

***“You must be leaders!”***

***Professor De Groof’s 2015 TASIS Commencement Address***

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*Dear Mrs Lynn Fleming Aeschliman, dear faculty and staff members and chiefly, dear parents and graduates,*

My wife and I were profoundly touched by the student speeches of last evening. It was a magic moment, illustrating that Europe, ‘the old continent’, needs to host distinctive schools like TASIS, and needs to be inspired by the ‘new world’---in order to remain internationally competitive.

I quote: *“Elegant, embedded in a tradition of cultural commitment and intellectually elite, with a learning capacity for concentration and reflection...”* These were terms recently used to describe the character and the profile of education at Oxford University in the UK.

They seem to a large extent also applicable to TASIS, the oldest American boarding school in Europe.

This sense of excellence reminds me of the Founder of this School, Mrs. M.C. Fleming,---a woman of great force, character, vision and generosity. We still honor her personality and admire her leadership. She took the lead in the vivid and inspiring conversations my wife Christine and I had the opportunity to have with her over a decade ago at her home in Italy.

Last week, I was staying at Trinity College, Oxford, where I was speaking at an international conference on ‘Private Higher Education’, which is the fastest growing sector of education in Asia and Latin America.

Reference was made by one of the speakers to the lack of knowledge of American high-school graduates in the USA. Of those surveyed recently, 75% of them could not find Syria or Iraq on the map, despite constant news coverage since the US invasion of March 2003. 63% were unable to locate Israel and half of them did not know that Paris is the capital of France.

Such a lack of geographical literacy will never happen to graduates of this School!

One of the main targets for the ‘Student of the Future’ will be the *internationalization of education*, regardless of the country of the School in which a student is enrolled.

Last year, I taught in the Law Faculty of Baghdad University in Iraq. One of the questions I asked my students was: *‘What is your mission in life?’* Surprisingly, they answered that it was the very first time a person questioned them about their future. However, their first wish was to become *‘global citizens’*, whatever that could mean.

*In the future, schools will be international, or they will fail.*

My wife Christine gifted me with six children. All of them spent a year abroad during their school career, and now *they* inspire *us* as to how we must behave as international citizens.

The poet Wordsworth wrote: *'The Child is Father of the man'...*

Let me focus on four vital issues *of* and *within* education, with some reference to my personal, academic, governmental and diplomatic commitments.

*First*, the unconditional, highest importance of education and thus of the school.

Among all human rights, the right to education is reaching the highest rank, close to 'the right to live'. Education should affect and frame society. According to the South African Constitutional Court, ultimately the right to equality is mainly guaranteed by the right to education.

Who were the first protesters, four years ago, at the *Tahrir Square* in Cairo, Egypt? *Students!* What was their first demand? *'Give us good education'*.

A similar scenario emerged at the *Maidan Square* in Kiev, Ukraine, and in Kinshasa, Congo.

What will remain the first request of students? *'Education in freedom. Equity and Dignity through Education'*.

The *'Eurobarometer'* is a survey, requested by the European Union Commission, of public opinion in the European Union. On every question detecting the priorities for all respondents in the age group 15-24, *'Education'* has always had the highest score---except for one other wish, namely: *'The opportunity to use your mobile phone at the same price throughout Europe...'*!

Education is determinative for the future of each person and of society. Educational quality is the critical component in boosting economic growth. Education provides people with 'human capabilities': the power to reflect, make choices, and enjoy a better life and promote a better life for others. *'Only the educated are free'*. Education enables people to fulfill the principle of *human dignity*.

What an ambition for teachers, to be engaged to achieve such targets!

Graduates of a world-class school should have world-class ambitions and missions.

The success of TESIS depends on the graduates' capacity to implement the search for *Bonum, Verum, Pulchrum*,---*the Good, the True, and the Beautiful*---and on their capacity to raise critical issues, and on the courage to doubt and question some alleged certainties in history.

*My second point.*

Education means: the sharing of responsibility of Families, Educators, and the Society. But the child definitely does not belong to the State. We should remain skeptical vis-à-vis each temptation of the State to influence the mind of the child. On Statist doctrine Nazis, Fascists, and Marxists used exactly the same terminology, - not by chance. In a landmark judicial decision, nearly a century ago, the United States Supreme Court ruled: *"The child is not the creature of the State"* (*"Pierce v. Society of Sisters,"* 1925).

