

PATHWAYS TO SCHOOL SUCCESS: AUTHENTIC LEARNER ENGAGEMENT

KEY MESSAGES

Learner engagement is a core driver of school success, wellbeing and democratic participation. Authentic engagement is also essential for building more inclusive, responsive and high-performing education systems. Yet, across many European education systems, student voice remains largely symbolic, with limited influence on decisions that shape learning and school life.

Strengthening learner engagement requires embedding participation in governance structures, ensuring transparent follow-up so learners see real influence, diversifying participation mechanisms to reach all learners, and investing in wellbeing support and staff capacity to enable meaningful dialogue.



WHAT IS LEARNER ENGAGEMENT?

Learner engagement refers to the meaningful participation of students in educational processes, encompassing involvement at the classroom, school, and system levels. This extends beyond passive attendance to include active roles in shaping their own learning, contributing to school governance, and influencing education policy development. In the context of this document, learners refer to children and young people in primary and secondary education.

True learner engagement requires building authentic participation structures where students are invited and empowered to become active co-creators of their educational experience, rather than passive recipients of instruction. The [Lundy Model](#), aligned with Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), identifies four essential elements of authentic participation:

Element	What It Requires
Space	Safe, inclusive environments and dedicated time for learners to express views freely
Voice	Appropriate support for diverse forms of expression, including accessible formats for all learners
Audience	Adults with decision-making authority who genuinely listen and engage with learner perspectives
Influence	Action taken in response: visible outcomes demonstrating how learner input shaped decisions

WHY DOES LEARNER ENGAGEMENT MATTER?

Research shows that meaningful learner engagement is critical for promoting academic outcomes, greater learner wellbeing, civic competence development, and achieving an inclusive education system. It increases motivation and ownership of learning, helps reduce disengagement and contributes to creating more responsive and democratic school cultures. Student participation can lead to better decision-making, improved services, and more effective school policy development, particularly when decisions directly affect children and young people. Teachers who actively engage with learners' feedback become more effective in their roles, enabling them to better identify learners' needs and intervene with appropriate teaching approaches. It is therefore key to acknowledge learners as essential stakeholders in developing a shared vision for education.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES TO FOSTERING AUTHENTIC LEARNER ENGAGEMENT?

Evidence across European countries points to persistent gaps between policy ambition and everyday practice.

While many systems formally recognise learner participation, implementation often remains uneven and limited in impact. Key challenges include:



Tokenistic participation and limited influence. Many schools have formal structures such as student councils or consultative bodies, but learners frequently perceive these as tokenistic, since opportunities to express views do not necessarily translate into meaningful influence. In other words, feedback is not systematically acted upon and decisions often remain unchanged. Without clear follow-up and visible impact, participation risks becoming performative rather than transformative.



Unequal participation and representation gaps. Even where learner voice is prioritised, participation tends to reflect the views of more confident or advantaged students. Marginalised learners – including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, with special educational needs, from migrant or minority communities, or in alternative education pathways – are less likely to be represented or heard, reinforcing existing inequalities.



Wellbeing barriers to engagement. For vulnerable learners, meaningful participation is difficult without basic conditions of safety, belonging and wellbeing. Learner engagement cannot be expected in contexts where students experience exclusion, stress, discrimination or unmet support needs. This highlights the importance of whole-school and cross-sector support structures as prerequisites for participation.



Narrow scope of learner involvement. Learners are often consulted on peripheral issues (e.g. school events or classroom rules) but are rarely involved in decisions that most directly shape their learning experience, such as curriculum design, assessment practices or school-level policies. This limits the relevance and credibility of learner participation processes.



Capacity and competence gaps. Meaningful learner engagement requires skills and support on both sides. Learners need opportunities to build communication, leadership and civic competences, while teachers and school leaders need training in facilitation, dialogue-based approaches and participatory school culture. Evidence suggests that these competences are often underdeveloped, particularly among novice educators.

HOW CAN LEARNER ENGAGEMENT BE SUCCESSFULLY FOSTERED?

Evidence points to several interconnected principles that underpin successful learner engagement.

Institutionalising participation as a right, not a privilege

Grounding learner participation in a rights-based framework (UNCRC Article 12) elevates it from a discretionary 'nice-to-have' to a genuine responsibility of the entire education system.

In practice: The first European country to develop a [national strategy](#) (2015) specifically supporting children's involvement in decision-making was **Ireland**. This initiative was concretely implemented through the establishment of a dedicated [Student Participation Unit](#) within the Department of Education and numerous related initiatives. Other examples include **Poland**, which mandates [learner self-government](#) in every school, with elected bodies chosen by universal ballot. Such institutionalisation ensures participation survives temporary trends and changes in leadership, by becoming embedded in the educational culture.

