

“Cooperation and Competition Parenting Social Innovation”

Keynote Speech, Dr. Matthias Strolz

Chairman and Parliamentary Leader of NEOS – Das Neue Österreich und Liberales Forum

Let me offer a warm welcome to this distinguished gathering. It's great to have so many representatives from all over Europe here in Vienna. We may come from different countries, but we have a lot in common in that we all believe in the power of diversity in education. All of you, all of us, foster freedom of choice. And all of us are convinced that independent schools are crucial promoters of socially responsible and value-based initiative in the field of education. In diversity we unite.

So, we share a common mission: To strengthen the vital role of independent schools in our societies. Hence, I am delighted to deliver this key note speech in the course of your annual seminar.

“How can independent schools – different in their approaches and each one unique in its essence – find a common path? How to unite in diversity?” This is the theme of your annual seminar. Trying to offer one answer to these essential questions, I will focus on the aspect of “Cooperation and Competition Parenting Social Innovation”.

Indeed, schools are about education for the individual and for the society at large. I will come back to that later, asking for a common understanding about education. However, independent schools are not just about education, but also about social innovation. Among other things, they can offer bottom up social advancement – due to their strong connection to the community and the ability to quickly respond to new demands of postmodern society. Certainly, if you go into detail, each of our societies shows different demands and challenges. Hence, let me expand on this issue in three points.

- 1) First I will give you a brief overview about the status quo *in Austria*: What are the challenges for the educational system in general and for independent schools in particular?
- 2) Next I will briefly outline our vision as a civic movement and political party: What do we NEOS want to achieve?
- 3) And finally, focusing on our common challenge, I will offer five hypotheses to the question “What fosters capacity, diversity and innovation in education?”

1. Challenges for the educational system and for independent schools in Austria

Like in many other countries Austria's schools are facing a lot of unsolved problems and challenges. Political wrangling and school bureaucracy are a hindrance for reform and innovation. The problems are manifold and the positions of the political parties are stuck in a rut. To make matters worse, presently the Austrian school system is defined by a culture of mistrust leading to demotivation and not allowing for the empowerment of positive players.

The major challenges for the Austrian school system are:

- a) Austria has one of the most expensive educational systems, whereas the output is average at best. Conclusion: high investment does not necessarily assure high quality.
- b) Austria has a high number of at-risk pupils: about 20 percent of our 15-year-old students are partially illiterate; they have insufficient reading comprehension, while 19 percent are considered at risk in mathematics.
- c) Too many early school leavers: in 2013 Austria had 7.3 percent of so-called "Early School Leavers" (compulsory school or less; Early School Leavers account for almost half of the unemployed in Austria).
- d) In Austria education is still "socially inherited": more than other factors the level of education achieved by the parents defines the educational development of the children.
- e) Austria does not sufficiently promote the talents of children with a migration background: they are heavily over-represented in so-called "special schools" and they are heavily under-represented in higher schools.
- f) We have many structural rigidities and bureaucratic obstacles: the dynamic, constructive and innovative forces are discouraged and demotivated.
- g) The problem of ideological blockade and politically motivated staffing policy: renewal is denied and in almost all areas of staffing party affiliation is more important than qualification.
- h) Independent schools are heavily disadvantaged in Austria, especially through financial discrimination.

The Austrian independent education scene is dominated by denominational schools (schools affiliated to communities of faith/religions). The state will pay for the employment of the teachers for denominational private schools (mostly catholic schools). This corresponds to about 80 percent of their total costs. Non-denominational independent schools, on the other hand, have been struggling to survive for decades. They receive a legally non-binding funding amounting to approximately 10 – 20 percent of their total costs. This support is getting smaller, while the student body has been increasing steadily. However, non-denominational independent schools have the same binding educational objectives as the denominational schools.

