SPECIAL PROCEDURES
UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

International Day of Education

[23 January 2026]

*****

"No education about us without us": children and youth as co-creators of their education

(Geneva, 23 January 2026) - On this International Day of Education, I am compelled to echo a message I hear consistently and powerfully from children and young people across our world's regions: education cannot be something that is merely delivered to them. It must be co-created *with* them. Across contexts, diversely situated young people all emphasise that **their voices are routinely excluded**. Decisions about curricula, assessment and governance are made about them, without them. Participation, when offered, is often symbolic rather than structural. Students are often spoken about, but not listened to.

To address this, last December, I launched the Right to Education Youth Network (#REYN), a global platform that brings together children and young people as rights-holders and co-creators of education. Today, REYN connects over 1,500 members from 138 countries, reflecting a wide range of lived experiences across diverse education systems and contexts. Around 65 per cent of members are university and college students, but there are also school-aged children under 18. Participation in REYN is individual and voluntary - a space for students across levels and types of education to share concerns, propose solutions and contribute directly to discussions and decision-making relating to the right to education at the global level.

Sustained engagement with young people, including REYN members, surface seven concerns –some already addressed in my annual thematic reports, some calling for further attention. The striking clarity with which youth express these concerns reveals a crisis of listening within education systems.

First, young people unequivocally stress that **inequality in access and quality** remains the defining failure of education today. Being enrolled in school does not mean receiving an education that is safe, dignified or meaningful. Vast disparities persist between public and private systems, between

urban and rural areas and between learners shaped by privilege and those navigating poverty, displacement, disability or discrimination.

Second, students repeatedly describe education as **outdated and disconnected from their realities**. Too many systems continue to prioritise memorisation, standardised testing and compliance over critical thinking, creativity and relevance to social, economic and environmental challenges. Learners are not asking for less rigour, but for an education that prepares them to think, question and act in a rapidly changing world.

Third, **poverty and financial pressure** continue to push millions of learners out of education or trap them in low-quality systems. "Free education" too often translates into free but inadequate schooling, while hidden costs, lack of stipends and pressure to earn an income undermine equal opportunity.

Fourth, young people warn that **digital transformation is deepening inequality**. While technology holds promise, the digital divide, lack of accessibility for learners with disabilities and unregulated use of AI risk creating new forms of exclusion and surveillance, not empowerment.

Fifth, learners persistently raise concerns about **unsafe environments and lack of dignity** in schools. Gender- and ability-based exclusion, bullying, language discrimination and the marginalisation of refugees, indigenous learners and minority groups remain widespread. Education cannot fulfil its human rights purpose so long as learners are unsafe or silenced.

Sixth, students speak openly about **mental health, burnout and performance anxiety**. Education systems that reduce learners to grades and rankings undermine well-being, confidence and the joy of learning. Physical, digital, socio-emotional, psychological safety are all integral to the realization of the right to education.

Seventh, children and youth living in contexts of **conflict, displacement and climate disruption** remind us that education is often the first service to disappear and the last to return. When education systems are not resilient, temporary exclusion becomes permanent loss, especially for girls.

Recognising children and youth as co-creators of education does not mean shifting responsibility to young learners. It requires creating spaces for their contributions and recognising **teachers as co-creators**, whose academic freedom and professional autonomy, well-being and expertise are essential to meaningful participation. Many teachers are already innovating, adapting curricula and

supporting learners far beyond what systems allow or resource. Participation flourishes when teachers are trusted partners rather than overburdened implementers of rigid systems.

Equally, education does not happen in isolation from families and communities. **Parents and caregivers** play a critical role in shaping learning, supporting well-being and sustaining access. Participatory education ecosystems must therefore extend beyond classrooms to include families and communities as active contributors, not passive observers.

Taken together, these concerns point to a single conclusion: as currently constituted, our education systems fall short of ensuring the right of education for all and will not meet the needs of the future unless participation is treated as a shared, structural responsibility today. Children and youth are not passive beneficiaries. Teachers are not mere transmitters. Parents and caregivers are not peripheral. All are essential actors in shaping education that is relevant, inclusive and rights-based.

On this International Day of Education, I call on States and all education stakeholders to move beyond tokenism and to embed participation as a core component of the right to education. This means involving learners, teachers and families in shaping curricula, pedagogy, assessment, school governance, financing and education policy. It means treating education as a public and common good that builds dignity, agency and shared futures.

Farida Shaheed

Special Rapporteur on the right to education