



Educational Leadership Network Europe (ELNE)

Policy Recommendations on proposing a
European definition of Collaborative School
and Educational Leadership

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The ELNE Network brings together stakeholders and social partners in education to focus on enhancing collaborative school and educational leadership which is essential in light of the needs of educational institutions and education systems.

The overall objective of the project is to develop and support a broad and sustainable Europe-wide network of relevant and reputable European-level and national organisations, and local institutions that represent policy makers, practitioners, researchers, and stakeholders. The aim of the network is to collect and showcase existing research and good practices which are educative and can be inspiring examples for other organisations and institutions to achieve the goals of the European Education Area. The network promotes co-operation and the development and implementation of EU policy at different governance levels, and it supports the Commission's policy work in the context of the European Education Area. Therefore, the project creates and continuously develops a broad, sustainable and inclusive network and community to facilitate dialogue and co-operation among experts from policy, research and practice. Aligned with the project objectives¹, the network intends to identify, share and promote effective policy practice and stimulate innovation and strategic development in policy, implementation and provision at different governance levels.

Within its second-year activities, the consortium focused on dimensions of collaborative school leadership and collaborative educational leadership. The ELNE network dealt with collaborative leadership for green and digital transitions, inclusive leadership and equity in education, school resilience, and professional development of school leaders and teachers. The Research Committee of ELNE also compiled research to develop an EU definition of Collaborative Educational and School Leadership.

This set of recommendations is based on and it is a continuation of [ELNE Policy Recommendations on Collaborative School and Educational Leadership](#)

¹ In line with its published objectives (to which the 2024 ELNE report and policy recommendations referred), ELNE Network focuses on enhancing collaborative school leadership which is essential in the context of evolving needs that schools and societies face. [...] The project is oriented to collect relevant research to support the achievement of the European Education Area objectives:

- Improving quality and equity in education and training by ensuring that all EU citizens have the right to high-quality inclusive education and training, in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights and UN SDGs;
- Supporting teachers, trainers and school leaders, in their respective professions within adjusting to changing needs and future of education, and providing them with high-quality initial education and professional development opportunities
- Promoting the development of high-performing digital education and enhancing digital skills and competences of EU citizens by quality teaching and school leadership with the support of students and parents
- "Green" education: encouraging the education and training sector to take action to contribute to the green transition and to strengthen the sustainability competences of all the learners, parents, teachers, and school leaders.



from the Perspective of Learning Communities and Evidence-Informed Policymaking and Practice (June 2024).

ELNE network considers it important to propose an EU level definition on collaborative school and education leadership for the following main reasons:

1. Policy alignment: The ELNE Network supports the European Commission's work, especially within the European Education Area (EEA). However, the lack of a shared EU definition hinders effective EU policy and research on this topic, which ELNE aims to address by proposing one.
2. Effective implementation of EU education policies: Many EU education initiatives, such as the European Education Area (EEA) and the Union of Skills, rely on collaboration among education stakeholders. A common definition and shared principles would support countries and institutions to implement EU and national policies.
3. Contributing to democratisation² of education systems and institutions: An EU-level definition on collaborative leadership allows education stakeholders at national and regional levels, and different actors of education institutions to self-assess their collaborative leadership practices and to improve their processes.
4. Research Support: Current research needs to be supported to enable it to focus more on collaborative school leadership and educational leadership. A common EU definition on a broader understanding of collaborative leadership in education systems and educational institutions would guide future research and strengthen ELNE's research efforts in the coming years.

² Based on [ELNE Policy Recommendations on Collaborative School and Educational Leadership from the Perspective of Learning Communities and Evidence-Informed Policymaking and Practice](#) (June 2024) which recommended for EU, national, regional, local, and institutional policymakers for all education sectors: "1. *Enhance democratic structures* within schools and education systems by well-defining, establishing and strengthening collaborative leadership culture with the involvement of stakeholders and education social partners by mutual respect, trust building, and fair allocation of time and resources to meaningful regular cooperation. In this regard, students' and parents' representative structures must also be considered as key stakeholders for educational leadership." and 2. Further develop collaborative school culture by strengthening *education on democratic citizenship which is the basis of effective collaborative school and education leadership* and by establishing and improving collaborative learning and work attitude, practices and mechanisms among students, teachers, school heads, and parents, in their level and among them in the schools;

In this regard, the ELNE Network identifies the following definition for EU, national, regional, local, and institutional policy makers for all education sectors³.

Proposed EU Definition of Collaborative Educational and School Leadership

While fully respecting the national competences and responsibilities in education across Europe, ELNE defines collaborative school and educational leadership in the following manner with the aim of guiding policy dialogue and cooperation:

Collaborative Educational and School Leadership refers to the multidimensional process in which relevant actors in institutions and education systems (i.e. policymakers, school leaders, teaching and non-teaching staff, students, parents, researchers and community partners) actively engage in shared reflection and decision-making to fulfil the educational mission of their institutions and systems including protecting education as a public good and fostering democratic values. This way of leadership is grounded in mutual respect and trust, common missions, shared values, and collective agency, and aims to achieve common goals that serve all the community.

