

“Support teachers for rights-based schools”

Statement by Thomas Hammarberg, Commissioner for Human Rights on the occasion of World Teachers Day

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On World Teachers’ Day, we need to think of ways to support teachers across the Council of Europe region in creating rights-based schools. Governments must listen to teachers more and provide them with more support.

The school environment is a crucially important location for learning about and practicing human rights from an early age. It is a place where all children are given the same opportunity to develop respect for human rights. As the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states, the purpose of education is ultimately to prepare the child for a “responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin” as well as “respect for the natural environment”.

The theme of this year’s World Teachers’ Day is “Quality Teachers for Quality Education”. We cannot emphasize enough how much the qualification of teachers and educators is key – and not only when it comes to teaching our children how to read, write and calculate. Teachers are also primary human rights defenders, and what’s more: key actors for the success of human rights education. Teachers have an essential role in preparing children to assume an active and participatory democratic citizenship.

Human rights values should not only be taught as a separate subject but should permeate the whole education system. Teachers should not only teach about democracy but also act in that spirit, giving students a practical understanding – as well experience – about democratic customs and behaviour. Each child should be given the opportunity to learn in a democratic atmosphere and to be heard and have his or her opinions taken seriously.

Teacher skills, attitudes and motivation are therefore crucially important for human rights education. The necessary preparation should be given through pre-service teacher education, focusing on both academic knowledge about the taught subjects and teaching methods needed to create a child-centred, inclusive learning environment. In addition, in our fast-changing world, teachers must be engaged in life-long learning to be able to meet new challenges.

It is a grave political contradiction that so much emphasis is being given to the importance of education while so little is being done to give teachers status, support and

reward. Their advice is too often ignored or not even asked for when decisions are taken about education policy. The professional status of teachers should be recognised as one of the most important in society.

Governments have endorsed numerous international conventions and recommendations emphasising the importance of human rights education. At the end of the day, however, it is the teacher community which has to work on the practical level, and turn the principle ideas into reality. It is vital therefore that teachers are involved in the process from the beginning, or there is a risk that the high ambitions will stay on the level of rhetoric, leading to few changes at the school level.

It is the responsibility of policy-makers and school management to support and empower the teachers in this important role, and to work toward raising their professional status.