

For our democracy – democracy education throughout all levels of education

Strong democracy – strong economy – strong country

22 August 2025

Why this paper?

The liberal democracy based on the rule of law is of inestimable value to Germany. The democratic constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany was expressly founded as a counter-model to the inhuman dictatorship of National Socialism. It also saw itself as a counter-model to communist “people’s democracies.” Closely linked to the free democratic constitution is the social market economy.

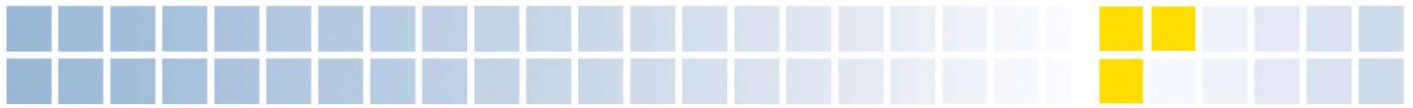
The idea of human dignity, fundamental rights, and freedom for all has its firm place only in liberal democracy. Only it enables equal political participation, freedom of expression and assembly, pluralism, and tolerance. Only it is characterized by the separation of powers and guarantees freedom of the press. Only it strives for opportunities and justice for all, sustainability, and peace. However, it must also be supported, filled with life, and defended by all of us. In everyday life, democracy quickly becomes something we take for granted. Much is taken for granted.

Today, our free democratic order faces major challenges. It is threatened from within and without. Anti-democratic forces and parties, extremist groups, and autocratic systems are fighting this order and its values. Liberal democracy must prove itself again and again—in global competition.

Policymakers bear a special responsibility. Within the framework of representative democracy, they must demonstrate that democracy works as a form of government. Policymakers must represent society, address and solve people’s problems, and guarantee freedom, security, and the rule of law.

Liberal democracy necessarily involves debate about the right solution, conflict, and ultimately compromise. A culture of debate and the ability to compromise are social skills that young people should acquire early and systematically—as should the ability to cooperate and offer criticism. Added to this is knowledge of democratic processes, which must not be neglected in school education. Young people should experience democracy early on and continuously, and in doing so, learn to act as active participants. Learning processes are most effective when they are linked to the realities of children’s and young people’s lives.

Social media has recently expanded the space for discourse, but at the same time it has also narrowed it and created social echo chambers and information bubbles. These restrict the exchange of opinions and arguments. Disinformation, hate speech, and conspiracy theories on the internet are putting our open democracy under enormous pressure. Learning to deal with these new challenges is a task for the education system along the entire educational chain.



Employers in Germany stand by our democracy and its values: like everyone else, they are protected by the free democratic constitutional state. Only in a stable, free and democratic environment can companies plan for the long term, invest, create jobs and operate independently. Only in an environment that allows for different perspectives can innovation flourish. This is what our economy thrives on, strengthening the prosperity and well-being of everyone in our country. Social partnership is based on the willingness to work together and cooperate. This includes conflict and compromise. Different interests seek dialogue in order to achieve a common goal. This social partnership dialogue can serve as a model for the culture of debate in our democracy.

Key Considerations

Our education system must focus more on democracy education and develop it further. This is not about telling people who to vote for or how to express themselves. On the contrary: freedom of expression remains a precious commodity that must be protected. Rather, it is about experiencing and learning general skills such as cooperation and critical thinking, but also about participating in democratic processes: the educational goal is to develop democratic skills. People should be empowered to become more conscious participants in democracy. The functioning and meaningful use of social media must also increasingly be addressed.

Democracy education begins in kindergarten and is a key focus in general education schools. It continues in initial vocational education and training (VET), continuing VET (CVET), and university studies. Employers contribute to democracy education as part of IVET and CVET. Companies also need to have a corporate culture that supports our free and democratic constitutional order.

