

european forum for freedom in education

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DG Education and Culture
of the European Commission

Brussels, October 18th 2007

Subject: Public consultation "Schools for the 21st Century"

*"A child is not a vase to be filled,
but a fire to be lit."*
François Rabelais

Dear Sir, Madam,

Enclosed please find the views of the European Forum for Freedom in Education – *effe* – in the context of the Commission's consultation process on schools for the 21st century.

The European Forum for Freedom in Education is an NGO, concerned with the quality and efficiency of education systems in Europe. Our members are active European citizens from the education sector –teachers, educators, schools, learning organisations, pupils/children, parents – and also from administrative and university life. We are open to everyone who believes in the importance of plurality in education. The main aim of *effe* is the promotion of diversity in education and our main focus is on primary and secondary education.

For the consultation the *effe* gathered the opinion of its members and member organisations throughout Europe. We realise that the Commission invited respondents to identify what actions should be taken in order to improve the quality of schools within their national contexts. Since the *effe* is not nationally oriented we have instead prepared a general European reflection on the topic drawing on examples of praxis in some of the Member States. We hope this will be useful.

Generally, the *effe* has confined its opinion paper to the common view that there is a need for a shift from the traditional paradigm of "education for the good of society" to the paradigm of "education for the good of the individual". The traditional paradigm of education is based on the assumption that educational policy should be formulated in terms of what "society" needs most. This kind of thinking is bound to be misleading considering the various political, economic and social changes taking place at the present time. Do we really know what society needs? Is it economic growth, is it technological progress? Is it competitiveness, as the Lisbon strategy suggests? Attempts to formulate policy for the so-called "good of society" must ultimately fail if there is no regard or respect for the needs of the individuals who make up that society.

“Education for the good of the individual” is education which:

- safeguards the human dignity of each person
- respects fundamental human rights as the basis for all education
- empowers children and young people to act as responsible members of society

Trust in human abilities is the basic premise upon which successful education depends. Education has to be geared to the abilities and skills of each individual and all curricula should take account of this need. This requires the decentralisation of education systems and a high degree of autonomy for schools and learning communities. This is what we mean by “freedom in education”.

Schools should become learning organisations where those who are involved on a day to day basis have responsibility for the content and methods of the teaching as well as for staffing and budgeting.

The *effe* therefore suggests that the European Commission recommends that Member States only outline general educational aims in their educational policies.

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These views will now be dealt with in detail through our answers to the consultation questions. There is some overlap in our answers as the questions are inevitably interrelated.

Question 1: How can schools be organised in such a way as to provide all students with the full range of key competences?

The eight key competences defined in the recommendations of the European Parliament and of the Council are important and valuable. Together they cover the challenges faced by a global society. But the *effe* fears that these key competences will be introduced only in a way which suits the needs of the market. Therefore, the real challenge lies in how these competences are addressed within Member States. Our view is that the way to reach the stated goals, especially the four last key competences, is by ensuring autonomy in respect of the influence and responsibility of parents, school leaders, teachers and pupils. Each school – whether a state school or an independent school - ought to have the possibility of creating its own school culture and learning based on a guiding national framework with respect and consideration for the challenges of European integration and globalisation.

Specific points:

- Children and young people need to live out the competences through their educational experiences so that learning is an active rather than passive experience
- Teachers require a degree of professional autonomy in order to carry out their task
- Pupils need to develop independence, responsibility and a sense of ownership which can be achieved by involving them in school decision making
- The key role that parents and guardians play in their children’s education needs to be recognised and fully supported. It is thus important that they have choice over which school to send their child to
- Inclusive policies are required which mean that children learn in mixed ability groups so that there is no streaming or segregation of children or young people

- Caring is seen as part of teaching and learning and reflects a holistic view of the learner. There is no distinction between the ‘pastoral’ and ‘academic’ role of the teacher
- The size and scale of schools matter. Children and young people learn best in a community where they are known and valued and where they enjoy positive relationships with each other and with the adults in the community
- A strong sense of community and partnership between the school and local community needs to be developed

Question 2: How can schools equip young people with the competences and motivation to make learning a lifelong activity?

To be able to engage in and to be motivated for lifelong learning joy of learning, relevance to their own lives and inner motivations are key. Joy of learning should be based on each school’s ability to give the children a feeling of inclusion, influence and responsibility.

Inclusion requires that in the school culture there is respect for the diversity and abilities of each individual. The term influence does not mean that each child has unlimited possibilities to do what they want. It is meant to refer to an existential and democratic education which allows the various opinions to be challenged in a dialogue between pupils and teachers. Influence in respect for other opinions gives courage and develops a feeling of responsibility. Responsibility begins with respect for fellow students and the diversity they meet in the classroom.

