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SCHOOLS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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Do not confine your children to your own learning for they were born in another time.'
(Hebrew Proverb)

1 Introduction – why a consultation on schools?

Member States are responsible for the organisation and content of education and training systems. The role of the European Union is to support them. The European Commission works closely with Member States to help them develop and modernise their education and training policies. It does this in two main ways: the 'Education and Training 2010' Work Programme, part of the revised Lisbon Strategy, facilitates the exchange of information, data and best practice through mutual learning and peer review. Through the new Lifelong Learning Programme¹, the Commission will invest nearly €7 billion over seven years in projects to provide new educational opportunities for thousands of pupils, students and teachers.

The importance of education and training within the Lisbon strategy for growth and jobs² has long been recognised. The European Council has repeatedly stressed the role of education and training for the long-term competitiveness of the European Union as well as for social cohesion. Successive Joint Employment Reports have underlined education issues; the most recent report, for 2006/2007³, calls for more investment in human capital through better education and skills and acknowledges the growing importance of lifelong learning in National Reform Programmes. It also highlights specific problems such as the persistence of early school leaving and argues that education systems too often compound existing inequalities and that reforms should be more comprehensive, based on long-term policy planning and on a 'culture of evaluation'.

The challenge facing education systems can be summarised in the terms set out in the Commission's Communication of 2006 on promoting efficiency and equity in education systems. It is to ensure that systems are simultaneously efficient in producing high levels of excellence and equitable in raising the general level of skills. Within such a framework, some of the most important challenges, which have the greatest significance for the well-being of individuals and for the good of society, relate to the quality of initial education and training, starting from early learning and pre-school education.

Issues surrounding schools thus tend to have a central place in national policy debates about education. School⁴ is the place where the majority of Europeans spend at least nine or ten years of their lives⁵; here they gain the basic knowledge, skills, and competences, and many of the fundamental norms, attitudes and values which will carry them through their lives. Complementing the key roles of parents, school can help individuals develop their talents and fulfil their potential for personal growth (both emotional and intellectual) and well-being. If it is to prepare them for a life in the modern world, school must set people on the path to a

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/newprog/index_en.html

² The Lisbon Strategy was adopted in March 2000 and aims to make the EU the most dynamic and competitive economy by 2010. This strategy involves several policy areas, from research and education to environment and employment.

³ http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/employment_strategy/employ_en.htm

⁴ The main focus of this document is upon compulsory education systems and institutions.

⁵ Eurydice: *Key data 2005*, table B1

lifetime of learning. A sound school education also lays the foundations for an open and democratic society by training people in citizenship, solidarity and participative democracy.

Until now, however, European Union initiatives and reflections in support of the Lisbon strategy have tended to focus on other aspects of education and training systems – for example, on vocational training and more recently on higher education. The school, despite being fundamental for the achievement of the common objectives set out in the Education and Training 2010 work programme has not up until now been comprehensively addressed.

Though there are many examples of successful schools across Europe, there are also signs that more work needs to be done on improving the literacy of 15-year olds, reducing the number of early school leavers and improving the completion rate of upper secondary education, all of which are key benchmarks in the Union's Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs. At present:

- One fifth of under 15-year olds attains only the lowest level of proficiency in reading.
- Almost 15% of 18 – 24 year olds leave school prematurely.
- Only 77% of 22-year olds have completed upper secondary education⁶.

The question of skills is vital. Almost a third of the European labour force is low skilled, but, according to some estimates, by 2010 50% of newly created jobs will require highly skilled workers and only 15 % will be for people with basic schooling. It is worth noting that schools are finding it difficult to engage the interest of young people in the key subjects of science and mathematics, which are crucial for Europe's competitiveness. Girls perform less well in Maths and Science than boys do, and there are other significant gender disparities: boys perform increasingly less well than girls in reading; and boys drop out of school more often than girls do.

In addition, there is evidence that high-quality pre-school programmes that focus on learning as well as personal and social competences have long-lasting benefits for pupils' achievement and socialisation at school and in later life, especially for the most disadvantaged, particularly if they are followed up with interventions such as support for language learning and social adjustment⁷. Despite this, provision of early learning and pre-school education varies widely between Member States. Furthermore, though no school system provides the same quality of education for all, the range of disparities between students differs widely among countries⁸, suggesting that there is still scope for improvement in this area.

It is against this backdrop that the Commission services have decided to launch this consultation.

