



UNDERSTANDING THE KEY CHALLENGES, PRINCIPLES AND SOLUTIONS

1

TOOLKIT FOR A DEMOCRATIC AND INCLUSIVE SCHOOL CULTURE

UNDERSTANDING THE KEY CHALLENGES, PRINCIPLES AND SOLUTIONS

TOOLKIT FOR A DEMOCRATIC AND INCLUSIVE SCHOOL CULTURE

The opinions expressed in this work are the responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the Council of Europe.

The reproduction of extracts (up to 500 words) is authorised, except for commercial purposes, as long as the integrity of the text is preserved and the excerpt is not used out of context, does not provide incomplete information or does not otherwise mislead the reader as to the nature, scope or content of the text.

The source text must always be acknowledged as follows: "© Council of Europe, year of the publication".

All other requests concerning the reproduction/translation of all or part of the document should be addressed to the Publications and Visual Identity Division, Council of Europe (F-67075 Strasbourg Cedex or publishing@coe.int).

All other correspondence concerning this document should be addressed to the Education Department, Council of Europe, Agora Building, 1 Quai Jacoutot, F-67075 Strasbourg Cedex, France, E-mail: education@coe.int

Cover design and layout: Pointillés

Cover illustration: © Council of Europe, designed by Gagi Print

Council of Europe Publishing
F-67075 Strasbourg Cedex
<http://book.coe.int>

ISBN 978-92-871-9637-8

ISBN 978-92-871-9638-5 (PDF)

© Council of Europe, February 2026
Printed in the Czech Republic.

Contents

FOREWORD	5
INTRODUCTION	7
The toolkit – Why, what and how?	7
Solutions developed in projects	13
PRINCIPLE: EQUITY AND INCLUSION	15
Tackling discrimination – Enjoyment of human rights for all	15
Reducing violence – Fairness in conflict resolution	15
Dealing with controversy – Fostering democratic values	16
Improving governance – Promote inclusive schools	16
PRINCIPLE: RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY	17
Tackling discrimination – Cultivating a culture of respect	17
Reducing violence – Well-being and fostering empathy	17
Dealing with controversy – Including all voices	18
Improving governance – Embedding inclusive practices	18
PRINCIPLE: ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION	19
Tackling discrimination – Upholding democratic principles	19
Reducing violence – Fostering a sense of community	19
Dealing with controversy – Supporting mutual understanding	20
Improving governance – Collaborative decision making	20
PRINCIPLE: WELCOMING AND ENABLING ENVIRONMENT	21
Tackling discrimination – Addressing discriminatory practices	21
Reducing violence – Safe and welcoming schools	21
Dealing with controversy – Creating safe spaces	22
Improving governance – Creating fair and equitable schools	22
CHALLENGE: TACKLING DISCRIMINATION	23
Prejudice and discriminatory language	23
Social exclusion	24
CHALLENGE: REDUCING VIOLENCE	25
Bullying and cyberbullying	25
Hate speech and identity-based violence	25
CHALLENGE: DEALING WITH CONTROVERSY AND POLARISATION	27
Intolerance	27
Propaganda and misinformation	27
CHALLENGE: IMPROVING GOVERNANCE	29
Low capacity for change	29
Disengagement of stakeholders	29
REFERENCES	31

Foreword

When prompted to search the term “democratic school culture”, the Knowledge Hub – the Council of Europe Education Department’s resource gateway – generates over 2 000 results. This amount showcases the extensive number of resources developed by the Council of Europe over the years to help schools become vibrant, democratic and inclusive communities where every individual feels valued, respected and empowered to reach their full potential.

For the purposes of this publication, we reviewed over 65 resources on the topic of democracy and inclusion in schools. The selected materials were developed as part of Council of Europe co-operation and capacity-building programmes in different member states. The result of our effort to extract the essence of good practice from existing resources is this collection of updated, decontextualised and adaptable tools, available both in print and online.

The *Toolkit for a democratic and inclusive school culture* is part of the implementation of our 2024-2030 “Learners first” Education Strategy. By promoting this toolkit, we work towards renewing the democratic and civic mission of education – a key pillar of the strategy. The activities presented in the toolkit reinforce the principles of equity and inclusion, respect for diversity, engagement and participation, and a welcoming and enabling school environment. Providing practical solutions and guidance for educators and school leadership as well as for parents and other members of the school community, the toolkit is designed to promote a proactive approach towards putting underpinning principles into action.

More broadly, this resource relates to the creation of the European Space for Citizenship Education (ESCE). Disconcerted by growing anti-democratic sentiment, the Council of Europe seeks to build learners’ competences to engage as active and informed citizens. Schools play a key role in this endeavour by fostering active participation, open dialogue and a celebration of diversity, and providing learners with a first experience of democracy.

I would like to thank Ms Judith Hollenweger Haskell and Mr Rolf Gollob from the Zurich University of Teacher Education and Ms Lana Jurko, Executive Director of the Network of Education Policy Centres, for their invaluable contributions in reviewing existing resources and producing this set of decontextualised tools. I further thank my colleagues from the Council of Europe Division of Formal and Non-Formal Education for co-ordinating and overseeing this crucial work.



Villano Qiriazhi
Head of the Education Department
Council of Europe

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Villano Qiriazhi', with a horizontal line underneath.

Introduction

Conscious of the many quality materials supporting inclusive education and democratic school culture developed through Council of Europe co-operation programmes over the past two decades, the Council of Europe Steering Committee for Education (CDEDU) instructed the Education Department to launch this initiative in 2024 to capitalise on these materials and to take them out of their original country or project contexts for use in all member states. The intention is to create a practical and operational tool to guide policy makers, school management and teachers, students, parents and the wider community to create a democratic and inclusive school culture. The toolkit will contribute to Pillar I of the Council of Europe Education Strategy 2030 “Renewing the democratic and civic mission of education”.

Over 65 resources created within Council of Europe-supported projects were mapped, a structure was decided upon and the chapters drafted by three renowned consultants in the field: Dr Judith Hollenweger Haskell and Dr Rolf Gollob, both of the Zurich University of Teacher Education (Pädagogische Hochschule Zürich PHZH), and Ms Lana Jurko, Executive Director of the Network of Education Policy Centers (NEPC). The chapters also underwent peer reviews.

The toolkit is built around principles, challenges and solutions.

Principles	Challenges	Solutions
Equity and inclusion	Tackling discrimination Improving governance	Tool: supporting students with special educational needs and disabilities Tool: involving families in democratic life in schools
Respect for diversity	Addressing discrimination in school Dealing with controversy	Tool: fostering school success for ethnic minority students Tool: living with controversy
Engagement and participation	Improving governance	Tool: promoting authentic student participation in schools
Welcoming and enabling environments	Reducing violence	Tool: creating a culture of respect and empathy in schools

The toolkit – Why, what and how?

The vision of the toolkit

This Council of Europe resource gathers theories, a policy framework and guidelines developed and piloted over the years within various capacity-building projects in the member states. The main goal of the resource is to make this wealth of assets visible to potential users and to help them further develop their own initiatives based on existing work.

The Council of Europe’s core values – human rights, democracy and the rule of law – have shaped education policies and practices in Europe for many years. The Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights has been instrumental in promoting the principles of democracy and human rights in educational settings across the member states. The Organisation has developed key resources that have made a significant contribution to the development of democratic and inclusive schools, including the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC), which provides tools and resources to help educators integrate democratic values, improve schools’ governance structures and incorporate intercultural competences into their inclusive teaching practice. Its projects have enhanced the ability of educational systems to foster inclusivity and prepare learners to actively participate in democratic societies. Insights and materials were created and tested in regional and country projects, including through joint programmes with the European Union such as “Democratic and Inclusive School Culture in Operation” (DISCO) or “Regional Support for Inclusive Education in South-East Europe”.

With a mission revolving around human rights, democracy and the rule of law, the Council of Europe naturally looks at inclusive education through the lens of these core values. As such, the organisation contributes substantially to the progressive realisation of inclusive education with its particular focus on strengthening democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Consequently, this resource will focus on the democratic and inclusive school culture, linking education and democracy and reflecting the specific Council of Europe mandate.

