Policy Paper on Student Welfare

[Adopted at the General Assembly 2016 - Amsterdam]

Introduction

1 OBESSU – The Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions is the platform for cooperation between the national school student unions active in general secondary and secondary vocational education in Europe. OBESSU has 24 member organisations, 1 candidate organisation and 2 affiliate organisations from all over Europe.

OBESSU defends education as a human right and as a cornerstone for a successful society. All school students should have an equal opportunity to use their full potential and for personal growth, leading to success. The personal well-being of school students needs to be respected, protected and fulfilled in order to fully exercise the right to education.

OBESSU has worked over several years on multiple aspects of school student well-being. The policy paper on School Student Welfare gives an overview of school student well-being and welfare, to point out the spaces for development and to call governments and public institutions to take action in this area. The policy paper is the outcome of a process within OBESSU involving the Working Group on Student Welfare, the Convention on Student Welfare, Well-being and Social Autonomy (2-8 November 2015) and the contributions of OBESSU Member, Candidate and Affiliate Organisations.

School Student well-being and school student welfare - a definition.

OBESSU understands school student well-being as the situation in which all school students’ human needs are met and covered and allow him/her to fully focus in education. These needs include, for example, a comfortable economic situation, good physical and mental health as well as the ability to challenge one’s self and experience satisfaction. Well-being occurs on an individual as well as on a community level. Thus, school students’ well-being is also influenced by the whole community and the role of school students in it.

School student welfare includes all the measures that ensure that a school student’s economic, health and social well-being is provided, fulfilled and protected. This further enables the school student to focus on education and individual growth.

For the purpose of clarity in this policy paper, economic, social and health well-being are discussed individually. These three aspects defined as parts of school student welfare are highly interlinked and all of them are important for the overall well-being of school students.

Social rights as such mentioned in the above paragraphs have been and are widely recognised by national and international legislation, starting from the Universal Declaration on Human
Rights. More specifically we look at the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) or the Revised European Social Charter (1996). In both these documents the right to an adequate standard of living or the right to health protection are covered, as well as the right to cultural life. Taking into consideration the group of people we aim at, school students, another relevant document is the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) that includes not only ‘the right to an adequate standard of living’, ‘protection from any kind of exclusion or discrimination’, ‘the right to health and protection’, but also ‘the right to participate to all the matters affecting his/her life’.

Governments are the institutions primarily responsible for the respect, protection and fulfilment of social rights. OBESSU calls on all governments to fulfil their obligations and ensure that school student rights are respected, protected and fulfilled. OBESSU also encourages the European Union and other European institutions, all civil society organisations, school student unions, private stakeholders and individuals to also work for the respect of social rights.

Europe has been affected by a severe economic and financial crisis. Many European countries have reduced and are reducing their public spending on education, social, health and economic policies. Millions of citizens, among them school students, feel the consequences of these budget cuts on the fulfilment of their social rights. OBESSU has actively demanded governments and public institutions to keep the investment in these fields to maintain quality and ensure equality in all educational systems. More than ever, OBESSU insists in the need to ensure social rights of school students are respected, protected and fulfilled.

Economic well-being

There are many costs related to education. From OBESSU’s understanding, school students should be able to fully focus on their studies and not have to worry for their financial safety. School students have the right to live in dignity, as well as to have an adequate standard of living.

Poverty, economic difficulties within a household, the need to work to cover the costs for education have a negative impact on school students. Social exclusion, early school leaving, low performance in school, stress, consequences in their health and personal development can be examples of these impacts.

In order to ensure equal access to education and equal opportunities for all school students, we call on governments to ensure the economic well-being of school students. This will be achieved when we ensure free access to education without hidden costs. Financial support for secondary school students is essential, in order to guarantee the completion of education.

Education is often referred to as free in many countries in Europe. However, there are a large number of costs related to it. We refer to them as hidden costs as they are often overlooked,
though sometimes they make up for most of the education expenses. These include costs covering learning materials, transport, school trips, extracurricular activities and other resources needed to complete education. OBESSU sees hidden costs as a source of inequality in education.

Transportation costs and food costs usually make up for a significant part of a school student's monthly budget. We refer to them as hidden costs, as they are often overlooked. Available and affordable transportation means that a school student has access to education. When a school student finds himself_herself in school, he_she should not be leaving it in search for a quality and affordable meal. School meals should provide variety, and be free for all school students.

The network of schools does not always offer an opportunity for school students to attend a school close to their home. For example, it is often the case in rural areas that school students need to travel long distances to get to school and sometimes public transport is not adequate. In addition, there are cases where the network of schools is not sufficient for specific types of education. Therefore, OBESSU thinks measures should be taken in order to reduce the travel time of school students and to ensure their access to education. Such measures include improving the network of schools and providing free housing for school students.

Cultural and extracurricular activities are beneficial for the personal development of individuals. They offer school students additional knowledge and skills that are not necessarily offered in formal education, but are often too expensive for them. In order to ensure access to these activities and to promote cultural life among young people, OBESSU calls for free access to culture and extracurricular activities for all school students.

Situations where school students are forced to work during their studies to be able to cover financial expenses of any kind are to be avoided, as every school student has the right to concentrate fully on his/her studies. When a mechanism for reducing or covering a school student’s expenses is not enough or does not exist, the school student should be able to apply for a governmental student income that guarantees basic financial safety. A student income is to be granted to everyone who holds the status of a school student.

The importance of secondary education should not be overlooked nor should the livelihood of its students. The hidden costs facing secondary schools students can be as high as the costs of those at tertiary level. For this reason OBESSU believes that secondary school students should be treated equally and therefore OBESSU demands secondary school students to be allocated a financial aid in order to enable more students to pursue their education.