In fact, with this poor strategy Austria systematically weakens the constructive forces in the school system. What often can be observed in independent schools is that they have highly innovative concepts, very committed teachers, motivated and motivating principals and strongly engaged parents. This allows for the fostering of talents of young people and higher quality of education. However, the Austrian government does not appreciate these positive aspects. The message the Austrian government delivers: "Well then, pay for it yourself." A strength-based, sustainable education policy of course should act exactly the opposite way. It should encourage involvement, quality and innovation.

2. What do we NEOS want to achieve?

Our vision: Talents are our most important resources. And these talents should be fostered. Students, their potential and their needs must be the focus of educational policy and of everyday school-life. Politicians should set the scene, that is to say, politics should define overall learning objectives and define the quality framework. Therefore, politics should create a fixed, reliable (legal) foundation while allowing for individual freedom in developing educational concepts. At the same time, politics has to refrain from intervening on the micro-level. Teachers and educators should act as free and responsible experts.

It is my conviction that extensive autonomy in education paves us the way to focus on students in the first place and to free schools from paternalism by the state. To achieve these goals, autonomy for schools should comprise three factors: the free choice of educational concept, full financial responsibility and free staffing decisions.

We suggest that funding is provided per student according to the principle of "freedom to choose a school without paying school fees". A school receives a fixed per capita rate for every student, regardless if offered by public, church or independent ownership. In addition, we want to promote fair chances for all students and equality of opportunity. Thus, we want to foster a good social mix. There should be additional funding for schools with a higher proportion of disadvantaged pupils (suggested criteria: parents with low education or low income, migrant youth) and there should be additional funding for schools in peripheral locations, i.e. in rural areas.

The common goal of our school system should be a so-called "Mittlere Reife". This common diploma for all Middle Schools sets the frame for quality in the main learning areas such as reading, writing, mathematics and social skills. This diploma should not promote phenomena as "learning to the test" but foster an integral, holistic understanding of education. It should partially be nationally standardized with external assessments combined with a strong individual focus for schools and students.

To summarize: There should be a common clearly defined target for the main learning areas while at the same time extensively offering leeway for schools and pupils to creatively act. This would trigger a rich educational landscape with a wide variety of pedagogical and organizational approaches. In short: Common goals – various ways to get there. With this multifaceted concept we are able to comprehensively serve the diversity of talents and the individual needs of students.

It is my conviction that this kind of change is possible for Austrian schools. The first time I presented this concept to our Minister of Education, she said: “This is utopian, out of reach.” “No, not really”, I answered. “Utopia is out there, being lived, for example in the Netherlands.” And we have been promoting our model for sustainable school reform over the last two years. Education reform lies at the very heart of our agenda and we will not rest until it’s realized. Hence, I am proud that there will be a fact-finding mission to the Netherlands with all six Parliamentary parties in January of next year. And guess what ... despite initial skepticism, our Minister for Education is hosting this trip. These small steps advance change and we will keep working for even bigger steps.

3. Hypotheses for successful social innovation in the field of education

Positive development and innovation in education needs appropriate breeding conditions in society and politics. Thus, I would like to point out five hypotheses on what I believe is crucial for a positive change in the field of education.

a) Consensus on common basic understanding about education and learning goals

What we need is a strong political and societal consensus on higher common goals. This agreement is the precondition for more freedom and more responsibility in the education system and must be achieved on two levels.

On the fundamental level we need to agree on a clear common answer to the questions: What do we really mean, when talking about education? This is the base line from where we can develop future concepts. I want to propose a shared vision about education which will frame our common endeavors: Education is a lifelong process of human development, extending intellectual, cultural, personal and social skills. Any experience that has a formative effect on the way one feels, thinks or acts may be considered educational. Education serves the empowerment of the people. Education strengthens the potential in every human being, to successfully master one’s life and to enrich the lives of others.

