

Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council of 21 November 2008 on preparing young people for the 21st century: an agenda for European cooperation on schools

(2008/C 319/08)

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE GOVERNMENTS OF THE MEMBER STATES MEETING WITHIN THE COUNCIL,

WHEREAS:

1. The conclusions of the Lisbon European Council of 23 and 24 March 2000 ⁽¹⁾ emphasised that investment in education and training was of crucial importance in the European knowledge-based economy.
2. The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 February 2001 on European cooperation in quality evaluation in school education ⁽²⁾ invited Member States to support the improvement of quality evaluation in school education.
3. The conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, of 14 November 2006 on efficiency and equity in education and training ⁽³⁾ invited Member States to ensure the efficient targeting of education and training reforms and investment to improve quality and equity, particularly by focusing on pre-primary education, early intervention programmes and equitable education and training systems.
4. Decision No 1720/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 November 2006 ⁽⁴⁾ established an action programme in the field of lifelong learning.
5. The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning ⁽⁵⁾ set out the minimum knowledge, skills and attitudes which all pupils should have acquired by the end of initial education and training in order to take part in the knowledge society and which, given their cross-cutting nature, imply an approach to teaching that goes beyond traditional subject boundaries.
6. The Council Resolution of 15 November 2007 ⁽⁶⁾ stressed the need to equip people with new skills for new jobs and to raise overall skills levels, by providing initial and continuing education and training for skills of the highest quality, in order to maintain and strengthen their capacity for innovation, which is required for greater competitiveness, growth and employment.
7. The conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, of 15 November 2007 on improving the quality of teacher education ⁽⁷⁾ emphasised the need to ensure that provision for teachers' initial training, early career support and further professional development is coordinated, coherent, adequately resourced and quality assured.
8. The conclusions of the March 2008 European Council ⁽⁸⁾ stressed that a key factor for future growth is the full development of the potential for innovation and creativity of European citizens built on European culture and excellence in science, and urged Member States to reduce substantially the number of young people who cannot read properly and the number of early school leavers, and to improve the achievement of learners from migrant or disadvantaged backgrounds.
9. The Council conclusions of 22 May 2008 on promoting creativity and innovation through education and training ⁽⁹⁾ noted that there is a growing need for action at national level as well as cooperation at EU level to bring about the change necessary if schools are to prepare pupils to face the significant challenges and problems of a fast-changing world,

WELCOME the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament of 3 July 2008 entitled *Improving competences for the 21st Century: An Agenda for European Cooperation on Schools*, which proposes an agenda for cooperation between Member States aimed at stepping up and strengthening the development of school systems.

REAFFIRM THAT:

1. free compulsory education is a fundamental right for all citizens, the provision of which is the duty of public authorities and organisation of which the responsibility of the Member States;
2. school education — including all forms of school education up to the end of secondary — lays the foundations for lifelong learning by enabling pupils to acquire the key competences which they will need and which will help to guide them throughout their personal and professional lives;

⁽¹⁾ Doc. SN 100/1/00 REV 1, paragraph 25.

⁽²⁾ OJ L 60, 1.3.2001.

⁽³⁾ OJ C 298, 8.12.2006.

⁽⁴⁾ OJ L 327, 24.11.2006.

⁽⁵⁾ OJ L 394, 30.12.2006.

⁽⁶⁾ OJ C 290, 4.12.2007.

⁽⁷⁾ OJ C 300, 12.12.2007.

⁽⁸⁾ Doc. 7652/08, paragraph 15, p. 10.

⁽⁹⁾ OJ C 141, 7.6.2008, p. 17.

3. school education not only represents an important means of socialising individuals and passing on the values, skills, knowledge and attitudes required for democracy, citizenship, intercultural dialogue and personal development, but also plays an essential role in the acquisition of the key competences needed for successful integration into economic life;
4. schools have a duty to provide their pupils with an education which will enable them to adapt to an increasingly globalised, competitive, diversified and complex environment, in which creativity, the ability to innovate, a sense of initiative, entrepreneurship and a commitment to continue learning are just as important as the specific knowledge of a given subject;
5. although responsibility for the organisation and content of education and training systems rests with individual Member States, and schools may sometimes enjoy a considerable degree of autonomy, European cooperation has a valuable role to play. It can help Member States to meet common challenges, in particular by means of the open method of coordination;
6. Member States have a common interest in cooperating in order to draw benefit from the range of innovative and high-quality practices to be found in EU school systems.
5. a coherent approach to competence development, based on the European reference framework of key competences for lifelong learning ⁽¹⁾, implies the need for stronger efforts to improve reading literacy and other basic skills, as well as more personalised approaches to learning that respond to the unique needs of each pupil, that involve suitable forms of assessment and that lead to better motivation for learning;
6. ensuring high-quality education and training systems which are both equitable and efficient ⁽²⁾ requires better and more accessible pre-school provision, ambitious schools that offer equitable opportunities for all pupils, regardless of their backgrounds, as well as the right balance of mainstream and specialist provision for children with special needs;
7. greater efforts are also required to implement the Council conclusions of November 2007 ⁽³⁾ in which Member States were invited to ensure a high standard of initial teacher education, to provide early career support and continuing professional development that is coordinated, coherent, adequately resourced and quality assured, to attract into the teaching profession — and endeavour to retain — the most able people, to tackle instances of poor performance, to support all pupils in making full use of their potential and to create school environments in which teachers learn from one another and which focus on improving student learning.

