



C/2024/1757

22.3.2024

P9_TA(2023)0306

System of European Schools — state of play, challenges and perspectives

European Parliament resolution of 12 September 2023 on the system of European Schools: state of play, challenges and perspectives (2022/2149(INI))

(C/2024/1757)

The European Parliament,

- having regard to Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union,
- having regard to the Convention defining the Statute of the European Schools ⁽¹⁾,
- having regard to the study conducted for its Committee on Culture and Education of 9 June 2022 entitled ‘The European Schools system: State of Play, Challenges and Perspectives’ ⁽²⁾,
- having regard to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report of December 2022 entitled ‘PISA for Schools: How The European Schools Compare Internationally 2022’,
- having regard to the 2022 final report of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education entitled ‘External Evaluation of the Implementation of the European Schools’ Action Plan on Educational Support and Inclusive Education’,
- having regard to the European Court of Auditors’ report of 25 November 2022 entitled ‘Report on the annual accounts of the European Schools for the financial year 2021’,
- having regard to the Interinstitutional Proclamation on the European Pillar of Social Rights ⁽³⁾,
- having regard to its resolution of 27 September 2011 on the European Schools system ⁽⁴⁾,
- having regard to its resolution of 11 November 2021 on the European Education Area: a shared holistic approach ⁽⁵⁾,
- having regard to its resolution of 19 May 2022 on establishing the European Education Area by 2025 — micro-credentials, individual learning accounts and learning for a sustainable environment ⁽⁶⁾,
- having regard to its resolution of 25 March 2021 on shaping digital education policy ⁽⁷⁾,
- having regard to its resolution of 7 July 2016 on the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, with special regard to the Concluding Observations of the UN CRPD Committee ⁽⁸⁾,
- having regard to Rule 54 of its Rules of Procedure,
- having regard to the report of the Committee on Culture and Education (A9-0205/2023),

⁽¹⁾ OJ L 212, 17.8.1994, p. 3.

⁽²⁾ Study — ‘The European Schools system: State of Play, Challenges and Perspectives’, European Parliament, Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the Union, Policy Department B — Structural and Cohesion Policies, 9 June 2022.

⁽³⁾ OJ C 428, 13.12.2017, p. 10.

⁽⁴⁾ OJ C 56 E, 26.2.2013, p. 14.

⁽⁵⁾ OJ C 205, 20.5.2022, p. 17.

⁽⁶⁾ OJ C 479, 16.12.2022, p. 65.

⁽⁷⁾ OJ C 494, 8.12.2021, p. 2.

⁽⁸⁾ OJ C 101, 16.03.2018, p. 138.

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- A. whereas the European Schools System (ESS) is a unique system that has demonstrated its strengths and qualities since its creation in the 1950s, as shown, for example, by the recognition of the European Baccalaureate in all Member States and the continuous growth in the number of Accredited European Schools (AES); whereas every EU citizen should have the opportunity to benefit from such an education;
- B. whereas everyone should have the opportunity to benefit from the type of education provided by the ESS and every school system across the European Union must be given the chance to gain from the ESS's pedagogical expertise;
- C. whereas the ESS, in combining the educational systems of Member States — through parallel language sections — with a strong European dimension, sense of belonging and cultural identity, multilingual education, and a focus on science, technology, engineering, the arts and mathematics, as well as pedagogical innovations, represents a laboratory and source of experience for educational reform, including for the creation of a European Education Area (EEA);
- D. whereas the ESS should be fully aligned with the educational policies put forward by the European Union; whereas a central aim of the ESS is to facilitate mobility and transfer to and from all national education systems, with the Member States being required to ensure fair and equal transposition of ESS learning results;
- E. whereas the governance structure of the ESS has the advantage of maintaining a direct link with the Member States, but requires reform given its clear limitations in terms of decision-making, change management and structured exchange of best practices with national education systems;
- F. whereas the scope of the Commission's role in the ESS needs to be broadened and the forms of its action expanded, given that its involvement is currently limited to budgetary matters, leaving the equally important educational, operational and human resources aspects out of the equation;
- G. whereas the current system of teacher recruitment in the ESS has serious shortcomings, resulting in a mismatch between the needs on the ground and the actual staff seconded by the Member States, issues with yearly recruitment plans, difficulties in finding qualified teachers and staff, precarious working conditions for locally recruited teachers and other educational staff and problems with continuous professional development; whereas there is a need to boost the attractiveness of the ESS among the teaching community;
- H. whereas although the ESS has made progress on the inclusion of students with special needs, disabilities or learning differences, there is a lack of psychological support and a growing need for intensive support assistance; whereas communication and adequate employment packages are key to ensuring that educational and psychological staff provide quality, tailored and continued support to students;
- I. whereas the ESS is responsible for ensuring that all EU languages, including small ones, are catered for equally, and for promoting linguistic and cultural diversity while reinforcing the European dimension of learning; whereas plans to have all the language sections represented in both the primary and secondary cycles in Brussels by 2028 are to be welcomed;
- J. whereas parents play a key role in the schools, including by organising extracurricular activities and providing transport and other services, and are represented by dedicated parents' associations;
- K. whereas EU resources account for the bulk of the ESS budget, for which reason Parliament must scrutinise the management and running of the ESS more strictly and objectives and investment priorities adopted by the EU in the field of education should be better reflected in the ESS;
- L. whereas the lack of accountability of some host countries, which are responsible for providing and maintaining school buildings, has led to serious issues, especially in Brussels, where schools face overcrowding; whereas these issues have had profound repercussions on the standard of education, on organisational aspects, and on the safety, security and well-being of students and staff alike;

