

EMPOWERING STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION

| Policy Road Map North Macedonia

**START THE
CHANGE!**

IMPRESSUM

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Empowering Students' Participation – Policy Road Map North Macedonia

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**START THE
CHANGE!**

PROJECT "Start the Change – creating a generation of change makers through intercultural education and volunteering" (Contract no.: 612200-EPP-1-2019-1-HR-EPPKA3-IPI-SOC-IN) Erasmus+ Key Action 3: Support for policy reform Action Type: Social inclusion through education, training and youth Zagreb, 2022

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BACKGROUND

About the project

The Forum for Freedom in Education (Croatia) together with the partner organizations: INOVA+ (Portugal), Macedonian Civic Education Centre (North Macedonia), Network of Education Policy Centres, SIRIUS – Policy Network on Migrant Education, the Ivan Meštrović Primary School (Croatia), Agrupamento de Escolas José Estêvão (Portugal) and the Nikola Karev State Municipal School (North Macedonia) is implementing the project "**START THE CHANGE – creating a generation of changemakers through intercultural education and volunteering**" within the Erasmus+ program (K3, Social Inclusion).

The purpose of the project is to strengthen the resilience of youth by supporting them to be healthy, self-confident, fulfilled, broadminded individuals, regardless of their backgrounds and possible challenges they face, who create and foster healthy relationships, develop their abilities and are actively engaged in their community. Providing opportunities for young people to express their own world perspective and experience being heard and seen by their teachers as well as supported in initiating creative and innovative projects through which they can express their own talents, values and potential for growth strengthens their resilience and reduces risks of manipulation, extreme attitudes, relationships and attitudes that are harmful. Focusing on the social inclusion of young people, helping them to develop self-confidence, a sense of identity and belonging, and teaching them how to think critically are among the most important elements of successfully preventing youth radicalization. Valuing and providing opportunities for participation and the raising of students' voices are key to increasing the sense of belonging of students and developing their self-confidence, especially for those in vulnerable situations.

Therefore, **the first cluster of the START THE CHANGE project** investigated the perspectives of young people themselves on how they perceive their school community, their position in it and whether they are being listened to and seen or not. These findings were the starting point for developing **the second cluster of START THE CHANGE** materials and training curricula for teachers and parents to empower them to create positive changes in their schools and learning spaces together with young people. In **the third cluster, the START THE CHANGE project** seeks to empower young people to create and lead with the support of their teachers, voluntary initiatives that will contribute to solving the problems that were previously identified by young people. While in **the fourth cluster**, the partner organization in cooperation with different stakeholders in 3 countries and at the EU level are developing further recommendations for strengthening the students' voice and participation in their schools and educational systems at the policy level.

The key focus of all clusters of the START THE CHANGE project is the promotion of the students' voice and participation as a growing number of researchers claim that it supports the opening up of spaces and capacities for marginalized youth to play key roles in the positive changes in schools and learning spaces, support more socially just school environments and ensure that disenfranchised youth are included in the decision-making processes and foster positive youth development around agency and civic engagement.

Why is student participation important at the policy and school level?

The demand for the active involvement of students in school life for all matters that concern them also arises from the general approach of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which emphasizes that childhood is not only a preparation for the period when we will be adults, but that it is a separate period from the life of every human being in which children should be treated as individuals with their own rights, as equals with adults and as active participants in school and community developments who should develop into capable and responsible citizens who respect the rights of others. Only an open school that enables the democratic participation of students and encourages the motivation to learn and participate in school is a guarantee for the stability of the school, the establishment of a respectful relationship between adults and children and an appropriate environment in which both children and adults feel comfortable.

According to many studies, the students' participation fosters the development of competencies that are necessary for growing up in democratic societies. Through the process of participation, children acquire knowledge, skills and values that prepare them for more complex forms of participation in adult life. From the developmental point of view, participation provides continuity between childhood and adulthood because it provides the development of competencies such as critical thinking, autonomy, and responsibility that are required for every adult citizen in any democratic society.

The importance of the consultation process with students is threefold. First, consulting students helps adults to decenter, i.e., to understand the students' perspective. Consulting students in some schools about the problems they had been facing showcased the great difference between teachers' and students' perspectives. Students considered some problems as important that teachers did not see as important at all. Secondly, Consulting children also helps adults to gain a better insight into the problems that children are facing. When it comes to the best interest of the child, consultation with students increases the probability of making decisions that are in their best interest (Students' participation: Policy and Practice to Start the Change, Forum for Freedom in Education, 2020). Finally, focusing on the social inclusion of young people, helping them to develop self-confidence, a sense of identity and belonging, and teaching them how to think critically are among the most important elements of successfully preventing youth radicalization. Valuing and providing opportunities for participation and student voices are key in increasing the sense of belonging of students and developing their self-confidence, especially for those in vulnerable situations.

