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COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

**Improving competences for the 21st Century:
An Agenda for European Cooperation on Schools**

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Improving competences for the 21ˢᵗ Century: An Agenda for European Cooperation on Schools

1 INTRODUCTION

Preparing young people for the 21ˢᵗ century

1.1   Economic and social changes in the European Union bring new opportunities and challenges. Young people need a wider range of competences than ever before to flourish, in a globalised economy and in increasingly diverse societies. Many will work in jobs that do not yet exist. Many will need advanced linguistic, intercultural and entrepreneurial capacities. Technology will continue to change the world in ways we cannot imagine. Challenges such as climate change will require radical adaptation. In this increasingly complex world, creativity and the ability to continue to learn and to innovate will count as much as, if not more than, specific areas of knowledge liable to become obsolete. Lifelong learning should be the norm.

1.2   The European Council has repeatedly stressed the key role of education and training for the future growth, long-term competitiveness and social cohesion of the Union. To achieve this it is crucial fully to develop the potential for innovation and creativity of European citizens. The education element of the knowledge triangle "research-innovation-education" should be strengthened, starting early – in schools. The competences and learning habits acquired at school are essential for developing new skills for new jobs later in life.

1.3   The Commission has stated[1] that to advance well-being in the face of the challenges of the 21ˢᵗ century requires a new approach centred on providing citizens with adequate *opportunities* for self-fulfilment, *access* to education, employment, healthcare and social protection, in a context of *solidarity*, social cohesion and sustainability. In this context, the Commission has identified investing in youth as a key priority.

1.4   The Council has concluded[2] that Europe's growth and prosperity depend on an active participation by all young people. Children's attainment in compulsory education has a strong direct impact on their later social participation, further education or training, and wages. However, access to high quality school education is uneven, so education systems often compound socio-economic inequalities.

1.5   Education Ministers have pledged to improve the quality and equity of education systems[3]. The Council has adopted three benchmarks for 2010 that relate directly to school education (on early school leavers, reading literacy and completion of upper secondary education). But progress is insufficient. Accordingly, the European Council has urged

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[1]   COM(2007)726 final
[2]   OJ 2007/C 282/12 of 24.11.2007
[3]   OJ 2006/C 298/03 of 8.12.2006

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 a migrant or other disadvantaged background[4].

1.6   In annual reviews of Lisbon National Reform Programmes, the Commission has made recommendations to several Member States to improve specific aspects of their school education systems.

Purpose of this Communication

1.7   The challenge facing the EU, then, is to strengthen the reform of school systems so that *every* young person can develop his or her full potential, through improved access and opportunities, to become an active participant in the emerging knowledge economy, and to reinforce social solidarity.

1.8   Member States are responsible for the organisation and content of education and training. Europe's diverse school systems, founded upon shared values, contain a host of innovative and excellent practices. We should make better use of this diversity.

1.9   Most Member States now have lifelong learning strategies in which school education is central[5]. They are working together more intensively on school policy issues. The role of the Union is to support them by facilitating the exchange of information and good practice. This cooperation also builds on 20 years' experience under the Lifelong Learning Programme and predecessors. In the context of this ongoing joint work, the Commission in 2007 undertook a public consultation on 'Schools for the 21st Century'[6].

1.10   Member States increasingly acknowledge the benefits of cooperation to address common challenges as evidenced by Recommendations on Quality Evaluation in School Education[7] and Key Competences[8], and Council Conclusions on Efficiency and Equity[9] and Improving the Quality of Teacher Education[10].

1.11   The Commission believes that, given the common nature of many of the challenges facing school systems and the importance of these issues for the Union's socio-economic future, school education should be a key priority for the next cycle of the Lisbon process.

