



RESPONSE FROM THE ASSOCIATION FOR TEACHER EDUCATION IN EUROPE (ATEE) TO THE PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON SCHOOLS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

The Association for Teacher Education in Europe (ATEE) welcomes the European Commission's recognition of the importance of schools, teachers (and others who work in schools) and those who lead schools in shaping and framing the 21st century. ATEE is pleased to have the opportunity to submit a response to the consultation document.

INTRODUCTION

In August 2007, the European Commission launched a public consultation on Schools in the 21st century. The aim of this consultation is to (1) identify what actions are necessary within the national contexts of the Member States to ensure that schools deliver the quality of education needed in the 21st century; and (2) identify those aspects of school education on which cooperation at European Union level could help to support Member States in the modernisation of their systems.

The consultation focuses on 8 key questions:

1. How can schools be organised in such a way as to provide all students with the full range of key competences?
2. How can schools equip young people with the competences and motivation to make learning a lifelong activity?
3. How can school systems contribute to supporting long-term sustainable economic growth in Europe?
4. How can school systems best respond to the need to promote equity, to respond to cultural diversity and to reduce early school leaving?
5. If schools are to respond to each pupil's individual learning needs, what can be done as regards curricula, school organisation and the roles of teachers?
6. How can school communities help to prepare young people to be responsible citizens, in line with fundamental values such as peace and tolerance of diversity?
7. How can school staff be trained and supported to meet the challenges they face?
8. How can school communities best receive the leadership and motivation they need to succeed? How can they be empowered to develop in response to changing needs and demands?

The rationale of the consultation seems obvious: schools in Europe need to address the challenges that they face in preparing their pupils and students for life in the 21st century. At the same time, national governments need to identify the best way to support schools in addressing these challenges.



SUPPORTING SCHOOLS

However, the key questions are phrased in such a way that it is easy to establish a long list of do's and don't for schools. But even today, schools are facing a multitude of expectations. Those working within the schools are burdened with an unrealistic overload of expectations arising from the social challenges present within the communities they serve. Schools are only a small (but important) part of the system of society and the preparation of children for tomorrow's society is a shared responsibility between parents, children, the local communities, the teachers and society as a whole. As schools can not solve all problems in society, schools need to make local choices in order to decide which challenges to prioritise. These choices need to be made in close co-operation with other stakeholders in the local community.

The questions of the consultation focus on the ways in which schools can address the issues and challenges in society. Clearly, the answer to these questions should be '*in a multitude of ways*'. The local contexts of schools differ enormously, varying between public and private schools, rural and inner-city schools, from pre-schools to vocational schools, from small specialized schools to broad general schools, etc. Based on these different local contexts, the answers that schools will give to the questions of the consultation will, and necessarily must, be very different even though there will be some similarities. The answer should meet the needs of the type of pupils or students they have, the expectations of parents, the specific local context, etc.

Therefore, it is not useful to raise the question how schools can or should respond to the challenges of the 21st century in general. Given the fact that schools need to answer those challenges in their own way, the important question is how schools can be *supported* to address the challenges in an effective way.

Below we will try to answer this question from the perspective of the work and experience of the research and development centres of the ATEE.

SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS TO FIND AN EFFECTIVE ANSWER TO THE CHALLENGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

a. Flexibility in curricula and assessment systems.

Since schools need to find their own answers to the challenges that they face, fitting to their local context and the characteristics of the pupils and students in their school, there is a need for flexibility in curricula and assessment systems, while recognising the need to ensure parity of qualification systems across Europe. Overly prescriptive curricular guidelines and assessment schemes may make it impossible to give an effective answer that takes into account local contexts. If the general aim for the education system is to provide a response to individual learning needs of pupils, there must also be room for the individual needs of schools to address their specific needs.



- b. The staff within schools needs to be part of an open community of learners.**
Supporting children to define their place in the 21st century is a collaborative enterprise of all staff in school and people outside schools – including parents, carers and community leaders. Finding effective answers to the needs of an increasingly diverse range of pupils and students is a continuous process of collaborative learning and reflecting. To facilitate open learning communities of teachers and other stakeholders, these communities need to be supported (e.g. in terms of time and other facilities contributing to an effective learning environment)
- c. Teachers need to be of high quality.**
In the EU communication ‘Improving the Quality of Teacher Education’, it is emphasized that teachers need a Higher Education qualification and need ongoing lifelong professional development. Teaching and supporting pupils and students in a complex society, demands that teachers constantly developing their skills and knowledge. Therefore, teachers must have access to high quality pre-service, induction and in-service support systems, e.g. provided by strong teacher education institutions, and reward systems that stimulate lifelong learning.
- d. Schools need to be part of local networks.**
Schools need to be part of local networks where different stakeholders are involved: parents, local authorities, the world of work, welfare, etc. These networks should be focused on giving effective support to children and on attuning the contributions of the different stakeholders. Teachers and student teachers should be enabled to work alongside the communities to ensure a more diverse understanding of the life of the child. Schooling should foster the ability to communicate with others and to survive in a diverse society.
- e. Schools need strong leadership**
Leadership is essential for giving a coherent answer within the school to the challenges that the school faces. This leadership should not be based on one or two persons (school leaders), but it should be an attribute that is distributed and recognised as part of the role of all members of the school community, including the pupils.
- f. Schools need support systems**
To respond effectively to the needs of education in the 21st century, schools communities will need support. This support system should be partly an in-school support system where the school leadership supports teachers and teachers support each other, and partly an extramural support system: teacher education institutions, educational researchers, local community, local, regional and national authorities and the world of industry and business. The support system could be arranged through long-term partnerships.



g. Effective working conditions and reward systems

To support teachers and school leaders there is a need for effective and equitable working conditions, both in terms of facilities to enable learning and working within and outside schools and in terms of (material and non-material) rewards for teachers. This will also influence the attractiveness of the teaching profession which is an essential precondition for finding and retaining school staff.

With these conditions met, schools may be asked to give their unique local responses to the needs of pupils and students in the 21st century and to be held accountable for their actions.

In general these answers should be characterized by four key terms:

- **Personal and professional development:** The core business of schools is learning and development, not only of pupils/students, but also of teachers, school leaders, and all who work in schools and the local community to enable pupils and students to achieve knowledge, skills, concepts and attitudes in order to make positive contributions to the whole community across Europe.
- **Involvement:** The educational system and school structure should aim to involve teachers, pupils/students, parents and other local stakeholders to create an ethos of shared responsibility;
- **Creativity, innovation and risk taking:** the school system should support and stimulate schools, teachers and pupils/students to seize opportunities and to turn ideas and ambitions into action¹;
- **Role models:** all stakeholders should be aware that they are role models to pupils/students. The system within the school and the people involved all define the hidden curriculum that is presented to pupils/students. This is also related to the (ethnic, cultural, gender and social class) diversity of the school staff. Positive policies to increase the diversity of role models across the sector should be adopted.

We believe that with a support system that meets the characteristics mentioned above, schools are supported and challenged to give an effective local response to the needs of their pupils/students in the 21st century.

Association for Teacher Education in Europe²
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¹ One of the key competences for lifelong learning as identified by the European Commission is 'entrepreneurship': an individual's ability to turn ideas into action, including creativity, innovation and risk taking, as well as the ability to plan and manage projects in order to achieve objectives and to seize opportunities.

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