What we know about student participation in MK?

There have been examples of student involvement in educational decision-making in North Macedonia but it is only in the last couple of years that the concept of actively including students in school planning has gained ground. The Law on Primary Education (Official Gazette of Republic of North Macedonia, no. 161/19 and 229/20), for the first-time regulates student's organizations and participation in school communities (Article 68). To ensure the realization of students' interests in an organized manner in a primary school, students will organize themselves at the class level and in a school parliament.

According to the definition in the Law the school parliament actively participates in advocacy and the promotion of students' rights and interests, promotes student activism, participates in activities to ensure peer support for students with special educational needs, and in the realization of classes and extracurricular activities, takes part in the drafting of the annual work program of the school, gives proposals for annual excursion programs, gives proposals for extracurricular activities in the school, gives proposals for improved student standard, takes part in the school evaluation, participates in the parental council and teacher councils with its own representatives and organizes and partakes in humanitarian activities, environmental activities and community work. The Law also regulates the role of the Student Ombudsman, which is to ensure the protection and promotion of the rights of students in the school. Based on this a guideline for student participation, student organization and protection of children's rights in primary schools was prepared by the Bureau for Development of Education in 2020. A similar Law on Secondary Education is being drafted at the moment which is expected to be adopted by the end of 2022.

Recent research conducted by the Macedonian Civic Education Center showed that in the primary schools the student representative body 'Student Parliament' (SP), consisting of class presidents from each class has been established. However, considering that the incorporation of provisions for organizing students is relatively new in the Primary Education Law, the legal requirement to establish an SP has only recently started to be mandatory. The schools are more advanced when it comes to the technical and procedural aspects of the student participation process, however, the overall quality of participation and influence is relatively low. In most secondary schools, the class community/student community are the most common forms through which students present their views and opinions and are most often informed about the educational policies and plans of the bodies of the school in which they attend classes. The forms of participation and organization of secondary school students are different, dependent on the will of each school, although there is a recognized initiative and awareness of secondary school students about the need for association and participation in decision-making.

MCEC research into the democratic participation in primary and secondary schools (2018), indicates that students usually feel more open to raising issues that affect them during their homeroom class or at the

meetings of the school's community. Still, when a particular issue/ problem needs to be raised to a higher level, they face a lack of knowledge, skills, and formal handling procedures. Regarding the opportunities that students have for participation and influence in making decisions about things that concern/affect them, about half of the surveyed students said that they could participate often or sometimes, while the others believe that they rarely or never had such opportunities. In general, students question the belief that they can initiate positive change in the community. Every second student thought that students could influence the initiation of a change in the school. One encouraging fact is that the majority of students felt that they have a responsibility to be active in addressing the needs of their environment and that they have the power to make a difference in the school. However, what is worrying is the fact that almost half of them thought that if they openly voice their opinions, they could end up in trouble with the school.

The Youth Ethnic Integration Project (implemented by the Macedonian Civic Education Center and the Youth Education Forum), through the Bureau for Development of Education, works with Civic Education teachers and school support staff to support students to express their needs and concerns and achieve positive change in the community through conducting student initiatives. All primary schools are expected to go through the process of capacity building and mentoring support by mid-2022. The project also works on connecting students with the municipality and organizing youth-led community actions for the improvement of certain aspects of communal life, selected by students and implemented in collaboration with the municipality.

According to the Law for Youth Participation and Youth Policies (Official Gazette of Republic of North Macedonia, no. 10/2020), each municipality should form/establish: a) a local youth council, b) a local youth parliament and c) a youth center. It is important to note that the Law defines young people as 15 to 29-year-old citizens of North Macedonia, and as such is relevant for students in secondary schools and above. The local youth councils were expected to be established within 1 year after the passing of the Law in January 2020, while any existing local youth councils with non-expired terms were expected to be transformed according to the new requirements of the Law. The Agency for Youth and Sport and the PM's advisor on youth policies, with the support of the local OSCE Mission, have been conducting informative sessions with the municipalities about the requirements of the new Law. About 2/3 of the municipalities have been informed about their role in the process of establishing the local youth councils and a small minority has started the procedure.

Why students should participate in curriculum development

The curriculum is constructed with the learner as its central focus. Yet the voice of the learner is usually largely excluded from the design and implementation process of a curriculum. The awareness of problems involving the lack of students' voices had been noted by some earlier curricular theorists, however, it is only more recently that the concept of student participation in curriculum development has begun to be actively pursued in the curriculum field.

Research shows that consulting children and respecting their perspectives has led to major changes in different aspects of education such as changing the relationship between curricular and extracurricular activities and greater child participation in choosing both curricula (choice of content/topics and learning methods) and extracurricular activities (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). Another research shows that "Student voice" in giving students a sense of meaning and connectedness to the curriculum (ACU, 2008).

