LIFELONG LEARNING PLATFORM
EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY FOR EDUCATION

STATEMENT

LLLP in solidarity with students and educators across Europe

A call to EU leadership: Listen to learners in the streets, invest in education as a public good

The EU leadership is getting ready for the **2026 Education and Skills Summit**, titled 'Schools for tomorrow: fit for the era of AI'. The irony cannot be much starker when seeing the Europe-wide students and teachers protests that show what **state of a breaking-point education and training has been brought to by deprioritisation, liberalisation, and defunding since 2008 onwards.** The protests show clearly that before engaging in high investment in AI, we need to secure the basic needs in education and training that stakeholders are demanding: filing in teacher roles, materials, classroom conditions, to name a few.

Thousands of young people, students, pupils, teachers and academic staff have exerted their right to assemble and protest across Europe to demand dignity, quality and fair opportunities for all. President von der Leyen, President Metsola, President Costa, Executive Vice-President Mînzatu, and European Council Heads of State/Government, have you given up on future generations and on the power of learning for social mobility? **Are you walking the talk on the EU's Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness?**

The **Lifelong Learning Platform - European Civil Society for Education** launches this Statement in anticipation of the 20 November International Youth Strike, coinciding with the Education and Skills Summit,to bring European attention to the issues that learners of all ages, educators, teachers, trainers, education and training institution leaders themselves identify as essential to secure quality education and training today, tomorrow, and in the future.

Decades of substantiated calls for investment

Continuous underinvestment and widening of inequalities are among the root causes of the movement that is spreading across countries and societies. The October and November demonstrations are not isolated events, they are the result of structural issues and systemic failures. Ever since 2008, public investment in education and training has eroded across Member States. EU average public expenditure in education and training declined between 2008 and 2015 both as percentage of GDP (from 5.2% to 4.8%) and as percentage of total governmental expenditure (11% to 10.3%). From 2016 to 2018, this further plummeted to 4.6% of the GDP[1]. Though a rise was experienced during COVID-19 years, it did not compensate for the prior underinvestment nor did it offset the pandemic's costs. Post-COVID-19, **investment in education and training was the slowest to recover compared to the public expenditure in all other sectors[2], showing the deprioritisation**. The universal right to education and what should be universal learning environments have become environments of exclusion. Learners from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, rural areas, and marginalised communities bear the heaviest burden of these shortfalls, while the worrisome for-profit commercialisation of education deepens systemic divides. This has been strongly exemplified in recent months by the cuts to public funds which were then followed up by raised tuition fees, pushing costs directly onto students, and pricing out disadvantaged learners.

Living off the investments made before the 1980s is not sustainable in the long run. 75% of the EU's educational buildings have been erected before the 1980s, with over 90 million pupils across the EU

[1] LLLPlatform (2022). **Position Paper** on Investment in Education and Training: A public good for all.
[2] European Commission (2024). **Investing in education 2024**.

learning in such conditions[3]. These buildings are now in a state of decay that requires additional investment for renewal, while they have to be retrofitted considering the environmental changes experienced in recent years and the low energy efficiency rating that such buildings have. 900,000 pupils in Europe had their education disrupted by heatwaves in 2024[4], with data from 2026 bound to be worse considering Europe experienced its deadliest heatwaves ever and many unequipped structures remained closed[5]. The pre-1980s buildings were also developed without consideration for how the learner-centred approach requires a completely different usage of the space[6]. To renovate 75% of the infrastructure in school education, we cannot operate with further cuts in education and training. Data is available only for school education, but the same conclusions can be drawn across all sectors and levels of learning.

A devalued profession hampers the right to learning

We find ourselves in deep contradictions. We demand miracles from educators and learners, implicitly from parents and guardians, expecting them to solve ever changing societal challenges, driving the green and digital transitions, fostering democratic resilience, and bridging industrial skills gaps. Additionally, we hold our systems accountable on very strict and narrow benchmarks such as international assessment on basic skills tests (OECD PISA/PIAAC) or employment metrics. Yet, governments persistently fail to ring-fence adequate, sustainable public expenditure for education. Looking specifically at earlier levels of education and training, teachers and school leaders are overworked, underpaid, and undervalued, and learners deprived of holistic, learner-centred support. Lower secondary teachers' statutory starting salaries represent only 58% of the earnings of workers with comparable qualifications, rising to 89% at the top of the salary scale[7]. Only 76.5% of teachers would choose teaching again if given the opportunity, a constant declining number from OECD's findings[8]. We demand miracles, yet what happens when there are no educators to deliver them? Over 50% of French public schools report at least a missing teacher at the beginning of a school year[9]. 25% of teaching positions in French-speaking Belgium are filled through temporary contracts, while 25% of novice teachers leave the profession within the first five years[10]. Over 3000 classes in Portugal miss complete schedules at the beginning of a school year[11]. The list goes on for the entire EU. **Educators have been forced by underinvestment and a declining public recognition of their societal role to leave the profession**, leading to learners not being provided with access to their basic right to education, in the absence of educators. **Education cannot be used for quick fixes to social crises while funded as an afterthought.**

