

## **Meeting of OECD Education Ministers - Raising the Quality of Learning for All - Chair's Summary**

It was my great pleasure to welcome OECD Education Ministers to Dublin and to chair this meeting. Our discussions were also able to draw on the valuable perspectives brought to us through the presence of non-member economies. The dialogue with the Business and Industry Advisory Committee to the OECD (BIAC) and the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (TUAC) also contributed to our meeting.

### **Raising Performance Levels for All**

In introducing the theme, Minister José David Gomes Justino pointed to the twin challenges of widening access to education and raising levels of performance. He invited participants to reflect on key policy levers that could help to address these challenges and raise educational quality for all, including formulating educational goals and monitoring adherence to these; fostering learning environments and models of school governance that are conducive to innovation; and allocating human and financial resources in ways that enhance an equitable distribution of learning opportunities. He particularly stressed the importance of creating knowledge-rich schooling systems in which those responsible for delivering educational services act as partners and have the authority to act, the necessary information to do so, and access to effective support systems to assist them in implementing change. This would require the right balance between internal and external evaluation and between co-operative and competitive approaches. He invited the OECD to help governments in sharing experiences with the development of dynamic benchmarks and effective support systems as well as policies for educational improvement. He concluded by suggesting that success be defined not merely in terms of current performance levels but also by the progress individual schools are making.

### ***Establishing standards and monitoring educational quality***

Minister Tuula Haatainen introduced the sub-theme by highlighting the central role that curricula and standards can play in shaping educational quality and assisting schools in countering the impact of socio-economic disadvantage. She pointed to the importance of international collaboration in defining and improving educational quality. She raised the question of what level of specificity and prescription in educational goals and standards would serve education systems best in their efforts to raise educational aspirations, establish transparency and coherence with regard to educational standards across schools, and provide guidance for teachers to understand and foster student learning. She concluded by stressing the importance of developing evaluation and assessment tools, including recommendations for quality learning and teaching, that would not merely "brand" schools but also promote development and improvement and examine learning outcomes in the context of students' overall well-being and their socio and economic

background.

### **Points of agreement**

Ministers:

- Underlined that the shift in public and governmental concern, away from mere control over the resources and content of education toward a focus on outcomes, has given prime importance to the establishment, implementation and monitoring of standards for the quality of educational outcomes.
- Noted that the concept of educational quality must extend beyond knowledge and skills in key subject matter areas and include broader learning outcomes, including students' self-concept, their social skills, their engagement with learning and their overall well-being.
- Underlined the role that the value societies attach to education plays in shaping learning outcomes and underlined the need to foster student educational aspirations.
- Noted that not all educational outcomes can be easily quantified and tested in large scale assessments and therefore considered it important to complement these with alternative forms of evaluation, including student portfolios.
- Noted the importance of extending quality frameworks and assessment systems beyond general/academic education.
- Underlined the importance of international collaboration in defining and monitoring educational quality and welcomed the contribution that PISA has made in this area.
- Underlined that PISA results, by showing that some countries are successfully combining high performance standards with a socially equitable distribution of learning opportunities, had sent an important and encouraging message for all countries, namely that poor performance does not automatically follow from social disadvantage.
- Invited the OECD to take the development of PISA further, with the aim to better assist countries in understanding the processes that shape quality and equity in learning outcomes within their educational, social and cultural contexts.

### **Points of debate**

- Ministers noted a variety of approaches in standard setting that range from the definition of broad educational goals to the formulation of concise performance expectations in well-defined subject areas. There was also considerable debate as to how standards might best be harnessed to raise educational aspirations, establish transparency with regard to educational objectives and content, and provide a useful reference framework for teachers to understand and foster student learning.
- Ministers agreed on the importance of evaluating student performance within a comparative framework of standards but debated to what extent national tests and benchmarks are best placed to achieve this objective. Some Ministers saw a potential risk in narrowing national curricula and teaching 'to the test' while many considered national benchmarks an essential tool for strengthening both the overall quality of the system as well as the capacity of education systems to address poor school performance.
- Some Ministers outlined their efforts to go beyond establishing educational standards as mere yardsticks and introduce performance benchmarks that students at particular age or grade levels should reach. Ministers debated the

question how such performance targets can best be defined to ensure baseline quality in educational outcomes while, at the same time, raising performance and aspirations for all students, including those who face particular disadvantages as well as those showing particular talents.

