

Contribution to the public consultation "Schools for the 21st century"

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Very appropriately, section 2.6 of the Consultation document uses the term "responsible European citizenship". This should be the result of education covering the principles of modern multilevel democracy proclaimed by the EU, the main elements of European history and cultures, the working of European institutions, the rights and duties of EU citizens, as well as a second European language.

It should be obvious (but one may also refer to various studies in the fields of sociology and political science) that in the absence of such education no common European political identity can ever develop. Since this identity is essential to the EU's long-term survival, membership of the Union implies necessarily for each Member State the obligation to ensure education towards a responsible European citizenship.

Up to now, this moral obligation has not been clearly identified, probably because education was generally considered in the light of cultural diversity. The latter is to be preserved with a minimum of intervention from the Union, as reflected in the Treaties. However, already in 1988 the Council expressed the need for a "European dimension in education" and advocated corresponding action. In this line, more and more attention has been drawn to the issue, as shown for example by the Parliament's resolution of 26 September 2006. Regarding the actual state of education in the Union, repeated Eurobarometer findings and the Eurydice report of 2005 demonstrate respectively that citizens know only very little about Europe, and that a European dimension is practically absent in many Member States' education systems.

Now, when addressing the theme of schools for the 21st century, time has come to clarify responsibilities in this area and to take action. Whereas education in view of cultural identity should principally be a matter of countries, regions, local and/or cultural communities, education in view of political identity and capabilities can only be a shared concern of European and Member State authorities. This distinction makes a more appropriate interpretation of Article 149 possible (later, the text of the Article itself may be clarified). Member States are indeed responsible for the content of education. They should therefore implement measures to ensure education towards responsible European citizenship in school programmes, covering the elements mentioned in the first paragraph above. For their part, the EU institutions should consider as a priority task to systematically evaluate progress on this point, in view of developing common political identity. The Commission could also provide support by organising flows of information and proposing best practice based models for content and evaluation. Procedures could be derived from the open method of coordination. Work done in the Council of Europe and other non-EU initiatives may be helpful here, but should never obscure the fact that this matter is a vital responsibility of the EU as a whole!