

FutureEd:
**Co-creating a rights-centred education
for a sustainable future**



**Rights-Centred Education
and Best Practices
from Democratic Education**
- Explanatory Guide -



FutureEd: Co-creating a rights-centred education for a sustainable future



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- Demokratine mokykla, Lithuania
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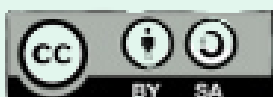
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Disclaimer:

This e-book builds on the work undertaken as part of the 'FutureEd' project funded by 'Anefore asbl' and advances knowledge with a view to adopting educational practices aligned with the guiding ethical principles of fundamental rights.



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The project "FutureEd: Co-creating rights-based education for a sustainable future" (2025-1-LU01-KA210-SCH-000351850) is co-funded by the European Union's Erasmus+ programme.

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Editorial letter

Dear Reader,

Thank you for your interest in improving the quality of life and learning within your community.

We kindly invite you to explore this guide and share your thoughts with us. We welcome your constructive feedback, enquiries about training opportunities, requests for access to other FutureEd materials, or any other comments or questions you may have. You can reach us at info@eudec.org.

*We also encourage you to complete the **self-assessment form** included in **Annex I** at the end of this guide (page 52) after reading the guide. It can help you reflect on your current practice and identify opportunities for further development. Therefore, we also recommend revisiting the self-assessment once a year to monitor your progress, celebrate achievements, and identify new priorities for continuous improvement.*

If you find this guide valuable, we would greatly appreciate it if you could share it with your colleagues and networks. Together, we can broaden its impact and contribute to more inclusive, democratic, and learner-centred educational communities.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you very much.

With kind regards,

Charlie Moreno Romero & Paola Boccia

*On behalf of the EUDEC Projects Team and the **FutureEd** Consortium*



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Introduction: From Rights to Practice

The FutureEd Project invites us to reimagine schools as spaces where human dignity, participation, equity, and rights are actively lived rather than simply taught. While ***Understanding the Ecosystem of Human Rights*** introduces the foundations of human rights, democratic values, and participation, and ***Digital Rights Awareness*** supports children, families, and educators in navigating the opportunities and challenges of the digital world, ***Rights-Centred Education and Best Practices from Democratic Education*** focuses on the implementation.

This guide explores how Democratic Education practices can help schools translate rights into everyday experiences. Drawing on the QUEST Guidelines for Teachers in Democratic Education, insights from focus groups conducted in early 2026, and survey data from democratic schools across Europe, it offers evidence-informed practices, examples, and reflections for creating more participatory, inclusive, and rights-centred learning environments. Rather than presenting rights as abstract principles, this guide demonstrates how they can shape relationships, governance, learning, and community life within schools.

About the surveys and the Focus groups

Schools
17

Countries
13

Age ranges
2-19
years old

Experience
2-20+
years



School types: fully democratic, transitioning, hybrid, and conventional-with-democratic-elements

Participant quotes from focus groups are included anonymously; survey schools are named where permission was granted



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1. What is Rights-Centred Education?

Rights-Centred Education (RCE) is an approach where every child is a rights-holder, and schools are designed to respect, protect, and promote those rights. It is rooted in four cornerstones:

Human Dignity

The foundation of all interactions, respectful language, eliminating humiliation, fostering multiple perspectives, and inclusive classrooms.

Participation

A core method of governance and learning, including student voice in decision-making, shared governance, co-created timetables and rules.

Equity & Non-Discrimination

Guiding principles of community life grounded in empathy, belonging, cross-age interaction, peer mediation, anti-bullying policies, support for diverse learning needs, accessible learning environments.



International Alignment

RCE aligns with the UNCRC, ECHR, OHCHR, EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and Council of Europe educational frameworks. It is not an alternative to quality education, it is its necessary condition.

Rights-Centred Education (RCE) is practiced in diverse educational contexts worldwide. It is reflected in initiatives, schools, and networks that promote children's rights, participation, inclusion, and democratic learning, such as [European Democratic Education Community](#) (EUDEC e.V), [Agile Learning Centres](#) (ALC), [Alliance for Self-Directed Education](#) (ASDL), etc.

Why Rights-Centred Education Matters Now

Democratic principles are increasingly under pressure across Europe. At the same time, 54% of teachers report feeling insufficiently prepared to teach rights and democracy (UNICEF, Teaching and Learning About Child Rights: A Study of Implementation in 26 Countries, 2015; OHCHR, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, 2025).

Schools that embed rights in their daily culture do not simply teach about democracy, they enable children and young people to practise it, here and now.



"Rights are real when they are lived daily in schools, through self-determined learning and democratic governance."

— FutureEd Project



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2. The Democratic Education Approach

The European Democratic Education Community, EUDEC, defines Democratic Education on the basis of two inseparable pillars:

Pillar 1: Self-Determined Learning

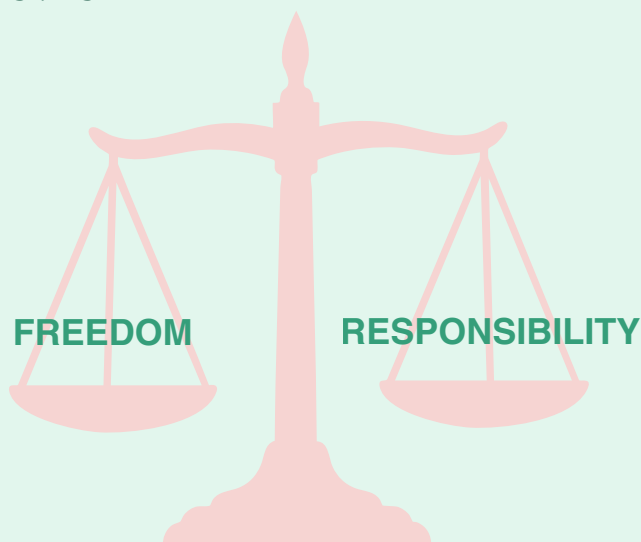
Every young person has the right to decide what, when, how, and with whom they learn. This respects their autonomy, curiosity, and responsibility for their own development.

Pillar 2: Democratic Governance

Every member of the school community, regardless of age, has an equal voice in decision-making processes. Decisions about rules, daily life, and structures are made collectively.

Together, these pillars create a community where rights are practised daily: children experience freedom balanced with responsibility, equity in governance, and agency in learning, showing how Democratic Education offers a tested framework to implement rights-centred education in practice, ensuring that human rights are not only taught but lived.

In addition to these two pillars, there are also key aspects as participatory framework, explained in the following pages.



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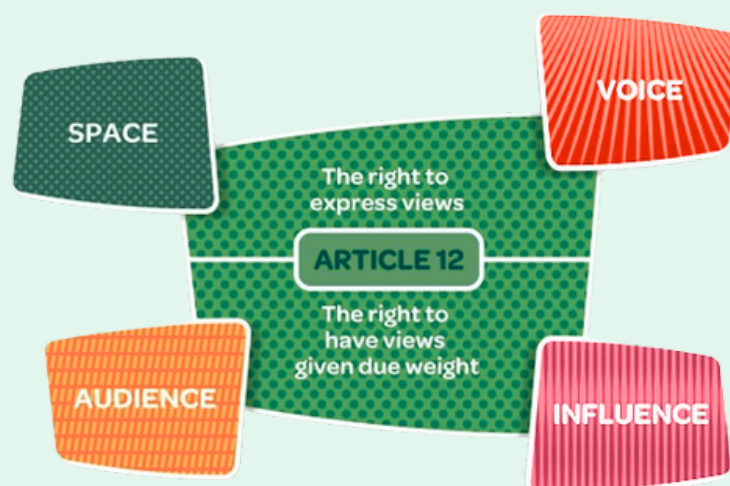
The Lundy model of participation, Lundy (2007).