Therefore OBESSU demands:

- Absolutely free education for all, free of hidden costs
- Schools to offer options in travel, food and supplies for school students
• Introduction of a student grant system to cover hidden costs when they do occur
• School students to receive financial aid to enable them to pursue their education

Social well-being

OBESSU believes that school students have the right to a school environment that is safe, encouraging, supportive, free of discrimination and participatory. This will ensure the social well-being of school students which means they will have the appropriate conditions for learning, for expressing themselves and for fully developing.

Discrimination - in all its possible forms and expressions - is one of the most common issues in the school environment. Discrimination in schools is often based on ethnicity, gender, language, religion, socio-economic background, sex or sexual orientation. OBESSU thinks schools should ensure social inclusion and equality, and be the places where all kinds of discrimination are addressed.

Bullying, as one of the forms of discrimination, should be tackled with real and comprehensive anti-bullying measures. The entire school community should condemn these situations by for example peer mediation or tutoring systems in place and trained teachers for tackling the issues.

The actual teaching methods, the school curricula and the relation between school students and school personnel has a great impact on the school environment. OBESSU believes teaching methods should be diverse and adequate for different learning styles and needs. Additional support should be given to school students with need for it.

School students often feel that what they are learning is not relevant for their lives and they all have different interests. For these reasons, school curricula should be flexible and school students should have more freedom of choice in subjects they want to pursue. School students should also have the right to choose their subjects without being discriminated in any form while having the ability to attend individualised learning in personalised learning paths.

Human Rights Education and Education for Democratic Citizenship are a right of school students. Therefore all school students should be able to learn their rights and the rights of all humans, as well as the mechanisms in place to defend them. This should be included as a part of the school curricula. Intercultural, gender, global, financial and civic education will contribute to ensuring a safe environment for everyone as school students will be more educated about diversity in society and in school.

A healthy relationship between the school students and the teachers greatly contributes in ensuring a comfortable school environment. This relationship can only be maintained through mutual communication and support. Teacher-student ratios should be controlled, as a ratio too big makes it harder for the school students to focus and for the teacher to devote enough
attention to every school student. Secondly, by giving the school students the opportunity to evaluate the work of the teachers and their teaching methods, teachers get valuable feedback that helps them improve their work.

OBESSU stresses the importance of ensuring and strengthening the participation of school students in their daily life in school. This is important for the sense of belonging of school students and ensures a good school environment. There should be functioning school student councils and networks of school student councils to ensure school students are part of the decision making in the school and the society. Support for school students to create their associations, clubs and unions should be provided in order to promote a way that social activities in the school life.

Social support should be an integral part of the school. All schools should have available and certified student counsellors, social workers and mental health professionals to whom school students can talk to when they need it. Specific guidance in their secondary school years as well as regarding further education should be available for everyone throughout the school years. It is essential that all support professionals respect confidentiality and the privacy of the school students.

Therefore OBESSU demands:

- **A school environment free of discrimination of any kind**
- **Teaching methods and flexibility in studies to meet the individual needs of school students**
- **Schools ensuring participation at school for school students**
- **Social support such as study counsellors and study guidance should be provided by schools**

### Physical and Mental Health

According to the World Health Organisation, health is defined as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”.

Student’s physical and mental health is achieved by conducting specific prevention, detection and treatment measures. OBESSU thinks that much can be done to protect the physical and mental health of school students in schools because they spend a significant amount of time there. Schools should be modeled to provide health protection and health education to school students, as those two are important elements in achieving physical and mental health of the school students.

A healthy school student will be able to focus on his/her education, and take part in all the educational activities offered to him/her.
Starting with preventive measures, there are a number of actions that can be taken to ensure the well-being of school students.

Nutrition is one of the most relevant ones. Healthy food is not always provided in schools. If the school students are not given the option to eat well, they will have difficulties in following the assigned tasks in school. That is why including healthy nutritious food and snacks in the schools’ cafeterias should be a priority, with options for school students nurturing a specific dietary regime (vegetarians, vegans, allergies etc).

Periodical medical check-ups would greatly affect the prediction and prevention of potential diseases and medical conditions. Medical checkups should include free services such as vaccinations and dental checks, for those who require.

School students should be provided access to free and confidential help of a medical professional when it comes to physical health, and a psychologist when it comes to mental health. If the medical problem goes beyond the expertise and capabilities of the mentioned health professionals, the student’s problem should be addressed by the public healthcare system for free.

The environment of schools affects the school student’s health greatly. Lack of ventilation, unhygienic conditions, inadequate toilets, lack of first aid resources and school personnel not taught how to react in case of a serious medical condition, all present a liability and a risk to school students’ health. School facilities should also be equipped to offer support for school students with special health needs, and practice effective emergency safety drills, aimed towards protecting the school students and preventing possible health problems.

Changes in the curriculum should also be adapted to provide variety of physical activities for school students to take part in. Traditional selection of sports is unattractive to some school students and they tend to abstain from taking part in it. For example, adding activities like hiking provides the opportunity for the school students to spend time in the nature, and has a great impact on the school student’s health.

OBESSU thinks, prevention and detection measures should be accompanied with comprehensive health education throughout the schooling period. Health education should include information on: nutrition and healthy lifestyle, first aid, emotional education and sexual education. By being educated on these four topics, school students learn about maintaining a healthy lifestyle and measures that protect their health. They also learn how to act when someone’s health is endangered, which strengthens the community they live in.

Therefore OBESSU demands:

- Healthy, affordable or free food should be available at school
- Free medical check-ups and physical and mental healthcare for all school students
• Healthy and clean school environment
• Adequate amount of physical activity for school students
• Comprehensive health education throughout different levels of school