

## THE END OF THE COOLE SCHULE

The Coole Schule was an Austrian association of schoolchildren, founded in 2003 by a group headed by Igor Mitschka, who was twelve years old. It flourished for seven years of vigorous campaigning but was wound up on March 19, 2010. The group of young people who had founded it were due to leave school at the end of the summer term, and although the association had many younger members, none of them were willing to take on the responsibility of management.

In an email to Lib Ed Igor Mitschka said, 'I find it a great pity, myself, and I have tried for months to motivate them, but in the end no one wanted to take on the work – which I can also more or less understand. Because the outlook for a change of the law and more democracy in Austria is gloomy, and the work often seems to be in vain – it is not a very attractive prospect. It's a pity, but that is the way it is.'

The Coole Schule was a nationwide, non-political association of school students and had the objective of strengthening school students' voting power in school and in national politics, in particular on behalf of primary school children who had no representation.

Particular successes were the first Austrian children's conference in Graz in 2003, attended by one hundred children and chaired by three nine-year-olds, the second Austrian children's conference in the Parliament building in 2005, attended by one hundred and fifty, and the provincial children's conferences in 2006, where six hundred took part. At these meetings school students discussed education and together decided what they wanted changed. Proposals ranged from no homework, longer breaks and swimming pools in all schools at the more optimistic end, to objectives such as the promotion of individual talent, smaller classes, putting things right instead of being punished, car-free zones outside schools, free German lessons for foreign children and their parents and in particular more power for pupils in school parliaments and class councils.

The argument was that the people who know most about what needs to be changed in schools are the children who attend them, and that it only makes sense to listen to them and let them share in the responsibility.

In 2007 ninety people aged between 9 and 15 met in the Epstein Palace in Vienna with representatives of the Green Party, the ÖVP (Austrian People's Party), the FPÖ (the Freedom Party of Austria) and the SPÖ (the Social Democrats). The politicians voted on each of five Coole Schule proposals, and of the twenty votes cast, only three were negative. Nothing happened.

In April 2008 the Coole Schule held a press conference under the title 'We've had enough. School students take the government to task.' Igor Mitschka, now sixteen years old, said, 'We have been campaigning for better schools and battling for our fellow-pupils for five years, and what we have learnt about the Austrian political parties gives a sobering picture of politics. We have learnt that children and teenagers are not taken seriously by the Austrian parties and cannot have any influence. In these circumstances it is hardly surprising that children and young people have had enough of this kind of politics and are fed up. They say they are listening and they do nothing.'

Nevertheless, on July 2, 2009 the Coole Schule introduced parliament to the first citizens' petition from school students, in which they demanded the implementation of their three points for more student involvement in decision-making:

1. Election of class and school representatives by all pupils at all schools.
2. Class councils in all subjects, where pupils vote on the teaching methods and the material to be studied.
3. School parliaments in all schools. 'We demand the right for every school pupil in Austria to elect representatives, to stand for election and to share in school decision-making.'

The petition was passed to a parliamentary subcommittee for further consideration. Nothing happened.

In November 2009 the Coole Schule organised a protest under the title 'Our right – your duty' demanding the implementation of the United Nations

Convention on the Rights of the Child, already twenty years old. Nothing happened.

The Coole Schule did not just close down quietly. It had a final celebration with speeches, a play and a film, and it sent out an email to its many supporters. This is how it ends:

We have experienced a lot in the last seven years. The first thing we did was to take the demand for more voting rights for all school students – not only secondary school students – as our aim. We introduced parliament to the first school students' citizenship petition. We organized nine children's conferences with more than 1000 school students. We have demonstrated that every child has an individual opinion which should be taken seriously.

But even so we have not been able to achieve our principal aim, the legal establishment of more democracy in schools (for example class councils, school parliaments and democratic student representation). We have been trying to open a dialogue with our politicians, but they are too ignorant.

We hope that the next generation of school students will continue the struggle which we began seven years ago. Eventually even politicians will not be able to pretend that they have not heard us.

We took the first step with the Coole Schule, it will only take a few more steps before children at school are allowed to speak and are recognized as people with equal rights.

With this in mind we send you our best wishes, and ask you not to forget our message:

**Give children a voice. Take children and young people seriously. Let us share in decision-making. It's worth it.**