

OTTAWA; COLOMBO; BERLIN; JOHANNESBURG (Nov. 18, 2023)

International Call for Clarity on “Compulsory” Education

The 30th International Democratic Education Conference (IDEC) 2023 in Nepal has called on the United Nations’ Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) to clarify that “compulsory education” means a guarantee of universal access to education and does not mean forcing a child to attend school.



(From left to right) Sifaan Zavahir of Sri Lanka and Henning Graner of Germany celebrating the adoption of the resolution by the International Democratic Education Conference (IDEC) in October 2023 in Nepal

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 was the first international recognition of Education as a Right, and it expressed the importance of this Right in Article 26 as “*elementary education shall be compulsory*”. While it has become common practice to translate and paraphrase this as ‘compulsory school attendance for children’, this is not in line with the original intent of the wording, says IDEC.

The minutes of the meetings of the UDHR drafting committee chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt record extensive discussions about this word and clearly show that nobody on the drafting committee at any point intended the word ‘compulsory’ to be interpreted as coercion of the child. This is confirmed by General Comment No.11 of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) “*The element of compulsion serves to highlight the fact that neither parents, nor guardians, nor the State are entitled to treat as optional the decision as to whether the child should have access to primary education.*”

The IDEC Resolution 2023 insists that the principle of the ‘*best interests of the child*’ must be fully respected, rather than being compromised for political and administrative expediency.

The Resolution was collaboratively drafted by international democratic education advocates led by Richard Fransham (Canada), Sifaan Zavahir (Sri Lanka), Henning Graner (Germany) and Je’anna Clements (South Africa) with input from a number of other participants from around the world. It was adopted at the IDEC General Meeting on Thursday 19th October 2023 and was sent to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in commemoration of the anniversary of the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is on 20th November 2023.

(Ends)

FAQ

Q - Does this mean that children should not go to school?

A - No, it means that children should be supported to have a choice of schools, homeschool, or be able to explore their education in other ways that they and their families prefer.

Q - Are you changing the meaning of the word 'compulsory' for education?

A - No, we are asking the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) to make it clear what this word has always meant, because in many places in the world there is confusion.

Q - Does this mean my country cannot make laws that force 'compulsory attendance' at a school?

A - Countries sometimes do make laws that violate human rights. In our opinion, 'Compulsory attendance' is not supported by the original intent of the UDHR¹ and UNCRC² and is not an expression of the child's right to education.

Q - Does this mean parents can just keep their children at home or just send them to work?

A - No. Parents **must** support their child to fulfill their right to education, whether this is at home, using a school, or in other ways that the child and family prefer.

Q - Where can the full text of the IDEC Resolution be downloaded?

A - It is available at

<https://www.idecnepal.org/PDFs/resolution-idec2023.pdf>

¹ Universal Declaration of Human Rights

² United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child