

Hearing on the Right to Education

Andrew Lewer MBE MEP - Speech

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen and welcome to our hearing today on the Right to Education: Freedom of parental Choice. I am very glad we have the opportunity to discuss diversity and independence of education today in the European Parliament together with colleagues and representatives of independent schools.

As a Coordinator of the Culture and Education Committee on behalf of the European Conservatives and Reformists group, I am not only very interested in this topic but I am a strong believer in demonopolizing education. Diversity between individuals is a celebrated principle amongst Europhiles and Eurosceptics alike, therefore it should transpire in the variety of educational opportunities provided to our children.

Independent schooling means a curriculum that is not wholly imposed by the state but it takes into account different type of skills and aptitudes. Since there is no better judge of a child's inclinations than his parent, the latter should be given the right to choose a suitable education for the former.

As we all know, the biggest impediment towards educational choice is the cost. In the UK, on average, a year at an independent day school costs about £11,000, while an independent boarding school requires the even heftier sum of £23,000 per annum (InterNations.org). However, according to the Independent Schools Council 2015 Census, 28 per cent of pupils at member schools – a total of 143,510 pupils – currently receive financial help from their school, support with a total value of over £700 million (Telegraph.org.uk). Hundreds of thousands of families still manage to find the money to pay school fees in the independent education sector. The number of children going to the UK's 2,600 private schools is around the 620,000 mark, which represents 6.5 per cent of the entire school-age population, and those figures have remained broadly unchanged through the last few, economically turbulent years (Independent.co.uk). The independent sector elsewhere in the EU is very different and much higher in attendance - Denmark is a good example.

The 2009 book of James Tooley, *The Beautiful Tree* tells the remarkable story of his travels from Africa to China, and of the children, parents, teachers, and others who showed him how the poor are building their own schools and learning to save themselves. The book was considered “a moving account of how poor parents struggle against great odds to provide a rich educational experience to their children.” Since then, he has contributed to the building of Omega Schools, a chain of low-cost private schools in Ghana, and Empathy Learning Systems, an educational service company that runs a chain of inexpensive private schools in Hyderabad, India. These private initiatives - which cost each child around \$1 a week (Economist.com) - came as a solution to the free, but low quality education provided by the state, where school absenteeism of both teachers and students represent a major problem.

This goes to show that the growth of private schools is a manifestation of the healthiest of instincts: parents' desire to do the best for their children. My school, a traditional English one has been delivered the compliment of being thought of as independent. The independent sector keeps the state sector on its toes.

Having said that, I would like to end my intervention by bringing into discussion whether there should be a limit to educational freedom. In the context of migration and of this melting

pot of religions and cultures, how can educational freedom serve as a tool to fight against radicalization rather than an opportunity for today's extremists to nurture the extremists of tomorrow?

Looking forward to hearing your thoughts.