



DESC National Action Plan

Recommendations to implement democratic education in Flanders

Objective

This action plan has been created in the context of the Erasmus+ project DESC, aimed at promoting life and citizenship skills in European education through the use of democratic education approaches by fostering a bridge and a dialogue between democratic schools and state schools.

The action plan aims to guide the implementation of democratic education's methodologies and practices in the Flemish context of Belgium, by providing recommendations of specific actions to be undertaken by key stakeholders involved in education.

Key Recommendations

1. **Include children' agency in education as policy priority**

Promoting democratic education in Flanders involves taking concrete actions that are supported by relevant policy frameworks and conventions. A serious engagement at the policy level should be taken by integrating children participation and voices in the education system. This could be done by including in the next Flemish Youth and Children's rights policy plan children's rights to participate and take decisions in their school environment.

2. **Flanders' education decision makers to follow the DESC training**

To grasp the complexity of an education philosophy, there is no better way than following a specific training led by experts in the field. We advice for the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, the Ministry of Wellbeing, Public Health and Family, the Children's Rights Commissariat and the Children's Rights Commissioner, to read the [DESC Report's executive](#)



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[summary](#), get acquainted with the list of [50 practices of Democratic Education](#) and follow the free [online DESC training](#).

3. Increase investments in education

In 2023-2024, Flanders' first expenditure, amounting to around 18 billion euros, was dedicated to education and training¹. A positive trend that should be pursued to answer current educational challenges such as the recent doubling of primary-level failings², the high levels of stress or administrative burden perceived by teachers³, education access for children living in poverty or disadvantaged backgrounds⁴, the low public esteem for teachers⁵ and to further adapt the education provided to children's needs.

4. A consent-based education

Following article 12 of the UN Convention on the rights of the child (UNCRC), children have the fundamental right to having a say in every matter affecting their lives⁶, as do adults. Yet, today, most of them do not practice this right until they reach the legal majority. Education policies, but also school curricula and learning plans should inscribe a specific commitment to respecting article 12, and in allocating specific resources towards the respect of children's rights, as stated in the UNCRC⁷. As a good practice, every education body should have a visible copy of the child-friendly version of the UNCRC presented to children and education experts. Collective reflections should also be taken with children, to inform them about their rights and create space for them to practice them.

5. Recognise democratic education in local and regional legislations

Formal recognition of this educational philosophy should go hand in hand with opportunities for administrative and financial support, similarly with what is done with other "alternative" educational approaches in the public discourse. Democratic education should be inscribed within the list of state supported free schools (as well as Freinet or Steiner) allowing future schools and education professionals seeking to open democratic schools to gain access to regional assistance.

¹ <https://financeflanders.be/budget/budget-highlights/budget-expenditures/>

² <https://www.brusselstimes.com/937434/twice-as-many-children-failing-primary-school-in-flanders-compared-to-six-years-ago>

³ <https://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=BFL&treshold=5&topic=TA>

⁴ <https://www.brusselstimes.com/980396/more-than-10000-minors-without-a-home-in-wallonia-and-flanders>

⁵ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13450600600644350?needAccess=true>

⁶ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

⁷ <https://www.unicef.org/media/60981/file/convention-rights-child-text-child-friendly-version.pdf>





6. Adding democratic education and child participation within the school curriculum

At the primary level, child participation should be imprinted as a cross-curricular theme. Children need to learn about their right to participate meaningfully and how to do so in every matter affecting their lives, which includes participating in both school and broader societal decision-making. **At the secondary level**, like several other education philosophies, democratic education should be included within the list of learning options. It should be available for pupils in all years and learning categories (A and B).

7. Informing school boards and educators about democratic school's education/pedagogy

In Flanders, teaching methods are chosen by school boards, who might or might not know of democratic education as an educational possibility. A first communication campaign, sharing key documentation about democratic education - such as the [DESC Report's executive summary](#), the list of [50 practices of Democratic Education](#) and the free [online DESC training](#), can foster new informed educational choices for schools in Flanders. Educators in Flanders should also be encouraged to discover the democratic education philosophy, notably through education networks.

8. Support the existence of democratic schools

Democratic schools often face economic, bureaucratic and legal struggles hampering their educational activities. Flemish education decision-makers can support the creation of democratic schools in various ways : by providing **micro-funding**, **training on how to secure local, regional and national funds**, **administrative and legal support**, (ex: setting-up of a calling-line dedicated to recent schools outside the public spectrum); information within an open website etc. Doing so, would contribute to guaranteeing the constitutional right to education, by offering a diverse qualitative educational offer, adapted to the multiplicity of learning needs.

9. Training teachers through practice

While most teachers in Flanders receive at least one professional training per year, they remain uncertain, or even stressed, when faced with the need to modify lessons for students with special needs⁸. The ways teachers in Flanders are trained to new pedagogies **should be studied**, to outline opportunities and challenges. Teachers should notably have the time and flexibility to practice what they have learned with and outside the received training. In that regard, spreading the list of [50 practices of Democratic Education](#) can inspire teachers

⁸ <https://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=BFL&treshold=5&topic=TA>





in Flanders to progressively adopt democratic education habits promoting an education fit to the needs of children.

