



INTERNATIONAL  
ASSOCIATION OF  
**Educating  
Cities**

# INTERVIEW

## MAYOR OF BRUSSELS

**Mr. Philippe Close**

After being appointed Mayor in 2017, you were elected in the 2018 elections. What is your assessment of these years in office?

Next year we will reach the end of this term. One of our goals was to provide each neighbourhood in the city with social, educational, cultural, recreational, and sports services to which our fellow citizens are entitled. We want to create a "ten-minute city" to improve the quality of life, reduce social polarization between territories, prevent certain neighbourhoods from becoming isolated, and combat the isolation of vulnerable individuals.

We have made progress in these areas because the City of Brussels is committed to the principles of solidarity and equal opportunities that underpin our inclusive city project.

All these principles are at the heart of our educational and pedagogical objectives. For example, we have supported the provision of free public services, and in particular those services that revolve around compulsory education.

Although education is free in Belgium, families have to bear the associated costs. At present, the City of Brussels covers the cost of school materials, including certain computer tools for personal use, swimming and extracurricular activities and - last but not least - meals in a large number of school establishments from its budget and/or with the support of the responsible bodies.



Of course, during this term we have had to deal with very serious crises. The Covid-19 pandemic mobilised an enormous amount of resources to mitigate its consequences for society as a whole. From the educational point of view, we have provided the best possible support to students and the public at large, continuously adapting schools and libraries to make them accessible in line with the evolution of the pandemic and health protection measures. Since the end of the pandemic, the city has contributed to the resilience of society, particularly children and young people who have suffered from high socialisation and learning delays.

The war in Ukraine has forced us to overcome ourselves once again, given the dramatic human consequences. The city, its inhabitants and businesses also have to bear the socio-economic consequences of this war, with the enormous problem of rising energy prices and galloping inflation. More than ever, solidarity is the basis of our political action.

Tell us about the city of Brussels. What are the defining characteristics of the city? What are its challenges and strengths in relation to education in the city?

The most striking feature of the city is its socio-cultural diversity. Our capital is home to more than 180 different nationalities. This is possible because the people of Brussels foster a spirit of encounter and solidarity between people. We want to make our differences a source of strength!

The challenge is therefore to "build our city together": this starts at school, from the earliest age, and is based on a pedagogical and educational project, in which citizenship classes and "Philo" workshops, for example, are essential.

In addition, our city is the capital of the country and manages a large number of public institutions in different sectors that serve the population of the whole region, far beyond the municipal boundaries. The educational network has more than 30,000 students, ranging from pre-school to higher education, qualifications, arts, social advancement, etc. It also includes a remarkable collection of public libraries.



The city also co-manages several large university hospitals, some of them specialised, especially in paediatrics. In addition, of course, there are numerous cultural centres, theatres, sports centres, etc., which are also part of the concept of an "educating city".

This is clearly an important asset, as it allows us to forge strong links and develop innovative projects and partnerships that are essential to our education. I am thinking, for example, of the civic practices of our 16-17 year old pupils in hospitals, nursery schools and old people's homes, the partnership between primary schools and the Théâtre de la Montagne Magique (the Magic Mountain Theatre) or the libraries within the framework of the "J'aime lire dès la maternelle" ("I like to read from nursery school") programme, etc.

In addition, countless educational, cultural, social and recreational events are organised throughout the city, in the neighbourhoods, in the streets and in schools. These events can have national or international resonance - exhibitions in federal museums, congresses, concerts, festivals, etc. - but they can also be local - street parties in which social, heritage and environmental appropriation takes place.

Can you briefly explain what are the city's main responsibilities in formal education and does the city also have other responsibilities in the field of non-formal education and lifelong learning?

The city has a unique educational network in Belgium. The municipality coordinates more than a hundred schools, from kindergarten to higher education. I often say that you can learn everything in the city. From ancient languages to welding and other advanced trades. Science or nursing, applied arts or carpentry...

It is a tradition that dates back to the 19th century, and it is one of our proudest achievements, as well as one of our top priorities. We are convinced of the emancipating role of education for children, young people and adults throughout their lives.

To keep pace with demographic changes and the demands of the professions of the future, the city constantly adapts its educational offer and invests enormous resources in its public education system.



Adult education has also been a priority for a long time: we offer education for social advancement of a remarkable quality, enabling thousands of our fellow citizens to enter professions, which are often in short supply, that fulfill their aspirations.

The role of public libraries is undoubtedly that of lifelong learning: in this respect, I would like to mention the "Open +" libraries, which are now accessible outside normal opening hours, in the evening, thanks to an automated system for opening the doors, allowing the entire population to benefit from study, reading or research spaces, and especially the Internet.

Finally, the city also teaches music and the arts to thousands of children, young people and adults in its academies. They can learn any musical instrument and any style, as well as dance, theatre, opera, graphic and visual techniques, etc.

### Could you tell us about some concrete measures that illustrate the inclusive growth plan?

The issue of affordable housing is essential in such a diverse city. We face a huge demand for social rental housing and we also want the younger generation, who want it so much, to be able to access home ownership. Urban diversity is a response to these challenges. It is reflected in the renovation of neighbourhoods and multifunctional buildings with public funds.

In response to demographic pressure, we have renovated or built housing linked to public infrastructure. For example, we have schools that have been designed at the same time as social housing, accessible to all pockets: these schools share certain spaces with other local actors, for example the sports halls in the afternoons.

With regard to the challenge of migration, we are working to offer a dignified and respectful welcome to all, by developing specific measures, such as the creation in 2017 of the "BAPA BXL", the New Arrivals Reception Office.