Quality education and inclusive education

The Council of Europe defined “quality education” in Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)13 of the Committee of the Ministers to member States on ensuring quality education as education that:

- a. gives access to learning to all learners, particularly those in vulnerable or disadvantaged groups, adapted to their needs as appropriate;
- b. provides a secure and non-violent learning environment in which the rights of all are respected;
- c. develops each learner’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential and encourages them to complete the educational programmes in which they enrol;
- d. promotes democracy, respect for human rights and social justice in a learning environment which recognises everyone’s learning and social needs;
- e. enables learners to develop appropriate competences, self-confidence and critical thinking to help them become responsible citizens and improve their employability;
- f. passes on universal and local cultural values to learners while equipping them also to make their own decisions;
- g. certifies outcomes of formal and non-formal learning in a transparent way based on fair assessment enabling acquired knowledge and competences to be recognised for further study, employment and other purposes;
- h. relies on qualified teachers who are committed to continuous professional development;
- i. is free of corruption.

Quality inclusive education and education for democratic citizenship as concepts reflect the needs of democratic societies. First, it is about creating schools where all children are welcomed and can participate and receive the education necessary to become full members of an inclusive society. Second, it is about empowering every child to exercise his or her rights and duties in a democratic state, both by assuming and claiming his or her rights and by respecting and protecting the rights of others. The vision here is a society in which everyone is participating and helping to shape and take responsibility for the functioning of democracy.

Along the same lines as the Council of Europe, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines inclusive education as ensuring that every learner has access to quality education regardless of their individual differences. This includes adapting the education system to meet the diverse needs of all learners, such as those with disabilities, from different socio-economic backgrounds or of varying abilities. Inclusive education is based on the principle that all children should learn together, whenever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Inclusive education is “an ongoing process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the learners and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination” (UNESCO 2013).

However, in the UN member states, there are different understandings and perceptions of inclusive education, which is often limited to education for learners with special needs. According to UNESCO, while 68% of countries have a definition of inclusive education, only 57% of those definitions cover individuals in multiple marginalised situations (UNESCO 2020).

Learning from the past for the future

The development of the Toolkit for a democratic and inclusive school culture, especially for those in the most marginalised situations, is embedded in the action planned within Pillar 1 of the Education Strategy

2024-2030 – “Learners first – Education for today’s and tomorrow’s democratic societies” (Council of Europe 2023a), “Renewing the democratic and civic mission of education”. The Council of Europe Education Strategy’s overall long-term vision is “that all learners will be able to fully exercise their rights as active citizens in European democratic societies”. It recalls the need to preserve and enhance the Council of Europe’s main *acquis* in the field of education (Council of Europe 2023a). It also recognises the importance of achieving coherence and synergy with the work of other relevant international stakeholders (such as the European Union, United Nations and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) and its commitment to the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education. The thematic priorities of the strategy include: (1) renewing the democratic and civic mission of education; (2) enhancing the social responsibility and responsiveness of education; and (3) advancing education through a human rights-based digital transformation.

Over the last several years, the Council of Europe has invested much in supporting member states in their efforts to create more inclusive and democratic schools. It is from these experiences that this toolkit draws to make them available for the present and the future.

A toolkit of good practice

The resource at hand is intended for education professionals and anyone interested in questions related to quality and inclusive education, including the creation of an inclusive and democratic school culture. Based on the Council of Europe’s *acquis* on pre-university education, this toolkit has a specific focus on inclusive and democratic school culture. Interconnected topics include sustainability, prevention of hate speech, managing controversial issues, children’s rights, digitalisation, service learning and addressing violence, among many others.

Working towards the vision of the Council of Europe in many different countries has resulted in a rich pool of materials with policy recommendations, guidelines and lesson plans, to name just a few. Each publication with its specific focus, purpose, strategy and context contributes to creating inclusive and democratic schools.

Access to the toolkit by principles

The Council of Europe defines democratic and inclusive school culture as one that fosters an environment where every learner, regardless of their background and affiliations, has equal access to education and opportunities to participate in school life, thus enhancing the learning experience and outcomes for all students, particularly those at risk of marginalisation. This culture emphasises respect for diversity, promoting human rights and developing democratic values and practices to safeguard democracy and social coherence. Development of a democratic and inclusive school culture is understood as the result of applying the following four principles: equity and inclusion; respect for diversity; engagement and participation; and welcoming and enabling environments.

- ▶ **Equity and inclusion.** Providing equal access and opportunities for all and strengthening the social dimension of education.
- ▶ **Respect for diversity.** The right of all to quality education, respect for their identity and promotion of their well-being. Education needs to be empowering for all, especially for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable. Respect for all learners ensures that they reach their full potential.
- ▶ **Engagement and participation.** Fostering competences to ensure children and young people participate fully and actively, building partnerships and collaboration.
- ▶ **Welcoming and enabling environment.** Grounded in the local context, acknowledging diverse cultural and linguistic environments and providing safe digital learning environments.

These four principles are interrelated and necessary components of good practices that contribute to an inclusive and democratic school culture. Practices can be represented visually by the following questions: Who does what, why, where and how?

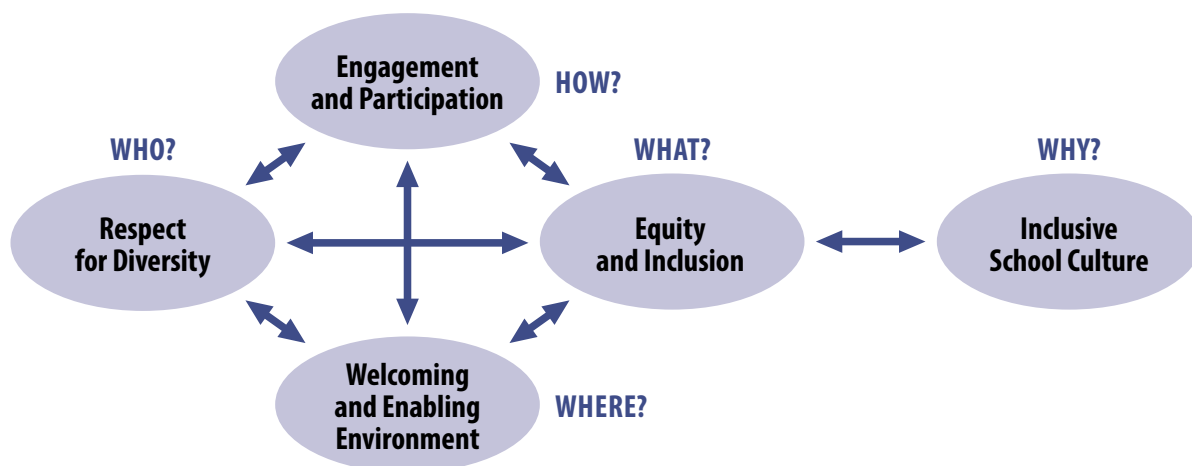


Figure 1. Principles for an inclusive school culture (Council of Europe 2015b)

Everyone involved in or affected by democratic and inclusive school culture practices needs to embrace respect for diversity. “Respect for diversity” therefore requires people to understand and improve their own competences, values, knowledge and understanding, their skills and attitudes (work on people; “who”). Equity and inclusion should be the main focus of practices aimed at creating a democratic and inclusive school culture. This principle ensures that every student, regardless of their background, abilities or circumstances has access to the same educational opportunities (work on objectives, “what”). Practices are only successful if they take place in a welcoming and enabling environment (work on context, “where”). Consequently, investing in creating such an environment is vitally important. Finally, the way everyone works needs to embrace the principle of engagement and participation (work on strategies, “how”). Strategies, tools and materials should be developed together, rather than imposed on others, and all processes should be planned, carried out and evaluated in a spirit of engagement and participation.

These principles underpin all activities for achieving the vision of a democratic and inclusive school culture. School culture is a prerequisite for effective education because it shapes the learning environment and influences both academic and social outcomes. The focus on creating a democratic and inclusive school culture underscores the importance of fostering a learning environment grounded in these four principles to ensure that all learners can thrive and develop the necessary competences for active and responsible citizenship. Schools not only promote academic knowledge but also instil values of democracy, respect and co-operation among learners, making them well prepared to participate in a diverse and democratic society. These are the long-term outcomes to which the work of the Council of Europe is contributing.

