

Democratic school leadership - Topic 4: Discipline through responsibility

Key Question: *How can schools encourage students to maintain discipline through responsibility rather than force and punishment?*

Preparation handout 4:1.

Joint decision-making encourages responsibility and ownership

No group or institution can function without order and shared respect for its rules, nor can it be democratic (see *Rethinking discipline and order from a democratic point of view*, <https://www.living-democracy.com/textbooks/volume-1/part-2/unit-1/chapter-2/lesson-5/>). Maintaining discipline, or respect for rules and order is therefore a key issue in every school. If discipline is maintained through democratic school leadership, the students can learn a lot about democratic citizenship.

Democratic school leadership shifts its focus from control to trust (see *Awareness handout 4.1*). By involving the students in adopting rules for the school, democratic school leadership can encourage the learners to identify with, rather than to reluctantly obey the school's rules. (See *Democratic governance of schools*, CoE publishing 2007, pp. 60 ff.)

Involving students in making school rules

Quite frequently, students discuss and adopt rules in their class communities. The students learn through experience that rules are necessary to address problems that are caused by their classroom behavior. They also learn to obey the laws and written rules, regardless of whether they agree with them or not, because they have been adopted by majority vote. By participating in the creation of rules for their class or the school, the students understand their purpose and intent and thus identify with the results. "Students are the real experts on what school rules should look like to be realistic and easy to follow." (*Democratic governance of schools*, p. 64).



Vol. 2 in the EDC/HRE teacher's manual edition offers a unit on rule-making in class (see <https://www.living-democracy.com/textbooks/volume-2/unit-5/> lessons 3 and 4), and the cover picture of the manual highlights the idea of school as a democratic micro community that makes its own rules. It is interesting to note that when students take ownership of rule-making at school, they tend to suggest stricter sanctions than adults do, for example in dealing with frequent late-comers or classroom disruptions. They can learn a lot about fairness as an elementary principle of justice, which means that punishment must not be too mild or too strict, depending on the offense and the lesson we wish to teach both the student in question and the community as a whole.

As the school principal, you should stay informed about such initiatives without intervening as long as the adopted rules at the class level comply with school legislation and school rules.