



**Opening speech by Maud de Boer-Buquicchio,
Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe
Standing Conference of Ministers of Education,
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Dear Ministers, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Barack Obama has said "The future belongs to the nation that best educates its children". I agree with him. Education is an investment for the future, a link to the past, and a dynamic component of the present day society. I would say that the past, present and future belong to the countries which best educate their children.

I am very pleased to be with you here to open the 23rd Standing Conference of Ministers of Education. I would like to thank most warmly the Slovenian authorities, in particular Minister Lukšič, Minister of Education and Sport, for hosting this Conference and for their close co-operation with the Council of Europe during its organisation.

Since its accession to the Council of Europe, Slovenia has shown a great commitment to our activities on education.

I would mention in particular that in October of last year, during their Chairmanship of the Organisation, the Slovenia authorities hosted a regional ministerial conference on higher education reform. Today's Conference marks the continuation of this close collaboration.

This Conference of Ministers of Education comes at an important juncture for our Organisation. Our new Secretary General, Torbjørn Jagland, was elected in autumn 2009 with a strong and clear mandate to pursue an ambitious programme of reform. Within the European architecture of today, and faced with new and complex challenges on our continent and beyond, our Organisation must take up and play its rightful political role. In order to do so, we must focus on what we do best, where we can add the most value, and where we can make a real impact.

Among the different organisations working at the European level, we contribute to what the Secretary General has called "deep security" in Europe. The fundamental values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law protect and support citizens in their daily lives, providing this security. The Council of Europe has a unique expertise in standard-setting, monitoring and co-operation, bringing together almost all European countries under a single framework.

By doing so it is deepening our democratic structures, enabling us as Europeans to come together for a better future.

The work of the European Court of Human Rights and our other monitoring institutions are crucial and enjoy the most visibility. But other aspects of our work, which have been called in the past the "enabling factors" are equally vital.

Indeed, the distinction which has been made in the past between "core values" and "enabling factors" now seems artificial. For what could be more core than the right to social cohesion, a quality environment and access to high-quality education for all?

I am convinced that education, which runs as a red thread through many of our activities, builds and sustains the bedrock of a healthy and secure society. Value-driven legal standards and instruments can only be genuinely effective if they are both understood and accepted throughout society. They cannot remain the preserve of the few, an intellectual bastion or ivory tower which means nothing to the man, woman or child in the street. We must win hearts and minds. We must build a culture of mutual respect, understanding and social inclusion, where there is a common will to seek peaceful means of resolving any differences.

In stormy weather, roots and foundations matter most, and faced with global instability and emerging threats, we must be able to count on this bedrock of stability.

Education is a fundamental right. It is a right not only in terms of access but also in terms of outcomes. We all recognise the importance of education as a vector of economic success. The global economic crisis and emergence of new countries as major economic players has put this aspect high on political agendas. But I would venture that the role of education in fostering democratic citizenship should be given no less political prominence.

Dear Ministers, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to ask you:

If education plays such a key role in developing stable and sustainable societies, what does this mean for the role of teachers?

How can it be that this profession does not always have the acknowledgement and status it deserves?

We entrust our most precious asset - our children - to the care of teachers for the best part of their formative years. And yet, we accord to teachers far less recognition than that which we give to most other professionals.

What can we do to ensure that this profession attracts the right people and that they receive initial and on-going training and development of their competences? How can we protect the resources needed for this, in a situation of economic crisis?

How to better involve teachers as partners in decision-making on educational policy and reform, so that we can fully benefit from their on-the-ground experience and commitment?

What are their rights and their responsibilities and how do these articulate with the rights and responsibilities of parents and pupils?

These are some of the questions which will be debated during this Conference.

Albert Einstein once said that intellectual growth should commence at birth and cease only at death.

I trust that you, as Ministers of Education, will make the decisions and provide the support that enable us to create the kind of societies in which we would like our children and grandchildren to live – societies that are sustainable environmentally and economically, but also politically, socially and culturally. Societies which grow intellectually. Education, and teachers in particular, will help determine whether Europe will be in the coming years a society in

which everybody - whatever their origin, background and level - can live together as equals in dignity.

Thank you for your attention and I wish you a most successful Conference.