Establishing common ground for Protestant schools worldwide
Imprint

GPENreformation
Global Pedagogical Network – Joining in Reformation
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Preface

Dear interested reader,

protestant schools exist all over the world. They enrich the educational landscape with often particularly outstanding school offerings. They are committed to their educational responsibility for boys and girls, for teens and young adults on all continents. They contribute significantly to equitable educational opportunities worldwide.

However, the fact that protestant schools link up, exchange and learn on an international level, that they take up global challenges together via good education, is new. This historic step was made possible by the international network of protestant schools and educational institutions, the Global Pedagogical Network – Joining in Reformation (former schools500reformation).

In a time when the fear of open borders and open-minded horizons increases in various countries it is especially important and meaningful to live this kind of practical global solidarity. Whole schools learn that we live together on this earth and bear responsibility for one another. During the writing process of this position paper which involved researchers and persons responsible in education from all over the world, it became clear: Even if protestant schools face very different contexts and challenges depending on their home country and region there is a lot more that unites than separates them. Deeply rooted in the faith in the gospel everyone shared the idea that the encouraging contemplation of god leads to a committed orientation towards the world and to a vision of equality in educational opportunities worldwide. The present position paper shows the common understanding of what protestant schools worldwide share and engage in. A strong common vision of shared goals and profile features of protestant schools became evident showing the remarkable contribution of the protestant educational landscape through their belief in public responsibility.

I wish you an inspiring lecture feeling the spirit of a strong community and the appreciation of global cooperation. Feel enheartened by the spirit of committed Christian education of the far more than 600 schools and educational institutions connected via the „Global Pedagogical Network – Joining in Reformation (GPENreformation). Together we want to initiate positive change in education quality, for young men and women and our common future on this earth!

Yours sincerely

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Background

On the initiative of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), in October 2013 representatives of Protestant schools from 13 countries came together to found the project schools500reformation. Under the slogan “500 Protestant schools worldwide celebrate 500 years of Reformation” the project aimed to connect Protestant schools around the world.

Since then the network of Protestant schools has grown constantly. The project was further developed in several regional or international conferences. The initial goal of “500 schools” was achieved in September 2015, long before the Reformation Jubilee.

In a second international conference in October 2015, more than 70 participants agreed: We want to continue our network even after 2017. To establish a common base for this global network of Protestant schools another symposium was held one year later. This symposium was focused on the basics of Protestant schools.

Thus, in December 2016 representatives of Protestant schools worldwide came together again in Soesterberg (NL) and drafted the present Position Paper: Establishing common ground for Protestant schools. Whatever their context, Protestant schools make a remarkable contribution to human dignity and the common good by seeking to develop a culture of hope, service and achievement, empowering staff and students to embrace the future with confidence. This position is characterized on the following pages.
Establishing common ground for Protestant schools worldwide

A position paper

Written by representatives of Protestant schools from Australia, Brazil, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, France, Germany, Ghana, Hong Kong – China, Ireland, The Netherlands, Philippines, Poland, Rwanda, Switzerland, Tanzania, United Kingdom and the United States of America.

Soesterberg, Netherlands, December 2016
Preamble

In 2017, the celebration of the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther publishing his famous theses in Wittenberg in 1517 takes place. This provides an opportunity for all Protestant schools to reflect on how best to build on centuries of their work for the common good, not only in Europe but worldwide. The Reformation put a special focus on the re-discovery of biblical insights and on education, from which people can still learn today.

Representatives of Protestant schools from 17 countries of all five continents gathered in Soesterberg / NL. Having exchanged experiences, they agreed on this document as their vision to enhance and extend collaboration. This includes information about the variety of contexts of Protestant schools and a common understanding of theological and pedagogical perspectives. It concludes with a vision that encourages and strengthens collaboration on regional and global levels. The document should inform all those who are responsible for Protestant schools, in churches, politics and wider society, about the ethos and contribution they make to the public education system.

From a plethora of different backgrounds, Protestant schools all have common ground in the Christian tradition and thus share a common mission. Whatever their context, they make a remarkable contribution to human dignity and the common good by seeking to develop a culture of hope, service and achievement, empowering staff and students to embrace the future with confidence.
Context: Challenges and Opportunities

Protestant schools can look forward to exciting development as the diversity of context in which they work across the world produces both challenges and opportunities that can be linked with signs of hope.

Protestant schools and globalisation

Globalisation brings opportunities to grow a global network for Protestant schools. It also means that the diversity of culture and religion becomes more obvious and that the Protestant profile should include a commitment to dialogue and exchange with other religions, world views and convictions. Globalisation also comes along with an increasing trend to shape education in the context of economic perspectives, with less emphasis on personal development. But Protestant schools should emphasise a comprehensive understanding of education and a pedagogy of hope. Globalisation also leads to reflection on the role and potential of new media and technology; they can be used fruitfully for the growing global network of Protestant schools, with an appropriate awareness of the limitations and misuse of new media.