Respondents are invited to (1) identify what actions are necessary within their national contexts to ensure that schools deliver the quality of education needed in the 21st century; and (2) identify those aspects of school education on which cooperation at European Union level

⁶ *Progress towards the Lisbon objectives in Education and Training* SEC (2006) 639.

⁷ Annex to Communication from the Commission *Efficiency and Equity in European Education and Training Systems*, 2006, S 2.2

⁸ OECD: *Learning for Tomorrow's World, First Results from PISA 2003*, Programme for International Student Assessment, Paris, 2004

could help to support Member States in the modernisation of their systems⁹. To this end, the Commission invites respondents to make use of the framework of issues and questions set out in Section 2, which reflects both themes, which have already been the subject of EU-level discussion and also issues which arise prominently in national debates.

Reflecting its role in support of Member States, the Commission's services will draw on this information and on other sources¹⁰ to identify those areas where exchanges of experiences and joint work would be most profitable for future work within the Education and Training 2010 work programme. The outcomes of the consultation will also be discussed at a conference to be organised by the Portuguese Presidency of the Union in November 2007.

2 DEVELOPMENTS AND CHALLENGES

2.1 Key Competences for all

Mass schooling began to be widely available in an era when it was possible to predict with reasonable certainty the knowledge and skills that pupils would need in their adult lives. This is less likely to be the case in future. Young people can no longer expect to spend their whole lifetime in one sector of employment, or even one place; their career paths will change in unpredictable ways, and they will need a wide range of generic competences to enable them to adapt. In an increasingly complex world, creativity, the ability to think laterally, transversal skills and adaptability tend to be valued more than specific bodies of knowledge.

To assist Member States to adapt their school curricula to modern needs, the Union recently adopted the European Framework of Key Competences¹¹, a reference tool on the key competences that all people require for a successful life in a knowledge society. Key competences refer to the knowledge, skills and attitudes that serve for personal fulfilment, social inclusion and active citizenship, and employability. These include the 'traditional' competences like mother tongue, foreign languages, basic competences in maths and science, and digital competence, but also the more transversal ones such as learning to learn, social and civic competence, initiative taking and entrepreneurship, and cultural awareness and expression.

The Framework builds on the fact that a number of Member States are redefining school curricula so that instead of listing inputs (the knowledge that schools are to impart) they specify outcomes (the skills and attitudes that pupils are expected to have developed at different stages of their education). Four of the eight key competences defined in it are transversal; this raises questions such as how they will fit into a school curriculum based upon traditional 'subjects', and to what extent schools will need to reorganise to help pupils acquire this kind of skill, both inside and outside 'lessons'.

⁹ The EU level action is mainly carried out through the Education and Training 2010 work programme, and by supporting National Reform Programmes

¹⁰ E.g. National reports within the Education and Training 2010 work programme, National Reform Programme reports etc.

¹¹ The Key Competences Framework was requested by the Lisbon 2000 European Council, in order to identify and define those competences that every citizen requires for a successful life in a knowledge society. The Recommendation is available at: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/oj/2006/l_394/l_39420061230en00100018.pdf

Question 1: How can schools be organised in such a way as to provide all students with the full range of key competences?

2.2 Preparing Europeans for Lifelong Learning

An individual's success in the knowledge society and learning economy will require the ability to carry on learning in different ways throughout life, and to adapt rapidly and effectively to changing situations. This suggests that pupils should leave school competent and motivated to take responsibility for their own learning throughout life.

Through educational research, our concepts of learning continue to evolve, but there is still some way to go before the lessons from research are fully reflected in teaching methods and school organisation. There are discussions, for example, about the extent to which there is still a role for 'traditional' teaching methods of transmitting knowledge and training students to recall it, and about the extent to which teaching for older pupils, who have developed sufficient skills and competences to be autonomous, could or should become a more learner-centred activity, in which learner and teacher actively co-construct knowledge and skills. Information and Communications Technologies, for instance, have an enormous potential to support autonomous learning, the collaborative construction of knowledge and the development of skills.

Question 2: How can schools equip young people with the competences and motivation to make learning a lifelong activity?

2.3 Contributing to sustainable economic growth

As noted earlier, the need to equip young people with the necessary key competences and to improve educational attainment is an essential part of the European Union's strategies for growth and jobs, and sustainable development¹²; it underlies the objectives set out in Member States' National Reform Programmes. The demand for competences is two-fold: rapid technological progress requires high and constantly updated skills, while growing internationalisation and new ways of organising companies (e.g. with flat hierarchies), call for social, communicative, entrepreneurial and cultural competences that help people to adapt to changing environments.

