needs people to work in multi-cultural contexts, at home and abroad. Economic recovery following the recession will depend on competitiveness in technology, innovation and communications. That is, the Lisbon Agenda.

More and more young people arise from multi-cultural environments, bi-lingual families and parents working outside their country of origin. They grow up in more than one Member State. The European Schools, provide us with a viable model to accommodate the legitimate personal, economic and social interests of this growing and crucial part of our population. These people have jobs and create jobs. They are often on the leading edge of new markets and new technologies.

Thus, the combination of multilingualism, the sciences and mathematics, including ICT skills, afforded by the European Schools is a strategic asset, that we should be making maximum use of, as soon as possible, particularly as the economic significance of the European Baccalaureate is now beyond question.

We need more students who have successfully completed this qualification, already held by thousands of citizens across half a century of European demography.

In short, we need an European Schools system that will be much **broader** in numbers and geographical extent, reach **deeper** into all levels of academic and technical ability and look **wider** at the global context, rather than focussing on an Euro-centric view of knowledge. School systems develop at the speed at which pupils mature to adulthood. Children entering primary school next year will enter the labour force, with their qualifications, in about 2025. There can be no quick fix. If we want to achieve results, the earlier we start the better.

VI. Conclusion

Madame President, the European Schools and the European Baccalaureate are a platform for the Member States and the European Union to coordinate a major expansion in European schooling. The time is right. The economic crisis is releasing human and financial resources for long-term investment in education. When the economy recovers its normal course, we do not want shortages of qualified people to stall the recovery. While physical and financial investment is blocked, we have the opportunity to maximise our investments in human resources. Now is the time to act boldly and constructively.

Interparents thanks the members of the European Parliament for this opportunity to bring our experience, analysis and ambitions before you.