On a concrete level, we need a societal and political consensus on the learning goals our schools must achieve. As pointed out earlier, education policy has to (legally) define the framework for

quality and therefore, our proposal is the introduction of a so-called “Mittlere Reife” as final exam, ending compulsory school.

b) Change of attitude by politicians: Co-creating spaces for freedom and responsibility

Politicians need to change their present attitude (not all of them, but many): moving away from mistrust and excessive top-down regimentation in favor of acting as general facilitators assisting positive change. The task of politics is – in co-creation with all stakeholders in the field of education – to define the basic framework offering wide opportunities for schools to succeed. Politics must create spaces in which freedom and responsibility can prosper. We refer to this approach as "creating fixed spaces for freedom". The responsibility for solving problems within school or student bodies must lie with the schools themselves and not with the state. This requires a new mindset and organizational culture in politics promoting mutual respect among different players in education. If this mental and cultural change succeeds, ideological gaps can be overcome more easily.

c) Improve professional self-concept and public image of teachers

Teachers are one of the most important factors for successful schools. In some of our countries, in Austria in particular, their professional self-concept is antiquated and they are not held in high esteem in our society.

We need to support a new, improved self-concept and public image of the profession of being a teacher. It is an expert's profession. We need to invest in better recruitment, differentiated job profiles, up-to-date professional education and higher quality in human resources development for this profession. This will foster a positive self-concept, increase teachers' abilities and confidence, boost their self-esteem and enhance their status in society.

d) Foster parental responsibility and involvement

Besides positively involving in the educational system, parents are also to be held responsible to convey to their children basic social norms of behavior, which include mutual respect as well as respect for learning and education as basic values in life.

e) Overcoming the duality of competition and cooperation – it's about fruitful synchrony

In Europe, the word competition has a negative connotation for many people. Far too often it is understood as the opposite of cooperation. To my opinion this is a fatal misconception. As social beings living a limited life in a finite world, cooperation and competition both are and will always be *conditio humana*, two basic conditions of human life. There is no evolution of life on this planet without competition and there is no human entity without cooperation. Cooperation and competition are “human twins”. We should understand them as “the span of human vitality”, as an arch of tension under which human mankind is living and marching forward.

Being a father of three children I was often asking myself, watching toddlers' birthday parties or interaction between our three daughters: Have I taught them competition? Have I done something wrong? I have come to the conclusion: No, the kids have inherited this as living beings. It is *conditio humana*. It is just normal, it is given by life, as it is given by life that toddlers will as a matter of course and completely naturally and permanently switch between cooperation and competition.

Competition means contesting for resources, for prestige, for recognition or whatsoever. Yes, this may lead to detrimental effects. It is the human moral and intellectual capacity that enables us to commit competition to common higher goals. In our context together we commit it to better education in favor of the involved individuals and our society as a whole. Once again: In diversity we unite. Commitment to a positive higher goal will lead competition to beneficial rather than detrimental effects. Each skiing club must show the capacity to manage and balance the fruitful synchrony and interaction of competition and cooperation. Each family has this task and destiny; each political party, too. And of course each school has to deliver this job. Independent schools are *avant-garde* in overcoming duality of competition and cooperation. It's about synergy. Finally we know that there is no freedom of choice without competing alternative options.

4. Conclusion

Let me summarize my general understanding on the theme of education, schools and innovation: I have outlined five ingredients which I favor as beneficial breeding conditions for positive innovation in education. It is much about shift of mindset; it's about cultural change in society, politics and education. I strongly support the understanding that independent schools are *avant-garde* and crucial promoters of this bottom-up and socially responsive innovation in our society.

With our societies developing at rapid pace, schools shall understand themselves as living organisms dynamically reflecting societal change. Schools must undergo a constant evolution; they shall cooperate with each other and learn from each other. This will automatically lead to adequate innovation and increased confidence of society in the educational system. Schools are meant to be living and learning organizations - just as students are meant to be learning individuals. You know this. You live this in concrete terms. Keep up the pace and continue your good work.