These facilities allow all people who come to live in Brussels to benefit from a welcome programme, to acquire the keys to understanding our society and our institutions, to receive support in settling in and learning the language, etc.

Our aim is to facilitate a positive and emancipating inclusion, and we hope that everyone can actively participate in the construction of a welcoming and supportive city.



Brussels aspires to become a "10-minute city", where citizens have access to all essential services within 10 minutes of their homes. What strategies are you pursuing to achieve this goal?

The "10-minute city", which we have already discussed, is a social and economic priority. But it also has implications for the environment. This is vital if we want to reach the zero carbon target and if we want city life to remain pleasant in the face of climate change.

In addition, there are a whole range of educational initiatives that go hand in hand with these goals and have ecological imperatives.

In schools, business, commerce, tourism and leisure, there are initiatives to raise environmental awareness. For example, in urban planning, the city educates homeowners, tenants and all residents on good practices for saving energy and water, sorting waste, promoting renewable energies and the circular economy.

Brussels is a cosmopolitan and multicultural city with more than 180 nationalities. How does the city promote equal opportunities?

In addition to the educational, awareness-raising and prevention work we carry out in our schools, the city has an "Equal Opportunities Unit" which fights discrimination against LGBTQI+ people, people with disabilities, women and the Brussels population of foreign origin. The aim is to launch awareness-raising initiatives aimed at citizens to fight against stereotypes of inequality that are still very much present in our society. These stereotypes are contrary to our ideals of an inclusive city.

Brussels is known for its openness: our country was one of the first in the world to authorise marriage for all, for example. The capital is famous for its annual "Pride" festival, a festive occasion, but a reminder that there is still a long way to go to achieve full equality in practice and in people's minds.

In the Department of Education, for example, we have created a "Gender Unit" dedicated to organising activities on all these issues in our schools. Sport is a gateway for students to reflect on issues of gender discrimination and sexual orientation. Ateliers Philo" (Philosophy Workshops) are organised in our classes to invite students to reflect on these issues, free from stereotypes. This is essential if we want to build a fair, inclusive and caring city.



Since 2017, the "School Contract" programme has been running in Brussels, which aims to improve the school environment and the relationship between the school and the neighborhood. Can you explain what this initiative consists of?

We have already talked about social and functional diversity. The "School Contract" is a regional urban renewal programme aimed at improving the school environment and strengthening the relationship between the school and the neighbourhood, through investments in the school and its surroundings over a five-year period (maximum budget of 2.5 million euros per contract).

These actions aim to integrate schools into the urban environment in order to open them up to their surroundings. They target schools whose pupils are at risk of vulnerability. To date, the city has carried out several contracts of this type.

7. We note that most of the experiences that your city has shared with the IAEC network give primary importance to principle no. 20 of the Charter of Educating Cities "Education for democratic and global citizenship".



Why is it important for cities to educate for democratic and active citizenship?

Of course, the experience of the Department of Education of the City of Brussels in the field of democratic citizenship is remarkable.

We believe it is vital to raise pupils' awareness of citizenship. We want to train "C.R.A.C.S." (responsible, active, critical and supportive citizens). As I said, all our students aged 16-17 years do a 30-hour civic internship. This allows them to immerse themselves in civic life in public organisations, hospitals, libraries, NGOs and so on. It is a unique programme in Belgium. We are proud of it, because the feedback we receive from our partners, students, teachers and families is extremely positive, in terms of maturity, understanding of social issues and civic engagement.

We also have every year a group of schoolchildren from the city who travel to Israel-Palestine with an NGO that organises a programme called "Pour mieux comprendre" ("To understand better"): these pupils go to meet the local population and come back as "ambassadors of connections", free from prefabricated stereotypes.

All these educational initiatives are the basis for a better society.

Improving the mental health of the population is one of the concerns of local councils in the aftermath of the pandemic. Is culture a way to contribute to improving mental health? Can you explain any initiatives in this regard?

The reopening of the cultural spaces after Covid-19 was seen as a much-needed breath of fresh air for the people of Brussels.

In our capital there are many examples of popular culture, a "Brussels" sense of festivity. The city has happily rediscovered the festivals that have made it famous in all genres of music.

Last summer, we had the "Summer Pop", small travelling fairs, reminiscent of village festivals, set up in three districts of the city for workshops and games in their caravans. Our "Plaisirs d'Hiver" (winter pleasures) are among the best Christmas markets in Europe and attract a large number of tourists.

The issue of mental health is a worrying one: our fellow citizens are under multiple stresses, including ecological anxiety. Mental health has a huge social, family and professional impact. Everything possible must be done, starting at school, to clear the mind, especially through culture.

Our school programmes include a "Cultural and Artistic Education Itinerary", with an annual project for primary schools (this year, Molière's theatre; next year, Art Nouveau). It seems that some doctors have also decided to "prescribe" cultural visits to their patients; this shows the importance of what some consider a "pastime", but which is so vital for our well-being.





The city of Brussels was elected at the Andong General Assembly in October 2022 as a new member of the IAEC Executive Committee. What motivated you to apply and what do you think is the most important aspect of being a member of this Association?

As a member of the IAEC Executive Committee, the city wishes to be active, in particular to bring together cities in Northern Europe in activities of discovery and joint reflection on the Educating City.

Because of the size of the city and its human resources, Brussels has expertise in countless areas related to education.

It is an international city and the seat of a large number of international bodies, notably the European Union, its Parliament and Commission, all of which are levers for action to raise awareness of the principles of the Educating City.

We are used to organising international meetings and welcoming groups from all over the world. We are fully convinced of the added value that international organisations such as the IAEC offer to share experiences and enrich us with the plurality of educational and pedagogical points of view.

