

# Conference on Education for All in Europe and North America

6 to 8 February 2000, Warsaw, Poland



## In search of quality

In most of Europe and North America, access to basic education has generally been achieved. But its quality has declined everywhere under the impact of two distinct factors - economic crisis in the East and a general trend towards the curtailment of the state in the West. Because they are slow to adapt, education systems have not responded to these developments. Teacher training and the publication of new textbooks, for example, lag too far behind expectations and needs.

Rural areas are at a disadvantage, notably in Central and Eastern Europe, mostly because regional decentralization rarely comes with an adequate budget. Some village schools have reached crisis point. In rural Romania, for example, the situation of post-primary education is critical. Of the total number of pupils enrolled in secondary school, at the beginning of the 1996/97 school year, only 6.4 percent were located in rural areas.

Although socio-economic background and parents' educational level play a role, good results everywhere depend on the quality of instruction. In Great Britain a qualitative analysis reveals that 3 per cent of schools cannot provide an acceptable level of education. Another 10 per cent have serious deficiencies.

In many Western European countries, young people are increasingly disenchanted with schooling. The British government stated in 1997 that absenteeism and the expulsion of students had become a serious issue: each year, at least one million children regularly miss classes, 100,000 are expelled temporarily and 13,000 permanently excluded from school.

Can an education be said to be of quality when it no longer guarantees meaningful employment, even in rich countries? "You study, you make sacrifices, and in the end, what do you have? Nothing," says Rachida Bensmilli, 22, a business student in Paris, France. "Sometimes I just think that it's not worth it. Employment perspectives are so bleak."

How to adapt to new conditions while improving quality? This is the new challenge to education in the region. It demands addressing the

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Press contact:  
**Teresa Murtagh**  
UNESCO  
7, place de Fontenoy  
75352 Paris 07 SP  
Tel: 33 1 45 68 21 27  
Fax: 33 1 45 68 56 29  
E-mail:  
[t.murtagh@unesco.org](mailto:t.murtagh@unesco.org)



whole system from pre-school up. It implies improving teacher training, teaching and learning materials, learning achievement and drop-out, and the vast disparities between privileged urban and neglected rural schools.

Nor will these reforms come free. The falling birth rates in Europe are lessening the demographic pressure on education budgets, thus freeing up extra resources that can be channelled to deal with the real challenges of basic education. In some regions, the number of 3 to 6-year-olds has gone down by 10 per cent to 45 per cent. This is good news for education ministers who can now concentrate on quality.



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