Subsequently that principle has been stated with confidence and repeated in various international covenants and in a large number of European constitutions, but it is still not always accepted as self-evident.

The European Court of Human Rights, in the historic Judgment of 23 July 1968 on the Belgian Linguistic Case, said : “*the State is obliged to respect the rights of parents by promoting the freedom of education.*” Parents are motivated to ensure that their children receive a good education. The Court clearly sanctioned the following principle: “*The responsibility for the maximum personality development of young people lies with the parents.*” Their responsibility responds to ‘*Natural Law*’. This remains a universal principle, but I have to remind legislators in the East of the predominant role of this axiom very frequently indeed!

There is some evidence, as shown through research, that the *ambitions of parents* and parental involvement are the best preconditions for high-performing schools, which is demonstrated quite obviously by TASIS.

*Third point.*

Schools should be able to show their distinctiveness, their ‘*caractère propre*’, their specific mission. Each should be invited to refine - through its ‘*Charter*’ – the values it is standing for.

The ‘*Ethos of the School*’ reflects the way that the school community (the ‘*communio*’) develops personal rights and duties, the way also that any vulnerable person – whatever the reason for his or her vulnerability – is cherished and guided.

But there is more. I would foster also the concept of the school as ‘*A School for Ethics*’, namely the cultivation of ethical standards through an educational vision, shared by all partners. Education does indeed affect the total personality of a young person, and therefore his or her ability to acquire and exercise democratic rights and duties in the most responsible way, within the common education setting, and within the *societies* to which he or she will belong.

After the collapse of the USSR, I was invited by the Russian Federation, in the early nineties, to co-draft legislation in the sphere of education, research, and culture. A couple of years later, I reminded the Russian Douma Members and the ministers of the next ‘*boutade*’: ‘*We can draft a Law in 7 months, and we need 7 years to implement the Law, but we need 70 years to influence the Legal Culture of this society....*”

What really makes the difference is how, in a most practical sense, a school shapes a ‘*value approach*’, through its curriculum, the choice of its staff, the respect for ‘*otherness*’, the moral attitude within the leadership of the educational institution. This *value approach* will guarantee even more effectively real changes, much more than formal reforms.

*Fourth point.*

*Pluralism* in society has been proved to be vital for each democracy and can only be fulfilled through a diversity of public and private schools and through the involvement of civil society---not just government---in education.

Recent research reaffirms that a majority of parents consider the moral development and character formation of their children as the most crucial objective of the whole educational process. Consequently, a widespread choice of different types of schools seems the only option in order to reach high quality *and* equal education opportunities.

As Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in *'Democracy In America'*: "without local and free institutions, a nation does not have the spirit of Liberty."

The art of *'associating together'* and the right to *'be different'* should be remembered for educational institutions too. There is as a sometimes embarrassing universal UNESCO principle to remember: *'All individuals and groups have the right to be different, to consider themselves as different and to be regarded and respected as such.'*

Private schools are responsive to parents, 'the authority that authorized them': *'In loco parentis'*.

Private schools are not 'domesticated', but – to some extent – can be free or 'wild-card' organizations. In order to survive, they have the duty to be competitive and to become laboratories for new or different educational approaches and ideas.

It is not by accident that educational pluralism boosts the economy, and that---for example--- Greece consistently hinders the private and independent schools!

*Let me conclude.*

*'Differences in education'* should not be neutralized. This statement counts for *schools* and thus for the whole *society*.

A true *'Humanism'* needs the collaboration of all 'local' cultures. Before or beyond a Western, African, or Asian culture, there is above all a *human* culture.

*High-quality education* favors the willingness to 'live together', even in less privileged settings, despite the rise of nationalism and religious extremism. *We have to build more schools than prisons.*

Schools should lay the foundations of hope, because *'Dans l'éducation de l'enfant, il y a le tout de sa vie.'* (*The whole life of a child is contained in his or her upbringing and schooling*).

*Dear Graduates, 'N'ayez pas peur'*---have no fear! But you have to become leaders!

Thank you.