Do not instrumentalise learners and educators

Another important contradiction is the **troubling double standards in how civil dialogue and public assembly are handled.** When sectoral lobbies mobilise aggressively, disrupt public infrastructure, and burn tyres outside the European Parliament[12], the institutional response is often swift appeasement and political concessions. Yet, when pupils and students organise to claim their fundamental right to a future, mobilisations are met with unjust use of force, defensive rhetoric, and calls to restrict civic space and freedom of peaceful assembly.

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[3] European Commission (2022). Investing in our future: Quality investment in education and training: **Expert report**.
[4] UNICEF (2025). **Learning interrupted**: Global snapshot of climate-related school disruptions in 2024.
[5] Clair Barnes et. al. (2026). **Heat-related urban mortality attributable to human-induced climate change in Europe in summer 2026**. Spiral Imperial College London: pp.1-11.
[6] European Commission (2022). Investing in our future: Quality investment in education and training: **Expert report**.
[7] European Commission (2026). **Investing in education 2026**: Focus on the teaching profession.
[8] European Commission (2026). **The teaching profession in the EU**: A comparative analysis building upon the TALIS 2024 results.
[9] SNES-FSU (2025). **La rentrée de la pénurie, nouvelle saison!**
[10] OECD (2026). **Education at a Glance 2026**: OECD Indicators.
[11] FENPROF (2025). **Ano letivo 2025/2026 arranca com falta de professores, horários por preencher e erros nos concursos.**
[12] Aleksandar Brezar and Evelyn Ann-Marie Dom (2025). **Farmers block roads in Brussels to protest EU-Mercosur free-trade deal**. Euronews.

Instead of constructively engaging with the protests, and identifying the root causes, the political debates moved in three dangerous directions. Firstly, they have claimed that certain political movements have hijacked the protests. The situation of learners, educators, and lifelong learning systems remains dire whether or not specific political parties support the claims of the protests. The political blame game simply distracts from the mission of public administration: **providing education and training as a public good**. Secondly, media coverage and political reactions have been almost exclusively focusing on the limited acts of violence rather than on the reasons why the masses have taken to the streets. There is a race to outrage for isolated episodes rather than will to understand the reasons for it. Thirdly, political debates have aimed to racialise the protests and peddle deeply discriminatory religious and racial narratives. This is an equity concern as both the most recent **PISA results**, although limited, and the recent **European Education and Training Monitor** showcase that learners with a migrant background and learners from less advantaged socio-economic conditions academically underperform at a rate higher than their peers. Instead of addressing equity concerns, the political debates decided to create fake identity wars.

The costs of desperation

The Lifelong Learning Platform firmly maintains the importance of having the right and freedom to peaceful protest. However, when frustration spills over into unrest, policymakers must recognise it as a clear institutional failure: the failure to provide authentic, structured pathways for civic dialogue, participatory governance, and meaningful youth consultation. Criminalising student dissent will not solve the underlying crisis. In its op-ed in January this year on "**When learning spaces turn unsafe: a wake-up call for European education and training policies**", LLLP frames inclusive **learning environments as the "backbone of our democracy shield"** and learning requires safe spaces as a prerequisite. The opportunity to learn and experiment must occur without criticism and judgement, and certainly in a space where basic human needs are met. Since our op-ed, violent attacks in education and training institutions continued, with the most recent in Romania[13]. Educators continue to report feeling unsafe[14], and the rise of cyberbullying has been affecting both educators and learners[15], though the reported cases are still far below the reality. As violence is perpetrated against education and training stakeholders, as further financial cuts raise the risks of further violence, and as student dissent has been met by police brutality (see the bodily harms experienced by learners in France during the protests[16]), **we must take the safety of education and training stakeholders seriously, and demand accountability from the public authorities that have left the sector into a state of disrepair across the EU.**

Moving from the rhetoric to actions, in our earlier op-ed, LLLP voiced deep concerns regarding safety, mental wellbeing, and climate in learning environments across Europe. Today, the unrest in our streets is an extension of that same reality: learners and educators feel unsafe, unseen, and unsupported.

