
Wat: Opening van de conferentie van de European Council of National Associations of Independent Schools ECNAIS ter gelegenheid van het 25 jarig bestaan.

Plaats: NH Atlantic in Kijkduin

Tijd: 18 april, 09:15 – 10:30 (opening door achtereenvolgens Anke, Buiteveld/OCW, Ingrid van Engelshoven/Gem.Den Haag, Simon Steen, voorzitter ECNAIS en directeur VBS)

Geschatte spreektijd: 10 min.

Mr. Steen, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and honour to be invited to represent the Netherlands ministry of Education, Culture and Science on this conference of the European Council of National Associations of Independent Schools. Let me start by congratulating you with your 25th anniversary.

In the ministry I am director of the International policy department . In that role I am often involved in discussions on the international comparison between education systems and why certain countries appear to be doing certain things better than we do – or at least get better results in international rankings.

Besides my professional involvement I am also mother of two children who still have to complete their primary and secondary education. So you may say I have a vested interest in the quality of the Dutch education system!

Compared to most other countries, the education system of the Netherlands is very much decentralised. This has a long history that is related to the formation of the Netherlands as an independent country in the 17th century. A country in which - relative - freedom of religion was an important principle.

This principle has been extended to the funding of schools. After the revision of the constitution in 1917, any religious - ór non-religious - group was allowed to establish a school and get state funding on the same basis as “normal” public funded schools.

Currently the majority of Dutch schools are rooted in a religion, or in educational principles such as Montessori or Dalton. All these schools are financed by the general taxpayer. Parents and children choose their school based on the principles they adhere to, because the school is close to home or simply because it is a good school!

But what makes a good school?..... Is it the foundation principle? is it the institutional setting? is it the budget? Or is it the professionalism of the teaching staff and the school leaders?

School systems like that of Finland, Scotland or the Canadian province Ontario are very different from each other and they are all high achieving or climbing fast.

Let me take Ontario as an example. The province has adopted a fundamental change of the public funded education system in 2003. Characteristics are that:

- implementation of measures is coordinated by the central government;
- all schools adopt the national (provincial) curriculum;
- The central theme is to raise the quality of education for every individual student;
- This also means that pupils regularly take central tests, of which the results are centrally stored and analysed. The results are expected to be the base for new improvement plans for school boards, school leaders and teachers;
- And every summer holiday, teachers are required to attend two weeks of summer courses to learn about new educational insights and upgrade their professional skills in peer groups.

Some of the Ontario characteristics may abhor this audience.

Yet, visiting representatives from our unions, education platforms and the ministry were all pleasantly surprised by the absence of competing views and fragmentation.

They were deeply impressed by the quiet professional competence and pride of staff at all levels within the educational system.

One of the reasons behind this professional pride may be the realisation that Ontario, just like Finland and Scotland tries to be at the forefront of educational change.

Indeed, they are the forefront. New visions and lessons are continuously shared to keep schools up to date and to prepare children to be successful and confident citizens in a world that keeps on changing.

This was also one of the discussions of the International Teacher Summit in Amsterdam of last month. Teachers, school leaders and policy makers will have to be much more active in sharing ideas and be open to comments by their peers from their own country and from other countries.

In the decentralised Dutch system it is even more important that all parties take responsibility, remain curious about new approaches and stay open to comments from their peers. In this way we can provide top quality education for our children to be citizens in the world of –let's say 2050 – even though neither you nor I know what that world will look like!

On the side of the ministry we engage in discussions with many of our peers in other countries. Issues are for instance how to raise language skills of children and their teachers, the influence of ICT on education and how to strengthen education on citizenship.

It is therefore no surprise to me that two of the three international speakers in this conference are from countries and organisations acquainted to the ministry. **Dr. Alan Flintham** is from the National College for School Leadership in the UK. Earlier this year we visited the College with a delegation from the Council for Secondary Education/ *VORaad*.

Dr Sylvia Eyzaguirre is from the Ministry of Education in Chili. A delegation from Chili visited us this winter to learn more about the Dutch education system.

This is also where institutions like the European Council of National Associations of Independent Schools play an important role. They offer a platform, for 25 years now, to share experience and ideas between different countries, hopefully not only on institutional issues such, but mostly on how to achieve the best possible education quality for our children.

Let me conclude by wishing you a very pleasant and inspiring two days.

= = = =