



HORIZONTAL OR VERTICAL?

So what is all this about wanting a horizontal split of the two Luxembourg European Schools as opposed to the vertical one agreed by the Board of Governors?

Yes, the parents' association is hoping to overturn this decision in favour of a separation which locates the Primary and Nursery schools on Kirchberg and the Secondary in Mamer/Bertrange.

Can you justify this?

Of course!

Firstly, parents would like the convenience of being able to drop off their small children at a school close to their place of work, rather than have them travel by bus or train. They see less of a problem with older children having to use public transport.

I can certainly sympathise with parents who, until now, have been able to drop children and be at their desks five minutes later, although this is a very rare privilege, unknown in most large towns and cities and not the situation in Brussels, where I used to work. I suppose some parents might decide to move near the school where their children will go – at least they will know in very good time! And there are arguments in favour of all the children from a family attending the same school. On a practical and educational level, if it were to be decided that a horizontal separation was a good thing, it might be better to make Kirchberg the secondary school and Mamer the Primary one. After all the building design at Kirchberg is far more suited to older children (the new Primary school was criticised for this reason when it was built); the laboratories and other specialist rooms were built with Secondary needs in mind and the proximity of the Sports Centre and swimming pool is of far more interest to a Secondary school than a Primary one. A total re-think of the Mamer plans could create a very fine modern Primary and Nursery school with all facilities one could hope for.

That is not really what these parents had in mind. They are determined that the Primary School should be on Kirchberg! But there are other arguments. They do not want to see a separation of language sections at all. One of the strengths of European Schools is the opportunity they provide for children of all European nationalities to meet and to experience their differences and points of similarity at first hand. You remember those fine words of Jean Monnet.....?

Of course I do, and the mixing of nationalities and languages is one of the things which pupils remember and appreciate most. But things are not so simple. Let us suppose for a moment that all 19 or 20 language sections were to be in the same school, whether Kirchberg or Mamer. Even if it were possible to make a secondary timetable, you would not find the mixture of nationalities in classes that you might expect. I had a daughter who was very unhappy to find herself as the only pupil from her section in a Human Science class, and I understand that the school tries to avoid this situation, at least in lower classes. This means that in a typical group of around 22 pupils you will never find more than 11 language sections represented, usually much less.

Well, alright, but what do you mean by "if it were possible to make a timetable"?

Look at it logically. The present school is rather like eleven parallel schools which must be synchronised for subjects taught across the language sections and for option blocks in the upper

years. The majority of teachers must teach at least two different subjects, but the combinations they teach vary from country to country, making the scheduling of these blockings extremely difficult. The increase in complexity with each new language section is far more than linear.

It is a well known fact that the larger a secondary school is, the easier it is to organize options particularly in less popular subjects. Dividing pupils between two schools would result in reduced numbers in each and a failure to run classes in these minority subjects

This might well be true in a National school, but surely things are different here when you look at the details. I just happen to have in my pocket a response to this very question given by a teacher involved in the organization of these things.

- In non-vehicular language sections there are sometimes too few pupils to create a course (e.g. Physics in Dutch this year), and this would not change however the school is split.
- In the German, English and French sections, most courses taught in mother tongue would still be safe with the projected numbers under a vertical split, and it should be possible to enable the endangered ones to run (e.g. Advanced L1 and 4 hour philosophy in German) by transferring a small number of pupils between schools.
- For those subjects taught in a vehicular language, there are very few courses which cannot be created (e.g. 4 period geography in French and German this year) but here, I agree, there would be no solution; we could not transfer pupils in a non-vehicular language section.
- One of the biggest causes of disappointment for pupils at present is the impossibility of providing for certain combinations of subjects because of timetable technical constraints (i.e. inevitable clashes between subjects). This would certainly become a bigger problem in a larger school with more sections; we shall still only have 40 periods per week.

Whatever your technical arguments might be, the choice of language sections to go to Mamer is always going to be a source of discontent and division, however that choice is made. Apparently the decisions made by the Steering Group were arbitrary and undemocratic and involved discrimination against certain language sections. How do you see this?

It is true that the choice is not an easy one as long as people see Mamer as a “second best” (although in many ways a new, purpose-built school should be a good place for children to be). I was told that the Steering Group, after discussing several alternatives, settled on one which satisfied criteria of numerical balance (equal numbers, equal numbers of language sections) as well as cultural balance (North/South, East/West) and the necessity to pair certain sections (Finnish/Swedish). Having produced a division, it seems the schools were attributed to Kirchberg or Mamer in a way which minimised the impact on families already having children in the Kirchberg school. I must say that if I was thinking of re-locating nearer to one of the schools to reduce the time that my children will spend travelling, whether by bus, train, bike, foot or car, I would want a clear decision without any second thoughts in the future.

Can I mention one other argument against a horizontal split?

By all means!

Can you imagine the problems of discipline and social integration which a Secondary school of over three thousand pupils would entail? There are clearly difficulties attributable to the sheer size of the

present Secondary school and few national systems, as far as I know, deliberately plan for such monsters. I can hardly imagine the difficulty of managing such an institution.

I do not think we are ever going to see eye-to-eye on this, but whether plans go ahead as agreed or there is change let us hope that school and parents can work together to make the project work.

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