In recent years international comparative studies of education have clearly shown that the quality of national school systems is rising, as much as those systems are based on the idea of the general learning ability of human beings and school is seen as a place for the individual development of teachers and pupils. On the other hand, where centrally fixed targets and selection by performance tests or ability are given priority, social divisions deepen and the general level goes down.

Question 3: How can school systems contribute to supporting long-term sustainable economic growth in Europe?

We believe that people who have had a successful experience at school will take initiative and participate creatively in the economic world. But in our opinion the premise is wrong: it is not school systems which should support long-term sustainable economic growth in Europe. The economy is only the basis for development of education and culture and is there to enable people to have a humane life.

The *effe* sees citizens as shaping their environment and future and not as „human resources“ who are there to optimise economic growth. Young people become demoralised when they notice for themselves that they are supposed to become fit for a mere economic society, which at the same time dismisses people in large numbers. If only necessities of economic growth are taken into account, pupils will be standardised by tendency and trained on questionable knowledge and key qualifications.

The *effe* is aware of the good intentions concerning education and learning for competitiveness in the global market economy, but we fear that benchmarking, harmonising and centralising aims in education will diminish the necessary freedom in education.

Question 4: How can school systems best respond to the need to promote equity, to respond to cultural diversity and to reduce early school leaving?

Large groups of immigrants, minority groups and families with extensive social problems are a challenge in the European educational system. Those groups need special attention in the educational systems. Again it is necessary to stress inner motivation for learning as an important factor. Centralised rules are not effective in accomplishing this task. It is clear that there is a diversity of problems which can only be solved with trust on a decentralised level.

It is to be noted that the question of equitable access cannot be resolved without addressing other public policy issues, including housing, welfare and social care. There are no magic solutions.

In addressing questions of equity and of early school leaving key issues are:

- The importance of respect. Where pupils are treated as individuals and with respect their engagement with their education increases. Early school leaving can be reduced when pupils are taken seriously and treated with respect. Academic skills never really are the problem. Those skills come as soon as self-respect is found. It is all about acquiring a sense of self-responsibility, being able to cope with stress and frustration.
- Inclusion. Schools with more autonomy are better able to address the challenges of inclusion and reduce divisions
- Minimisation of bureaucracy. Schools dealing with disengaged or difficult children must be able to meet their needs with the support of the authorities. Take for example: the “Freie Schule Spatz” in Offenburg, Germany. This is a school which specialises in giving school leavers a last chance to finish school and depends on the youth welfare office for sending school leavers to become pupils. However the youth welfare office seems unable to place the young people according to the needs and possibilities of the school. Due to such unnecessary bureaucratic problems some of the young people haven’t been in any school for at least two years.
- Scale. A study in Nebraska in 1999 explored the “penalties of scale” and discovered that graduation rates and post secondary enrolment rates were higher in areas with the smallest schools.

Question 5: If schools are to respond to each pupil's individual learning needs, what can be done as regards curricula, school organisation and the roles of teachers?

Curricula, evaluation and assessment

The school curriculum should be thematic and cross-curricular, emphasising depth rather than breadth, on the principle of “less is more”, and stressing the inter-connectedness of knowledge. Within this framework children and young people should be encouraged to exercise a degree of choice in what and how they learn and thus develop a sense of authorship in their learning.

Assessment should be based on dialogue, critical reflection and documentation. These should be built into the process of learning and should include “authentic assessment” in which children and young people are encouraged to present portfolios and exhibitions of their work to their peers and to the wider community.

Testing and centralised curricula are now often seen as a way of equating quality in education with the goal to support long-term sustainable economic growth in Europe. This policy is very problematic, because the goal is based on economic progress, and the aims to achieve that goal are based on testing, benchmarking and best practice – leaving out the need for diversity and autonomy and the importance of emancipation of each individual.

Alongside the requirement for schools to have freedom and autonomy we recognise the need for public accountability. Whilst we are against rigid testing mechanisms, we applaud the system in the Netherlands whereby schools self-evaluate against criteria they have set themselves. Another best practice example is “Blick über den Zaun”, an independent created system of self-evaluation in Germany.

School Organisation

We are supportive of a later school starting age for children (ie aged 6 or 7) and recognise the need for first class early years provision. We have also noted the benefits of all-through schools (from ages 7- 16) – see below case studies from Scandinavia. We have already noted above the importance of size and scale in school organisation. We believe in the need for diversity of provision since different kinds of schools suit different children. We recommend that financial support is given to schools based on different educational philosophies (such as Steiner, Montessori, Jenaplan, Dewey, Freinet). Such schools offer different pedagogical approaches and can act as a resource for other schools.

