



# Policy Paper on Student Welfare

**[Adopted at the General Assembly 2016 - Amsterdam]**

## 1 Introduction

2 OBESSU – The Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions is the platform for  
3 cooperation between the national school student unions active in general secondary and  
4 secondary vocational education in Europe. OBESSU has 24 member organisations, 1  
5 candidate organisation and 2 affiliate organisations from all over Europe.

6 OBESSU defends education as a human right and as a cornerstone for a successful society. All  
7 school students should have an equal opportunity to use their full potential and for personal  
8 growth, leading to success. The personal well-being of school students needs to be respected,  
9 protected and fulfilled in order to fully exercise the right to education.

10 OBESSU has worked over several years on multiple aspects of school student well-being. The  
11 policy paper on School Student Welfare gives an overview of school student well-being and  
12 welfare, to point out the spaces for development and to call governments and public  
13 institutions to take action in this area. The policy paper is the outcome of a process within  
14 OBESSU involving the Working Group on Student Welfare, the Convention on Student  
15 Welfare, Well-being and Social Autonomy (2-8 November 2015) and the contributions of  
16 OBESSU Member, Candidate and Affiliate Organisations.

## 17 **School Student well-being and school student welfare - a definition.**

18 OBESSU understands school student well-being as the situation in which all school students'  
19 human needs are met and covered and allow him\_her to fully focus in education. These needs  
20 include, for example, a comfortable economic situation, good physical and mental health as  
21 well as the ability to challenge one's self and experience satisfaction. Well-being occurs on an  
22 individual as well as on a community level. Thus, school students' well-being is also  
23 influenced by the whole community and the role of school students in it.

24 School student welfare includes all the measures that ensure that a school student's economic,  
25 health and social well-being is provided, fulfilled and protected. This further enables the  
26 school student to focus on education and individual growth.

27 For the purpose of clarity in this policy paper, economic, social and health well-being are  
28 discussed individually. These three aspects defined as parts of school student welfare are  
29 highly interlinked and all of them are important for the overall well-being of school students.

30 Social rights as such mentioned in the above paragraphs have been and are widely recognised  
31 by national and international legislation, starting from the Universal Declaration on Human



32 Rights. More specifically we look at the International Covenant on Economic, Social and  
33 Cultural Rights (1966) or the Revised European Social Charter (1996). In both these  
34 documents the right to an adequate standard of living or the right to health protection are  
35 covered, as well as the right to cultural life. Taking into consideration the group of people we  
36 aim at, school students, another relevant document is the Convention on the Rights of the  
37 Child (1989) that includes not only ‘the right to an adequate standard of living’, ‘protection  
38 from any kind of exclusion or discrimination’, ‘the right to health and protection’, but also  
39 ‘the right to participate to all the matters affecting his/her life’.

40 Governments are the institutions primarily responsible for the respect, protection and  
41 fulfilment of social rights. OBESSU calls on all governments to fulfil their obligations and  
42 ensure that school student rights are respected, protected and fulfilled. OBESSU also  
43 encourages the European Union and other European institutions, all civil society  
44 organisations, school student unions, private stakeholders and individuals to also work for the  
45 respect of social rights.

46 Europe has been affected by a severe economic and financial crisis. Many European countries  
47 have reduced and are reducing their public spending on education, social, health and  
48 economic policies. Millions of citizens, among them school students, feel the consequences of  
49 these budget cuts on the fulfilment of their social rights. OBESSU has actively demanded  
50 governments and public institutions to keep the investment in these fields to maintain quality  
51 and ensure equality in all educational systems. More than ever, OBESSU insists in the need to  
52 ensure social rights of school students are respected, protected and fulfilled.

## 53 Economic well-being

54 There are many costs related to education. From OBESSU’s understanding, school students  
55 should be able to fully focus on their studies and not have to worry for their financial safety.  
56 School students have the right to live in dignity, as well as to have an adequate standard of  
57 living.

58 Poverty, economic difficulties within a household, the need to work to cover the costs for  
59 education have a negative impact on school students. Social exclusion, early school leaving,  
60 low performance in school, stress, consequences in their health and personal development can  
61 be examples of these impacts.

62 In order to ensure equal access to education and equal opportunities for all school students,  
63 we call on governments to ensure the economic well-being of school students. This will be  
64 achieved when we ensure free access to education without hidden costs. Financial support for  
65 secondary school students is essential, in order to guarantee the completion of education.

