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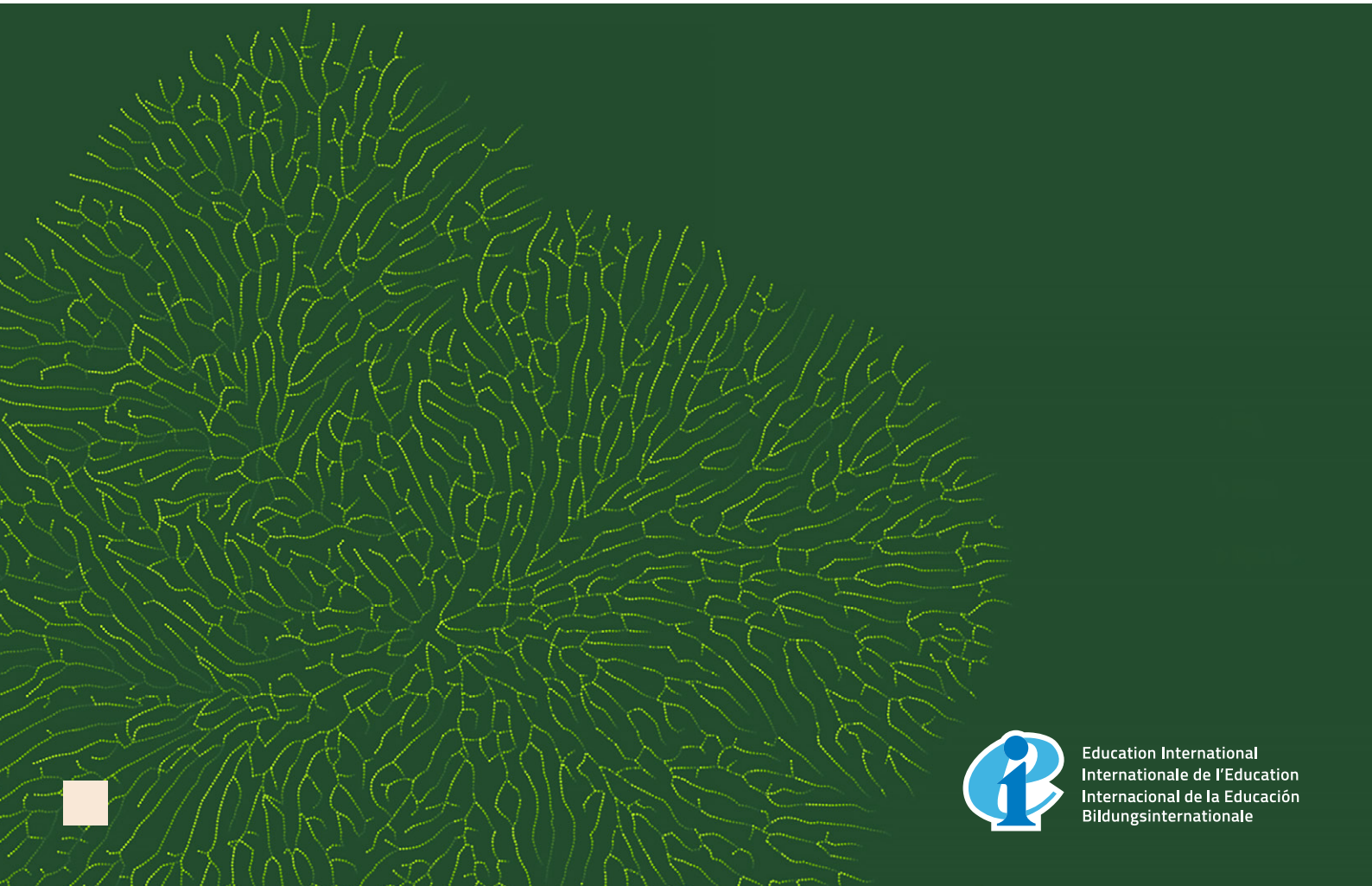
International Summit
of the Teaching Profession 2026

Switching gears:

Teachers and learners in the future learning environment

A Briefing by Education International



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A Briefing by Education International

2026

International Summit on the Teaching Profession

ISTP26 International Summit on the Teaching Profession Tallinn, Estonia

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International Summit on the Teaching Profession

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Introduction

by David Edwards,
General Secretary of Education International

Welcome to the 16th edition of the International Summit on the Teaching Profession (ISTP). First, I would like to express my gratitude to our hosts, the Estonian government, and EI member organisation, the Estonian Educational Personnel Union (EEPU). My thanks also go to our permanent partner at the summit, the OECD, whose continued commitment to these Summits has made them so effective.

