

Press Release – 22/05/2012

Discrimination to mark 60th anniversary of the European School

Founded in 1953, the European School of Luxembourg is the oldest and largest of the European School sites. The aim of the school was expressed in the words of Marcel Decombis, the first headmaster of Luxembourg I:

"Educated side by side, untroubled from infancy by divisive prejudices, acquainted with all that is great and good in the different cultures, it will be borne in upon them as they mature that they belong together. Without ceasing to look to their own lands with love and pride, they will become in mind Europeans, schooled and ready to complete and consolidate the work of their fathers before them, to bring into being a united and thriving Europe."

To defend that ethos, the European School Non-Discrimination Campaign, representing a group of European School parents, today submitted a claim of serious discrimination against their children to the Luxembourg Ombudswoman for Children's Rights. The meeting was constructive and included discussion of a legal opinion drafted by a discrimination law specialist practising in Luxembourg.

The group claims that the 'vertical split' of the school favours those nationalities that will remain at the original Kirchberg site, where the EU institutions are located and where most parents work. Other nationalities will be transferred to a new 'Lux II' school in the outlying town of Mamer. As of September, a child who speaks Italian, Greek, Danish, Hungarian or Czech can expect much less sleep, leisure, study and family time and much more commuting than their Portuguese, Spanish, Finnish, Swedish or Polish counterparts.

The 'vehicular' languages of the European institutions – English, French and German – have been divided on residential criteria, so that only those who live near Kirchberg, the most expensive part of one of the most expensive cities in Europe, will continue to benefit from work located school facilities. Those who live in more affordable accommodation away from the city centre now face an even longer commute as property prices in Mamer are prohibitive.

Lux II parents of young children are particularly enraged as they now face hours of additional commuting, exacerbated by the heavy traffic now expected in the Mamer area. Most will be unable to attend parent-teacher meetings, school concerts or assist in extra-curricular activities, thus effectively excluding their children from those activities. As one single mother with two young children, explained *'Considering the traffic jams, I expect to arrive in my office, under optimistic circumstances, by 10 a.m. As our normal working day is 8 hours plus 1 hour lunch break, I will be leaving my office at 7 p.m. I do not have anybody to pick up my children from school for me, so they will have to wait for me in the nursery (supposing that it will be open that long) until 7.30 p.m. and we will happily reach our home at 8-8.30 p.m.'*

As the reality of the plan takes shape, many parents are now asking why their children should face such disadvantage because of the language they speak. Gordon Mackenzie, spokesperson for the campaign, claimed that tensions were already mounting among EU staff in the city - *'Can't the decision-makers in Brussels see where this is going? Favouring some languages and discriminating against others can only foster resentment and that is already noticeable in the school and in the workplace. It goes against everything the EU is supposed to stand for.'* A member of the parents' association pointed to one outcome of the language split: *'A staff member who is a single Italian mother will be unable to work the same hours/earn the same career evaluation as a Finnish colleague, simply due to fact that her child has been assigned to the school at Mamer'*.

Vassilis Sklias, a long-time campaigner against the vertical split and president of EPSU-CJ, the trade union at the European Court, concluded *'This is what happens when decisions are taken without consulting those concerned.'*

The European School Non-Discrimination Campaign is demanding that the decision to vertically split European School in Luxembourg along language lines be reversed. The parents want a horizontal split, with all pre-school and primary children, regardless of language or residential status, remaining in the Kirchberg site. The association argues that the Mamer site should cater for all secondary school children, as they do not need to be accompanied to school. This primary-secondary split would also allow for a greater choice of subjects which, along with career options, will suffer as a result of the vertical split of the school. This preferred option has been demanded by parents for years but ignored by the Commission and Board of Governors of the European Schools. Despite repeated requests, no official study to justify the vertical choice/reject the horizontal choice has ever been organised. On the other hand, the validity of the 'horizontal' arguments has been recognised on multiple occasions

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