If the European Union and its Member States are genuinely committed to building a resilient European Education Area, delivering on the European Pillar of Social Rights and on the Union of Skills, they must act rapidly and firmly. Our **2025 LLL Manifesto** is a good reminder of what needs to be done by 2035 to build a truly modernised and inclusive European Lifelong Learning Area.

EU funding's role given national defunding of education and training

The calls for national, regional and local funding in education and training are loud, and the responsibility for the education and training system should be placed in the hands of the national, regional and local

[13] Reuters (2026). **Romanian president calls for child safety measures after two violent school attacks**.
[14] Romas Prakapas (2026). **Students' and teachers' sense of (un)safety in schools: a scoping review of international research data**. Cogent Education, vol.13.
[15] OECD (2025). **How's Life for Children in the Digital Age?**.
[16] Angelique Chrisafis (2026). **French police accused over war-like injuries to teenagers in school protests**. The Guardian.

governments. **EU funding must, in no way, become a substitute for the responsibilities that Member States have to protect their learners and educators, achieving the right to lifelong learning.**

Nevertheless, the EU funding serves as a complement to provide additional opportunities to learners and to test new initiatives in education and training that could be replicable across Member States. Thinking of the many joint challenges that Member States confront with, the EU funding becomes a vector for joint collaboration and resource-pooling, while strengthening cross-border cooperation among education and training systems and their stakeholders. **To this end, any calls to cut the next long-term EU budget (2028-2034) represents an additional action of EU Member States to defund education and training.** The **European Parliament called for 47.4 billion EUR for the Erasmus+ programme**, after beneficiaries called for sums double than this. However, the same governments that are now facing the wide-scale protests from the education and training stakeholders are the ones **proposing only 39.1 billion EUR for Erasmus+**. You can read more on the **letter that civil society has sent to all governments**.

The current protests must make it clear that we need to find any possible avenue to increase commitment and support to education and training, and that also means cross-border collaboration through the Erasmus+ programme and beyond it in the next EU Budget 2028-2032.

How do we rebuild our learners and educators' trust?

We must constructively engage with the protests, understanding the roots of the protests and the reasons behind them, while admitting that their grievances are real.

We must **ensure that all decisionmakers abide by the fact that education is a fundamental human right[17], and, thus, a public good**; cease treating learning purely as an instrument for economic competitiveness and re-anchor its fundamental human right accessible to all throughout life.

We must commit to **sustainable public investment**; establishing binding benchmarks for public expenditure in education, training and all forms of learning environments backed by strong EU funding mechanisms that prioritise equity and inclusion but also quality. This also requires a **stock-taking of current education and training infrastructure and assessment of what surplus funding is required** to address investments made in the 20th century that now require refurbishment.

We must **safeguard civic space and learner participation, both in person and online**, protecting the right to peaceful assembly and institutionalised structured, permanent civil dialogue mechanisms. We must respect student bodies, unions and educators organisations, as well as professional associations representing educators and bringing their professional perspective in decision-making, providing them with means to direct and organise any **peaceful civic participation and collective action.**

We must restore and safeguard professional autonomy to the educators and teachers educators, providing them with the right working conditions and ensuring that the educator profession has its societal status restored. This must be coupled with **an improved voice of learners in the design and delivery of education and training**, ensuring that they are active participants in their learning journey. It will be crucial to engage parents and guardians in decisions regarding curriculum, pedagogy, or classroom decisions, especially as the **PISA results** revealed the importance of parental engagement.

Last but not least, **we must foster safe, well resourced learning environments** that provide schools, universities, vocational centers, training centers and all learning environments and its actors with the psychological, physical, and pedagogical resources needed to nurture wellbeing, equity, and democratic citizenship.

[17] Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26

This is a turning point, Europe must be on the right side of history to change things for the better, where quality education is for all not only for a few privileged among us. Education cannot wait another day, week, month or year. We must listen to our learners more than we listen to our politicians. Top down policy does not work anymore and our youth is giving us a lesson in Serbia, France, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Austria, Ireland, Czech Republic, Luxembourg, Lithuania, Poland, Albania, Switzerland. This list might be ongoing after the publication of this Statement.

This is yet another reminder of the long history of student movements defending human rights and democracy, their role in changing the course of history, and the importance of education and training in securing our civic space and empowering all learners to be active citizens.

This time of global uncertainty, educational poverty, and growing anger among learners and educators, should translate into a Europe that guarantees the right to safe, equitable, and high-quality education for everyone, at every stage of life.