The materials at hand are organised around these four principles, with the concept of inclusive education being defined and understood in its broader sense as one that caters to all learners living in a democratic and diverse society. Each principle is also linked to four challenges.

Access to the toolkit by challenges

The Council of Europe has invested much to find solutions to key challenges when working towards the vision of a democratic and inclusive school culture and the principles that support it. Europe is facing social, economic and societal challenges, which feed feelings of uncertainty towards democratic processes, the rule of law and respect for people with different opinions. There is a backlash against the social inclusion of individuals in the most vulnerable situations and in need of protection and support. Full and equal participation, pluralism, non-discrimination, transparency and accountability are under strain as countries go through rapid change.

There are many challenges to establishing a democratic and inclusive school culture and they can be conceptualised in many different ways. Everyone has a personal responsibility to tackle discrimination in schools to help foster a generation that values equality and is less likely to perpetuate discriminatory practices. The Council of Europe also addresses violence as a challenge to peaceful learning environments with long-term negative impacts on physical and mental health. Another major challenge comes in the form of the recent societal tendencies to polarisation, a reduced tolerance for others’ views and impatience with governments in terms of finding solutions to pressing problems.

The toolkit includes four key challenges that need to be addressed to achieve a democratic and inclusive school culture; tackling discrimination; reducing violence; dealing with controversy; and improving governance.

- ▶ **Tackling discrimination.** The challenge of addressing discriminatory language, policies and school practices as well as addressing prejudice, biased practices, segregation and social isolation.
- ▶ **Reducing violence and bullying.** The challenge of individuals or groups inflicting harm or distress on others, either physically, emotionally or psychologically.
- ▶ **Dealing with controversy and polarisation.** The challenge of addressing latent or manifest divisions or polarisation in school communities, leading to environments of conflict and misunderstanding.
- ▶ **Improving governance.** The challenge of addressing a lack of transparency and participation in decision making, resistance to change, decisions that result in discriminatory practices or disparities in educational access and outcomes.

These challenges are not resolved within a day and require prolonged, well-structured and co-ordinated interventions. The toolkit provides guidance on how to assess, understand and define specific challenges, how to plan for positive change, how to co-create and implement programmes and how to evaluate the outcomes. It compiles available knowledge and experiences for all levels (individual level, classroom level, school level, system level) that are necessary to create an ecosystem of good practice. A problem-solving cycle is used to map solutions and contributions from different projects.

It all starts with becoming aware of a challenge that creates a barrier to living in a democratic and inclusive school culture. To better understand the challenges at hand, the toolkit gives some guidance. Once the challenge has been recognised, the following steps are suggested.

1. **Situation analysis:** a systematic assessment of the current status and conditions to identify key issues.
2. **Vision and goal setting:** a strategic process where an organisation or a team outlines its aspirations and guiding principles.
3. **Planning:** outlining the steps necessary to achieve an identified goal or vision.
4. **Co-creation or implementation:** the collaborative process of putting plans and guidelines into action.
5. **Monitoring and evaluation:** a systematic process that involves regularly reviewing and assessing the effectiveness of implemented strategies and initiatives against the set goals and objectives.

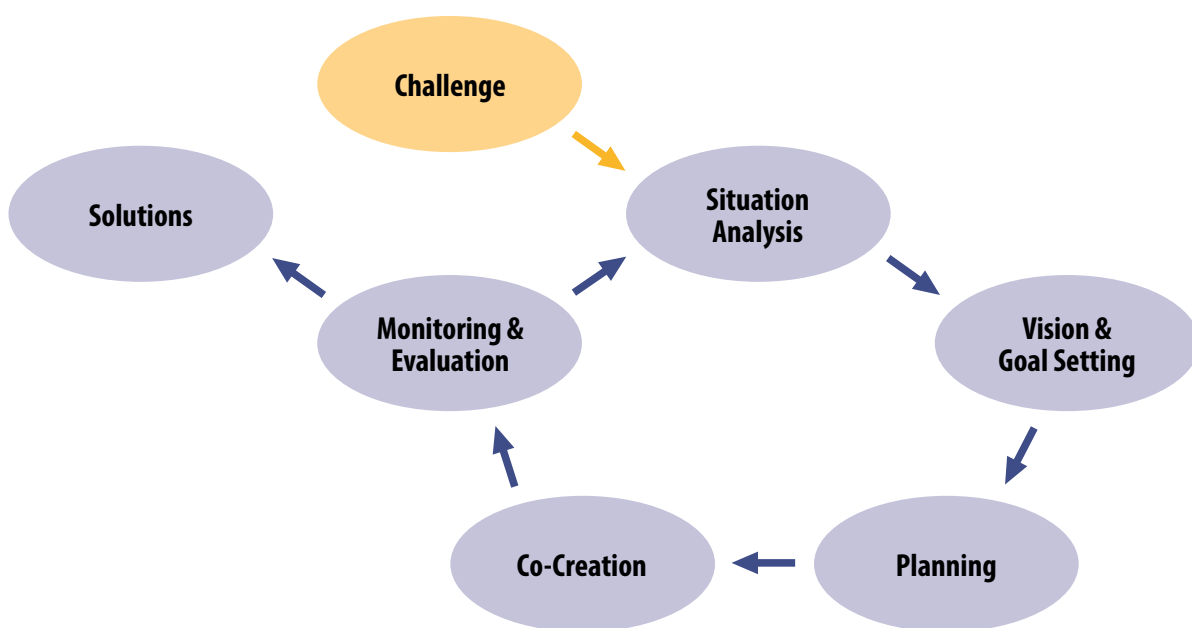


Figure 2. Problem-solving cycle (Council of Europe 2015b)

Solutions developed in projects conducted or supported by the Council of Europe are presented to support school leaders, policy makers and teachers to solve the challenges at hand. Not all projects address every step of the problem-solving cycle. The toolkit guides users towards good practice examples, which sometimes may be used immediately; in other cases the user will need to or want to adapt the described approach or content to the local situation.

Access to the toolkit by solutions

Over the last 15 years, the Council of Europe has conducted and supported many projects that have contributed to building democratic and inclusive school cultures where all children are welcomed, all parents are involved and all teachers valued. It has conducted joint programmes with the European Union, for example “Democratic and Inclusive School Culture in Operation” (DISCO) (Council of Europe 2021) or “Regional Support for Inclusive Education” (Council of Europe 2015a), as well as projects like “Fostering a Democratic School Culture and Diversity in Schools” (Council of Europe 2019) and “INCLUDE – Building Capacity for Inclusion in Education” (Council of Europe 2023b), to name a few. The toolkit draws on products, insights, materials and processes that have been tested in the field and have proved meaningful and useful beyond their immediate application in the context in which they were developed. The range of solutions from all relevant projects have been compiled and organised thematically.

- ▶ **Solution – Fostering school success for ethnic minority students.**
This tool provides guidance and resources to identify and assess instances and areas of discrimination on ethnic grounds in schools. It helps to build awareness, explains the role of different stakeholders in tackling discrimination and provides prevention as well as intervention strategies.
- ▶ **Solution – Supporting students with special educational needs and disabilities.**
This tool focuses on one specific group of children who are often among the most vulnerable. It includes resources that help to shift from a medical to a bio-psycho-social approach to understanding disability and provides information on how to improve learning environments to create opportunities for participation and learning.
- ▶ **Solution – Creating a culture of respect and empathy in schools.**
This tool helps better understand the dynamics of violence and bullying in schools and how to take action at school level. It also includes guidance on how to develop school policies and procedures, how to raise awareness and how to improve class and group environments.
- ▶ **Solution – Promoting authentic student participation in schools.**
This tool provides key information, resources and materials on how all stakeholders can become part of informed decision making and collaborative school developments and presents ways of assessing participation as a starting point for positive change and implementation by providing guidelines for teachers, students and parents to improve the participation of students.
- ▶ **Solution – Involving families in democratic life in schools.**
This tool brings together materials, tools, guidelines and insights from different projects involving the Competences for Democratic Culture (CDC) and sets out the key principles of a democratic and inclusive school, including values, competences, attitudes and skills, each with matching descriptors.
- ▶ **Solution – Living with controversy.**
The Council of Europe tool “Living with controversy” (Council of Europe 2020) highlights the importance of taking controversies seriously and provides insights, materials and resources on how school leaders, teachers and students can engage in activities, including information on how to assess and build necessary skills and competences. The tool is composed of three volumes that cover teaching controversial issues, managing controversy and learning how to handle controversial issues in schools and other education settings.