Protestant schools and religious change

In many parts of today’s world, Protestant schools are affected by religious change. While some countries experience increasing religious commitment, others face radical religious movements and the misuse of religion for political purposes. In some societies, the variety of religions increases, whilst other regions of the world become more secular and religion is considered often as old-fashioned or threatening.
By this, Protestant schools are challenged to explain their special profile, their mission and their contribution to the educational landscape and to society. They have to develop the ability to stand for their convictions and explain guiding Christian principles to non-Christians in an understandable and convincing way. They must also be capable of playing an active role in dialogue with other religions and world views.

Protestant schools and the state system

Another crucial point is the relationship between Protestant schools and the state through national, regional and local government. In some contexts, support and encouragement is received, in other cases no support is given. Protestant schools often face increasing competition with state schools. Protestant schools contribute actively to the common good and to the needs of society, so support by the state is grounded on good reasons. In this situation, we emphasise the Christian call for good education and also the right to education according to parental conviction or religious views. This includes also the task of the schools to contribute to education for citizenship and human rights for all.
Education in Protestant schools

Protestant schools are globally and locally diverse. Located in different countries and continents, they are of varying denominational affiliation and are inevitably shaped by their regional context and respective church and state-based educational systems. This means that their concepts of education differ, producing a colourfulness which is celebrated as richness, and the possibility of learning from one another.

Especially in the field of education, much is to be gained by searching for common ground through dialogue and by mutually exploring the heritage of reformation. And beside all these local, economic, cultural and social differences, Protestant schools have a great deal in common. This common ground is explored from a theological and from an educational perspective, two equal, interwoven perspectives which give a foundation to Protestant schools.
Strong foundations in Christian understanding: A theological perspective

1 Education at Protestant schools builds on God’s good creation.

All humans are created by God and made in his image. By that they are endowed with an inviolable dignity. For Protestant schools in today’s world, this means that their educational responsibility extends to everyone, irrespective of social status, gender, capabilities or religious affiliation. All students are welcome and valued, each and every one of them is created with unique gifts and talents. Therefore, protestant education cherishes differences. It is inclusive by principle and aims at strengthening young people in gaining self-confidence and a feeling of personal dignity.

In seeing nature as a manifestation of God’s abundant grace, Protestant schools are dedicated to ecological awareness and sustainable development.

2 Education at Protestant schools builds on God’s unconditional love.

The core belief of Christianity, that people are redeemed by grace through faith alone, brings an insight that is highly significant for the education and well-being of young people: human beings are not perfect – and don’t have to be. God gives his love unconditionally. All students have a dignity that goes beyond what they are, do, manage or accomplish. Therefore, Protestant schools scrutinize prevalent ideologies and pedagogies of success with a critical eye.
3 Education at Protestant schools builds on God-given freedom.
Christian faith sees freedom as a gift from God. Protestant education respects the freedom of individual conscience and aims at strengthening the capacities of each student to make decisions and to think for themselves in matters of faith and life orientation.

However, from a Christian perspective, freedom is always relational in accordance with the commandment of love. Life, learning and service are experienced together and exercised for the good of all. Therefore, Protestant schools are communities of learning and places of shared life in which young people can enjoy experiences of achievement, faith, service and compassion for others.

Education in Protestant schools takes a holistic approach which includes spiritual, moral, intellectual, physical, emotional, cultural and social dimensions, developing the whole person.

4 Education in Protestant schools builds on trust in the Holy Spirit.
Trust in the Holy Spirit is an important gift to Protestant schools. Teachers in these institutions acknowledge and appreciate that they are not in control of “forming” their students and that learning processes can never be totally planned or standardized. In this perspective, teaching requires an open mindset and has a lot to do with moments of surprise, astonishment and exploring of talent.

5 Education at Protestant schools builds on global solidarity and God’s option for the vulnerable.
Public accountability is a decisive feature of Christian faith. It challenges injustice in today’s world; it sides with the poor, the weak and the oppressed. Therefore, Protestant schools do not cultivate an inward,
exclusive identity of being Protestant, but recognize their responsibility towards the wider public. They are, both locally and globally, engaged and caring communities. By exploring the global horizon of education and faith, their profile is ecumenical in the original sense the word – reaching out to the whole inhabited earth.

6 Education in Protestant schools builds on hope for peace and justice in God’s kingdom.

Christian faith sees the present reality from a different perspective; the promise of God’s Kingdom. Protestant schools are communities of hope, which develop a culture empowering staff and students to embrace the future with confidence. Recognizing the brokenness of humanity, facing difficulties and dealing with conflicts, they are working towards peace and reconciliation.
Supporting students as they grow: A pedagogical perspective

1 Protestant schools believe in the potential of every student to learn, to develop and to be joyful.

For Protestant schools, every child is a unique being with unique opportunities and a special set of talents which enhance all aspects of that person. Protestant schools work towards being “good schools” by providing hope as they seek to integrate these individualities in order to support the development of each student’s personality. A shared ethos and high quality relationships can lead to joyful encounters and happiness.

