



The Voice of OECD Business

Improving Equity in Education

BIAC Submission to Informal Ministerial of OECD Ministers of Education

Oslo, 9-10 June, 2009

I. Introduction

BIAC is very pleased to be able to participate in the Informal Ministerial of OECD Ministers of Education "Improving Equity in Education".

Equity in education is important not just for those individuals within the education system, but also for the functioning of economy and society as a whole. As an OECD 2007 report¹ noted, fair and inclusive education is associated with higher incomes, better health, a longer life, successful parenting and civic participation. Equity in education is therefore a fundamental issue for the OECD business community to encourage sustainable economic growth and greater social cohesion.

OECD Secretary General, Mr. Angel Gurría noted in response to the OECD Report "Growing Unequal", that "Better education is a powerful way to achieve growth which benefits all, not just the elites. And it is the key to upward social mobility." Education impacts the capacity of people to improve their lives.

The following note outlines BIAC's main messages on equity in education with respect to the issues being addressed at the Informal Ministerial meeting.

II. Early intervention

Early childhood learning and care are critical to ensure that individuals are best equipped to attain well being and positive opportunities in work and family life.

Throughout schooling, individuals should have equal opportunities to access quality education.

Talented and hard-working individuals should have the right to excel, which is enhanced through good education.

¹ OECD (2007) *No More Failures: Tens Steps to Equity in Education*.

BIAC thus supports the OECD view that early childhood intervention through quality education available to all is essential for greater equity in education. We encourage governments to invest in early childhood education and care in order to create a more equal starting opportunity for all and greater social mobility later in life.

Lack of investment in early childhood education leads only to later education failure, poorer-quality skills, and poorer-quality jobs.

Furthermore, the benefit of investing in early childhood education greatly outweighs the costs of addressing problems that later affect the education system and labour market.

It is therefore essential that child wellbeing is assured, and BIAC particularly encourages governments to ensure that budget allowances for early child education do not face cuts due to the current economic crisis. This would only undermine long-term sustainable economic growth and social development.

For economic reasons and sustainability, programmes for early childhood education should be targeted to those most in need. If there is a system in place to target those who are at risk, in combination with testing, much more can be done per individual child, rather than broad generic approaches for every-one.

II. When schools fail to interest

School drop-outs often face difficulties for the rest of their lives. In an economic crisis such as the one we are currently facing, school drop-outs are likely to suffer more than other individuals due to lack of competitive skills. The OECD business community believes more must be done to [1] reduce the school drop-out rate and [2] improve the re-entry of school drop-outs into education and training systems.

Individuals may drop-out of school due to many reasons, such as: an unappealing school learning environment; unsupportive parents with low aspirations and expectations; and lack of suitable didactic approaches and curricula that clearly meet labour market needs.

In BIAC's view, there are various policy responses that should be implemented to help counter high school drop-out rates and improve equity:

- **Create more VET-oriented schools:** Schools should strive to provide greater vocational education and training (VET) systems and more inductive learning approaches. This would appeal to those students who find the traditional education system unattractive. These VET systems should enjoy close links with the business community to ensure their relevance and also to boost chances of employment. In BIAC's view, a strong VET system is a key mechanism for reducing the school drop-out rate.
- **Create more attractive student learning programmes:** Curricula should be revised to avoid an excessive number of disciplines for an individual student programme, which can limit learning and student interest. Efforts should also be taken to boost

the attractiveness of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) courses.

- **Improve teaching quality:** Education reforms for improving teaching quality should be encouraged in order to retain students in the education system and improve learning outcomes. Teachers and head-teachers should be given clearly differentiated salaries according to their skills and responsibilities, in order to improve teaching quality.
- **Encourage talented and hard-working individuals:** In addition to the human right to education for all, talented and hard-working students should be granted the right to excellence. It can often be frustrating for top students if they feel they are being held back by their peers or by other constraints, and it is thus essential to also be fair to such students. Talented individuals should be allowed to advance their learning through more flexible school programmes, scholarships, and special encouragement by teachers.
- **Encourage the best teachers to work in difficult school districts:** Schools that suffer in poorer socio-economic areas need the best teachers and head-teachers in order to effectively educate students. The salaries of these teachers and head-teachers should reflect their respective skills and capacities and thus encourage them to work in difficult school districts.
- **Raise the minimum school leaving age:** For those countries with below-average school leaving ages, BIAC would advise increasing the legal age by which students can leave school in line with international standards.
- **Keep balance between classroom-centred education and individualised approaches:** Students at risk often lack competencies for self-discipline and self-steering team projects. Although VET should include such components, a sufficient part of the school curriculum should be based on more intensive coaching and the leading role of teachers.
- **Do not start VET pathways too late:** Students who have less academic interest (even in cases where they have the capacity) risk dropping out from school if they have to stay with academic/general programmes in secondary education too long. There is no ideal blueprint, and there may be cultural differences between countries, but first VET-oriented pathways can start at age 14. An important policy is that VET pathways should give access, if well completed, to higher education. This policy keeps as many as possible students within the system while not excluding them from higher education. Equity in education is not the same as equality in education: the system should be differentiated enough to serve the different needs of the students.
- **Lifelong Learning** can mean a second chance for early school leavers. Although prevention should have the first priority, stimulation of vocational qualification at a later age for those without a proper qualification for the labour market should be a policy priority of government and social partners.

III. What do we know – and what do we do with our insight?

OECD plays an important role in research and data collection related to access and quality of education.

BIAC continues to support and encourages continued work of OECD in areas that will contribute to improving equity in education.

The evidence that emerges from OECD studies should be the basis for continued dialogue among stakeholders, and the basis for policy recommendations and best practices.

With this BIAC encourages OECD to:

- Continue research on school participation
- Continue focus on quality and accountability of schools
- Continue focus on providing right incentives for excellence of teachers and head teachers
- Continue to stimulate governments to improve investment in quality of schools and to ensure equity of education to all, including those vulnerable groups
- Continue focus on dialogue between schools, higher education institutions and employers to ensure better match of curricula and labour market demands
- Continue focus on early childhood education and care, including through the proposed new OECD project on: Encouraging Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care
- Continue to develop indicators, particularly for learning outcomes, in such a way that they can be used internationally (such as PISA).
- Consider using the “learning gain” concept when determining the individual progress of a student (i.e. the competences added by the school after enrolment until the leaving date). This would of course depend on implementation of well-developed entry and leaving tests, but could effectively allow for measurement of those with learning difficulties, where a lower outcome may also be a positive measure.