State of affairs and vision

1. Stresses the need for a critical, in-depth assessment of all aspects of the ESS, and for reform to future-proof the system, expand its outreach activities and ensure that it serves as a model for the exchange of good practices across educational systems;
2. Calls on the European Schools' Board of Governors (BoG) to update the mission, principles and objectives of the ESS in the form of a new 'ESS Charter' that is fit for the 21st century and provides a reinvigorating vision for the system and realistic objectives against which it can be assessed, drawing on both internal and external expertise; calls for this new 'ESS Charter' to be introduced by the end of 2024;
3. Calls on the Commission to assess the role of the ESS in the establishment of the EEA, including with regard to language learning and a strong European dimension of learning, and in the automatic mutual recognition of diplomas across the EU, based on the established model of the European Baccalaureate;
4. Calls for a more integrated and active role for the Commission, in particular in terms of interlinking the ESS and the EEA; expresses its explicit wish that the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture be strongly involved in the Commission's dealings with the ESS;
5. Calls for increased accountability and transparency, tighter parliamentary scrutiny and control, and improved communication to increase the visibility and understanding of the ESS and the European Baccalaureate at all levels;
6. Reminds the Member States of their obligation to grant and maintain non-discriminatory university admission under the Convention defining the Statute of the European Schools and to guarantee that full educational provision and academic progress are also ensured for students without a language section; calls on the BoG and the Member States to ensure fair and equal transposition of learning results from the ESS and the European Baccalaureate in their equivalence tables and to make the necessary rectifications in national conversion systems in order to fully comply with the principle of equal treatment and ensure that all students can successfully move to any Member State;
7. Calls for a closer relationship between the ESS and local, regional and national educational ecosystems, in particular through the exchange of best practices and through collaboration on programmes and activities with partner schools from national systems;

Governance, management and legal issues

8. Calls on the Commission to perform an in-depth review under an independent chairperson, by the end of 2024, of the governance and management structures across the ESS and at each individual school in collaboration with the Office of the Secretary-General of the European Schools (OSG) and the BoG, and for this review to examine the roles, responsibilities and structures in place at all levels, to assess the independence of functions and potential conflicts of interest, and to identify regulatory issues that are a hindrance to the ESS;
9. Insists on the need to streamline and increase the flexibility of the BoG's decision-making through an alternative voting system with enhanced consultation of ESS stakeholders in order to enable the BoG to better respond to the needs of schools; insists, moreover, on accurate communication of decisions within the ESS;
10. Calls for clear responsibilities, transparent decision-making, biennial performance appraisals, and training and development plans for all management staff, including structured induction, at central and school levels;
11. Requests the OSG and the BoG troika to present a detailed, joint annual ESS report to Parliament as of 2024, in cooperation with all ESS stakeholders, allowing Parliament to monitor progress on reforms and objectives, flag critical issues and play an ongoing role in oversight and change management;