The structure of the solutions follows the steps in the problem-solving process to facilitate orientation for the reader. Each solution includes information on how to become aware and assess key issues and provides practical materials and guidance on how to use them.

Solutions developed in projects

Much of the Council of Europe’s material on schools and learning (and which address the issue of inclusion) have been developed within the framework of country-specific programmes. Accordingly, there are references to country-specific laws or school organisations that contain specialist content but that are not always relevant and can even be detrimental to other education systems. It would therefore be counterproductive to organise the many valuable textbooks, manuals and toolkits by country or region. We will therefore decide on how to classify the material once we have completed our work. For now, we suggest that they should be organised along the problem-solving cycle.

Principles	Challenges	Solutions
Equity and inclusion	Tackling discrimination Improving governance	Tool: supporting students with special educational needs and disabilities Tool: involving families in democratic life in schools
Respect for diversity	Addressing discrimination in school Dealing with controversy	Tool: fostering school success for ethnic minority students Tool: living with controversy (Council of Europe 2020)
Engagement and participation	Improving governance	Tool: promoting authentic student participation in schools
Welcoming and enabling environments	Reducing violence	Tool: creating a culture of respect and empathy in schools

Principle: equity and inclusion

Equity and inclusion, as defined by the Council of Europe, mean ensuring fair treatment, opportunities and advancement for all individuals while identifying and eliminating barriers to full participation. This means providing tailored resources and support to achieve equal outcomes, creating environments where everyone feels welcomed, respected, supported and valued. An inclusive environment respects differences and promotes the full participation of all individuals, regardless of their background, affiliations or circumstances, aligning with the Council of Europe's commitment to non-discrimination, diversity and equal access to rights and opportunities.

Tackling discrimination – Enjoyment of human rights for all

Discrimination undermines the enjoyment of human rights and democracy by everyone, leading to inequality and social exclusion. By addressing discrimination, societies can ensure genuine equality and full access to rights and opportunities for all members. By fostering respect for diversity, schools can ensure that inclusion goes beyond tokenism, creating environments where differences are celebrated and viewed as opportunities for learning and collaboration. This commitment to equity and inclusion through the eradication of discrimination strengthens democracy, builds trust and enhances the well-being of all stakeholders.

Contribution of tackling discrimination to equity and inclusion

- ▶ Promoting human rights education
- ▶ Creating safe learning environments
- ▶ Preventing exclusion
- ▶ Ensuring equal opportunities
- ▶ Enhancing access, participation and learning
- ▶ Building inclusive policies and practices

Reducing violence – Fairness in conflict resolution

Reducing violence in schools is intrinsically connected to ensuring fairness in conflict resolution within the educational environment. Fairness involves impartiality, equal treatment and allowing all students to express their perspectives and concerns. When conflicts among students are resolved fairly, trust in school authorities and the overall school environment is strengthened, reducing the likelihood of students resorting to violence to address their grievances. Implementing restorative justice practices in schools is crucial in this context. Restorative justice focuses on repairing harm and reconciling parties rather than punitive measures alone. By incorporating restorative practices, such as peer mediation and restorative circles, schools can address the root causes of conflicts and foster a culture of empathy and understanding. This approach ensures that all students feel heard and valued, promoting a sense of justice and deterring violent responses. By prioritising fairness in conflict resolution, schools can create environments where disputes are resolved through dialogue and mutual respect, significantly reducing the potential for violence and promoting a peaceful school culture.

Contribution of reducing violence to equity and inclusion

- ▶ Safe learning environments
- ▶ Promotion of mental health and well-being
- ▶ Fair disciplining practices
- ▶ Enhancement of academic achievement
- ▶ Empowering of students in marginalised situations

Dealing with controversy – Fostering democratic values

By facilitating open dialogues on contentious subjects, educators can create environments where all learners feel heard and respected, thereby promoting inclusivity. This approach not only enhances learners' ability to navigate complex social dynamics but also prepares them to participate actively in democratic societies. Engaging learners in discussions on sensitive topics fosters critical thinking, mutual respect and a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives, which are essential components of an inclusive school culture. Promoting inclusive schools involves integrating these practices into the curriculum and school policies, ensuring that diversity is celebrated and that every learner has the opportunity to engage meaningfully in their education. By addressing controversial issues thoughtfully, schools can uphold the Council of Europe's commitment to fostering democratic values and inclusive education.

Contribution of dealing with controversy to equity and inclusion

- ▶ Fostering mutual respect
- ▶ Enhancing student voice
- ▶ Encouraging dialogue and empathy
- ▶ Preparing active citizens
- ▶ Building democratic competences

Improving governance – Promote inclusive schools

Effective governance structures ensure that all stakeholders – students, educators, parents and community members – actively participate in decision-making processes, fostering a sense of ownership and accountability. This collaborative approach leads to the development of policies and practices that address diverse needs, thereby promoting equitable access to educational opportunities. Promoting inclusive schools through improved governance ensures that equity is embedded in daily practices and inclusion becomes a shared responsibility, contributing to a more cohesive and equitable society.

Contribution of improving governance to equity and inclusion

- ▶ Enhanced participation
- ▶ Fair resource allocation
- ▶ Inclusive policies
- ▶ Democratic culture
- ▶ Building social cohesion
- ▶ Empowering marginalised voices

Principle: respect for diversity

Respect for diversity, as defined by the Council of Europe, involves recognising, valuing and embracing the differences among individuals and groups within society. This principle underlines the importance of fostering environments where diverse backgrounds, perspectives and experiences are appreciated and respected. It aims to promote understanding, mutual respect and peaceful coexistence among people of different ethnicities, cultures, religions, genders and abilities. By advocating respect for diversity, the Council of Europe works towards inclusive societies that celebrate differences and ensure that everyone can participate fully and equally in all aspects of life.

Tackling discrimination – Cultivating a culture of respect

Addressing discrimination is essential for fostering respect for diversity, which in turn enhances equity and inclusion within educational settings. Discrimination undermines the enjoyment of human rights and democracy by everyone, leading to inequality and social exclusion. By tackling discrimination, societies can ensure genuine equality and full access to rights and opportunities for all members. By actively combating discrimination, schools can cultivate a culture of respect and appreciation for diverse backgrounds and perspectives, thereby promoting inclusivity and equity for all learners.

Contribution of tackling discrimination to respect for diversity

- ▶ Creating safe spaces
- ▶ Strengthening intercultural dialogue
- ▶ Developing empathy and tolerance
- ▶ Upholding democratic principles
- ▶ Shaping inclusive policies
- ▶ Building democratic competences

Reducing violence – Well-being and fostering empathy

The well-being of students and the fostering of empathy are crucial for reducing violence within schools. Empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, is a foundational element of building harmonious relationships and communities. When students are taught to empathise with others, especially those from diverse backgrounds, they are more likely to resolve conflicts peacefully and less likely to engage in violent behaviour. Educational programmes that include social and emotional learning (SEL) are instrumental in this regard. SEL helps students develop emotional intelligence, self-awareness and interpersonal skills, which are essential for managing emotions and interactions constructively. The Council of Europe's initiatives to promote human rights education and democratic citizenship are also critical in this context. By educating students about their rights and the importance of respecting the rights of others, these programmes cultivate empathy and a sense of responsibility towards others. Emphasising diversity within these programmes teaches students to appreciate and respect differences, further reducing prejudices and promoting inclusive interactions. This, in turn, contributes to decreased violent behaviour and increased co-operative and peaceful interactions within the school community. By focusing on well-being and fostering empathy, schools can create a safe and supportive environment that celebrates diversity and encourages positive, non-violent conflict resolution.