1.12   Accordingly, this Communication draws on the responses to the Commission's 2007 public consultation, recent work by peer learning 'clusters' of Member State experts[11], and the latest international statistics and research, to propose an agenda for strengthening European

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4   European Council Conclusions March 2008 para. 15
5   COM(2007) 703 final, para. 2.1
6   SEC(2007)1009. The responses have been analysed in a separate report available at http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/consult/index_en.html and are summarised in the Staff Working Paper
7   2001/166/EC; OJ L 60 of 1.3.2001
8   2006/962/EC; OJ L 394/10 of 30.12.2006
9   OJ C 298/03 of 8.12.2006
10   OJ C 300/07 of 12.12.2007
11   On Key competences and curriculum reform; Teachers and Trainers; Access and social inclusion; Maths, Science and Technology.

cooperation on schools[12] by identifying the major challenges facing systems that can best be tackled by such cooperation. These are divided into three areas:

–   Focus on competences

–   High quality learning for every student

–   Teachers and school staff

2.   FOCUS ON COMPETENCES

Implementing key competences

2.1   The Council has 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 and competences of the highest quality, even excellence, in order to maintain and strengthen their capacity for innovation which is required for greater competitiveness, growth and employment'[13].

2.2   The trend in school curricula is to help learners acquire knowledge and the skills and attitudes necessary to apply it in real life situations. The European Framework of Key Competences[14] describes the knowledge, skills and attitudes required for a successful life in a knowledge society. It is a basis for a coherent approach to competence development, in school and in vocational training.

2.3   To acquire competences, learners need, from an early age, to 'learn to learn' by reflecting critically on their learning aims, managing their learning with self-discipline, working autonomously and collaboratively, seeking information and support when necessary, and using all the opportunities of new technologies.

2.4   The school consultation responses called for a more flexible learning environment that helps students develop a range of competencies, while retaining a grounding in basic skills. Proposed approaches included new pedagogies, cross-curricular approaches to supplement single-subject teaching, and greater involvement of students in the design of their own learning.

2.5   Curricular reform to improve competences needs a holistic approach, organising learning within and across subjects, teaching competences explicitly, new teacher training and didactic approaches, and, vitally, involving teachers, learners and other actors fully. Similarly, schools should promote the health and wellbeing of pupils and staff, and active citizenship (including in its European context). The acquisition of a range of competences, including

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[12]   'School' in this text refers to pre-primary, primary, lower and upper secondary institutions and also to institutions of vocational training and to pre-school institutions. The issues outlined here apply also in large part to initial vocational education, and should be reflected in future work under the Copenhagen Process.
[13]   OJ 2007/C 290/01 of 4.12.2007
[14]   Recommendation 2006/962/EC

entrepreneurship education[15] and languages, can be reinforced in a school environment where staff and students are encouraged to be innovative and creative.

Literacy and Numeracy

2.6   Literacy and numeracy are essential components of key competences. They are fundamental for further learning, but performance in the EU is deteriorating. The EU benchmark is by 2010 to decrease the proportion of 15-year-olds who are low-achievers in reading literacy to 17%. However, the rate actually increased from 21.3% in 2000 to 24.1% in 2006. Moreover, almost twice as many boys as girls have low reading skills: 17.6% of 15 year old girls and 30.4 % of 15 year old boys. The decline in reading literacy must urgently be reversed. This represents one of the key challenges currently facing Europe's schools.

2.7   Reading literacy depends on diverse factors: family reading culture, home language, choice of parental and school pedagogies, and the impact of an image-based multimedia culture. Good policy practices include family literacy policies; early specialist support from pre-primary onwards; national literacy strategies and targets; and improvements in literacy infrastructure (libraries, classroom material).

2.8   Numeracy, mathematical and digital competences and an understanding of science are also vital for full participation in the knowledge society and for the competitiveness of modern economies. Children's first experiences are crucial, but students are too often anxious about maths and some distort their learning choices to avoid it. Different teaching approaches can improve attitudes, raise attainment levels, and open up new learning possibilities[16].

Personalised approaches to learning

2.9   Every learner's needs differ. Every classroom is a place of diversity: of gender, socio-economic groups, ability or disability, mother tongues and learning styles. Improving competences means teaching learners in a more personalised way.

2.10   Better tailoring teaching to each child's needs can increase student interest and engagement in learning activities and improve their results, but its benefits should reach all students equitably.

2.11   Early identification of individual difficulties and comprehensive preventive strategies within the school are the most important ways to reduce numbers leaving early. Teachers require specific training to work effectively in diverse classrooms. More flexible education and training pathways can facilitate the completion of schooling and ensure that all students are prepared for lifelong learning.

