

*Velkommen til Stavanger*

Honourable Mayor of the County of Rogaland  
Ladies and Gentlemen  
Dear colleagues,

Let's open the ninth ESHA biannual Conference in this welcoming city of Stavanger, and in this beautiful country of Norway.

I want to say that this conference is an important one, and you are right not to have missed it. First of all, it takes place at a moment when Europe is growing at a speed never experienced before. You may remember that – two years ago – when we met at the eighth conference in Tallin, Estonia, the theme was: “the widening house of education”. The house has widened indeed, at a speed that none of us had imagined at that moment: the European Union now includes twenty-five member countries instead of fifteen. But you are also perfectly aware that, if the European Union is widening at a fast pace, ESHA has already gone beyond that point. I am proud to remember that, since the beginning, ESHA has not shrunk its boundaries within those of the political European Union; its homeland is each and every country where European values and traditions in the field of education are honoured and put into practice. The whole of Europe is our country when it comes to education.

There is another reason why this opportunity of meeting has to be considered an important one. Everywhere in this continent, school systems that used to be very different are on their way to finding a common field of convergence in giving each school the autonomy for deciding upon many important issues. And this trend calls for an even more important role of school heads, as leaders towards change, as guarantors for school level to parents and students, as negotiators with local stakeholders. More and more, the quality of education is school leader-related, not to say school leader-dependent. And evidence of this is not far away: here and now, during this conference, is running the first module of ESLN, a training course conceived for school heads from many different countries, united in searching for similar ways and mutual inspiration for their common task. They want to be architects of change for their communities: and they will succeed together. Let's greet them.

There is still a third reason not to be forgotten, especially these days. In a world where cultural gaps and ethnical rivalries are growing at a fast pace, schools have a fundamental and strategic role to play in spreading a message of peace and solidarity throughout Europe, and beyond. If any hope still exists of repelling the shadows of ignorance, the assaults of fear, the waves of fanaticism and violence, this hope cannot live without school and education. And, unfortunately, it is not a coincidence that violence and fanaticism chose a school as their most recent target. It is not only because it is an easy field for raising and spreading global horror and fear: it is also because school is the most powerful enemy of fundamentalism and of the moral and intellectual slavery that it would like to impose all over the world. We are well aware that the massacre of children in Beslan is a poisonous fruit of hate against civilisation and education. Those children are also our children, because they are the children of all the men and women of good will that live and act in schools; those who spend their lives in feeding the minds and the hearts, to prevent them from falling victims of ignorance and prejudice. We want to say here aloud and clear: ignorance and prejudice will not prevail.

Europe is great for us: but it is still part of a much wider world. For this reason it is important not to lose contact with other international associations that gather principals from different regions and continents. It is a good tradition now that representatives from partner organisations are invited to our biannual meetings. It's a great pleasure and a great honour to me to welcome here

- Mrs. Nola Hambleton, from New Zealand, president of the International Confederation of Principals, whose member associations cover all the five continents

- Mrs. Cindy Rudrud, from the United States of America, president of the National Associations of Secondary Schools Principals
- Mr. David Vodila , also from NASSP

Their experience and their humanity are a resource for all of us. I invite you to warmly welcome them and to take profit from their presence here for getting valuable information about what is happening in the world of education. If Europe is widening at a fast pace, the world, on the other hand, is narrowing at a faster pace, at least as far as cultural and intellectual issues are concerned. What used to be far away is now in our backyard. Let's not ignore it. Be aware; be curious; be open-minded.

Of course, a conference like this requires a lot of work for it to be made possible and to run smoothly. And this requires that many people spend much time to this end.

It would be impossible to thank them all now: I would at least like to remind you of some of them, that have been in these last two years totally committed to preparing our stay:

- Elj Vinje, president of our host association, the Norwegian association of principals
- Marit Midtskog, principal of a primary school in Smeaheia
- Ruth Hope, principal of a primary school in Eigerøy
- Kjersti Hasseloo, head of studies from an upper secondary school in Romsdal

Although the city of Stavanger is used to hosting many international events, this conference is certainly a special one, for the number of the attendees as well as for the kind of interests that they represent. We are very grateful to the Mayor of Stavanger and to the Mayor of the County of Rogaland who generously gave their support for hosting this event and who will welcome us later this evening in the Red Sea Houses. Many thanks to both of them.