12. Calls on the BoG to:
- (a) clarify the applicability of primary and secondary EU legislation to the ESS;
 - (b) assess compliance with health, safety and security standards in the schools;
 - (c) ensure that locally recruited teachers' contractual and working conditions are fully in line with EU and Member State employment laws and principles;
 - (d) amend the staff regulations and the General Rules of the European Schools to explicitly clarify the competences of the Complaints Board vis-à-vis national courts, ensuring that there is no gap in legal protection;
 - (e) put in place an independent ombudsperson to address complaints about maladministration and mediate in conflicts; and
 - (f) develop a code of good administrative conduct for school management at all levels;
13. Requests a review of the mandate of the European Court of Auditors and the Commission's Internal Audit Service to provide annual opinions and recommendations on various aspects of the ESS and asks that these opinions and recommendations be presented as part of the deliberations on the joint annual ESS report to Parliament;

Resources, infrastructure and staff

14. Urges the Member States to meet their obligations vis-à-vis the ESS in full, particularly with regard to the secondment of qualified teachers and other educational staff and the provision of adequate infrastructure (suitable premises, maintenance thereof and upgrades thereto), and calls for a binding system of direct financial contributions to ensure greater flexibility and security for both the ESS and the Member States;
15. Calls for a dedicated task force to be established by mid-2025, composed of representatives of all budgetary contributors to the ESS and involving relevant pedagogical experts from the OSG, the Commission and the Member States, in the light of the planned review of the current cost-sharing agreement in the 2025/2026 school year, with a mandate to make concrete suggestions to resolve critical resourcing issues and develop a comprehensive, adequate and sustainable cost-sharing model that will allow the ESS to fulfil its mission in line with the new 'ESS Charter';
16. Encourages host Member States to include ESS infrastructure in any national school infrastructure investment plans; asks the Commission and the Member States to work together to ensure that the ESS can benefit from the forthcoming Recovery and Resilience Facility disbursements to Member States, taking into consideration upcoming evaluations of national plans and taking into account any relevant updates, such as updates linked to RepowerEU chapters;
17. Calls on the BoG to urgently resolve ongoing teacher shortages and ensure a stable and fair employment situation for all by retaining staff and reducing turnover, thereby also avoiding a brain drain; calls, in this regard, for additional resources and a strengthened and fair employment package for seconded and locally recruited staff alike, with competitive remuneration, more equal salaries for nursery, primary and secondary teachers, clarity about employment status and stability, a system of continuous professional development (CPD) and further career prospects in and beyond the ESS;
18. Calls for teachers and schools alike to be given a greater degree of autonomy to enable them to better respond to specific needs and situations, while strictly ensuring that this greater autonomy is accompanied by stronger assessment and accountability mechanisms so that harmonised standards are guaranteed;
19. Calls for additional middle management posts focused on high-quality teaching methodologies and curricula to be introduced at schools, and for all national secondment procedures to be more transparent and open;
20. Recognises and encourages the work of the school community, especially parents, in school life, such as in providing extracurricular activities, and insists on the need to monitor the schools' activities to guarantee good management, appropriate pedagogical qualifications, affordability and inclusiveness; recalls that the Convention grants parents a role in the governance of the ESS and asks that this role be adequately recognised;

21. Calls for an urgent annual review of the enrolment policy and school fees in order to guarantee a place for all category-one students, for the socio-economic mix to be broadened by opening the ESS to more categories of students and for the full potential of the AES to be harnessed, including to address overcrowding; emphasises the importance of strictly enforcing the sibling rule and insists that legal fees should not prevent parents or legal guardians from appealing decisions by the Central Enrolment Authority that infringe enrolment rules;

22. Calls, furthermore, for the BoG to work on an ambitious and regularly updated ESS mobility plan at all levels to make school transportation more efficient, more affordable, more accessible and greener;

Educational and pedagogical quality

23. Calls on the BoG to strengthen educational and pedagogical standards by:

(a) creating a task force, with relevant pedagogical expertise, to undertake open, transparent and regular consultations with stakeholders and review the quality assurance approach put in place as part of the 2009 European Schools reform, ensuring that the review is completed by mid-2024, is updated periodically from then on, is accompanied by clear indicators and is monitored and evaluated;

(b) introducing an enhanced and accountable inspection regime, including a quality assurance unit within the OSG composed of permanent and seconded inspectors, subject-specific inspections and follow-up processes that include AES;

(c) reinforcing the role of the OSG's Pedagogical Development Unit and the Joint Teaching Committee; and

(d) ensuring ESS participation in EU programmes and initiatives such as the Erasmus+ Teacher Academies and the EEA;

