



## Comments of the European Parents Association on the debate

### Schools facing up to new challenges

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The European Parents Association welcomes the discussion on modernising the schools in Europe. For children, of which parents are the primary educators, schools play a vital role in their upbringing. As the future of our children depends on the quality of this upbringing, the quality of the school system in all its aspects is an issue of great concern. Therefore, the call of the European Commission to the Member states, to raise the general standard of education and to reduce the number of early school-leavers, has the full support of the European Parents Association. We feel we are partners of those European, and national, institutions who seek the benefit of children in educational policy. We hope the call from the European Commission will foster a broader discussion in politics and society about the importance of education. Further, we hope it raises the attention and consciousness of all stakeholders.

An issue which is not covered by this paper is the pre-school education. However, the EPA also asks for attention to this. As parents, we would be very interested in discussing this issue with policymakers at a European and a national level.

Schools have a great impact on children's lives, but at the same time we have to acknowledge that between a child's birth and sixteenth birthday, only 16% of their time is spent in school (even without counting sleeping hours). Informal learning has been an issue of importance but new technologies such as the internet have made this issue even more pertinent. This means that learning outside school is of great importance and should have the attention of educational policy makers. The EPA believes the necessity for schools to include the role and effects of this informal learning, is equally important. Informal learning is partly practiced within families. Therefore, we feel that cooperation between families and schools is necessary. Educational policy must include this issue and there should also be minimum, quantifiable standards in this. The EPA and the national members offer to discuss these minimum standards with the policymakers at a European and a national level.

We support the idea that modernising the educational system is not only about qualifications but also about skills. Raising and educating children means that we must see each child as whole and not just in narrow limits. A holistic approach means that each individual child must develop their mind, body and spirit.

It is sometimes seen that official reports focus too much on the element of the cognitive development of the child. Although we agree that the level of knowledge in an expanding knowledge-economy is of great importance, we as parents not only want to see a strong economic future for our children, but more importantly we want our children to be happy and

healthy. This means we must build for a future where the economy serves the people (and not the other way around), where labour fulfils the talents of each individual and daily life does not put too much pressure on people.

In this way, education and upbringing should train children in the areas of skills, attitudes, values and virtues which prepare them for their future life. Also, schools and parents should cooperate to give their best effort for this common interest.

We have witnessed that more and more parental organisations worry about a decreasing interest in or even negligence to the importance of physical and cultural education. The holistic approach to education includes our role of developing cultural talents (music, dance, visual art and theatre). Children can then develop different styles of learning which are necessary in the development of the entire brain. Through education we can also prevent European cultural heritage from fading. Moreover, we should encourage creativity, aesthetic appreciation and responsibility as elements of this holistic education.

Premature tracking, streaming and setting is of great concern for parents. Measures to stimulate this are often taken with the idea that they create a more effective educational system, but they may cause a massive loss of talent. Child development is and will never follow a predictable line, as children are not robots. There are several physical, pedagogical and social reasons why a child could develop itself in a different way than those who develop normal or even faster (the 'early birds') which we sometimes feel policymakers base their decisions on.

In the future we see, together with the European Commission, a career path for our children which will change in unpredictable ways. This does not only mean that our children should have the flexibility and other skills necessary because they will have to make more choices in their working lives than their parents did. In this they need good advice and information. This applies to their advisors as well. In this issue, the role of parents is often underestimated. Research shows that children rely on their parents intensively when it comes to making important choices about their future. Parents are still major advisors for their children in the choice of school careers and/or their (first) jobs. Yet we still see that parents often have outdated information about the labour market and also about educational possibilities. We are lacking this advisory role of parents in our investments in children's education. The European Parents Association requests both the European Commission and the national Ministers to put more emphasis on this subject, and we offer to help.

In its issue paper, the European Commission also recognises that today's children have to deal with an increasingly complex world. We underline that this complex world will probably become even more complex for future generations. Thus, we have to deal with raising children in an environment that less and less provides the 'rest, rhythm and hygiene' that we have always seen and continue to see as necessary components of children's development.

A key issue, therefore, focuses on how we can maintain tranquility in the lives of children. For that reason we ask the policymakers in the EU and the member states of the EU to discuss with the representatives of the parents the ways in which we can protect children against the negative aspects of this complex world.