The Lundy Model of Children and Youth Participation is a rights-based framework developed by Prof. Laura Lundy to support meaningful participation of children and young people in decision-making processes, aligned with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

While many democratic schools have embedded participatory practices, shared decision-making, and meaningful student involvement in school governance for decades, the Lundy Model offers a clear and accessible framework for understanding, implementing, and evaluating participation across diverse educational contexts, supporting EUDEC's Pillars, and the Democratic Education approach. Its contribution has been particularly valuable in translating participatory principles into a language that is accessible not only for educators and schools, but also for policymakers, institutions, and organisations working to implement children's rights more systematically.

The model is built around four interconnected elements: Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence, which together help ensure that participation is meaningful, effective, and rights-based. These elements follow a rational chronological order:

1. **SPACE:** Children must be guaranteed a safe space, where they can feel free to discuss, debate, decide what they want to say and how to say it, and plan their actions
2. **VOICE:** Children must be provided with the support they need to be able to speak out and express their views. They must have access to the right media to ensure their voice is heard
3. **AUDIENCE:** Those responsible for the decisions that affect's children's lives, concerns and opportunities must be willing and available to hear what they have to say
4. **INFLUENCE:** Decision-makers must be willing to accept their obligation to give due weight to children's views, and take them into account in decisions affecting their lives.



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Checklist for Participation, as included in Ireland's National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020

“This checklist aims to help organisations, working with and for children and young people, to comply with Article 12 of the UNCRC and ensure that children have the space to express their views; their voice is enabled; they have an audience for their views; and their views will have influence”

SPACE:

- Have children's views been actively sought?
- Was there a safe space in which children can express themselves freely?
- Have steps been taken to ensure that all children can take part?

VOICE:

- Have children been given the information they need to form a view?
- Do children know that they do not have to take part?
- Have children been given a range of options as to how they might choose to express themselves?

AUDIENCE:

- Is there a process for communicating children's views?
- Do children know who their views are being communicated to?
- Does that person/body have the power to make decisions?

INFLUENCE:

- Where the children's views considered by those with the power to effect change?
- Are there procedures in place that ensure that the children's views have been taken seriously?
- Have children and young people been provided with feedback explaining the reasons for decision taken?

In the following Chapter, you will find some examples of how this approach is translated into School Culture



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3. Translating Rights into School Culture

Building on Activity 1, the following dimensions are central to making rights real in schools. Each is reinforced by the two pillars of Democratic Education: self-determined learning and democratic governance.

a) Human Dignity in Daily Life

Dignity is not a rule to enforce but a culture to cultivate. This means eliminating practices that carry a risk of humiliation, public shaming, comparative grading, unwanted feedback given before the group, and actively building a culture where every student's dignity is non-negotiable.

Pillars in action: dignity is safeguarded when learners are free to direct their learning and when they have an equal say in governance.



"I know how to disagree with someone and still work with them. I know how to make a proposal and argue for it. I know my rights. Most of my friends from conventional schools have never had to exercise any of these skills."

— Young graduate, Germany

b) Autonomy & Participation

Participatory structures in democratic schools go far beyond symbolic student councils. Young people and adults sit on hiring panels, vote on budgets, create school rules, and co-design learning pathways. Survey data revealed a wide spectrum of self-direction, from schools with complete student freedom to those operating within national curriculum frameworks while maximising agency within them.

Pillars in action: autonomy is nurtured through self-determined learning; participation is guaranteed by democratic governance structures.



"Democracy in our school is not just about the weekly meeting. Students sit on the hiring panel when we recruit teachers. They help decide the budget. These are real responsibilities, not simulations."

— School facilitator, Germany



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The surveys produced some memorable examples of self-directed learning in action. At a Dutch democratic school, a student designed a self-directed project measuring energy use at home and researching sustainable alternatives, planning, researching, and presenting entirely on her own initiative. At a Spanish democratic school (ages 2–12), children discovering an invasive cactus species led to weeks of learning spanning ecology, colonialism, local biodiversity, and direct collaboration with environmental authorities. At a Polish democratic school, students who wanted to learn French but had no teacher self-organised into a study group and successfully passed their A2 exam. At an Estonian school, students advocated for a learning workshop based on Korean culture and language, they took initiative and, with the support of an adult, contacted the local Korean cultural center and agreed of having lessons once a week for two years.

c) Non-Discrimination & Inclusion

Inclusion in democratic schools is structural rather than merely attitudinal. Mixed-age environments, open admissions, and flexible participation structures mean that inclusion is built into the architecture of the school. Survey data showed that 100% of surveyed schools use mixed-age learning environments; ~65% use sliding-scale fees to ensure socioeconomic access; and all schools reported zero or near-zero bullying after implementing democratic practices.

A democratic school in Slovakia provided a striking illustration: 32% of its full-time students have specific learning needs. The school's decision-making processes routinely factor in less visible needs, for example ensuring balloons are only used when a student afraid of them is not present, and making wheelchair accessibility a non-negotiable item in trip planning.

Pillars in action: freedom to learn in one's own way (pillar one), equal voice in decision-making (pillar two), and caring adult support ensure inclusion in practice.



“One of our students has ADHD. In a conventional school they would have been told to sit still and conform. With us, they move around, engage when they are ready, and they flourish. The school adapts to them, not the other way around.”
— School practitioner, Slovakia



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“Sometimes we have presentations from students who would like to share about their special needs, so that the community understands their situation better.”

— School practitioner, Poland



“Power structures can still exist in democratic spaces. We need to name these hierarchies to address them, not assume that a vote makes everyone equal.”

— School practitioner, Lithuania

d) Educational Pluralism

In most democratic schools, learners have the freedom to choose what, when, and how they learn, supported by mentors rather than directed by teachers. In other democratic schools, particularly within the public schooling system, adults and young people “negotiate” the curriculum to integrate learners’ doubts, concerns and areas of interest. Co-created timetables, individualised learning pathways, and freedom to choose subjects or pursue projects of their own design are core expressions of this right.

Pillars in action: pluralism is expressed in learners’ freedom to self-direct (pillar one) and the collective shaping of curricula and policies (pillar two).

e) Balance of Power & Protection

Democratic governance provides institutional checks that protect everyone. Peer courts, school councils, and mediation boards ensure no single person, adult or child, dominates decisions. At the same time, adults retain a protective function, particularly when lasting harm is at stake.

The key principle: when adults do intervene, they explain their reasoning to students rather than simply exercising authority. This preserves trust and models reflective democratic behaviour.



“Not intervening can also be a powerful statement. When we step back, we are saying: we trust you to handle this. But when someone’s wellbeing is genuinely at risk, we act, and then we talk about it openly.”

— School facilitator, Germany



“Democratic culture reduces many risks. But it does not eliminate the need for proper child protection structures. We learned this the hard way. Now we have both.”

— School practitioner, Germany



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4. Best Practices from Democratic Education

This section presents case studies drawn from focus groups and the implementation survey, illustrating how rights can be made real in schools. Each is mapped to the two pillars of democratic education.

Case Study 1: Restorative Justice in Place of Punishment

Context	A German and a Dutch Democratic School.
Practice	The German school operates a 'Kläranlage' ('water treatment plant'), a committee of two students and two advisory staff, who receive reports from anyone (including students reporting teachers), mediate and build a jointly agreed solution proposal. At a Dutch school, trained student mediators run structured mediation circles: one speaker at a time; listening without interruption; speaking from personal experience; maintaining confidentiality.
Impact	Reduction of bullying across all surveyed schools; increased trust; stronger sense of fairness and community ownership of rules.
Pillars	Dignity protected through equal respect (Pillar 1) and shared responsibility in conflict resolution (Pillar 2).

Case Study 2: Participatory Budgeting

Context	A Dutch democratic school (Sudbury-inspired).
Practice	Students collectively decide how to allocate part of the school's annual budget through the weekly school meeting. Budget decisions require a full community vote and can be revised at subsequent meetings.
Impact	Students develop financial literacy, responsibility, and genuine ownership of their community. One school reported a student-led school garden that emerged from participatory budgeting.
Pillars	Learners take initiative (Pillar 1) and exercise equal governance rights (Pillar 2).



