



# Empowered Schools

Cooperation and Competition  
Parenting Social Innovation.



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We may come from different countries, but we have a lot in common in that we all believe in the power of diversity in education. All of us foster freedom of choice. And all of us are convinced that independent schools are crucial promoters of socially responsible and value-based initiatives in the field of education. In diversity we unite.

»How can independent schools – different in their approaches and each one unique in its essence – find a common path?« This is the theme of your annual seminar. Trying to give concrete and inspiring input, I will focus on our Austrian challenges and on the aspect of innovation in the field of education.

Schools are about education for the individual and the society at large. I will come back to that later, asking for a common understanding on education. However, independent schools are not just about education, but also about social innovation. Among other things, they can offer bottom-up social advancement – due

to their strong connection to the community and the ability to quickly respond to new demands of postmodern society. Certainly, if you go into detail, each of our societies shows different demands and challenges. Hence, let me elaborate on this issue in three points.

- Brief overview about the status quo in Austria:  
What are the challenges for the Austrian educational system in general and for independent schools in particular?
- Outline our vision as a civic movement and political party:  
What do we NEOS want to achieve?
- Finally, I will offer five hypotheses to the question:  
What fosters capacity, diversity and innovation in education?

### **Challenges for the educational system and for independent schools in Austria**

Like in many other countries Austria's schools are facing a lot of unsolved problems and challenges. Political wrangling and school bureaucracy are a hindrance for reform and innovation. The problems are manifold and the positions of the political parties are stuck in a rut. To make matters worse, presently the Austrian school system is far too often defined by a culture of mistrust leading to demotivation and not allowing for the empowerment of positive players.

The major challenges for the Austrian school system are:

- Austria's school system shows only moderate results: relatively high public spending does not foster high quality.
- High number of at-risk pupils: about 20 percent of our 15-year-old students are partially illiterate, while 19 percent are considered at risk in mathematics.
- Too many early school leavers: in 2013 Austria had 7.3 percent of so-called »Early School Leavers« (compulsory school or less; Early School Leavers account for almost half of the unemployed in Austria).
- Education is still »socially inherited«: more than other factors the level of education achieved by the parents defines the educational development of the children.
- Talents of children with migrant background are not sufficiently promoted: migrant youth is heavily over-represented in so-called »special schools« and heavily under-represented in higher schools.
- Ideological blockade and politically motivated staffing policy: innovation is denied and in many areas of staffing party affiliation is more important than qualification.
- Structural rigidities and bureaucratic obstacles: the dynamic, constructive and innovative forces are discouraged and demotivated.
- Structural discrimination: Independent schools are heavily disadvantaged in Austria, especially through financial discrimination.

The Austrian private school scene is dominated by denominational schools (schools affiliated to communities of faith/religions). The state will pay for

the employment of the teachers for denominational private schools (mostly catholic schools). This corresponds to about 80 percent of their total costs. Non-denominational independent schools, on the other hand, have been struggling to survive for decades. They receive a legally non-binding funding amounting to approximately 10 – 20 percent of their total costs. However, non-denominational independent schools have the same binding educational objectives as the denominational schools.

In fact, with this poor strategy Austria systematically weakens constructive forces in the school system. Independent schools mostly show highly innovative concepts, committed teachers, motivated and motivating principals and strongly engaged parents. This allows for the fostering of talents of young people and high quality of learning outcome. However, the Austrian government does not appreciate these positive aspects. It sends the message: »Well then, pay for it yourself.« A strength-based, sustainable education policy of course should act exactly the opposite way. It should encourage involvement, quality and innovation.

### **What do we NEOS want to achieve?**

Our vision: Talents are our most important resources. And these talents should be fostered. Students, their potential and their needs must be the focus of educational policy and of everyday school-life. Politics should define overall learning objectives and define the quality framework. Thus, politics should create a fixed, reliable (legal) foundation while allowing for individual freedom in developing educational concepts. At the same time, politics has to refrain from intervening on the micro-level. Teachers and educators should act as free and responsible experts.

It is my conviction that extensive autonomy in education paves us the way to focus on students in the first place and to free schools from paternalism by the state. To achieve these goals, autonomy for schools should comprise three factors: the free choice of educational concept, full financial responsibility and free staffing decisions.

We suggest that funding is provided per student according to the principle of »freedom to choose a school without paying school fees«. Schools should receive a fixed per capita rate for every student, regardless if organised by public, church or independent ownership. In addition, we want to promote fair chances for all students and equality of opportunity. Hence, we aim to foster a good social mix. There should be additional funding for schools with a higher proportion of disadvantaged pupils (suggested criteria: parents with low education or low income, migrant youth) and there should be additional funding for schools in peripheral locations, i.e. in rural areas.

The common goal of our school system should be a so-called »Mittlere Reife« (Intermediate Exam). This common diploma for all Middle Schools (age-group 10 to 15) sets the frame for quality in the main learning areas such as reading, writing, mathematics and social skills. This diploma should not promote phenomena as »learning to the test« but foster an integral,

holistic understanding of education. It should be partially standardised with nation-wide external assessments combined with a strong individual focus for schools and students.

To summarise: There should be clearly defined targets for the main learning areas while at the same time extensively offering leeway for schools and pupils to act creatively. This would trigger a rich educational landscape with a wide variety of pedagogical and organizational approaches. In short: Common goals – various ways to get there. With this multifaceted concept we are able to comprehensively serve the diversity of talents and the individual needs of students.