Contribution of reducing violence to respect for diversity

- ▶ Encouraging positive relationships
- ▶ Building empathy and understanding
- ▶ Creating safe learning environments
- ▶ Supporting vulnerable groups
- ▶ Encouraging positive role models
- ▶ Aligning school practices with human rights
- ▶ Breaking down stereotypes

Dealing with controversy – Including all voices

Dealing with controversy contributes to respect for diversity by fostering open dialogue and encouraging individuals to engage constructively with differing perspectives. The Council of Europe highlights that addressing controversial issues in educational settings promotes critical thinking, empathy and mutual understanding, which are essential for challenging stereotypes and reducing prejudice. By creating safe spaces for discussion, schools can empower learners to express their views while learning to respect the diverse experiences and identities of others. This process reduces polarisation and promotes shared values rooted in human rights and democratic principles. Furthermore, the inclusion of all voices in these discussions ensures equity and strengthens social cohesion. Through these efforts, schools can cultivate environments where diversity is not only respected but celebrated, aligning with the Council of Europe's commitment to fostering democratic and inclusive societies.

Contribution of dealing with controversy to respect for diversity

- ▶ Encouraging open dialogue
- ▶ Reducing prejudice
- ▶ Reducing polarisation
- ▶ Empowering individuals
- ▶ Strengthening human rights education
- ▶ Promoting critical thinking

Improving governance – Embedding inclusive practices

Improving governance enhances respect for diversity by embedding democratic values and inclusive practices within educational institutions. By promoting active participation from all stakeholders – learners, educators, parents and community members – governance structures ensure that a range of voices are heard and considered in decision-making processes. Inclusive governance fosters the development of policies that address the needs of all members of the school community, creating equitable opportunities and reducing exclusion. It also supports intercultural dialogue, encouraging collaboration and mutual understanding among individuals from diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, effective governance establishes mechanisms to prevent and address discrimination, ensuring dignity and respect for all. These efforts align with the Council of Europe's commitment to fostering democratic, equitable and inclusive school cultures where diversity is celebrated as a strength and every individual is empowered to thrive.

Contribution of improving governance to respect for diversity

- ▶ Inclusive decision making
- ▶ Equitable access to resources
- ▶ Fostering a culture of respect
- ▶ Enhancing social cohesion
- ▶ Embedding democratic values

Principle: engagement and participation

Engagement and participation, as defined by the Council of Europe, emphasise the importance of actively involving individuals and communities in decision-making processes that affect their lives. This principle promotes democratic participation by encouraging people to contribute their ideas, perspectives and efforts to communal and societal activities. Engagement and participation foster a sense of ownership, responsibility and empowerment, ensuring that a range of voices are heard and considered in the creation of inclusive and equitable policies and practices. By advocating widespread engagement and meaningful participation, the Council of Europe aims to strengthen democracy, enhance social cohesion and build resilient communities where everyone has the opportunity to influence and shape their environment.

Tackling discrimination – Upholding democratic principles

Tackling discrimination significantly enhances engagement and participation by creating equitable opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their background, to contribute meaningfully to their communities. By addressing discriminatory practices, schools and institutions foster inclusive environments where everyone feels valued and empowered to express their opinions and take part in decision-making processes. This approach reduces fear and intimidation, particularly for marginalised groups, enabling their full engagement in activities and discussions. Eliminating discrimination also promotes social cohesion, strengthens trust in institutions and encourages different perspectives, enriching collective outcomes. Furthermore, it upholds democratic principles by ensuring representation and participation for all, preparing learners to engage actively in diverse and inclusive societies. These efforts align with the Council of Europe's commitment to equity, inclusion and democratic engagement, laying the foundation for lifelong participation in democratic communities.

Contributions of tackling discrimination to enhance engagement and participation

- ▶ Creating equitable opportunities
- ▶ Fostering inclusive environments
- ▶ Reducing fear and intimidation
- ▶ Enhancing confidence and agency
- ▶ Building trust in a school as an institution
- ▶ Supporting lifelong engagement
- ▶ Encouraging diverse perspectives

Reducing violence – Fostering a sense of community

A strong sense of community within a school is a powerful deterrent to violence. When students feel connected to and supported by their school community, they are less likely to engage in violent behaviour. Community-building initiatives that promote inclusivity, mutual respect and shared goals help to create an environment where students feel valued and understood. Efforts to foster social cohesion and protect the rights of all students, especially those affiliated with minority backgrounds, are vital for building a sense of community. Programmes that encourage learner participation, engagement, cultural exchange and dialogue among a variety of groups help to break down barriers and build trust. By addressing social inequalities and providing platforms for marginalised voices, these initiatives reduce tensions and the potential for conflict. Additionally, school-oriented conflict resolution practices, such as peer mediation and student-led initiatives, emphasise collaborative approaches to problem-solving. These practices not only resolve disputes effectively but also strengthen community bonds, making violence a less attractive option for resolving conflicts. By fostering a strong sense of community, schools can create a supportive and inclusive environment where all students feel a sense of belonging and safety.

Contributions of reducing violence to enhance engagement and participation

- ▶ Creating safe spaces
- ▶ Encouraging open participation
- ▶ Encouraging open communication
- ▶ Promoting positive relationships
- ▶ Fostering trust and respect
- ▶ Creating equitable opportunities
- ▶ Enhancing emotional well-being

Dealing with controversy – Supporting mutual understanding

Dealing with controversy contributes to engagement and participation by fostering an environment where a variety of voices are heard, respected and included in meaningful dialogue. Addressing controversial topics encourages individuals to express their perspectives, listen to others and collaborate in seeking solutions to complex issues. This process strengthens critical thinking, mutual understanding and empathy, which are essential for active and informed participation. By creating safe spaces for discussion, controversy management empowers marginalised groups to contribute their unique experiences and perspectives, promoting equity and inclusiveness. These practices align with the Council of Europe's commitment to democratic education, which prepares students and educators to engage constructively in diverse and pluralistic societies.

Contributions of dealing with controversy to enhance engagement and participation

- ▶ Encouraging open dialogue
- ▶ Promoting active listening
- ▶ Strengthening critical thinking
- ▶ Empowering marginalised voices
- ▶ Preparing for democratic participation
- ▶ Encouraging shared responsibility
- ▶ Fostering empathy

Improving governance – Collaborative decision making

Improving governance directly enhances engagement and participation by fostering transparency, inclusivity and collaborative decision making within schools and institutions. Democratic governance structures actively involve all stakeholders – students, teachers, parents and community members – ensuring that a range of voices are represented and valued. By creating equitable systems and addressing barriers to participation, governance reforms empower individuals in marginalised situations and provide opportunities for everyone to contribute meaningfully. This participatory approach builds trust, strengthens social cohesion and encourages shared responsibility, cultivating a culture of active engagement. Furthermore, it aligns with the Council of Europe's commitment to democratic education, preparing individuals to participate effectively in diverse and inclusive societies throughout their lives.

Contributions of improving governance to enhance engagement and participation

- ▶ Enhancing representation
- ▶ Strengthening collaboration
- ▶ Empowering marginalised groups
- ▶ Aligning governance with democratic principles
- ▶ Building social cohesion
- ▶ Promoting transparency

Principle: welcoming and enabling environment

A welcoming and enabling environment, as defined by the Council of Europe, refers to creating spaces where all individuals feel accepted, valued and supported, enabling them to thrive and participate fully. This principle involves ensuring that physical, social and cultural environments are accessible and conducive to the well-being and active involvement of everyone, regardless of their background or abilities. A welcoming and enabling environment fosters a sense of belonging, encourages interaction, and provides the necessary resources and support systems to help individuals achieve their full potential. By promoting such environments, the Council of Europe aims to enhance social inclusion, reduce barriers and empower individuals to contribute meaningfully to society.

