

For All children to Succeed
A New Network Organisation for Quality Education in Malta

Position Statement by the Malta Employers' Association

The Malta Employers' Association expressed satisfaction on the document issued by the Ministry for Education regarding a reform of the system in state primary and secondary schools and the restructuring of the education division. It is a well researched document that certainly provides a basis for serious discussion and action to improve the standard of state schools to reflect the country's current and emerging needs. As the document rightly exposes, this is an extension of other pivotal developments in the country's educational system that has occurred over the years.

The following are the main points and comments that the MEA raises on the document:

1. Quality Education

The Association agrees that quality education is a national priority, both as a means of personal development and for economic and social reasons. If Malta wants to compete and prosper in globalised markets, it can only do so on the quality of its human resource. The Association also looks at the role of the educational system not only as imparting knowledge to students, but also as a means of fostering a positive work culture.

2. Increased Autonomy

The concept of having increased autonomy in schools is to be supported. Clearly, one of the advantages that private schools have is that each school has its own distinguishing characteristics and culture that generates a stronger sense of belonging and ownership among its stakeholders. This system should also affect students through a better sense of individualism and self expression because they will feel that they are part of something that they can shape and influence, rather than belonging to a massive institution called 'Government Schools'. Indirectly,

this should also contribute to foster an entrepreneurial culture in the students, which many employers find lacking even among university graduates.

3. The All-through School Concept

The MEA agrees with having students move from primary to secondary education in the same school. However, it notes that one of the reasons why this system works in the private schools is that parents always have the option of removing their children from the school. Will the same apply in the state schools?

4. Management

Increased autonomy will imply added responsibilities on school management, in particular on heads of schools. These need to become more entrepreneurial and management orientated, as they will be entrusted with building a school identity, and be less dependent on rigid, centralized structures. Too often the perception of heads of schools is that they are ‘semi-retired’ teachers. The job description included in the report provides a clear indication that many heads will require training to achieve the results that are required of them. An issue worth mentioning here is that heads of schools need to be sufficiently motivated to perform these leadership roles. It is common knowledge that the narrow (sometimes nonexistent) wage differential between heads of schools and their subordinates acts as a disincentive to perform and to embrace the changes that are necessary. Therefore a change in the salary structures may be necessary to motivate the implementers of this scheme.

5. Networking between schools

One of the salient features of the system is that of networking between schools. Through proper coordination, this could result in economies of scale and better use of underutilised resources. It is agreed that schools could network to share resources, for example counselors and guidance officers, facilitators, librarians, handymen. There could also be coordination in extra curricular activities and after

school activities. The principal will have to build teamwork and co-ordinate the activities of the schools that form the college.

6. Networking between stakeholders

The proposed structure could also be used to build networks with external stakeholders, which can include employers. For example, the business community can assist in delivering sessions in entrepreneurship even to young students, or to host workplace visits.

7. College structure

The document states that the college structure is composed of schools from the same area. It might be considered to have schools from different parts of the island/s making up a college. This way there will be stronger interaction between schools (and students) from different areas in Malta and reduce the current stigma associated with some areas in Malta. One of the benefits of many private schools is that the students come from different parts of Malta. The all-through schools must not be perceived as being area schools.

8. Cost

The document does not mention the cost element. Will this system be more expensive to run than the current one? If yes, by how much and how does government intend to allocate the revenue necessary to implement it, considering the current state of government finances? It is proposed to conduct a cost benefit analysis to evaluate the net benefits of the system.

In principle, MEA supports an improvement in the quality of education even if it comes at a price. However, this may imply that resources will have to be allocated from other activities. For example, the Association has strong doubts whether the number of facilitators (currently more than 800) in government schools is justified. Some schools today have more facilitators than teachers.

9. Objectives

The document can perhaps be more specific in defining the final objectives of implementing this scheme. The objectives could be better MATSEC results, stronger formation of character; fewer school dropouts; improved life skills; lower cost per student. Ideally these should be quantifiable, where possible so that results can be measured objectively.

10. The College Board

The document explains adequately the function of the College Board, but its composition is not specified. There could be a representation from the business community on this board to have a stronger interaction between the business community and education.

11. The Malta Education Directorate and the Educational Services Directorate

The idea of having separate directorates to handle national policy issues on one hand, and another to focus on the more operational aspect of the schools is very constructive and should allow for a more structured management of the primary and secondary educational sector.

12. Location and Architecture

Since the system intends to introduce an all through system of education at primary and secondary level, there should be forward planning and liaison with the Foundation for Tomorrow's schools so that the location and architecture of these schools will match the new concept. This should also take into consideration changing demographics which in some cases may lead to an amalgamation of schools in areas where the student population will fall significantly in the coming years.

One may also consider the fact that the falling birth rate is resulting in spare capacity in many private schools. Perhaps there can be a case for networking with private schools to utilize such spare capacity and avoid duplication of resources.

Conclusion

The document expresses a strong commitment to improve on the educational system in Malta and to manage it on lines that make its managers (heads of schools) more accountable and at the same time have access to better back-up from the educational authorities. The Association believes that the idea of organizing schools into colleges is a step in the right direction. Its success will also depend on the extent to which this process is integrated with other areas of education in Malta. The document in fact mentions that this is part of a more comprehensive process of restructuring of the educational system. MEA believes that this will be an important step in upgrading the value of Malta's human resource which will ultimately contribute to an improvement in the country's economic and social well being.