Assessing learning outcomes

2.12   Research shows that explicitly designing assessment to promote learning is one of the most powerful tools for raising standards, particularly among low-achieving pupils, and for

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[15]   See Commission Communication Fostering entrepreneurial mindsets through education and learning COM(2006) 33 final
[16]   Support for science and maths education is an objective of the Seventh EU Research Framework Programme; the emphasis is on inquiry- and problem-based teaching techniques in schools and on promoting the exchange of good practice.

empowering lifelong learners. However, assessment is too often used merely to grade pupils, and not to help them improve; tests do not always assess what competences pupils can use, only what information they can remember.

2.13   Improving competences implies a more extensive use of formative[17] assessment to identify and address problems early, and the development of more sophisticated techniques of summative[18] assessment based on agreed standards for learning outcomes. Teachers have considerable autonomy in pupil assessment; their training needs to address these issues.

To support the Member States in implementing the Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, the Commission proposes to focus future cooperation on:

- **developing action plans to increase levels of reading literacy and numeracy, including the use of target-setting;**

- **reinforcing transversal as well as subject-based competences, particularly learning-to-learn; and**

- **adopting a comprehensive approach to competence development, encompassing curricula, learning materials, teacher training, personalised learning, and assessment techniques.**

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3   HIGH QUALITY LEARNING FOR EVERY STUDENT

3.1   Providing all young people with the full range of competences for life is an equity challenge. No school system provides exactly the same educational opportunities for all pupils. The quality gap between schools should be closed. Recent research shows that low variation in student achievement scores can go together with high average achievement, and suggests that policy makers should reduce disparities and improve participation by targeting those with lower skill levels. The EU benchmark is that by 2010 at least 85% of young people should have completed upper secondary education. The 2007 average rate for 20-24 year-olds is 78.1%, an improvement of only 1.5 percentage points since 2000.

3.2   The 2006 Spring European Council concluded that reforms must be stepped up to ensure high quality education and training systems that are both efficient and equitable[19]. There remains a need to understand better, and reduce, the correlation between learners' socio-economic background and educational outcomes.

3.3   The responses to the school consultation emphasised the importance of early learning opportunities and of inclusive school systems that integrate students from all backgrounds into mainstream education, while giving additional support for disadvantaged students and those with special needs.

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[17]   Assessment providing feedback used to adapt teaching to meet the learner's needs and to help the learner reflect on his / her progress

[18]   Summarises learning that has taken place at a particular time

[19]   European Council Conclusions March 2006

Better early learning opportunities

3.4   Pre-school education can reduce the educational disadvantages of children from low-income and minority backgrounds. It can reinforce learning of the language of instruction or of a second language. Early, intensive, multi-systemic approaches offer impressive long-term results and can bring the highest rates of return over the whole lifelong learning process, especially for the most disadvantaged. There is evidence that pre-primary education improves children's average attainment, attention, and participation in class in primary school. Early childhood education should focus not only on academic performance but also on social and emotional care and should be articulated with wider social services. Staff need specialist training and qualifications.

3.5   Member States are tending to generalise pre-primary education and care. The Council in 2002 agreed that Member States should provide childcare to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age[20]. Between 2000 and 2005, participation in education by 4-year-olds increased by about 3 percentage points to over 85%, but disparities remain great: from over 99% in some countries to under 50% in others[21]. Improving pre-school provision and widening access to it are potentially the most important contributions that school systems can make to improving opportunities for all and achieving Lisbon goals.

Promoting system equity

3.6   Research indicates that the most successful school education systems build high expectations for all pupils, particularly those who do not experience high expectations at home. Systems should seek to ensure that no 'failure' is seen as definitive and no pupil leaves school believing that he or she is 'unable' to learn.

3.7   Policies that seek to secure flexible learning pathways according to each individual's needs, can help promote system equity. This implies removing "dead ends" in learning pathways, strengthened guidance systems and better possibilities to transfer between different levels of education and between different strands (e.g. between vocational and higher education).

3.8   The Council noted that "there is research evidence to suggest that, in certain cases, differentiating pupils at too early an age into separate schools of different types on the basis of ability may have negative effects on the achievements of disadvantaged pupils".[22] The bulk of available evidence indicates that early tracking into different school types can exacerbate differences in pupils' educational attainment due to social background. This is a complex phenomenon and there is scope for Member State cooperation to identify the right mix of policy measures to address it.

