

“Create an institution where democracy is alive (...)” - Summer Academy on Democracy at School was held successfully in Poland



The first Summer Academy, ‘Democracy at School’, ended after an intense week on July 17, in Sulejówek, Poland. Eleven teams of educators from Georgia, Azerbaijan, Poland, Belarus, Russia, Sweden, and Ukraine joined the Academy. Each team consisted of a teacher, a head teacher and an NGO representative coming from the same school/local community.

The Academy aimed at training educators to be multipliers and to help them incorporate the principles of human rights and democracy into their daily work. It is meant to put the Council of Europe (CoE) policy into practice through trainings based on recommendations and publications.

The official opening ceremony on 12 of July took place at the Centre for Education Development in Warsaw, where the participants and trainers were joined by representatives of the Polish Ministry of National Education, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Education Development Centre, the European Wergeland Centre (EWC), embassies and NGO representatives.

The speakers all underlined the importance of initiatives like the Summer Academy and welcomed the plans of making it an annual event. Mr. Mandt, the EWC Special Adviser emphasized:

"If you want to have a democratic society, this must be reflected in the schools. Human rights, democracy and intercultural understanding do not come automatically. The history of Europe clearly tells us so. You must work for those ideas every day. Once you have them, they must be protected."

The Polish Ministry of National Education was applauded for making the initial proposal at the EWC Inauguration in May 2009, and all organizing bodies were acknowledged for their contributions in making the first Summer Academy a reality within a year of the proposal.

To translate the CoE policy into educational practice, the Summer Academy's program was based on two CoE manuals: *Democratic School Governance, How can all teachers can support citizenship and human rights education: A framework for the development of competences*.

An experienced team of trainers was carrying out the training, which was held in Russian and English: Ms Felisa Tibbitts (USA), Ms Olena Styslavska (Poland), Mr Andrey Ioffe (Russia), Mr Milosz Czerniejewski (Poland), Ms Malgorzata Tur (Poland), Ms Leah Davcheva (Bulgaria).

In accordance with the manuals, the training addressed multiple levels of HRE/EDC¹ work, ranging from the individual teachers, the classroom, and the school to the community. It started with a variety of workshops on different learning styles, methodology, school climate, and participants could choose those that best matched their individual interest.

One of the highlights was a session which through a role play allowed participants to explore different kinds of school culture, hierarchical as well as more liberal types. This initiated personal reflections among the participants on the kind of leadership style typical of their own schools.

Another day centered on community involvement, including an active contribution from pupils/ students. The Warsaw Youth Council and School Councils were presented as concrete examples of how partnerships between schools and local community actors can work.

Building on previous discussions and sessions, each team was asked to draft a one year action plan on how to improve the HRE/EDC competencies at their school. Future plans were then broken into more concrete steps, such as conducting a school-level survey on democracy as a starting point to identify needs for improvement, running training sessions for teachers, pupils and parents on human rights issues, and lobbying local media.

The EWC has created an online working space for the follow up of the action plans during the school year 2010-2011. This space will be used by the teams to report on progress, receive feedback from trainers and to discuss challenges and good practices with each other. Once put into practice the various action plans will not only benefit schools and local communities, they could also be inspirational for other practitioners working on democratic school governance. The EWC cooperates with the Centre for Education Development in Poland for this online follow-up of the participants' action plans.

The week was packed with activities, and the enthusiasm and high motivation of participants indicated that the program served its purpose well. Participants gave very positive feedback, stressing the space given for sharing and building on their own personal experiences, and the opportunity to have a closer look at their whole school development.

The Summer Academy was organized by the Ministry of National Education, Poland, the Centre for Education Development, Poland, The Council of Europe and the European Wergeland Centre.

¹ HRE/ EDC abbr. for Human Rights Education/ Education for Democratic Citizenship