

INTERPARENTS

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- THE ASSOCIATION OF THE PARENTS' ASSOCIATIONS OF THE EUROPEAN SCHOOLS -

PRESIDENT

Notes on the meeting between Interparents and the European Commission, Cabinet of Vice President Siim Kallas Berlaymont, Brussels, Tuesday 27 May, 2008

2 June 2008

Participants:

Interparents: Christopher Wilkinson (CW), President; Carine Lingier, Vice President.
Apologies, Karin van Vrede, Marit Hololei

European Commission: Henrik Hololei (HH), Chef de Cabinet
Veronica Manfredi, Simona Schlede.
Alain Scriban (AS), Director, DG ADMIN
Annie Javelle, Armelle Macrez, DG ADMIN

I Background:

Following the election of the new Interparents Management Committee in January 2008, CW wrote to Vice President Kallas and Commissioner Jan Figel in March 2008 to introduce Interparents and the new Management Committee. We drew attention to several issues:

1. overcrowding in Brussels and several other European Schools.
2. Maintaining and improving the quality of the European Baccalaureat
3. Pedagogic aspects, including teaching in Second Language
4. ICT
5. Transparency and participation.

A meeting between Interparents Management Committee and the Cabinet of Vice President Kallas was eventually arranged for Tuesday 27 May 2008, 15.00-16.30.

II Discussion:

CW thanked the Cabinet for this opportunity to discuss the European Schools. Amplifying the contents of our earlier letter he noted that:

- the **accommodation crisis** in the schools might call for radical, unforeseen and unprecedented measures in the next few years. Although Interparents would continue to press for viable solutions within the present framework, CW said that in his personal opinion, the existing financing model for the European Schools would not be sustainable in the longer term.
- **Type II and Type III schools:** the key precondition for success is maintaining the quality of the Baccalaureate qualification. This implies a sustained input from the Inspectors across language sections and Member States, for quality control and recruitment.
- **Financing of Type II schools:** DG ADMIN should not pursue a narrow agenda related to the children of EU officials only. What was needed is a broad model for the financial viability of a new form of European education, as a whole. The capital costs of new Type II and Type III schools could be financed, in part, by the European Investment Bank, which is already funding educational developments in the Member States.
- **Reform:** CW pointed to a certain dichotomy between the annual EU Budget procedure and the the requirement in the Attainment Contracts envisaging inter-alia, medium term commitments. The EU Commission should give a clear political signal that it intends to respect its medium term commitments through the annual budgetary procedure. Alain Scriban said that was already the case.
- **Educational issues:** CW informed the Cabinet that the EU Commission is perceived as unduly privileging budgetary and administrative aspects of the European Schools at the expense of educational and pedagogic priorities. This, perhaps, goes some way to explain why the European Schools community – which in all other respects is fundamentally *Communautaire* – mistrusts the participation of the European Institutions, particularly the EU Commission.

The DG ADMIN position regarding Cost Sharing, in the Board of Governors and the Working Groups, is a pertinent illustration of this problem.

- **ICT:** CW confirmed that he was encouraged by the positive response to Interparents comments, and that these matters would be followed up with the ICT officers in the Secretariat and in the Schools.

- **Transparency:** Interparents and its member Associations are the primary representatives of Civil Society in the context of European education. The general policy of transparency and participation in the decision making processes of the public authorities should be adopted and applied in this context as well. Although there had been some incremental improvements during 2008, the general policy of the Board of Governors and the Secretariat was not yet clear.

The EU Commission should practice transparency consistently, and not *à la carte*. (NDLR: this refers to the fact that the Group d'Accompagnement indeed meets from time to time before Board of Governors meetings, but that the Commission has promoted in the EURSC Steering Group and in Working Groups positions that have not been referred to in the Group d'Accompagnement, and would not be supported there.)

In response, Henrik Hololei welcomed Interparents and emphasized that there is a common interests in sustaining the quality of the European Baccalaureate and recognition by all the Member states, recent and current difficulties in certain Member States notwithstanding.

Regarding financial models in the future, HH indicated that he was open for discussion. Regarding pedagogical issues, the perception was misplaced and there was not a problem.

The Commission and the European Parliament are on the same page here. Indeed, Vice President Kallas, and the Netherlands Minister had been among the architects of the vision of opening European education more widely.

Rather, the issue had been one of financial management in the European schools system.

Alain Scriban said that the Commission was committed to the educational quality of the schools. However, the impossible situation in Brussels was compromising the situation and spoiling the debate.

He agreed that there might be a problem of perception, but that it was misplaced. The fact was that since the budget had been blocked [in 200?] it had become urgent to resolve the situation. The Commission had had to act with respect to the Financial Regulation and Audit in order to maintain its accountability to the European Parliament.

Regarding Category III students, HH said he did not see why they should be subsidized by the EU and that fees might be aligned with the Lycée Français or the Deutsche Schule. Carine Lingier responded that the discussions on school fees and the Van Dijk report had made clear that Category II and III fees should be regarded as a source of income. Moreover, their presence helped to assure the quality of the service provided to the EU staff in certain language sections.

CW: What are the issues that the Commission thinks that Interparents members might address with the Member States? HH: 1. That the Member States respect their obligations. 2. Member State recognition of the European Baccalaureate. 3. The UK issues.

Conclusion:

CW: These are all on-going issues. Interparents will continue to stay in touch with the European Commission as these matters evolve and whenever necessary. Transparency and Participation are important principles. For instance, Interparents would be neutral as to whether a Board of Governors meeting takes place at Senior Official or Ministerial level, provided that the representatives of the parents participate and are heard in both cases. (NDLR: Interparents opposes the migration of decision-making to fora in which the parents are not represented.)

Interparents may write a follow-up letter in the foreseeable future, depending on how matters develop in the Reform WG and in the Board of Governors.

The Cabinet and DG ADMIN thanked Interparents for their visit.
