



25 May 2021

Dear Commissioner Hahn,

We are writing to you with respect to the role of the Commission in the European Schools system.

The Commission has traditionally taken the position that it will only address financial issues within the school system. Parents have long argued against this narrow engagement, pointing out that the Commission is the lead stakeholder, accounting for circa 70% of the schools' budget and the employer of the largest number of parents using the schools. Firstly as a co-signee, it is bound to uphold all parts of the Convention of the European Schools and secondly, as a member of the Board of Governors, it has a specific fiduciary responsibility for 'supervising the implementation of the Convention', in educational, administrative and budgetary matters.

We were therefore very pleased to hear the Commission spokeswoman, Marta da Silva-Mendes, state to the CULT Committee of the European Parliament on 25 February that the Commission is not only involved in the financial aspects but also helps and supports in all the other challenges facing the schools. We very much welcome this statement, and would like to discuss with you or your Cabinet how this will take shape in practice. The Commission is involved already in all the key decision-making forums of the schools—the Board of Governors, the Joint Teaching Committee, the Budget Committee, and the School Administrative Boards—and therefore already has the opportunity to act directly on administrative and pedagogical issues.

To address administrative and in particular pedagogical issues, we strongly urge that DG EAC is brought in to support DG HR. This will allow the school system to benefit from the expertise in education that the Commission already has, and will ensure that the European Schools can be a showcase for European educational best practice. The European School system comprises just thirteen category 1 schools – yet it has all of the same responsibilities as a national system. As well as running the schools, the Office of Secretary General also has to manage education policy, curriculum and assessment, benchmarking and recognition, wellbeing, safety and security, quality assurance and inspection. This is a considerable scope of activity for what is essentially a small group of people.

It is surely not logical that in addition to these diseconomies of scale, the schools should also be deprived of the specific educational expertise that already exists within their governing institutions. We believe that colleagues at DG EAC should have a place at the table alongside their counterparts at DG HR in the governing bodies and preparatory committees listed above so that they can bring their expertise to bear on the strategic challenges faced by the system.

We further request that the Commission takes on a greater supervisory responsibility. At present there are no mechanisms for redress or genuine accountability within the system short of legal action. The system is established *sui generis*, therefore sits outside national law for many of its operations. The principle mechanism of recourse is the complaints board, which has a limited scope and as a judicial process is ill suited to address the many issues that arise on a daily basis. No ombudsman exists and the ‘whole-school inspection’ mechanism occurs only every three years so offers no possibilities for ensuring that problems are addressed and responsibilities fulfilled on a daily basis. The Board of Governors meets just twice per year so is not able to perform the kind of independent oversight function any organisation needs in order to perform well.

By taking a greater role in guardianship of the system the Commission can bring the degree of scrutiny necessary to ensure that the various parts of the school system, and the individuals therein, work well and deliver the quality schooling experience that we all want. Being practical, this could for example be by establishing an Ombudsman function and by ensuring the European Ombudsman has jurisdiction over the European Schools. We would in particular welcome the Commission establishing and chairing a working group of stakeholders charged with establishing administrative and judicial recourse systems to fill the gaps referenced above.

In the longer term we believe it would be appropriate for the Commission to consider what changes to the convention are needed to address the governance shortfalls that have become apparent as the system has both grown and aged.

We would like to thank you for the role you have taken personally in addressing various issues in the Brussels schools and hope that you will agree to a meeting to discuss the above points.

Yours sincerely

Katie Mathe, President, APEEE EEB1 School
Giles Houghton-Clarke, President, APEEE EEB2 School
Tassos Papadopoulos, President, APEEE EEB3 School
Kristin Dijkstra, President, APEEE EEB4 School

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Sabine Verheyen MEP, Chair, Committee on Culture and Education
Mariya Gabriel, Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth
Themis Christophidou, Director General, DG Education, Youth, Sports and Culture
Gertrud Ingestad, Director General, DG Human Resources and Security
Marco Umberto Moricca, Director, DG Human Resources and Security
Marta Silva Mendes, Head of Unit, Agencies, European Schools and International Affairs