Role of the teachers

Teachers should have a central role in helping to create the curriculum, and in mediating public knowledge into the personal lives of young children. The role of the teacher needs to be that of mentor, guide, coach rather than “deliverer” of information. With regard to special pedagogical questions, it is up to the teacher and the school to find the best solution to every situation.

Question 6: How can school communities help to prepare young people to be responsible citizens, in line with fundamental values such as peace and tolerance of diversity?

Democracy should be practised within educational settings as an essential way of guaranteeing the practice of democracy in society. To prepare young people to be responsible citizens, schools have to live out these fundamental values. If each school has a degree of autonomy, if confidence and trust are fostered amongst pupils and if individual and common challenges are encouraged, this will foster a sense of responsibility. The *effe* refers to experiences of democratic schools such as the Sudbury-Valley Schools.

Schools as part of the wider community

Fundamental values such as peace and tolerance can best be manifested in a school community where each child or young person is known individually and is seen holistically as a person who is capable, creative and responsible. By involving young people actively and continuously in decisions about their learning and about how their school or learning community is run, they learn through experience the skills of participation and citizenship. But schools also have to be part of the whole community. Therefore it is valuable to involve

the whole community in schooling (as in the case of the Vensterscholen in Groningen, Netherlands) Furthermore it is beneficial to see schools as learning places for people of all ages.

On a separate but related point, increasing globalisation means that communities are no longer determined by their geographical location. At the same time, there is an urgent need to address the environmentally damaging consequences of increasing amounts of travel, to and from work and school. We believe that a combination of these two factors will lead to a re-energisation of village-like communities, with an increasing number of small, human scale neighbourhood schools networked together by digital technologies and applying environmentally sustainable policies such as local sourcing of food, energy audits, recycling and other environmental and ethical principles. Thus localism will become an essential feature of life and therefore of modern education in the 21st century.

Question 7: How can school staff be trained and supported to meet the challenges they face?

With regard to the education of young people nothing is as important as the view of teacher as role model. In the younger years it is the direct role model of teachers and their actions which is important. Later it is the authenticity of the teacher which counts. Nevertheless the qualities which teachers should aspire to are: joy in human interaction, thirst for knowledge, ability for empathy, humour, curiosity, ability for criticism and mature judgement, team spirit, ability for idealistic as well as realistic thinking and attentiveness...

Many studies show that the complexity in society causes identity and existential problems for children and youngsters. The diversity of these problems is complex. Teachers must be trained to face and define those challenges; otherwise it is difficult to give each individual the best chance to become responsible and democratic citizens.

A significant problem is that teacher education mainly focuses on academic skills, and to a much lesser extent on pedagogical, sociological and psychological training. Teacher education should include discussion about alternative strategies and pedagogies in order to train school staff to meet the challenges they face. Instead of offering a homogeneous view of education – diversity should be seen as a strength in education and training.

We believe that laying the foundations for acquiring the skills, knowledge and understanding of an informed educator cannot take place in one-year post-graduate courses (as for example in England) where students barely have time to think about the purposes, aims and values of education. If the teaching profession is to hold its own amidst the growing decline in trust of professionals and of public institutions, it is essential that those who enter the profession are supported in their development of a deeper understanding of the historical, social and cultural contexts within which they are working, and that they develop an awareness of the various kinds of knowledge which help communities and individuals make sense of their world.

Teacher education should not be based on dogmatism and orthodoxies, or on the unquestioning adoption of theories, especially when they run counter to experience. Nor should it focus on the student teacher's capacity to "deliver" pre-determined national strategies. We strongly believe that teachers must be educated to regard teaching as a

problem-solving or research-in-action activity during which teaching methods and strategies, formal or informal, are examined in relation to children's learning and their progress.

We recommend that teacher education includes the following features:

- Praxis oriented to include exchange with experienced teachers and school praxis
- Educational theory and child development to have the same significance as academic education.
- Non-core subjects introduced to develop imagination and intuition and to support teachers to develop cross-curricular key competences.
- An academic education which starts as a common basic education and then extends to include a vivid exchange with pedagogues from different fields of work to bring in important experiences and cognitions.
- Time for continuing professional development and cooperation. Sustainability in the professionalism of the teachers' work should be secured by a system of self-organised further education as well as opportunities for continuing professional development. This should focus on the training needs of each teacher as an individual as well as on common pedagogical work. Continuing professional development is to be seen as an important aspect of the working time of teachers and educators.
- Public appreciation and recognition of the work of the teacher reflected in good working conditions and fair remuneration.

Question 8: How can school communities best receive the leadership and motivation they need to succeed? How can they be empowered to develop in response to changing needs and demands?

