

Citizenship Education as a Cross-curricular Educational Principle General Ordinance 2015



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Citizenship education in Austrian schools rests on three pillars. It

- is included in curricula as an independent subject or as a combined or cluster subject;
- takes effect in the frameworks of school partnership and legal student representation;
- is an interdisciplinary teaching principle and as such an important contribution to shaping society as well as to bringing about and developing democracy and human rights.

The general ordinance “Citizenship Education in Schools” describes the content and implementation of this cross-curricular educational principle. It is also intended as a guideline for training and continued education, and constitutes a recommendation for other measures of citizenship education. The 1978 general ordinance is thus brought up to date in terms of a modern didactics of politics.

All teachers as well as school supervisory boards and administrations are invited to promote an effective implementation of citizenship education by disseminating this basic text and by implementing suitable accompanying measures.

Citizenship Education as a Cross-curricular Educational Principle in Schools—General Ordinance 2015

1 Foundations

In 1978, “citizenship education” was introduced as a cross-curricular educational principle for all school types, grades and subjects. This broad mandate and the goals of citizenship education in schools are key elements for Austrian schools to fulfil their tasks pursuant to § 2 of the School Organization Act (SchOG).

Citizenship education is a precondition for individual development as well as the development of society as a whole. It actively contributes to shaping society and to putting democracy into practice; it addresses the problem of what makes society recognize government and authority as legitimate. In a democracy, free appointment, control and impeachment of the governing by the governed legitimate government and authority. Citizenship education is committed to this conception of democracy. The more this notion of democracy is embedded at all levels of society, the more successful democratic government systems will work and the better society will be able to organise itself according to the concept of democracy.

Since the ordinance was first issued, schools, society, and politics have evolved. Political communication, media coverage and channels of information have also been transformed. Not least, in 2007 the active voting age was lowered to the age of 16. These changes need to be addressed by new methods of teaching and through up-to-date political references.

Besides the tasks of Austrian schools listed in § 2 SchOG, this cross-curricular educational principle is based on international recommendations and guidelines emphasizing the significance of citizenship education and young people's right to it. These are in particular the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education [Circular no 15/2012, BMUKK 33.466/0119-I/6a/2012]¹ and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning² also establishes a clear link to citizenship education.

2 Goals

Citizenship education

- offers an important contribution to the stability and development of democracy and human rights;
- empowers individuals to recognize social structures, power relationships and the potential for further development, and to examine underlying interests and values, as well as to evaluate and to change them if need be in terms of their own opinions;
- demonstrates democratic means of participation on all social and political levels and enables individuals to take an active part as individuals, as members of social groups, or as a part of society;
- promotes an interest in social issues and the readiness to participate in political life in order to advocate one's own interests, the concerns of others, and matters of general welfare;
- addresses fundamental political questions, e.g. the legitimation of political power and its control, a just distribution of resources, a responsible and resource-friendly approach to nature and the environment, the equality of political rights, etc.;
- enables individuals to recognize, understand and evaluate different political concepts and alternatives, and leads to a critical and reflected engagement with one's own values and the political beliefs of others;
- is based in democratic principles and values such as peace, freedom, equality, justice and solidarity; in this context, overcoming prejudice, stereotypes, racism, xenophobia and antisemitism as well as sexism and homophobia is a specific aim;
- highlights the role of Austria in Europe and globally, and communicates an understanding of existential and global relationships and problems of humanity;
- shows that a just order of peace and a fair distribution of resources are necessary for humanity's survival, and that these demand a global, concerted effort, but also need to be understood as a personal obligation.

1 www.bmbf.gv.at/politische-bildung

2 <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32006H0962>

3 Implementation

Citizenship education aims to introduce learners to subject-specific competences of citizenship education (expert knowledge, methodological competence, competence in judgement and agency) (cf. Krammer et al.: Kompetenz-Strukturmodell Politische Bildung, Wien, 2008³). Its aim is for students to acquire a repertoire of approaches and key political concepts (for instance democracy, law, gender) to be applied to different situations. On this basis, it aims to promote an interest in political events and the willingness to actively participate in politics through concrete experience. Competence-oriented citizenship education thus enables individuals to form and to articulate their own opinions—but also teaches them self-reflection and respect for controversial views. Students learn to critically evaluate the opinions of others and the media presentation of content, and how to (responsibly and) consciously deal with the new media in particular.

High-quality and accessible citizenship education is oriented towards

- the lives, interests and previous experience of students;
- current political problems and events;
- different forms of political communication in the media;
- its scientific background, in particular regarding the development of educational pedagogics and didactics of politics.

Citizenship education needs to be an essential part of school from the moment a child enters the education system, and to play a key role in all subjects and activities at the school itself from the beginning of compulsory schooling—in particular in the context of school democracy. School should be a place of democratic action as an everyday practice. This allows children and young people to experience at an early age that they not only have a right to participate, but also that each and every individual can bring about change through active commitment. This presupposes a sustainable cooperation within the school partnership (framed by the legal mandates of the bodies of the school community: class forum, school forum, school community committee, students' representatives) as well as an active participation of children and young people in shaping their school and classroom teaching. For a successful implementation of citizenship education, a democratic organization of everyday life at school is an essential precondition.

In implementing citizenship education, it is particularly important for learners to meet individuals who are actively engaged in politics and political institutions (politics, special interest groups, NGOs, civic action groups, media, etc.). Involving external agents or providers of citizenship education brings significant added value, as school is no hermetic sphere, but always part of a concrete social environment.

Freedom of opinion and a democratic culture of debate in class bring special responsibilities for pedagogues. In addition to the necessity of presenting controversy within politics and society in class and of developing a didactic format to do so, it also requires that teachers allow and stimulate opposing points of view and their reasoning (controversy imperative), as well as an occasional open presentation of personal views. On no account, teachers may use the occasion of citizenship education to promote their personal political opinions or attitudes (prohibition of indoctrination), even though it seems admissible for a teacher to make his or her own political judgement known in some situations. Teachers have to pay close attention to the ability of students to form independent judgements (analytical capability), to maintain a critical, balanced distance, and to avoid any discrediting of dissenting statements or opinions.

Citizenship education is no finite process, as its objects of scrutiny—politics and society as a whole—are always changing. Therefore, an essential task in implementing citizenship education is the training and further and continued education of the teaching staff.