Tackling discrimination – Addressing discriminatory practices

Tackling discrimination is vital for creating a welcoming and enabling environment where everyone feels valued, safe and empowered to thrive. Addressing discriminatory practices ensures inclusivity and equity by removing barriers that marginalise individuals or groups, allowing everyone to access opportunities and participate fully. By fostering mutual respect and reducing prejudice, schools and institutions can cultivate a culture of acceptance and understanding, where diversity is celebrated as a strength. Tackling discrimination also promotes trust and safety, providing a supportive space that nurtures positive relationships and well-being. These efforts align with the Council of Europe's commitment to human rights and democratic values, building environments that enable all individuals to reach their full potential.

Contributions of tackling discrimination to building welcoming and enabling environments

- ▶ Fostering inclusivity
- ▶ Promoting equity
- ▶ Encouraging mutual respect
- ▶ Supporting well-being
- ▶ Strengthening community cohesion
- ▶ Empowering marginalised groups
- ▶ Building trust
- ▶ Reinforcing positive relationships

Reducing violence – Safe and welcoming schools

Creating safe and welcoming school environments is essential to reducing violence and promoting a culture of peace. Schools are not only educational institutions but also critical spaces for social development. A positive school climate, where learners feel safe, respected and valued, significantly reduces incidents of violence and bullying. The Council of Europe's anti-bullying initiatives and its promotion of inclusive education policies are key components in this effort. By ensuring that schools are inclusive and that all students regardless of their background or affiliations, feel welcome, these initiatives help to create environments where diversity is celebrated and conflicts are resolved peacefully. Programmes that teach conflict resolution skills, such as negotiation and mediation, empower learners to handle disputes constructively. Furthermore, fostering a sense of belonging and community within schools encourages learners to support one another and stand against violence. By prioritising the safety and inclusivity of schools, the Council of Europe helps to cultivate a generation of individuals who are equipped to contribute to peaceful and just societies.

Contributions of reducing violence to enhance engagement and participation

- ▶ Promoting positive relationships
- ▶ Encouraging equitable participation
- ▶ Enhancing emotional well-being
- ▶ Fostering trust
- ▶ Strengthening social cohesion
- ▶ Teaching conflict resolution skills

Dealing with controversy – Creating safe spaces

Dealing with controversy contributes significantly to creating a welcoming and enabling environment by fostering open dialogue, mutual respect and critical thinking within schools. Addressing contentious topics in a constructive and inclusive manner ensures that different perspectives are heard, respected and valued, promoting fairness and equity. It creates safe spaces where individuals feel confident expressing their opinions without fear of judgment or exclusion, which is crucial for building inclusive schools. By equipping learners and educators with the skills to navigate complex issues, schools can address biases, reduce polarisation and build trust, laying the foundation for collaborative and supportive communities. These practices align with the Council of Europe's commitment to fostering equitable, inclusive and democratic educational environments where everyone can thrive.

Contributions of dealing with controversy to enhance engagement and participation

- ▶ Encouraging open dialogue
- ▶ Promoting mutual respect
- ▶ Promoting respectful dialogue
- ▶ Reducing conflict and polarisation
- ▶ Supporting emotional well-being
- ▶ Strengthening social bonds

Improving governance – Creating fair and equitable schools

Improving governance contributes significantly to creating a welcoming and enabling environment by establishing transparent, inclusive and participatory decision-making processes. Governance structures that involve all stakeholders – learners, educators, parents and community members – ensure that a range of perspectives are valued and addressed, promoting a sense of belonging and equity. By embedding democratic principles into policies and practices, improved governance fosters trust, accountability and mutual respect, which are essential for a positive atmosphere. Inclusive governance also ensures that resources and opportunities are distributed fairly, creating conditions where everyone can thrive. These efforts align with the Council of Europe's commitment to democratic education and human rights, laying the groundwork for environments that empower and welcome all individuals.

Contributions of improving governance to enhance engagement and participation

- ▶ Promoting inclusivity
- ▶ Ensuring equity
- ▶ Encouraging fair decision making
- ▶ Fostering trust and collaboration
- ▶ Addressing barriers to participation
- ▶ Strengthening social cohesion
- ▶ Reinforcing democratic values
- ▶ Enhancing educational outcomes

Challenge: tackling discrimination

According to the Council of Europe, discrimination occurs when people are treated less favourably than other people in a comparable situation only because they belong, or are perceived to belong, to a certain group or category of people. People may be discriminated against because of their age, disability, ethnicity, origin, political belief, “race”, religion, sex or gender, sexual orientation, language, culture or many other grounds, including on several grounds at the same time.¹ Discrimination, which is often the result of prejudices people hold, makes people powerless, impedes them from becoming active citizens, restricts them from developing their skills and, in many situations, from accessing work, health services, education or accommodation (Council of Europe 2025a).

Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights states that “The enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in [the] Convention shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, “race”, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status” (Council of Europe 2025b).

Protocol No. 12 to the European Convention on Human Rights is an anti-discrimination treaty from the Council of Europe, which states that “The enjoyment of any right set forth by law shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, “race”, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status” (Council of Europe 2005).

The Council of Europe has been actively engaged in initiatives to tackle discrimination, especially focusing on prejudice and discriminatory language and on social exclusion. These two broad topics are critical areas where the Council of Europe has developed comprehensive strategies, educational materials and policy recommendations.

Prejudice and discriminatory language

Prejudice and discriminatory language are critical issues for the Council of Europe as they contribute to systemic inequality, marginalisation and the erosion of social cohesion. Discriminatory language perpetuates stereotypes, reinforces negative biases and can lead to exclusion, harassment or violence against individuals or groups based on “race”, religion, gender or other protected characteristics. These issues undermine the principles of human dignity, equality and mutual respect, which are the foundations of the Council of Europe's mission.

The Council of Europe addresses prejudice and discriminatory language within the Council of Europe Reference Framework for Competences for Democratic Culture (Council of Europe 2025d), to equip educators with tools to promote democratic values, intercultural understanding and respect for diversity. It emphasises teaching skills such as critical thinking, empathy and intercultural dialogue, which are vital for challenging prejudice and discriminatory language.

Education for democratic citizenship and human rights education (EDC/HRE) helps learners recognise and challenge prejudice and discrimination, encouraging the use of language that respects diversity and fosters inclusion (Council of Europe 2010).

The Council of Europe has also developed guidelines for the use of language as a driver of inclusivity (Council of Europe 2024) to help ensure that school curricula and textbooks do not perpetuate stereotypes or discriminatory language. These materials aim to represent a range of perspectives and promote equality.

1. Since all human beings belong to the same species, the Council of Europe's European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) rejects theories based on the existence of different “races”. However, ECRI uses this term in order to ensure that those persons who are generally and erroneously perceived as belonging to “another race” are not excluded from the protection provided for by the legislation. The term “race” is used with inverted commas to signal its problematic nature.

Social exclusion

Addressing social inclusion is vital to combating discrimination, as it fosters equal opportunities and participation for all individuals, regardless of their backgrounds. Inclusive societies mitigate marginalisation and prejudice by ensuring that everyone has access to resources and decision-making processes. The Council of Europe emphasises that genuine equality and full access to rights are essential for upholding human rights and democracy.

To ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all is an important aim of the Council of Europe for achieving the sustainable development goals (Goal 4: Quality education). Fostering quality education and improving access to education for children in disadvantaged situations, including children affiliated with minority backgrounds and children with special educational needs. The Council of Europe Disability Strategy 2017-2023 (Council of Europe 2017a) stresses that access for children with disabilities to information and education and ensuring their participation and successful learning is of paramount importance.

To promote a culture of democratic participation among all learners is a safeguard for democracy. Therefore, the Council of Europe promotes participatory practice in education, recognising that such an engagement is vital for the development and maintenance of democratic school cultures.

Challenge: reducing violence

The Council of Europe defines violence in schools as a broad term encompassing various forms of physical and psychological harm, including bullying, intimidation and repression. This violence creates an environment of insecurity and fear, hindering students' right to learn in a welcoming, enabling and safe environment. It is considered one of the most visible forms of violence against children. The Council of Europe advocates educational initiatives centred on human rights and democratic citizenship to prevent and eradicate violence in schools. Its strategy emphasises creating a culture of respect and understanding through school-wide programmes that align with the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education. Saying no to violence at school means fulfilment of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is an obligation of all signatory states.

