

Consultation on options for developing the European Schools system

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PURPOSE : to take stock of the development of the European Schools and to open a debate about their future.

CONTENT : for the last 50 years, the European Schools have provided a high-quality, multi-cultural, multi-lingual education service to the children of the staff of the EU institutions. The availability of the Schools has made it easier for the Institutions to recruit experienced, highly qualified staff. The recognised and often praised European Baccalaureate enables and allows access to university education across Europe.

The aim of this consultation is to take stock of the development of the ES and, at this important stage of the expansion of and change in the European Union and to open a debate, seeking to establish a consensual approach to their future evolution and possibilities for change, rather than make any concrete proposals

This Communication begins by setting out the current governance and funding of the schools. Growth of the Institutions and successive enlargements of the Union have led to a considerable expansion of the ES system, from one School in one location to 14 ES in 10 locations by the end of this decade. Whilst some kind of international, multi-lingual international education should always be available to the children of EU staff in all locations where there are EU institutions or bodies, the question of the provision of education in the mother tongue of each pupil in a EU with over 20 official languages, and, indeed, in locations with few pupils needs careful consideration and consultation. Particular issues arise in relation to the small ES.

The paper goes on to focus on an examination of the governance, administrative and budgetary aspects of the ES' system. Thereafter, a number of educational questions, falling more within the areas of the curriculum and quality of service delivery within the Schools, are considered. The main points are as follows:

- On the matter of governance, the Commission feels that the current structure, leaving governance to the Board of Governors is not well suited to taking operational decisions. This will hardly be alleviated by the arrival of the 10 new Member State representatives. The European Institutions, which are de facto major stakeholders are taking an increasingly active interest in the Schools on the grounds that they have a valid interest both as main service receivers and principal paymasters. However, the system of governance under the current Convention largely excludes their participation, where the Commission is limited to one vote on the Board of Governors alongside 17 (or in some cases 19) other voting members. This legacy of a "democratic deficit" on the Board should not continue unchanged.
- Greater autonomy in administration and staffing decisions.

The Communication points out that teachers at the Schools are currently selected for secondment by the education authorities of the Member States. It seems possible and appropriate in the short-term to give consideration to how the final say on the appointment of teachers might be given to the Schools themselves, which are better able to judge the specific skills required to teach successfully in a multi-lingual environment.

- With regard to financing of the European Schools, the paper points out that at present, there is a basic paradox in the budgetary arrangements, namely that a balancing contribution from the EU budget is provided within the annual budgetary procedure without any corresponding influence by the budgetary authority on the costs of the ES. It is, moreover, widely considered that the system of reliance on effectively open-ended EU funding to balance the ES budget has not provided adequate incentives for better resource management, increases in income, and cost savings which could be made without reducing the quality of service provided. At the same time, the budget is also a contentious issue for some of the Member States, which currently provide approximately 22 % of the budget revenue directly by means of the secondment of teaching staff as foreseen by the Convention. Due to vehicular linguistic requirements however, certain MS bear a disproportionate share of the cost and are signalling that they are not prepared to fund any further increases.

- on the matter of maintaining small Schools or language sections, such as those in Mol, Karlsruhe, Bergen and Culham in their current form, the paper states that this is an important issue needing reflection with many elements to be taken into consideration, including the needs of the EU institutions and their staff.

With regard to educational and curriculum issues, the paper discusses the following:

- Education of children with special needs be they learning difficulties or physical disabilities deserves greater attention. The existing provisions of the Convention are currently implemented by the Schools in a diverse manner and the programme for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and for Learning Support (LS) are important tools to be developed further. Both programmes require monitoring so to ensure a good distribution of resources among language sections and individual pupils, to optimise locally provided services and to evaluate their impact.

- The need to consider the option for the Schools to offer a leaving certificate other than the European Baccalaureate. A feasibility study would need to be undertaken.

- The maximum class size is set at 32 which is larger than in many Member-States. In some cases, these classes also accommodate pupils for whom there is no mother tongue section and who therefore need extra support in order to work as effectively in a "foreign" language. Consideration should therefore be given to ways to reduce the maximum size.

- The high intrinsic value of the European Baccalaureate must be maintained. The EB examination system needs to be reviewed to ensure a harmonised approach and high academic quality. Concerns about the absence of real quality evaluation of the ES' education provisions and the way the inspection system operates have been expressed by parents and parents' associations.

- The success of the European Baccalaureate has led to a broader interest for its wider availability in several MS, while, at the same time, decentralisation of EU activities has created a need for European schooling to be provided in schools other than the traditional European Schools.

For some of the matters outlined above, the Commisison proposes certain improvements which could be decided upon and implemented by the Board within the present framework. The Commission states that it will build on the ideas set out in this Communication for its work within the BoG.

The Communicates also opens a debate on possible longer-term more radical change to the system of governance of the ES beyond the scope of the current international Convention. The Commission will organise a wide consultation with and between stakeholders over the coming months before making any significant proposals on the future development of the ES system.