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OBESSU Position Paper on Multi-Stakeholder Cooperation in School Governance

Introduction: A Foundational Shift for European Education

The Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU) represents school students in Europe since 1975 and has ever since been advocating for participatory, inclusive and quality education for all. As OBESSU, we wish to assert that multi-stakeholder cooperation (MSC) is the cornerstone of modern, effective school governance. The traditional, hierarchical management models of the past are insufficient to address the complex challenges facing our societies, including democratic backsliding, systemic inequality, and the need for digital and green transitions.

Achieving a resilient, democratic, and inclusive European Education Area (EEA)1 requires a foundational shift towards shared ownership and collective intelligence. This position outlines our common principles for MSC, the necessary foundations for genuine engagement, and the strategic alignment required to turn cooperation into resourceful, tangible action for all learners.

Key Principles Building on European Cooperation

Our vision for school governance is rooted in a "polycentric" model, the whole-community and whole school approach, which moves beyond tokenistic consultation to active co-creation. Such approaches are evident from practices driven by European cooperation, including initiatives like the EEA Strategic Framework2, the Erasmus+3 priority on democratic life, and co-creation tools such as SELFIE4. The Digital Education Action Plan5 further validates this approach by promoting collaborative development methodologies that engage all stakeholders meaningfully.

As OBESSU, our work and engagement with stakeholders build upon three interconnected principles that form the foundation of effective multi-stakeholder cooperation.

First, shared ownership recognizes that governance must constitute a collective responsibility distributed among students, teachers, parents, school leaders, and the wider community. This principle transforms educational governance from top-down mandates into a culture where all stakeholders hold genuine responsibility for addressing shared challenges and advancing common goals.

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[1] European Education Area by 2025", 2021 - https://education.ec.europa.eu/about-eea

[2] European Commission, "Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European education area and beyond" - https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/strategic-framework-for-european-cooperation-in-education-and-training-towards-the-european-education-area-and-beyond.html

[3] European Commision, "Erasmus+ Programme Guide - Priority: Inclusion and diversity in all fields of education, training, youth and sport. Specific focus on participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement" - https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-a/priorities-of-the-erasmus-programme

[4] European Commission, SELFIE (Self-reflection on Effective Learning by Fostering the use of Innovative Educational Technologies) - https://education.ec.europa.eu/selfie

[5] European Commission, Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027), 2020 - https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan

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Second, distributed leadership ensures that genuine cooperation extends beyond symbolic gestures to encompass the meaningful distribution of decision-making powers and resources. This empowerment enables each stakeholder group to contribute effectively according to their unique perspectives and expertise, ensuring that policies respond to diverse needs rather than bureaucratic convenience. Such distribution creates the conditions for innovation and responsiveness that hierarchical structures cannot achieve.

Third, consensus and negotiation establish the procedural framework through which multi-stakeholder cooperation functions effectively. A properly designed framework actively fosters negotiation and builds consensus, restraining any single actor from monopolizing control while constructing more resilient and widely accepted solutions. This principle ensures that the inevitable tensions among stakeholder perspectives become productive forces for creating robust, balanced policies rather than sources of paralysis or domination.

Foundations of Engagement

For these principles to become a reality, OBESSU demands the establishment of formal, structural foundations for meaningful and inclusive learner engagement. Collective responses to collective challenges are only possible when the mechanisms for engagement are guaranteed, inclusive, and holistic.

Therefore, our demands focus on:

1. **Formal and Structured Representation:** We call for guaranteed, structured representation of school students in all relevant decision-making bodies, from the local school board to national and European policy forums. OBESSU supports a clear target of equipping 100% of schools with democratic, representative structures by 2030.

2. **Inclusive and Mandatory Forums:** Engagement must be proactively inclusive. We call for mandatory Parent-Student-Teacher forums and student-led inclusion reviews to ensure that all voices, especially those of marginalized and underrepresented learners, are actively sought out and meaningfully heard.

