

DEMOCRATIC COMPETENCE AS A PROFESSIONAL/LIFE SKILL: A POSITION PAPER ON STRENGTHENING POLITICAL EDUCATION IN THURINGIAN VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS

*An appeal for a systemic
reevaluation of civic
education in the dual
system*



**improving
civics
in VET**



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Summary

Thuringia faces a double challenge: demographic change and a shortage of skilled workers are colliding with an increasingly polarized political landscape. While vocational schools are under intense pressure to “produce” qualified workers for the market, the mission of democratic education is in danger of falling by the wayside. Political education should not only be understood as learning about political structures, the state apparatus, and civil rights and obligations such as elections and trade unions, but also as profound core competencies such as critical thinking, empathy, sensitivity, solidarity, social cooperation, conflict resolution, and much more. This paper argues that political education is not a “soft” additional service, but a core competence for the future viability of Thuringia as a business location and democracy. Based on our current research findings, we call for a structural anchoring that goes beyond mere commitments, supports and relieves teachers, strengthens the student body, and produces independent, responsible citizens.

1. THE URGENCY OF THE SITUATION

Modern democratic societies face enormous social, economic, and political challenges. Societies such as Thuringia's are undergoing rapid demographic change, leading to a noticeable shortage of skilled workers. In response, education systems are increasingly focusing on equipping young people in vocational training with the skills required for the labor market as quickly as possible.

But this focus comes at a price: general education content, including political education, is becoming increasingly marginalized in vocational schools, even more so than in other schools. This marginalization is happening at a time when we are witnessing a rise in extreme political options, particularly right-wing populist movements that challenge the core values of liberal democracy. Research suggests that young people in vocational education, often referred to as "forgotten voters", may be more susceptible to these offerings if they feel excluded from democratic discourse. Thus, the neglect of political education leads to a double divide: an elitist separation based on the social status and educational level of students, which directly results in political division. This division undermines our social solidarity and paves the way for dangerous social polarization.

Vocational schools are often the very last point of contact young people have with the formal education system. If we fail to teach fundamental democratic values here, we risk not only the political maturity of several generations, but also the stability of our community! Vocational schools must not be degraded to politically neglected zones where students merely function as economic agents! It is therefore evident that the economic necessity of rapid labor market integration must never come at the expense of the socio-political and social necessity of democratic consolidation and the accompanying depolarization.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE STATUS QUO IN THURINGIA

2.1 BEYOND THE “SKILLED WORKER”: THE POLITICAL CORE OF (PROFESSIONAL) LIFE

The myth that vocational and political education are two separate spheres persists. This perception underestimates the inherent political dimensions of professional and private life. Today, automotive mechatronics technicians have to deal with environmental laws; nurses work in the field of tension between health policy decisions and day-to-day interactions with our colleagues and fellow human beings, which requires a high degree of democratic, solidarity-based attitudes. Professional tasks are never politically neutral; they are embedded in broader social conditions. A democratic working atmosphere is also a direct productivity factor: where discrimination and polarization are reduced, team spirit and efficiency increase. Nevertheless, political education is often treated as a “soft” additional subject at vocational schools in Thuringia, lacking curricular integration and institutional priority.

2.2 THE GAP BETWEEN ASPIRATION AND REALITY

Politically, political education is well established in Thuringia. The Thuringian School Act defines it as a fundamental democratic principle of the educational mandate. The Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK) also stipulates that political education must be integrated into the subject “economics and social studies.” However, the reality in classrooms often looks different:

- **STRUCTURAL DEFICITS:** Implementation depends heavily on the personal commitment of individual teachers rather than on a uniform strategy. Vocational schools are particularly affected by the marginalization of political education. There is no statewide and cross-school strategy that recognizes, strengthens, and protects political education as a systemic core objective.
- **LACK OF RESOURCES AND “DRY” TEACHING MATERIALS:** There is often a lack of up-to-date, pedagogically relevant, and target group-oriented teaching materials that reflect the specific realities of trainees' lives. This leads to purely cognitive teaching that tests facts instead of opening up spaces for depolarization and the experience of self-efficacy. Without methodological innovation, democracy education remains an abstract compulsory program.

- **SOCIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL INEQUALITY:** Schools with strong resources and already privileged students often offer more substantial educational opportunities. Schools with socioeconomically disadvantaged students (who are often most affected by political marginalization) frequently receive only reduced offerings. This inequality cements the elitist division in our society and denies political participation to precisely those who need it most as protection against populist simplifications and hostility.

2.3 THE PERSPECTIVE OF TRAINEES

Our research shows that vocational school students in Thuringia are by no means apolitical. They understand fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, but have gaps in their knowledge in work-related fields such as labor law, protection against discrimination, and co-determination. Since many students do not feel represented by politics, they often view institutions with skepticism.

