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on Better Schools: an agenda for European cooperation
(2008/2329(INI))

Committee on Culture and Education

Rapporteur: Pál Schmitt

CONTENTS

	Page
MOTION FOR A EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RESOLUTION	3
EXPLANATORY STATEMENT.....	8

MOTION FOR A EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RESOLUTION

on Better Schools: an agenda for European cooperation (2008/2329(INI))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to Articles 149 and 150 of the EC Treaty on education, vocational training and youth,
- having regard to Article 14 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union on the right to education,
- having regard to the Commission Communication of 3 July 2008 entitled 'Improving competences for the 21st Century: An Agenda for European Cooperation on Schools' (COM(2008)0425),
- having regard to the Commission Communication of 16 December 2008 entitled 'An updated strategic framework for European cooperation on education and training' (COM(2008)0865),
- having regard to the Commission Communication of 12 November 2007 entitled 'Delivering lifelong learning for knowledge, creativity and innovation: Draft 2008 joint progress report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the Education and Training 2010 work programme' (COM(2007)0703),
- having regard to the ten year Education and Training 2010 work programme¹ and to the subsequent joint interim reports on progress towards its implementation,
- having regard to Decision No 1720/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 November 2006 establishing an action programme in the field of lifelong learning²,
- having regard to the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning³,
- having regard to the Presidency Conclusions of the European Council of 13-14 March 2008, notably the part on 'investing in people and modernising labour markets',
- having regard to the Council Resolution of 15 November 2007 on education and training as a key driver of the Lisbon Strategy⁴,
- having regard to the report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century,

¹ OJ C 142, 14.6.2002, p. 1.

² OJ L 327, 24.11.2006, p. 45.

³ OJ L 394, 30.12.2006, p. 10.

⁴ OJ C 300, 12.12.2007, p. 1.

- having regard to its resolution of 27 September 2007 on efficiency and equity in European education and training systems¹,
 - having regard to its resolution of 13 November 2007 on the role of sport in education²,
 - having regard to its resolution of 23 September 2008 on improving the quality of teacher education³,
 - having regard to its resolution of 18 December 2008 on delivering lifelong learning for knowledge, creativity and innovation - implementation of the Education & Training 2010 work programme⁴,
 - having regard to Rule 45 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Culture and Education (A6-0000/2009),
- A. whereas Member States are responsible for the organisation, content and reform of school education; whereas the exchange of information and good practice, and the cooperation on common challenges, are excellent tools to support reforms; whereas the European Commission has an important role to play in facilitating this cooperation,
- B. whereas the Council has adopted three benchmarks for 2010 relating to school education, on early school leavers, reading literacy and the completion of upper secondary education; whereas progress towards these benchmarks is still insufficient,
- C. whereas the acquisition of basic skills and key competences by all young people and the improvement of educational attainment levels are crucial for reaching the goals of the Lisbon agenda,
- D. whereas young people's educational attainment has a direct effect on their later employment prospects, social participation, further education or training, and income,
- E. whereas inequities and early school leaving produce high social and economic costs and have a detrimental effect on social cohesion,
- F. whereas inclusive educational models promote the integration of disadvantaged groups of pupils and of students with special educational needs, and increase solidarity between pupils from different backgrounds,
- G. whereas curricula as well as teaching and assessment methods should allow every student to acquire key competences and to develop his or her full potential; whereas the physical and mental well-being of children, as well as an agreeable learning environment, are crucial for positive learning outcomes,

¹ OJ C 219 E, 28.8.2008, p.300.

² OJ C 282 E, 6.11.2008, p.131.

³ Texts Adopted, P6_TA(2008)0422.

⁴ Texts Adopted, P6_TA(2008)0625.

- H. whereas a well developed pre-primary education significantly contributes to the integration of disadvantaged groups, can help raising overall skills levels, and is crucial for increasing equity and lowering drop-out rates,
- I. whereas education expenditure should be particularly directed to the areas that produce the greatest improvements in student performance and development,
- J. whereas the quality of teaching is recognised as being the most important factor within the school environment affecting student attainment,
- K. whereas mobility and exchanges can foster intercultural, language, social and subject-related competences, enhance motivation of both teachers and students, and help improve teachers' pedagogical skills,
- L. whereas schools alone form only part of a group of actors sharing a collective responsibility for the education of young people,
 - 1. Welcomes the above-mentioned Commission Communication on Improving competences for the 21st Century, and the areas on which it proposes to focus future cooperation;
 - 2. Welcomes the above-mentioned Commission Communication 'An updated strategic framework for European cooperation on education and training' and the measures it suggests;
 - 3. Endorses the view that school education should be a key priority for the next cycle of the Lisbon strategy;
 - 4. Welcomes Member States' agreement to cooperate on school education in key areas; urges Member States to take full advantage of this opportunity to learn from each other;

