

## Reactions on the “reply” of the Secretariat-General of 1 December 2011

### **(1) On decisions taken in the past**

The reasoning in the Secretariat-General's note that a decision taken in 2006 cannot be overturned is unconvincing. It is common sense that a decision taken some time ago should be revisited if the situation has changed. There are several new elements that were not present in 2006 which could very well lead the Board of Governors to conclude that a modification to the 2006 decision that all pupils move to Laeken when the site is opened is needed:

(i) It seems confirmed that the Belgian authorities will not request the Berkendael site to be returned when Laeken opens in 2012; instead the Berkendael site will remain at the disposal of the European Schools. This was not at all clear in 2006.

(ii) The Belgian authorities decided in 2009, three years after the Board's decision of 2006, that the women's' prison next to the Berkendael site will be closed, presumably in 2015. The current Berkendael site together with the grounds of the women's' prison would be large enough to host a normal-sized European School (around 2,500 pupils). The enlarged Berkendael site is in the south of Brussels where most priority 1 pupils live and would therefore qualify as an appropriate site for Brussels V.

(iii) In 2006 it was not foreseeable that because of the overcrowding of the other European schools a large number of pupils was forced to accept a place in Brussels IV even though they live in the south in Brussels and hence closer to Berkendael (or Brussels I - Uccle - and III - Ixelles) than to Laeken.

(iv) Since 2006 environmental concerns and the carbon footprint have become an even bigger concern. With four and soon five European Schools spread all over Brussels not to take into account geographical criteria at all for allocating 8,000 pupils (the number of pupils currently enrolled in European Schools in Brussels that are in a language section that exists in more than one school - 80% of the overall population of European Schools in Brussels) might prove untenable in the medium term, not only for environmental but mainly for pedagogical reasons. Not to address the issue that the current enrolment policy has led to several thousand young children down to 4 years of age having to commute to their school for up to 3 hours per day while another European School with the same language section is situated much closer to their place of residence will indeed create an explosive situation over time.

Keeping Berkendael open and distributing current and future pupils of Brussels IV nursery and primary according to geographical criteria to the two sites Laeken and Berkendael would be a first step into this direction.

### **(2) The satisfaction rate**

Every year the Secretariat-General issues an annual report with the satisfaction rate, i.e. the percentage of applications that are allocated a place in the school of the parents' first choice. Currently, the rate is supposed to stand at around 74%. That's a drop from more than 80% in the past and this downward trend is supposed to continue next year when all non-priority applications will be automatically put to Brussels IV. The rate, even though decreasing, seems quite high at first glance. However, analysing this percentage in detail leads to a very different picture. First of all, in order to determine the real satisfaction rate of parents trying to enrol a first child in a European School in Brussels, the pupils for which there is no choice (i.e. pupils enrolled in a language section which only exists once) have to be taken out of the equation. Secondly, the number of pupils with a priority (primarily those with a sibling already enrolled at a European School) has to be taken out as they have a guaranteed place in the same school.

We would presume that the satisfaction rate of pupils without the sibling criterion who apply for a language section that exists several times, in particular those 5 language sections currently present in Brussels IV (FR, EN, DE, IT, NL) is way below 50%, and possibly even lower if also those applications are included where parents have not taken up the place offered to them (mainly parents opting against their children being sent to Laeken, we would

think). The Secretariat-General can very easily provide the real satisfaction rate of those trying to enrol the first child newly into a language section which exists several times in Brussels. We can only urge the Board of Governors to request the Secretariat-General that this be calculated so that it is clarified that the large majority of parents enrolling a first child in a European School in Brussels is not given a place in the school of their choice.

### **(3) Parents knew it all along...**

We have been reproached that we as parents knew all along that Brussels IV would move to Laeken at some stage so why did we enrol our children there in the first place? This is linked to the allegedly high satisfaction rate. For many (most?) of us there simply was no choice. Even though we may have asked for a place in Brussels I or III as first and second priority we were allocated a place in Brussels IV. And for those pupils with mother tongues other than French and Dutch, i.e. those who applied for a place in the EN, DE and IT language sections, to refuse this place in Brussels IV would have been tantamount to having to submit a child to being sent to school in a foreign language while the European Schools are supposed to cater - inter alia - for exactly this, schooling in the mother tongue. Many parents decided to refuse the place (more than a hundred every year) and sent their children to Belgian or international schools instead, others bit the bullet in spite of their dissatisfaction as they did not want to jeopardise their children's development.