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Case Study 3: Self-Organised Learning Pathways

Context	A Polish democratic school (14 years), and multiple survey respondents across Europe.
Practice	Students choose what, when, and how to learn, supported by mentors rather than directed by teachers. Where no teacher is available, students self-organise: in Poland, a group of students formed their own French study group, met twice weekly, and passed their A2 exam. At a Spanish school, a child's discovery of an invasive cactus led to weeks of interdisciplinary learning including direct collaboration with environmental authorities.
Impact	High motivation, creativity, and preparation for self-directed lifelong learning. Survey respondents noted students consistently outperform expectations when given genuine ownership of their learning.
Pillars	Self-determined learning (Pillar 1) drives the model, reinforced by governance structures ensuring equity (Pillar 2).

Case Study 4: Student-Led Governance in a Public School

Context	A democratic school within a public school system in Estonia (7 years).
Practice	Weekly school meetings decide rules; peer courts resolve violations. The curriculum is negotiated to integrate learners' interests within national requirements. Older students get a dedicated quiet space negotiated through the school meeting. Disrupting lessons becomes a topic for the whole school community rather than a matter for adult sanction.
Impact	Students develop learning and socioemotional skills, alongside democratic citizenship skills: empathy, justice, responsibility, and accountability. Alumni report taking on leadership roles in further education and work.
Pillars	Governance ensures fair participation (Pillar 2), while self-determined learning (Pillar 1) underpins authentic responsibility.

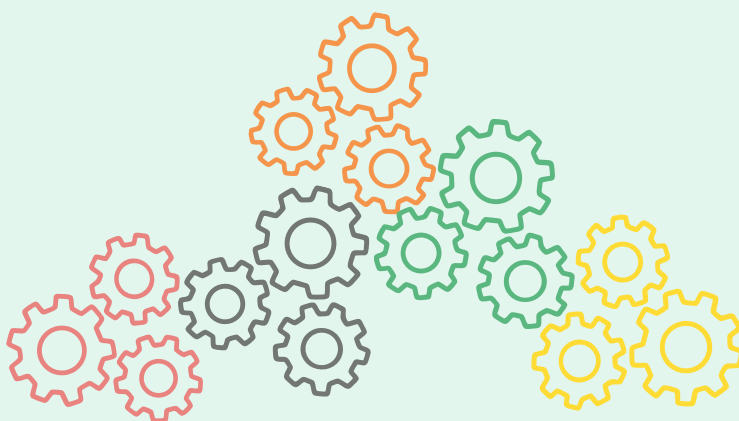


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Case Study 5: Community Signals and Shared Protocols

Context	A Slovak democratic school (5 years).
Practice	The school introduced the word ' <i>buchta</i> ' (meaning 'bun') as a community signal: when anyone says it, every member of the school, regardless of age, must immediately stop an undesirable behaviour. This signal is known to all, bypasses hierarchy, and empowers even the youngest community members to intervene. At the Estonian democratic school, the first school agreement is "STOP", exemplifying a similar logic: dignity and respect.
Impact	Students develop a strong, internalised sense of their own physical and emotional boundaries. After 6–12 months, new students no longer need constant adult supervision to navigate safety.
Pillars	Community governance protects all members (Pillar 2); every child becomes an agent of community safety (Pillar 1).





5. Practitioners Recommendations: Important Aspects to Develop and Maintain in Democratising Learning

Practitioners and graduates from democratic schools shared their perceptions as to the main changes required to democratise learning and promote an inclusive culture in schools. These eleven aspects create the pillars of democratic sustainability of learning practices

1. From Teacher to Facilitator

In democratic education, the teacher's role shifts from authority figure to facilitator and co-inquirer. Rather than directing learning, teachers create the conditions for exploration, dialogue, and shared discovery. This redefined role involves offering guidance, modelling curiosity, and supporting students as they navigate their own questions and interests.

Focus group practitioners described this shift vividly: the measure of a good democratic educator is not how much they teach, but how genuinely they trust students to lead their own learning, and how honestly they reflect on the power they still hold.

“Conventional schools often transmit feelings of insufficiency. Students learn they are not enough. In a democratic school, the starting point is trust, trust that the child has value and capacity.”

— Democratic school practitioner, Czech Republic

Survey respondents across countries echoed this. A democratic school (Netherlands, 18 years) described adults as not holding power in the conventional sense: "Adults do not have power, so they cannot share it", a radical reframe that reflects a genuine levelling of authority within a structured rights-based community.

At a German democratic school (15 years), an evocative mechanism embodies this accountability: when an adult speaks too long in a school assembly, a symbolic umbrella is opened as a gentle, visible reminder. At a Spanish democratic school, the facilitator regularly voices self-critical reflection to students: "When I act in a certain way, I could be influencing you without realising it, always think for yourselves."

“In my old school, everything was about the grade. You stopped caring about what you actually learned and just focused on the number. In the democratic school, I started learning things because I actually wanted to know them.”

— Young graduate from a democratic school, Germany



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What does this look like in practice?

Key practices for redefining the teacher role

- Move from instructor to facilitator: create conditions for students to explore, question, and discover
- Model empathy, curiosity and humility openly, admit uncertainty, learn alongside students
- Reflect honestly and regularly on the power you hold, even in egalitarian environments
- Eliminate humiliation and competition: no public shaming, no comparative grading, no unsolicited feedback before the group
- Trust students' capacity, and make that trust visible through your daily actions
- Use community tools (such as the “umbrella signal” or verbal self-check-ins) to hold adults accountable for dominating discussion



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2. Support the Learning Process

A key element of democratic learning is fine-tuning the delicate balance between honouring students' personal discovery and providing the inspiration, and gentle challenge, they need to step outside their comfort zone. Several pedagogical approaches support this balance, including Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL), Self-Directed Learning (SDL), and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). These methodologies position students as active protagonists in their learning journeys, encouraging choice, responsibility, and meaningful agency.

Survey data revealed a wide spectrum of self-direction, from schools where students have complete freedom over all content to those operating within national curriculum frameworks but maximising student agency within them. This diversity underscores a key principle: democratic education is not a single model but a living practice adapted to context.

“Democracy in our school is not just about the weekly meeting. Students sit on the hiring panel when we recruit teachers. They help decide the budget. These are real responsibilities, not simulations.”

— School facilitator, Germany

The survey produced some memorable examples of self-directed learning in action. At a Dutch democratic school (Netherlands), a student designed a self-directed project measuring energy use at home and researching sustainable alternatives, planning, researching, and presenting entirely on her own initiative. At a democratic school in Spain (ages 2-12), children discovering an invasive cactus species led to weeks of learning to span ecology, colonialism, local biodiversity, and direct collaboration with environmental authorities.

“One of our students has ADHD. In a conventional school they would have been told to sit still and conform. With us, they move around, engage when they are ready, and they flourish. The school adapts to them, not the other way around.”

— School practitioner, Slovakia



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What does this look like in practice?

Supporting self-directed and inclusive learning

- Use SDT, IBL, SDL, and YPAR frameworks to position students as active learning protagonists
- Offer genuine choice over what, when, how, and with whom students learn
- Create mixed-age learning environments that foster inclusion and peer mentorship
- Involve students in designing learning structures — not just following them
- Adapt the school environment to diverse learning needs rather than expecting students to conform
- Ensure age-group assemblies give younger students a structured entry point into democratic governance
- Where curriculum constraints exist, negotiate content within them and be transparent with students about what is required versus what is chosen



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3. Work on Communication

Communication is at the heart of democratic education. To create a classroom culture grounded in respect and understanding, teachers need to develop skills in empathic, nonviolent communication. Restorative circles are an approach that can be employed by educators to resolve conflicts and build learning environments where dialogue replaces confrontation, and conflicts become opportunities for learning and restoration.

Across all three focus groups, practitioners emphasised that democratic schools must cultivate an everyday culture of dialogue where disagreements are named rather than suppressed, and where minority perspectives are actively sought out rather than overridden by majority votes.



“After a majority vote, we always ask: is there anyone who feels their rights are being violated by this decision? It is not just a formality. It changes the whole culture around decision-making.”

