



Creating Europe's innovative learning environments

MORE THAN A BRICK IN THE WALL

Combining policy, pedagogy and investment



Flanders
State of the Art

General Representation of the Government of Flanders within the Permanent Representation of Belgium to the EU

Seminar Paper

Innovative learning environments and school infrastructure: a European priority for the future strategic framework for European policy cooperation in education and training?

In Europe, more than 64 million students and almost 4.5 million teachers spend hours each school day inside pre-primary, primary and secondary schools. Children spend more time in school buildings than in any other place except their homes. The Member States of the European Union have an enormous school patrimony and schools can be found in every corner of the European Union. From the far north, to the deep south, from bustling metropolis to the smallest, most remote village, each school building is unique, with its own environment, challenges, opportunities and learning community. Providing high-quality school and learning infrastructure is crucial to providing quality and inclusive education and training for all, as prescribed in the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Today Flanders, Belgium and other European Member States face similar challenges maintaining, modernizing and expanding their school patrimony. Evolutions in the fields of demography, pedagogical practices, health, digital society and sustainability pressure our school systems to provide 21st-century school infrastructure where European Key Competences and 21st-century skills are taught under optimal conditions. As a result, new approaches to building learning environments that both create better spaces for children and increase the efficiency of investments in educational infrastructure are being developed by the competent authorities in the different Member States.

Even though school construction is high on the agenda of the Flemish government, due to the size of the school patrimony the task is enormous. As in many regions, many school buildings in Flanders do not meet the specific challenges posed by new forms of 21st-century learning. Yet the Flemish government fully endorses the relationship between school infrastructure and educational goals, in particular with regard to building for 21st-century skills, and is striving for excellence. For example, the multifunctional construction and shared use of school buildings is encouraged, and the climate plan of the Flemish government led to additional investments in



energy renovations. We also see a wide variety of financing sources: bid-build, public-private partnerships, rent subsidies, the Flemish climate fund, secured loans and investments in photovoltaics. Despite these efforts, the needs remain large and exceed the available financial resources. Investing more in the renovation and expansion of the building stock from a lifecycle approach remains a permanent future challenge.

High-quality education infrastructure, including school buildings, classrooms, laboratories and equipment, facilitates better instruction, improves student outcomes, and reduces dropout rates. In Europe, new demographic needs, energy efficiency and changing pedagogical requirements are important drivers for investments in school buildings. However, schools are not always aware of the contribution of the physical learning environment to learning and teaching. Another challenge is that different stakeholders often have different agendas when it comes to the construction and redesign of school buildings. The implementation of school infrastructure projects should ideally be based on an ongoing dialogue among multiple stakeholders in order to reap the full benefits of these projects in terms of learning outcomes. This dialogue should continue over the long term to encompass ongoing changes in demography and pedagogy. A school building is, or has the potential to be, the centre of its local community and taking that into account when designing and planning infrastructure promises major benefits for all involved.

In Europe the investments needs of school infrastructure are huge but local, regional or national resources are rather limited. Furthermore authorities are bound to operate within the rules of the Stability and Growth Pact. Nonetheless the Commission’s proposals for the new Multi-annual Financial Framework 2021-2027 allocates more resources on Union-level than ever before for school infrastructure investments through funds ranging from EFRO, Digital Europe and financing tools such as the InvestEU Programme. Without any prejudice to the outcome of the negotiations on the next EU budget, we believe the key challenge for the different education authorities in the Member States will be to direct these European opportunities to concrete education and school infrastructure projects and schemes.

At “More than a brick in the wall: creating Europe’s innovative learning environments, connecting policy, pedagogy and investments”, we will look at education and school building from a European perspective. We want to encourage the exchange of good practices and explore how infrastructure, pedagogy, policy and investment can work together when designing and constructing innovative learning environments. We hope that the experience and knowledge we have acquired can inspire other Member States and that we can be inspired by them. Member States and their competent authorities have gathered a lot of capacity and experience in how



to deal with the above summed-up challenges and opportunities. Interesting innovations are being implemented in Europe on a daily basis. For this reason, school infrastructure should be among the priorities in discussions regarding the future strategic framework for European policy cooperation in education and training. In doing so, a long-term European focus on this theme can emerge to create opportunities for peer learning and exchange of good practices between Member States and their different competent authorities. This collaboration has the potential to help us build capacity to create the best possible innovative learning environments and offers learning opportunities on how to make optimal use of available Union funds and financing schemes. This will enable us to deliver better school infrastructure for all children and students, something every child, school and community needs.