3.9   In some school systems, up to 25% of students repeat a year at some point, while in others it is rare. It is an expensive technique. While some repeaters catch up, the vast majority do not. Repetition rates are significantly higher for children from less advantaged socio-economic groups and repeaters' long-term achievements are often lower than for weak students who did not repeat. Some countries instead use formative assessment combined with

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[20]   Presidency Conclusions, Barcelona Council March 2002
[21]   COM(2007) 703 final
[22]   OJ C 298/3 of 8.12.2006

short, intensive interventions or individual lessons with support staff. Teachers need training in such techniques.

3.10 Disadvantage due to personal, social, cultural or economic circumstances can hinder children's education and is a central challenge for EU school systems. Poverty impairs individuals' cognitive development and, ultimately, their academic achievement. Disadvantaged children are less likely to do well in school, to enjoy good health, to integrate into the labour market and society, and to stay out of the criminal justice system[23]. The specific challenges faced by students from a migrant background are addressed in a separate Commission document[24].

3.11 School alone cannot compensate for pupils' social disadvantage. Solutions require partnerships involving families, social services, municipalities, and health services, in order to break the transmission of poverty and exclusion to the next generation.

3.12 Schools with high drop out rates tend to have a high turnover of teachers, exacerbating their problems. Ministers have agreed that the provision of high quality teaching in disadvantaged areas should be particularly encouraged[25]. Financial support to schools attracting disadvantaged pupils might narrow the differences in the social composition of schools.

Early School Leaving

3.13 Early school leaving (ESL) means wasted potential. It has social costs (social breakdown, increased demand on the health system, and lower social cohesion) and economic costs (lower productivity, lower tax revenues and higher welfare payments). The costs to the individual include low skills, unemployment, lower lifetime earnings, lower participation in learning later in life, and less adaptability to change.

3.14 In its 2007 Lisbon report on Growth and Jobs, the Commission made specific recommendations to several Member States to improve their performance in reducing ESL. While Member States' ESL rates differ considerably, the link with disadvantage is always clear. Children from families at multiple social disadvantages are overrepresented among school dropouts in all countries[26], as are the most disadvantaged areas.

3.15 Increased policy effort and resources through the European Structural Funds is improving the situation, but progress is too slow. The EU benchmark is that by 2010 on average no more than 10% of young people should leave school early. In 2007 the average EU rate for 18-24 year-olds was still 14.8%, 2.8 percentage points lower than in 2000. Ministers in 2008 discussed measures to combat school drop-out, including: reinforcing newcomers' competences in the language of instruction and other skills in order to reach the level of their peers; identifying early those 'at risk' and fostering collaboration between their parents and teachers; providing after-school learning activities; and improving continuity of support during the transition from one school level to the next.

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[23] European Council, *Joint report on social protection and social inclusion* 2007, p.5
[24] COM(2008)423
[25] OJ C 298/3 of 8.12.2006
[26] SEC(2007)1284, para 1.1.2

3.16   While 'second chance' schools are important, there needs also to be closer collaboration between the general and vocational education and training sectors, and action to make mainstream schools more attractive.

Special Educational Needs

3.17   Students with special education needs tend to favour inclusive education, and inclusive approaches can bring benefits to all students[27]. Despite strong political intentions, more than 2% of EU pupils are still taught in segregated settings because of their special educational needs.

3.18   Achieving inclusion whilst supporting those with specific needs implies re-thinking policies for organising learning support, improving collaboration between schools and other services, and implementing personalised learning. Timely and flexible support can help those with temporary learning or adaptation difficulties to catch up, rather than transferring them to a segregated setting.

School development

3.19   Schools need to be able to adapt continuously to their changing environment, and to the changing needs of pupils, staff and parents, their key partners.

3.20   In many countries, the role of school inspection is changing from one of control, to supporting and inciting improvement. School networking (e.g. Comenius school partnerships, or eTwinning) can accelerate innovation. Systemic and cyclical self-evaluation is effective in helping schools identify directions for change. The Council has concluded that schools should develop as 'learning communities'[28]. More schools are opening their facilities to the wider local community, and are developing closer links with local enterprise.

3.21   A wide variety of reforms have recently been implemented in Europe to increase the autonomy of schools. More work is needed on the quality benefits of different types of autonomy, their links with student performance, external examinations, accountability and choice and how increased autonomy can be made to serve system equity.