In detail

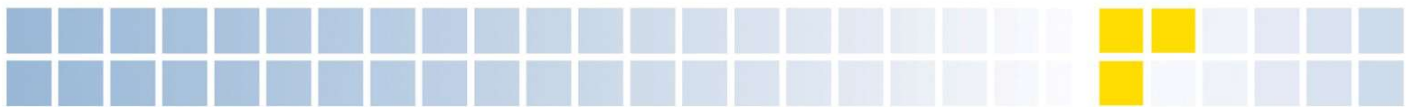
1. Teaching values and democratic skills – in early childhood education and schools

The goal should be for young people to develop into informed, knowledgeable, and active citizens. General education schools have a legal mandate to promote democracy, which they must fulfil to a greater extent. Basic social skills should be promoted as early as kindergarten.

Schools should equip young people with the key skills they need to understand and help shape our liberal democracy¹:

- Knowledge of subject matter: Lessons must clearly convey the system of liberal democracy based on the rule of law and the social market economy. The differences between autocracy, theocracy, and dictatorship, as well as planned and clan economies, must be explored. This helps young people develop their powers of judgment and critical thinking. The vulnerability of our democracy and the contribution of each individual to its preservation should also be made clear.
- Developing social and personal skills: Skills that are essential for democracy should be promoted as early as kindergarten, when children engage in exchanges of arguments and listen

¹ On the following points, see: Expert Report 2020: [Education for Democratic Competence. Action Council on Education vbw – Bavarian Industry Association](#), Münster: Waxmann 2020



to each other. These skills should be continuously developed at school, when tasks are mastered together and conflicts are resolved without violence. Students should experience self-efficacy and take responsibility for others. Educational goals include respect for the opinions of others, willingness to consider different perspectives, consideration for those who are weaker, and respectful coexistence. They help to accept the plurality of interests and opinions and make political compromises possible.

- Agree on nationwide educational standards: The Conference of Ministers of Education should agree on binding common learning goals for democracy education. Democracy education should be designed to be interdisciplinary in order to strengthen its relevance in everyday school life. Effective teaching and learning concepts must be available to all schools. Universities and teacher training colleges should place greater emphasis on democracy education in teacher training so that teachers can further develop their skills. This also applies to providers of continuing education for teachers.

- Experiencing democratic processes: Young people should experience that they can participate and make a difference. In this way, they gain initial practical experience with compromise-finding processes – whether through participation in school committees, voluntary work, as mediators and conflict mediators, by designing projects at school or in cooperation with extracurricular partners.² They should also be encouraged to participate in initiatives, associations, and political parties that support our democracy. Conversely, democratic actors should specifically address young people and actively involve them.

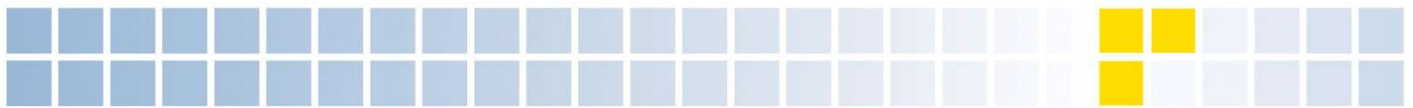
- Using social media constructively: Children and young people today grow up with social media – it is a central part of their everyday lives. Schools should therefore actively address this issue. Democratic competence today also requires media literacy: Students should learn at an early age to critically question digital content, classify information, and communicate responsibly. Teachers need significantly more support in dealing with disinformation, hate speech, and conspiracy theories. Further training for all teachers in digital skills and the integration of this topic into teacher training are necessary. Parents must also be involved in this educational process. School social work and extracurricular youth work can further strengthen the personal development of young people. In view of the flood of information, it is particularly important to promote young people's resilience and ability to focus.

- Finding paths in work and society: Career guidance in schools must build on students' strengths and interests and show them prospects at an early stage. Young people rightly want to feel accepted, to be asked about their issues, and to find their place in society and the world of work. Work experience placements also show young people the way to the future. Schools and companies work together locally in the [SCHULEWIRTSCHAFT](#) network.