In order to improve the development of children, we should invest in protection against (and education to deal with) concerns such as contemporary but dangerous lifestyle choices

which include unhealthy food, too little exercise, too much media consumption, drugs, tobacco and alcohol. We see the whole entertainment industry overwhelming our children with incentives which are too much to interpret correctly before maturity. We see violence, racism, xenophobia and bullying occurring; this does not respect our children's dignity and is a barrier in the development of their talents. We witness psychological pressure on and even psychological terror in our children (sometimes even brought about by their own parents) and also an inefficient protection of children from the media.

In our opinion, it would be very unfair if official policy stated that these matters are solely the responsibility of the parents. While billion euro industries invest their capacity to influence our children, we as parents feel helpless and unrecognised in this pursuit by our own politicians.

Modernisation of the educational system must take these issues into account because there is an enormous interaction between them and educational development. The modern school, therefore, is more than a teaching institute. What children learn here is of great importance in their lives. We ask for effective school programs on these issues and we offer to help.

We see poverty. It even seems that children inherit the poverty of their parents. We ask attention to this point. Poverty often goes hand in hand with a lack of access to education. Only education finally helps these children who live in poverty to leave this inhuman environment. Also, in this case we ask attention to the position of parents. Many if not all parents who live in poverty want to help their children to escape these circumstances. However, they often lack the necessary capacity, the contacts and the resources. Without being aware of it they frequently influence their children in a harmful way by being negative role models. We believe that programs which stimulate and help these parents to overcome this lack of capacity, to raise awareness and help them with the resources, are effective in two ways: they help children in their struggle to find their way out of these circumstances and help parents to see opportunities (at least for their children). The EPA would like to include these parents as target groups of the programs of Life Long Learning. Programs like these can stimulate the parents' participation in schools, and take them out of their isolation by having contact with other parents.

We notice the problems of migrancy and fear for the future. We witness an expanding economy and industry already asking for migrant workers in disregard for the problems for these parents and children. It is as if we have not learned from the past. We request that you recognise that migrant work is a cause of inhuman circumstances. Families often fall apart or have great problems integrating into a society different from what they were used to. We ask to pay respect to the educational problems of the children of these families, and to take the necessary measures.

Another point of attention is the general capacity of the child. While politicians focus on the innovational changes within schools and take into account the capacity of teachers and other staff to implement the changes into school, we never question if all these changes are possible for the children. What do we know about the capacity of children? We know the maximum working week of teachers (we consider a maximum working week even as a human right), but what is the maximum workload for a young child of eight years old and that of a fifteen-year-old? As soon as the child enters the labour market it is protected by labour laws. But what is the situation of a student? For a lot of policymakers the child is a black box. Only if problems arise and there are demonstrations of students they will open the black box

to see what went wrong. The EPA asks for a more comprehensive view on the lives of children (evidence based), about their natural capacity (both physical and psychological) and we would like educational policy to be based on this. We want the same protection for children as adults receive through labour laws. Only innovation which is based on the natural capacity of children will be effective in the end. Children can only reach the key competences we set if they are based on this natural capacity.

Furthermore, we notice that sometimes the interests of education and families count less than the interests of the economy and other policy issues and that we fail to identify the responsible policymakers. For example, regarding a sound routine in school life, we would like to see that pedagogical reasons lead to decisions as opposed to the interests of the holiday industry and/or traffic which currently put pressure on the school time tables. If we really want to invest in education we must give priority to the pedagogic and psychological aspects, otherwise the nice words are nothing more than 'hot air'.

School is the tool for the education of children and not the aim. This means that schools should have the flexibility to change with society, to change with the children. Schools serve children, not the other way around. In recognising the values which schools bring into the life of a child (discipline, order, setting goals etc.), we must also recognise that they sometimes fail. A child, who enters a school, enters an institute which is going to qualify him/her and pre-select him/her for society. The psychological effects on children are enormous, especially if they fail to meet the qualifications set by teachers. The role of parents is then of unique importance. Their reactions to the child, their understanding, love and affection can compensate for the child's feeling of not being the unique and unproblematic child. However, parents often miss information concerning the educational process of children. Schools regularly have the idea that information for parents is only necessary if the child has failed. They see the child solely as their pupil without considering the parents behind it, or they do not have the competence and capacity to communicate with the parents in the right way, which is often due to a deficiency in the teacher training period. For that reason, the EPA asks for policy measures which stimulate teachers who are already in their vocational training to learn to include parents in the educational process as well as learn the skills to deal with parents. We feel a strong need to invest in this partnership in today's school system. In our opinion, this not only means that teachers should be able to spend, within their job, some hours for contacts with parents and with pupils on an individual basis, but also that parents who have a regular job should have the juridical permit to employ some hours during their work for contacts with the school of their children. If today's schools invest in this parent-partnership the quality of the learning process will certainly increase.

