



Memorandum

23 September 2009

Swedish Presidency of the European Union

Minister for Education

Introductory Speech of Jan Björklund

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear colleagues and delegates,

Good afternoon to you all and welcome to our Informal Ministerial Meeting here in Göteborg!

First I would like to say a few words about the city of Göteborg and this extraordinary setting of Eriksbergshallen:

Göteborg, Sweden's second city, has a distinct maritime history. It is the big Swedish port to the West, to the North Sea and to the Atlantic. Shipping and trade has been dominating the industry here. After the second world war, Göteborg was actually one of the world's largest shipbuilding centres in the world.

This area, once a shipyard, brings us right back and into the heart of those times. The building we are in right now used to be a machinery workshop. It was here that diesel motors were built and tested.

This city is also an industrial city. Volvo is being produced here.

A year ago, I was at a study trip in Asia and visited the International school in Shanghai. The pupils at this school all have parents who have moved to work in the expansive area of Shanghai. When I met with these parents they told me about a parents' meeting at the school:

First to speak at the meeting were the European parents. They required less homework as they thought of it as putting too much pressure on the children. After that, the parents from South Korea spoke. They wished for more homework, since the children have "much more to give".

Out of all the impressions during this trip that lasted for a week, it was the story from the parents' meeting at the international school that made a long-lasting impression. The ambitions in Asia are very high. Whereas, in our part of the world, many take wealth and welfare for granted.

Education is the key to success in a globalized world. It is only through a good education that European countries can meet the competition from the new economies.

Europe's education system is, however, facing great challenges. In international comparisons of learning outcomes, many European countries have a reason to be concerned. In an international context, we are simply not good enough. We are of course pleased that other parts of the world are showing positive developments, but we want Europe to be even more successful in the 21st century.

Our great task, as politicians and policymakers, is to break this pattern.

In the EU, education policy has been given increasing significance over the years. It is now obvious that knowledge and skills are keys to success in the Lisbon Strategy for growth and employment.

In May this year, under the Czech Presidency, the objectives and priorities for the coming decade were set – a strategic framework for cooperation in education. The Swedish Presidency is honoured to be able to take this development further.

The first of our priorities within this framework is to do with teachers, their professional development and the role of school principals.

The significance of our teachers cannot be overstated: Good quality teachers is perhaps a country's greatest asset. Good teachers are crucial to pupils' results and consequently to the ability for a country - or a region - to compete in a globalised world. In times of economic difficulties, the teachers have a fundamental role in providing young people with the knowledge needed in a rapidly changing world.

The knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities of each and every one of Europe's six million teachers is consequently of great importance. The recruitment of the best teachers should therefore be at the top of our agenda.

I must say, I am concerned over the development seen in recent years.

If I go back two generations, the top students chose between becoming doctors, engineers, lawyers or teachers. The situation today is quite different. Very few top students choose to become teachers.

Why is this?

In my opinion there are a few elements essential for a young person in the process of choosing career, of deciding what to work with for the rest of his or her life.

First, a good education. When I say good education, I am not thinking only of the substance of the course or the quality of the, in this case, teacher trainers. I also mean demanding. An education that is too easy will never attract the best students. An education in the best interest of the students, is challenging.

Second, good working conditions. Working conditions is a wide term that needs to be defined. For teachers, it includes the classroom environment and the interaction with the pupils, as well as the professional environment in the school as a whole.

The school principal is essential in giving the teachers professional support in a sometimes very difficult job. This applies to new teachers who need a good induction when they start working, but also to the more experienced teachers who must be given the challenge and encouragement they need to remain in the profession.

We need a new kind of leadership in schools. Schools need principals who constantly work for good results and educational development, and who also encourage leadership in others. This means a powerful role for school principals who focus on improving the quality of learning among both pupils and teachers. I emphasize: the school principals should not be bureaucrats – they should be instructional leaders.

And when considering working conditions, we also have to be blunt and include the money. In the choice of career, salary is indisputably an influential factor.

Third, professional development. For a teacher, as for any other profession, the possibility to continue develop professionally is of great importance. All teachers need to be given this opportunity. In this area we need a new concept for the profession, whereby teachers, both independently and with others, are constantly engaged in critical reflection of their own work. Continuous in-service training throughout teachers' careers is needed to support this.

To make the teaching profession more attractive than today requires, on the one hand, a high-quality teacher education and attractive working conditions for teachers, and on the other, a society that awards high status to its teaching profession.

Each and every one of these variables has to be taken into account when analysing how to make the teacher profession much more attractive than today.

These issues are undoubtedly on the national agenda of each Member State, and we have got a lot of work to do in our home countries. But they should also be discussed in a European context.

I will invite you to a broad discussion and a fruitful exchange of experiences regarding the teacher profession and how we can make it more attractive.

Another key issue that I would like to emphasize at this meeting is mobility. For those training to be teachers or already in the profession, the EU provides a huge potential. Teachers can draw great benefits from teaching in other countries. Further initiatives, at both European and national levels, are needed here.

During this meeting, we will also have the opportunity to listen to our distinguished Key Note Speakers who will provide us with some insights concerning the issues raised here today.

But first, I would like to introduce our Commissioner for education, training, culture and youth, Jan Figel.