10. Promote public knowledge about the diversity of educational approaches

Education decision-makers in Flanders (Ministry of Education and Training of Flanders, the Flemish Ministry of Wellbeing, Public Health and Family, the Children's Rights Commissariat, the GO!Education network, Municipalities) should provide clear explanations on the diversity of educational approaches in Belgium, in order to promote informed decision making for families and education professionals. This should be done through official websites, available printed and online documentation, the mobilisation of parent and education networks, and other communication actions. As there are, at the time of writing, no democratic education school in Flanders, a clear map of the schools implementing this educational philosophy across Belgium should be provided, to allow educational professionals and families to research, contact, witness and get inspired by democratic schools across the country.

11. Foster dialogue between public schools and democratic schools

Promote cooperation between teachers working with different educational approaches through constructive dialogue. This dialogue can take the shape of: 1. A communication channel between educators in Flanders and democratic education experts in Belgium; 2. Funded day-trips for teachers and education students to discover different educational approaches across the country; 3. Funded projects promoting teacher mobility across territories and educational pedagogies.

12. Involve democratic schools in local and regional activities

Foster exchange between schools, education specialists and democratic schools outside Flanders, across Belgium or in the Netherlands for instance. This can be done as part of regional activities on education and child participation, in which democratic education experts can share their experience. Inviting democratic schools can also mean inviting the children within these schools to lead a project, discover Flanders, and exchange with other children, thus developing new skills on the way.

13. Systematise trainings on children's rights and democratic education

Multiply training access and information for all educators and soon-to-be teachers on: 1. Children's rights and their international recognition; 2. Children's participation's effect on children's well-being and overall development; 3. The diversity of educational philosophies around Belgium; 4. Applicable methodologies for child-led learning, children participation in decision-making and learning assessment; 5. Applicable methodologies for project-based



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and experiential learning. These training opportunities should be integrated within education studies as well as later proposed by the government and municipalities through the creation of a knowledge hub. The organisation of a one week tour of different educational settings across the country is a good practice allowing soon-to-be educators to understand the concrete application of educational pedagogies by visiting schools applying them.

14. **Child participation as a key component of civic education**

While the Flemish Youth and Children's Rights Policy Plan 2020-2024⁹ acknowledges the importance of children participation, it only addresses it through the promotion of volunteering activities. Democracy, to be felt and understood, needs to be practiced everyday¹⁰, from early ages on, notably at school. There is therefore a need to anchor a new definition of civic education, both in school curricula and education policies, that includes the transversal participation of children in the school governance, in their own learning pathways, and more broadly in the public debate. In that regard, democratic education by establishing democratic community-processes of decision making, can support the inclusion of children in school level, municipal and regional levels' decision-making.

15. **Fund and spur research on democratic education**

Foster funding and spread local, regional and national research on democratic education by involving universities, research networks, young researchers and democratic schools in defining the opportunities, challenges, characteristics of democratic education and its effects on children's growth and development in the long-term, on their career prospects and social integration, on their life skills' acquisition and contribution to society. More research is also needed on children participation, self-directed learning and community processes of decision making. The results of these research should be adapted and disseminated to all educational actors (schools, researchers, institutions, families, children themselves...).

16. **More openness for state schools**

When state schools remain closed units, following strict curriculums, missed opportunities for learning can be accounted for. Opening public schools to involving specialists, the private and social sectors can first allow children to gain insights from a diversity of expertise, especially when applied through project-based or experiential learning. In return, children learning outside the classroom, within diverse learning spaces (including nature) can spur their creativity, well-being and allow them to contribute to society while developing essential life skills. **Promote the open-schooling approach within state schools**, where schools

⁹https://www.vlaanderen.be/cjm/sites/default/files/2021-04/Vlaams%20Jeugd-%20en%20Kinderrechtenbeleidsplan%202020-2024_EN.pdf

¹⁰ <https://quest-eu.org/policy/a-protected-democracy-is-a-practiced-one/>





interact with society (and vice-versa). To do so, teacher training, communication campaigns and curriculum flexibility will be needed to prepare educators to educational methodologies such as project-based, outdoor or self-directed learning.

17. Create a bridge between democratic schools and state schools

For children seeking to move from a state school to a democratic one, or the other way round, tools, training and guidance should be guaranteed to accompany a change in learning approach. Learning to fit into a curriculum or to lead your own learning projects are two different skills one needs to adopt before being able to thrive in education. Administrative gateways, but also personal guidance should be granted to families and children wishing a change of educational approach by both sending and receiving education settings. Municipalities and the government of Flanders should accompany **the structuration of fluid gateways**, respectful of children's rights and their educational wishes.

18. Children councils in schools and policies

Children councils, where children below 18 years old give feedback on policies affecting their lives, allow for the gathering of essential information concerning children's needs and the creation of child-sensitive policies. Include children in decision-making from the start : **establish children councils in schools but also in local, regional and governmental institutions**. In this regard, the Flemish Youth Council, having a say "on all matters concerning children and young people" within the Flemish government is a good example, that should be **broadened to children from 12 years of age**. Children in these councils should come from the whole educational spectrum and social backgrounds.

19. Child protection and safeguarding

With a good knowledge of children's rights, all educational settings should formalise child protection and safeguarding mechanisms ensuring that every action taken within schools settings are respectful of children's rights, prevent harm and provide protection in case of child rights abuse. Training should also be given on how to formulate and implement a child protection policy within educational contexts - a training that should be available and free for everyone. Dialogues between public schools and democratic schools in that regard could highlight case-examples of good practices.

