European Schools ICT Report for the year 2007
Comments and suggestions from Interparents

Ref: 2008-D-172-en-1, Issued 4 March 2008
         2008-D-172-en-[1], Issued 14 March 2008

Rev.2   18 March 2008

I.   Preface to the Second Edition

Interparents thanks the Secretariat for issuing a second edition of the 2007 ICT report, following the discussion in the CAF. In general, our comments, presented in the CAF, stand. We would make the following additional comments on the second edition:

Para. 1.3 Infrastructure: Interparents endorses the concerns expressed by the Secretariat about ICT support and invites the Board of Governors to approve the Secretariat's request for <u>two</u> ICT support staff, contrary to the advice of the CAF.

Para. 1.4 & 3.3 Learning Gateway and Distance Learning: Interparents welcomes the assurance that the learning gateway is accessible from any computer connected to the Internet. We recall the position outlined below, that in evaluating the cost of systems, this should include the <u>total costs of use</u> to all final users, notably parents and students at home.

Para. 3.5   Use of ICT: The examples cited are of considerable interest and tend to endorse our request for 24/7 ICT support by the Secretariat.

Interparents recalls our advice that, although school reports may be prepared internally by extensive use of wordprocessing and e-mail among teachers and the school administration, the final Report (carnet scolaire) should be addressed to parents, delivered by their children, on paper, preferably in an envelope, signed by the Director. <u>Not by e-mail.</u>

Para. 4.   **Inventory of ICT material in the schools:** The additional information provided is interesting and welcome. Interparents will revert to the Secretariat in due course should the new data give rise to specific advice from individual schools.

Table 5.   **Progress of the ICT Plan:** Interparents maintains our reservations as to the relationship between the ICT Plan, the annual ICT Report, the annual school budgets and the actual situation in each of the schools. We retain the impression that, rather than being a medium term guide, the ICT Plan is becoming an afterthought.

In all other respects, our comments on the 2007 ICT Report, stand.

Interparents would be prepared to designate a delegate to the ICT Steering Group, should we be invited to do so.

II. Discussion of the Secretariat's 2007 ICT Report to the CAF

Interparents has received the ICT Report for 2007 which is on the agenda of the CAF on 10 March 2008. Accordingly, in spite of the very short delay, Interparents wishes to table the following comments and suggestions.

ICT policies and applications affect a wide swathe of the activities of the European Schools and their relationships with the outside world, including the parents and their children at home. In particular, Interparents is concerned that the schools' ICT systems should be inter-operable with affordable Open Source home systems, and that their children's ICT education should not be limited to certain proprietary systems only. Families should be able to choose which computing platform to use at home, without prejudicing their children's ability to inter-operate with the schools' systems.

This approach is consistent with the European Union's policies, and that of several Member States.

ICT applications are also relevant for policies and practices for transparency, privacy and security in the schools' environment.

1. General comments

In general, it is most important that the ICT platform for the administration of the Bureau, the administration of the schools and the pedagogic and educational applications throughout the schools should be interoperable with Open Source solutions. They should not be tied to a particular proprietary environment.

The relevant international standardisation organisation (ISO) has endorsed Open Systems.

ICT education in the schools, should not entrench in any way particular dominant proprietary solutions. Children must know that there are alternative environments and that they have the right to use them, usually quite inexpensively. They should be taught about the available Open Source solutions, both software and operating systems if so desired, as well as the main proprietary software that they will encounter in the future. Thus, parents should be under no obligation to equip their children at home with proprietary systems. School ICT teachers should be trained to orient their pupils, and their parents to this effect.

In any event for the time being, the European Schools ICT systems should support both Open Document Format (ODF) and proprietary formats on a non-discriminatory basis. Documents prepared by the European School system in proprietary formats should by saved and transmitted in standardised non-proprietary formats.

In the interests of non-discrimination, the formal description of systems, such as in the present ICT Report, and in all calls for proposals and other tenders, should not employ proprietary terminology.

2.   New Administrative Applications

The new administrative applications that are being developed provide an opportunity to begin implementing a policy based on Open Source solutions, outlined above. Paragraphs 1.2 and 2.2 refer. The same approach should be extended to ICT aspects of distance learning, the so-called school "dashboard" ('tableau de bord') and to the training of teachers and ICT and administrative staff.

3.   Infrastructure

The laudable objective of permanent access to the Bureau's data bases needs to be complemented by 24/7 ICT support. Paragraph 1.3 refers. Indeed the system is necessarily used at all hours. The EU extends over three time zones, and many parents, teachers and students use the system at home at any time, particularly at weekends.

The necessary support is not presently provided, notably for the DADEE data base which has been known to crash during the weekend. The envisaged DOCEE system should be associated with 24/7 support.

4.   Transparency and Privacy

In practice the ICT applications express the degree of openness and transparency that is being employed by the European Schools system. Indeed the rationale for the current labyrinthine hierarchy of access to DADEE documents is incomprehensible. There is no reason why all European School documents should not be in the public domain, with very few regulated exceptions. Furthermore, many documents that are supposed to be restricted in some way are apparently often available through back-channels of various kinds. Finally, nearly all documents can be obtained, should the need arise, through Freedom of Information Rules.

Accordingly, it would perhaps be easier and less expensive to implement openness and transparency *ab initio* in the ICT document management systems themselves.

