Honourable Participants, Our Dear Guests,

Dear President of ECNAIS, Ladies and Gentleman,

As we all witness, a rapid process of change and transformation that cannot be easily understood with previously well-known approaches, is going on. Industry 4.0 merges the biological with digital, physical and cyber. Artificial Intelligence learns, behaves and talks just like we do, learns the dialects of languages, smiles and even can have dreams. This age is called the Exponential Age. We are talking about an age in which life has become exponential. A velocity that began with 1G and reached up to 4G and 5G, a velocity that started with monologue and made its way to digital and quantum, a velocity that made its way from production lines to automation, and nowadays autonomy...

Now the determinant is velocity and keeping up with it.

Technology now lies in the heart of every sector. Health, transportation, finance, advertising, media and of course, education...

When it comes to change and transformation, and preparing all kinds of skills and character development of the individuals for this change, all eyes naturally turn to us, the educators. This is such a change that, where ever you are in the world, in the light of future trends a gap between the promises of education and employment, workforce, business related demands and expectations emerge. One of the major aims of educators should, therefore, be to minimise these gaps. How traditional educational structures, schools, curricula, qualifications of teachers and administrators can handle this change has now taken the centre stage in this argument.

On the other hand, most of the major crises that the world faces are caused by highly educated people. Education on its own can be seen as a threat to humanity. How? According to present data, environmental pollution increases as the level of education increases. We are living in an age in which, obesity and poverty are on the rise simultaneously. As the level of education increases, the killing power of technology also increases. All of which indicates that, we have a fundamental ethical and moral problem. We must remind ourselves that ethics is a field that tells people what not to do, rather than what to do. If we cannot come up with an ethical framework, we may have issues in understanding how the blessed science has lost its alignment with ethics. We can then easily see, how instead of serving for the sake of humanity, it is taking aim at the affection and compassion of it.

We need to ensure the balance of the primeval and actual in education. Education is universal. Education is also universal for the representatives of 13 countries in this hall. If need be, it is painted in their local colours. Yet, a non-universal education would form a dead end for our
children. The participating language can only bud, and a culture of participation can only grow when the universal education is painted and interpreted in local and national colours.

Dear Participants,

We need to rethink of the shiny words that we use, which may have to do with the learning and participation processes of students. For instance, the phrase ‘21st century skills’ is so often used that the society is obsessed with these words, as if hypnotised. Who can argue that those words do not exist in Edison, Da Vinci, Aristotle, Mimar Sinan, or Nicola Tesla? We need to re-evaluate the emphasis of linearity of this age. We should deal with the idea that it brings us an illusion. We have to avoid linearity, and see that the adventure of maturation and wisdom of humanity has a spiralling nature; it may then become possible to explain that what we call 21st century skills are, in fact the skills of humanity and the history of civilization, that they are primeval skills, and that what is popular and what is primeval are often confused.

We should not wait anymore for a new understanding in education. Therefore, we should evaluate education bi-laterally. We are face to face with an understanding which narrows education down to an institution that meets the needs of the industry. Education is the mediator of our path to humanization from being mere human beings. What we in fact aim at, is the holistic development of our children in terms of their emotions, thinking and action. We will arrive nowhere with an education that solely serves to a limited part of thinking. It is not only a matter of measuring memory and knowledge. In such case, the interaction of the students with their surroundings, the way they view all their actions, as well as their participation in life would occur within this framework. This is not the way we would like to head for.

If we would like to make measurement in education more holistic, we should also be able to measure the participation of the student. It would not be easy for us to eliminate the gaps that emerge through confining learning to school, classroom and curriculum.

Education is the process of revelation of the hidden curriculum in every child. If children do not receive an education that addresses their emotions, character and actions, these three will not come together. If all that I listed are not brought into action in coordination, i.e. if emotion, thinking and action do not act in synchronicity, we would face extremely serious issues in terms of the mental health of the children.

When we look at the world, to our surroundings, we see that the future has become the primary medium and the course of education. The future should not be wasting today that is stuck between utopia and dystopia. For some reason, the children are put in the position of the main actors, the subjects of this waste. This waste is designed over them. We are against this.

People are wasting the present by living in the past or the future. The waste of the present should not be actualised over our children. The future should definitely be handled universally; yet, it must be interpreted locally. We are facing a world in which there is a futurization of today, while the future is being transformed to the present time. There needs to be a serious criticism on the time perception of societies based on the concept of the present and the future. I think, if the questions of which society lives in the future more, and which society lives in the present are answered, our perceptions regarding the past and the
future, can be better understood.

Dear Participants,

Education is waking up people and children to the present, not preparing them for the future. The abstract vision of the future is limited to our current background. We should focus on the design of a foreground for our children rather than a background; and encourage children to design their own future. So that they can do that, we should make every fancy, old and new education concept ready for them. We should put everything we do from 21st century skills to STEM, project-based learning to coding, drama education to music, maths to science; and evolve them from being only activities to using them to increase the life skills of our children in and out of the school.

We should pair the 360-degree student participation ecosystem with the agendas of our official educational institutions, by aligning student participation with academic work, school decision mechanisms and social activities outside the school.

