

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

PRESIDENT

31 July 2009

Mr Siim Kallas
Vice President
European Commission
1049 Brussels

Dear Mr Kallas:

Subject: European Schools

I am writing to give you an overview of the issues confronting the European Commission and the Board of Governors relating to the European Schools. During the past two years, as President of Interparents, I have had the opportunity and privilege of working with your Cabinet and DG ADMIN, for which I thank you. I have also addressed several of the matters referred to below with the Board of Governors and the Secretariat of the European Schools.

Generally, I consider that it is now recognised that the European Schools have reached a critical mass from which substantial further development is now both feasible and desirable. The value of the education and the schools' economic and social contribution to European integration have been recently assessed and confirmed.

However, the European Schools are subject to several constraints which unnecessarily compromise the best that they could offer to their students and to the European public. The burden of this letter is to highlight to the Commission and to our colleagues and successors the nature of these issues and to suggest what could be done about it.

I. The Convention

In the light of my experiences as a parent since 1973, I must say that a large part of the present problem arises from chronic neglect by the Commission of the consequences of delay and inaction on several fronts, notably by the Host Countries. I am aware that the Commission has in recent years attempted to restore the situation by adopting a rather higher profile in this regard, however, I doubt whether you appreciate the scale of the mountain-to-climb that the Commission has inherited.

Notably it has become essential to reappraise fundamentally the political reasons for the enduring impasse between the European Commission and, particularly, the Belgian authorities. In this context the repeated assertions by representatives of the Commission that it supports unconditionally the present Convention are counterproductive. Such statements are taken as confirmation that the Commission will continue to do no more than it has done to date, which is manifestly not enough. It is already clear that radical and unconventional steps will have to be taken if the Schools' obligations to their families and the Institution's obligations to their staff are to be respected in the future.

II. Type I Schools

Secondly, it is ironic that at the same time as we are attempting to manage the crisis in Brussels and several very difficult situations elsewhere, a number of the existing European Schools are distinctly under-employed. Indeed, for a European School to be educationally efficient at the upper Secondary school level, it must have a sufficient number of pupils. From this point of view it is counterproductive and contradictory on the one hand to pursue a policy of decentralisation through the JRC and the Agencies, and on the other hand to continue to restrict the size of their schools through limitations imposed on the numbers of "category 3" pupils. Unless this issue is addressed constructively, soon, the Commission will continue to offer the families in the Agencies a sub-standard European Schooling with highly restricted options available in the European Baccalaureate. I suggest that this prospect should be made clear to the prospective staff concerned, at the outset.

I have already referred to these matters in [Interparents' presentation](#) to the Hearings on the European Schools at the European Parliament.

III. 'SWALS'

Thirdly, there is a particular problem of the students without a language section, arising from enlargement. Granted that 'Swals' are a feature of the European School system, two factors have recently conspired to create a most disturbing situation: the arrival of families from Member States for whom no language section has yet been created and the Central Enrolment Authority's policy of obliging all new arrivals to register their children in one particular school. On the contrary it was, and is, essential that the numbers of 'Swals' be fairly and evenly distributed among all the schools and language sections.

Having consulted some of the parents concerned, it would appear that the Institutions did not explain to them, on appointment, the options available and the consequences of the decisions that were being taken. I expect that Interparents will address these matters directly to the Board of Inspectors and the Board of Governors. However, in any event, DG ADMIN should take steps to reconcile the Commission's responsibilities as employer with its activities in the Central Enrolment Authority.

The ill-advised conclusions of the Board of Governors regarding Cost Sharing – unfortunately supported by the Commission – serve but to aggravate the situation. There is still no mechanism for Member States who are not contributing fairly to the European Schools to make a compensating financial contribution. This, even when they have no mother tongue language section to contribute to directly, and their *ressortissants* are nevertheless being employed by the EU Institutions, without the normal support for the education of their children.

IV. Reform

Recognising that the Commission has undertaken a significant political and administrative task in launching the Reform, together with the government of the Netherlands, and pursuing the issue to date, it is nevertheless important that the Commission appreciate that the Reform is by no means complete. There is a great deal of unfinished business and the critical issue of the reform of the European Baccalaureate has only just begun. Note that here, the principal issues of European policy are now educational, economic and social and no longer administrative, only related to EU staff.

