

STRONG TEACHERS + STRONG STUDENTS = STRONG DEMOCRACY

From racist comments voiced during breaks to swastikas carved into desks, how should teachers respond to xenophobic and anti-democratic sentiments expressed by their students?

A pilot project launched by the foundation provides some answers.




Calmly and assertively confronting extreme mindsets: Teachers should support young people in becoming responsible citizens.

A teacher working at a vocational school in the east German state of Saxony reported that it happened during social studies. One of his students announced to the entire class, “Let’s just let all the foreigners drown, then fewer of them will come here.” Was this student a member of the far right? Or was he just blowing off some steam? And should the teacher have glossed it over or risked a serious argument in the classroom? In light of increasing right-wing populist sentiment in Europe and other parts of the world, more and more teachers are facing these questions. This particular teacher took part in the Strong Teachers – Strong Students project along with 22 colleagues – and got some answers.

This three-year project was financed by the Robert Bosch Stiftung and the Saxon Ministry of State for Culture and Education, and was carried out by TU Dresden. Leibniz University Hannover also supported the project research from the start. Results have now come in, and show one thing above all else: There is an urgent need to provide schools with support in dealing with right-wing extremism. After all, teachers should not only convey knowledge related to their subjects, but also support young people in becoming responsible citizens who are familiar with and live out democratic principles. At the start of the project, most participating teachers indicated their knowledge of right-wing extremism as “rather low” or “non-existent.” They felt correspondingly insecure in handling extreme right-wing sentiments voiced by their students. Wherever possible, they avoided engaging with them. “I don’t address extremism directly, since I don’t feel very knowledgeable on that topic,” said one teacher. They feared they would look foolish.

As part of Strong Teachers – Strong Students, teachers received training on far-right youth culture. They shared their experiences with one another in workshops and learned about practical approaches for providing explanations and reactions. External consultants visited participating schools to develop custom strategies with them on-site and provide feedback on their approaches.

At the end of the three years, a survey of the teachers showed that the concept was effective. The majority now ranked their knowledge of right-wing extremism as “pretty comprehensive” or “comprehensive.” Their sense of assurance in dealing with students with extreme mindsets also significantly increased. It is now easier for them to recognize xenophobic, racist, or anti-Semitic statements and counteract them. The teachers rated the reactions of their own colleagues as less positive, however. At some schools, colleagues declined to participate in the project because they held right-wing populist opinions themselves. As a result, according to the teachers, the school culture only changed in places where the school’s leadership also put a big effort into implementing the project.

The Robert Bosch Stiftung is applying the experiences gained from the pilot project and will continue Strong Teachers – Strong Students together with its partners – many more schools and teachers will be reached and stand to benefit, in Saxony as well as in other regions of Germany.  *Florentine Anders*




Fight Racism! A constant challenge for schools and teachers.

GETTING YOUNG PEOPLE ON BOARD WITH DEMOCRACY



“Krumping” is a type of dance. For young people in Kiel, Germany, it serves as an outlet to decompress from their personal challenges: pressure, stress, and fears about the future. Inside the dance studio, they can unwind, increase their self-esteem, and release negative energy. And that’s not all. There’s a friendly atmosphere in this sports hall. Nobody feels left behind here. “When you’re part of the group, you spend time with everyone every other day. I’ve learned what real friendship means,” says Can (above, kneeling).

Many young people are no longer interested in political parties and politics in general. They don’t sense an immediate connection between their daily lives and the political system. They also feel that they can’t make a difference, and therefore they disengage. The Robert Bosch Stiftung is trying out new methods of getting these young people interested in social and political topics – whether this is at school, out on the sports field, or through digital media. Young people should be encouraged to assume social responsibility and to mobilize for their interests. The Stiftung would like to make use of suitable projects to make politics tangible to young people in their everyday lives and to counteract extremism.  <https://www.bosch-stiftung.de/en/theme/youth-and-democracy>