In this sense, the title of today’s meeting, which is student participation, becomes even more important. All of our efforts are for the happiness of our children. Under the name of education, curriculum and schooling, what we are doing is actually like pouring a bucket of water over them. We make decisions for them, implement and evaluate for them, provide guidance. While doing so, we barely ask for their ideas, talk to them and barely act together.

However, to explain with another metaphor, we should make them drink water. What we call learning is like water making its way to the cells of the child when he or she drinks it. Children should be able to reveal the hidden curriculum in them with what they get from their school, teachers and family. Then with different methods, we measure how wet they got after we poured a bucket of water over them. On the other hand, if learning is like drinking water, our aim should be to measure how well nourished they are after drink water, how much water they are satisfied with, and find out what other physical and emotional effects the water has triggered.

Success for us is not what a child remembers from the beginning until the end of an examination. Success for us, would be to reveal the hidden curriculum in children, make them hold on to life with it, participate in the social, economic, cultural life, as well as art and sports. Happiness for us is synonymous with success in education.

Rather than making our children the main subject of a waste of the present, stuck between the future and the past, we should consider them as the main actor, the lead-author of our future text. We should evaluate their feedback as commentary made by futurists. Regardless of their age, we should consider their contributions for world-peace, welfare, happiness and resolutions of humanitarian crises as worthwhile as those made by the adults.

Dear Participants,

I would like to draw your attention to a small point; when we announced our three-year plan in September 2018, called ‘2023 Vision of Education’, we used the title ‘Happy Children.” I would also like to remind you that you can download the English version of our Vision
Document from the website of our Ministry. Your contributions and comments would be invaluable for us.

Now that we are talking about the happiness of the child, we should remember that private schools, in order to meet the expectations, skills and abilities of students in tune with the schools’ profile and curriculum, must have a system that is open to innovative school applications. Private schools are important parts of the system in our country. Private Schools Association is an important partner of our Ministry. Private schools educate more than 8% of the total number of students Comparing this number with the 5% two, three years ago, the progress in terms of private schools of our country will be better understood.

Student participation requires students to be more involved in school work, to access more than what they already know, and necessitates more students to participate in the application process. In this sense, it should be ensured that students get feedback from teachers related with their work and problem solving skills, thus enabling them to deepen their understanding of their learning, to better cope with unclear situations and to be able to work with people from different backgrounds and different views. Student participation should be evaluated in all mediums and platforms available. We should note that digital platforms are no less important than conventional mediums in terms of student participation.

Schools have huge responsibilities within the context of eliciting and evaluating students’ views on how they would like to spend their school life. Students should be able to reshape the education they are to receive and therefore be a part of a developing system as schools act democratically. Thus, we can expect our schools to write their own futures with their students. In fact, the future of our schools is a reflection of the future written by students.

As the Ministry, we provided our schools with School Profile Model as a supporting tool in this journey. Similarly, we will provide our students with opportunities such as Social Activity Module and e-Portfolio. We will evaluate the activities of our students in ‘science’, ‘art’, ‘culture’, ‘sports’ and ‘community service’, as well as their academic success in primary, secondary and high school, with this new module on the e-School system. The holistic and eco-systematic approach of 2023 Vision of Education enables us to handle student participation within a broader framework, through the interaction of multiple parameters rather than taking it as a singular title, and evaluation of them within a matrix.

Throughout all of these processes, we will guarantee that the guidance channels are fully operational. Thus, our schools, administrators and teachers will significantly contribute to students’ development of all social and emotional skills besides the academic ones. Student participation at schools can only be possible when students are provided with a democratic atmosphere in their families and daily life. Democracy is a system of values that can only be learned and internalized when practised in daily life in terms of attitude and behaviour.

The aim of democratic education is to nurture citizens who are independent, inquiring and analytic, as well as cognizant of the applications of democracy in depth. According to participatory education understanding, democracy and education go hand in hand, and only a democratic education can lead to a democratic society. In this sense, the school should be a miniature society. In such a school, children internalize the basic principles of democratic
lifestyle. Improve democracy, as well as making it learned and internalized by younger generations, is among the responsibilities of the school.

At this point, it is crucial to create new platforms between our Ministry and Private Schools in terms of student participation, to increase collaboration and to foster international cooperation with institutions such as ECNAIS.

I find the student participation theme selected by ECNAIS (European Council of National Associations of Independent Schools) and Turkish Private Schools Association very timely and important. I wish private school representatives and students participating from 13 different countries serve as an important platform to improve this field.

I would like to let you know that we are excited to hear the answers of these main questions to be handled here:

What is student participation?

How student participation foster citizenship?

How can parenting, schools’ freedom of choosing, of putting new school projects forward and student participation be balanced?

What is the contribution of independent schools to the diversity in national education system?

This is a new field; therefore, a lot of work, discussion, application and piloting are needed. I hope the result of this meeting lead to the planning and beginning of a new meeting.

I wish you a productive conference emphasizing once more my belief in the fact that an important issue such as student participation to be addressed in an international context will bring important values to the participating countries in the context of cooperation in education.

Through Turkish Private Schools Association, I would like to thank to the member countries of ECNAIS and to all participants whom we are delighted to welcome here.

Prof. Ziya Selçuk

Minister of National Education, Republic of Turkey

Istanbul, april 11th, 2019