To support Member States in implementing the Council Conclusions on efficiency and equity in education and training, the Commission proposes to focus future cooperation on:

- **generalising access to high quality pre-school education;**

- **measuring and improving the equity impact of school education systems, and reducing quality differences between schools;**

- **ensuring that school systems facilitate successful transitions between different school types and levels, and into further education and training;**

- **reducing early school leaving; and**

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[27]   *Inclusive education and classroom practices in Secondary Education*, European Agency for Developments in Special Needs Education, Summary Report, 2005

[28]   OJ C 300/07 of 12.12.2007

> • **providing more timely support and personalised learning approaches within mainstream schooling for students with special needs.**

4 TEACHERS AND SCHOOL STAFF

Teacher Competences and Qualifications

4.1 Teacher quality is the most important within-school factor affecting student performance. As such, it is vital to the achievement of Lisbon goals. The profession has a high percentage of older workers; some 30% of teachers are over 50, and around two million will need to be replaced in the next 15 years to maintain the size of the teaching workforce. Staff need the skills to give every pupil adequate opportunities to acquire necessary competences in a safe and attractive school environment based on mutual respect and cooperation, which promotes social, physical and mental well-being and where bullying and violence have no place[29]. Yet most countries report shortfalls in teaching skills. Despite this, incentives for, and investment in, continuous training and development are weak. Generally, time spent on in-service training is minimal and many Member States offer no systematic support for new teachers.

4.2 Ministers agreed in 2007 to make the teaching profession a more attractive career choice, and to improve the quality of teacher education and to provide initial education, early career support (induction) and further professional development that is coordinated, coherent, adequately resourced and quality assured. Teachers should have sufficient incentives throughout their careers to review their learning needs and to acquire new knowledge, skills and competence, including in languages.

4.3 The school consultation responses highlight the need to improve the balance between theory and practice in initial teacher education, and to present teaching as a problem-solving or research-in-action activity linked more to children's learning and progress. Staff should have time for training and professional development and this should be accredited. In some countries, teachers' working conditions, including remuneration, were cited as key issues.

4.4 Recent research shows that the best-performing education systems attract the most able people into the teaching profession; use effective processes to select the right applicants to become teachers and to tackle poor performance; adopt a career-long and practical approach to teacher education; and create school environments in which teachers learn from each other.

School Leadership

4.5 Schools are increasingly complex and autonomous organisations. Their effective leadership requires diverse skills. The trend is for more collaborative management styles and distributed leadership, linked more strongly with school governance. This requires more teachers and trainers who have been able to develop their leadership qualities[30]. Leadership posts are increasingly onerous; many Member States experience difficulties recruiting school principals.

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[29]   Ibid

[30]   Cluster 'Teachers and Trainers': Main policy conclusions 2005 – 2007

4.6   Recent evidence suggests that school leadership should re- focus on tasks that are most effective in improving student learning, that distributing school leadership tasks can improve school effectiveness, that those involved in leadership require adequate training and preparation throughout their careers, and that school leader recruitment and retention should be professionalised[31].

To support Member States in implementing the Council Conclusions on improving the quality of teacher education, the Commission proposes to focus future cooperation on:

- **ensuring that teachers' initial education, induction and ongoing professional development are coordinated, coherent, adequately resourced and quality assured; and improving the supply, quality and take-up of in-service teacher education;**

- **reviewing teacher recruitment to attract the most able candidates, select the best applicants, and place good teachers in challenging schools; and**

- **improving the recruitment of school leaders and equipping them to focus on improving student learning and developing school staff.**

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5   CONCLUSION

5.1   This Communication has identified areas where change, sometimes radical, will be needed if Europe's schools are to equip young people fully for life in this century. There is an impressive range of innovation and excellent policy practice in EU systems, but too often still locked behind national borders. Member States should cooperate to capitalise better on it.

5.2   The Commission accordingly proposes an agenda for cooperation about the issues set out in the three summary boxes above, with a particular focus on how to improve performance on issues highlighted by the European Council, such as improving literacy, extending access to pre-school provision, and strengthening teacher education. Exchanges on this cooperation agenda should be undertaken through the Open Method of Coordination in education and training and supported by the Lifelong Learning Programme, while key challenges should be highlighted in Member States' Lisbon National Reform Programmes.

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[31]   *Improving School Leadership,* OECD 2008