Improved educational achievement is important for individuals, because people's attainment in compulsory school has a strong direct impact on their later educational attainment¹³ and on their wages¹⁴. It is also important for society; given that increased attainment (as measured by average performance on comparable international student tests such as PISA and TIMSS) is

¹² The EU Sustainable Development strategy asks Member States to develop education for sustainable development. This can include education on issues such as the sustainable use of energies and transport systems, sustainable consumption and production patterns, health, media competence and responsible global citizenship.

¹³ See for example Rice *The impact of local labour markets on investment in further education: Evidence from the England and Wales youth cohort studies*. Journal of Population Economics (1999) and Maani and Kalb *Childhood economic resources, academic performance, and the choice to leave school at age sixteen*. Economics of Education Review (2007)

¹⁴ See for example Currie and Thomas *Early test scores, school quality and SES: Longrun effects on wages and employment outcomes*. Research in Labor Economics 20 (2001) and Murnane et al. *The growing importance of cognitive skills in wage determination*". The Review of Economics and Statistics 77 (1995)

strongly linked to economic growth¹⁵, a rise in the overall level of attainment of European school students will improve the Union's competitiveness and economic growth.

Question 3: How can school systems contribute to supporting long-term sustainable economic growth in Europe?

2.4 Responding to challenges in our societies

A recent Commission Communication¹⁶ and a recent Consultation Paper on Europe's Social Reality¹⁷ point out that education and training policies can have a positive impact on economic and social outcomes, but that inequities in education and training have huge hidden costs. This is not to say that schools can ever tackle wider social problems alone; research demonstrates that isolated education policy initiatives will have only limited success in (for example) removing barriers to inclusion unless they are articulated with wider social and economic reform programmes linking education and training with action in other policy fields¹⁸. However, the school, being central for children and parents' lives, today faces numerous challenges.

For example, single parent families, or working parents, may look to the school to provide childcare, as well as educational, support such as after-school activities.

School populations reflect migration patterns. In several countries, over 10% of pupils aged 15 have parents who were born abroad¹⁹; some Member States are facing this phenomenon for the first time. The presence in a school community of pupils and parents from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds can be a rich source of learning opportunities²⁰, and school can provide a safe environment in which people from different backgrounds can learn from each other. Dealing effectively with the increasing cultural diversity in classrooms also presents a challenge to some Member States, however.

Most immigrant students are motivated learners and have positive attitudes towards school²¹; however, there is concern in several European Union countries that students with an immigrant background often perform at levels significantly lower than their native peers. In general, minority-background pupils may be subject to less favourable treatment than the rest of the population and may suffer severe inequalities in access to and benefits from education. The European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, for instance, has pointed out that this is the case for Roma children in some Member States.²²

According to the Commission's *Joint report on social protection and social inclusion*, "Children have a higher-than-average risk of poverty in most Member States. In some, almost

¹⁵ See Hanushek and Kimko *Schooling, labor force quality, and the growth of nations*. American Economic Review 90 (2000).

¹⁶ *Efficiency and Equity in European education and training systems*; COM (2006) 481 final

¹⁷ Consultation Paper from the Bureau of European Policy Advisers: *Europe's Social Reality*. http://ec.europa.eu/citizens_agenda/social_reality_stocktaking/docs/background_document_en.pdf

¹⁸ S Power, *Policy-relevant synthesis of results from European research in the field of Education*, European Commission, Directorate-General for Research, 2007

¹⁹ *Integrating immigrant children into schools in Europe*, Eurydice, 2004

²⁰ *Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity* COM (2003) 449

²¹ *Where immigrant students succeed*, OECD, 2006

²² *Roma and Travellers in Public Education*, EUMC, 2006

every third child is at risk. ... Deprived children are less likely than their peers to do well in school, stay out of the criminal justice system, enjoy good health, and integrate into the labour market and society"²³. Poverty affects their cognitive development and, ultimately, their academic achievements.²⁴ In general, young people brought up in a less advantageous socioeconomic environment are more likely to leave school early.²⁵

Early school leaving is a significant problem in several Member States. Progress towards the Union's objective of no more than 10% early school leavers by 2010 is slow, and the European Council has stressed that efforts should be intensified²⁶.