66 Education is often referred to as free in many countries in Europe. However, there are a large  
67 number of costs related to it. We refer to them as hidden costs as they are often overlooked,



68 though sometimes they make up for most of the education expenses. These include costs  
69 covering learning materials, transport, school trips, extracurricular activities and other  
70 resources needed to complete education. OBESSU sees hidden costs as a source of inequality  
71 in education.

72 Transportation costs and food costs usually make up for a significant part of a school student's  
73 monthly budget. We refer to them as hidden costs, as they are often overlooked. Available and  
74 affordable transportation means that a school student has access to education. When a school  
75 student finds himself\_herself in school, he\_she should not be leaving it in search for a quality  
76 and affordable meal. School meals should provide variety, and be free for all school students.

77 The network of schools does not always offer an opportunity for school students to attend a  
78 school close to their home. For example, it is often the case in rural areas that school students  
79 need to travel long distances to get to school and sometimes public transport is not adequate.  
80 In addition, there are cases where the network of schools is not sufficient for specific types of  
81 education. Therefore, OBESSU thinks measures should be taken in order to reduce the travel  
82 time of school students and to ensure their access to education. Such measures include  
83 improving the network of schools and providing free housing for school students.

84 Cultural and extracurricular activities are beneficial for the personal development of  
85 individuals. They offer school students additional knowledge and skills that are not  
86 necessarily offered in formal education, but are often too expensive for them. In order to  
87 ensure access to these activities and to promote cultural life among young people, OBESSU  
88 calls for free access to culture and extracurricular activities for all school students.

89 Situations where school students are forced to work during their studies to be able to cover  
90 financial expenses of any kind are to be avoided, as every school student has the right to  
91 concentrate fully on his\_her studies. When a mechanism for reducing or covering a school  
92 student's expenses is not enough or does not exist, the school student should be able to apply  
93 for a governmental student income that guarantees basic financial safety. A student income is  
94 to be granted to everyone who holds the status of a school student.

95 The importance of secondary education should not be overlooked nor should the livelihood of  
96 its students. The hidden costs facing secondary schools students can be as high as the costs of  
97 those at tertiary level. For this reason OBESSU believes that secondary school students  
98 should be treated equally and therefore OBESSU demands secondary school students to be  
99 allocated a financial aid in order to enable more students to pursue their education.

100 Therefore OBESSU demands:

- 101 • *Absolutely free education for all, free of hidden costs*
- 102 • *Schools to offer options in travel, food and supplies for school students*



- 103 • *Introduction of a student grant system to cover hidden costs when they do occur*
- 104 • *School students to receive financial aid to enable them to pursue their education*

## 105 Social well-being

106 OBESSU believes that school students have the right to a school environment that is safe,  
107 encouraging, supportive, free of discrimination and participatory. This will ensure the social  
108 well-being of school students which means they will have the appropriate conditions for  
109 learning, for expressing themselves and for fully developing.

110 Discrimination - in all its possible forms and expressions- is one of the most common issues in  
111 the school environment. Discrimination in schools is often based on ethnicity, gender,  
112 language, religion, socio-economic background, sex or sexual orientation. OBESSU thinks  
113 schools should ensure social inclusion and equality, and be the places where all kinds of  
114 discrimination are addressed.

115 Bullying, as one of the forms of discrimination, should be tackled with real and  
116 comprehensive anti-bullying measures. The entire school community should condemn these  
117 situations by for example peer mediation or tutoring systems in place and trained teachers for  
118 tackling the issues.

119 The actual teaching methods, the school curricula and the relation between school students  
120 and school personnel has a great impact on the school environment. OBESSU believes  
121 teaching methods should be diverse and adequate for different learning styles and needs.  
122 Additional support should be given to school students with need for it.

123 School students often feel that what they are learning is not relevant for their lives and they all  
124 have different interests. For these reasons, school curricula should be flexible and school  
125 students should have more freedom of choice in subjects they want to pursue. School students  
126 should also have the right to choose their subjects without being discriminated in any form  
127 while having the ability to attend individualised learning in personalised learning paths.

128 Human Rights Education and Education for Democratic Citizenship are a right of school  
129 students. Therefore all school students should be able to learn their rights and the rights of all  
130 humans, as well as the mechanisms in place to defend them. This should be included as a part  
131 of the school curricula. Intercultural, gender, global, financial and civic education will  
132 contribute to ensuring a safe environment for everyone as school students will be more  
133 educated about diversity in society and in school.

