

March 20, 2012

Subject: Teaching of section language at the European School of Varese for SWALS

Dear Sir/Madam,

The undersigned are functionaries of the European Commission Joint Research Centre (JRC) in Ispra, Italy, and/or parents of Students Without a Language Section (SWALS), enrolled in a vehicular language section at the European School of Varese (ESV), Italy.

We are writing this letter to inform you of our concerns for the recent changes in the teaching of section language and mother tongue that have been implemented in the primary cycle of ESV, which are deeply affecting the level of education of our children as well as their integration in the respective classes. The ESV has a higher percentage of SWALS than most other European Schools. With the recent enlargement of the European Union, the number of SWALS is expected to rise even further, due to the growing number of people recruited for the JRC arising from the new countries. The problem described below will therefore affect an even higher number of students in the future than it already does.

The problem originated at the beginning of school year 2010/2011, when a change in the organization of classes for P1-P2 was implemented. As of the beginning of school year 2011/2012, this change was extended also to P3-P4-P5 of the vehicular language sections.

Before, SWALS would get tuition of the section language at L1 level, with a complete L1 syllabus. The comprehension of the section language would allow them to follow all the other subjects, which are taught in the section language.

As a result of the change in the organization of language classes, SWALS students now get tuition in their section language, partly at L1 level, with their class, and partly at L2 level, together with students from other sections.

The arrangement implemented at ESV has created the following specific problems:

1) SWALS of the vehicular language sections are taught the section language at two different levels, which is against the regulations. The Decisions of the Board of Governors, under sections 2.1 (Regulations for language teaching, paragraph a.) clearly state that *"No language may be studied at more than one level simultaneously ..."*

2) Due to the efforts of the mother tongue teachers, SWALS receive the best instruction they can in their mother tongue. However, please be advised that SWALS instruction in their mother tongue is limited to the absolute minimum of time slots (5/week), with no instruction given in non-language courses (math, discovery of the world, etc). In other words, tuition of mother tongue is insufficient for SWALS to reach the level taught in their country of origin, thus creating a learning handicap in case they must return to their home country. Hence, with the recently introduced change in the organization of instruction of the host section language to SWALS, SWALS remain with a less than optimal instruction in their mother tongue and with a clearly downgraded instruction in the language of the section.

3) SWALS of the vehicular language section in the ESV are being discriminated towards SWALS from other schools, who keep being taught in the old system. All these children will be given the same exams in the future when pursuing a baccalaureate, despite the fact that SWALS of the ESV will be much less prepared in their section language and in all the other subjects taught in that language;

4) SWALS have increased difficulties to keep up with their class associates due to reduced exposure to the section language at an appropriate level. In the primary cycle, SWALS in the vehicular language sections miss 5/16 (in P1-P2) or 5/9 (P3-P4-P5) of the L1 lessons of their section. The difficulties are not restricted to the vehicular language, but to all subjects taught in the vehicular language, including but not restricted to maths;

5) This situation is forcing segregation of SWALS away from non-SWALS and is in sharp contrast to the integrative environment that was found in the primary cycle of ESV before this system was implemented.

Dear Sir/Madam, we have approached the school on several occasions to try to solve this issue, always unsuccessfully. The school has informed us that the changes implemented in the ESV were following a decision made by the *Board of Governors of the European Schools concerning language teaching in the European Schools*.

We find this very distressing. Our children need to become perfectly fluent in the section language for practical purposes, and we believe they are losing out considerably by being forced to waste 5 periods per week on the section language at L2 level.

Given the worrying situation described above that is taking place in the Primary cycle of the ESV, we ask your intervention to raise this issue in the next meeting of the Board of Governors. Specifically, we ask the quality of the implemented change to be assessed both economically and pedagogically. We further ask the SWALS Inspector and all the other Language Inspectors to make sure these children are being given tuition at an appropriate level, i.e. a level that allows them to compete side by side with their peers from all European schools, all sections and all origins.

We are not only pointing out the existence of a problem, and we take the opportunity to present you with an alternative solution, which would terminate most of the current problems, while at the same time safeguarding approximately the same budget. The solution in attachment has been presented by the SWALS representative at the Parents Association of the ESV on a previous occasion.

We ask you to take this solution in deep consideration and to support its implementation or the implementation of a comparable solution as soon as possible, and at least by the beginning of the school year 2012/2013.

Sincerely,

The undersigned