Educational practices and societal conditions also interact. There is evidence²⁷ that the segregation of children into separate schools based on ability before the age of 13 ('tracking') exacerbates differences in educational attainment due to social background, and leads to even more inequitable outcomes in terms of student and school performance.

Question 4: How can school systems best respond to the need to promote equity, to respond to cultural diversity and to reduce early school leaving?

2.5 A School for all

There is a trend in Europe towards educating all pupils (whatever their needs may be) in mainstream classrooms; the number of learners in fully segregated 'special' schools is decreasing as these are transformed into resource centres that support the work of mainstream schools. According to experts, 'inclusive education provides an important foundation for ensuring equality of opportunity for people with special needs in all aspects of their life; (it) requires flexible education systems that are responsive to the diverse and often complex needs of individual learners.'²⁸

The types of classroom practice that support the inclusion of pupils with 'special' needs include: co-operative teaching, co-operative learning, collaborative problem solving, heterogeneous grouping, and systematic monitoring, assessment, planning and evaluation of each pupil's work. Such approaches are likely to benefit all pupils, including children who are particularly gifted or talented²⁹.

Steps to include children with 'special' educational needs can therefore be seen as an extension of the principle that school be constructed around the particular needs of every individual child. Despite these trends, in some Member States, dissatisfaction with the kind of schooling publicly available has led a small number of parents to educate their children at home.

²³ *Joint report on social protection and social inclusion*, 2007.

²⁴ *A thematic study to identify what policy responses are successful in preventing child poverty*, European Commission, DG Employment and Social Affairs, 2006

²⁵ *Study on Access to Education and Training, Basic Skills and Early School Leavers*, European Commission, DG EAC, 2005

²⁶ Presidency Conclusions, European Council, Brussels 2006, 38.

²⁷ See Commission Staff Working Document: Annex to Commission Communication *Efficiency and Equity in European Education and Training Systems*, 2006

²⁸ *Key principles for Special Needs Education*, European Agency for Special Needs Education, 2003

²⁹ Inclusive education and classroom practices. European Agency for Developments in Special Needs Education. Available at: http://www.european-agency.org/iecp/iecp_intro.htm

Question 5: If schools are to respond to each pupil's individual learning needs, what can be done as regards curricula, school organisation and the roles of teachers?

2.6 Preparing young Europeans for active citizenship

An increase in young people's participation in representative democracy is one of the most important challenges facing European society³⁰. Effective links between schools and the wider world – in the immediate locality, the region, the state, the European Union and beyond – have been acknowledged to be vital if students are to be prepared to take their place in society. Through school, society helps to prepare young people to live in community and to be responsible and active citizens; it can provide young people with an idea of what is meant by responsible European citizenship within a democratic society^{31 32}.

As a contribution to addressing this challenge, the Council of Europe has mapped out possible ways to foster a culture of democracy in schools, involving students, parents and teachers. These aim to show that democracy is not a game of adults for adults, and that it 'requires a life-long learning process which supposes both that future adult citizens be nourished by democracy and that they have practised it at their own level. Democracy in schools also has pragmatic justifications: it is an effective way for creating a climate of confidence and responsibility within schools³³.

However, trends such as increased violence, radicalism or fundamentalism in society, and expressions of racism, xenophobia, homophobia and sexism are inevitably also reflected in school communities; bullying is a problem that several Member States have identified as a priority for action.

Question 6: How can school communities help to prepare young people to be responsible citizens, in line with fundamental values such as peace and tolerance of diversity?

2.7 Teachers – key agents for a change

The contribution of school staff, and especially of teachers, is key to the success of every school. It is teachers who mediate between a rapidly evolving world and the pupils who are about to enter it.

The demands placed upon teachers are increasing: they work with pupil groups that are more heterogeneous than before (in terms of mother tongue, gender, ethnicity, faith, ability etc.); they are required to use the opportunities offered by new technologies, to respond to the demand for individualised learning and to assist pupils to become autonomous life-long learners; and they may also have to take on additional decision-taking or managerial tasks consequent upon increased school autonomy.

³⁰ See e.g. Youth Pact; Council Resolution of 25.11.2003 on common objectives for participation by and information for young people (OJ C 295, 5.12.2003)

³¹ *Citizenship Education at School in Europe*, Eurydice, 2005

³² Education and citizenship. Report on the broader role of education and its cultural aspects. Council of the European Union, 13452/04.

