

# Policy Paper

## “School Students’ Europe 2024”

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### Introduction

In 2024, elections will be held throughout Europe in order to elect representatives at the European Parliament. These elections are a crucial moment for all who wish to take part in the European project and democracy and will have great consequences on the orientation of the EU in the following years. Despite the importance of these elections, the participation of particularly young people has been very low in the past years, maybe because citizens aren't sufficiently feeling the outcomes of the work done by the EU in their everyday lives. If we wish these elections to be a success, and truly representative, youth's and school students' voices must be heard and their needs taken into consideration.

The European Project should be based on bringing peace to Europe by cooperation between the member states on an economic and political level and share a common vision of human rights and citizenship. Now, after one of the worst crisis since the Second World War, these achievements are under threat from the resurgence of intolerance and discrimination, linked to the deterioration of Europeans' social conditions.

Europe is at a critical juncture where the decisions of today's policy makers will have a tremendous impact on the lives of tomorrow's citizens. We must choose between the short-term reduction of costs to lessen the debt and long-term investments in education, in order to overcome the crisis of 2008, that Europe is still recovering from and to build a European society of knowledge and democracy at all levels. Education must be seen as a long-term investment in both the economy and the construction of an emancipated society. In this perspective, education is the key to the success of the European Project.

The previous mandates of the European Parliament were devoted to the development of the common market, the implementation of economic treaties and investment in strategic sectors like agriculture. Education has not been a priority and has only been viewed from an economic perspective. Education has almost been entirely the responsibility of national government and has been the subject of very few European policies. What we, as OBESSU, expect from this mandate is for the EU to give education the focus it deserves.

Massive investments must be made on both the national and European level, hidden costs and fees must be eradicated and a right to succeed must be guaranteed to all young people. School students' voice must be heard and taken into account in all stages of the decision-making process and finally education policies must be set to the highest standards.

### **A universal right for education and equality**

Education is the best way of empowering people in society and of giving everyone an equal right to be emancipated and to access fulfilling employment, regardless of their initial social status. Secondary education cannot be regarded as a universal right if it does not take into consideration the socio-economic disparities between individuals. Social

46 differences should not impact on school students' rights to succeed therefore government  
47 must ensure equality in education, by all means possible.

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49 Even though public schools are free to access in almost every country in Europe, hidden  
50 costs and fees incurred by school students are a burden sometimes too heavy to carry for  
51 families with economic difficulties, thus leading to exclusion and marginalization. Paying  
52 for books, stationery and equipment, food, transport, school trips, cultural activities etc.  
53 constitutes a heavy expense for the majority of families and young people, especially in  
54 these times of economic crisis when living standards are being squeezed.

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56 These added costs mean that not all necessities and opportunities are available to all  
57 students and therefore the aim of equality in education is not achieved. Social status is still  
58 one of the strongest determining factors in academic or vocational success. To ensure the  
59 right for all to succeed education must be entirely free.

60 The cost of education is not the only impediment to guaranteeing all school students the  
61 right to succeed. Extra-curricular activities can be just as beneficial as formal education  
62 and social disparities give a significant cultural advantage to the more affluent school  
63 students. Implementing an efficient school student welfare system is the best solution to  
64 this inequality. Every European school student must be guaranteed basic financial security  
65 in the shape of a student income, granted by the national government.

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67 A learning environment free from presumed gender constructions and gender-related  
68 discrimination has to be ensured. As school is the most important arena for shaping of  
69 personality and identity, it needs to deconstruct, rather than promote role clichés and  
70 gender stereotypes. We demand as an educational system that allows every individual to  
71 discover and develop their identities regardless of gender. By creating a learning  
72 environment free from presumed gender constructions and stereotypes, schools should  
73 be the first step in changing the way society impose gender-related norms, discriminations  
74 and inequalities.

75 Considering the fact that school students have no income to pay for healthcare insurance  
76 or social security, society should provide a free healthcare system for all minors in order  
77 to ensure that the lack of medical treatment due to financial difficulties will never be the  
78 cause of a young person failing school. Youth is also a time of discovering life and taking  
79 risks. Prevention must also be ensured in schools by warning and informing students about  
80 the dangers of drugs, alcohol or cigarettes. Sex education should be mandatory for all  
81 school students and never become a taboo.

