EU**N**EC
European Network of Education Councils

Outcomes of the exchange on education in the COVID19 pandemic: challenges and opportunities

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Participants

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Excused

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1 Purpose of this exchange

Last year, EUNEC organized an online consultation on this topic. The input has been published at the EUNEC website. The current exchange has the objective to update the results.

EUNEC members exchanged on how our countries respond to the crisis.

They discussed in two consecutive rounds of three parallel sessions on determined questions, and wrapped up in a plenary session.

We started from the results of the EUNEC consultation on education councils in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, giving every member the opportunity to bring their experiences in parallel round tables.

First session: how did your national education system react to the crisis. Lessons learned?

Second session: How did your council position itself during the crisis? Lessons learned?

After the parallel sessions, the rapporteurs presented for the whole general assembly a summary of the outcomes of the discussion in the three groups. The present report is based on that presentation; it is an integrated report, not a report of each separate session. It will be completed by documents sent in by the members.

2 Outcomes of the exchange

2.1 Organization of education

All governments had to make decisions related to education: to keep the schools open or not, organize distant learning or hybrid learning, vaccinate teaching staff or not,... Decisions have been different in the countries, mostly depending on the fact whether the **politicians rely on the recommendations of virologists or rather economists or psychologists**. In Flanders, for instance, the government tried to keep school open as much and as long as possible (by means of prolongation of holidays, cool down weeks, …).

The decision making level varies amongst countries. In Cyprus, for instance, centralizing tendencies have even become stronger. In Portugal, for instance, municipalities have plaid a crucial role, whereas in Spain, for instance, the role of the regions was crucial.

It is clear that in those systems where pupils and students are **prepared and ready** to work to distant learning, the adaptation has been more easy. In Estonia, for instance, the IT platforms were already in place; teachers and pupils were used to work with online textbooks and teaching materials. Nevertheless, for elder teachers, the challenges remained high. In other countries, such as Flanders, education had to make a leap forward towards digital education, with government investments in devices (supported by EU funding).

2.2 Challenges for education during the crisis

The pandemic has revealed or made more visible a number of challenges:

- One of the main challenges during the crisis has been the **continuous and unpredictable adaptation** to changing circumstances. This has been hard for
  - Teachers. Teachers have shown a great deal of flexibility, but now they are exhausted.
  - Pupils

- o Parents.

In the first months of the crisis, there has been a lot of enthusiasm and energy, but now all stakeholders are stressed and tired.

- **Learning and assessment** is another challenge. It has been hard for teachers to know and to assess what pupils actually learn.
- Equity is another challenge. There have been **clear disparities** between schools, between families, in terms of support and of access to digital learning. In Morocco, for instance, there are disparities between urban and rural areas with no connection at all: efforts have been made to reach all students, by using smartphones, for instance.
- There has been a lot of anxiety and stress. **Mental health** is another challenge.

2.3 Opportunities

The crisis also brought about a number of chances, of opportunities.

- **A boost for digitalization.** There is a wider willingness to work with digital methods, but at the same time the awareness that digital learning cannot replace schools.
- The **self-management skills** of pupils have been developed and enhanced.
- Awareness that **schooling is a social experience**, about relations between people. Schools have multiple roles, the emotional side is not to be neglected.
- The **complexity of teaching** has been appreciated more by the broad society. Parents, for instance, have acquired better insights in teaching, leading to a more open conversation.
- Awareness of the **importance of connections between home and school** for learning.
- Teachers have always been rather individual. As a consequence of the crisis, they have started organizing themselves, cooperating, **creating networks,** sharing experiences.
- In a way education has become **more inclusive**; suddenly children that did not attend school and whose parents had asked for distance learning without avail, could participate because everyone was involved in distance learning

2.4 Position of education councils. What can be the role of education councils in this crisis?

- Some councils experience **challenges in positioning in the policy cycle**. Often, in Flanders for instance, the minister is regularly sitting togethers with more than half of the stakeholders represented in the council, but outside the council.
- Some councils have executed important **studies** leading to reports on how schools, teachers, pupils deal with the crisis. Some have organized webinars on how to deal with recovery, how to prepare the 'new normal' in schools, how to set up a digital pedagogy, how to deal with learning losses.
- As far as the advisory role is concerned, it is a challenge for a council to find the **balance between recommendations focusing on crisis management versus more sustainable recommendations**, related to the 'bigger questions': what kind of society do we want, what is the place of education in this society? This way, the crisis is at the same time a window of opportunity for reflection on society as a whole, and the place of education in it. In general, councils try to include in their recommendations **the future**

perspective: how to learn from this crisis. On the other hand, a council can be helpful to policy by extracting relevant information from earlier recommendations, related to wellbeing, to distance learning, for instance. Most councils insist, in their recommendations, on education as a right for all, also for vulnerable pupils, also in times of crisis.

- Councils can have **important societal impact** in the way the contribute to keeping a cool mind, to bringing tranquility to public discussions. Councils can contribute to bringing a **message of hope** for the education stakeholders.