



When learning spaces turn unsafe: a wake-up call for European education and training policies

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.

We are witnessing a period in Europe's history where needs such as bodily and mental safety are in danger.

In recent months, Europe has witnessed a painful increase in violence in spaces that should be our safest – schools, adult learning centres, and other learning environments. From shootings to stabbing attacks, the pattern is tragically clear: spaces meant for development and growth are becoming places where lives are endangered or which induce trauma and [fear](#).

In 2024, a [government study in the UK revealed that only 2 in 5 pupils always feel safe in school](#), and, while more recent data on the perception of safety in learning environments is missing, reports of education staff and learners suggest that this is a general trend in Europe. Almost 20% of early leavers in the EU reported 'not feeling safe in schools' as a reason for their drop out¹. The 8th edition of the EUROSTUDENT survey also pointed out to many concerns about on-campus safety². The numbers are even more dire when looking at those most disadvantaged. According to the PISA 2022 cycle of monitoring, the OECD identified that socio-economically disadvantaged students and those with an immigrant background reported feeling less safe than advantaged students and those without an immigrant background. Moreover, girls were more likely than boys to report feeling unsafe at school, with serious concerns in France, Belgium and the Czech Republic³. Unsafe schools were also linked with insufficient teacher support⁴, bringing

into question the importance of well-resourced education and training institutions.

Evidence suggests that physical violence in Europe's schools is on the rise. In the last 12 months alone, six violent attacks took place in education centres in the EU, leaving dozens of dead and hundreds of wounded. These are not isolated incidents - they are a symptom of a societal shift and reflect broader social tensions. This includes rising violence connected to organised crime, political violence, more extreme rhetoric, and the use of violent, discriminatory, antisemitic, anti-inclusionary language and portrayal of other (groups of) people on social media under the guise of free speech.

This has an impact on learners' emotions, well-being, and perceptions of the supposed threats to their societies, social and economic prosperity, and opportunities in life. The insufficient focus on the development of socio-emotional competences leads to learners lacking tools to process emotions, which then get exacerbated negatively in the social media bubbles.

However, it is not a lack of competences (alone) that is at the core of the issue: there also appears to be a link between general financial resources and support for the education system, and the risk of violence. Studies in the USA show a significant difference in the risk of violence between public educational institutions (especially in disadvantaged areas) and private, well-equipped educational institutions. According to these studies, the risk of being a victim of physical violence in a public educational institution is between 5 and 10 times higher than in a well-equipped private educational institution. According to some estimates, the risk of psychological violence is about twice as high in a

1 European Commission (2024) [Education and Training Monitor 2024](#).

2 European University Association (2024) [The students are not ok](#).

3 OECD (2024) [Education GPS: Students well-being](#).

4 Ibid.

public educational institution as in a private one.

The results of the American studies are certainly not directly transferable to Europe due to differences in educational structures, and, fortunately, public educational institutions in most European countries remain relatively well funded. However, the 2022 PISA study also shows that students in high-performing systems and in systems with a higher average sense of belonging to the school feel safer and less exposed to risks and bullying. Feeling safe at school was positively related to a range of aspects of well-being, but particularly strongly to sense of belonging and life satisfaction, while negatively related to mathematics anxiety.

Safety is a human right that needs to be respected. The future of any education and training reform depends on guaranteeing, first and foremost, learners' safety. The current debates regarding banning knife selling for young people, banning smartphones in schools or reflecting on gun ownership legislation are essential, as it is important to ensure that unsafe weapons or tools are not easily accessible. However, true safety in education will not be reached through bag searches, metal detectors, or the NRA's offer for firearm training for learners. It demands a holistic approach to learning:

- **Training:** Pre-service and in-service, teachers and educators must be equipped with skills in peaceful communication, de-escalation, and constructive dialogue. Methods and tools developed in global citizenship education are at the heart of this.
- **Financing:** Understaffed schools, learning centres and other learning environments cannot secure psychologists, nurses, other mental health workers, social workers, and trained teachers to support learners. Expanding and financing mental health support would help identify early signs of distress and trauma.
- **Stakeholder cooperation:** Cooperation and dialogue between stakeholders in health services, education and social services, law enforcement services as well as other stakeholders, is key to reaching learners and their social environments, spotting potential issues, and creating first-line support mechanisms.
- **Democratic education cultures:** Democratic learning settings, including learners' and educators' councils, can promote a more open atmosphere for discussion and tolerance for different perspectives. Democracy needs to be embedded in education environments and governance structures to ensure that learners and their needs are at the centre.
- **Digital and media literacy:** The current

proliferation of cyberbullying and other forms of online violence and hate speech and the ease in accessing dangerous weapons online, makes it essential to train learners to have the competences to healthily engage digitally so as to prevent the exacerbation of violence.

However, while addressing these issues directly in education policy plays a crucial role, policymakers must also address root causes for violence, i.e. inequality and injustices, social fragmentation, mental health crises, civic space shrinking, etc.

Learning environments are more than buildings. They are foundations for democracy, critical thinking, and social well-being. Fostering a culture of empathy, openness, and dialogue is not optional; it is essential for promoting safe learning spaces. This requires adequate resourcing and insight into wider societal issues. At least for the latter, there is good news: this insight can be gained through education.

Raffaella Kihrer, General Secretary of the Lifelong Learning Platform and representative of the European Association for the Education of Adults.



Lifelong Learning Platform

Rue de l'Industrie 10
1000 Brussels - Belgium
info@lllplatform.eu
www.lllplatform.eu

For further details, contact:
policy@lllplatform.eu