The ESHA board too has worked hard in preparing this conference. But, in addition, they have also worked on many other issues: one of them, that has already been mentioned, is the ESLN course. Another is the adoption of a structured and forward-looking activity plan. And, moreover: the start of a series of "position papers" about the most relevant issues for education. The first of them has been officially adopted by the General Board this morning. The following ones will be prepared and adopted – with the active cooperation of all the members of the board – twice a year at least for the three coming years. They will clarify and communicate the vision of ESHA about crucial themes, like inclusion, school autonomy, quality evaluation and so on.

I could also add: a lobbying activity in Brussels, a professional secretariat. And much more.

For this intense activity, I have to thank all those that have been members of the Executive Board of ESHA during the last three years. I ask you to honour them with very warm cheers:

- John McNally, past member
- Kate Griffin, actual member
- Alan Stockley, actual member and Treasurer
- Jorma Lempinen, actual member and General Secretary

They all well deserved your thanks. But one, that I have not mentioned yet, has to be especially honoured and thanked, because many of the results that I mentioned before come from his impulse and his vision; and from his long dating work in the ESHA Board. Please, applaud:

- Jan Gispen, immediate Past President of ESHA

It would not be fair if I omitted here to mention another member of the past Executive Board, to whom our community owes very much and who is not here for health reasons:

- Anders Cassne has been for a long time an active member of the Board and has been President Elect of ESHA since 2001. He should have been here in my place at this moment, as ESHA President.

He could not assume this role, because his heart prevented him from doing so and obliges him to stay home instead of being here. The General Board held last Spring in Budapest decided to nominate him as honorary life member of ESHA, the highest distinction that our statutes reserve to those that have greatly contributed to the cause of education in Europe.

He well deserved it: and it's my great regret that he is unable to be here to receive the thanks and the greetings of all of you, the community to which he dedicated so great a part of his life.

Our conference programme is a rich and various one, as you may have seen. There is space for listening and debating, for working and for chatting, for culture and for fun. I would like to remind you of the names of the well known keynote speakers that you will have the opportunity to listen to in the coming two days:

- professor Louise Stoll, President of the International Congress for School Effectiveness and School Improvement
- doctor Tony Wagner, from the Harvard Graduate School of Education
- professor John Mac Beath, from Cambridge University
- professor Michael Schratz, from the University of Innsbruck

I am sure that you will find their speeches fascinating and stimulating. And I am sure that you will be intensely attracted by the workshops too, that offer to everyone so wide a range of options.

There is another initiative hosted in our conference, worth drawing your attention upon. Some colleagues from BBS (a Dutch organisation of former and active school leaders, with focus on education in European perspective) are carrying on a research about the European dimension in preparatory vocational education in different EU countries. Part of their inquiry will take place during this conference, since here is to be found a lot of knowledge about that subject and it would be a good idea to mobilise it. I hope that you will give your contribute when asked. They will remain at a desk in the central hall during the coming two days.

But, as the Bible says, there is a time for everything in a man's life: and surely, in this conference there is time for fun. I hope that you will appreciate the various possibilities that our Norwegian hosts have organized for you.

I have to add one final consideration: despite all the opportunities that I mentioned earlier, I am and remain convinced that the greatest advantage of this conference comes from elsewhere: it stays with you and it comes from yourselves. All that has been forecast and prepared for was, of course, something that it was possible to forecast and prepare: and hence it was not completely original and new. You are the real added value: communicating to each other your own experience, sharing competence and issues, finding solutions together. That is the benefit that no one but yourselves could supply to this community.

This is the real aim of our biannual meeting: and here lies the most important wealth for all of the educators in Europe and beyond.

May the conference start. And enjoy it.

Antonino Petrolino  
ESHA President