In this context, the Commission's Press Release of 12 May (IP/09/739) and the associated statement to 'Commission en Plus' merit several qualifications relating to the breakdown in the functioning of the present Convention, the educational viability of the smaller Type I schools and the minimalist characteristics of the so-called Type II and Type III schools proposed to date. These matters are also addressed in greater detail in [Interparents presentation](#) at the European Parliament.

In particular, an essential element of the Reform is the opening of the European Schools system to the European public at large. However, DG ADMIN - perhaps inadvertently - continues to give the impression that the Reform is primarily about the EU staff in the Agencies. I would strongly advise against this attitude: (a) there is little political support for an 'elitist' approach to the European Schools (b) the numbers are so small that the 'leverage' of the Commission contribution to Type II schools is not significant in most cases, and (c) unless the Agencies become considerably larger and more concentrated geographically, there will be a chronic problem with quality, options and continuity in the 'Type II' and 'Type III' schools based only on Category I pupils.

It would be greatly appreciated if the Commission would come out more clearly in support of the overall objectives of the Reform and the opening of the system as a whole.

We also trust that DG ADMIN will now withdraw its long-standing opposition to opening the existing schools to Category III pupils where space is available.

V. Governance

I consider that in the Twenty-first Century, it is a given that the interested parties and civil society have a right and obligation to participate fully in the governance of their affairs. This is particularly relevant in education where the parents are the principal stakeholder.

However, the European School system is far from acknowledging these principles. I would encourage the Commission to take steps to ensure that general principles of good governance, widely supported in European policy, be specifically endorsed and applied in the European Schools – so to speak, on our doorstep.

In this context, I was surprised and rather disappointed to read in Commission en Plus that it is considered that the parents would have an increased decision making power at the local level. That is not the case. Under the present proposals, the parents' voting power in the schools' Administrative Boards would be reduced. I have written separately to the Secretary General about this issue which will have to be reconsidered at the next meeting of the Board of Governors. I trust that the Commission will support the Parents' Associations, in that the already inadequate standing of their representatives in the Board of Governors and the Administrative Boards must be at least maintained, pending the necessary reformulation of the Convention which should give all stakeholders greater parity in decisions.

VI. Transparency

Although the European Schools system are subject to European Union policy and laws, and the Secretariat is actually housed within the European Commission, the system as a whole does not apply normal conditions of transparency and access to information which should be publicly available. Indeed the Commission would normally release any information in its possession, on request, under Freedom of Information. Accordingly, I would consider that the Secretariat should spontaneously make preparatory documents more widely available and that all final documents should be published, subject only to justified privacy considerations.

Interparents has addressed this issue explicitly to the Secretary General and the Board of Governors on more than one occasion. We appreciate that the Commission has supported our approach by rejecting an even more restrictive policy proposed by the Secretariat earlier this year. We request continued support from the Commission to ensure that normal conditions of transparency apply throughout the European Schools system.

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Dear Vice President Kallas, many of these matters will take time to resolve and merit the commitment and permanent attention of the EU Institutions. More widespread, high level, European Schooling is a significant contribution to integration and competitiveness.

For historical and practical reasons, contemporary contributions by principal stakeholders is handicapped. Until that can be resolved, many parents inevitably look to the European Commission. Please ensure that you and your colleagues in the next Commission continues to act effectively in this regard.

This has now become a matter of general EU educational policy and no longer just a question of the Commission's responsibilities as an employer.

May I also take this opportunity to thank all those teachers, administrators and other officials who work for the European Schools system, and to recognise the many parents who devote their voluntary time to organising services in the schools and their Parents' Associations.

With my best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Christopher Wilkinson

Copies: Mr Jan Figel, Member of the Commission
Md. Catherine Day, Secretary General of the Commission
Md. Odile Quintin, Director General
Md. Irene Souka, Director General
Md. Renée Christmann, Secretary General of the European Schools.

[Interparents Website](#)