For over fifteen years, the ISTP has been built on a simple but powerful conviction: that meaningful collaboration between teacher unions and governments is essential for building quality education systems that serve all students. This conviction has never been more important than it is today.

We meet at a time of profound uncertainty. The poly-crisis that defines our era, with deepening geopolitical tensions, the erosion of democratic norms in many parts of the world, rising inequality, and the accelerating climate emergency, continues to reshape the landscape in which teachers do their vital work. In 2026, the challenges facing our societies feel more complex and more urgent than they ever have before. Conflict and instability threaten communities across continents. The rise of authoritarianism and the far right is undermining civic freedoms and placing new pressures on public institutions, including schools. Teachers are working in a world that is shifting beneath their feet, and yet they continue to show up for their students, day after day, with dedication and resilience.

It is in this context that the 2026 ISTP turns its attention to three interconnected themes at the heart of the teaching profession's future. First, we examine the evolving teacher profession, including the changing demands placed on teachers, the persistent shortages that weaken education systems, the imperative to ensure every child has a trained and qualified teacher, and the need to safeguard the irreplaceable teacher-student relationship. Second, we explore the professional autonomy of educators and the conditions required for teachers to exercise genuine professional judgement, the accountability systems that either support or constrain them, and the collaborative professional communities that sustain high-quality practice. Third, we confront the opportunities and risks of artificial intelligence and educational technology, asking how these tools can be governed in ways that empower teachers rather than sideline them, and that protect students rather than expose them to harm.

A question that runs through each of these themes is one that every education system must grapple with honestly: how do we prepare teachers

for a future that is not yet written? The pace of technological change, the shifting social expectations of education, and the unpredictability of global events mean that the learning environments of tomorrow may look vastly different from those of today. We cannot train teachers for a single, fixed version of the future. What we can do is invest in their capacity to adapt, to think critically, to collaborate, and to exercise professional judgement in the face of the unknown. We can build systems that treat teachers not as passive recipients of reform, but as the agile, knowledgeable professionals they are – professionals who, when trusted and supported, have always risen to meet the challenges of their time.

Whatever changes the future brings, one thing remains certain: teachers' ability to meet those challenges will rely on their ability to count on fully funded, well-designed, and enabling education systems. Decent salaries, secure employment, manageable workloads, quality initial training and continuous professional development, as well as the freedom and trust to exercise professional autonomy, and meaningful participation in the decisions that shape their work are not luxuries to be granted in good times and withdrawn in hard ones. They are the foundations upon which every ambition we hold for education must rest. The recommendations of the United Nations High-Level Panel on the Teaching Profession and the Santiago Consensus adopted at the 2025 World Summit on Teachers provide a clear roadmap. Now, the task before us is implementation.

To all the participants gathered at this Summit, I extend a warm welcome and a sincere request. The ISTP is a rare space. It is a forum where those who lead education systems and those who represent the teaching profession can be together, listen to one another, and seek common ground. This kind of informed dialogue is precious, and in the current global climate, it is more necessary than ever. I ask each of you to engage in these discussions with openness, with good faith, and with a genuine willingness to learn from one another's experiences and perspectives.

Since its conception, the ISTP has demonstrated that constructive partnership between unions and governments can drive meaningful change for teachers and for the students they serve. This tradition of dialogue has weathered political shifts, a global pandemic, and periods of deep disagreement, and it endures because the work it does matters. Let us honour that tradition by making this Summit one of substance, honesty, and shared resolve.

David Edwards
General Secretary
Education International

Sub-theme 1 The evolving teacher profession

Teachers' work has always been multifaceted and in flux. In recent years, however, changes in the educational landscape mean that teachers are increasingly expected to take on additional roles, including learning facilitators, mentors, emergency responders, career counsellors, social workers, and language specialists. Teaching and learning do not take place in a vacuum – as changes occur in society, educational theories change, educational research is updated, and consensus on what constitutes quality education shifts, teachers have always responded by adapting their practice and making the necessary pedagogical changes to meet their students' needs. Teachers are agile professionals – adaptability is a key competency for the education workforce.

