

# FREE TO SPEAK SAFE TO LEARN

Democratic Schools for All



**A Council of Europe education campaign**  
[www.coe.int/free-to-speak-safe-to-learn](http://www.coe.int/free-to-speak-safe-to-learn)



# The Six Campaign Themes

*There are six main campaign themes. They can be adapted to the priorities of schools and central or local authorities.*



Teaching controversial issues raises challenges for both teachers and school directors. However, being able to **discuss sensitive and controversial issues in a respectful way is a vital skill in a democratic culture.** Schools must be places where students feel safe to engage in debates with people who have different opinions. Through the careful management of discussions on controversial issues, schools can promote freedom of expression, as well as inclusion, tolerance and human rights and prevent, or counter, the use of hate speech by students. To achieve this, a school action plan on managing controversial issues – which provides staff training – should be adopted as a priority.



In democratic societies, children and young people have the right to be heard and not to feel afraid to express themselves. Schools have a key role in upholding this principle. At the same time, students need to be aware of both their rights and responsibilities. **Learning about human rights and democracy is a fundamental first step for becoming an informed and responsible citizen.** Students also need to participate in activities such as debating and community work. Skills, knowledge and critical understanding must be coupled with the attitudes and values that form part of a democratic culture. All this should be promoted through a whole-school approach.



Bullying, cyber-bullying and violence in schools are human rights violations which infringe on the rights of children and young people to live a life free from violence. Schools can, and should, play a key role in tackling these abuses. Whole-school anti-bullying programmes are needed, which promote peer support systems and **involve active and well-trained teachers and parents, to foster a safe learning environment in which no violence is allowed.**



DEALING WITH  
PROPAGANDA MISINFORMATION  
AND FAKE NEWS

Propaganda, misinformation and “fake news” have the potential to polarise public opinion, to promote violent extremism and hate speech and, ultimately, to undermine democracies and reduce trust in the democratic processes. It is vital for schools to provide students with a solid education on media and information literacy as part of the curriculum. Teachers must be well-trained in the subject to **empower students with the necessary competences to critically understand and assess information reported by all forms of media**. Projects in partnership with national and local authorities and media organisations are encouraged.

IMPROVING  
WELL-BEING  
AT SCHOOL

Students’ well-being and their success in and outside school depend on their ability to use their competences for democratic culture. Since well-being has many facets, **improving students’ well-being in schools requires a whole-school approach**, involving both teachers and parents. Schools should provide lessons focused on the responsible use of the Internet, the need to adopt a healthy lifestyle and how to prevent or cope with mental health problems, in collaboration with those involved, including health and social services, local authorities and civil society organisations.

TACKLING  
DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination is a human rights violation which can have a damaging effect on all learners, especially those who are targeted. Schools can tackle discrimination by promoting democracy, respect for human rights and citizenship. To ensure that all students’ needs are met equally, **schools need to prioritise language and cultural competences, multiperspectivity in history and gender equality**. In this way, students can acquire competences for democratic culture, to fulfil their potential in school as well as in society.



## What is the Campaign?

■ “Free to Speak, Safe to Learn” – Democratic Schools for All is a Council of Europe campaign for schools all over Europe.

■ The main aim of the campaign is to highlight the **commitment to democratic values and principles** in the life and culture of schools in the Council of Europe’s member states.

■ It will **showcase the work done** every day by teachers, students, parents and school leaders to develop democratic and inclusive schools. To achieve this, schools across Europe provide students with the competences they need to function effectively in a democratic society.

■ The campaign will also show in which way schools across Europe **support children and young people to feel safe to learn** and able to express even the most controversial opinions in classrooms and in the school yard.

■ The campaign, **in partnership with the European Wergeland Centre<sup>1</sup>**, will run for **four years (2018-2022) at national, regional and European level**. It involves 50 states across Europe; the Council of Europe’s 47 member states as well as the additional parties to the Organisation’s European Cultural Convention.

## Why a Campaign?

### Today’s Challenges

■ The new campaign “Free to Speak, Safe to Learn” – Democratic Schools for All follows up Secretary General Thorbjørn Jagland’s 3rd Annual report (2016), recommending“(…) a safe spaces project around teaching controversial issues…” to **support educators across Europe** as they tackle controversial issues while promoting freedom of expression, inclusion and tolerance.

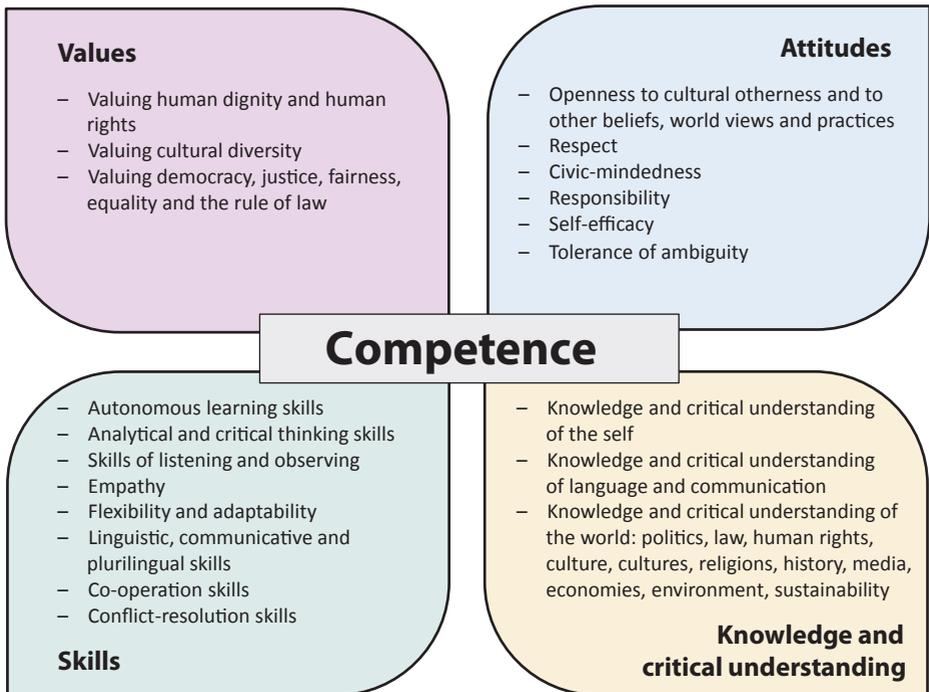
■ The overall aim is to safeguard human rights principles and the fundamental mission of education **in developing and maintaining a culture of democracy in European societies**.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.theewc.org>.

