Role of sport in education

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The Committee on Culture and Education adopted an own-initiative report drawn up by Pál **SCHMITT** (EPP-ED, HU) reaffirming the EU's legitimate interest in sport, in particular its social and cultural aspects, as well as the educational and social values. Members stressed that, in our multicultural society, sport can and should be an integral part of formal and informal education. Studies had shown that regular physical activity improves mental and physical wellbeing, while having beneficial effect on learning abilities.

Accordingly, Members called on Member States to ensure that greater stress was placed on health development in school and preschool teaching programmes by encouraging specific forms of physical activity suitable for the latter age group and raising awareness within clubs and associations in order to ensure that children start physical activity at the earliest possible age and hence to guarantee PE status in accordance with the profile of the institution and the corresponding level of study.

The Committee pointed out that sport and physical activity could make an important contribution to combating negative health trends such as a sedentary life-style and obesity, and stressed the important role of sport for public health, especially in the fight against obesity that currently affected 21 million children in the EU. It urged Member States to carry out information campaigns aimed at children from a very early age and their parents on the need to adopt a healthy lifestyle, and engage in regular physical activity and on the health risks linked to an unhealthy diet. The Committee proposed that the work of the group of experts involved in the 'EU Platform on Diet, Physical Activity and Health' set up by the Commission be reinforced through the participation of PE educators and sport experts. Members recalled that physical education (PE) imparted important social values such as fairness, self-discipline, solidarity, team spirit, tolerance and fair play. They recommended a series of measures to encourage physical activity. Member States were called upon to:

- make PE compulsory in primary and secondary schools, and to accept the principle that the timetable should guarantee at least 3 PE lessons per week;

- promote body awareness and healthy development through a higher degree of integration between sport and academic subjects;

- ensure that a balance is struck between physical and intellectual activities in schools;

- invest in quality sports facilities and take appropriate measures to make sports premises and sports curricula at schools accessible to all students, with proper regard being paid to the needs of disabled students;

- ensure the teaching of PE at all levels, including primary school, by specialised PE instructors;

- in the spirit of the Bologna process, to step up convergence between training programmes for PE teachers at each school level;

- in cooperation with physical education colleges, to provide high-quality, all-round education, equipping athletes with all the necessary skills to enter the employment market or pursue their studies in higher education institutions and beyond;

- provide physical education teachers with training in the issue of gender by including this aspect in their curriculum. Members called for an end to the downgrading of the status of physical education as a subject and of the status of PE teachers;

- encourage the option of having either sports coeducation or single sex classes from secondary level onwards in order to encourage girls to try out sports traditionally practiced by men;

- carry out a study of quantitative and qualitative participation of girls and boys in sport within and outside schools and to provide the necessary resources to further expand the sports on offer and thereby increase the participation of girls in sports;

- ensure equality of opportunity by taking steps to put an end to any discrimination which might arise on the grounds of gender, religion or ethnic origin,

- promote cooperation, and improve the exchange of information and exchanges of best practice examples, between schools and out-of-school sports associations, local authorities, voluntary and civil society organisations which run sporting activities;

- actively support forms of physical activity which can be carried out by families, and to improve the dialogue between parents, PE teachers and sports associations;

- ensure that sports facilities are designed for easy access by disabled spectators and/or participants;

- ensure that the diversity of sports offered encourages children to adopt an open-minded attitude to the world and develop values such as self-respect, respect for others, solidarity, self-awareness and tolerance;

- pay particular attention to situations in which children’s talent is exploited with a view to success in sports competitions.

The Committee went on to call for a unambiguous reference to the social, cultural and economic value of sport, which will form the basis of the legal framework of future Community action, in the text of the Treaty during the current revision of the latter. In the context of the prospective Commission White Paper on sport, it considers it important to include funding opportunities for sport related activities which are linked to the objectives stated in Article 149 of the EC Treaty.

The report welcomed the Commission's White Paper on 'A Strategy for Europe on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity related health issues', which identified prevention, primarily by means of the promotion of exercise and an increase in the numbers of participants in sport, as a priority. (Please see INI/2006/2231). It also welcomed the achievements of the European Year of Education through Sport (EYES 2004), which stressed the role of sport in education and drew attention to the wide-ranging social role of sport. It approved of the Commission proposal to include sport in the field of application of the European Credit Transfer System for Vocational Education and Training.

The Commission was called upon to undertake a series of measures, while taking full account of the subsidiarity principle:

- to draw on the experiences of the “sports-minded schools” programme initiated by the Luxembourg Presidency and to devise, in cooperation with the Member States, a uniform set of criteria for the award of this label, as well as the conditions for a European sports prize to be awarded to acknowledge new initiatives;

- to initiate multi-disciplinary research in the field of sport and PE, and to disseminate best practice. The Committee recommended that it devise basic principles for the pan-European survey on physical education policies and practices which the Council of Europe has defined as a priority;

- to devise clear guidelines on rules for state support, setting out what type of state support is regarded as acceptable and necessary in the interest of successfully fulfilling the social, cultural, health protection and educational functions of sport;

- to identify areas where EU action can provide added value with regard to action already taken by sports organisations and Member States authorities. The report considered that the open method of coordination was an appropriate way to achieve better cooperation at European level in the specific area of physical education policy and sport for all;

- EU structural funds should be used for the creation and development of school and other sports facilities in disadvantaged areas;

- to ensure that legislation applies to the provision of services in the sports sector in the same way as to other activities in the framework of all Community policies;

- building on the experiences of EYES 2004, in the framework of the Lifelong Learning, Youth and Europe for Citizens programmes, to devise new initiatives aimed at heightening the profile of the role played by sport and PE not only in education and culture point of view but also in terms of social integration and health protection;

- to promote the European mobility of PE teachers and trainers, as part of the Lifelong Learning Programme;

- to identify best practices in the fight against sexual harassment and abuse in sport.

Lastly, and on the issue of doping, the Committee stressed that the use of performance-enhancing chemical substances was contrary to the values of sport as a social, cultural and educational activity. It called on Member States to ensure that PE teachers inform pupils about the physical and psychological dangers inherent in the use of doping substances.