134 A healthy relationship between the school students and the teachers greatly contributes in  
135 ensuring a comfortable school environment. This relationship can only be maintained through  
136 mutual communication and support. Teacher-student ratios should be controlled, as a ratio  
137 too big makes it harder for the school students to focus and for the teacher to devote enough



138 attention to every school student. Secondly, by giving the school students the opportunity to  
139 evaluate the work of the teachers and their teaching methods, teachers get valuable feedback  
140 that helps them improve their work.

141 OBESSU stresses the importance of ensuring and strengthening the participation of school  
142 students in their daily life in school. This is important for the sense of belonging of school  
143 students and ensures a good school environment. There should be functioning school student  
144 councils and networks of school student councils to ensure school students are part of the  
145 decision making in the school and the society. Support for school students to create their  
146 associations, clubs and unions should be provided in order to promote a way that social  
147 activities in the school life.

148 Social support should be an integral part of the school. All schools should have available and  
149 certified student counsellors, social workers and mental health professionals to whom school  
150 students can talk to when they need it. Specific guidance in their secondary school years as  
151 well as regarding further education should be available for everyone throughout the school  
152 years. It is essential that all support professionals respect confidentiality and the privacy of  
153 the school students.

154 Therefore OBESSU demands:

- 155 • *A school environment free of discrimination of any kind*
- 156 • *Teaching methods and flexibility in studies to meet the individual needs of school*  
157 *students*
- 158 • *Schools ensuring participation at school for school students*
- 159 • *Social support such as study counsellors and study guidance should be provided by*  
160 *schools*

## 161 Physical and Mental Health

162 According to the World Health Organisation, health is defined as “a state of complete  
163 physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”.

164 Student’s physical and mental health is achieved by conducting specific prevention, detection  
165 and treatment measures. OBESSU thinks that much can be done to protect the physical and  
166 mental health of school students in schools because they spend a significant amount of time  
167 there. Schools should be modeled to provide health protection and health education to school  
168 students, as those two are important elements in achieving physical and mental health of the  
169 school students.

170 A healthy school student will be able to focus on his/her education, and take part in all the  
171 educational activities offered to him/her.



172 Starting with preventive measures, there are a number of actions that can be taken to ensure  
173 the well-being of school students.

174 Nutrition is one of the most relevant ones. Healthy food is not always provided in schools. If  
175 the school students are not given the option to eat well, they will have difficulties in following  
176 the assigned tasks in school. That is why including healthy nutritious food and snacks in the  
177 schools' cafeterias should be a priority, with options for school students nurturing a specific  
178 dietary regime (vegetarians, vegans, allergies etc)

179 Periodical medical check-ups would greatly affect the prediction and prevention of potential  
180 diseases and medical conditions. Medical checkups should include free services such as  
181 vaccinations and dental checks, for those who require.

182 School students should be provided access to free and confidential help of a medical  
183 professional when it comes to physical health, and a psychologist when it comes to mental  
184 health. If the medical problem goes beyond the expertise and capabilities of the mentioned  
185 health professionals, the student's problem should be addressed by the public healthcare  
186 system for free.

187 The environment of schools affects the school student's health greatly. Lack of ventilation,  
188 unhygienic conditions, inadequate toilets, lack of first aid resources and school personnel not  
189 taught how to react in case of a serious medical condition, all present a liability and a risk to  
190 school students' health. School facilities should also be equipped to offer support for school  
191 students with special health needs, and practice effective emergency safety drills, aimed  
192 towards protecting the school students and preventing possible health problems.

193 Changes in the curriculum should also be adapted to provide variety of physical activities for  
194 school students to take part in. Traditional selection of sports is unattractive to some school  
195 students and they tend to abstain from taking part in it. For example, adding activities like  
196 hiking provides the opportunity for the school students to spend time in the nature, and has a  
197 great impact on the school student's health.

198 OBESSU thinks, prevention and detection measures should be accompanied with  
199 comprehensive health education throughout the schooling period. Health education should  
200 include information on: nutrition and healthy lifestyle, first aid, emotional education and  
201 sexual education. By being educated on these four topics, school students learn about  
202 maintaining a healthy lifestyle and measures that protect their health. They also learn how to  
203 act when someone's health is endangered, which strengthens the community they live in.

204 Therefore OBESSU demands:

- 205 • *Healthy, affordable or free food should be available at school*
- 206 • *Free medical check-ups and physical and mental healthcare for all school students*



- 207 • *Healthy and clean school environment*
- 208 • *Adequate amount of physical activity for school students*
- 209 • *Comprehensive health education throughout different levels of school*