Improving competences of every student

- 5. Urges the Member States to do their utmost to provide every young person with basic skills that are fundamental for further learning, to continue efforts to implement the above-mentioned Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, as well as efforts to reach the benchmarks previously agreed upon;
- 6. Recommends Member States to further consider strategies to reduce gender imbalances in basic skills;
- 7. Advocates inclusive education models where the school communities reflect society in terms of diversity, avoiding any kind of segregation;
- 8. Takes the view that schools should provide high quality education for all children and to have ambitious goals for all students, while offering a range of study-options and additional support to take account of individual students' needs;
- 9. Urges the Member States to continue efforts to reduce the number of early school leavers; emphasises the need to identify students at risk as soon as possible and to

- provide them with additional support and after-school learning activities;
10. Believes that schools should not only strive to improve employability, but also give all young people the opportunity to develop their full potential, in line with their personal aptitudes;
 11. Therefore considers that all children should, from the earliest age, be given the opportunity to acquire musical, artistic, manual, physical, social and civic competences; therefore, strongly believes that musical, artistic and physical education should be compulsory parts of the school curriculum;
 12. Is convinced that children should learn foreign languages from an early age; welcomes the proposal of a new benchmark foreseeing that at least 80% of pupils in lower secondary education be taught at least two foreign languages; underlines the importance of education in ICT and in media literacy;

High-quality schools and teachers

13. Calls upon the Member States to invest in pre-primary education, to provide for a sufficient number of high-quality pre-primary and childcare institutions with adequately trained teachers and carers; and to guarantee affordability; supports the proposal for a new benchmark on the rate of participation in pre-primary education;
14. Recommends that financial support is given equally to all kind of schools regardless of their size or educational philosophy;
15. While recognising the need to ensure comparability of qualification systems across Europe; calls on Member States to give schools the necessary autonomy to find solutions to the specific challenges they face in their local context, as well as the appropriate flexibility in curricula, teaching methods and assessment systems;
16. Considers that the composition of teaching staff should reflect, as far as possible, the increasing diversity of European societies, in order to provide role models for all pupils;
17. Strongly advocates that as many students and teachers as possible are given the opportunity to participate in mobility and in school partnership projects; underlines the importance of the Comenius programme in this respect; welcomes the setting up of Comenius Regio; supports the proposal to develop a new benchmark on mobility;
18. Is convinced that it is necessary to provide both high-quality initial teacher education based on theory and practice and a coherent process of continuous professional development; believes that teacher education and recruitment policies should be designed to attract the most able recruits and that teachers should be offered levels of social recognition, status and remuneration corresponding with the importance of their tasks;
19. Recommends involving parents in school life, and to raise awareness about the potential impact of living conditions and of extracurricular activities on the acquisition of skills and competences at school;

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20. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission and the governments and parliaments of the Member States.

EXPLANATORY STATEMENT

Background note for Members

Under the EC Treaty, the responsibility for the organisation of the education system and of the content of education and training lies with the Member States. The Union takes on a supporting role, for example by facilitating the exchange of information and good practice.

EU cooperation on education and training has intensified over the years, and EU Member States and the European Commission have been working together on education and training issues under the Education and Training 2010 work programme. This work programme was set up in 2002, in the framework of the Lisbon Strategy, its main aims being to improve the quality and effectiveness of education and trainings systems and to facilitate access to them.

Within this framework, Member States and the Commission have also been cooperating on school education. They have addressed common challenges, such as key competences, the quality, efficiency and equity of education systems, as well as the quality of teacher education. Moreover, the work programme defines five benchmarks. Three of them are related to school education: they concern the rates of early school leavers, of 22-year-old students having completed upper secondary education, and of low-achieving 15-year-olds in reading literacy.

Recent evaluations show that progress towards the commonly agreed benchmarks is insufficient, and that the school-related benchmarks set for 2010 will not be reached. Progress on early-school leaving and on upper-secondary attainment is insufficient, and the number of low achievers in reading literacy has even increased. In an international perspective, other OECD countries show a better performance than many EU Member States. The 2008 Spring European Council therefore urged Member States to take concrete actions in the fields of reading literacy, early school leavers and the achievement levels of learners with a migrant background.

In this context, the Commission presented, in July 2008, a Communication entitled "Improving competences for the 21st Century: An Agenda for European Cooperation on Schools"¹. Taking the view that school education should be a key priority for the next cycle of the Lisbon process, the Commission suggests an agenda for strengthening European cooperation on schools².