School systems that are empowered to modernise and search for the best pedagogy and are free from directives will in the end be more successful than those which undergo reform in a controlled and regulated fashion. People have to have freedom of choice in the selection of schools for their children and the schools have to have a large degree of autonomy in the determination of pedagogy, their internal organisation and the management of their finances. The state should finance all schools without distinction.

Cooperation between schools and other forms of internal evaluation and mutual feedback are valuable and should be encouraged and given financial support. Attempts to ensure quality of education by external controls and forced evaluations will lead to greater bureaucracy and less freedom thus diminishing their effectiveness in the modernisation of education systems.

An important contribution from Member States would be to support continuing professional development for teachers and head teachers and the exchange of knowledge – for example through the establishment of non profit making academies, searching for and multiplying „best practice“ projects or encouraging schools with excellent pedagogical concepts which could become „model schools“ in their area with an advisory service for other schools and teachers.

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CASE STUDIES: The example of three successful countries

Those European countries whose pupils achieved the best results in the comparative studies TIMSS and PISA as far as technical and individual competences, school leaving achievements and individual improvement were concerned, without exception based their school structures on the ability of both teachers and pupils to accept personal responsibility. As outstanding examples we cite, from PISA, Finland, Sweden and, from TIMSS, the Netherlands.

In **Finland** there are nine years of common schooling for all pupils. There is no selection. Pupils are treated individually according to their recognised strengths and weaknesses. The lower school classes are treated well financially in order that individual weaknesses can be strengthened. Since the 1990s more and more effort has been made to decentralise curriculum-making to the individual school.

The nine year basic school is to be found also in **Sweden**. Among the most important results of the extensive educational reforms of the 1980s and 1990s were the decentralisation of the state system along with the transfer of responsibility to local authorities and a new way of awarding grades. The former meant that more responsibility was handed over to schools themselves, something that went with a wider autonomy. The award of grades no longer distinguished between ‘good and ‘bad’ but measured the extent of achievement in relation to certain aims. This encourages a professional understanding for teachers that guarantees them a self-sufficient independence at their job as supporting and helpful colleagues.

A characteristic of the **Netherlands’** education system is the separation of financing and legal organisation of educational establishments as well as the high degree of decentralisation. Responsibility for the distribution of the funds laid down by state law is transferred to the local area to which independent schools belong. Today 70% of pupils attend independent schools. An increasing emphasis is placed on the schools’ self-evaluation through the creation of school plans and the setting of examinations.

It is the perception of the school as a learning organisation which gives both teachers and pupils the opportunity to accept responsibility that has led to extensive school reform in the Scandinavian countries. The basis of this school reform was and is the concept of subsidiarity which accords responsibility for the content and methods of teaching as well as for staffing and budgeting to those on the spot. Definitions of what schools should do are now limited to a formula outlining general educational aims. Correspondingly the internal and external evaluation of the school is related to these general aims and the minimum standards which are aimed at achieving them by providing the individual pupil at the appropriate time with the requisite challenge. This contrasts with past policy of prescribing detailed curricula and rules.

Schools in the community, state or independent sectors in the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands are all treated as equal partners in the public sector and correspondingly equally well supported. The priority given to the basic educational capacity of the human being is manifest in the support given to a wide and varied array of schools. The allocation of resources to individual schools is made on the basis of a flat rate per head and is decided by the type of school and not by the type of management.

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*“It's not because things are difficult that we dare not venture.
It's because we dare not venture that they are difficult.”*

Seneca

Conclusion

The autonomy of schools is pivotal to the future success of quality school systems and their ability to meet the challenges of modern times. Therefore, in a national context the *effe* would favour Member States embracing the idea of decentralised school systems, with each State responsible for the general frame and financing. European cooperation could be effective by disseminating and publishing best practice vis a vis the autonomy of schools, curriculum and evaluation and by promoting the view that this is the recommended way forward. European institutions could also release recommendations for those Member States which are less developed in this area.

To the *effe*, it is of utmost importance, that educators, schools, school communities and learning centres are allowed autonomy - both pedagogical and financial – in the process of educating their pupils. Only then they can work with efficiency, flexibility and success. To the *effe* freedom in education is the answer to the demands of our time, whereby school as an “institution” is changed into a real place of life and lived freedom and democracy amongst the pupils and for the pupils. It is the crucial basis for young people to be able to develop the key competences required for lifelong learning. Narrow curricula, fixed learning goals, central examinations, learning for the test hinder these basic requirements. Young people will take responsibility for themselves and their world when they are encouraged to develop responsibility through their educational experience. A basically free education system is the most important precondition to achieve this goal.

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