

School Democracy

New generations are born in an age of crises - political crises, pandemics, financial volatility and rising inequalities, climate change, conflict and migration. Crises that these new generations did not cause or substantially contribute to, but merely inherited. As the largest secondary school students' platform in Europe, we believe that the most acute current global crisis is that of the democratic values and norms on which we have built our societies. Shrinking civic space and lack of participation are not just reflected in the political life of a country, but also in the quality and reach of the public goods it provides to its citizens.

There is therefore a very concrete connection between democracy and education. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic exposed the ways in which education systems across the EU reproduce long-standing social inequalities. According to the EC, "socio-economic patterns and stratification exert a strong influence on the educational experiences and outcomes of individuals; learners from disadvantaged backgrounds are over-represented among underachievers and are more likely to leave education and training without an upper secondary qualification." ([source](#))

Secondary students and their unions, represented at the EU level by OBESSU, are and have been on the forefront of the efforts to improve the quality and accessibility of education systems across the EU. We welcome the latest [EC Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success](#): never as much as now the priorities and agenda points of the EC have been so in line with the students' demands. Nonetheless, with this paper, we would like to bring attention to an aspect of school governance that can greatly contribute to achieving school success and reducing Early School Leaving: School Democracy. We believe that restoring and establishing new democratic norms in decision-making processes in education at all levels is the single most important step that we can take to address present and future challenges. Democratizing decision-making in education also fosters intergenerational solidarity and justice: in a moment of intergenerational conflict such as this, schools are a key space to build solidarity, through equal representation and the establishment of truly democratic structures, against all forms of ageism, paternalism and gerontocracy.

We appreciate the departure from a new and improved, 'broad and inclusive definition of school success' which disentangles the categories of performance and success. When students think of succeeding in school, they are led to measure themselves against unrealistic standards. In terms of learning, the focus on performance and assessment favors assimilation of notions over critical engagement and understanding of complex issues. In terms of well-being, conflating self-worth



and educational attainment can harm students' perception of themselves and have long-term effects on their mental health. We also welcome the educational measures proposed to bring about this new reality: innovative, blended teaching methods, curricula development and the introduction of learning matters such as bullying prevention and sex education.

We agree that 'creating sustained cooperation between different levels of governance of the education and training systems, as well as systematic dialogue with all relevant stakeholders' is paramount for designing, implementing and evaluating the effectiveness of measures adopted. The whole school approach has been proven particularly effective to ensure stakeholder engagement, and it should be mainstreamed. While we recognise that dialogue is a meaningful tool for consultation, too often consultation is merely a procedural exercise. Power-sharing is fundamental to build effective representative structures. Strong, independent and democratic student unions are well versed and positioned to take the voices of the student body to decision-making bodies at various levels. Teachers, staff and parents, too, should have the opportunity to participate in school life.

Implementing a whole-school approach is one of the areas of work where projects have a key role, especially those that promote cooperation between school stakeholders and CSOs. Nonetheless, the impact of these projects might be limited if systemic measures are not put into place as these projects should be an accompanying measure to wider policy frameworks.

For democratic school governance to help bring about school success for all learners, participation in the student movement needs to be encouraged, as opposed to punished, which is often the case. This is why we welcome the proposal to facilitate access to extracurricular and out-of-school activities, and systematise the documentation of learning outcomes. We would like to see student activism included amongst those activities. **We believe student participation in school life - and meaningful representation at the national and regional level - teaches students many skills fundamental for their civic, social and cognitive development.** It is also quite literally a 'gymnasium' where **students can acquire hands-on experience and understanding of democracy** in addition to other hard and soft skills such as public speaking, bookkeeping or leadership skills amongst others. Indeed, in decades of representing autonomous student organisations, we have ascertained without a shadow of a doubt that **the most effective way to promote democratic culture and foster social and civic engagement is not to teach it off a book - but to provide instead a real, concrete space where it can be practiced.**

In this sense, many of the proposals of the Commission [have been on the political platforms of national student unions for decades](#). We believe had they been provided the space and power to act on their demands, the education systems of the future would be here already: safe,



participatory and inclusive school environments, where diversity is highly valued and encouraged, and students' and teachers' well-being is an essential aspect of the activities and practices of education.

Finally, the Commission highlights some gaps of the Pathways to School Success policy framework, namely the short-term, project-based and therefore limited reach of actions and initiatives, as well as the insufficient involvement of key educational stakeholders (learners, families and NGOs). Investing in school democracy is the key to address these gaps: by making governance structures more transparent, fair and accessible; creating effective strategies for power sharing between key educational stakeholders; and encouraging and promoting student self-determination and autonomy through their already-existing collective structures.

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