

Integration of children with disabilities by the European Schools

Correspondence - 13/07/2009

Case OI/3/2003/JMA - **Opened on** 19/11/2003 - **Decision on** 04/07/2007

Summary of the follow-up inquiry to the European Ombudsman's decision on his own-initiative inquiry OI/3/2003/JMA concerning the integration of persons with disabilities by the European Commission

In the decision closing his own-initiative inquiry on the integration of persons with disabilities (reference: OI/3/2003/JMA), the Ombudsman identified one area where action was still needed, namely, the European Schools' treatment of disabled children with special educational needs (SEN children). The Ombudsman asked the Commission to send him a further report on the European Schools' progress in integrating SEN children. The Commission's report was published on the Ombudsman's website and the public was invited to make comments.

In his decision, the Ombudsman acknowledged the Commission's efforts to strive towards more effective policies for integrating SEN children. Progress was shown by the fact that, in recent years, the number of SEN children in the European Schools has increased significantly. The Ombudsman regretted, however, that the financial support given to officials with disabled family members is insufficient. This assistance is particularly inadequate with regard to covering expenses incurred by families whose children are excluded from the European Schools because of their disability.

It was worrying that a significant number of the SEN children accepted into the Schools subsequently withdraw for unknown reasons. This may point to the inadequacies in the Schools' approach to integration. The Ombudsman encouraged the Commission to ensure a greater involvement of parents on the basis of mutual respect, transparency and partnership. He also considered that the European Schools' insistence on integration is not sufficient and that they should move towards a new policy based on inclusion. Furthermore, the Ombudsman noted that the public had identified ways of facilitating inclusion by enhancing the role of better trained SEN co-ordinators, reinforcing the role given to parents, and/or introducing best practices. The Ombudsman welcomed the European Schools' decision to develop a pilot project, which could result in the establishment of a new SEN resource centre, and the Commission's commitment to carefully consider the replies from the Board of Inspectors concerning the minimum standards for that SEN resource centre. He further asked the Commission to monitor the pilot project



closely and pointed out that the integration of SEN children should take due account of the obligation to provide inclusive, non-discriminatory education for all enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and signed by the Commission on behalf of the EU Members States.

In line with the opinion expressed by the European Parliament, the Ombudsman considered that the Commission should be more actively involved in the European Schools' SEN policy and try to strengthen its own role in this respect. He hoped that, by opening a further public debate on the integration of SEN children in the European Schools, he has helped the Commission to reassess its actions with an eye to better serving all European citizens.

In an effort to inform as many citizens as possible, the Ombudsman will publish on his website the full version of this follow-up inquiry in English, as well as a summary of it in all the official languages of the EU.