— Democratic school practitioner, Germany

Survey respondents described a rich variety of formalised conflict resolution systems. The German school operates a ‘Kläranlage’ (‘water treatment plant’), a committee of two students and two advisory staff, who receive reports from anyone (including students reporting teachers), mediate and build a jointly agreed solution proposal. At a Dutch democratic school, trained student mediators run structured mediation circles with a clear protocol: one speaker at a time, listening without interruption, speaking from personal experience, and maintaining confidentiality.

Other democratic schools have created words that make part of their school culture a community signal, when anyone says the word, every member of the school, regardless of age, must immediately stop an undesirable behaviour. The signal is known to all, bypasses hierarchy, and empowers even the youngest community members to intervene.



“Complaints are written down and brought to the justice assembly. Students can volunteer to be judges. Consequences are voted on. Anyone can request that a decision be reviewed at the next school meeting. It is a real system, and students take it seriously.”

— School practitioner, Germany



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What does this look like in practice?

Building a culture of dialogue and restorative communication

- Develop and practise nonviolent communication skills as a teacher — model them daily
- After majority votes, actively invite minority voices: ask whether anyone feels their rights are affected
- Establish student-led restorative justice systems with written processes, volunteer judges, and appeal rights
- Use conflict resolution circles as an alternative or complement to formal justice proceedings
- Distinguish between temporary hurt (part of learning) and lasting injury (requiring intervention)
- When adults do intervene, explain the reasoning transparently rather than simply exercising authority
- Consider community signal words or shared protocols that empower every member to intervene in harmful situations

4. Prioritise Wellbeing and Relationships

Strong relationships and empathy are central to democratic classrooms. Schools and education can play a central role in promoting wellbeing and mental health in the classroom and beyond. To support this, it is recommended to integrate Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and model self-care, helping students develop resilience and emotional awareness while maintaining your own wellbeing as a teacher.

Survey respondents highlighted a striking and unexpected benefit observed across multiple schools: the democratic environment appears to accelerate students' recovery from burnout, anxiety, and disengagement caused by conventional schooling. A staff member at a democratic school in the Netherlands noted: "We see students move from different stages of anxiety, depression and burnout from the traditional school system to vibrant, energetic, confident and self-aware."



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“Democratic culture reduces many risks. But it does not eliminate the need for proper child protection structures. We learned this the hard way. Now we have both.”

— School practitioner, Germany

A democratic school in Slovakia (5 years experience) observed that students in democratic environments develop a strong, internalised sense of their own physical and emotional boundaries: “They don’t take unnecessary risks when unsure and don’t require constant adult supervision to stay safe.” New students may need more support initially, but after 6-12 months most have internalised this self-awareness.

At a Polish democratic school, every student has a dedicated tutor, a qualified staff member who knows the student’s needs deeply, supports them in fulfilling their potential, and helps develop strategies for navigating daily challenges. This model was particularly valued for students with special needs including autism, ADHD, and sensory difficulties.

“Not intervening can also be a powerful statement. When we step back, we are saying: we trust you to handle this. But when someone’s wellbeing is genuinely at risk, we act, and then we talk about it openly.”

— School facilitator, Germany

What does this look like in practice?

Prioritising wellbeing in democratic schools

- Integrate SEL into daily school life, not as a separate subject but as a cultural practice
- Develop and implement robust child protection and safeguarding structures alongside democratic governance
- Invest in external specialist support for inclusion, safeguarding, and mental health
- Model self-care as a teacher: your wellbeing is part of the school’s democratic health
- Distinguish between temporary hurt and lasting injury as a framework for intervention decisions



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- When intervening, always explain your reasoning to students, authority exercised transparently builds trust
- Assign personal tutors or mentors who know each student's individual needs, especially for students with special educational needs
- Recognise that democratic school culture can actively support recovery from educational trauma caused by conventional schooling

5. Ensure Inclusion and Equity in Education

Although democratic schools have been criticised for being “exclusive”, as they charge fees to families - given the lack of public funding to sustain educational alternatives, there is no democratic education without inclusion of differences. Inclusive environments that value diversity and accommodate varied cultural, social, and learning needs help every child reach their full potential. Reflect on how your school's governance may create barriers to students of different groups, and always consider a plurality of sources and viewpoints, particularly those from marginalised groups and experiences.

Survey data showed that democratic schools typically achieve inclusion through structural design rather than policy alone. 100% of survey respondents use mixed-age learning environments. Many also use sliding-scale fees to address socioeconomic exclusion, a practice that applies democratic values directly to school accessibility.

100% of surveyed schools	use mixed-age learning environments
~75% of schools	have anti-bullying policies co-created with students
~65% of schools	use sliding-scale fees to ensure socioeconomic access
All schools	reported zero or near-zero bullying after implementing democratic practices



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A democratic school in Slovakia provided a striking illustration of structural inclusion: 32% of its full-time students and 25% of its home-schoolers have specific learning needs. The school's decision-making processes routinely factor in less visible needs: for example, a rule ensuring balloons are only used when a student who is afraid of them is not present. Wheelchair accessibility is a non-negotiable discussion item in the school's trip planning.



“Power structures can still exist in democratic spaces. We need to name these hierarchies to address them, not assume that a vote makes everyone equal.”
— School practitioner, Lithuania

A democratic school branch within a public school (Estonia) introduced a “welcome ambassador” system for new students: an older peer from the same age group who shows the new student around and supports their integration. A shared handprint wall, featuring the handprint of every student and adult who has ever been part of the community, provides a physical, permanent sense of belonging.

What does this look like in practice?

Ensuring inclusion and equity

- Design mixed-age, open learning environments that embed inclusion structurally
- Audit your governance structures: who speaks, who is heard, who is systematically under-represented?
- Name power dynamics openly with students rather than pretending the school is power-neutral
- Use tools like pictograms and secret votes to support younger or more vulnerable students' participation
- Actively invite “abstain” as a legitimate democratic option, not everyone can or should be pressured to vote
- Apply sliding-scale fees to ensure economic barriers do not exclude families from democratic education



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- Create ambassador programmes and community rituals that give new members a visible, immediate place in the community
- Make specific learning needs a routine discussion item in governance decisions (trips, spaces, rules)

6. Strengthen the School Community

Cultivating a sense of belonging in the school community is crucial to sustaining shared democratic values. Adopt daily rituals, collaborative activities, and community events to foster connection and participation. Promote student leadership by engaging students in planning and leading assemblies, exhibitions, and service projects. Collaborate with families to understand the long-term journey of democratic education and support them in extending its principles beyond the classroom.

Survey respondents described remarkably diverse meeting structures, all serving the same core purpose: genuine shared governance. The frequency ranged from daily meetings (the Slovakian democratic school held 55 meetings across 67 school days in autumn 2025) to twice-weekly (Poland, Estonia) and weekly (Germany, Netherlands). All models share the principle of open proposal systems and equal voting rights.

“Power structures can still exist in democratic spaces. We need to name these hierarchies to address them, not assume that a vote makes everyone equal.”

— School practitioner, Lithuania

A Polish democratic school demonstrated how democratic community can extend to school infrastructure: students hold “Thursday coordinators” roles to organise city excursions, manage animal care committees, run a trampoline management group with its own written rules, and facilitate a weekly Monday “Hello Meeting” (Powitajka) where all community members share how they feel and what they’re up to. Kangaroo Days, held three times a year, bring together the entire community including families, graduates, and special guests.

“Having an external mentor who visits twice a year changes everything. They see things we are too close to see ourselves. And knowing someone is coming helps us maintain accountability to our own values.”

— School facilitator, Germany



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A Lithuanian democratic school offered concrete advice for schools starting this journey: “Use mentoring from other democratic schools. Have lots of time to reflect. And participate in each EUDEC Conference, to remind yourself that you are not alone on this wonderful and meaningful journey.”

What does this look like in practice?