It is my conviction that this kind of change is possible for Austrian schools. The first time I presented this concept to our Minister of Education, she said: »This is utopian, out of reach.« »No, not really«, I answered. »Utopia is out there, being lived, for example in the Netherlands.« Education reform lies at the very heart of our agenda and we will not rest until it is realised.

### **Hypotheses for successful social innovation in the field of education**

Positive development and innovation in education needs appropriate breeding conditions in society and politics. Thus, I would like to point out five hypotheses on what I believe is crucial for a positive change in the field of education.

#### **Consensus on basic understanding about education and learning goals**

We need a strong political and societal consensus on higher common goals. This agreement is the precondition for more freedom and more responsibility in the education system and must be achieved on two levels.

On the fundamental level, we need to agree on a clear common answer to the questions: What do we really mean when we are talking about education? This is the baseline from where we can develop future concepts and which will frame common educational endeavors. Let me propose a shared vision: Education is a lifelong process of human development, extending intellectual, cultural, personal and social skills. Any experience that has a formative effect on the way one feels, thinks or acts may be considered educational. Education serves the empowerment of the people. Education strengthens the potential in every human being to successfully master one's life and to enrich the lives of others.

On a concrete level, we need a societal and political consensus on the learning goals to be achieved by our schools and youngsters. As pointed out earlier, education policy has to define the framework for quality.

#### **Change of attitude by politicians: Co-creating spaces for freedom and responsibility**

Politicians need to change their present attitude (not all of them, but many): by moving away from mistrust and excessive top-down regimentation in favor of acting as general facilitators assisting positive change. The task of

politics is – in co-creation with all stakeholders in the field of education – to define the basic framework offering wide opportunities for schools to succeed. Politics must create spaces in which freedom and responsibility can prosper. I refer to this approach as »creating fixed spaces for freedom«. The responsibility for solving problems within school or student bodies must lie with the schools themselves and not with the state. This requires a new mindset and organizational culture in politics promoting mutual respect among different players in education. If this mental and cultural change succeeds, also ideological gaps can be overcome more easily.

### **Improve professional self-concept and public image of teachers**

Teachers are one of the most important factors for successful schools. In some of our countries, in Austria in particular, their professional self-concept is antiquated, and they are not held in high esteem in our society. We need to support a new, improved self-concept and public image of the profession of being a teacher. It is an expert's profession. We need to invest in better recruitment, differentiated job profiles, up-to-date professional education and higher quality in human resources development for this profession. This will foster a positive self-concept, increase teachers' abilities and confidence, boost their self-esteem and enhance their status in society.

### **Foster parental responsibility and involvement**

Besides positively getting involved in the educational system, parents are also to be held responsible to convey to their children basic social norms of behavior, which include mutual respect, as well as respect for learning and education as basic values in life.

### **Overcoming the duality of competition and cooperation – it's about fruitful synchrony**

In Europe, the word competition has a negative connotation for many people. Far too often it is understood as the opposite of cooperation. To my opinion this is a fatal misconception. As social beings living a limited life in a finite world, cooperation and competition both are and will always be *conditio humana*, two basic conditions of human life. There is no evolution of life on this planet without competition and there is no human entity without cooperation. Cooperation and competition are »human twins«. We should understand them as »the arch of human vitality«, as an arch of tension under which humankind is living and marching forward.

Being a father of three children I was often asking myself, watching toddlers' birthday parties or interaction between our three daughters: Have I taught them competition? Have I done something wrong? I have come to the conclusion: No, the kids have inherited this as living beings. It is just normal, it is given by life. Toddlers will as a matter of course and permanently switch between cooperation and competition or execute both at the same time.

Competition means contesting for resources, for prestige, for recognition or whatsoever. Yes, this may lead to detrimental effects. It is the human moral and intellectual capacity that enables us to commit competition to common higher goals. So let us commit it to better education in favour of the involved individuals and our society as a whole. This commitment to a positive higher goal will lead competition to beneficial rather than detrimental effects. Each skiing club must show the capacity to manage and balance the fruitful synchrony and interaction of competition and cooperation. Each family has this task and destiny. And of course each school has to deliver this job. Independent schools are avant-garde in overcoming duality of competition and cooperation. It's about synergy. Finally we know that there is no freedom of choice without competing alternative options.

Let me summarise: I have outlined five ingredients which I favour as beneficial breeding conditions for positive innovation in education. It is much about shift of mindset; it's about cultural change in society, politics and education. I strongly support the understanding that independent schools are crucial promoters of bottom-up and socially responsive innovation in our society. With our societies developing at rapid pace, schools shall understand themselves as living organisms dynamically reflecting societal change. Schools must undergo a constant evolution; they shall cooperate with each other and learn from each other. This will automatically lead to adequate innovation and increased confidence of society in the educational system. Schools are meant to be living and learning organisations – just as students are meant to be learning individuals.

# Free SCHOOLS FROM PATERNALISM

Learning  
Organisation



SCHOOLS are  
learning organisations.

Independent  
Schools

Politics  
creates  
Space for:

Social  
innovation

**INDEPENDENT  
SCHOOLS** are promoters  
of social innovation.



**POLITICS NEEDS** to  
create space for freedom  
and responsibility.