OECD Urges Governments to make Further Efforts in Lifelong Learning

Education and the implementation of lifelong learning must be one of the top policy priorities for OECD countries in the years ahead, according to OECD Secretary-General Donald Johnston. In the past five years, OECD countries have made real efforts to develop educational policies that encourage lifelong learning for all their citizens. But most still have a long way to go, as is made clear in the latest edition of the OECD’s annual Education Policy Analysis.

The report’s conclusions will serve as a basis for discussions at a meeting of OECD Education Ministers in Paris on 2-4 April. One of the main topics of this meeting will be how best to enable citizens to take advantage of lifelong learning opportunities in order to continually update and upgrade their knowledge, skills and competencies.

On the positive side, according to the OECD’s latest Education Policy Analysis, more students are participating at every level of education. But there are still many gaps – in particular, learning in early childhood and in the adult years remains patchy. Getting a clear picture of performance in individual countries is difficult, as figures about attendance and qualifications do not show the whole picture. What is clear, however, is that quality of education varies greatly from one country to another. Less privileged groups are still being left out, and national education systems are struggling to keep up with technological, social and economic change. Even countries that have made progress in one aspect of education can still find themselves lagging behind in other areas.

• In some countries, as many as half of young people who leave full-time education on completion of secondary school do so with low literacy skills. While most young people in OECD countries now graduate from secondary school, worrying numbers still lack certain basic skills. One way to measure quality of education systems is to see how many people with upper-secondary school qualifications struggle with complex written materials. Among 16-25 year olds educated to upper-secondary level (excluding those who go on to acquire higher qualifications), between 10% (in Finland) and 60% (in the United States) show low literacy (Chart 1).

• Increased public spending does not always produce good education systems – but the few countries with a strong all-round performance are high spenders. The OECD has identified a range of indicators of countries’ progress towards lifelong learning. Most countries do well on some and less well on others. Only four countries – Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden – have a strong all-round performance, and even they have weaknesses in some areas. These four states are also among the OECD countries spending the most on education.

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Schools play an important role in reducing the digital divide – which is strongest in the home. Students are using computers and the Internet for an increasing range of educational tasks. But this trend is accompanied by growing concern about inequalities of access – the "digital divide". OECD analysis shows that the divide is particularly acute in the home, with countries varying substantially in the degree to which their students have home access to PCs. (Chart 2). Even in countries with high average rates of home access, there are sharp differences between social groups. In the United States, children from better-off families increasingly use computers at home, while children from poorer families are less likely to use computers for homework. In the school environment, by contrast, access and usage are more evenly spread (Chart 3). In France and the United Kingdom, for example, although the share of households possessing computers is below the average, student access to computers in upper secondary schools is more favourable (as measured by students per PC) (Chart 2). So, schools can play an important role in giving access to computers to those who would not get it outside.

Scenarios for the future of schooling -- the status quo, re-schooling or de-schooling? What lies ahead for the institution we know today as the "school"? Based on current trends and plausible inter-relationships between a range of variables and policy choices, a range of scenarios for the future of schools can be imagined. These scenarios are neither predictions nor ideal visions of schooling futures. Rather, they are possible futures that invite reflection on the types of policy approach most likely to forestall least desirable features and to enhance the emergence of the most desirable ones.

- Schools may continue to exist as we know them today, possibly with a greater reliance on market approaches.
- Schools' public recognition, support and autonomy may even be strengthened, for example thanks to further development of social links and community leadership. Schools may even be transformed into "learning organisations" with a strong knowledge focus and highly motivated teachers.
- Alternatively, a dismantling of school institutions and systems may take place. Non-formal learning networks, facilitated by ICT and a "network society", may replace the learning that now takes place in schools. In a worst case scenario, policy measures may fail to attract sufficient qualified and highly motivated teachers, due for example to low pay and poor perceptions of the profession, leading to a more or less extensive "meltdown" of schools.

Journalists may obtain Education Policy Analysis from the OECD Media Relations Division (request by fax: 33 1 45 24 80 03 or news.contact@oecd.org). For further information and for accreditation to the meeting of OECD Education Ministers, journalists are invited to contact Jacob Arfwedson in the Media Relations Division (Tel: 33 1 45 24 81 03 or jacob.arfwedson@oecd.org).

Note to Editors: The three-day meeting of OECD Education Ministers will commence at 4 p.m. on Monday 2 April with a Forum on Information and Communication Technology and Education which will be open to the media. The ministerial meeting itself is not open to the media, but a parallel series of media seminars will enable journalists to explore in greater detail with OECD and experts some of the main themes under discussion. There will be a news conference at the close of the meeting at 3 p.m. on Wednesday 4 April. For further information you can consult the OECD’s website at: http://www.oecd.org/els/ministerial/

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Chart 1: Percent of secondary school graduates aged 16-25 (excluding those who go on to acquire higher qualifications) who are below literacy level 3 in the International Adult Literacy Survey

Note: Literacy level 3 is considered by international experts as the minimum needed to cope with the complex demands of modern life.

Chart 2: Home and school access to computers in OECD countries, 1998

A. Percentage of households possessing a PC

B. Students per computer in upper secondary education

Data on percentage of households possessing a PC:
1. 1999.

Data on students per computer in upper secondary education:
a. OECD (1999)
c. NCES (2000).

Source: OECD, Education Policy Analysis 2001
Chart 3: Percentage of 1st to 8th grade students in U.S. using computers at home and at school