Strengthening the democratic school community

- Hold regular whole-school meetings as genuine decision-making bodies, not ceremonial assemblies, frequency should match the community’s needs
- Establish committees for justice, budget, teacher selection, and trips with real student participation and age-appropriate responsibility
- Develop an open proposal system: any community member can bring a topic to the floor
- Create age-group meetings to give younger students an accessible entry point to democratic governance
- Schedule biannual peer evaluation visits and exchanges with partner democratic schools
- Cultivate ongoing mentoring relationships with more experienced democratic schools
- Build community rituals: weekly hello circles, termly community gatherings, shared physical symbols (handprint walls, gardens, murals)
- Collaborate with families: brief them on democratic principles and actively support the school-home culture connection

7. Embrace Innovation and Digital Literacy

In a rapidly evolving digital world, teachers and schools should stay current with digital transformation, ensuring students’ rights and democratic values are respected. Modelling ethical, respectful, and safe online behaviour at school nurtures responsible digital citizens. Informing students about the risks of the digital world and supporting them to think critically enhances their critical thinking. Digital tools and AI can enable personalised, self-directed learning, giving students agency and reinforcing participation, dialogue, and shared responsibility.



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All three focus groups agreed that digital rights is one of the most complex areas democratic schools face. The survey confirmed this complexity: schools adopted significantly different approaches, reflecting their democratic values, student ages, and national legal requirements. What united them was the principle of community governance over digital rules.

“Our screen time rules were written by the students. They are stricter than what we adults would have imposed. Because they made the rules themselves, they actually follow them.”

— School facilitator, Germany

A democratic school in the Netherlands developed a layered, age-differentiated phone policy negotiated with students: primary-age students hand in phones, middle students can make a personal agreement with their mentor, and older students use phones freely as learning tools. The policy was agreed collectively and is reviewed at the annual end-of-year evaluation.

A German democratic school described their “Driver’s Licence” model for digital media access, a community-developed system that was democratically adopted and later democratically abolished when the community decided to move on. The process of making and revisiting this rule was itself a demonstration of democratic governance in action.

In Slovakia, national law prohibits mobile phone use in schools. The democratic school communicates these legal constraints clearly and openly to students, while allowing laptops for designated learning purposes. A democratic school in Czechia invites digital safety professionals to run workshops for both students and adults.

What does this look like in practice?

Developing digital rights and literacy

- Involve students directly in developing and periodically revising all digital policies



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- Review platform choices collectively, applying democratic values to questions of privacy and data
- Develop age-appropriate digital literacy workshops and licensing structures
- Create ongoing space for conversation about AI, its capabilities, limitations, and ethical dimensions
- Connect digital rights explicitly to broader discussions about autonomy, dignity, and community values
- Model ethical digital behaviour yourself as a teacher
- Where national regulations restrict device use, be transparent with students about the legal reasons, making state constraints visible is itself a civic education

8. Advocate for Democratic School Governance

In the face of growing polarisation and erosion of democratic norms, democratic schools are more and more an example of how democracy can be meaningfully built from an early age. Democratic education actors have an important role in promoting these practices beyond the school community. Promote participatory decision-making and children's rights within educational institutions by contributing to policies and initiatives both nationally and at EU level.

Survey respondents provided candid accounts of the institutional resistance they have faced, and the strategies they have developed. A Dutch democratic school described 7 years of court cases before the government began to respect constitutional and ECHR rights around educational freedom. Their approach: meticulously document everything (now more than 400 pages) and ask inspectors directly what they need to be satisfied in their role, then find the least intrusive way to meet that need.

"Inspectors sometimes arrive expecting separate lesson plans for ethics and life skills. We explain that our whole school community is a living ethics lesson. Some inspectors understand this. Some don't. We have learned to speak both languages."

— School practitioner, Lithuania



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A democratic school in Slovakia described operating as a “turquoise” organisation, prioritising self-management, transparency, and collaboration, while patiently educating political stakeholders who expect simplified answers to complex questions. Another Dutch democratic school grounds its advocacy in scientific evidence: “We keep explaining what we are doing and give scientific proof why democratic education is better for the health of people, not only children but also their parents and teachers.”

The survey also highlighted the growing importance of federated advocacy. A Polish democratic school works with a federation of democratic schools to build a shared public narrative, an effective counter to being labelled “anarchistic” or “children-pleasers” by outside commentators.

“I know how to disagree with someone and still work with them. I know how to make a proposal and argue for it. I know my rights. Most of my friends from conventional schools have never had to exercise any of these skills.”

— Young graduate, Germany

What does this look like in practice?

Advocating for democratic governance

- Frame your school’s practices in relation to the UNCRC, ECHR, and UNESCO frameworks in conversations with regulators
- Develop “bilingual” communication strategies: articulate democratic practices in terms inspectors and policymakers recognise
- Ask inspectors and regulators what they need to be satisfied in their role, then find the least intrusive way to meet those needs
- Document your practices thoroughly; evidence is your strongest advocate
- Have annual conversations with students about state examination choices, explaining the full consequences of both paths
- Join EUDEC and other educational networks to share experience and amplify the democratic education voice
- Build federated advocacy with other democratic schools to develop shared public narratives



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- Use scientific evidence to support your advocacy, research on wellbeing, motivation, and long-term outcomes

9. Connect Learning to Real-World Contexts

Learning in a democracy must be connected to life beyond the school walls. Teachers are encouraged to link classroom experiences with real-world issues and global challenges through students' engagement in community projects that address real issues and position young people as agents of change. According to the OECD, the capacities developed through democratic schooling, collaborative decision-making, constructive disagreement, conflict navigation, are among the most crucial skills for 21st-century citizens.

Survey respondents provided vivid examples of learning directly connected to real-world stakes. At a Dutch democratic school, students noticed the schoolyard lacked green space, proposed a school garden at the weekly council, planned and built it themselves, and now maintain it as a shared community resource. At a Lithuanian democratic school, when a civic protest related to the national political situation was organised, the school community discussed it in a whole-school meeting, older students and teachers participated together, practising democratic citizenship directly.

Survey respondents were also candid about the challenges students face when they leave democratic schools. A graduate of a Polish democratic school returned to the school “complaining”, genuinely puzzled, about classmates at his new public high school who disrupted lessons and cheated on exams. He had grown up unable to understand why anyone would do these things. The transition gap is real, and schools are encouraged to prepare students explicitly for it.

“We ask students every year: do you want to sit the state exams? We explain the consequences of both choices. Some choose not to. Some do. It is their decision, made with full information.”

— School practitioner, Germany



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What does this look like in practice?

Connecting learning to real-world contexts

- Design community projects that engage students as genuine agents of change, not just observers
- Connect governance structures to real-world challenges: climate, digital life, civic participation
- Ensure students develop transferable civic skills, proposal-making, constructive disagreement, conflict navigation
- Prepare students explicitly for the gap they will encounter between democratic school culture and the wider world
- Link digital rights education to real cases and live debates, not just hypothetical scenarios
- Celebrate and document student-led initiatives that create change beyond the school community
- Create spaces for students to discuss and process current events that affect their world, politically, environmentally, and socially

10. Collaborate and Reflect

Democracy in education flourishes through collaboration and reflection. Stay connected to the democratic education community, share good practices, exchange ideas, and support one another in developing democratic pedagogies. Regular reflection on your teaching philosophy, classroom dynamics, and students' rights is also essential to remaining intentional and responsive in your practice.

Survey respondents were consistent in identifying professional development not as an event but as a culture. Several schools named their biggest challenge as teacher training and preparation, not because resources were unavailable, but because the depth of transformation required is ongoing. As the Lithuanian democratic school staff described: "The lack of democratic education for us as adults is the challenge. It's such a transforming journey, when we started, we felt so not ready, even though our spirits were high. We're still on the journey."



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“Having an external mentor who visits twice a year changes everything. They see things we are too close to see ourselves. Knowing someone is coming helps us maintain accountability to our own values.”

— School facilitator, Germany

Schools also described learning from each other as a core professional development practice. Two democratic schools, one in Luxembourg and another in Lithuania, described starting democratic practices and then discovering the EUDEC network as transformative. A Slovak democratic school noted that, surprisingly, “the democratic environment is a powerful learning experience for adults, perhaps even more so than for children.”

