

Press Release

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The Síndic de Greuges (Catalan Ombudsman) recommends a new plan for greater public preschool capacity and improved access conditions

The Ombudsman is proposing a minimum mandatory public school capacity for children 0 to 3 years of age

Catalan Ombudsman Rafael Ribó, has recommended the definition of a new plan for the creation of public nursery school capacity for the 2008-2012 period that ensures the continuity of the plan now in force, and sets school enrolment goals higher than present levels (30% for municipalities of up to 20,000 inhabitants; 25% for municipalities of 20,000 to 50,000 and 20% for municipalities of over 50,000 inhabitants).

The Ombudsman has also suggested a mandatory minimum public preschool and nursery school capacity to overcome the current shortage. Despite the plan launched by the Catalan Government (and still in force) to create capacity for 30,000 students during the 2004-2008 period, the demand for nursery and preschool is still higher than the available supply. There is no sign this trend will change in the short term, given certain indicators such as the rise in birth rates and higher female employment levels.

Contrary to the first plan, the new plan should take the real data on current unmet demand into consideration. Acknowledgement of the unmet demand is important to plan the capacity offering and involve the administrations competent in the management of existing needs.

Rafael Ribó and the Deputy for the Defence of Children's Rights, Xavier Bonal, made this proposal at the presentation of the special report "School Enrolment for Children 0 to 3 in Catalonia", which they delivered to the President of the Catalan Parliament, Ernest Benach earlier today.

The need to improve access conditions

The report discusses certain social inequalities in the access to education. It shows that children from families with stronger cultural and economic backgrounds attend school in higher numbers. The lack of public capacity and the cost of nursery schools are the reasons behind these inequalities.

The Catalan Ombudsman is proposing new admissions criteria and scales to reduce access inequalities in this educational period. To do so, the Ombudsman recommends an analysis of the accessibility needs of the social groups with the highest risk of marginalization. He also suggests the incorporation of criteria that prioritize single-parent families, as is already

done with large families, and the establishment of income criteria that would cover a broader proportion of the population facing financial woes.

Additionally, it would be necessary for the Catalan Autonomous Ministry of Education to assume greater control over admission criteria, and for these criteria to be standardized in all municipalities. At present, some competent local councils set their own requisites, such as being registered in the local census for a certain number of years. Such measures do not benefit equal access to the offering.

Lastly, the Ombudsman has proposed a reinforcement of the economic support policies for families with access difficulties. Families assume around 30% of the cost of public schools' operation. This entails paying an estimated average annual tuition of 2,172 euros per child (including lunchroom fees). In 50% of Catalan households, these fees stand for over 10% of the family income for each child in school. Many municipalities do not offer grants or aid for economically disadvantaged social groups. The insufficient offering does not only leave children without a school to attend. It also diminishes parents' opportunities to reconcile professional and family life.

Territorial inequalities in access to educational offering

The new plan and the minimum school capacity should help not just to increase schooling levels, but to significantly reduce the existing territorial inequalities. In general, urban counties in the Barcelona area, Tarragonès, Baix and Alt Penedès Provinces present mid-to-low school enrolment rates (31%) with structural deficits in the public offering.

On another note, there are greater differences among rural counties. Some counties (Garrotxa, Ripollès, Berguedà, Alta Ribagorça, Pallars Sobirà, Garrigues and Conca de Barberà) have a consistent public offering, with enrolment rates close to 50%, while others are below 20%, such as Montsià, Priorat, Terra Alta, Noguera, Solsonès, Alt Empordà, Osona or la Selva.

The Catalan Autonomous Ministry of Education as the central body of the system

Although services for early childhood are local services and must be covered by local councils, a clear role must be played by the Catalan Autonomous Ministry of Education in ensuring their quality and equality. This role is especially necessary in the context of diverse municipal economies, with very unequal levels of service provision, territorial dispersion, presence of private centres with different traits and disparate working conditions.

Against such a backdrop, public resources are often insufficient to ensure proper management of the existing diversity, as is the case of special educational needs. The Catalan Ombudsman's report emphasizes the importance of promoting full integration of first-cycle children's education in the educational system, so that nursery schools may have access to the Catalan educational administration's schooling support resources and services.

The authorization or partial financing of the centres is not enough. There must also be decentralization accompaniment policies, and municipal projects that provide support services, supervise offering conditions and guarantee regular inspections.

Stricter regulations compliance

Some nursery schools are still not meeting the legal requirements on per-group ratios of professionals to children (which range from 8 to 20 children, depending on age) and regarding staff qualifications.

What is more, one of the foremost claims among sector professionals involves reducing the legal limit of children per group. The Catalan Ombudsman also recommends tougher regulations, among them, the implementation of classroom ratios lower than current levels, a measure that would improve the quality of service.

As for the qualifications of sector professionals, the Ombudsman proposes increasing the proportion of teachers, and making the qualification requisites for first-cycle children's education professionals equivalent to those for all other educational stages.

Improvement in professionals' working conditions

The inequalities faced by first-cycle children's education professionals, caused by a lack of acknowledgement of this educational period, compared to those of all other educational stages, must be done away with. Along these lines, it is recommended that the salary and scheduling conditions of first-cycle children's education professionals be brought up to levels of second cycle professionals.

Further, dialog must be sought among social agents to improve the salary and scheduling conditions established in the private education teachers' collective bargaining agreement to minimize inequalities with public sector professionals.

It should also be a priority to reduce the inequalities among professionals, derived from outsourcing the management of the service. The Catalan Ombudsman recommends including mechanisms of supervision over working conditions in the specifications for sub-contracting processes. Along these lines, the agreements established by the local councils vary widely from one to another.

Regulation and inspection of unauthorized centres

Once again, the Ombudsman has reiterated the importance of the inspection and supervision that must be carried out by the Catalan Autonomous Ministry of Education on the offering of facilities that operate as the equivalents of preschools and nursery schools under different names, such as "play centres" (ludoteques) without administrative authorization. In this regard, the Ombudsman recommends developing the legislation necessary for the mandatory authorization of these centres by the Ministry of Education, to put an end to the current legal void.□