The following dimensions and conditions of collaborative leadership support the common understanding of the EU definition. They also help different educational stakeholders and school actors to use it as part of self-assessment and to further develop it for their educational and institutional environment.

Dimensions and conditions of collaborative educational and school leadership

Collaborative educational and school leadership depends on a set of **interconnected dimensions and conditions** that enable it to function effectively and contribute to quality education, student success, inclusiveness and sustainable school development:

1. Cultural transformation and shared values

- It is essential to build up and further develop a culture of collaborative leadership and education governance which must be based on shared values, mutual responsibility, respect, recognition, equity, and adherence to democratic principles. Such cultural transformation helps

³ From this perspective the policy recommendation uses “students” as a broad term meaning pupils, students, and learners; it uses “teachers” as a broad term meaning educators, pedagogues, trainers, and professors in different sectors; and it uses “school heads” meaning principals, school leaders, and deputy school heads



create inclusive, transparent, and responsive environments where all stakeholders feel valued and heard.

- For well-functioned collaborative leadership, it is important to recognise the diverse perspectives and forms of expertise of each stakeholder, and that they hold different, appropriate and complementary levels of agency and leading roles.
- Educational institutions must promote openness to horizontal relationships and social cooperation, moving beyond hierarchical models while reducing internal conflicts and power struggles.
- Ensuring a dialogic culture is essential to encourage authentic, informed dialogue and psychological safety, where communication is relational, and understanding is co-constructed.

2. Democratic and inclusive structures

- Collaborative leadership must establish and maintain robust and transparent structures (at all relevant levels) that facilitate meaningful inclusion of its stakeholders' different perspectives and forms of expertise.
- A bottom-up approach to collaboration must be guaranteed, with support from the entire education system in a holistic manner.
- Respecting and further developing democratic governance structures are essential to promote inclusiveness, shared responsibility, distributed leadership, and consensus-based decision-making.
- These structures need to institutionalise practices of dialogue, collegiality and shared leadership through regular meetings, collaborative planning, and feedback loops, increasing resilience during times of challenge, crisis or transition.

3. Long-Term Commitment and Sustainable Change

- Achieving meaningful collaborative leadership requires long-term adaptation and commitment from the entire school/institutional community⁴ to support lasting cultural transformation.
- Leadership must navigate the balance between short-term decision-making and a long-term vision that aligns with the school's mission and values.
- Collaborative leadership should strengthen personal effectiveness as well as collective capacity and skills, empowering all in the school community to respond creatively and effectively to challenge and/or change.

4. Empowerment, autonomy, and accountability

⁴ All members of the school community (i.e. school leaders, middle management, teaching and non-teaching staff, learners, parents and families)





- Collaborative leadership must recognise and empower all stakeholders in the educational institutions and education community, enhancing their resilience and sense of agency.
- Collaborative leadership requires balancing the rights and entitlements of students and parents and the rights and entitlements of staff (including contractual rights as employees and the professional autonomy of teachers and school leaders) with appropriate forms of accountability, ensuring that both their responsibility and freedom are respected.

5. Professional and organisational learning

- In collaborative leadership every actor needs to be respected as leader of their own responsibilities and in order to achieve this they need appropriate time, resources and trust.
- Educational institutions must foster individual and collective learning at all levels of the education system.
- It is important to create supportive conditions for all actors to develop and practice collaborative leadership, individually and together, and to participate and operate effectively within the desired collaborative leadership culture.
- Students and parents need to be trained on collaborative leadership methods and practices, and this need to be included to initial education and continuous professional development for teachers, other education staff, school heads, and management teams.

6. Ethical and caring human resource management

- Collaborative leadership should foster democratic participation, trust, and dialogue, contributing to stronger professional and cooperative relationships, improved quality and inclusiveness of education, better student achievement, enhanced teacher motivation, and sustainable school development.
- Institutional management should manage staff performance and roles in a way that aligns with the inclusive, respectful, and supportive spirit of collaborative leadership, to ensure that systems serve people rather than people being constrained by systems.

7. Resources and institutional support

- Collaborative leadership need to rely on effective, structured and timely collaboration and meaningful whole-school representation, e.g. school boards, student councils, collegial governance, social dialogue, and collective bargaining. It should acknowledge the need for and





practices effective social dialogue that flourishes collaborative governance.

- Effective collaborative leadership needs to be based on appropriate, sufficient and equitable organisational resources: time for reflection and dialogue, training, facilitation, and access to information, supportive learning and working environments, decent working conditions and manageable, reasonable workloads.
- Collaboration among the stakeholders and actors need to be supported by appropriate physical resources, including spaces and digital platforms that enable collaboration.
- Institutional and system-level support must be active and sustained, demonstrating a genuine commitment to shared leadership beyond symbolic endorsement.
- Resources must be allocated equitably, enabling all school actors to contribute fully and ensuring alignment with the values of inclusion, respect, and democratic participation.

To succeed in the recommendation for a common definition, the ELNE Network members are invited to **disseminate this definition and further elaborate it** for their educational and school environment.