2 Protestant schools offer error-friendly forgiveness.

Learning and growing is not a linear process but includes learning from mistakes, making detours and even experiencing pain. Learning allows the possibility of making mistakes and clear, constructive feedback promotes learning. Protestant schools aim to give second chances, leading to work on reconciliation for the benefit of students as well as teachers. Teachers in Protestant schools should have an understanding of the compulsory nature of schooling and should be aware of their power over the life of students.

3 Protestant schools are committed to freedom with responsibility.

Protestant schools aim to educate students to experience freedom with responsibility. Individuals are empowered when their own talents are nurtured at the same time as they are encouraged to contribute to social life together. They are empowered to focus simultaneously on

Education in Protestant schools

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taking responsibility for themselves, for others, for nature and for the future. Protestant schools work with students and communities of other religious traditions and world views, widening understanding through dialogue and thus fostering mutual respect through an acceptance of plurality and diversity in human society and within the school community. They seek to educate for individual autonomy, creativity and critical thinking, but in a spirit of empathy and action in solidarity with others.

4 Protestant schools aim for high quality teaching.

Protestant schools want to deliver quality through student-centred teaching methods, by enhancing participation, by a good learning climate, clear rules at school, effective time use and reflective classroom management. Since empirical evidence shows that empowering teachers to develop their own teaching style enhances the quality of learning, this is encouraged in Protestant schools. There should also be a high level of self-understanding in order to develop and reform continually.

5 Protestant schools strive for social justice.

Protestant schools strive for social justice by caring for every single student, by a reflective policy of school admission, and by focusing on education for those with fewer opportunities, such as students with special needs, from removed areas or challenged social backgrounds. They aim to be inclusive with regard to gender, language, social background, ethnicity and other characteristics of possible exclusion. Protestant schools want to enhance social justice on a regional, national and global level by working on ethical challenges, offering education for sustainability, human rights education, Global Learning and inclusive learning. In a culture marked by war and conflict, Protestant
schools can be places of reconciliation, developing trust and valuing freedom of speech. This starts with treating people with respect and includes learning to speak out on injustice.

6 Protestant schools aim to show Christian sensitivity and an ability to reflect on the purpose of curriculum content.

Dealing with content and the development of a sense of cultural identity is purposeful and values based: it should lead to competences. Protestant schools should be aware that the application of what has been and should be learned needs Christian-based reflection in some cases.

7 Protestant schools aim to support the spiritual, religious and world view development of their students.

Protestant schools teach religious education and live their spirituality with services and prayers within their daily life. Chaplaincy and pastoral care should be included in schools. The pluralism of denominations and religions should be taken into account and schools are encouraged to develop a capacity for dialogue.

8 Protestant schools aim to support their teachers actively.

Teachers are the most important resource for providing quality learning. Teachers at Protestant schools should act as role models including having doubts and dealing with failures. Continuous learning and self-development of teachers is a necessity. Providers of Protestant schools should try to support teachers’ health, pay them properly and encourage their professional development.
Protestant schools intend to understand their role within the educational landscape.

Education is not only the objective and duty of schools, but needs parents, youth organizations, neighbourhoods, peers, parishes and other stakeholders. Protestant schools should cooperate actively, aware that they are part of a wider educational landscape.
Our Vision

The theological and pedagogical understanding outlined above leads to the following aspirations for Protestant schools, forming a vision of an ideal towards which all can work.

Protestant schools look forward, encouraging young people to take responsibility for their own lives, guiding them towards meaningful work and giving them a sense of purpose in life. They prepare them to take a positive role in society, inspiring them with a strong sense of social responsibility and encouraging them to be people of integrity wherever they go. These schools are communities of hope, where achievements are celebrated, character is formed, self-discipline is learned and service is undertaken. The Latin phrase “semper reformanda” reminds us that reflection and self-criticism are valued. Students and staff alike are enabled to develop as whole persons. Professional knowledge, understanding and skills are used to create a culture in which each person is valued and given a vision of what he or she can contribute to the whole.

The depth of understanding in Protestant schools comes from an inner spiritual life which gives those who work and learn in them the strength and resourcefulness to face the different challenges which life presents. Prayer, reading the Bible and experience of Christian community and worship bring together a diverse group of teachers and learners for the common educational task. There is a shared understanding of the holistic purpose of a school. There is gratitude and admiration for those who give freely of their time and expertise to support others. There is an appreciation of good progress made in adverse circumstances. There is a care for the created world with which people have been entrusted.

These attitudes enable Protestant schools to focus on children, to emphasise the importance of learning, to value each area of the curriculum and to maximise opportunities at school for each pupil.
to get a good and secure foundation for life. These schools teach
discernment and pass on wisdom; they prize honesty and integrity;
they believe that actions speak louder than words, but that words
matter, too; they see leadership as service and good governance as
vital. They are not afraid to challenge and question prevailing cultural
norms, but they are also prepared to accept and learn new things.
They are places of human growth and change, made possible by the
universal Christian message of redemption and new life.