³³ Council of Europe 'Democracy in Schools'

Furthermore, challenging environments exist in many schools; aggressive behaviour towards teachers is recorded in many Member States. A recent study³⁴ listed 37 different environmental and organisational factors that lead to teachers suffering from stress and stress-related illness. Questions about the working conditions and support that teaching staff require are therefore raised.

Many Member States have difficulty in retaining experienced teachers. Overall, in countries for which data are available, the majority of teachers retire from their profession as soon as they are offered an opportunity to do so. This presents Member States with a challenge - to replace the experience that is being lost, and an opportunity - to invest in the initial training of a new wave of teachers and to improve the skills of existing teachers. The Commission and Member States are currently working together, through the Education and Training 2010 programme, to find ways to improve the quality of Teacher Education.

Question 7: How can school staff be trained and supported to meet the challenges they face?

2.8 Helping school communities to develop

School Heads / Principals play a vital role in the management and leadership of schools. There is a variety of models of school management in Europe. Some systems place a premium on 'school leaders' (or teams of leaders) who can set the pace and direction of change, facilitate open communication, stimulate creative thinking and innovation, motivate staff and pupils to higher levels of achievement, and exemplify the lifelong learning ethos. In other systems, the role of school leader does not exist.

Public debate increasingly refers to the desirability of schools working in partnership with other agencies and organisations. Processes vary for ensuring that schools are accountable to the communities they serve. In some countries, parents and other stakeholders are represented on governing bodies with wide powers over staffing, finances, school ethos and curriculum; in others, all these powers are held centrally. The extended use of school premises for after-school activities or as an educational resource for the whole community (such as local learning centres) can help promote lifelong learning opportunities.

Evaluation and inspection systems can provide valuable feedback to enable a school to build upon its achievements and meet changing needs. The European Parliament and Council³⁵ in 2001 recommended that Member States establish transparent quality evaluation systems and encouraged them to create a framework that balances schools' self-evaluations with any external evaluations, to involve all relevant actors in the evaluation process, and to disseminate good practice and lessons learned. Despite this, parents, pupils and other school members are involved less often in evaluations than teachers and school councils³⁶. A key question is the extent to which the evaluation and assessment of a school's performance can take into account the socio-economic and educational profile of pupils, thereby highlighting the school's added value.

³⁴ Education International (EI) European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) *Study on Stress: The cause of stress for teachers, its effects, and suggested approaches to reduce it.*

³⁵ *Recommendation on European cooperation in quality evaluation in school education* OJ L 60/53 1.3.2001.

³⁶ *Evaluation of Schools Providing Compulsory Education in Europe.* Eurydice 2004.

There is considerable variation across Europe in the extent to which schools have the autonomy to set their objectives, to shape their curricula, to select and remunerate their staff and to implement any changes that evaluations may show to be necessary.

Question 8: How can school communities best receive the leadership and motivation they need to succeed? How can they be empowered to develop in response to changing needs and demands?

3 CONCLUSION

The foregoing is by no means an exhaustive list of the challenges facing schools and school systems; however, it serves to highlight the significant pressures under which they operate. It seems logical to conclude that the institution of the school cannot remain static if it is to serve as a foundation for lifelong learning and to contribute fully to Member States' social and economic prosperity.

Respondents are now invited to respond to some or all of the eight questions presented here by identifying (1) what actions they would favour within their national contexts to ensure that schools deliver the quality of education needed in the 21st century; and (2) to suggest how European cooperation³⁷ could be effective in supporting Member States in the modernisation of their systems.

³⁷ European cooperation takes place within the Education and Training 2010 work programme, and through National Reform Programmes that are designed to contribute to the Union's Lisbon Strategy.

SUMMARY OF QUESTIONS

1. How can schools be organised in such a way as to provide all students with the full range of key competences?
2. How can schools equip young people with the competences and motivation to make learning a lifelong activity?
3. How can school systems contribute to supporting long-term sustainable economic growth in Europe?
4. How can school systems best respond to the need to promote equity, to respond to cultural diversity and to reduce early school leaving?
5. If schools are to respond to each pupil's individual learning needs, what can be done as regards curricula, school organisation and the roles of teachers?
6. How can school communities help to prepare young people to be responsible citizens, in line with fundamental values such as peace and tolerance of diversity?
7. How can school staff be trained and supported to meet the challenges they face?
8. How can school communities best receive the leadership and motivation they need to succeed? How can they be empowered to develop in response to changing needs and demands?