A common theme that came out of the historical review was the sense that student engagement increased when their voices were heard. However, it is important for the power of the argument in favor of students' voice in curriculum theory to go one step further and seek a link between engagement and academic achievement. Although research in this area is relatively new, there have been positive links made between engagement and learning. A broad-based university-level analysis found that "student engagement is linked positively to desirable learning outcomes such as critical thinking and grades" (Carini, Kuh, and Klein, 2006, p. 23)

Therefore, we believe that student involvement in the curriculum planning process is a means of improving student learning.

Why students should participate in a school's governance structure and bodies

Students who are involved in school life feel like a central and essential part of it, they feel that it cares for them and they reciprocate with their active participation, which further leads to the continuous development of the school. Ultimately, the atmosphere that is created in such conditions contributes to the improvement of interpersonal relationships between children and adults.

Studies show that there are different benefits of active student involvement for students such as: increased self-confidence; increased sense of responsibility; improved communication and organizational competencies; increased feeling of happiness and belonging to the school; empowered belief that they can start a change.

Therefore, students should be involved in different ways and at different levels of decision-making on all matters affecting the school. Students can participate in almost all domains of school life, related to: teaching, extracurricular activities, relationships between students, relationships with adults, and the physical conditions in school, etc. Participating in the Student Council and other school governance bodies could have the role of representing the rights of students and being a catalyst for certain changes.

PROCESS (METHODOLOGY)

How did we get to the Policy Road Map?

The process began with the collection of background materials and data about student participation in the three project implementing countries which lead to the production of a Desk Research Report "Students' participation: Policy and practices to start the change" and a Comparative Report "Student Voice as a Token of a Quality School" with observations by students from selected schools in Portugal, North Macedonia and Croatia about the active participation, relationships and classes during the COVID-19 crisis

In order to properly prepare for the first Policy Lab, the Macedonian Civic Education Center collected data from the project's participating schools and drafted a report about the students' participation practices in North Macedonia at different levels.

In May 2021 the first Policy Lab was organized under the slogan: "Policy and practice to Start the Change", as an online event that gathered over 60 participants, policymakers, teachers, school leaders and support staff as well as NGO representatives from the project implementing countries and NEPC region together with the Consortium. The main aim of the event was to introduce and raise awareness about the topic of the students' participation and the importance of students' voices in connection with policy change.

During the project implementation the participating schools organized several activities initiated by the students. The aim of these activities was to make students aware that their voices can be heard and that through their active participation they can make a difference for themselves and others.

As the project progressed the awareness of meaningful student participation was raised. The Second Policy Lab "Students' participation – a path towards inclusive and democratic society" was held in March 2022 in Zagreb, Croatia. The Second Policy Lab followed up on the knowledge acquired and experiences shared in the first policy event and it was an opportunity for teachers from 15 schools in Croatia, North Macedonia and Portugal and the policy decision makers from the educational field to meet in-person and exchange their experiences in this project and to further discuss the recommendations for strengthening the students' voice and participation in their schools and educational systems.

The event served as inspiration for discussions among the participants within the solution-generating sessions that focused on identifying the policy goals that would support the overcoming of the insufficient participation of the students in the decision-making process in school life and governance at all levels with a special focus on the potential for student participation to improve inclusion and combat negative effects of student disengagement.

The information gathered also served for the preparation of this **National Policy Road Map** that outlines the country-specific policy issues at school, local and national levels as well as offers step-by-step recommendations for policy improvements.

Overall policy goal

To enhance student participation in education

Specific goals/objectives

1. To ensure student participation in the development of curricula
2. To ensure the implementation of participative school governance

Recommendations

SG 1: Ensure student participation in the development of curricula

- Adopt the bylaws for including students in curriculum development

The current bylaws adopted by the BDE/VET Center regulate only the engagement of teachers and university professors as external experts to the BDE/VET Center for the development of new curricula and/or revising the existing ones.

- Raise awareness among stakeholders about the importance of including students in the development of the curriculum

As it has never been the practice in North Macedonia to include the students' voice in curriculum development it is necessary to raise awareness among stakeholders. However, recently there have been positive examples of the inclusion of students in the decision-making process, such as the development of the new concept of primary education in 2021 and the development of the new model for Matura examination for the academic year 2021/2022.

- Train students

Examples of consultations with children in primary and secondary schools show that most students (regardless of age) are extremely competent in discussing the curriculum and the learning process, although (especially younger students) they are not always able to articulate their perspective using the language of formal education (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004).