They criticize the curriculum as “dry material” that is far removed from reality and demand topics that reflect their everyday lives: wages, rent, taxes, and employee rights. Research shows that as soon as political education establishes this relevance, interest increases. Youth workers also report a huge increase in engagement when alternative teaching methods such as hands-on activities, excursions, and active training methods are used, which allow self-efficacy, solidarity, and community to be experienced directly and have a depolarizing effect.

In addition, some students report a lack of feeling safe in the school environment, both in relation to their classmates and to teaching staff. This suggests that fundamental democratic soft skills have not been adequately promoted to date.

3. THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY: POTENTIAL AND PRECARIOUSNESS

In Thuringia, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and extracurricular youth work play a crucial role in filling the gaps in the formal system. These actors bring innovative, participatory, real-life formats to schools, such as simulation games or workshops on depolarization and community building. These formats offer safe spaces where vocational school students can practice democratic practices and social solidarity outside of the pressure to perform at school.

However, this important work is built on shaky ground. Cooperation is often hampered by bureaucratic hurdles and project-based funding. External educators report a precarious situation: Projects are often financed on a short-term basis (a few weeks or months), which stands in the way of long-term, transformative impact. Without a clear institutional framework, extracurricular political education remains fragmented and fragile. If civil society offerings are only called upon as a “fire brigade” in acute problems, the necessary emotional and democratic consolidation of students cannot be achieved in a sustainable manner.

4. DEMANDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

A paradigm shift is needed to make political education in Thuringian vocational schools future-proof. Based on the results of the comparative study, we make the following demands to the Thuringian Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports, as well as to school authorities, chambers, teachers, and students:

4.1 POLITICAL EDUCATION AS A CORE SUBJECT, NOT AN ADD-ON

Political education (in theory and practice) in vocational schools must be redefined as a core democratic responsibility, not as an optional extra.

- **DEMAND:** The political dimension of the subject “economics and social studies” must be strengthened, and it is also possible to create a subject specifically designed for political education. It must not be reduced in favor of purely business-related content. We need binding minimum hours for political education that cannot be reallocated.
- **REASON:** Reducing the curriculum to purely economic content misjudges the mission of vocational schools, which is to educate responsible citizens and not just functioning employees.

4.2 LIFE-WORLD ORIENTATION: EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY INSTEAD OF ABSTRACT THEORY

Teaching must overcome the “false separation” between vocational and political education.

- **DEMAND:** Curricula must be reformed in such a way that they consistently link political issues to the lived reality of students. In addition to hard facts such as labor law, trade union roles, and occupational safety, this explicitly includes social and interpersonal core competencies. Democracy must be taught as a living principle in our interactions with each other, both privately and at work.
- **REASON:** Students show a deep interest when they recognize the benefits for their own lives. Topics such as “rights and obligations in training” in combination with skills for depolarization, nonviolent communication, and solidarity are not just introductions to theory. They are the basis for the development of one’s own politically lived values.

Only those who learn to tolerate different opinions in interpersonal relationships and to recognize diversity as a productive reality will develop the necessary resilience to extremist simplifications.

4.3 METHODOLOGICAL INNOVATION: PARTICIPATION INSTEAD OF FRONTAL TEACHING, ACTION INSTEAD OF LISTENING

Students in Thuringia and the comparison regions reject abstract theory lessons and demand interactive, realistic formats.

- **DEMAND:** The use of simulations, role-playing games (e.g., collective bargaining), encounters with decision-makers, debate formats, experience-based learning, and extracurricular activities such as excursions and practical workshops must become standard. Vocational schools must be places of active democracy, where student co-management not only exists formally, but is actively promoted by the school.
- **REASON:** Democracy is not learned by memorizing institutions, but by actively experiencing self-efficacy. Those who learn at school that their voice counts will also participate as citizens and live democracy.

4.4 STRUKTURELLE INTEGRATION DER ZIVILGESELLSCHAFT

Cooperation with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) must no longer depend on chance or the isolated commitment of individual teachers. It is not the task of teaching staff to secure funding for diverse political education.

- **DEMAND:** We call for formalized, permanent partnerships between vocational schools and political education providers, secured by long-term framework agreements instead of short-term "firefighting projects". Schools need stable budgets and time allocations to coordinate these collaborations professionally.
- **REASON:** External actors bring expertise and a variety of methods that teachers often cannot afford in their tight schedules. This synergy must be consolidated, as it relieves teachers and offers additional perspectives and methods.

4.5 QUALIFICATION AND SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS

Teachers often feel left alone and inadequately prepared, especially when dealing with controversial topics or extremist attitudes in the classroom. Political education should no longer be seen as an “additional task” undertaken on one’s own initiative.

