

Simon Steen: “Room for diversity in education is needed”

The educational policies in the EU countries are “x-rayed” by the President of the ECNAIS

The educational policy pursued today in most EU countries is in favor of “open schools”, of decentralized school management and the ability of each school’s community to co-decide on issues of educational matters, and on the students’ everyday life, said to VIMA representatives of the European Council of National Associations of Independent Schools – ECNAIS. Its chairman Mr. Simon Steen visited recently our country and spoke with representatives of the educational community.

The ECNAIS founded in April 1988 and is recognized by the Council of Europe and the European Commission as a non-governmental organization (NGO) with consultative status.

Not just a tool for work, but a tool for investment

Commenting on the overall “map” of policies on education in the European Union countries, Mr. Steen states that in times of crisis “governments have to realize first of all that education is a great asset with intrinsic value for the lives of citizens”.

In this regard, schools should develop relationships with the local community and operate additionally as cultural centers, thus attracting people’s interest.

“Education is not only a tool for policy development in the labor market, but first and foremost an investment in the development of the various talents of each child and thus is also an investment in the future, that every child will have as an adult citizen in a knowledge driven economy”, says Mr. Steen.

“Schools can only fulfill their important role in the education of the children, when there is room for diversity in education, so that parents can choose the school that best suits their personal perceptions on the upbringing of their children” continues Mr. Steen.

“Precisely for this reason, Article 14 of the Charter of fundamental rights of the citizens of EU countries is very important, because it states that in each Member State of the EU, the right of individuals or associations to establish schools with respect to democratic principles and respect for the right of parents to ensure the education of their children, based on their religious, philosophical or pedagogical ideas is guaranteed”, he said.

Almost everywhere common decisions on public and private schools

However, as members of the same Council say, in the majority of the EU countries there is no such intense separation between private and public schools at policy level, as all decisions taken are common and rarely open disputes or disagreements are expressed.

When asked how private schools operate in most European countries, Mr. Steen answered by saying that “throughout Europe there is a strong tradition of autonomy in education. The extent of the autonomy of independent schools varies from country to country as well as the extent of public funding they receive. In the Netherlands where I come from, the autonomy of independent schools is very strong and independent schools receive the same funding as public schools. Almost 70% of primary and secondary schools in the Netherlands are independent schools”.

It should be noted, that in most EU countries rarely news, on the education process or on the admission of students by Universities, make the newspapers’ headlines.

“As chairman of ECNAIS I have visited many times our 25 national member associations. I have seen in most European countries a growing process of decentralization in education, precisely because of the urgency felt in society to give more room for bottom up initiatives, rising either from individuals or from within the civic society, in order to overcome the stagnation in education created by the centralized management structure of all schools by a central authority”, concludes Mr. Steen.