

Better schools: an agenda for European cooperation

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PURPOSE: to present a Commission communication on improving competences for the 21st Century: an Agenda for European cooperation on schools.

CONTENT: the European Council has repeatedly stressed the key role of education and training for the future growth, long-term competitiveness and social cohesion of the EU. To achieve this, it is crucial fully to develop the potential for innovation and creativity of European citizens. The education element of the knowledge triangle "research-innovation-education" should be strengthened, starting early – in schools. The competences and learning habits acquired at school are essential for developing new skills for new jobs later in life. The challenge facing the EU is to strengthen the reform of school systems so that every young person can develop his or her full potential, through improved access and opportunities, to become an active participant in the emerging knowledge economy, and to reinforce social solidarity. The Commission believes that, given the common nature of many of the challenges facing school systems and the importance of these issues for the Union's socio-economic future, school education should be a key priority for the next cycle of the Lisbon process.

This Communication proposes an agenda for strengthening European cooperation on schools by identifying the major challenges facing systems that can best be tackled by such cooperation. These are divided into three areas:

Focus on competences: the trend in school curricula is to help learners acquire knowledge and the skills and attitudes necessary to apply it in real life situations. The European Framework of Key Competences describes the knowledge, skills and attitudes required for a successful life in a knowledge society. It is a basis for a coherent approach to competence development, in school and in vocational training. Literacy and numeracy are essential components of key competences, but performance in the EU is deteriorating. The EU benchmark is by 2010 to decrease the proportion of 15-year-olds who are low-achievers in reading literacy to 17%. However, the rate actually increased from 21.3% in 2000 to 24.1% in 2006. Moreover, almost twice as many boys as girls have low reading skills: 17.6% of 15 year old girls and 30.4 % of 15 year old boys. The decline in reading literacy must urgently be reversed.

To support the Member States in implementing the Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, the Commission proposes to focus future cooperation on:

- developing action plans to increase levels of reading literacy and numeracy, including the use of target-setting;
- reinforcing transversal as well as subject-based competences, particularly learning to- learn; and
- adopting a comprehensive approach to competence development, encompassing curricula, learning materials, teacher training, personalised learning, and assessment techniques.

High quality learning for every student: providing all young people with the full range of competences for life is an equity challenge. No school system provides exactly the same educational opportunities for all pupils. The quality gap between schools should be closed. Recent research shows that low variation in student achievement scores can go together with high average achievement, and suggests that policy makers should reduce disparities and improve participation by targeting those with lower skill levels. The

EU benchmark is that by 2010 at least 85% of young people should have completed upper secondary education. The 2007 average rate for 20-24 year-olds is 78.1%, an improvement of only 1.5 percentage points since 2000.

To support Member States in implementing the Council Conclusions on efficiency and equity in education and training, the Commission proposes to focus future cooperation on:

- generalising access to high quality pre-school education;
- measuring and improving the equity impact of school education systems, and reducing quality differences between schools;
- ensuring that school systems facilitate successful transitions between different school types and levels, and into further education and training;
- reducing early school leaving; and• providing more timely support and personalised learning approaches within mainstream schooling for students with special needs.

Teachers and school staff: teacher quality is the most important within-school factor affecting student performance. As such, it is vital to the achievement of Lisbon goals. The profession has a high percentage of older workers; some 30% of teachers are over 50, and around 2 million will need to be replaced in the next 15 years to maintain the size of the teaching workforce. Staff need the skills to give every pupil adequate opportunities to acquire necessary competences in a safe and attractive school environment based on mutual respect and cooperation, which promotes social, physical and mental well-being and where bullying and violence have no place. Yet most countries report shortfalls in teaching skills. Despite this, incentives for, and investment in, continuous training and development are weak. Generally, time spent on in service training is minimal and many Member States offer no systematic support for new teachers.

To support Member States in implementing the Council Conclusions on improving the quality of teacher education, the Commission proposes to focus future cooperation on:

- ensuring that teachers' initial education, induction and ongoing professional development are coordinated, coherent, adequately resourced and quality assured;
- improving the supply, quality and take-up of in-service teacher education;
- reviewing teacher recruitment to attract the most able candidates, select the best applicants, and place good teachers in challenging schools; and
- improving the recruitment of school leaders and equipping them to focus on improving student learning and developing school staff.