The Council of Europe has been actively engaged in initiatives to reduce violence, particularly focusing on bullying and hate speech. These two broad topics are critical areas where the Council of Europe has developed comprehensive strategies, educational materials and policy recommendations.

Bullying and cyberbullying

Bullying in schools represents a pervasive global issue that significantly undermines the overall school climate and infringes upon students' right to learn in a safe, welcoming and supportive environment. This phenomenon, although not new, remains widespread across many educational settings. It is important to distinguish bullying from short-lived conflicts, arguments, aggressive confrontations or exclusion among children and adults. The systematic and prolonged nature of bullying involves the targeting, humiliation or exclusion of a student who may be more vulnerable by those who exploit their power advantage. Effective anti-bullying efforts require the co-operation of entire school communities to develop a coherent, inclusive and systematic educational approach.

Cyberbullying is a specific form of bullying that occurs within the realm of modern technology and uses information and communication technologies, including social media, e-mails, text messages, online games, etc. It encompasses offensive remarks, threats, the publication of unwanted pictures or videos, sending unpleasant messages, hacking accounts, identity theft, revealing secrets, publishing private materials, stalking and provoking certain behaviours for further documentation and dissemination.

The longer bullying persists, the more difficult it becomes to find a solution, and the greater the likelihood that the individuals involved will suffer physical or emotional harm. Bullying has profound consequences for all parties involved – victims, perpetrators and bystanders. For victims it may lead to lasting emotional trauma, lowered self-esteem, academic difficulties and long-term social isolation. Perpetrators are also victims who may experience social benefits through their actions, reinforcing the belief that violence is an effective social tool, and bullying often serves as a mechanism to alleviate tension from other situations, often occurring outside school. Witnesses (bystanders) to bullying often feel helpless and guilty, learning passivity and avoidance, which negatively impact their future conflict resolution skills. Bullying, therefore, has extensive and lasting repercussions for everyone involved, necessitating comprehensive and proactive strategies to address and mitigate its impact.

Hate speech and identity-based violence

Hate speech encompasses all forms of expression that incite, promote, spread or justify violence, hatred or discrimination against individuals or groups based on characteristics such as “race”, colour, language, religion, nationality, ethnic origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation. In the context of schools, addressing hate speech is crucial for fostering a positive and inclusive educational environment. It is important to combat hate speech through human rights education, aiming to raise awareness among young people and equip them with the skills to recognise and counter such expressions. By integrating relevant principles into school curricula and policies, educational institutions can promote respect for diversity, uphold the dignity and rights of all learners and cultivate a culture of inclusion and mutual understanding.

Identity-based violence refers to harmful acts – whether physical, psychological or verbal – directed at individuals or groups because of their actual or perceived characteristics or identity markers, such as “race”, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability or other attributes. This type of violence aims to degrade, exclude or harm individuals based on these aspects of their identity, often rooted in prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination.

Challenge: dealing with controversy and polarisation

Dealing with controversy in the context of the Council of Europe's educational policies refers to the deliberate and constructive engagement with contentious, sensitive or divisive issues in a way that promotes critical thinking, open dialogue and mutual respect. This approach is integral to fostering democratic principles and an inclusive school culture. It entails equipping educators with the tools and strategies needed to address disagreements or conflicting perspectives in a safe and supportive environment, where learners are encouraged to explore a range of different viewpoints and develop the skills necessary for respectful and informed debate. Aligned with the Council of Europe's Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education, dealing with controversy supports the cultivation of active citizenship, social cohesion and the protection of human rights by embedding these principles into the teaching and governance practices of educational institutions.

By effectively managing controversial issues, schools can uphold human rights and democratic principles, contributing to a more inclusive and participatory school culture. It encourages educators to create safe spaces where students can explore and discuss contentious topics, thereby promoting democratic engagement and inclusivity.

The Council of Europe has been actively engaged in initiatives to deal with controversy, especially addressing intolerance and propaganda and misinformation. These two broad topics are critical areas where the Council of Europe has developed comprehensive strategies, educational materials and policy recommendations.

Intolerance

The Council of Europe identifies intolerance as a significant barrier to establishing democratic and inclusive school cultures. Intolerance manifests as a lack of respect for differing practices or beliefs and the rejection of individuals perceived as different, such as those from diverse social or ethnic groups or with varying political or sexual orientations. This rejection fosters discrimination and exclusion, undermining the principles of democracy and inclusivity within educational settings (Council of Europe 2025a).

Intolerance is a critical issue because it obstructs open dialogue and mutual respect, which are foundational to democratic and inclusive school cultures. Intolerance limits students' ability to engage constructively with differing viewpoints, exacerbates social divisions and leads to an environment where prejudice and exclusion thrive. This contradicts the principles of democratic education, which aim to prepare students to participate actively and responsibly in diverse societies.

When educators are equipped to address controversial topics effectively, they can help mitigate intolerance by creating a safe space for critical dialogue. This promotes the development of key democratic competences such as empathy, intercultural understanding and the ability to critically evaluate information, enabling students to counteract the biases that fuel intolerance.

Propaganda and misinformation

Propaganda is information that may be true or false, created and disseminated to deliberately to influence public opinion for political, ideological or commercial purposes. Propaganda often exploits emotional appeal and oversimplifies complex issues to promote a particular agenda or viewpoint. Misinformation is false or misleading information shared without harmful intent. Unlike disinformation, misinformation may be shared by individuals who are unaware of its inaccuracy, leading to its unintentional spread (Council of Europe 2017b).

Propaganda and misinformation are significant threats to democratic and inclusive school cultures. These elements can polarise public opinion, promote violent extremism and hate speech and ultimately undermine democracies by eroding trust in democratic processes.

Propaganda and misinformation can hinder the development of critical thinking skills and lead to environments where discrimination and exclusion thrive. Addressing these challenges is crucial for promoting democracy, respect for human rights and citizenship within schools.

Challenge: improving governance

The Council of Europe defines school governance as encompassing all aspects of the way a school is led, managed and run – including its rules and procedures, its decision-making structures, the behaviour of its personnel and how they relate to each other (Council of Europe 2007). This comprehensive definition includes the school curriculum, teaching methods and the overall ethos of the institution.

In the context of democratic education, the Council of Europe emphasises that a democratic school is one that upholds human rights, democracy and the rule of law which are the core values of the Council of Europe. Such a school adopts a whole-school approach to democratic principles, integrating them into the content of lessons, the school culture and its management structure.

Furthermore, the Council of Europe highlights that “school democracy is connected with inclusive and transparent decision making at school governance level as well as at daily class and school life level”. This approach relies on the active participation of all school community members, each contributing according to their roles (Council of Europe 2025c).

The Council of Europe has been actively engaged in initiatives to improve governance, especially addressing the low capacity for change and disengagement of stakeholders. These two broad topics are critical areas where the Council of Europe has developed comprehensive strategies, educational materials and policy recommendations.

Low capacity for change

Teachers often lack the necessary training to effectively implement inclusive practices and promote a democratic and inclusive culture in classrooms. Supporting teachers in the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes to address EDC/HRE in the classroom remains a key challenge.

Balancing autonomy and accountability in schools is complex. The Council of Europe highlights the urgent need to improve the interplay between quality assurance mechanisms that are external and internal to schools.

Disengagement of stakeholders

Disengagement of stakeholders is a significant challenge across many member states, where there is a pressing need to enhance democratic governance in schools. In many instances, participation and involvement from all stakeholders – students, teachers, parents and school leaders – are lacking in the processes of school governance. This insufficient engagement undermines the potential for effective educational outcomes and democratic participation.

Moreover, many schools employ only superficial methods in their implementation of Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (EDC/HRE). Rather than adopting meaningful, sustained strategies, they rely on short-term initiatives that fail to implement lasting democratic values and skills. The Council of Europe advocates a shift away from these “tokenistic” approaches towards more robust, long-term strategies and programmes that can truly embed EDC/HRE principles into the fabric of educational experiences.