- There were diverging views on how results from evaluation and assessment can and should be used and how the rights of parents and schools to know where they stand could be combined with the goal to use comparative results to inform and support school improvement in adequate and effective ways. Some Ministers saw assessment and evaluation primarily as tools to reveal best pedagogical practices and identify shared problems in order to encourage teachers and schools to improve and to become more supportive and productive learning environments. Some of them suggested that published school rankings alone may not achieve that objective or may even have adverse effects on the effective collaboration among the different stakeholders in education. Most, however, considered that it was important to provide parents and the wider public with information on the quality of learning outcomes and considered such transparency a key lever to improve educational performance.
- Some Ministers stressed that, where rankings are published, such rankings would need to be "fair", in the sense that a school's actual results need to be compared with what can be expected given its socio-economic intake and the resources available.
- One country explained an initiative from the Federal Government to tie increased funding to states and schools to the provision of information to parents on their child's performance against national literacy and numeracy benchmarks.

### ***Developing effective support systems and devolving responsibility to the front line***

In opening the sub-theme, Minister Bálint Magyar underlined the importance of ensuring that comparisons of school results focus on added value of schools, given the context in which they operate. He then raised the question of how education policy can raise standards in poorly performing schools, including through differential resource allocation. He underlined the importance of complement evaluation and assessment with well-targeted support structures for under-performing schools, and encouraging schools to assume greater responsibility in devolved structures of decision-making.

### **Points of agreement**

Ministers:

- Agreed that good and comparative information on the quality of educational outcomes was a prerequisite for strengthening the autonomy and accountability of schools. Ministers therefore underlined the importance of combining efforts to reinforce the authority and the capacity of schools to respond to rapidly-changing needs of societies with the development of strong frameworks of national curricula and standards. Ministers also noted that greater autonomy at school level would need to be complemented with adequate support and management by educational authorities.
- Recognised that central challenges facing governments lie in feeding information on the quality of learning outcomes back to those who deliver educational services, establishing rewards and support systems, developing models of school governance that are conducive to innovation, and establishing ways to target resources to those most in need without creating rewards for poor school performance.
- Considered strengthening individualised learning as one way to resolve the dilemma between the growing universality of education and the need to maintain the flexibility needed in education systems to foster both excellence and equity. Ministers noted that placing emphasis on strategies and approaches for teaching

heterogeneous groups of learners through highly individualised learning processes would have profound consequences for the entire education system, including the learning environment and organisation of schools, interactions between schools and the wider community as well as initial and continuing professional development of teachers. It would also require a shift away from the assessment of learning towards an assessment for learning, requiring advanced feedback mechanisms and the inclusion of teachers in the process of development and school improvement. Some Ministers underlined the important role of parental involvement in the choice and support for individualised learning pathways.

- Invited the OECD to assist governments in sharing experiences with the development of effective support systems and policies for educational improvement.

### **Points of debate**

- Ministers debated what distribution of decision-making responsibilities across the various stakeholders in the different areas of decision-making was most conducive to encouraging performance orientation, local responsiveness and collaborative learning within and between schools while, at the same time, ensuring that performance standards are reached and learning outcomes are distributed equitably.
- Ministers noted that the trend towards devolved responsibility was not uniform across the different areas of decision-making. While some Ministers considered the development and adaptation of educational content as a main expression of school autonomy, others were placing the emphasis on strengthening the management and administration of individual schools through new governance instruments or collaboration between schools and other stakeholders in local communities, at times even moving towards a more centralised governance of curricula and standards.
- Some Ministers highlighted the effectiveness of comprehensive approaches towards learning and schooling where heterogeneous learning environments provide opportunities both for countering disadvantage and strengthen talents and excellence. Others noted the challenges such approaches present for education systems that are traditionally highly stratified and federally organised.

### **Improving Teacher Supply and Effectiveness**

Ministers agreed that the issues of improving teacher supply and teacher effectiveness are closely connected and should therefore be discussed together. The quality of teachers and their work are key determinants of student learning, and the improvement of school systems.

Many countries have an ageing teaching force, and are finding it difficult to attract high quality new entrants into teaching - whether young graduates or people from other careers. Quantitative shortfalls raise quality concerns. In some countries a significant proportion of teachers do not hold a full teaching qualification, the proportion teaching in areas in which they are not fully qualified is strikingly high in some key subjects, and attrition and turnover rates have increased in recent years.

However, Ministers noted that the absence of teacher shortfalls does not mean that there are no quality concerns. All countries, whether they currently face shortages or not, report concerns about ensuring that the teacher workforce has the skills and knowledge needed to meet the demands of modern schooling and more diverse student populations.

Countries in which there is a general over-supply of teachers face particular challenges in creating openings for new teachers and bringing new skills into schools.

