

Netzwerk-Schule, Germany

“School Assembly of the Netzwerk-Schule” by Leonie Rodrian, Dr. Anja Kranich, teacher

Netzwerk-Schule is a democratic school for students aged 5 to 17 in Berlin, Germany. It is organized through direct democracy. The central governing body of day to day management is the weekly school assembly. Here school members have direct influence on all decision-making, sharing equal powers in all matters (one vote per person). The assembly is based on parliamentary procedure (majority rule) and takes decisions on rules, finances, hiring etc.

The school assembly is chaired by an elected team of three school members, two of whom are students. They are responsible for the smooth functioning of the school assembly and follow some basic parliamentary procedures (speakers list, motion to adjourn, motion to limit the time of the debate, protocol etc.) Attendance of the school assembly is voluntary, and it is possible to attend for single motions only. In this way students’ mutual interest in the matter discussed is assured. Proposed motions must be written up for all to see on the motions board situated just outside the assembly room. In order to have the right to vote, one must be present during the entire debate of the motion. The start of each debate is announced publicly outside of the room. The petitioner has the right to speak first, then a debate follows and concludes in a vote by show of hands. Some motions may require an anonymous vote.

The school assembly actively implements that authority does not lie solely in the hands of adults. School members learn how to voice their opinion and how to take decisions collectively. By listening to each other in the assembly they learn about different perspectives. Rules are not fixed but are enacted and reformed by the community. Active participation and transparent decision-making lead to increased understanding and acceptance of rules and widens horizons towards shared responsibility for a functioning coexistence. Furthermore, it results in higher identification with the school and less structural violence.

Challenges we have experienced: One issue the school is facing in regard to its governing practise is the two seemingly conflicting goals of the school assembly: taking complex decisions (that sometimes need long and abstract discussion) and participation. Especially for younger students, complex motions seem to make attending the assembly unattractive.

Advice we can give: It is very important to structure the school assembly with clear procedures that are accessible to students of all ages. These procedures have to be exercised regularly in order for them to become well established. Also, it is important to describe openly (e.g. in a constitution) that there are some limits to the assembly’s power to avoid a loss of trust when decisions are made but cannot be applied. The meeting cannot take decisions that break existing state laws, threaten the school’s existence or endanger the well-being of students.