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STANDING COMMITTEE OF THE EFTA STATES

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SUBCOMMITTEE IV ON FLANKING AND HORIZONTAL POLICIES

EEA EFTA COMMENT ON THE COMMUNICATION ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE (COM(2011)66)

The EEA EFTA States (Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway) have read the *Communication (2011)66 on Early Childhood Education and Care* with great interest. We welcome the increased focus on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) at the European level and support the Commission's proposed agenda for cooperation on key issues in this policy area. We believe that we can certainly contribute to and learn from a European cooperation process for the identification, analysis, exchange and transfer of good practices in ECEC and would like to offer some comments and considerations at the present stage.

The EEA EFTA States share the concerns, objectives and perspectives of the *Europe 2020 Strategy and its flagship initiatives; Youth on the Move, An Agenda for New Skills and Jobs and European Platform against Poverty*. We recognise that universal and high-quality ECEC is essential in order to build "smart, sustainable and inclusive" societies and to achieve the targets on employment, education and social inclusion.

Access to ECEC - Universal and inclusive ECEC and efficient and equitable funding

In the EEA EFTA States ECEC is regarded as an important tool for social inclusion and lifelong learning and is an essential part in children's welfare. Equity in education is an important goal, starting already from the pre-school age. As an example, in Iceland ECEC services (pre-primary schools) are defined by law as the first level of the educational system and are open to children up to the age of six. Approximately 96% of the age group 2-5 years old attend pre-primary schools.

Since 2009 all children in Norway from the age of one have a legal right to a place in an ECEC service (kindergarten – integrated pedagogical settings for children from 1 – 6 years of age) and in 2004 regulations were issued on maximum parental fees. The increased use of kindergartens makes it possible for more women to take an active role in the work force. In Liechtenstein kindergarten is the traditional form of pre-school education for children aged between four and six. Around 95% of the children aged 4 to 6 attend public kindergarten. Attendance at kindergarten is voluntary and free of charge. Until the age of four children can attend day care centres or playgroups. These are seen as child care services and as such are supervised by the office of social affairs.

Quality of ECEC – Curriculum, staff and governance

National policies in the EEA EFTA States focus increasingly on quality in ECEC. In Norway, the Government presented a White Paper to the Norwegian Parliament in 2009 focusing on Quality in ECEC. The White Paper presents three concrete goals to improve the quality in kindergartens:

- Secure equity and high quality in all kindergartens;
- Increase the role of kindergartens as an arena for learning and development;
- Make sure that all children have the opportunity to participate actively in a safe and inclusive kindergarten environment.

With the new law from 2008 regarding pre-primary schools in Iceland, a stronger foundation was laid down to ensure more quality in ECEC. More demands are made to pre-primary schools to serve as an institution of education and care and higher demands are made to pre-primary school teachers. Parents are supposed to be more involved in pre-primary schools' activities e.g. in evaluation processes and planning, all local governments must make an education policy and all pre-primary schools do their own school curriculum based on the law frame, the national curriculum and the local governments' policy. In Iceland each pre-primary school shall systematically evaluate the achievements and quality of the school's activities with active participation from the school personnel, children and parents as relevant. The pre-primary school issues publicly information on its internal evaluation, its connections with school curriculum guide and plans for improvement.

Since 1999 the Principality of Liechtenstein has had a curriculum which is equally valid for kindergartens, primary schools and secondary schools. Continuity in the curriculum aids smooth transition between the various school stages. The aim is to prepare children for the move up to primary school in such a way that the skills they have acquired make this step as problem-free as possible.

There is no compulsory and established framework for the organisation of play groups and pedagogic principles therein. Since 2007 the playgroups are organised within an association in order to raise the quality and the social importance of play groups. Besides these play groups a number of other child care services exist for children aged 1 to 16 years. Child care services are subject to authorisation and are supervised by the Office of Social Affairs. They have defined qualifications for staff and measurements for quality assurance. Several national policy initiatives have recently been set up in Liechtenstein that are tackling ECEC. These developments reflect that ECEC has gained awareness and importance.

The EEA EFTA States would like to underline that ECEC is strongly embedded in each country's social and cultural values. Some European countries have traditionally emphasised the educational values, while others have had a more holistic approach, seeing education, pedagogy and care as a whole. It is crucial to recognise and respect these different approaches. It is our experience that, through international cooperation, these two approaches are now more and more integrated.

