

Wednesday 16 March 2011

US/OECD/EI SUMMIT ON THE TEACHING PROFESSION

NEW YORK, 16-17 MARCH 2011

Remarks by Fred van Leeuwen

General Secretary, Education International

Mr Secretary, Madame Director, Ministers, and colleagues,

We come to this summit convinced that the way forward is through dialogue.

None of us underestimates the scope and scale of the challenges we face in the 21st century.

The future of healthy and prosperous societies depends on the success of the education of our children – and respect for the right to education. And the stakes are higher than ever for young people preparing their future in a new world of globalization and rapid change.

It may be useful to kick off the discussion by identifying some basic principles and thorny issues. Education unions, and the trade union movement as a whole, are important pillars of democracy. Countries or states that do not recognize by ignoring basic labor rights, or revoking those rights, allow a democratic deficit to emerge which, sooner or later, will backfire. We in Education International are deeply concerned about recent developments in Wisconsin and Ohio, where social dialogue has come to a stand-still. Even if it were true, which I doubt, that these measures have been driven by budgetary constraints, I am afraid that when democratic freedoms become a cost item, we may soon find ourselves all together at the bottom of a deep, dark pit, where nobody really wants to be.

The unions and associations which are members of Education International are all independent and democratic organizations with two key objectives. On the one hand they protect and promote the interests of their members; and on the other hand they promote high quality

education services. These objectives are complementary, and are clearly recognized in the ILO/UNESCO Recommendation on the Status of teachers. Yes, our member unions are the guardians of the teaching profession. And numerous examples can be given of unions present in this room which have, in their own countries, contributed to or even initiated successful education reforms. They are the living examples of what this summit is all about, making a joint effort to advance the quality of education, by making a career in education an attractive proposition to talented young people, and then supporting our teachers as professionals.

This brings us to the thorny issues. Although we subscribe to most of the analyses and ideas in the excellent background paper for this summit, we may not, not yet, have similar answers to questions such as what actually constitutes quality, what is needed to achieve it, nor how you measure it. There is a worldwide consensus that the teaching profession is the most crucial factor in achieving high quality education. But we may have different opinions about the roads leading to our shared goals. And that is okay. Let's explore these differences. For example, what constitutes an excellent teacher? Or, are student achievement scores the appropriate basis for the appraisal of teachers? And do we believe that standardized testing produces relevant, dependable information about a child's development or do we feel it as a vote of no confidence in the profession? Mind you, we are not against testing. We do it all the time. We invented it. But testing is a teachers' diagnostic tool, not a political device.

Teaching is both a science and an art: As Mary Futrell, one of our Founding Presidents, put it so well: *"When the untapped potential of a child meets the creative imagination of a teacher, a miracle occurs."* Daily miracles, in thousands of classrooms around the world. You can't measure them, but they are the source of our passion.

This summit has convened nations and regions which are high performers or rapidly improving according to the results of PISA; which has proven to be an instrument for informed discussions about educational outcomes. PISA provides powerful evidence, for example, for the case that good policy can achieve both **quality** and **equity** in education. But, we all know, and I'm sure

Andreas would be the first to agree, that the core competencies assessed by PISA at age 15 do not capture all that we mean when we speak of quality education. Governments – and the media - sometimes jump to conclusions when they find their country going up or down in the rankings.

Another thorny issue: We believe that all teachers are entitled to appraisal and feedback that leads to positive advice and high quality professional development. But where compensation is based on student results, it becomes high stakes. There is no evidence that individual performance pay raises standards. What it does raise is anxiety and turmoil in teachers' staff rooms. We should rely on evidence-based strategies that strengthen the system as a whole - not experiment with competitive programs designed to create a few winners and many losers.

Last month, when I had the pleasure of meeting with Secretary Duncan, as I left the Department of Education in Washington, I saw this statement at the entrance to the building: **“Throughout our nation’s history, the power of the arts and humanities to move people has built bridges and enriched lives, bringing individuals and communities together through the resonance of creative expression.... The arts and humanities contribute to the vibrancy of our society and the strength of our democracy ...”** The author of these words? President Obama!

And what he said for the United States, applies in the 21st century for the world.

Yes, of course, we support quality teaching of the core competencies for **all** children. The late Al Shanker; also Founding President of EI, used to say often: public education gives young people from all backgrounds, from working families, from minorities, a chance to acquire the core competencies that they will need for success in life. Quality education **is this, but it is more**, as President Obama so eloquently said.

Colleagues, friends, our host nation, the United States, was built on the **public school**. So were the other nations represented around this table. We want to build with you a great profession serving children in **all** schools – public and private. But we are absolutely convinced of the need to work with governments on building great **public** schools as the foundation of our democracies.

We have all come to this summit understanding not only that the stakes are high, but also that we have a common interest in raising the level of debate. We know the reality in many countries. There are very real issues in national discussions – especially as the world recovers, unevenly, from the fall- out of the 2008 banking crisis. At a time of cutbacks, it is all the more important to focus on teacher retention and support. At the very time when we – education unions and union leaders – must join our voices to insist that investment in education is the key to sustainable recovery, there are cases – too many I’m afraid – where the responses to limited public resources has been the opposite – massive lay-offs, challenging teachers’ tenure, and attacking their unions. In many countries, fiscal consolidation at the national level has been pushed down to public entities in states, provinces and municipalities.

These issues should be the focus of our joint efforts, not the denigration of a great profession.

We salute the fact, Mr Secretary, that you and President Obama have made a clear choice, a choice for dialogue, for working together with teacher unions to build a great profession that will serve our children and young people in the best possible way. Our objective is a confident and positive teaching profession, engaged as equals in necessary reforms. We believe that your fellow Ministers come to the table with the same thought in mind.

This Summit represents a unique opportunity. For the first time teachers, Unions and Governments come together in a spirit of partnership and equal status. This cannot be solely a one-off event. Otherwise the potential of this Summit will be lost. It is vital that this Summit provide a springboard for a global forum in which this valuable dialogue will continue. All of us

need to remember why we are all here. Children and young people only have one chance at school. No-one knows that better than teachers themselves.

Thank you.