

# Austria's Cool School Association



Since 2003, Igor Mitschka, aged 14, of Austria's Cool School Association, has organised a two children's conferences. They have been open to every school student in the country. In 2003 one hundred students took part, and in 2006 one hundred and fifty students from all nine federal states and from all different types of school (including primary school) took part. The first conference was held in Graz in 2003 and the second in the Chamber of the Austrian Parliament in Vienna. In September 2006 the Cool School Association is planning to hold children's conferences in every federal state in Austria.

## What the participants said ...



Unfortunately children are much too seldom asked for their opinions. But they should have a say, particularly about school, where it is a question of their own education. For this reason I make the following proposal: There should be regular research into children's opinions, or opportunities for them to vote about things. Only in that way can we really be sure that planned reforms will have the desired effect and work out well.

*Johanna, 13 years old*

Every pupil should have a right to extra help. This can be quite simple, for instance special courses that people can take.



Various courses will be outlined.

The pupils can apply to take one of these courses. It doesn't matter whether there are two or twenty children in a course, everyone will be helped in the subject they need help with and will learn.

*Elisabeth, 12 years old*

We would like to have a new school subject, called "General Education". It should be two lessons a week, without a fixed curriculum. We want to deal with themes from current affairs and learn to research, work on projects, argue and discuss.

*Kristina, Alexandra, Jacqueline, Nikola, Clara, Marlene, Bence, Valentin, all 13 years old*



Just as children have reports twice a year, so should teachers have reports, in which their pupils judge them for their friendliness and fairness.

*Mirjam, 12 years old*

I propose that children should vote on what they learn and how they learn it, so that they are more interested in learning.

*Katharina, 9 years old*



The resulting conference consisted of meetings at the beginning and the end of the day at which everyone took part, and a variety of activities in between. There was an opportunity to question politicians face to face, and there were also workshops in drama, radio, newspaper, film and creative work (making posters and banners).



# **Demands of the children's conference**

A demand for greater democracy in schools was accepted unanimously, on the grounds that **all** pupils (including pupils under the age of fourteen) should have strong representation within their schools and the right to nationwide representation. The system proposed to achieve this involved school parliaments with elected representatives; to ensure that no decision could take effect within the school without the approval of the students, these parliaments were to have a right of veto.

### **The demands of the Austrian Children's Conference in 2005:**

- Election of class and school representatives in every school
- Class Council on all levels and in all types of school
- A School Parliament in every school
- More Montessori and progressive education
- Decrease of maximum number of pupils per class from 36 to 25
- Individual encouragement of talents and skills
- Better training for teachers
- More time for social learning
- More time for political education
- More time for foreign languages
- School Psychologists at every school
- Libraries in all schools
- Access for the disabled in all schools
- Car-free zones in front of schools
- Shaping and design of schools by students
- Increase in the number of all-day schools and bilingual classes
- Verbal reports
- Repeating a course instead of repeating a class
- New school system(s)

# **Letters from the organisers**

After the conference a report was circulated which included the following letter from the conference organiser, Igor Mitschka.

Dear Readers,

The children's conference was a great success. However, there were a lot of difficulties to overcome in the organising of it. In particular some of the institutions and individuals who were involved in the arrangements thought my age meant I was incompetent.

This makes the message that was beamed out by the conference all the more important. We children are capable of forming opinions and representing them strongly. We are in a position to express ourselves well and clearly and to speak up for our wishes and our needs. We can work and organise ourselves independently. And we are absolutely capable of deciding about our own future – school – on all levels, on our own or in co-operation.

For these reasons I hope that in the year 2006 our wishes about education will go beyond party boundaries and school democracy will at last be part of life.

Monika Lore was an adult who helped with the organisation of the conference. Her comments in the report included the following:

Two striking aspects of the relationship with the adult helpers during the preparations are symptomatic.

Grown-ups generally find it difficult to work in partnership with children. They often don't believe in their competence and in the end fall back on other grown-ups.

Children are co-operative partners who know what their own objectives are, and have great respect for adults who support them in their efforts.

# **After the children's conference ...**

After the children's conference had been held in 2005, two parties in the Austrian Parliament (the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party, both in opposition) introduced two proposals which included the demands from the children's conference of 2005. Both proposals were discussed in the Austrian Parliamentary Education Committee on May 9<sup>th</sup>. Igor Mitschka and Florentine Frantz spoke in front of the committee. They were the youngest experts ever to speak before an Austrian parliamentary committee.

Unfortunately the majority parties rejected both proposals. Their reason: "There is enough school democracy in Austrian schools".

But Austria's Cool School Association has not lost its will to fight to make a difference and to make schools better. The Association is planning to hold children's conferences in every single federal state of Austria in September 2006.

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### **Postscript**

Approximately 600 school students took part in the September conferences. They have sent a letter to the principal politicians of all parties with demands for the election of student representatives by all children in all schools, the introduction of school parliaments, and the introduction of class councils in all classes.