

OPENING ADDRESS OF SIMON STEEN, CHAIRMAN OF ECNAIS, AT THE OPENING SESSIONS OF THE ECNAIS SEMINAR ABOUT INCLUSION IN EDUCATION IN PRAGUE 23 NOVEMBER 2017

I welcome all of you to the annual autumn Seminar of the European Council of National Associations of Independent Schools ECNAIS about

Inclusion in education

with special attention for

The role of independent schools in organizing inclusive and equal education for all learners.

A special word of welcome for the deputy Minister of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic, Mr. Petr Pavlik, who is already present at the seminar.

The Czech Minister of Education and former Professor of pedagogical psychology at Charles University in Prague, Mr. Stanislav Stech, will arrive during the first coffee break.

We are glad to have him in our programme. I will introduce him later when I invite him to take the floor for his presentation later this morning.

We are very grateful for the willingness of the Association of Private Schools in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia to host and co-organize - together with the Executive Committee of ECNAIS – this seminar in the beautiful city of Prague. I want to thank Mr. Vladimir Kolder, chairman of the Czech association, for the cooperation of his association with us in organizing the seminar.

I mention especially Mr. Michal Musil, representative of the Czech association in the Management Committee of ECNAIS, and Mrs. Pavla Katzová, coordinator of the preparatory team of the seminar, for their professional and stimulating role in the preparation of the seminar.

I also want to speak a special word of welcome to Mr. Aki Holopainen, member of the ECNAIS Management Committee on behalf of the Finnish Association of Private Schools, and his Finnish colleagues. They decided to hold their annual Headmasters Conference this time in Prague and to combine it with participation in this ECNAIS Seminar.

They are here not only as a kind of silent majority, but when the day is passing by, I expect them to take more and more an active part in the seminar, especially with a presentation about the actual curriculum development in Finland on Friday afternoon. We feel privileged to have such a big Finnish delegation at our seminar. A lot of people have to travel to Helsinki to learn from the Finnish education miracle and we can just listen to them and talk with them during our own seminar here in Prague.

The actual meaning of inclusion in education

We are gathered here with 115 participants from member associations in 14 European countries together with policy makers, who share a great interest, dedication and passion for the ongoing innovation in education.

Independent schools all over Europe see it as a challenge to respond time and time again, not only to social and economic changes, but also to the dynamic demands of the new generation of parents and children.

Their points of departure are always the pedagogical, philosophical or religious values, which once formed the deeper motives for the school founders to establish the school.

The theme of inclusion has resonated in various discussions across societies for many years, as stated in the introduction text for the theme of the seminar in your seminar folder.

The basis of the idea of inclusion is the highest human values - respect for the other, solidarity, fundamental human rights.

Inclusion does not evade any of the human areas in life, such as work, housing, leisure and, of course, education.

Educational institutions have a great potential to influence, from the logic of their mission, social values and development.

Encouraging inclusive processes in schools can be seen as a necessary condition for building an inclusive and globalized society.

That is why education systems and schools themselves are subject to the demands of continual transformation.

Inclusive education needs to be recognized as a continual process involving both legal reform and transformation of cultures, values and policies.

It is obvious that in each country this process is somewhat different, both at system and school level; it is influenced by the historical, geographic, national and religious composition of the society and, last but not least, by the political direction of the state.

In order to get the most useful and inspiring information from the seminar, the preparatory team of the seminar has prepared - together with colleagues from six ECNAIS member associations in Czech Republic, Finland, the Netherlands, Greece, Portugal and Bulgaria - expert background materials mapping the current situation in the area of inclusion in education, current national debates and problems in this area.

These materials will be the basement for presentations and, in particular, for the follow-up discussions held in the working groups included in the seminar program on Thursday afternoon and during the whole seminar time as well.

The fact that this seminar takes place in Prague is not accidental. The Czech Republic is one of the countries in which significant legislative changes concerning the education of pupils with special educational needs have recently come into effect.

ECNAIS would like to make with this seminar a small contribution to the global debate on inclusion in education, with focus on the role played by independent schools in this field.

We are inspired by some initiatives from international organizations. I mention

- a recent publication of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization called "A guide for ensuring inclusion and equity in education" (published in 2017)
- The UNESCO 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This agenda, with its focus on

leaving no one behind, provides a unique opportunity to build more inclusive and equitable societies. This should start with inclusive education systems. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on education calls for inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030.

ECNAIS

ECNAIS is a non-political, non-confessional, international association for collaboration between national associations of independent schools in European countries.

ECNAIS was founded in 1988 and represents the interests of national school organizations for independent schools all over Europe. The member organizations are not only from EU countries, but organizations from Iceland, Ukraine, Belarus, and Turkey are also active members.

ECNAIS has been increasingly active since in sharing experience, expertise and knowledge by organizing annual conferences and seminars. We were for the first time in Prague with our conference in 1996 and later on again in 2002.

ACTIVITIES AT EU LEVEL

And last but not least ECNAIS lobbies also for the recognition and for public funding of independent schools at a European level. Since three years we organize together with other European organizations cooperating in the European Meeting of Independent Education - EMIE - a Hearing about the freedom of education and the parental right of free school choice in the European Parliament in Brussels in the third week of January.

With these Hearing we want to make the independent schools more visible at the EU level and we want to make the Members of the EU Parliament more aware of the long history of the independent school sector and their added value for the public school system in the different European countries.

By so doing we underline the cultural enrichment which the civil society will gain, when there is sufficient room in the national legislation for an alternative approach by value driven independent schools. These schools give shape to the European notion of plurality and reflect the diversity from within the civil society.

Respect for plurality and diversity in the member countries of the EU is one of the key points in the strategy document of the European Commission called *Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture*. (Published 17 November 2017).

Our Hearings in the EU Parliament about independent schools as part and pillar of the civil society didn't stayed unnoticed.

We received quite recently an invitation from the EU Parliament's rapporteur on Modernization of education in the EU to take part in a Round Table on this topic that will take place on Tuesday (**28 November**) in the EU Parliament in Brussels.

There will be a First European Education Summit, organized by the EU Commissioner for Education on 25th of January 2018. ECNAIS chairman is also invited to participate in this summit.

During our Management Committee meeting Saturday morning we will prepare the ECNAIS contribution to the Round Table in the EU Parliament later this month and to the first EU Summit in January next year.

Next ECNAIS Conference in Kiev

The next ECNAIS event will be the 30th annual Conference, this time in Kiev, Ukraine, from 19-21 April 2018. We started with the preparation of the conference in good cooperation with the Ukraine organizational committee during a visit to Kiev last September.

We feel inspired by the recently adopted new Ukrainian education legislation, which gives room for further development of what is called a new Ukrainian school.

Finally I bring you warm greetings of the honorary vice president of ECNAIS, Mr. Carlos Diaz Muniz, who is the former chairman of ECNAIS and of Mrs. Sofia Reis, the former secretary general of ECNAIS. Both couldn't attend the seminar this time, but they hope to meet you again at the conference in Kiev next year.

I wish you an inspirational seminar and a pleasant stay in Prague.