The Nordic countries have for a long time cooperated closely within the ECEC field, across political party lines and irrespective of an EEA or EU affiliation. All these countries have integrated systems for children under compulsory school age, with high quality and access for all children whose parents want it soon after the end of parental leave.

The professional and personal competence of the staff is the most important resource in the ECEC and a prerequisite to ensure that the ECEC is a good arena for care, play, learning and social equity. In Norway, a special effort has been made to recruit preschool teachers and improve the competence in the ECEC by:

- Increasing the number of staff with pre-school teacher education;
- Increasing the number of study places at institutions for pre-school teacher education;
- Offer supervision of all newly educated pre-school teachers;
- Continue national strategies for improving ECEC staff's competence;
- Initiate work concerning other professions to be included in ECEC staff.

Iceland has been looking into ways to reinforce the pre-primary school stage further, e.g. by recruiting more students into pre-primary school education and to make pre-primary school teachers' occupation more attractive. This year a special effort in this regard will be set forth.

Proposed issues and instruments

The EEA EFTA States have participated in and contributed to the cooperation processes under the work programme *Education and Training 2010 (ET 2010)*. We support the idea of developing cooperation in the area of ECEC as a priority area for the first work cycle in the new strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training - *ET 2020*.

The present Communication proposes several key issues of great importance and interest for increased and further policy cooperation to support the work done at national level. The EEA EFTA States would like to highlight the following ECEC issues:

- Pre-primary school teacher education: Iceland has recently redesigned the teacher training education where a MA degree will be a prerequisite to become a qualified pre-primary school teacher. Norway has evaluated the present pre-school teacher education and proposals for reforms are now being worked out. We would be happy to share these results with you, when available.
- ECEC curriculum: The curriculum should be varied and attentive to the interests and abilities of the child or group of children. It is important that the children attain a positive, common platform for learning from the beginning of the lifelong learning cycle. We believe that the content and the organisation in kindergartens/pre-primary schools should be looked at with a holistic approach, where care, play and learning are well integrated. In May 2011 a new revised curriculum for pre-primary school, compulsory and upper secondary school will be issued in Iceland. It is based on six fundamental pillars in education from pre-primary school to higher education: literacy in wide sense, democracy and human rights, equality, sustainable development, creativity and health and wellbeing. These six pillars are based on an attitude that is reflected in the Icelandic education policy and requires schools to ensure that work is both sociological and educational according to the needs of every individual. The six pillars are intended to highlight the core of general education and to serve as a foundation for a good and solid lifelong learning.
- Gender balance in ECEC: Norway has for many years focused on recruiting male staff and equality between the genders in ECEC by means of two action plans for equality,

including one that covers both ECEC and primary school. Among the proposed actions is the creation of a special recruitment team in the various counties focusing on the recruitment of men; promote kindergartens which have made special efforts to include more male staff; work towards the goal of 20% male staff in kindergartens; establish a financial support scheme for those institutions for pre-primary school education which have graduated the largest number of male students.

- European cooperation in ECEC: Making good use of the possibilities in The Lifelong Learning Programme for transnational projects and networks.
- Research in the area of ECEC: The Commission will provide research possibilities in this field under the 7th Framework Programme of Research and Development. The EEA EFTA States take part in this programme, and we value the possibilities for cooperation on transnational research, e.g. on different aspects on the so-called 'Nordic ECEC model'. In Norway, the Ministry of Education and Research has already commissioned research programmes within the context of the Norwegian Research Council. We see research in ECEC as a prerequisite for quality development and for a research based pre-primary school teacher education.

Use of other resources

The Commission encourages investment in the area of ECEC through the Structural Funds. The EEA EFTA States are concerned that use of the Structural Funds, and other budget lines not currently covered by the EEA Agreement, could potentially limit parts of our participation in the foreseen European cooperation processes in ECEC. We would suggest that this aspect is taken into consideration in order not to exclude the non-Member States that are fully part of the relevant programmes in our area.

Conclusions

The EEA EFTA States agree that enhanced European cooperation and structured OMC-processes can give strong support and valuable input and encouragement to the work done at national level on ECEC issues. The EEA EFTA States would like to express their strong interest in and commitment to such processes.