Nonetheless, teachers need to be supported by systems that provide the enabling conditions for them to fulfil changing professional demands. Recognising this need, UNESCO and the ILO this year began a process to revise the international normative policy instrument on the status of the profession. The 1966 Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers will be updated to better reflect the numerous substantial changes that have reshaped the education landscape in the last six decades, such as the rise in digital technologies, including artificial intelligence; changes in curricula, including a stronger focus on sustainable development; societal expectations of education; learning crises and teacher shortages (UNESCO, 2025, p.1). Education International aims to ensure that the revised recommendation provides a strong policy roadmap for upholding the status of the profession today and into the future.

Currently, teachers experience a double challenge – at the same time as shifting educational landscapes present teachers with new demands, many teachers are faced with poor employment and working conditions due to systems that undervalue their work. As a result, some teachers are leaving the profession and many young people are being deterred from entering it, leading to teacher shortages.

Improving teacher recruitment and retention requires transformed systems which support and value teachers, uphold their status, pay professional level salaries, and recognise them as leaders and agents of change in determining the direction of the profession's evolution.

Tackling teacher shortages

Teacher shortages are rife across OECD countries, and their impact is strong. Between 2018 and 2022, the share of students in schools whose principal reported that instruction is hindered by a lack of teaching staff increased by 21 percentage points (from 26% to 47%) (OECD, 2023, p.172).

The nature and extent of teacher shortages vary across countries. Whilst the root causes for the shortages vary too,

there are some common key factors that deter many from pursuing or remaining in teaching across jurisdictions. Education International's 2024 survey of education unions globally found high consensus amongst education unions that teacher workload was the most significant work-related problem for teachers. Class sizes, respect for teachers, and teacher mental health were reported as other critical issues globally (Arnold and Rahimi, 2024, p. 82). Furthermore, the survey results show that, from the perspective of education unions, in general, teaching is undervalued as a profession. In Europe in particular, unions report that teachers are not seen on par with other high-status professionals, they are not respected members of society, and teacher status is low (Arnold and Rahimi, 2024, p. 66).

In many cases, societies' changing expectations of teachers mean that teachers take up multiple roles, increasing their workload and adding to work intensity. In this context, high work-related stress and burnout is rife, often leading to attrition. A recent global survey revealed widespread job dissatisfaction and illbeing amongst the 26 000 educators responding. For example, in France, nearly two thirds (64%) of the respondents expressed dissatisfaction with their work/life balance (Billaudeau et al. 2023, p.8), and in the UK, 76% of respondents said that they found their job fairly or very stressful (Billaudeau et al. 2023, p.9). In Japan, newer teachers were most dissatisfied: 62% of teachers that had been teaching for fewer than 5 years responded that they disagreed or strongly disagreed that overall, they were satisfied with their job. Nineteen percent of those same respondents rated their health as poor or rather poor, and full-time staff reported working on average 50 hours per week. (Billaudeau et al. 2023, p.16). In this context, policies to proactively promote teacher well-being need to become a priority for governments seeking to tackle teacher shortages.

Salaries and working conditions are also key drivers of the shortage. Data from TALIS 2024 suggests that in OECD countries, on average, only 2 in 5 teachers are satisfied with their salaries (OECD, 2025, p.251). Those who are satisfied are, on average, 25% less likely to want to leave teaching within the next five years (OECD, 2025, p.254). The High-Level Panel on the Teaching Profession, convened by the UN Secretary General to consider how to tackle teacher shortages, makes clear that sustainably funding competitive salaries and incentives is key to uphold the status of the profession. Recommendation 36 spells out that "teachers should receive salaries and benefits at the same level as compared to other professions with similar educational requirements" (ILO, UN, & UNESCO, 2024). Whilst multiple factors influence status, governments that want to support the evolution of the profession into a high status, first choice career cannot ignore the importance of decent salaries and secure jobs.

EI's 2024 World Congress Resolution on the teacher shortage emphasises "the importance and necessity of expanding both the reach and scope of social dialogue and collective bargaining in developing effective and sustainable solutions to the teacher shortage" (Education International, 2024, article 29). Similarly, the High-Level Panel recommended more specifically that governments establish inclusive national commissions to assess and tackle shortages of adequately trained teachers. Importantly, these commissions "should include relevant financial authorities, representatives of teachers' organizations and other relevant stakeholders" (ILO, UNESCO and the UN, 2024, Recommendation 5). Where governments are not yet implementing this recommendation, education unions can take the lead. For example, in the UK, a Teaching Commission was created in 2024 to examine the drivers of the teacher shortage and consider how to make

teaching an attractive and sustainable profession. It includes representatives from education unions as well as teachers, education researchers and experts (Teaching Commission, 2024).