The discussion was opened by Ms Ulla Tornaes, the Minister of Education in Denmark.

She emphasised that:

- Good teachers are invaluable not only in influencing children in their formative years, but also in determining young people's attitudes to learning and their skills and motivation for lifelong learning.
- There is a need to create more flexible paths into teaching for people with different backgrounds alongside the commitment to ensure that able young people want to enter the teaching profession.

Mr Thomas Östros, the Minister of Education and Science in Sweden argued that the key strategic elements in guaranteeing teacher effectiveness are:

- A well-structured and systematic quality enhancement programme for all schools;
- A stronger system of teacher education that draws more extensively on research and educational sciences.
- The organisation of teacher education programmes embedding a lifelong learning approach to teacher development.
- Ensuring that the characteristics of effective schools - competent leadership; clear and widely understood goals; a commitment to student and parental participation; critical self-evaluation leading to continuous improvement - are embedded in the design of teacher preparation programmes and teachers' career and reward structures.

Ministers agreed that:

- Teacher recruitment, job satisfaction, and teaching effectiveness will all be improved by strengthening the connections between teachers' work, new knowledge and research, and by encouraging schools to develop as learning organisations.
- Policies to improve teacher recruitment and retention also need to address the equitable distribution of teachers across schools.
- The problems faced by beginning teachers need critical attention. Attrition rates are often very high in the early years of the career, which is partly due to the fact that new teachers are often allocated to the most difficult workplaces. Structured induction programmes, which combine on-going support from teacher education institutions and experienced mentor teachers need to be an integral part of the teaching career.
- It is important to improve the image and status of teaching. A number of countries are promoting the image of teaching by highlighting its importance for the nation as well as its sophistication and complexity, and the intellectual excitement it can generate. Ministers noted that those people with the closest contact with the daily work of schools, whether through their roles as parents or employers, generally have the most positive view of teachers, and that this provides a further reason for strengthening school-community links.
- There are considerable benefits in opening up alternative pathways into teaching, especially for people with substantial experience in other occupations and careers. Not only can this help to address problems of shortages, it also broadens the skill base in schools in ways that benefit students. A key requirement is that teaching education programmes become more flexible, and that people are given opportunities to start working in schools while undergoing concurrent teacher training.
- The teaching career needs to be seen in a lifelong learning framework in which initial teacher education, induction and on-going professional development are integrated and teachers have incentives and support for continuous improvement.

- School leadership is an important influence on teacher effectiveness. Good leaders foster a stimulating and supportive school culture for both teachers and students. A major priority for OECD countries is improving the recruitment, training and support of leaders in schools.
- The generally supported moves towards greater school autonomy necessitate school leaders and teachers to develop new skills, including in management, self-evaluation and meeting accountability requirements.
- The evaluation of teachers' work needs to draw extensively on teacher inputs, use a wide variety of approaches and sources of information, and be sensitive to individual school circumstances.
- The particular problems in recruiting and retaining teachers for subjects such as mathematics, science, technology, and vocational subjects, attracting more male teachers and teachers from minority backgrounds require a comprehensive set of targeted policy initiatives. Given the priorities endorsed by the recent Ministerial discussions on science and technology, there would be particular value in the Directorate for Education collaborating closely with the Committee for Scientific and Technological Policy (CSTP).
- Ministers also welcomed collaborative work within OECD and with Member countries on the implications of migration for developing new teacher skills, and for teacher recruitment and mobility.
- It is vital that teachers and their professional organisations are fully engaged in the debate about educational reform, and in the implementation of change. Ministers committed themselves to consultative and participatory processes, and were encouraged by the reports from some countries of the lead that teachers' organisations were taking in designing new approaches to teacher evaluation and career structures.

### **Education and Social Cohesion**

The meeting of Education Ministers was opened by a Forum on Education and Social Cohesion. I would like to thank the meeting's Vice-Chair, Letizia Moratti, Minister for Education, University and Research (Italy), for presiding at this session. Ministers were joined by members of the press and non-governmental organisations.

Professor Robert Putnam, Professor of Public Policy, Harvard University gave the opening presentation. 'Social capital'- meaning social networks, trust, and reciprocity - supports the broader objective of social cohesion. Bonding social capital (within communities) and bridging (across communities) are both building blocks of a cohesive society. Networks among students, among teachers, and networks linking educational institutions to families and the community all support educational performance. Conversely education can support social capital and cohesion - through civic education, through the way in which schools can become the foci of community and extracurricular activities, and through work in educational institutions. Links between different communities and ethnic groups are very important.