SG 2: Ensure implementation of participative school governance

- Raise awareness among school staff about the importance of student participation

Even though teachers play a significant role in the process, the educators have different perspectives as to what student participation includes. Educators involved in participatory design can be divided into three groups: proactive consultation, managerial consultation, and constrained consultation (Thompson, 2009).

- Provide educators with CPD about student participation and participative school governance

The current educational system isn't designed to equip teachers entering the profession with the necessary philosophical understanding and coaching skills to create opportunities for the student-teacher partnership. Therefore, it is important to value the teachers' and school principals' efforts i.e., teachers/principals who encourage and support student participation in school governance and take these efforts into account in the methodology for career advancement.

- Provide programs for school staff and students about school committees and councils to improve their understanding of the characteristics and functions of those bodies

The overall concept of student participation (including school committees and councils) needs to be clearly defined, and the expectations for both the student and the teacher need to be understood by all those involved in the change process.

- Facilitate student participation and ensure its development from a mere formality into a meaningful process i.e., creating an encouraging environment

When a student's voice is introduced in an artificial manner it can actually be harmful to the school environment. This is especially true if there is a history of students being treated with disrespect. Insincere approaches to student-teacher partnership will lead to students becoming disengaged and alienated (Mitra & Gross, 2009).

Enhance student participation in education

Specific Objectives	Recommendations	Actions	Lead/Actors	Level of implementation	Timeframe/priority
1. Ensure student participation in the development of curricula	Adopt the bylaws for including students in curriculum development	1. Creation of WG (working group) to change the bylaws 1.1. Define the scope of the WG (Need assessment) 1.2. Define the members of the WG.3 Establishment of the WG 2. Drafting the new bylaws 2.1. Analyses of good practices 2.2. Surveys/Focus groups with teachers/students/vulnerable groups 2.3. Drafting a concept of student participation, which needs to be clearly defined 2.4. Preparation of draft bylaws 3. Adoption of the bylaws 3.1. Public consultation 3.2. Including the comments 3.3. Adoption of the bylaws	MoE/BDE/ VET Center	Policy level	
	Raise awareness among stakeholders on the importance of including students in the development of the curriculum	1. Engaging experts with previous experience in student involvement in the development of curriculum to promote the benefits (eg. improving student learning). Specific data needs to be provided that can substantiate the claim that increased student voice has tangible benefits in student engagement and achievement. 2. Round tables with representatives of MoES, BDE, VET Center, universities, teachers and students presenting the results of the analyses of good practices and discussing the modules of student involvement in the development of the curriculum. The expectations for the students need to be understood by all those involved in the change process.	MoE/BDE/ VET Center		
	Training students	1. Creating a training module for student involvement by the advisors in BDE and VET Center 2. Training of students interested in participating, and articulating their perspective in the curricula development	MoE/BDE/ VET Center		

	<p>Raise awareness among school staff about the importance of student participation</p>	<p>1. Define a clear framework for children's participation in school governance 2. Organizing seminars for headmasters and school staff about the importance of student participation 3. Promotion of good practices at school and municipality level in cooperation with the media 4. Discussing the possibilities and the advantages of student participation during teacher councils' and teacher actives' meetings.</p>	<p>1. Amendments to the two bylaws for headmasters' training (basic and advanced) and certification (Official gazette No.219/15) in order to add a training module for student participation 2. Accreditation of training providers and training programs for teachers about student participation, by the BDE and adding these programs to the official catalog of trainings and to the program for teacher trainings adopted annually by the MoES 3. Amendments to the bylaw on career development (Rulebook about professional standards for the title of teacher - mentor and teacher advisor and the manner of acquisition) with the object of evaluating/taking in consideration the teacher's efforts/activities for creating environment for student participation</p>	<p>MoE/BDE/ VET Center/ Schools/ LGs</p>	<p>School-level</p>	<p>Immediate Continuous</p>
<p>3. Ensure the implementation of participative school governance</p>	<p>Provide educators with CPD about student participation and participative school governance</p>	<p>1. Develop a guideline about student participation in secondary schools (based on the already developed guideline for primary schools) 2. Prepare a manual with examples of good practices and projects/activities that can be organized by the School Parliament and the Student Ombudsman (eg. how to participate in a meaningful way in the development of the annual work program of the school; how to take into account the voice of the marginalized students; how to improve student standards, community actions, how to build stronger teacher-student relationships, etc.) 3. Organize training sessions for the members of the Student Council</p>	<p>1. Organize school projects with a gradual increase in the level of responsibility that students have in the implementation of an assignment and actively involve more students 2. Introduce creative ways of opinion polling and analyzing the needs of all students, so that the topics that come before the Council are representative 3. Organize student-teacher gatherings during the school year in order to get to know each other, thus improving their mutual communication.</p>			
	<p>Facilitate student participation and ensure its development from a mere formality to a meaningful process (creating an encouraging environment)</p>					

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United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child



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