Schools reflect the challenges facing society as a whole. It is no surprise that they also have to deal with issues related to the threats and challenges to our democratic societies such as the socioeconomic crisis in many countries, migration, information disorder and the rise in violent extremism and radicalisation leading to terrorism.

For member States of the Council of Europe, one key challenge lies in addressing issues concerning students and their families, as well as education and security professionals **while preserving the core democratic values of education**. Schools are increasingly seen as places where solutions are developed, tested, adapted for society as a whole.

For decades, the Council of Europe has acknowledged this through its education programme influencing education policy and practice throughout Europe. And the practices reported have been the starting point for many policy initiatives and activities.



## Solutions – Democracy in action: the prerequisite for a culture of democracy

To tackle these challenges, democracy must be a part of every citizen's daily life, including in school. This is democracy in action – the prerequisite for a culture of democracy.

When looking at good practice in communities and neighbourhoods, in families and schools we see the development of a Culture of Democracy: the attitudes and behaviours needed to make democratic institutions and laws work in practice.

■ The Council of Europe has responded and developed the **Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture**, which sets out, for the first time, the core values, skills, attitudes and knowledge and understanding that every citizen needs in order to be active in a democratic society.

■ Individuals are not born with these competences; they need to be learned. The Campaign draws on the work done in many schools for a Culture of Democracy and, through the lens of the Framework, aims to provide a “**common working language**” for schools all over Europe.

■ The 20 competences and their descriptors can be adapted for use in primary and secondary schools, as well as in vocational and higher education.

## What the Campaign will Do

■ The campaign will support schools in providing tools as well as opportunities for showcasing and working further on building and maintaining democratic culture across Europe:

- ▶ Identify successful democratic practices to show how schools move from theory and policy to practice.
- ▶ Promote the sharing of expertise and provide networking opportunities for schools.
- ▶ Help schools implement projects and initiatives that favour inclusion and freedom of speech in safe learning environments.
- ▶ Further develop the democratic engagement and competences of children and young people.
- ▶ Support the use of the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture in practice.
- ▶ Empower schools to tackle key challenges in the classroom using both existing and new tools.
- ▶ Establish a network of democratic schools recognised by the Council of Europe.
- ▶ Highlight the benefits to society of human rights and citizenship education in building inclusive and sustainable democracies.



## What is a Democratic School?

The Council of Europe understands a democratic school as:

- ▶ A school which upholds human rights, democracy and the rule of law – the core values of the Council of Europe.
- ▶ A school with a whole school approach to democratic principles; which puts theory into practice, from the content of lessons through to the school culture and management structure.
- ▶ A school with a democratic culture, which includes and involves all students, of all backgrounds, nationalities, and beliefs, in an age-appropriate way.
- ▶ A school which provides quality education for all students.



## Council of Europe Democratic Schools Pledge

Our school promises to:

- ▶ Share our work with other schools.
- ▶ Work continually to create and sustain a democratic culture within our school.
- ▶ Uphold the Council of Europe's values: human rights, democracy and the rule of law in our daily practice.

## How we can be involved in the Campaign

### Share

First and foremost, the campaign involves schools. Information about good practices will be made available on the campaign website, providing opportunities for direct contacts between schools.

For the launch of the campaign, hundreds of schools submitted case studies of their best democratic practices. From these, examples from across Europe were selected for the website.

### Connect

Throughout the campaign, other schools are encouraged to join and participate, with national campaign committees acting as the liaison point for schools in each country. Interested schools are encouraged to contact the Campaign team in their country.

### Act

There will be action days covering the six campaign themes and a major conference every year.

Interested schools must:

- ▶ Commit to the Council of Europe Democratic Schools Pledge
- ▶ Submit a new or ongoing project and/or practice
- ▶ Join the Council of Europe Democratic Schools Network

### Partnership

The states which have ratified the European Cultural Convention – as well as interested organisations and companies – are encouraged to take part in the campaign.

For more details, see the campaign website: [www.coe.int/web/free-to-speak-safe-to-learn](http://www.coe.int/web/free-to-speak-safe-to-learn)

The Directorate General of Democracy works for the “protection, promotion and development of a genuine and advanced democratic space in Europe, based on a set of values that are at the basis of the functioning of any healthy democratic society in Europe and are essential for the full enjoyment of fundamental freedoms and civil liberties, for the democratic security of our societies, for the quality of life and the personal fulfilment of all individuals in Europe.”



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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 47 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