Assessment in democratic contexts looked radically different across the surveyed schools. A Dutch democratic school assesses nothing institutionally, students assess themselves if they choose to. Another democratic school in the same country uses student portfolios, self-assessment, and mentor observation. A Czech democratic school uses shared charts with expected learning outcomes filled in by both mentors and students. A Slovak democratic school takes five in-depth case studies per year for research purposes. The principle across all: evaluation serves the learner, not the institution.

What does this look like in practice?

Collaborating and reflecting as a democratic educator

- Engage in regular structured self-reflection: journaling, peer observation, or mentoring
- Seek external mentors who can offer an outside perspective on your school’s practices
- Participate in biannual peer evaluation visits and feedback exchanges with partner schools
- Invest in specialist support: sociocracy, inclusion, child protection, organisational development
- Share your school’s learning, both successes and failures, with the broader democratic education community



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- Stay connected to networks like EUDEC and QUEST to access resources, training, and peer support
- Choose assessment methods that serve the learner's development rather than institutional accountability
- Build professional development into the school's democratic governance — adults reflecting on their own learning alongside students

11. Showcase Commitment to Lifelong Learning

Democratic Education is a dynamic practice that evolves alongside society, making continuous professional development essential. By remaining curious, adaptive, and open to change, educators can respond creatively to new technological, social, and cultural challenges while keeping democratic values at the heart of their work.

Survey respondents were generous in their advice to schools beginning this journey. Their collective wisdom spans practical and philosophical dimensions, see page 50.

"I know my rights. I know how to argue for them. And I know how to keep learning. Most of my friends from conventional schools are still waiting to be told what to think."

— Young graduate, Germany

Perhaps the deepest finding from both the survey and the focus groups is that Democratic Education changes everyone, not just students. Adults who work in democratic schools describe becoming more reflective, more humble, and more genuinely curious. The school becomes, in the words of one respondent, a place of more fun and deeper connection for adults too.



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Quick Reference: 11 Guidelines at a Glance

1 From Teacher to Facilitator

Shift from authority to facilitator. Eliminate humiliation. Hold adults accountable for dominating discussion.

2 Support the Learning Process

Use SDT, IBL, SDL, and YPAR. Create inclusive mixed-age environments. Negotiate curriculum constraints transparently.

3 Work on Communication

Practise nonviolent communication. Build student-led restorative systems. Create community signals that empower all ages to intervene.

4 Prioritise Wellbeing and Relationships

Integrate SEL. Build robust safeguarding. Assign personal tutors. Recognise democratic culture's power to support recovery from educational trauma.

5 Ensure Inclusion and Equity

Name power dynamics. Apply sliding-scale fees. Create ambassador rituals. Embed specific needs in governance decisions.

6 Strengthen the School Community

Hold genuine school meetings. Create committees with real student power. Build community rituals. Exchange with partner schools.

7 Embrace Innovation and Digital Literacy

Co-develop digital policies. Teach data rights. Be transparent about legal constraints. Address AI critically.

8 Advocate for Democratic School Governance

Use international standards as an ally. Document everything. Build federated advocacy. Prepare students to advocate for themselves.

9 Connect Learning to Real-World Contexts

Design community action projects. Develop civic skills. Prepare students for the transition gap to conventional settings.



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10 Collaborate and Reflect

Choose learner-centred assessment. Seek external mentors. Participate in peer exchanges. Invest in specialist support.

11 Showcase Commitment to Lifelong Learning

Plan the transition realistically. Trust the children. Reflect with the whole community. Stay curious — for yourself and for them.



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6. Implementation Roadmap for Schools

For schools wishing to adopt rights-centred practices, the following steps are recommended. Each should be guided by both pillars: freedom for learners to make choices, and equal governance for all community members. Survey respondents who had completed the full transition consistently advised: do not rush. Vision-setting alone can take one to two years.

Step 1: Rights Awareness & Training

Ensure teachers, students, and families understand human rights principles and participatory governance mechanisms. Rights awareness should be embedded in school culture, not delivered as a one-off event.

Practices

- Explicit teaching about the UNCRC, ECHR, and EU Charter as living frameworks
- Regular whole-community discussion of rights in school meetings
- Making rights visible: posted in shared spaces, referenced in decision-making
- Connect to the [DESC project](#) and [Agile4Collaboration](#) project for democratic practices implementation within conventional schools

“No rush, it’s not a fast train. Be ready to fall, never give up. Use mentoring from other democratic schools. Participate in EUDEC.”

— *Demokratinė mokykla, Lithuania*

Step 2: Creating Participatory Spaces

Establish regular meetings where students and staff share power. Begin with what is feasible in your context, a weekly class circle, then a year-group assembly, then a whole-school meeting. The frequency should match the community’s needs and capacity.



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Practices

- Daily or weekly school meetings with open proposal systems and equal voting rights
- Committees for justice, budget, teacher selection, and trips with real student participation
- Age-group meetings that give younger students an accessible entry point
- A shared handprint wall or physical community symbol to mark belonging
- The Lundy Model of Participation as a framework for meaningful student voice



“In our school, everyone has one vote. A six-year-old and a teacher have exactly the same say. That is not a symbolic gesture, it is how decisions actually get made.”

— Democratic school practitioner, Czech Republic

Step 3: Embedding Dignity in Policies

Remove punitive measures and introduce restorative approaches. Rewrite school rules with students. Make the distinction between temporary hurt (part of learning) and lasting injury (requiring intervention) explicit in school culture.

Practices

- Restorative circles as the default response to conflict
- Student-led justice systems with written processes, volunteer judges, and appeal rights
- Community signal words or protocols that empower all ages to intervene
- Transparent adult intervention with explicit reasoning shared with students



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- Robust child protection and safeguarding structures built alongside democratic governance

Step 4: Inclusive Practices

Co-design classrooms, activities, and governance that respect diversity and individual needs. Audit your structures regularly: who speaks, who is heard, who is systematically under-represented?

Practices

- Mixed-age learning environments that foster inclusion and peer mentorship
- Sliding-scale fees to address socioeconomic barriers to access
- Welcome ambassador programmes for new students
- Specific learning needs as a routine item in governance decisions
- Secret votes and pictograms to support younger or more vulnerable participants
- Personal tutors or mentors for students with special educational needs

Step 5: Partnerships & Networking

Connect with EUDEC and FutureEd partners for training, mentoring, and exchange of practices. The survey consistently showed that schools that maintain external relationships are more sustainable, more honest about their weaknesses, and better at staying true to their values.



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Practices

- Biannual peer evaluation visits and exchanges with partner democratic schools
- Participation in the EUDEC network and annual conference, as in ALLI asbl and CollectiveUP events, contact them for training, mentoring, and exchange of practices.
- Use the FutureEd Self-Assessment Form to identify possibilities and challenges for implementation, on page 52.
- Build federated advocacy with other democratic schools, shared narrative counters public misunderstanding
- Document everything: evidence is your strongest advocate with regulators and inspectors



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7. Policy and Systemic Implications

Rights-Centred Education is not only about individual schools. It has implications for systems and policies at national and European level.

The Training Gap

54% of teachers in Europe report a lack of preparation in rights and democracy education (UNICEF, 2023). This gap is both a challenge and an opportunity: teacher training programmes that embed participatory and rights-based approaches can shift school culture far more rapidly than top-down policy mandates.

Systemic Change

The survey highlighted that democratic schools operating within national frameworks have developed sophisticated strategies for change within constraints. Several described themselves as operating in ‘two languages’, one for inspectors and policymakers, one for their community. This bilingualism is not dishonest; it is a strategy for survival that allows democratic values to take root in systems not yet designed for them.



“Inspectors sometimes arrive expecting separate lesson plans for ethics and life skills. We explain that our whole school community is a living ethics lesson. Some inspectors understand this. Some don’t. We have learned to speak both languages.”