By partnering with education unions to identify the root causes of teacher shortages, governments can efficiently and sustainably address the most critical issues driving teachers away from the profession. When teacher policies provide teachers with the support and conditions they need to thrive professionally, teachers are satisfied with their jobs. For example, TALIS shows that teachers' sense of self-efficacy is correlated with job satisfaction (OECD, 2025, p.86). Similarly, teachers that have support in managing disciplinary issues are more likely to be satisfied in their jobs (OECD, 2025, p. 93).

Ensuring every child has a trained and qualified teacher

Quality teacher education is an essential component for improving teaching and learning. Strong preparation increases teachers' efficacy and makes it more likely they will remain in the profession. Studies in the United States found that attrition rates were between two or three times higher for teachers who enter the profession without full preparation, than for teachers who are comprehensively prepared (Podolsky et al. 2016).

With many countries struggling to tackle teacher shortages, some are opening up new, more "flexible" pathways into teaching that seek to facilitate entrance into the profession. Managed effectively, such routes into teaching can enhance the diversity of experience held within the teaching workforce. Ensuring high standards is critical, however. A proliferation of low quality, short courses, offered by private, unregulated training companies risks lowering the status of the profession and impacting teaching quality.

The High-Level Panel on the Teaching Profession is clear that lowering standards for teacher preparation is not a sustainable solution to address teacher shortages. It recommends that "governments should immediately begin phasing out… the hiring of unqualified personnel to fill teacher shortages" (ILO, UN, & UNESCO, 2024, Recommendation 19). Instead, governments should invest in supporting prospective teachers from diverse backgrounds to complete comprehensive, quality training programmes that include both theoretical and practical components. Unqualified or underqualified personnel should be offered support to gain the necessary qualifications to enter the profession.

Research shows that mentoring and targeted support for novice teachers reduce attrition in teachers' first years in the profession and improves student achievement. While mentoring is on the rise, TALIS found that a larger share of teachers who started working in their current school in the past 5 years reported participation in informal induction activities (57%) than reported participation in formal programmes (44%) (OECD, 2025, p.145). Informal induction activities can be useful to fill gaps when formal programmes are lacking. However, investing in structured, institutionalised mentoring and support means that mentors can themselves be systematically trained, supported, and compensated for their time and skills.

Teacher education must be constantly refreshed to effectively prepare teachers for classrooms over time. Training in topics such as gender-responsive pedagogies, inclusive education, digital literacy, cultural sensitivity, human rights education, conflict resolution and climate change education is critical. A recent global survey of teachers found that 95% believed that it was important or very important to teach about the severity of climate change, but only 40% felt confident to do so (Education International and UNESCO, 2021). This

suggests high motivation amongst teachers to integrate climate change education into their teaching, but a lack of professional development opportunities on the topic. TALIS found that teachers felt far less prepared for emerging areas of teaching than for traditional topics. Only 33% of recent graduates, on average, reported feeling prepared to teach in a multicultural or multilingual setting; 44% felt prepared to support students' social and emotional development; and 57% felt prepared to use digital resources and tools for teaching (OECD, 2025, p.137). These figures suggest the need to update the professional development offer available to teachers according to their evolving needs.

The format of professional development opportunities should also respond to teachers' self-identified needs. Teachers cite time, work schedules, and cost as key barriers to their participation in professional development (OECD, 2025, pp.156-7), showing the importance of free, quality training that is offered at suitable times during the working day. This is key also given the data showing that women are less likely to participate in in-person training than men (OECD, 2025, p.150), likely due to care obligations hindering their attendance.

Despite the importance of quality teacher education, too often, policy rhetoric points to teacher training as a silver bullet for improving education, thereby conceptualising teachers as deficient in terms of knowledge or competencies and placing the onus on teachers to enhance learning outcomes. This narrative ignores the broader policy ecosystem in which teachers operate, and the often-challenging teaching environments in which teachers work (characterised by large class sizes, students with increasing specific needs, and limited resources inter alia). Without addressing system shortfalls and ensuring a supportive policy environment, even the most well-prepared teacher, with constant skill updates, will run into difficulties based on issues that are beyond her control.

