



ECNAIS

European Council of National Associations of Independent Schools

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Reflection on COVID and education

ECNAIS is a nonpolitical, non-confessional, international association for collaboration between national associations of independent schools in European countries.

ECNAIS was founded in 1988 and represents 20 associations from 12 European countries. Since 2019, we are an association under Finnish law, with headquarters in Helsinki.

Independent schools educate more than 20 million students in Europe; 18% of the European education system.

In some countries, freedom of education is seen by the government as a privilege for the elite, leading to the misunderstanding that independent schools can do without any legislative recognition and public funding. In other countries, freedom of education is an important pillar of social cohesion and wellbeing.

However, a country that neglects the freedom of education will, in the long run, pay a price in terms of wasted talents of the new generations and not so cohesive social systems.

This is even clearer when we think about education in times of pandemic.

The freedom of movement is a universal human right and a cornerstone of the European project.

So, it is not a small thing that millions of people's freedom of movement are still restricted in the context of the fight against coronavirus.

This, of course, is also true for the freedom of students to go to school and the freedom of teachers to meet their students.

Non presencial teaching and learning has brought important challenges to the educational communities.

Firstly, schools had to make sure that they were offering quality education just as before.

Secondly, interpersonal relationships, an integral part of education, do not develop the same way when they are mediated by technology.

And thirdly, the fact that families were secluded in their houses had a relevant impact on the students.

Within this context of uncertainty, independent schools all over Europe found out ways to educate and were front runners in the adoption of more interactive digital tools.

Now that students are back at school all over Europe, we still face important challenges.

Challenges relating to technology: how do we ensure learning goes on when groups of students or teachers are quarantined?

Challenges relating to wellbeing: how do we support staff, students and families that are over anxious or afraid?

Challenges relating to social cohesions: how do we, as part of the broader social system, assure no one is left behind?

Finally, there are also some positive aspects of these demanding times.

While re-thinking teaching and learning, some teachers and schools have rediscovered the joy of re-creating one`s profession: we have focused on the basics and are giving a lot of thought on a more student centered approach to learning; we have had to find robust ways to help students learn by themselves and in cooperation with others.

Some years ago, the theme for the ECNAIS conference was *“Schools as reservoirs of hope”*. We could not have guessed how important this theme would be today.

These are challenges to be addressed by the whole educational community. Independent schools, but also public schools, governments and the whole of society. The probability that we will face new times of social isolation in the future makes finding balanced answers to these challenges a social imperative.

However, especially when things look bleak and the future is on hold, value ridden education is a fundamental ingredient of healthy human development.

In these times of seclusion and uncertainty, independent education is even more valuable than in a “normal” context.