2. Learning democratic skills – in training and higher education

Educational institutions must understand democracy education as a central component of the learning process and strengthen it in a targeted manner. VET can impart not only professional skills, but also democratic skills. It must prepare future skilled workers for tomorrow's world of work and enable them to take on responsibility and actively shape liberal society. In higher education, too, it is important to specifically promote discourse and key skills.

² Good practice examples: [Democracy Education Toolbox](#) from the non-profit Hertie Foundation



- Integrating democracy education into vocational school teaching: Vocational schools must strengthen democracy education and integrate it into their teaching in line with their general educational mandate. The aim is to empower young people to act responsibly, get involved, and participate in society. To this end, the existing opportunities for strengthening democracy education in vocational schools must be made use of in a targeted manner. The standard occupational profiles updated in 2021 also offer points of reference in terms of content.

- Use companies as places for learning democratic skills: Training companies are more than just places of work. They can specifically promote democratic skills by bringing democratic values to life through cooperation and teamwork, creating a culture of feedback, and providing opportunities for participation³. This allows trainees to experience self-efficacy. In addition to technical training, young people in the workplace should also learn how to resolve conflicts, form opinions, and give fair feedback. Trainees can experience actively contributing and taking responsibility in independent projects and teamwork. Approaches that promote personal responsibility, teamwork, and self-reflection are suitable for this. Where there is a trainee representative body, young people can also stand for election and get involved. Conflicts that are brought into the company from outside must be addressed appropriately.

Good practice:

Hermann Schmidt Prize

The Hermann Schmidt Prize awarded by the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB) 2024 shows how democratic skills can be taught in a committed way during training⁴.

- The “MUTausbruch” project by [Evonik AG](#) raises awareness among trainees about discrimination, anti-Semitism, and racism. It encourages them to show moral courage and social commitment.
- The “Ausbildungskompetenz+” project by the Bildungswerk der Sächsischen Wirtschaft⁵ teaches democratic values via a digital learning platform.

Siemens – “Xplore” module

Siemens AG integrates democratic values into training with its new “Xplore” module. The concept promotes social engagement and addresses topics such as equality, participation, and fake news. Practical and social content is combined, for example, through a democracy day, social media competitions, and projects on remembrance culture.⁶

Association of Bavarian Business – Values and Democracy

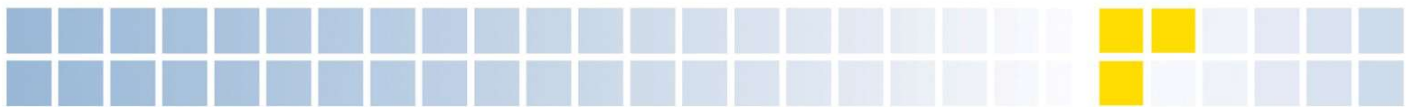
The model project “Werte.BS – Experiencing and Learning Values and Democracy at Vocational Schools” by the Bavarian Education Pact Foundation gave rise to the [Werte.BS](#) platform – an

³ cf. <https://www.kofa.de/mitarbeiter-finden/ausbildung/wie-ausbilden/soziale-kompetenz-schlüsselqualifikation/>

⁴ cf. [BIBB / Hermann-Schmidt-Preis 2024: Drei Projekte ausgezeichnet](#)

⁵ The Saxony Economic Education Association also offers escape room project days for school pupils, trainees and teachers: [Mobiler Escape Room für gesellschaftspolitischen Unterricht](#)

⁶ cf. [Siemens press release](#)



offering tailored to vocational education for teaching values and democracy. The website, which contains information, materials, and examples of good practice, is managed by the Bavarian Values Alliance Foundation. The vbw made the model project possible and provided funding for it.