### **(4) The involvement of parents in the decision-making process**

The Secretariat-General makes reference to the fact that a representative of the parents is involved in the decision-making process on the enrolment policy and that our concerns should have been voiced via this representative. Unfortunately, it has to be said that many parents have tried time and again to voice through the APEEE their dissatisfaction with the enrolment policy in general and with the forced move of all pupils from Berkendael to Laeken. These voices were usually discarded at the APEEE level (and hence not brought to the higher level of Interparents) by saying "there is nothing we can do", "the decision has been taken" or "this is political and we do not deal with political issues". The APEEE of Brussels IV and its board members showed no interest in the petition thus disregarding the expressed wishes of more than 30% of the school's population they are supposed to represent (presumably because they live very close to Laeken already). There were a few class representatives (some of them APEEE board members) that even refused to forward the petition to the parents in the class they had been elected to inform on anything of importance. Under these circumstances to reproach us for having addressed the political authorities directly does not seem to be a valid argument. We simply had no other choice.

### **(5) The fear that the site in Laeken cannot be filled**

This is a fear which seems to be wide-spread. Of course, even if Berkendael remains open as a second site of Brussels IV the Laeken site will be filled. It might take one year or two longer until Laeken reaches maximum capacity but instead of having empty class rooms in Berkendael in 2012 there would be some empty class rooms in Laeken in 2012 that would be filled only in subsequent years. Would this be a disaster? No, certainly not, it would probably even be beneficial to start the site in Laeken with less pupils and grow slightly more slowly since growing at a rate of 600 or more pupils per year (or 50% for the next school year) as is currently foreseen for Laeken will be very difficult to manage. It should not be forgotten either that most European Schools outside Brussels and Luxembourg are much smaller (many around 1,000 pupils) which would be approximately the size with which the Laeken site would open next year if Berkendael was kept as a second site.

It is clear that many parents have already moved to Laeken or the surrounding quarters and are eagerly awaiting the school to open next year in order to move their children from Belgian schools to the European School in Laeken. Moreover, several hundred priority 1 children living in the north of Brussels, Schaerbeek in particular, for whom Laeken would be by far the closest school geographically, are currently enrolled in other European Schools, namely Brussels II and III. If these pupils and their parents were targeted specifically many would probably voluntarily opt for the shorter way to the Laeken school rather than to continue with

the long commutes to their current school, in particular if whole groups of pupils would move to Laeken so that friendships (for example of pupils currently travelling on the bus together every day) could be maintained.

#### **(6) Changes to the enrolment policy and giving a privilege to certain parents**

The Secretariat-General states that giving parents the choice to select Berkendael or Laeken based on geographical proximity would give these parents a privilege that all other parents have been denied for the last five years. This is not convincing as our proposal has been to distribute current and future pupils of Brussels IV nursery and primary - without asking the parents - according to the sole criterion of geographical distance to the child's place of residence to either the Laeken or the Berkendael site. If indeed the Secretariat-General preferred to let the parents choose, we would find nothing objectionable to this either. We presume that the results would be approximately the same.

Moreover, contrary to what seems to be the conclusion of the note of the Secretariat-General, the enrolment guidelines for new pupils adopted by you in September will not need to be revised at all if our proposal is accepted to keep Berkendael as a second site of Brussels IV: all non-priority enrolment applications for the five language sections concerned (apart from French nursery) will be sent to Brussels IV as planned, with the one additional element that nursery and primary pupils would be allocated to either Berkendael or Laeken by simple determination which of the two sites is closer to the place of residence of the child concerned.

#### **(7) The presence of the nursery and primary of Brussels I in Berkendael**

The note sent by the Secretariat-General on 1 December confirms that it is foreseen that at some stage in the school year 2012/2013 21 classes from Brussels I will be hosted in Berkendael for the time of the renovation of their "Reine Fabiola" building. The costs of this presence of 400-odd pupils on the Berkendael site would therefore as we have indicated in our note of last week have to be budgeted in any case in the budget of Brussels I. This in turn would for the time of the presence of the Brussels I pupils in Berkendael, i.e. at least two years if not three, significantly decrease the infrastructure costs for keeping Berkendael as second site of Brussels IV. Whether these savings are generated as of September 2012 or only starting in 2013 seems to be of little importance. Have these savings been fully included in the simulation table?

