

Opening address by Simon Steen, chairman of ECNAIS  
for the ECNAIS Seminar

*The role that civil societies play in developing independent education at all levels*

Bucharest, Romania, 12-14 November 2013

We, more than 80 participants of 18 different national associations of independent schools in Europe are for this seminar gathered in this Parliament building in Bucharest on solid grounds of democracy.

We are honored that Prof. univ. dr. Remus Pricopie, Minister of Education is present and that he will be the keynote speaker this morning.

Civil society can play a more important role in the governance of the society and its institutions.

When there is more room for initiatives from the civil society to start and establish private schools this will strengthen the responsiveness of society to changes and this will benefit the quality of education in public and private schools.

It has been said that we live in a time of transition, where social changes and different kind of crises have become the constant elements.

Kathleen Thelen, professor of political sciences at the MIT (America) has recently stated that in all societies the success formula of today can suddenly turn into a receipt of failure for tomorrow.

Today, the first day of the seminar we will be informed about the historical and cultural background of Romanian education and the position of Independent Schools within the national system. Later today we will visit 'SPIRU HARET'UCECOM school in Bucharest. There we will also launch the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary booklet of ECNAIS.

Tomorrow, representatives of ECNAIS member associations from Bulgaria, Iceland and Ukraine will inform us about the developments in their national education system and about the actual situation of the Independent Schools in their countries.

During this seminar we want to learn from each other how private schools can fulfill their entrepreneurial and innovational role in the different national education systems in our European countries.

Ideas about the added value of private schools for society as a whole come first. Those ideas have to be understood by the common people before you can expect that members of Parliament will take their responsibility to make more room for private schools in the national legislation and for their public funding.

In the public debate about the role of civil society within the national education system it is crucial to focus on the quality of education. One can expect improvement of the quality of education by making more room for private schools if you look to the experiences in

European countries with a long tradition of freedom of education.

When quality of education is assured there will be a better understanding in society of the importance of diversity which finally will lead to a better quality for all students.

We should not copy the choices made in other systems but just try to compare the ideas behind those choices and to see them in the right context. What can we learn from it for our own situation and for the never ending dialogue about the freedom of education with the politicians in our own country?

Maybe we even need a radical new understanding of the meaning of education in nowadays society as the American sociologist Richard Sennett has said. Let's realize that there is not a forever given hierarchy between the (higher valued) academic graduation and the (under esteemed) vocational training for good craftsmanship.

I hope this seminar will be the beginning of an ongoing dialogue and that we can enrich each other with inspiring ideas and good practices about diversity in education as a result of the entrepreneurial and alternative approach of independent schools all over Europe.

Let's keep in mind that the world of the future is what children make of it. We better educate them well and give them the opportunity to gain competences for a rapidly changing world we can only dream of.

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