

Parents of the Slovak children in
1st first year of secondary school
European School Brussels III

Mr. Kari KIVINEN, PhD

The Secretary-General of the European Schools

Mr Giancarlo MARCHEGGIANO

The Deputy Secretary-General of the European Schools

Office of the Secretary-General of the European Schools

c/o European Commission

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Brussels, 9 October 2012

Dear Mr Kivinen,

Dear Mr Marcheggiano,

Let us draw your attention to a long-term issue of the problematic attribution of the language 1 and language 2 to the Slovak pupils (SWALS) after their move from the primary to the secondary level.

As you know due to a low number of the pupils, the Slovak children do not have their own linguistic section at the European schools so they are placed in the existing sections (EN, FR, DE) in the school - Brussels III. They are also provided with Slovak lessons (language 1).

In the secondary school they continue to attend their specific host language sections however only at the beginning of this school year we found out that they no longer learn English, French and German languages with their companions who have these languages as language 1. The rest of the subjects such as mathematics, integrated science, history, art, etc. are taught in the language of their sections (EN, FR or DE). Due to major differences in syllabus and teaching methodology to language 1 and 2, we are convinced that they will start lagging behind and therefore the system applied in the secondary will disadvantage them from mastering other subjects at the same level as their companions for whom language of the section is their language 1. We require fair treatment of our children offering them the same conditions for their education and development.

The system in the European schools allowed our children to master the language of the section also thanks to a major investment (both human and financial) of the learning support available to them when they joined the European school. The various assessment reports on the integration of the SWALS presented by the Board of Governors (ref. 2011-04-D-11 en 1 or 2003-D-7710-en 3) show that the objective of such support was to ensure their full integration not only in terms of their social inclusion and their motivation and well-being but also in terms of necessary knowledge to master education in the primary school. The recommendations of the Board of Governors were to remain flexible in application of the SWALS programme to suit the needs of individual pupils or to ensure maintenance of the quality of the language used in the host section.

Despite a high initial investment of learning support in our children we think that these recommendations are not followed anymore in the secondary level. Our children were excluded from their host section and put in the language class (L2) with a huge variety of level and knowledge of other children (from complete beginners up to the intermediate level). Our children have learned hard to catch up with their companions at primary school and now they feel that this is not appropriate for them. "What happened?", "Am I worse than my classmates?" These are the questions they keep asking us. The methodology and the environment are highly demotivating to our children and we believe that to maintain enthusiasm and motivation of the children in the first year of the secondary is critical for them to create the functioning links with the school and build adequate self-confidence necessary to master the secondary school syllabus.

While we understand the European schools are governed by a set of the specific rules and procedures we think that our children deserve a solid solution that would reflect their specific situation (level of knowledge of the language they have brought from the primary and necessity to master language 2 in order to succeed in other subjects taught in the language of the host section). In fact, there is a conflict in the definition of the language 1 as mother tongue/dominant language. While Slovak is their mother tongue so it is their language 1, the dominant language for them is the language of the section (their language 2). This is the language they use for other subjects, for homework, for writing/reading at home, watching TV and for siblings it is even the main language used also at home between themselves.

We would like to propose a few options to the existing problem:

- a) to continue with the same model as applied in the primary school (language of the section will be language 2 but will be taught together with the native speakers companions). We realise our children would be assessed at the same level as other children but we are fully confident they would master the applicable syllabus.
- b) to use the same model as used for the pupils from the countries such as Ireland or Malta who have two official languages so they have two languages 1 (English and Irish/Maltese) and in addition they have language 2 (FR or DE). A special arrangement that reflects a special need of these children confirms that such set-up in terms of timetable is possible. Why special needs are not taken into consideration for our children? They are prepared to take any additional burden linked to the extra study or lessons as required.
- c) We would support any other option as proposed by the Board of Governors that would adequately tackle the problem of our children.

Both Slovak language and the language of their section are equally important for further study and achievements of our children. We are not satisfied with the current set-up which forces us to withdraw our children from the Slovak lessons (as the only possibility) if we want to guarantee them continuation and adequate quality of level of the language of their host section. A number of such cases have occurred in the past as the parents were not given an adequate solution. In addition, it is unfair to change the conditions in their education after five years. The same conditions should be established at the beginning of their education i.e. first year of primary school.

One may argue that our children should be in the Slovak section however as you know even if the Slovak section were established, it would not apply to our children due to a low number of the pupils in the secondary. Therefore some prompt measures to remedy the confusing situation created for our children should be established to ensure their successful integration in the system of the secondary school, continuous and fair educational conditions and their positive development and motivation.

This problem comes back each year at the beginning of the secondary school and therefore a proper decision is required now to avoid further demotivation and frustration of other pupils and their parents.

We promptly collected a number of signatures of other Slovak parents whose children are in the primary and who expressed their worries and showed full support to our letter requesting a prompt solution.

We have already contacted Mr Pino, the Director of the European School Brussels III but he directed us to you as he said it would not be in his competence to change the system. His response is attached to this letter.

Please contact us at the email addresses mentioned below. If necessary we would also be happy to discuss our position at the meeting with you.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Yours sincerely,

Parents of the Slovak pupils in S1, European School - Brussels III

Signed:

Contact details:

[Redacted signature block]

[Redacted contact details block]

Other Slovak parents, in favour of this initiative, whose children are in the primary or nursery of the European School Brussels III:

[Redacted signature block]

[Redacted contact details block]

[REDACTED]

The letter is also supported by the Slovak teacher in the nursery and primary school of Brussels III [REDACTED].

Cc: Mr. J. Nociar, Head of Cabinet – CAB Šefčovič, European Commission
Ms. H. Chraye, Ms. J. Poupé, Parents Association, European School of Brussels III
Mr. Ivan Hromada, Permanent Representation of the Slovak Republic to the EU
Mr. A. Pino, Mr. M. Radhuber, Ms B. Bartušová - European School of Brussels III