Another possibility is that a child, despite all the help from parents, fails to meet expectations, in which case a younger child will receive special education and an older child risks leaving the educational system without proper qualification to enter the labour market. Both cases are of great concern to the parents of these children. Yet, also on a macro level this is where the educational system and the transition from education to the labour market are at risk. While we often see that special education helps children to meet their potential, we also observe that training in special education is regularly an 'impasse' when the transition from school to work is reached and they become the young unemployed in the labour market. This is a tragedy for the individual and it is a loss of human capital in the labour market. If we want to increase the effectiveness of our European education system, this is one of the major issues and the EPA asks policymakers on different levels to search for solutions.

We request attention for life-long teacher training. The core element in education was, is and will be the interactions between teacher and their students. Therefore, the importance of good teacher training cannot be underestimated. This teacher training should also be based on the new role of teachers as experts, facilitators, managers, life long learners, practitioners and researchers.

Europe will have fewer children in the future as birthrates are falling by almost 20 %. There are different opinions about the effects of this development. The issue paper of the European Commission presents the opportunity to reduce the pupil to teacher ratio and offers the possibility of investing more per child in education. Nevertheless, at the same time the EPA witnesses that fewer and fewer students choose to become teachers. In a lot of systems male teachers have even totally disappeared in primary education. An effect of the input of less young teachers is that the average age of teachers will become increasingly higher. This also affects the innovation capacity of the schools. New elements will take longer to be applied in class. While education should be ahead of society to prepare the child to enter the labour market and social life, the developments in society will occur faster than the educational system can implement in its methods. As a result, we see schools becoming more old-fashioned than society itself. This is a risk for modernising the educational system. The EPA therefore asks the EU and the governments to work on a major plan to help prevent this stagnancy in the educational system. Invest in teachers and in the vocation of teachers. Invest in Life-Long Learning. If the number of children falls, we request you not to cut the budget of education to the same degree but to use the money to invest in better education.

Our children are the future of Europe. They are the people who will run our societies when we are old and dependent on them. They will be in charge of the economy and guarantee the standard of living in the future. They will inherit our societal debts (i.e. the state debts) and have to pay them. They will have to pay our pensions if we have not saved enough for our old days. Thus, investing in them is also investing in us. All of society benefits from a high level of education. This means that investing in their education is a task and obligation for the entire society. Education, both at state and non-state schools, therefore must be paid by the governments from general resources. Education from primary level to higher education should be free of costs according to the ECOSOC treaty. However, this is currently not the case in every European country.

When we ask from the present students in future to have solidarity when they have to pay for the costs of the other generations, we have to take care of the financial costs of their studies now. How can you ask for intergenerational solidarity if we have no solidarity nowadays?

The role of parents is of great importance. Partnership is the choice we want to make. We ask for schools with democratic structures in which on every level the partners discuss and decide about the correct procedures. We would like to see improved contact between parents and their child's teacher, parent participation on a class level, active parent associations at a school level, and a substantial amount of parents in school boards.

In addition, we would like to know more about the effects of the active role of parents in the education of children and the importance of Family Learning to find out more about the results of the Social Background (the cultural capital). We request for more research on this and on ways in which parents can support their children to improve their results.

The face of education will change rapidly. Formal and informal learning will go hand in hand. Schools will become more than schooling institutes and especially primary schools will develop into community centers, centers for education, youth work, art, sport and culture. Children learn in schools but also from other sources. Even though they obtain more information from outside the school, they will always need teachers to help them to transfer this information into knowledge and they require teachers and parents to transfer knowledge into wisdom. Education is an inter-human process which develops a child to become a responsible adult. In this process there are stakeholders: teachers and other educational workers, pupils themselves, and certainly not least, the parents. Teachers are temporary, parents are for life. We strongly encourage the EU policymakers to recognise this and invest in the partnership between schools and parents.

While we prepare our children for life long learning we have to prepare the parents for life long learning as well as taking up the role of life long advisors to the child. We are life long stakeholders. The EPA is ready to set up a transnational information platform and network for the best practices in this matter, with the help of the European Commission.

We compliment the European Union in putting emphasis on its future by investing in education. We share your worries and will stay available for advice and co-operation. We consider ourselves partners in education, towards teachers and their organizations, and towards governments and their Ministers. We recognise our rights but also our duties, as we see them for all stakeholders. The national parent organisations, members of the European Parents Association, are ready to cooperate with the national ministers, to take up the challenge. We look forward to your invitation.