

**Press Release**

**December 2006**

## **The Síndic demands more resources for detection, mediation and immediate intervention on bullying at schools**

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The Catalan Ombudsman, the Síndic de Greuges, presented a special report on positive coexistence and conflict in schools, demanding that the Catalan authorities should devote more resources to the prevention of confrontation in schools and the training of professionals in the field of detection and intervention of school harassment. The report also highlights the importance of mediation as a mechanism for the resolution of conflicts, the perils associated with the excessively hasty judicialisation observed in some cases, and the strengthening of mechanisms of participation of the educational community as the best strategy for the prevention of conflictive situations in schools.

The report was submitted to the President of the Catalan Parliament, Ernest Benach, for its handling and discussion in the Commission on the Síndic de Greuges of the Parliament of Catalonia. After that it was presented in a press conference by the Síndic, Rafael Ribó, accompanied by the Deputy for the Defence of Children's Rights, Xavier Bonal.

Bearing the title "Positive Coexistence and Conflict in Schools", the report originated from the complaints received by the Catalan Ombudsman on these matters, basing itself on the actions that the Catalan Ombudsman institution has carried out. It has been drafted in coordination with a report on the same subject prepared by the Ararteko (Ombudsman of the Basque Country).

The Catalan Ombudsman's report is focused on the relations of positive coexistence and confrontation in secondary schools. It analyses the set of school-related factors that influence good or bad school climates, the typology of the most common conflicts, the situations of vulnerability suffered by some students, and the conflict management mechanisms that are used by the various schools.

In presenting this and other information, the report also takes into consideration the replies of 1,200 students in the first and fourth years of compulsory secondary education to a school coexistence questionnaire, the qualitative material obtained from interviews of students and teachers at new secondary schools in Catalonia, and the analysis of complaints received by the Catalan Ombudsman on school coexistence conflicts.

## Highlights of the report:

- The rate of physical aggressions in schools is not high. 80% of the students surveyed state that they have never been subject to aggression at school and 75% state that they have never exerted aggression against any schoolmate.
- This low rate of physical aggression contrasts with a higher rate of insults or ridicule among schoolmates.
- Generally speaking, students have confidence in their teachers and in the mechanisms for the resolution of conflicts at school. This confidence, however, is higher among the students in the first year of compulsory secondary education than among those of the fourth year, and the latter are always more critical of the systems that regulate the rules and punishments of the schools.
- The existence of unwritten codes that establish rules of order in a class or school is important enough so that 45% of the students choose passive alternatives in cases of harassment rather than to be called a “squealer” or “grass”.
- On some occasions mistreatment among peers is not perceived as such by young people but rather they interpret it in terms of jokes, games or insults among friends. It often appears as a phenomenon that is minimised by the young people themselves.
- The above point and other factors contribute to a significant isolation of the victims, who take recourse to invisibilisation as one of the most commonly used strategies for avoiding confrontation with their aggressors.
- The preponderance of psychological mistreatment and “unwritten codes” of not resorting to teachers make the timely detection of cases of repeated harassment of some students significantly more difficult. The delay in detection is one of the factors that most impedes the possible rectification of conflictive situations by means of mediation and dialogue.
- From the complaints received by the Síndic, it is deduced that the schools generally have difficulties in quickly detecting situations of school harassment and in identifying the signs of such conduct. Although quality instruments are available for the detection and resolution of conflicts, more teacher training is required in this field together with a broader dissemination of these instruments in schools.

- Detection problems may lead on occasions to the lack of recognition of cases, preventing an agile reaction of the school with respect to the students suffering aggression and those who exert it.
- Dialogue and mediation are under-utilised resources. On some occasions this is because the schools restrict their action to the application of punishments, and on other occasions because the affected families—including those of both the aggressors and the victims—are little inclined to resolve conflicts through dialogue.
- On some occasions, the difficulties in achieving a timely resolution of conflicts through dialogue lead the students affected by mistreatment to change schools. The educational inspection service complains often that the affected families make a hasty decision in this respect, without waiting to take all the steps established for the resolution of conflicts. The families, for their part, show a lack of confidence in the capacity of the educational administration and the school management to resolve such situations.
- Likewise, on some occasions the families of the victimised students express their discontent with the action of the school or of the educational administration. They complain of an insufficiency of action of the educational services, a lack of suitable preparation of the professionals to resolve such cases, or the inappropriate treatment that is dispensed to the affected students.

### **Main recommendations**

The report includes 27 recommendations addressed to the educational administration, the schools and other actors involved (Administration of Justice, communication media). Some of the main recommendations are as follows:

- Foster the participation of the schools in programmes and plans for the improvement of positive coexistence. Carry out a greater dissemination of the existence of these plans for improvement of positive coexistence, especially among the school management teams and the members of the School Council.
- Lend support to the schools through the provision of resources, advice, teacher training and specific materials that can help them to apply the positive coexistence plans.
- Disseminate and assure the application of protocols of action for confronting situations of mistreatment among students.

- Make the improvement of positive coexistence and the rejection of all types of mistreatment a priority objective of all schools and promote the involvement of students in the management of certain conflicts.
- Extend the practice of individual tutoring sessions and work systematically on social skills in the group tutoring sessions.
- Favour an organisation that will allow the reduction of the number of teachers who intervene in each class, and foster a greater stability of tutoring sessions.
- Assure the educational supervision and observation of non-teaching times and places, including outdoor areas, the dining hall, transport means, etc., in order to prevent conflictive situations outside of class.
- Increase the functions and role of the coexistence commissions and assure the participation of all sectors of the educational community in them.
- Foster the mediation mechanisms for conflict resolution, as provided in the Decree on Rights and Duties by the educational community, and do so, whenever possible, by lending a prominent role to the students themselves as mediators.
- Assure the protection and safety of the victim in all situations of school harassment.
- Intervene immediately with harassing students, conveying a clear message of zero tolerance for any type of aggression.
- Establish communication circuits with teachers so that students can report on their situations to their tutors or to the persons in charge of the school.
- Carry out a continuous follow-up of the situation and do not delay the investigation and punishment processes.
- Establish mechanisms of information and guidance on the various possibilities of action in situations of school harassment.