Continental – Demokratie erLeben (experience democracy)

Experiencing Democracy is a workshop program that firmly integrates the topics of democracy, values, and diversity into vocational [training](#) at Continental. It strengthens tolerance and a sense of responsibility.

▪ Using universities for discourse: (Dual) students must experience their universities as places where they engage with topics academically. Academically means that students learn to substantiate arguments according to recognised criteria, to engage with theses in an open-minded manner, and to deal with different positions objectively. The democratic constitutional state guarantees freedom of science and teaching, and in turn, free science strengthens democratic competencies. Critical thinking and judgment help combat disinformation on the internet and narrow discourse. The exchange of well-founded arguments promotes tolerance for other points of view. The space for free discourse is wide, but not limitless. It ends where laws are broken – in calls for criminal acts, racist or anti-Semitic statements, or attacks on the free democratic basic order. Freedom of expression does not mean that every statement must remain unchallenged – but it does mean that different opinions must be heard and discussed objectively within the framework of the law.

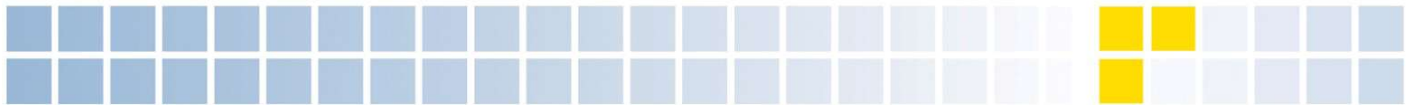
▪ Strengthen key competencies in higher education: Universities should promote social skills and key competencies overall, e.g. in interdisciplinary cooperation. Universities can strengthen personal development by allowing students to discover and develop their own interests and abilities. These are important elements for future specialists and managers to take on social responsibility.

German Economy Foundation

The German Economy Foundation actively contributes to the promotion of democracy education. Democracy education is integrated into the programs of the Klaus Murmann Study Support Organization for prospective [teachers](#) and [early childhood educators](#). In the [TidA](#) program for trainees, the Democracy Campus of the Federal Association of Liberal Professions is an integral part of the idealistic support. All scholarship recipients are encouraged to engage in volunteer work and take responsibility for our democracy. 89% of former scholarship recipients say they are involved in volunteer work, compared to 36% of 18-29-year-olds in Germany as a whole.

German Employer Award for Education

The theme of [the German Employer Award for Education](#) 2025 is: **“Strengthening social cohesion – promoting democracy!”** The award recognises educational institutions in the areas of daycare, schools, vocational schools, and universities that strengthen cohesion and promote democracy education. They show young people that it is worthwhile to participate and get involved in a free, pluralistic democracy based on the rule of law.



3. Addressing social upheavals in everyday working life – with continuing education

Employers can make greater use of their central role in IVET and CVET in the future to promote understanding of our liberal democracy based on the rule of law and to support democracy education. This is already the case in many instances today, without companies being aware of it or naming it as such. This awareness must be heightened. The workplace reflects society on a small scale. As a constantly learning organisation, companies offer numerous opportunities to address the topic of democratic values and skills directly or indirectly as part of in-house continuing education. In this way, companies can contribute to democracy education:

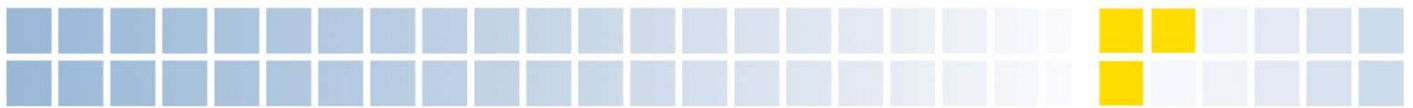
- Strengthening democratic skills through continuing education in the workplace: Social challenges such as increasing disillusionment with politics very quickly find their way into everyday working life. They disrupt it just as much as they disrupt social coexistence. Companies face the same challenges as our society in this regard. Companies are skilled at strengthening skills and developing self-efficacy, which are also the basis of a functioning democracy. This applies, for example, to working in a diverse team or reviewing and processing different types of information. Many companies offer training courses for this purpose, which can also implicitly teach democratic skills. Small and medium-sized enterprises should increasingly offer low-threshold and practical formats, e.g. compact learning modules, regional support services or targeted support programmes that can be easily integrated into everyday working life.
- Understanding and teaching 'future skills' as part of democratic education: Companies have a vested interest in ensuring that key competencies and [future skills](#) are sufficiently available or taught by them. Currently, topics such as willingness to change or dealing with digitalisation and artificial intelligence are at the forefront. The willingness and openness to deal with change are also central to living together in a democracy. As the importance of digital media increases, so do the requirements for digital skills. Digital skills must also be understood and taught in terms of digital literacy and social participation. When it comes to future skills, the topic of democracy should be considered and, if possible, incorporated.

Educational institutes of the German economy as important partners in democracy education

Educational institutes of the economy are important partners for companies, especially in the current period of structural change. The topic of democracy and the consequences of disillusionment with democracy are becoming increasingly important in corporate training and continuing education. Appropriate programs can provide crucial support to companies in times of social upheaval. For example, the educational institution of the Thuringian economy has set up a [blog on democracy education](#) that addresses topics such as fake news, racism, and discrimination. It also offers [continuing education](#) courses for companies on these very topics.

4. Making corporate culture visible – pro democracy

The free democratic basic order is the basis for entrepreneurship, social market economy, and economic strength. It enables diversity and participation for all in Germany as a business location. It is the right move for companies to decide to show their colours and take a stand against extremism and polarisation. This is especially true in times when populists and extremists are attacking democracy and attempting to undermine trust in our political system.



Preserving and strengthening democracy is the responsibility of society as a whole. Employers cannot, should not, and must not dictate what their employees should think. However, companies can fulfil their shared responsibility by upholding the values of our democratic constitution. Many companies are setting a good example by:

- Taking a stand: By clearly communicating their values, companies strengthen their employees' understanding of democracy. For example, they can encourage participation in elections at the European, federal, state, or local level without dictating to their employees who they should vote for. Some companies have spoken out on relevant events, such as Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

- Embracing an open and diverse corporate culture: Employers and managers act as multipliers and role models by fostering an open culture of communication within the company. Companies are already in the process of integrating employees with diverse profiles, for example. This requires a clear stance, a non-discriminatory environment, and a climate of openness and tolerance. Mentoring programs and language learning opportunities are just a few examples of employers' commitment. In view of the shortage of skilled workers, employers want and need to utilise all potential. Companies can also benefit from diverse workforces, as diverse and inclusive teams often have greater innovative and creative potential.

- Supporting and training employees: Companies support their employees and provide them with further training as needed. This increasingly presents the challenge of being alert to disinformation, hate speech, and conspiracy narratives and taking countermeasures. Employers who address these issues send a signal that a strong understanding of values and democracy among the workforce is important. Programs such as the Business Council for Democracy offer meaningful support.

Business Council for Democracy

The [#BC4D](#) is an offering for companies: in training courses, employees learn more about the spread of hate speech, targeted disinformation, and conspiracy narratives, and learn how to combat them. The BDA has supported the initiative from the outset and also offers the training courses to its own employees. Project partners are the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, the non-profit Hertie Foundation, and Robert Bosch Stiftung GmbH.

For more information please contact:

BDA | GERMAN EMPLOYERS

Confederation of German Employers' Associations
EU, International and Economic Affairs
T +49 30 2033-1050
eu@arbeitgeber.de

As the umbrella organisation, BDA organises the social and economic policy interests of the entire German economy. We bundle the interests of one million companies with around 30.5 million employees. These companies are associated with the BDA through voluntary membership of employers' associations.