

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING LEARNING THROUGH VOLUNTEERING IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

The recommendations below are based on the findings of the survey *Recognition and Validation of Learning Acquired through Volunteering in Educational Institutions in Croatia*, conducted among educational institutions between May and July 2025, and on insights collected through two online dialogues with representatives of schools, civil society organisations and volunteer centres.

The findings clearly show that volunteering and service-learning have significant potential for developing pupils' civic, socio-emotional and life competencies, yet this potential, as well as their contribution to the educational experience, remains insufficiently recognised and systematically supported.

The recommendations, therefore, focus on strengthening the institutional framework, developing a clear system for assessing learning acquired through volunteering, encouraging diverse and well-designed volunteering activities and reinforcing cooperation and networking through school volunteering clubs.

They are intended for national and local decision-makers, school leadership, school counsellors, teachers and civil society organisations as guidance for the further development of a supportive environment in which volunteering becomes an integral part of education.

1. Systematic Integration of Volunteering and Service-Learning into Education Policies and School Curricula

The survey results and online dialogues indicate that volunteering and service-learning largely depend on the enthusiasm of individual teachers and school counsellors, while systemic support remains limited. Volunteering activities are usually implemented as extracurricular or project-based activities, and are rarely clearly connected with learning outcomes, civic education or school prevention programmes. At the same time, participants highlighted that volunteering has strong potential for developing empathy, socio-emotional skills, responsibility, solidarity and for supporting pupils' mental wellbeing. Therefore, volunteering and service-learning should be understood and recognised as integral components of a school's educational mission

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ◆ Integrate volunteering and service-learning into national curriculum documents and guidelines, particularly within civic education and school prevention programmes in Croatian educational institutions.
- ◆ Define roles and responsibilities (e.g., a school volunteer manager) and ensure workload and time recognition for teachers and counsellors who continuously develop volunteering programmes.
- ◆ Provide systematic support from relevant institutions (the competent ministry, agencies, local government) through guidelines, good practice examples, professional conferences and funding schemes that encourage long-term, not only short-term volunteering activities.

2. Developing a Clear System for Assessing Learning Through Volunteering and Wider Use of the Certificate of Competencies Acquired through Volunteering

The survey showed that a significant number of educational institutions do not assess volunteering at all, or assess it informally without clear criteria. Awareness of assessment tools, such as the Certificate of Competencies Acquired through Volunteering, the volunteer booklet and other templates, is limited, and their use is rare. Participants in the online dialogues noted that they lack clear guidelines, universal templates and training that would enable them to identify and document the competencies pupils develop through volunteering (e.g., communication, teamwork, initiative, empathy).

A structured system would allow volunteering to be recognised as a meaningful learning experience, increasing pupil motivation and enhancing the visibility of service-learning outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ◆ Establish a recognisable and user-friendly system for assessing learning acquired through volunteering, including clear criteria, learning outcomes and monitoring procedures (e.g., volunteering records or journals, reflective questionnaires, evaluation conversations).
- ◆ Systematically promote and integrate the Certificate of Competencies Acquired through Volunteering into the work of schools and organisations, incorporate it into school documents, pupils' achievement portfolios, career guidance processes and application/enrolment procedures where relevant.
- ◆ Develop and distribute standardised templates and guidance (volunteer booklets, volunteering logs or journals, guidelines for mentoring conversations) and organise basic and advanced-level training for teachers, school counsellors and volunteer managers.

3. Encouraging Diverse Volunteering Activities in Educational Institutions Aimed at Civic, Socio-Emotional and Developmental Outcomes

Findings show that volunteering activities in schools are often narrow in focus, dominated by humanitarian and charitable actions, while topics such as human rights, democratic culture, sustainable development, intercultural dialogue, media literacy, climate change or crisis response are less represented. Online dialogues confirm that well-designed volunteering significantly contributes to the development of socio-emotional skills, self-confidence, empathy and resilience, and can be an important component of preventing risky behaviours and supporting pupils' mental health. Diverse and thoughtfully guided volunteer programmes would therefore allow pupils to live the values of democracy, solidarity and responsible citizenship through practical activities

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ◆ Develop thematically diverse volunteer programmes that go beyond one-off humanitarian actions and cover areas such as human rights, democratic participation, sustainable development, inclusion, cultural creativity, digital citizenship and crisis response.
- ◆ Plan volunteering activities as experiential learning, with clearly defined outcomes (e.g., development of empathy, cooperation, responsibility, self-regulation) and structured reflection with pupils (conversations, logs and volunteering journals, workshops, etc.).
- ◆ Connect volunteer programmes with mental health goals and risk-prevention efforts, in cooperation with school counsellors (psychologists, pedagogues) and external experts.

4. Strengthening and Networking School Volunteer Clubs as Centres of Cooperation Between Schools and the Community

The survey shows that volunteer clubs exist in only a smaller share of educational institutions, but where they do operate, they become an important meeting point for pupils, teachers, civil society organisations and the local community. Online dialogues highlight several benefits: schools receive support in developing volunteer programmes and access to the expertise of CSOs and volunteer centres; CSOs gain motivated volunteers and a channel through which their values enter school and family contexts; pupils gain opportunities for responsibility, leadership roles and active participation in planning and implementing activities. At the same time, challenges are noted: lack of time, resources, clear roles and communication channels, and insufficient involvement of parents. It is, therefore, important to support the development of volunteer clubs as stable infrastructures connecting schools with their communities, ensuring continuity of activities and increasing the visibility of volunteering at system level.

RECOMMENDATIONS::

- ◆ Strengthen volunteer clubs as hubs connecting schools, volunteer centres, civil society organisations, local government and parents, with clear support from school leadership.
- ◆ Formalise the role of the school volunteer manager (teachers or school counsellors) and provide training and support through networks (e.g., Volunteer Managers Network, Volunteer Centres Network).
- ◆ Encourage pupil leadership and participation within volunteer clubs - engage pupils in identifying community needs, planning activities, communication and evaluation - turning clubs into genuine "laboratories of democracy".
- ◆ Build long-term cooperation with local volunteer centres and organisations that can provide mentoring support, training, volunteering opportunities and help connect schools at local and national level.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



- Analiza ispitivanja prepoznavanja i vrednovanja učenja kroz volontiranje u odgojno-obrazovnim ustanovama u Hrvatskoj (Hrvatski centar za razvoj volonterstva, July 2025)
- Fact sheet: Prepoznavanje i vrednovanje učenja kroz volontiranje u odgojno-obrazovnim ustanovama u Hrvatskoj (Hrvatski centar za razvoj volonterstva, November 2025)