82 Finally, commodification of education must be prevented since it contradicts the principal  
83 of free education and delegates a public service to the private sector. OBESSU considers  
84 that education should not be a business or a service that can be sold, we believe in a free  
85 public service that would be provided to all young people equally.

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## 87 **Participation and Democracy.**

88 We consider that the purpose of school is not only to break social barriers and train school  
89 students in the best possible way: its aim is also to educate emancipated active citizens.  
90 We believe that by changing the way schools are organised we can change society. School  
91 students must experience the ways and means of democracy in school if we wish them to  
92 fully understand the goals of participation in society. Schools tend to reproduce and  
93 contribute to social hierarchies instead of serving as platforms for democratic citizenship  
94 and critical thinking. The opinions of young people are often treated as inferior in society,

95 and this trend is clearly reflected in the school reality. School communities must re-claim  
96 their function as a grow-ground for democracy and active citizenship.

97 School students are often denied the right to fully influence their daily school life. In school,  
98 democracy remains just a theoretical concept learned in class and not practiced in reality.  
99 That is why school students must be free to organise themselves in independent  
100 assemblies or in school student councils within every school in Europe so that they can  
101 take decisions and discuss any topic they wish to. Such assemblies will only reach their  
102 purpose once they are fully taken into consideration whenever any decision concerning  
103 their school are made. School students must also be informed on their rights and on how  
104 they can get involved in these structures.

105 School students must also have their say in the way curricula and teaching methods are  
106 implemented and given the opportunity to evaluate the work of their teachers. Bringing  
107 dialogue in the teaching process will make it easier for all to learn in a safe environment.

108 The European Union must guarantee participation in all discussions and all decision-  
109 making affecting school life. School democracy is a way of improving the environment and  
110 the social climate in school.  
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112 There is also an educational purpose in letting students have an influence on their  
113 environment and organise themselves democratically in order to take decisions. Active  
114 citizenship in society will be fostered if school students are given the opportunity of  
115 receiving a proper civic education and there is no better way of learning about democracy  
116 than living it. Democracy is a way of life, its culture of co-existence cannot be understood  
117 without actively taking part in it.

### 118 **Vocational Education and Training.**

119 Over the last thirty years national governments in Europe have used Vocational Education  
120 and Training (VET) as a way of opening access to secondary education to more and more  
121 school students. However, VET has always been labelled as second-hand in regard to  
122 academic education, it is considered more as a solution for school students with difficulties  
123 rather than guaranteeing everyone access to higher education and personal fulfilment.  
124 VET presents in many cases limited social mobility and systems are organised in such a  
125 way that they fail to provide university access to all school students.

126 In order to provide an equal right to succeed to everyone regardless of their social status,  
127 VET must be given the value it deserves. OBESSU believes that VET and academic  
128 education must be equally valued, also in gaining access to higher education. VET school  
129 students must be given the tools to access further education when finishing VET: this will  
130 require providing them with the same basic competences than any other school students  
131 in academic education paths, in terms of languages, economics and social sciences.  
132 Learner-centred and alternative pedagogical methods should be considered in order to  
133 provide them the best education as possible.

134 One of the main differences between VET and academic school students is the hands-on  
135 experience gained during vocational education. This often contains training in private  
136 companies. In some cases, already searching for an opportunity of an apprenticeship  
137 poses a problem, to then find oneself exposed to exploitation and bad working conditions.

138 The educational purpose of the apprenticeship or traineeship is also forgotten since some  
139 companies only see school students as cheap (or free) labour at their disposal. The  
140 government must recognise the status of apprentices as school students but also as  
141 workers in contact with the labour market by guaranteeing their rights through contracts  
142 and the labour code, at national and European level. Every school student should have a

143 tutor that guarantees his/her rights and ensures that s/he is assigned tasks with high  
144 educational relevance during the apprenticeship period.

145 In order to achieve our goals VET will require massive investment and be prioritised. Of  
146 course, funding and administration of VET must remain the responsibility of the  
147 government as opposed to the private sector and private interests.