— School practitioner, Lithuania

Advocacy and Recognition

EUDEC and FutureEd partners serve as reference networks for rights-based education at European level. Framing school practices in relation to international human rights standards, particularly the UNCRC, ECHR, and Council of Europe educational frameworks, proved helpful in regulatory conversations across survey respondents. A Dutch democratic school spent 7 years in court cases before the government began to respect constitutional and ECHR rights around educational freedom; their approach of meticulously documenting everything (over 400 pages) and engaging inspectors collaboratively is a model for others.



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Policy-level recommendations

- Integrate democratic governance tools into national teacher training frameworks
- Create funding pathways that do not impose pedagogical constraints on democratic schools
- Adopt the UNCRC, ECHR, and Council of Europe frameworks as explicit standards for school inspection
- Recognise EUDEC-affiliated schools as reference sites for rights-based education
- Support federated advocacy between democratic schools at national and EU level
- Commission longitudinal research on the long-term outcomes of democratic education graduates





8. The Curriculum Controversy: Navigating Fixed Curricula in Democratic Education

The Tension

The greatest practical challenge to democratic education in many settings is the existence of rigid, pre-established curricula mandated by governments or education authorities. Democratic education philosophies argue for learner autonomy and flexibility. State curricula emphasise standardised content, assessments, and accountability.



“When you compel children to study what they do not wish to learn, you destroy curiosity, which is the basis of education.”
— A. S. Neill

What the Survey Shows

Survey respondents described a diverse range of positions on curriculum requirements. Some schools operate with no mandatory curriculum at all (Sudbury-model schools in the Netherlands). Others work within strict national requirements (Estonia, Lithuania) but negotiate content, pacing, and method democratically. Several described what they called ‘creative compliance’: finding ways to satisfy regulatory requirements without compromising core values.

No mandatory curriculum	Sudbury-model schools: students choose all content. Staff are available as resources, not instructors.
Minimal requirements	Schools integrate state requirements into democratic structures; students choose projects that meet curriculum goals.
Flexible requirements	Negotiated curriculum: students and teachers co-create learning pathways within national frameworks.
Strict requirements	Schools explain state requirements transparently; frame tests as tools not judgments; support students to engage with exams on their own terms.



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“We could introduce democratic classroom practices, but we were always circling back to ‘what will be on the test?’”
— DESC project teacher

Institutional Perspectives

UNESCO promotes curriculum flexibility to enable global citizenship education. The Council of Europe encourages values-based education and local adaptation. EUDEC advocates for complete learner choice, rejecting externally imposed curricula. The DESC project highlighted this tension as the central practical challenge for mainstream schools adopting democratic practices.

Practical Strategies

Survey respondents developed several practical strategies for navigating this tension:

Navigating curriculum constraints democratically

- Be transparent with students about what is state-required versus what is chosen: making constraints visible is itself a civic education
- Frame mandatory tests as tools for information, not judgments on students' value or intelligence
- Have annual conversations with students about state examination choices, explaining the full consequences of both paths
- Negotiate content, pacing, and method even when the curriculum framework is fixed
- Use break time, free periods, and elective slots for fully self-directed learning
- Involve students in reviewing how well the school's democratic values are maintained under curricular pressure
- Connect with the DESC project (desc-project.eu) for tools designed specifically for this challenge



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9. Digital Rights: An Emerging Curriculum Frontier

All three focus groups agreed that digital rights is one of the most complex areas democratic schools face: how to protect students from genuine digital harm while respecting their autonomy and avoiding paternalism. Schools that handled this best involved students directly in developing digital policies, with remarkable results.



“Our screen time rules were written by the students. They are stricter than what we adults would have imposed. Because they made the rules themselves, they actually follow them.”

— School facilitator, Germany

A German democratic school developed a ‘Driver’s Licence’ model for digital media access, a community-developed system democratically adopted and later democratically abolished when the community decided to move on. The process of making and revisiting this rule was itself a demonstration of democratic governance in action. In Slovakia, national law prohibits mobile phone use in schools; the democratic school communicates these legal constraints clearly and openly to students, making state power visible as a form of civic education.



“We teach students that the digital space is like the Wild West right now, legal frameworks are underdeveloped and commercial interests dominate. They need to understand this, not just follow a list of dos and don’ts.”

— Focus group participant, Germany

Digital rights in practice

- Involve students directly in developing and periodically revising all digital policies
- Teach data privacy and consent as human rights issues, not just safety rules
- Review platform choices collectively, applying democratic values to questions of privacy and data
- Develop age-appropriate digital literacy workshops and licensing structures
- Create ongoing space for conversation about AI, its capabilities, limitations, and ethical dimensions



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- Where national regulations restrict device use, be transparent with students about the legal reasons
- Connect to the CollectiveUP digital rights guide and awareness toolkit for schools



If you would like to access the **Digital Rights Awareness Guide for Children** from **CollectiveUP**, see references at page 51



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10. Challenges Facing Democratic and Rights-Centred Schools

Despite strong philosophical grounding and promising outcomes, democratic and rights-centred schools face significant challenges. Survey respondents were candid about these, and generous in sharing the strategies they have developed.

Standardisation and Assessment Pressures

High-stakes testing and rigid accountability systems limit democratic pedagogy and curriculum flexibility. This was the most commonly cited systemic challenge across survey respondents, particularly in countries with strict national inspection regimes.

Strategy: Frame your school's practices in relation to the UNCRC, ECHR, and UNESCO frameworks. Document everything. Ask inspectors what they need to feel satisfied, then find the least intrusive way to meet those needs. Build federated advocacy with other democratic schools.

Teacher Readiness and Mindset

Teachers need extensive training and sustained support to shift from authoritative roles to facilitators. The survey showed this is not a one-time challenge: even experienced democratic schools describe it as an ongoing journey. The Lithuanian democratic school staff noted: "The lack of democratic education for us as adults is the challenge. It's such a transforming journey, when we started, we felt so not ready, even though our spirits were high. We're still on the journey."

Strategy: Build professional development into the school's democratic governance. Seek external mentors. Participate in biannual peer evaluation visits. Invest in specialist support for sociocracy, inclusion, child protection, and organisational development.



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Institutional and Cultural Resistance

Hierarchical school cultures, parental expectations, and political climates can oppose democratic approaches. Survey respondents described being labelled ‘anarchistic’ or ‘children-pleasers’ by outside commentators. A Dutch school spent 7 years in court cases. A Lithuanian school described national inspection reports as full of ‘useless bureaucratic recommendations.’ An Estonian democratic school is facing restrictions by inspection agencies that demand homogenized teaching structures and mechanisms.

Strategy: Develop ‘bilingual’ communication strategies that articulate democratic practices in terms inspectors and policymakers recognise. Ground advocacy in scientific evidence on wellbeing, motivation, and long-term outcomes. Build shared public narratives through school federations.



“We keep explaining what we are doing and give scientific proof why democratic education is better for the health of people, not only children but also their parents and teachers.”

— Democratic school, Netherlands

Resource Constraints

Time, funding, and appropriate physical spaces are necessary for democratic practices to thrive. Funding and resources were the second most commonly cited challenge in the survey. Many democratic schools are private and self-funded, creating socioeconomic barriers to access that conflict with inclusion values.

Strategy: Apply sliding-scale fees to address socioeconomic exclusion. Advocate for public funding pathways that do not impose pedagogical constraints. Connect with EUDEC and EU funding streams. Use peer networks to share resources and reduce duplication.

Sustainability and Scaling

Without policy support and systemic embedding, democratic education initiatives risk being short-lived or isolated. Survey respondents identified sustainability as a long-term concern, particularly around staff turnover and the challenge of maintaining culture as schools grow.



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Strategy: Invest two years or more in shared vision-setting before making structural changes. Document your vision thoroughly. Connect new staff to the school's founding philosophy through careful mentoring. The survey showed that schools with founding members still involved after 15–20 years are the most stable.