Social diversity - increasing in many countries as a result of immigration and other factors - can substantially enrich society. It also poses some challenges for social cohesion.

Some successful interventions were noted. Measures to improve teacher expectations of minority pupils and engage them in extracurricular activities and lifelong learning are particularly relevant. Evidence suggests that mother-tongue teaching and/or bilingual education can sometimes be effective. Where populations were more ethnically homogeneous, diversity in other respects could nevertheless pose challenges.

More collegial approaches to the governance of educational institutions, and increased involvement of parents in schooling may help to develop social cohesion within and around educational institutions. More co-operative modes of learning can also develop social bonds within schools, alongside interpersonal skills; as well as extra-curricular activities including sports, arts and civic education.

Although education interventions are important, social justice and equity are pre-

conditions for social cohesion. In some countries, diminishing the gap between rich and poor is a particular priority, and some poor rural communities face real educational challenges despite strong communities and/or family bonds. Wider public policies are often the key to tackling broader inequities. These may include effective welfare systems and support for early childhood and care.

School systems can create a cohesive common culture. However, through selection, schooling can also divide social groups, by gender, religion, special educational need, age, or income, sometimes damaging social cohesion. The policy challenges involved are not simple. Information and communications technology (ICT) systems are a new and powerful educational tool, but they also pose new risks of exclusion through a digital divide and, to some extent, through the capacity of electronic communication to connect with remote communities and isolate local communities.

Quality and excellence on the one hand, and equity and justice on the other must interact to provide mutual support and constitute central objectives of educational systems. They also contribute to the creation of social capital and social cohesion. In addition, an evaluation framework to measure not only educational results but also the development of social capital and cohesion is essential and something with which OECD could assist. Collectively, these efforts should help to raise the quality of learning for all.

In his concluding remarks, Hugh Brady, President, University College Dublin, linked the topic of the Forum to the broader objectives of education, noting for example how social networks support individual learning, and how the economic role of education is inextricably connected to its wider social benefits, including social cohesion.

#### ***Education for Democratic Citizenship***

Berglind Ásgeirsdóttir, Deputy Secretary-General of the OECD, hosted a working lunch, chaired by Thomas Östros, Minister of Education and Science (Sweden).

Introducing the discussion, Maria van der Hoeven, Minister of Education, Culture and Science, (Netherlands), said that ideas of citizenship need to be reinvented to reflect a society which is becoming more diverse, while losing traditional civic ties. As well as the links from individual to government, links between individuals are increasingly important for effective citizenship. Citizenship needs to be developed in the relationships within schools, through the encouragement of community involvement by school students and by teaching not only national, but also global citizenship.

In discussion some common problems were identified:

- The form of political engagement is changing, with young people increasingly supporting special interest groups, rather than more traditional party politics.
- Education needs to develop a sense of 'belonging' and identity for a new generation - in a world where individuals increasingly have overlapping regional, national and global identities.
- Citizenship, values and other broader outcomes of education, are hard (but not impossible) to measure, but nevertheless important. Pursuing these broader outcomes in schools is therefore difficult, particularly when the economic return is not immediate.
- Teaching values and personal responsibility raises particular challenges, not least because it immediately raises the issue of how those values can be conveyed to teachers and also because values must not only be taught, but also experienced in the school context.

Among suggested solutions:

- Ensuring basic skills for all provides an essential basis for democratic citizenship.
- Student involvement in school management is important. School councils, youth parliaments and newer web-based fora can all provide frameworks for encouraging and developing civic and democratic engagement.

- Pedagogical approaches play an important role. Respect for the opinions of others can be built into methods of classroom teaching.
- Practical on-the-ground understanding of the local community and the environment can be effective in engaging young people in local concerns and issues.
- More controversial issues in some countries include the acceptance of faith-based schools - (and indeed other schools catering to special groups) - within the state sector, and the option of lowering the voting age to promote participation.
- The evaluation of competences, skills and experiences acquired within an informal context was also relevant.

Future activities:

The Council of Europe, working with other international organisations, would declare 2005 as the European Year of Citizenship through Education raising the possibility of wider international co-operation over this initiative. The scope for useful future work by the OECD in this field was noted. Exchange of best practice is important to broaden international co-operation.

*Noel Dempsey, TD,  
Minister for Education and Science  
Ireland*

For more information, see [www.oecd.org/edumin2004](http://www.oecd.org/edumin2004)

Also available: [Réunion des ministres de l'éducation des pays de l'OCDE - Améliorer la qualité de l'enseignement pour tous - Résumé du Président \(French\)](#)