Another significant challenge is engaging parents and civil society organisations in school governance. Often, there is a disconnect between schools and these vital community stakeholders, making it difficult to foster a co-operative environment that supports educational governance. The co-operation between governmental agencies, civil society organisations, NGOs and other community groups is crucial yet challenging to achieve. Strengthening these relationships is essential for developing inclusive, democratic school environments that are responsive to the needs of all community members.

References

Council of Europe (2005), Protocol No. 12 to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ETS No. 177), www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-detail&treaty-num=177.

Council of Europe (2007), *Democratic governance of schools*, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg, <https://rm.coe.int/16804952d0>.

Council of Europe (2010), Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education, www.coe.int/en/web/edc/charter-on-education-for-democratic-citizenship-and-human-rights-education.

Council of Europe (2015a), Joint Programme “Regional Support for Inclusive Education in South-East Europe”, pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/inclusive-education/home.html.

Council of Europe (2015b), “Tool to upgrade teacher education practices for inclusive education”, coe.int/en/web/learning-resources/-/tool-to-upgrade-teacher-education-practices-for-inclusive-education.

Council of Europe (2017a), Disability Strategy 2017-2023, <https://edoc.coe.int/en/people-with-disabilities/7276-pdf-human-rights-a-reality-for-all-council-of-europe-disability-strategy-2017-2023.html>.

Council of Europe (2017b), “Information disorder: toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making”, Council of Europe report DGI(2017)09, tinyurl.com/4ztxa94b.

Council of Europe (2019), “Fostering a Democratic School Culture and Diversity in Schools”, Council of Europe, tinyurl.com/mu4x55wa.

Council of Europe (2020), Living with controversy – A toolkit for handling controversy in schools, [https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/charter-edc-hre-pilot-projects/publications#{%228522015%22:\[0\]}](https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/charter-edc-hre-pilot-projects/publications#{%228522015%22:[0]}).

Council of Europe (2021), Joint Programme “Democratic and Inclusive School Culture in Operation” (DISCO), pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/charter-edc-hre-pilot-projects/home.

Council of Europe (2023a), Education Strategy 2024-2030 “Learners first – Education for today’s and tomorrow’s democratic societies”, <https://rm.coe.int/education-strategy-2024-2030-26th-session-council-of-europe-standing-c/1680abee81>.

Council of Europe (2023b), “INCLUDE – Building Capacity for Inclusion in Education”, pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/building-capacity-for-inclusion-in-education.

Council of Europe (2024), “Guidelines for the use of language as a driver of inclusivity”, <https://rm.coe.int/guidelines-for-the-use-of-language-as-a-driver-of-inclusivity/1680aec235>.

Council of Europe (2025a), Discrimination and intolerance, coe.int/en/web/compass/discrimination-and-intolerance.

Council of Europe (2025b), A Convention to protect your rights and liberties, coe.int/en/web/human-rights-convention.

Council of Europe (2025c), Background of the Democratic Schools Network, tinyurl.com/3nxa4dkp.

Council of Europe (2025d), *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (RFCDC), Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg, www.coe.int/en/web/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture/rfcdc-volumes.

UNESCO (2013), Inclusive Education, the Way of the Future: Conclusions and Recommendations of the 48th Session of the International Conference on Education, unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000222124.

UNESCO (2020), “UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report 2020”, Chapter 2, Laws and Policies, <https://iite.unesco.org/news/2020-global-education-monitoring-report-all-means-all/>.

Sales agents for publications of the Council of Europe
Agents de vente des publications du Conseil de l'Europe

BELGIUM/BELGIQUE

La Librairie Européenne -
The European Bookshop
Rue de l'Orme, 1
BE-1040 BRUXELLES
Tel.: + 32 (0)2 231 04 35
Fax: + 32 (0)2 735 08 60
E-mail: info@libeurop.eu
<http://www.libeurop.be>

Jean De Lannoy/DL Services
c/o Michot Warehouses
Bergense steenweg 77
Chaussée de Mons
BE-1600 SINT PIETERS LEEUW
Fax: + 32 (0)2 706 52 27
E-mail: jean.de.lannoy@dl-servi.com
<http://www.jean-de-lannoy.be>

CANADA

Renouf Publishing Co. Ltd.
22-1010 Polytek Street
CDN-OTTAWA, ONT K1J 9J1
Tel.: + 1 613 745 2665
Fax: + 1 613 745 7660
Toll-Free Tel.: (866) 767-6766
E-mail: order.dept@renoufbooks.com
<http://www.renoufbooks.com>

FRANCE

Please contact directly/
Merci de contacter directement
Council of Europe Publishing
Éditions du Conseil de l'Europe
F-67075 STRASBOURG Cedex
Tel.: + 33 (0)3 88 41 25 81
E-mail: publishing@coe.int
<http://book.coe.int>

Librairie Kléber
1, rue des Francs-Bourgeois
F-67000 STRASBOURG
Tel.: + 33 (0)3 88 15 78 88
Fax: + 33 (0)3 88 15 78 80
E-mail: librairie-kleber@coe.int
<http://www.librairie-kleber.com>

NORWAY/NORVÈGE

Akademika
Postboks 84 Blindern
NO-0314 OSLO
Tel.: + 47 2 218 8100
Fax: + 47 2 218 8103
E-mail: support@akademika.no
<http://www.akademika.no>

POLAND/POLOGNE

Ars Polona JSC
25 Obroncow Street
PL-03-933 WARSZAWA
Tel.: + 48 (0)22 509 86 00
Fax: + 48 (0)22 509 86 10
E-mail: arspolona@arspolona.com.pl
<http://www.arspolona.com.pl>

PORTUGAL

Marka Lda
Rua dos Correeiros 61-3
PT-1100-162 LISBOA
Tel: 351 21 3224040
Fax: 351 21 3224044
E-mail: apoio.clientes@marka.pt
www.marka.pt

SWITZERLAND/SUISSE

Planetis Sàrl
16, chemin des Pins
CH-1273 ARZIER
Tel.: + 41 22 366 51 77
Fax: + 41 22 366 51 78
E-mail: info@planetis.ch

UNITED KINGDOM/ROYAUME-UNI

Williams Lea TSO
18 Central Avenue
St Andrews Business Park
Norwich
NR7 0HR
United Kingdom
Tel. +44 (0)333 202 5070
E-mail: customer.services@tso.co.uk
<http://www.tsoshop.co.uk>

**UNITED STATES and CANADA/
ÉTATS-UNIS et CANADA**

Manhattan Publishing Co
670 White Plains Road
USA-10583 SCARSDALE, NY
Tel: + 1 914 472 4650
Fax: + 1 914 472 4316
E-mail: coe@manhattanpublishing.com
<http://www.manhattanpublishing.com>

Council of Europe Publishing/Éditions du Conseil de l'Europe

F-67075 STRASBOURG Cedex

Tel.: + 33 (0)3 88 41 25 81 – E-mail: publishing@coe.int – Website: <http://book.coe.int>

The Council of Europe envisages schools as vibrant, democratic and inclusive communities where every individual feels valued, respected and empowered to reach their full potential. Rooted in the principles of equity, human rights and mutual respect, these schools foster active participation, open dialogue and a celebration of diversity. Through transparent governance, collaborative decision making and a commitment to creating safe and enabling environments, we prepare learners to navigate and contribute to pluralistic societies with empathy, critical thinking and a deep sense of shared responsibility. Guided by the Council of Europe's values, our schools are to be models of fairness, inclusion and democracy, cultivating the next generation of engaged citizens who champion justice, respect and cohesion in their communities and beyond.

To help achieve this vision, this toolkit is organised with principles to give direction and guidance on fundamental good practices, lists the most pressing challenges to which the Council of Europe has most contributed and provides examples of solutions for specific issues as developed in various countries and projects.

The vision of the toolkit is to create a gateway to available resources and experiences from different countries.



TOOLKIT FOR A DEMOCRATIC AND INCLUSIVE SCHOOL CULTURE

PREMS 07/4925

ENG

www.coe.int

The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation.

It comprises 46 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.