#### **(8) The costs of keeping Berkendael open**

(i) No to phase-out: First of all, it does of course not make sense to stop enrolling pupils in Berkendael next year as envisaged in the simulation submitted by the Secretariat-General. In a phase-out approach the costs per pupil in Berkendael become prohibitively high over time with the fixed infrastructure costs continuing to be incurred for a dwindling number of pupils.

(ii) No cost simulation beyond 2015: The purpose of the petition is to keep the Berkendael site open as a second site of Brussels IV and accept new pupils there up to the maximum capacity until the opening of Brussels V in 2015 either in Berkendael itself or at another site in the south of Brussels. This could potentially bring about even some additional pupils who would otherwise not be enrolled in the European Schools as we know a number of parents who have currently put their priority 1 children into Belgian or international schools in order to avoid the long commute to Laeken. Therefore, no cost simulation should go beyond 2015, i.e. cover more than three school years, as a new budget would in any case have to be planned for the opening of Brussels V in September 2015.

(iii) Minimalist approach and additional costs only: it is evident that our rough cost estimation is driven by our objective to reduce additional costs as much as possible (several age groups being taught together, no canteen/kitchen at the beginning, for details cf. the note sent last week). Therefore, if a more "luxurious" approach were taken as seems to be the case for the simulation developed by the Secretariat-General, higher additional costs would of course be incurred. However, we would like to ask you to request more detailed explanations from the Secretariat-General on a number of figures in the simulation table which seem very high for

covering "additional costs" ("surcoût") only. Indeed, our rough estimates sent to you last week seem to be on certain points more detailed than the attached simulation of the Secretariat-General, which is somewhat surprising.

(iv) Savings to be taken into account: Firstly, the simulation does not take into account savings that could be generated, either in Laeken (less class rooms to be heated, lit and cleaned, less teachers, etc.) or in terms of transport (significant savings if no bus transport has to be paid for several hundred children). It is not clear whether the temporary presence of a few hundred nursery and primary pupils from Brussels I on the Berkendael site during the renovation of their building in Brussels I is taken into account, thus reducing the fixed infrastructure costs like heating, electricity, cleaning, etc.

(v) Additional equipment costs: Without further explanation from the Secretariat-General it is not at all evident why an additional € 750,000 are needed in 2012 as "équipement salles de sport, bibliothèque, salle de musique, ICT, téléphones, serveurs, outils matériel entretien, photocopieuses". It seems to make little sense to move to Laeken all the equipment if not all pupils move there - instead, as indicated in our note of last week, most of the equipment could be divided between Laeken and Berkendael proportionally. In the same vein it seems exaggerated that all of the equipment which has been bought over four years since the inception of the school in 2007 needs to be bought again in one go in September 2012 if Berkendael remained open - instead these investments, if they are needed, should be spread over several years as has been the case in the past. Moreover, almost all such investments could in 2015 be used for equipping Brussels V. Truly "additional" costs for equipment should under these circumstances be minimal and could be easily spread over the years until Brussels V opens.

(vi) Additional teaching costs: Even though the details are not provided in the simulation table of the Secretariat-General the additional costs for teachers amount to a staggering € 100,000 per month which seems to be a lot even if all sections including the NL section were split and hence the total number of additional teachers would be 16. In a minimalist approach as detailed in our note last week the number of additional teachers would be as low as 2 and consequently additional teaching costs would be much lower. It seems that the Secretariat-General has not taken into account that with 600 pupils not moving to Laeken less teachers would be needed there. Also, it seems as if the Secretariat-General would presume that no one of the additional teachers would be seconded but all would be "chargé de cours" while currently the overwhelming majority of teachers in Brussels IV are seconded and only a small minority are "chargé de cours". The latter are much more costly as their salaries have to be paid entirely out of the European Schools' budget. Shouldn't the additional costs for supplementary teachers be calculated using the currently existing ratio between seconded teachers and "chargé de cours"?

(vii) Transport subsidy: According to our minimalist scenario there would be no bus transport for the Berkendael site of Brussels IV so the transport subsidy mentioned in the simulation could be scrapped.

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