

OPEN LETTER TO COMMISSIONER OETTINGER

- NEW EUROPEAN SCHOOL IN RUE DE LA LOI

Brussels, 18 December 2018

There is a serious overcrowding problem at the European schools in Brussels, as we all know. It has arisen because although pupils' numbers have grown year-on-year, the Office of the Secretary General for the European Schools and the Belgian Government (which is responsible for providing school buildings) have continuously failed to plan for this growth. A 5th European School was needed as of 2017 according to the Secretary General's own forecasts, yet the project is only now being approved for the old NATO site and will not be open until 2024 at the earliest.

Union Syndical was informed that, to address this problem, the Belgian Federal authorities have offered to convert one of their governmental office buildings in Arts-Loi into a temporary school site. The Secretary General, School Directors and the Commission support this. The intention is to relocate senior year pupils (S5-S6/S7) in two or more of the Brussels schools into this building.

Parents have very serious reservations about this particular proposal, which is being put forward as the only possible solution without any consideration of other alternatives.

A highly polluted location...

Firstly, being an office building, the proposed site does not meet the basic requirements of a school site. There is very limited outdoor space available, certainly nothing that could be described as a recreational area, so where will pupils spend break/free time. This cannot be the surrounding roads outside the building as this is one of the most congested, high-traffic areas in Brussels. It is also one of the most polluted, with levels of NOX reaching 2.4x the maximum legally allowed limit according to a recent Client Earth study. As we regularly hear, such high levels of pollution are not only very damaging to health, especially for youngster who are growing rapidly, but also harm learning abilities and mental development for life.

... without the necessary facilities of a normal school...

Secondly, although parents are told school facilities will be provided, this will not be comprehensive, for example there will be no sports or gym facilities or space for after school activities. However, these are required either for the curriculum or as part of normal school life so cannot simply be withdrawn or provided only via a separate bus journey to another location during an already hectic school schedule. Although there seems to be a small canteen in place (only for 150 students), it is not big enough to cater for 1200 pupils, so it is entirely unclear how pupils will get lunch; roaming around the streets of Arts-Loi to find a sandwich is not an adequate solution. Without the full range of necessary facilities the site is simply not suitable to be a school.

...in an inaccessible location with major transport problems...

School buses will not be allowed because of the congestion problems in the area. This means pupils will take the school bus to a metro station but then face an additional metro journey to reach Arts-Loi, which will add significantly to the journey time. These pupils will be in their final years of study; many of them preparing for they BAC exam. If they are to lose 2+ hours per day on transport it will cut significantly into the hours available to study, impacting their exam results. Other traffic

consequences that have not been considered in the proposal are the inevitability of many parents dropping their children off by car, causing significant traffic problems in the neighborhood. 1200 pupils arriving or leaving within a very short time slot morning and afternoon will itself overload the roads, Arts-Loi metro station and pedestrian crossings, creating a risk to pupils safety, unless specific measures are put in place to manage the situation.

... that will result in damage to the education and wellbeing of our children

Finally, there will be serious impacts on the teacher community that will result in adverse pedagogical consequences for the pupils. Because in many language sections teachers are spread across several secondary years, these teachers will need to work both at Arts-Loi and their current school site. This means they will lose a lesson travelling each way. No plan is proposed for how these lost lessons will be covered. It must be underlined that member states have not been consulted about sending additional teachers. The outcome can only be fewer classes delivered and fewer option choices available. And should this move result in a change of teacher from S6 to S7, this would also disadvantage effected pupils and sections greatly in their BAC. Many teachers have already expressed opposition to being asked to teach at two sites and as it is already difficult to attract teachers from many member states, this will make recruitment even more challenging than at present. No doubt gaps will be filled with more locally hired teachers, but as we know, it is extremely difficult to find the necessary subject and language combinations in the local market, especially for the uncompetitive salaries offered by the European Schools for these positions. In consequence, education quality must inevitably suffer.

Union Syndical wants to know why more suitable sites are not being considered. In particular why a quick-build school premises (using modern modular building techniques) is not being considered as the starter of the 6th school on the already vacant NATO site? This is a more convenient location that can be served by school buses and has the space for a full complement of buildings to ensure a normal school environment. It could therefore be used for new pupils arriving in the school system, rather than forcing existing pupils to move. These techniques, which are widely used for school buildings, could potentially deliver a solution in as short a time frame as converting the Arts-Loi premises.

Union Syndical believes that this 'quick-fix' solution to overcrowding proposed by the Secretary General of the European Schools will expose our children to the consequences of an unhealthy environment and has enormous risks in terms of mobility and loss of education quality. Parents associations should be informed and consulted before any proposal on the school site is made by the Secretariat General of the European Schools.

Union Syndical supports the parents associations and finds it impossible to consider this site as even a temporary measure. Therefore, we request your intervention as Commissioner responsible for Human Resources and Budget towards the Secretary General for the European Schools and the Belgian Authorities **in order to stop immediately the implementation of this project.**

The Executive Committee

Union Syndicale Brussels



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