24. Calls on the BoG and the OSG to develop a CPD strategy and induction programme for teachers and other educational staff throughout the ESS by the end of 2024 and insists on a broad approach to CPD, including in terms of subjects and methodologies, to widen career opportunities and build collective efficacy and formal structures that support teachers in designing, implementing, evaluating and exchanging pedagogical best practices and materials across classrooms and the system as a whole;

25. Calls on the Member States to exploit the full potential of experienced ESS teachers to become trainers and mentors in national systems, asks the BoG to establish incentives and guidelines for that purpose and emphasises the role that should be played by the ESS in establishing a European teachers' module, to be included in the initial training of teachers across the EU;

26. Insists that schools draw on the potential of personalised learning; calls on the BoG to reinforce existing frameworks and implement a coherent, uniform and systematic inclusion policy across the ESS that provides quality inclusive education, avoids exclusion due to disabilities, ensures reasonable accommodation, adapts teacher-to-students ratios, uses a flexible curriculum, considerably increases the number of qualified educational and psychological support staff and provides orientation and mentoring services; urges for progress to be made towards recognising the learning outcomes of students with special needs, disabilities or learning differences with certification or an end-of-studies diploma if they do not sit the European Baccalaureate; encourages the introduction of an inclusion index in the ESS;

27. Asks the BoG and OSG to foster a safe learning environment in which no form of violence is allowed and to strengthen the fight against bullying and cyber-bullying in the ESS by developing a harmonised whole-school approach that includes awareness-raising, training, guidelines for dealing with offline and online bullying, the promotion of a peer support system involving active and well-trained teachers and parents, and a clear and enforceable sanctioning system at all levels;

28. Asks the BoG and the OSG to assess the inclusion of vocational education and training (VET) modules in the ESS, establish partnerships with VET institutions and explore the possibility of setting up accredited European VET schools across the European Union;

29. Insists on the need to deliver a full, high-quality educational experience for all students, in particular in their mother tongue and for students without a language section in both the primary and secondary cycles; requests the Board of Inspectors (BoI) to consult students, teachers and parents about the impact of reducing the number of lessons and subjects or of putting different class levels together when student numbers are below the threshold;
30. Calls on the BoI to periodically review second- and third-language teaching on the basis of the latest pedagogical guidance on the introduction of reading and writing in early education, cooperative teaching methods and the suitability of differentiated learning in order to ensure that students of all ages enjoy learning languages;
31. Calls for greater student and teacher mobility within the ESS and to and from other school systems and for existing curricula to be updated with a view to further strengthening the European dimension, such as by reviewing the European history syllabus, including the role of minorities, by teaching citizenship education as a standalone subject, by incorporating 'European Hours' at all educational levels, with a focus on the importance of European heritage and values, and by developing entrepreneurship and soft skills; insists on maintaining the current provision of religious and ethical education;
32. Calls on the BoG to boost environmental learning and digital education in the ESS, including by implementing the European sustainability competence framework and the digital competence framework, insists on improving the teaching of green and digital skills and urges the ESS to take part in initiatives such as the European Digital Skills Certificate, while still valuing traditional learning methods that use printed books and fighting digital exclusion;
33. Suggests the creation of an annual celebratory event to share pedagogical best practice, pool knowledge among schools, teachers and students and showcase their work and projects to the broader system, with national education representatives being invited in order to raise awareness of the ESS;
34. Calls for the establishment of a formal ESS alumni community and measures to raise awareness of it, and for the collection of data on students' education paths after graduation, with a mandate for the OSG to collect anonymised information;

Outlook

35. Asks for the financial contributions from the EU to the ESS to feature as a separate budget line in future EU budgets, in order to increase transparency, ensure strategic planning and facilitate parliamentary scrutiny under the discharge procedure, and requests that the ESS be included in the further development of the EEA and that both become closely interlinked;
36. Expresses its wish that the ESS will become a beacon for high-quality multilingual and multicultural education in Europe and beyond, demonstrating that being 'united in diversity' can also be a living reality in the educational sphere; asks for all stakeholders to work towards that aim as co-creators, including through enhanced collaboration with the AES, whose inclusion and development are key for the whole system; calls for a re-evaluation of AES to assess ways of extending the scope of the ESS to all Member States by putting in place more flexible procedures and requirements for the accreditation of schools while improving quality assurance and inspection;
37. Expresses its wish for the European Parliament to be represented on the BoG and calls for an independent, external expert body to explore and propose alternative governance models, including a review of the Convention defining the Statute of the European Schools and the possibility of replacing the schools' intergovernmental legal status with a supranational European model;

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38. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council and the Commission.