3. **Holistic Co-Creation:** We call for a holistic approach in student engagement, which entails that it extends to the very core of the educational experience. This includes the co-development of curricula, learning methods, and assessment (examples and good practices can be seen through projects like ELNE and InclusivET). More concretely:

    a. Advancing and reinforcing the democratic culture[6] within the education sector and each institution, it is extremely important to monitor and evaluate the level of cooperation and its outcomes. Thus, in line **with ELNE's recommendations**, we also support the definition set on "***collaborative leadership***"[7].

[6] Educational Leadership Network Europe (ELNE), Policy Recommendations on Collaborative School and Educational Leadership from the Perspective of Learning Communities and Evidence-Informed Policymaking and Practice (Jun' 2025) - https://www.elnenetwork.org/global/gene - PR_Learning Communities and Evidence-Informed Policymaking and Practice

[7] Educational Leadership Network Europe (ELNE), Policy Recommendations on proposing a European definition of Collaborative School and Educational Leadership (Sep'2025) - www.elnenetwork.org/global/gene - PR_Collaborative School and Educational Leadership

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b. Furthermore, it necessitates the adoption of mandatory well-being metrics that measure the social, emotional, and mental health of the school community, ensuring governance serves the whole person.

Alignment for Visibility and Resourceful Action

Cooperation among all educational stakeholders must be enacted to secure the visibility and resources needed to achieve meaningful progress. Strategic partnerships and common positions, formalised through instruments such as Memorandums of Understanding, break down the traditional organisational silos that have fragmented educational advocacy and limited collective impact.

This alignment sends a clear, unified message to policymakers at local, national, and European levels, reinforcing our shared, student-centred goals while demonstrating the breadth and depth of support for multistakeholder approaches. Such partnerships amplify individual voices into a powerful collective demand that policymakers cannot easily dismiss or ignore.

Furthermore, the proposal for European School Alliances[8] represents a significant opportunity to operationalize these partnerships through dedicated funding for multi-stakeholder networks addressing systemic challenges. As OBESSU, we intend to bring the learners' perspectives into this initiative to ensure that the practices, resources, and structures put in place foster and apply our polycentric whole-school approach in tackling the complex, interconnected challenges faced by contemporary education systems.

Additionally, all educational actors must be empowered to take on this approach by themselves. Thus, we call for the strategic deployment of local, national, and European Union funds to support the development of democratic, cooperative competencies across the whole educational community.

This investment must prioritize the development of the competencies essential for active citizenship and democratic participation for all learners, including democratic literacy, critical thinking, global citizenship education[9], digital citizenship education, and AI literacy. Professional development for educators and school leaders must similarly emphasize the skills required to facilitate genuine multi-stakeholder cooperation, including collaborative leadership, consensus-building, and inclusive facilitation methodologies.

Our Shared Commitment

Multi-stakeholder cooperation should not be understood as an optional complement to existing governance structures, but as the primary mechanism for shaping the future of European education. The complex challenges confronting our societies demand approaches that harness collective intelligence, distribute responsibility, and ensure that those most affected by educational decisions participate meaningfully in shaping them.

The European Education Area will fulfill its promise only when governance structures genuinely reflect and respond to the needs of every student.

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[8] European Commission, "Proposal for European School Alliances as networks supporting multistakeholder cooperation to address systemic educational challenges.", 2024 - https://education.ec.europa.eu/news/european-school-alliances

[9] UNESCO, "Global Citizenship Education (GCE) - Educational framework aimed at empowering learners to engage and assume active roles to face and resolve global challenges." - https://www.unesco.org/en/education/global-citizenship

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Through principled multi-stakeholder cooperation, robust foundations for engagement, and aligned action, we can create education systems that serve the development, well-being, and empowerment of all learners across Europe.

By aligning the efforts of all educational actors, we can ensure that school governance is democratic in principle, inclusive in practice, and resourceful in action, ultimately delivering a European Education Area that serves the needs of every student. As OBESSU, we commit to engaging with all partners to build upon this strategic common ground, recognising that the transition from hierarchical to polycentric governance represents both an opportunity and an obligation.

About OBESSU

The Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU) represents school students in Europe since 1975 and has ever since been advocating for participatory, inclusive and quality education for all.

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