Interparents also takes this opportunity to recall the letter addressed to the Secretary General on 12 December 2006, attached, regarding data protection and privacy in the European Schools. We request that this letter and related principles and rules be communicated directly to all those involved in developing, installing and using ICT systems in the schools' bureau and local administrations.

5.   Video-conferencing, audio-conferencing

At a time when economies are being sought throughout the system, it would appear that video and audio conferencing could be used more widely in the administration and policy-development of the European Schools system. Paragraph 1.4 refers. For instance, the cost of organising the baccalaureate, each year, is largely accounted for by the travel and expenses of the Inspectors and examiners concerned, at least some of which could be replaced by videoconferencing.

In any event, videoconferencing is <u>not</u> appropriate for oral examinations.

Interparents would welcome the opportunity to have access to a simple Internet-based videoconferencing facility for the purposes of inter-sessional meetings. Internet Protocol (IP) conferencing systems are affordable to acquire and inexpensive to use.

6.   ICT in the European Schools

The declared ideology and challenging objectives, so eloquently expressed in paragraph 3.1, are not consistent with the reality experienced in the individual schools. In particular, budgets for necessary ICT support staff are regularly cut in the schools' Administrative Boards and in the Administrative and Financial Committee (CAF) itself. Supply of informatics equipment for the administration of the schools is privileged as against equipment for education in the schools.

Rather than reading high-flown language about the potentialities of ICT in the schools, Interparents would prefer to see a bottom-up construction of real requirements, responsibly budgeted and treated as the highest priority at each stage of the budgetary procedure.

Specifically, regarding the current pilot project about the autonomy of the schools' management, Interparents considers that the ICT systems should already be designed to facilitate taking decisions locally.

7.   Future ICT applications

It will be recalled that the prospect of greater use of ICT in the preparation, conduct and marking of the European Baccalaureate examiniations has been evoked in the context of improving efficiency, objectivity and speed of these examinations. Indeed this might contribute to modernising an otherwise complex and cumbersome exercise. For present purposes, Interparents is open to further development of these ideas. However, we must all be quite clear from the start as to the practical implications.

Moving in this direction would mean:

(a)   all pupils from an early age learning to touch-type in at least Language I and Language II, using appropriately configured keyboards. Entering essays and homework on a computer would have to become a regular experience, if not the norm.

(b)   wider access to computers than is presently the case, with appropriately secured networks.

(c)   Inspectors, teachers, invigilators and examiners would themselves have to become familiar with the system both from the point of view of education and training of the users and from the point of view of their own personal use.

(d)   Co-opting the support and understanding of parents as to the objectivity and reliability of ICT based alternatives, and their cooperation in encouraging their children to respond accordingly.

Should it ever be envisaged that such a system might be introduced within, say, the next ten years, it would be appropriate to begin to thinking about it now and to start by ensuring that in early secondary school years, all pupils are fully competent in expressing themselves quickly and accurately through a keyboard and screen, in the languages in which they will later be examined. Granted, the quality of handwriting might suffer, but it has evidently suffered greatly already – which is one of the justifications for considering this change. Handwriting might benefit more from being promoted to an art form.

8.   **Evaluation of the use of ICT in the Schools**

The information provided under paragraph 3.4 is surprisingly modest. More than one third of the teachers do not login at least once a week? More than two thirds of pupils use a computer at school less than once a week? In view of the current growth of the Internet, doubling the broadband volume each year is not particularly exceptional.

Either there is something wrong with the data, or the schools need of a wake-up call, if indeed anything like the ambitions expressed in paragraph 3.1 are to be approached.

Interparents would suggest publishing the usage data for at least each school, primary and secondary, and looking for other indicators to give a more complete picture over recent years.

Regarding the availability of ICT for educational purposes (page 9 of the report refers), we have examined, as a first approximation, the numbers of pupils per pedagogic computer in the primary and secondary cycles in each school in 2007. There are indeed very wide differences, which would appear to arise from the cumulative effect of the

rather arbitrary budgetary procedure referred to above.

For example, in the secondary cycles, the number of pupils per computer ranges from 7.7 in Uccle to 3.2 in Bergen. The larger schools are all distinctly disadvantaged, all above 7.0, whereas the smaller schools are in the range 4.4 - 3.2, the others lying in between.

In the primary cycles the numbers of pedagogic computers per pupil are equally variable. The larger schools are in the range 11.5 - 8.2 whereas other schools are much better off in this respect.

Interparents recognises that ICT usage may be measured by other less approximate indicators, although no useful data has been provided. For instance, the usage, age and eventual obsolescence of equipment could be identified. Meanwhile, there is no clear rationale for the observed differences in the provision of computers, presumably also associated with corresponding differences in related infrastructure and ICT support.

In any event such disparities are inconsistent with the general concepts and objectives set out in the ICT Report and elsewhere.

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The report to CAF in reference was issued on 4 March for a meeting on 10 March 2008. Interparents is not able to ensure full consultation of all its members within such a short delay. Should the need arise we will issue an updated version of the present document. Meanwhile, we would invite the CAF and the ICT Steering Group to take these initial comments into consideration.

Interparents would be prepared to designate a delegate to the ICT Steering Group, should we be invited to do so.

Attachment: Interparents Privacy Letter, December 2006