Learning in the information society: action plan for a European education initiative 1996-1998

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The committee unanimously adopted the proposal for a resolution on the action plan launched in the form of a Commission communication. While welcoming the pragmatic aspect of the paper under examination, the rapporteur, Mrs Ahlqvist (PSE, S), addressed the budgetary problems raised by the Community initiative in question. Although the action plan had the merit of bringing a European "added value" to national, regional and local initiatives and encouraging action by Member States in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity set out in Article 126 of the Treaty, it could not be allocated a specific budget because it was a plan, not a programme. Consequently, the committee report notes with concern the Commission's tendency to "retarget" or reorientate existing programmes in the form of action plans and white papers. In addition, the present case concerned the allocation of resources granted to educational or training programmes (such as Socrates, Leonardo etc.) set out within the framework of the codecision procedure and would therefore cause institutional problems at a later date. This explains why the rapporteur welcomed better coordination of the Community programmes in question and encouraged recourse to the "call for proposals" method in order to achieve economies of scale but did not exclude the fact that the best way forward in this area in the future would be a specific programme with its own budget. With regard to the plan's objectives, the rapporteur feared that Community resources could be used to create "elite" teaching establishments and that the information society might flourish at the expense of new social divisions, which is why she urged educational targets to be placed in a wider context encompassing the promotion of social cohesion, the fight against illiteracy, better teaching and the teaching of languages. From this perspective, it went without saying that Parliament subscribed fully to the approach taken by the Commission when it gave priority to primary and secondary schools rather than to higher educational establishments. The report also emphasized the importance of using information technologies during play in order to overcome the unequal starting conditions between boys and girls from the earliest possible age, given that girls are still supposed to be less technically minded than boys. On a more general note, the Commission was called on to strengthen the "European dimension in schools" by making it easier to pool and share skills and experience and hold "virtual classes" of pupils from several schools linked via multimedia education, especially through the Internet. An overall reform of school teaching should go hand in glove with this innovative approach of opening schools up to new information technologies: this would include, inter alia, teacher training and support within the framework of the structural funds and links not only within existing school networks but also with other educational or cultural establishments such as libraries and museums, without losing sight of the need to monitor the negative impact of new technologies in schools, such as the distribution through these channels of information harmful to young people. Finally, the report called for an in-depth assessment of the action plan in question in the medium term and increased transparency in the various financial frameworks (which might include some appropriations from the increase in the budget of the fourth RDT framework programme) used to link schools and distribute educational software within the European Union.