EMPHASISE THAT:

1. given the essential contribution made by education and training to the future growth, long-term competitiveness and social cohesion of the Union, as well as to the promotion of active citizenship, they should remain a key priority for the next cycle of the Lisbon process;
2. further development of school systems is needed to ensure that social cohesion is maintained and that — through improved access and opportunities — every young person is able to develop his or her full potential and to become an active participant in the emerging knowledge society;
3. schools need to foster creativity and a spirit of innovation and enterprise in their pupils by providing stimulating working environments. To achieve this, schools should themselves be creative, dynamic places that are open to cooperation and partnerships with the wider world and that develop a culture of internal and external evaluation in which families too are involved, in order to identify possible areas for change and improvement;
4. there is still on average insufficient progress towards the three European benchmarks adopted by the Council for 2010 which relate directly to school education: on early school leavers, reading literacy and the completion of upper secondary education;
1. to guarantee and improve the acquisition of key competences, in particular literacy and numeracy;
2. 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;
3. to promote teaching as a profession and to improve initial and in-service training for teaching staff and school leaders.

AGREE ON THE FOLLOWING PRIORITIES FOR EUROPEAN COOPERATION ON SCHOOLS:

INVITE THE MEMBER STATES, WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE COMMISSION,

1. within the framework of the open method of coordination, to work together to enhance European cooperation in order to promote the policy priorities outlined in these conclusions;

⁽¹⁾ OJ L 394, 30.12.2006.

⁽²⁾ European Council Conclusions, March 2006 (doc. 7775/06, paragraph 23, p. 6).

⁽³⁾ OJ C 300, 12.12.2007.

2. when following up the Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning, to focus cooperation on:
 - increasing levels of literacy and numeracy, as well as promoting the learning of at least two languages in addition to the mother tongue,
 - stimulating greater interest in mathematics, science and technology, in order to develop scientific ways of thinking from an early age,
 - reinforcing not only subject-based, but also transversal competences, in particular 'learning to learn' and social and civic competences,
 - improving assessment techniques in the context of personalised learning;
3. when following up the Council conclusions on efficiency and equity in education and training, to focus cooperation on:
 - ensuring accessible, high-quality pre-school provision,
 - reducing early school leaving,
 - combating inequality and fostering social inclusion, by seeking to reduce the underachievement of pupils and to improve the performance of schools,
 - ensuring successful transitions between different school types and levels, and into lifelong education and training, particularly by improving access to and the quality of information, guidance and advice services,
 - ensuring access to high-quality educational opportunities and services, particularly for children and young people who — disadvantaged by personal, social, cultural and/or economic circumstances — need particular support in order to fulfil their educational potential,
 - identifying learning difficulties early and finding solutions based on more personalised pedagogical approaches, tailored to the needs and abilities of each pupil,
 - ensuring timely and adequate learning support for all pupils with special needs, whether in mainstream or specialised schools,
4. when following up the Council conclusions on improving the quality of teacher education, to focus cooperation on:
 - improving the governance of schools and their openness to the world around them;
 - enhancing the attractiveness of teaching as a profession,
 - enabling all beginning teachers to benefit from structured early career support programmes,
 - improving the supply, quality and take-up of teachers' continuous professional development programmes,
 - reviewing teacher recruitment, placement, retention and mobility policies, in order to maximise their impact on the quality of school education,
 - expanding opportunities for teachers to spend a period of time in another Member State, so that they can further their own education and training, acquire additional work experience and develop their foreign language skills,
 - improving the recruitment and training of school leaders, in order to enhance their management and teaching skills;
5. to use all relevant instruments, such as those forming part of the open method of coordination, the Lifelong Learning Programme, the 7th Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development and, in accordance with national priorities, the European Social Fund, in order to promote the above aims;
6. to conduct regular dialogue on schools issues — including the promotion of creativity and innovative capacity in and through school education — involving high-level policy makers from the Member States.

INVITE THE COMMISSION:

to propose appropriate forms of cooperation and the exchange of good practice in the areas set out in these conclusions, in the context of preparations for a new strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training beyond 2010.