More precisely, the Commission proposes to reinforce cooperation in three areas: key competences, high quality learning for every student and teachers and school staff. In each of the three areas, the Commission identifies major themes on which future cooperation should focus, such as literacy and numeracy, personalised learning and assessment techniques, the equity of school education systems, early school leaving, and teacher education and recruitment.

¹ COM(2008) 425. The Communication is based on a public consultation whose results can be found here: http://ec.europa.eu/education/school21/results_en.html

² In the Commission's text, "School" refers to pre-primary, primary, lower and upper secondary institutions and also to institutions of vocational training and to pre-primary institutions.

In November 2008, the Council discussed the above-mentioned Communication and agreed on the following priorities for European cooperation on schools: to guarantee and improve the acquisition of key competences, in particular literacy and numeracy, to enhance the essential role which schools play in promoting inclusive societies and strengthening social cohesion, by ensuring high-quality education for all pupils in accordance with the principle of equity, to promote teaching as a profession and to improve initial and in-service training for teaching staff and school leaders¹.

In December 2008, the Commission presented another Communication proposing "An updated strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training"². Based on the recent evaluation of the progresses made within the Education and Training 2010 work programme, this document identifies long-term strategic challenges and immediate priorities in lifelong learning. Important parts of it deal with issues related to school education. The Commission proposes to improve implementation concerning the areas of languages, teacher training, and early school leaving, and to further develop policy cooperation on issues such as basic skills, pre-primary education, migrants, learners with special needs and on transversal key competences. The Commission also suggests to review and where appropriate update existing benchmarks, and to integrate new benchmarks into the framework. More specifically, in the field of school education, the document proposes to extend the benchmark on low achievers in reading skills to include also mathematics and science, and to develop new benchmarks on language learning, on mobility, and on the participation rate in pre-primary education.

Rapporteur's statement

While the Treaties underline that each Member State retains exclusive competence for the content of teaching and the organisation of its educational system, the European Union has intensified its initiatives in this field, since the adoption of the Treaty of Maastricht, by promoting cooperation between Member States and by supporting and complementing their action. The adoption of the recommendation on key competences, of the European Qualifications Framework or of ECVET all witness this development.

Schools of the 21st century face a double challenge: on the one hand, they have to fulfil the educational policy guidelines set by national governments and on the other, they are expected to help achieving the aims described in the EU's essential strategic document, the Lisbon Strategy, designed to increase Europe's competitiveness.

My conviction is that in the centre of the school system should be the children, and the educational policy should not exclusively be subordinated to economic considerations, and should not be considered merely a tool for economic growth. Education is a tool for individual and social development and school constitutes the first experience of formalised learning. Therefore, it has a considerable impact on the students' views on learning in general.

Schools are also a stage of socialization where children get in touch with their peers and adults through communication. Therefore, the school environment should be characterised by a good social climate, the presence of a wide range of pedagogical methods, a supportive

¹ 14855/08, 30 November 2008.

² COM(2008) 865.

learning environment, openness and flexibility that contribute to the adoption of a culture of continuous learning.

Schools should pay special attention to equal opportunities, social justice and cultural diversity. School communities should reflect the surrounding society and be exempt of any kind of discrimination and segregation, in order to develop in children the feeling of solidarity and acceptance towards their disadvantaged fellows. Inclusive education may also help social integration of migrant or handicapped pupils, increase motivation and community cohesion. Additional financial and personal needs of inclusive education should be compensated by the authorities.

Schools should have an excellent relationship with other public institutions like regional and local authorities, social and children welfare institution, as well as with parents associations and the world of work. Accessibility and proximity of schools are key factors in inclusion and social justice, and an effective means to fight early school leaving.

National school systems should be ready to offer education in the mother tongue to native national minorities in all levels, while migrant children should be offered lessons in their respective mother tongue. The European Union plays an eminent role in the collection and dissemination of best practices in this field.

Adequate and equitable financing should be granted for all schools, while diversity of pedagogical methods, the scale and the ownership of the institutions should be respected. Additional funding and support should be granted for schools in disadvantaged and remote regions. These institutions are often unable to apply for EU projects exclusively by their own resources.

Quality of teaching is a decisive factor in students' performance, therefore efforts should be doubled to improve teacher's pre-service induction, in-service training, mobility prospects, as well as to establish a continuing support and guidance about new pedagogical methods. The attractiveness and the social status of the teaching profession should be restored by offering adequate working conditions and a fair remuneration and reward systems.

In conclusion, the question about how schools can better contribute to the challenges of the 21st century should be reversed: what should be done for schools so that they are able to serve better our societies and future generations? European cooperation offers a unique opportunity to Member States and educational institutions to exchange their experiences and to adopt the methods that best fit their needs and expectations.