Advice from surveyed schools to schools beginning the democratic transition

- “Think about your vision, talk it through with the founding group, and talk as long as needed to agree on vision into practice. We took 2 years, after almost 20 years, we are still with the same founders and the heart of the vision is the same.” — De Vrije Ruimte
- “The starting point is to take young people seriously. Treat them with full respect, as you want to be treated yourself.” — Sudbury School Amersfoort
- “You can trust the children, they are fantastic learners. They don't seek the easy path; they can make thoughtful, capable decisions about their own lives while staying safe.” — Democratic School, Slovakia
- “Involve the whole community. Reflect and adapt when necessary. Pay attention to adult monopolisation of power.” — Suvemäe, Estonia
- “No rush, it's not a fast train. Be ready to fall, never give up. Use mentoring from other democratic schools. Participate in EUDEC.” — Demokratinė mokykla, Lithuania
- “Self-reflection and self-education of the adults first.” — PlayaEscuela el Médano, Spain
- “Relax and take your time.” — Wolna Szkoła Demokratyczna Bullerbyn, Poland



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Conclusion: Rights Lived Daily

Democratic Education is both a philosophy and a daily practice grounded in respect, participation, and shared responsibility. Teachers in democratic schools are not solely transmitters of knowledge, they are builders of communities and nurturers of civic consciousness. By embracing these guidelines, educators contribute to a culture of dialogue, inclusion, and empathy, assisting young people to become active, compassionate citizens capable of sustaining democracy in an interconnected world.

The voices gathered in this guide, from focus groups and from 12 schools across Europe, offer something beyond theory: they are evidence that democratic education works, that it is hard, and that it is worth it. From the students who self-organised language and culture lessons, to the nine-year-old who gave feedback to a staff member about his behaviour, to the school that collectively decided to repaint its walls in the colours students chose: these are the testimonies of a movement that is quietly transforming what education can mean.

As FutureEd moves forward, this Guide stands as a bridge between legal principles **“Understanding the ecosystem of Human Rights”**, the lived practices of democratic education, paving the way for the child-friendly **“Digital Rights Awareness”**.

“Democratic culture reduces many risks. But it does not eliminate the need for proper structures. We learned this the hard way. Now we have both the culture and the structures, and the two reinforce each other. They are collaboratively built between young people and adults.”

— School practitioner, Germany



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Annex I

Self-Assessment Form

Democratic Practices in Schools

For Teachers and School Communities

This form supports teachers and school communities in reflecting on how democratic and rights-centred practices are currently embedded in their learning environments. It draws on the EUDEC Guide on Rights-Centred Education and insights from the FutureEd implementation survey.

Complete this form individually or as a team. There are no right or wrong answers, the goal is honest reflection and identifying opportunities for growth.



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Part A | School Profile

School name	
Country / Region	
Type of school	
Age range of students	
Years implementing democratic practices	
Name of respondent (optional)	
Role	

Pedagogical approach (check all that apply):

- ☐ Sudbury model
- ☐ Montessori
- ☐ Humanist / Peace school
- ☐ Democratic school (EUDEC)
- ☐ Democratic within public system
- ☐ Other



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Part B | Self-Directed Learning

Rate each statement from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Always).

Statement	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Students have meaningful choices over what they learn.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Students can decide when and how they engage with learning activities.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Unstructured or free time is valued and protected in our schedule.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Adults act as mentors and facilitators rather than instructors.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Students are encouraged to follow their own interests and curiosity.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always



Describe one specific example of self-directed learning in your school. What did the student(s) do, and what was the outcome?

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Part C | Democratic Governance

Rate each statement from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Always).

Statement	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Our school holds regular democratic meetings (assemblies, circles, councils).	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Students and staff have an equal vote in school decisions.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Students participate in creating and revising school rules.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Students have a voice in curriculum and learning planning.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Students are involved in decisions about budget or resources.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always



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Students participate in conflict resolution processes.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Younger children are supported to participate meaningfully (e.g. pictograms, adapted language).	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Minority views are acknowledged and discussed before majority decisions are finalised.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always

How often does your main democratic governance body meet?

- ☐ Daily
- ☐ Several times a week
- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ Irregularly / when needed



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Describe a significant decision made through democratic governance in your school. What was the issue, how was it decided, and what did participants learn?



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Part D | Human Dignity & Conflict Resolution

Rate each statement from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Always).

Statement	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Respectful language is modelled and expected from all community members.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Humiliation, public shaming, or punitive measures are absent from our practices.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Conflicts are resolved through dialogue, mediation, or restorative circles.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Students and staff are equally protected by conflict resolution structures.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always



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Any community member (student or adult) can raise a concern or complaint.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
The outcomes of conflict resolution focus on repairing relationships, not punishment.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always

Which conflict resolution structures exist in your school? (check all that apply)

- ☐ Mediation circles
- ☐ Peer court / justice committee
- ☐ Human rights committee
- ☐ School assembly review
- ☐ One-to-one tutor mediation
- ☐ Other



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Describe a situation where restorative justice or mediation was used instead of punishment. What happened, and what did students learn from the process?

A large area of lined paper for writing, consisting of approximately 25 horizontal blue lines on a light gray background.



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Part E | Equity, Inclusion & Non-Discrimination

Rate each statement from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Always).

Statement	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Students with diverse learning needs are fully included in community life and get the support they need	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
There is no discrimination based on age, background, ability, or identity.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Anti-bullying policies are co-created with students.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Multilingual and multicultural backgrounds are respected and celebrated.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always



How does your school support students with diverse learning needs while maintaining democratic principles? Give a specific example.

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Part F | Digital Rights

Rate each statement from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Always).

Statement	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Students are informed about their digital rights and responsibilities.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Digital device use policies are agreed with students, not imposed on them.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Students understand how to protect their personal data and privacy online.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Students are taught to critically evaluate online sources and misinformation.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
The school has an onboarding process for responsible digital use.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always



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Learners are required to show “digital literacy” to use devices.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
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Which digital rights practices exist in your school? (check all that apply)

- ☐ Community-agreed device rules
- ☐ Digital licence / onboarding
- ☐ Age-based restrictions
- ☐ Training on online dangers
- ☐ Privacy and consent education
- ☐ None yet

Describe how your school approaches digital rights in practice. What works well, and what is still developing?



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Part G | Rights Awareness in School Culture

Rate each statement from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Always).

Statement	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Students are explicitly taught about their rights (e.g. UNCRC, EU Charter).	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Rights are visibly embedded in school culture (posters, charters, daily language, mechanisms).	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Rights are regularly discussed in school meetings and community life.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Students have helped create their own rights charter or community agreements.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always



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Individual rights and collective needs are balanced through democratic processes.	1 Not at all	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
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Part G | Rights Awareness in School Culture

Indicate how significant each challenge is for your school

Challenge	Not a challenge	Minor	Moderate	Significant	Critical
Standardised testing and assessment pressures	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Mandatory national curriculum requirements	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Lack of teacher training in democratic education	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Resistance from parents or guardians	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐



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Resistance from education authorities or inspectors	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Insufficient funding or physical space	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Cultural resistance to child-led decision-making	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Difficulty sustaining democratic practices over time	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Scaling democratic practices to a larger school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Balancing individual rights with community needs	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐



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Describe the most significant challenge your school has faced when implementing democratic practices. How did you respond?

Lined area for writing the response.





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Part I | Observed Impact & Outcomes

Which outcomes have you observed as a result of democratic practices in your school? (check all that apply)

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Increased student motivation | ☐ Development of critical thinking |
| ☐ Improved conflict resolution skills | ☐ Enhanced sense of responsibility |
| ☐ Stronger community bonds | ☐ Better preparation for lifelong learning |
| ☐ Reduced bullying | ☐ Increased creativity and initiative |
| ☐ Greater civic engagement | |

Share a specific story or example that illustrates the impact of democratic education on a student or on the wider community.



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What unexpected benefits or surprises have you experienced when implementing democratic practices?

A large area of lined paper for writing answers.



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Part J | Priorities & Next Steps

In the next 6 months, the democratic practice I most want to strengthen is:

The biggest barrier I need to address to do this is:



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