14 July 2022

Dear families of the European Schools,

The School trips, with both pedagogical and social benefits, are a distinctive tradition of the European Schools, where they generally play a more important role than in most other schools. Until now the school trips have been organized by devoted teachers and administrative staff who has done great work over so many years. Parents are generally satisfied with the School trips as they are run until now.

Some parents have struggled to afford School trips in the past. To help these families, there is a Social Fund run by the Parent Association in most of the European Schools. Parents find that it is crucial to maintain the good quality and affordability of School trips.

In December 2021, the Board of Governors endorsed the proposal to include obligatory School trips costs (which concern entire Primary or Secondary academic level and which exceed a cost of 100 EUR per pupil) in the schools' budget with effect from the financial year 2023.

One of the reasons the OSG decided to embark in this new tendering process is the criticism received from the Court of Auditors regarding the extra-budgetary accounts. Such criticism should be addressed by solving the identified challenges (no proper accounting rules, badly implemented and double booking of expenses, etc.) and not by overhauling the otherwise well-functioning school trip system

Facilitating administrative management and audit is just one of many factors to be taken into account, when deciding on the organization of School trips. Parents find that this objective has to be balanced against other objectives such as the **price and quality** of the School trips, their integration with the overall School program and pedagogical process.

In spring 2021, a working group was established in OSG to analyze the practical steps and come up with concrete proposals. Parents' representatives were consulted on the conclusions during the meetings with OSG on September 1st and 16th 2021.

InterParents representatives present at these meetings expressed the main concerns of the parents:

- The value for money should remain the same as with previous organization
- Solid insurance (including cancellation insurance) policy
- Who will provide legal help in case the travel agency does not comply with the conditions?

At the end of February, the tender documents were shared with InterParents to which InterParents provided its comments at the end of March. At the beginning of April, amended tender documents were shared with InterParents to which the final comments and clarification was sent to OSG on April 11th. The call for tender was launched by OSG on May 12th with the deadline for the submission of tenders on June 13th. 6 evaluation committees were set up by OSG, one for each lot (Belgium, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Italy). InterParents nominated the parent representatives for each lot.

The initial procurement procedure did not lead to **any offer being submitted.**

On June 28th, amended tender documents (changes made based on the comments OSG received from the Schools and from the travel agencies; to simplify the aspects that might have caused problems for the travel agencies in order to increase the chances to receive good offers) were shared with InterParents. Main amendments consisted of **deleting specific requirements for insurance policy and deleting the paragraph about penalties applicable to the service provider**.

On July 4th and July 6th, the meetings were held between all stakeholders, where these changes were discussed.

After the internal discussion within InterParents School trips WG members, on July 12th, InterParents sent to OSG the subsequent letter:

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Following the fact that the initial procurement procedure did not lead to any offer being submitted, InterParents regrets to state that we cannot support the drive to complete the outsourcing at any cost this year for the following reasons:

- *When the outsourcing process was launched, it was not quite clear what could be expected from the market.*
- *Outsourcing via procurement works best, when there is competition and competition works best for standardized products that can be offered by many companies.*

Unfortunately, the complete failure of the first procurement procedure clearly demonstrated that the actual market conditions are far from what was expected. This fact needs to be acknowledged and appropriate conclusions drawn. In fact, the failure to obtain any offers is a good argument to put to the auditors to justify not changing the procedures currently in place.

As a matter of fact, the contracting authority has no experience and no good knowledge of the market for School trips. Moreover, the School trips demanded by the European Schools are not a standard product. There are not many operators with the experience and ability to provide this type of services on this scale and with this level of complexity where both the Schools and the students/parents are a sort of client, even though only the families would ultimately pay the bills.

In this situation, parents believe that two main approaches are possible:

A. *Change the parameters of the procurement procedure in the hope to spur at least one offer and hopefully even some competition. This appears to be the approach currently favored by OSGES.*

Problems with this approach:

- *The new parameters need to be set by the same authority, which has already proven its lack of experience and knowledge of this specific market in the first go.*
- *So far Interparents could not see any reliable indication that the market is ready to provide the type of School trip needed and that there would be sufficient competition for that.*
- *Interparents is concerned that the drive to complete outsourcing quickly at all costs is leading to a dangerous watering down of the requirements. Chasing potential candidates in this way is not an approach that promises to lead to a satisfactory price and quality of the School trips. Interparents has the impression that the* ***interests of students and parents are currently being seriously compromised*** *at the expense of the interests of auditors.*

B. *Change the approach.*

- *Relaunch the discussion on finding possible solutions within the existing framework (i.e. in-house organisation of School trips, but with more resources, strengthened accounting etc.).*
- *To launch a framework contract in each School, with selected providers, who can bid a price (EUR/child) for different types of trips.*
- *If the option of outsourcing is retained - postpone its implementation by a year and use the time to gain better knowledge of the market, exchange info with other Schools that organise similar trips, give more time to the potential candidates to get better acquainted with the requirements of the European School trips.*

Conclusion / Recommendation

In light of all the above ***InterParents cannot support*** *the drive to complete the outsourcing at any cost this year.*

The risks are too high and not justified by the benefit of simplifying the audit procedures (risk of significant deterioration of price/quality ratio of School trips. If this risk materialises, there is no way to correct it - the Schools would be stuck with the contractor in place, the damage may be huge and long-lasting, many of the good things mentioned in the introduction / background may be lost).

Alternative approaches need to be considered and InterParents is willing to actively participate in this process.
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We received an answer from OSG expressing surprise and disappointment that parents now, at this point are questioning the whole approach which has been previously favored by all stakeholders consulted, including parents.

On July 14th, the following clarification letter was sent to OSG:

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Indeed, parent representatives have been involved and supportive since beginning in the process of incorporating the school trips in the schools budget, underlining, inter alia, the necessity of a solid insurance policy.

Unfortunately, the fact that no offers were received to the initial tender and following changes in tender specifications, specially the ones about the insurance and penalties, have made us realise (also due to time constraints of the summer holiday) that we are not in a position to support at this stage the requested changes in your amended tender specifications. We do believe that at the time being, under these new circumstances, outsourcing the school trips at any cost is not in the best interest of parents and pupils.

Therefore, one of our proposals is to postpone the implementation of the outsourcing by one year. This would allow to gain better knowledge of the market and reduce the risks of an unsatisfactory outcome, which we consider too high in the present situation.

As it will be difficult to meet during summer holidays with all parent representatives from different schools appointed to InterParents school trips WG, we propose to continue in September when all volunteer parents will be available to meet for discussion.

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We will keep you updated of any further developments.

We thank you for your confidence and wish you a nice summer!

InterParents School trips WG