Ensuring authentic influence through transparent feedback

The critical distinction between tokenistic and transformative participation lies in visible outcomes. Learners must understand how their input shaped decisions. Without transparent feedback, even well-designed engagement mechanisms can lead to learner cynicism and disengagement.

In practice: The '[Four Fs](#)' model (Full, Friendly, Fast, Follow-up) in **Ireland** provides a practical framework for closing this loop. The model requires that feedback to learners be comprehensive in scope, accessible in language, delivered promptly and accompanied by concrete information about what actions were taken as a result of their input, thereby demonstrating that their voices led to tangible change. Examples from **Portugal** also illustrate authentic influence at scale: student proposals through the [Youth Parliament](#) directly inspired the 2018 key education laws on inclusion and curriculum autonomy, while participatory budgeting schemes give students real financial authority to design and implement school improvements.

Diversifying mechanisms to reach all learners

A single student council model is insufficient for inclusive participation. Effective systems offer multiple entry points: interest-based committees (such as green teams, cultural groups), project-based work, digital platforms, or parliamentary-style assemblies.

In practice: [Children's Parliaments](#) in **Slovenia** allow children to choose discussion topics, while **Ireland's** [Hub na nÓg](#) reaches harder-to-reach youth through anonymous, asynchronous digital participation. This national participation hub allows young people who might not speak up in traditional forums – whether due to shyness, disability, or simply preferring written expression – to share their views online at their own pace, ensuring that student voice is not dominated by the most confident few. This diversity ensures representation extends beyond the confident few to include marginalised learners whose voices often remain unheard.

Securing wellbeing as the foundation for engagement

Meaningful participation is only possible once fundamental needs for safety, health, and belonging are met.

In practice: **Multidisciplinary Teams** in **Ireland's** DEIS programme (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) demonstrate how integrated wellbeing support creates the conditions for engagement: when one school used learner focus groups to identify that unstructured break times caused conflict, they had both the data and the resources to redesign the yard space. Schools functioning as integrated community hubs – bringing educational, health, and social services together – can address the barriers that often prevent vulnerable learners from fully participating in school life.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO PROMOTE TRUE LEARNER ENGAGEMENT

To strengthen learner engagement as a meaningful driver of school success, education systems should move beyond symbolic participation structures and create conditions for sustained, inclusive and influential learner voice. This requires clear legal frameworks, capacity-building and accountability mechanisms that ensure learners' contributions lead to visible change.

Key recommendations include:

- **Embed learner participation as a right in legislation and key strategic documents**, while creating dedicated structures, national frameworks and coordination capacity that define expectations, responsibilities and minimum standards. Ensure learner representation in school governance structures, supported through training and facilitation.
- **Ensure authenticity through influence and transparent feedback loops** by introducing accountability mechanisms showing how learner input has shaped decisions. Promote transparent communication tools (e.g. structured feedback models) and provide schools with sufficient flexibility to enable learner co-design in relevant areas.
- **Diversify participation mechanisms and prioritise inclusion** by moving beyond traditional student councils to create multiple engagement channels (e.g. assemblies, project-based groups, thematic committees, digital platforms). Develop targeted approaches to ensure marginalised learners are represented and supported to participate meaningfully.
- **Strengthen wellbeing and belonging as prerequisites for participation** by investing in school-based wellbeing and mental health support systems and ensuring safe and inclusive school climates. Recognise that learners' voices often remain unheard when they experience exclusion, insecurity or unmet support needs.
- **Build capacity for both learners and educators** by supporting learners to develop communication, leadership and civic competences, and by integrating participation-focused training into initial teacher education and continuous professional development. Promote professional learning communities and mentoring structures that help schools embed learner voice into everyday practice.

RESOURCES

- ★ The webinar **Enabling children's right to be heard in education** explores the practical application of the Lundy Model and how schools can create supporting structures for child participation.
- ★ The **EU Children's Participation Platform** is a safe space for children to have a say in the EU laws and policies which concern them. Recent examples include **children's voices on cyberbullying**.
- ★ **Guidelines on mental health and wellbeing at school** prepared by children for children capture 10 actions schools can do to promote wellbeing and mental health.
- ★ Children corners on the **Better Internet for Kids** platform support children to navigate the digital world, with a full range of interactive materials.
- ★ **Empowering active citizenship in eTwinning Schools** is a practice example showing how eTwinning projects can be used to promote active citizenship, collaboration, and learner voice across countries.
- ★ The **Safer Internet Forum** annual meetings are youth-led events, organised with the support of a Youth Advisory Group (YAG).

KEY REFERENCES

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