- **DEMAND:** We demand the immediate introduction of mandatory, interdisciplinary training for the entire vocational school teaching staff. Political education must not be bound by subject boundaries, but requires a systemic reorientation:
 1. **REPRESENTATION AND REFLECTION ON PERSPECTIVES IN ALL SUBJECTS:**
Subject curricula must be critically revised. This includes making female and international actors visible in all subjects, as well as reflecting on the perspective from which teaching materials were written.
 2. **SECURITY IN THE SCOPE OF ACTION:**
The teaching staff must be trained in dealing with the Beutelsbach Consensus. Teachers must understand that the prohibition of indoctrination does not mean value neutrality towards the Basic Law, but on the contrary strengthens the responsibility to actively represent and communicate democratic values and to professionally moderate controversial topics in class.
 3. **ESTABLISHING A DEMOCRATIC CULTURE OF DEBATE:**
Teachers need coaching on de-escalating and moderating conflicts. The goal is to establish the classroom as a “brave space” where differences of opinion can be tolerated without losing respect for one another.
 4. **PROMOTING DECISION-MAKING SKILLS:**
Teachers must be provided with specific methods to strengthen social skills such as teamwork and initiative among students and to demonstrate their own self-efficacy. This is best achieved through structured exchange with external youth workers and social organizations.

5. SUSTAINABLE SUPPORT:

This process must be supported by regular supervision and refresher courses to relieve the burden on teachers, as well as by providing up-to-date materials. These teaching and learning materials must be explicitly tailored to the diverse realities of vocational school students' lives.

6. CREDITED HOURS FOR COORDINATORS:

Teachers or external staff must be provided with binding, paid credited hours for coordinating projects. This essential work should not be unpaid overtime based solely on personal initiative, but must be valued and remunerated by the institution.

- REASON: Democratic competence does not arise in isolation in social studies classes, but through the attitudes practiced in all subjects. Only confident teachers who critically reflect on representation in their own disciplines and are aware of their democratic mission can offer students in a polarized society a space for open, critical, and respectful discourse.

5. ROADMAP FOR IMPLEMENTATION: WHO NEEDS TO DO WHAT NOW?

A paradigm shift can only succeed if all levels take action simultaneously. Here is the concrete roadmap:

5.1 MINISTRY & SCHOOL AUTHORITIES (CREATE STRUCTURE)

- **BUDGETING:** Secure fixed budgets for external cooperation and end the “firefighting policy.”
- **TIME RESOURCES:** Introduce binding credit hours for coordinators and teachers.
- **CURRICULUM REFORM:** Anchor political education and democracy in ALL subject plans in a way that is relevant to everyday life and representative.

5.2 TEACHERS & STAFF (REDESIGNING PRACTICE)

- **CHANGE OF METHODS:** Move away from frontal teaching towards hands-on activities, excursions, role-playing, etc.
- **Consciously choose teaching materials to show multiple perspectives, especially female and international perspectives that have long been neglected.**
- **ATTITUDE:** Actively represent democratic values and moderate the classroom as a safe space for discourse.
- **NETWORKING:** Actively use synergies with external youth workers to complement your own expertise.
- **Use further training to strengthen decision-making and action-taking skills.**

5.3 STUDENTS (DEMAND/UTILIZE PARTICIPATION)

- **CO-DETERMINATION:** Actively utilize student representation and participation in the design of project days.
- **ARTICULATE NEEDS:** Actively demand topics such as protection against discrimination and labor law from teachers. Teachers who do not adhere to fundamental democratic values will be confronted collectively.

5.4 CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE PUBLIC (INCREASE PRESSURE)

- **DEMOCRATIC LEVERS:** Massively increase political pressure through petitions, open letters, and campaigns.
- **ALLIANCES:** Trade unions, chambers, and NGOs must act together to put the issue on the political agenda.
- **VISIBILITY:** Publicly scandalize the lack of political education in vocational schools in order to create a sense of obligation.

6. CONCLUSION: POLITICAL EDUCATION FORMS CORE COMPETENCIES FOR OUR FUTURE

An analysis of the situation in Thuringia, mirrored by experiences in Croatia and Romania, makes it clear that the deficits in political education in vocational training are structural. It is not enough to pay lip service to political education while it is subordinated to the supposed “usefulness” of purely technical training in everyday school life.

For many young people, vocational school is the last formal educational setting before they enter adult life. If we miss this opportunity to educate this demographic group politically, we risk long-term alienation from democracy. In this context, political education has a multidimensional effect: it empowers young people to participate in decision-making (e.g., in the workplace), strengthens social and communication skills, teaches rights and protective mechanisms, and opens up access to social participation. In short, it introduces young people to active democracy.

Political education in vocational schools thus takes on not only a formative but also a compensatory function: it compensates for structural inequalities and gives a voice to those who are often marginalized in political discourse.

We therefore make a clear appeal to politicians, education administrators, and school authorities in Thuringia:

POLITICAL EDUCATION MUST BE RECOGNIZED AS AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION, STRUCTURALLY SECURED, AND PERMANENTLY FINANCED!

Half-hearted solutions are not enough.

Investments in political education at vocational schools are investments in the resilience and future of our democracy.

The time for hesitation is over.

DEMOCRATIC COMPETENCE IS PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE AND LIFE COMPETENCE.

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