Safeguarding the teacher-student relationship

As teachers navigate shifting societal contexts and complex global transformations, the importance of the teacher-student relationship remains a constant – over time and across countries and cultures. The teacher-student relationship has unique and specific characteristics, significantly influencing educational pathways, student learning, and their life stories. With all aspects of life becoming increasingly digitalised, the physical presence of those who teach and educate takes on increased importance. Education International is campaigning for the teacher-student relationship to be enshrined as common heritage of humanity by UNESCO (Education International, 2025).

The centrality of this relationship was underlined by governments at the 2025 World Summit on Teachers. The Santiago Declaration affirms that "in the face of climate change, rapid technological advances, widespread crises, conflict and violence, the role of teachers must be safeguarded and their relationship with learners nurtured as part of our common heritage." (World Summit on Teachers, 2025, preamble article e).

Positive teacher-student relationships are crucial to enable teachers to provide students with the care and support they need to navigate the complex world beyond the classroom. With the growing consensus that students have to be well to do well at school, teachers are now far more than transmitters of knowledge. Instead, they are expected to take on multiple roles including guiding students in their personal, social, and emotional development. Yet to successfully foster student well-being and mental health,

teachers must have the time to engage with their students beyond the syllabus. This is a question of professional autonomy, discussed in the next section, but also of systems design and the conceptualisation of a quality education.

According to TALIS, on average, around half of teachers report general administrative work as a source of stress (52%), the highest share compared to all other demands (OECD, 2025, p.115). It is deduced that administrative work is such a common source of stress not because of the number of hours it occupies, but because teachers view this type of work as interfering with their core professional activities – teaching and engaging with students. It is crucial that systems support the profession to evolve so that teachers can dedicate more time to the tasks that they know matters most for teaching and learning, such as building and maintaining positive relationships with their students.

New educational technologies risk devaluing or even damaging the student-teacher relationship. More than 6 out of 10 teachers responding to the I-Best survey in France, Belgium, Switzerland, and Japan disagreed with the statement that "digital tools improve my relations with pupils and families" (Billaudeau et al. 2023, p.10).

A school culture that recognises this relationship as critical for quality education will support teachers in their efforts to create a safe, caring, and inclusive learning environment. Establishing such a culture requires a whole-school approach and a supportive policy framework. School leaders can model positive relationships with their staff, and governments can adopt policies that empower teachers with the time, autonomy, and trust to prioritise pastoral care. This means avoiding over-crowded curricula, unmanageable workloads, high-stakes accountability systems, and expecting teachers to complete large amounts of administrative work. Teacher professional autonomy and the ability to influence decision-making in their school is also key, as it has been shown to positively impact teacher well-being (OECD, 2025, p.172), which in turn can impact student well-being.

Reflection questions

- *Can teachers ever be fully prepared for a future that is not yet written?*
- *Has a national commission on the teaching shortage been established in your country? If not, what would it take for government and union representatives in your country to work together to identify the nature and root causes of the teacher shortages and address them effectively?*
- *In the context of teacher shortages, how can governments ensure immediate staffing needs are met whilst still upholding professional standards and respecting every student's right to a qualified teacher?*
- *Are training, support, and resources available for teachers in your country to update and enhance their pedagogical skills in emerging topics?*
- *What would it take to substantially and sustainably change a school culture so that it prioritises the student-teacher relationship and supports students to flourish socially and emotionally as well as academically?*

Sub-theme 2 Autonomy of educators and school leadership

Safeguarding professional autonomy

Teachers who are afforded the trust and authority to exert influence over how their work is structured, organised, and practised perceive their profession as one of higher status (Arnold and Rahimi, 2024), are more satisfied with their jobs, less stressed, more self-efficient, and develop greater professional confidence (OECD, 2025). Teachers with more instructional autonomy more often report being able to adapt their teaching to respond to students' needs, vary instructional strategies in their classroom, and reduce achievement gaps between students (OECD, 2025).

Setting a longstanding international standard, the 1966 ILO/UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers recognises that "the teaching profession should enjoy academic freedom in the discharge of professional duties" (ILO, 2016, p.32). The Recommendation outlines that teachers must have professional autonomy and space for professional judgement to make key pedagogical decisions about teaching and learning materials, methods, and assessment. Noting that teachers are particularly qualified to determine the needs of their students and make judgements on the teaching and learning materials most suitable for their pupils, the Recommendation also stipulates that teachers and their organisations should participate in the development of curriculum, be involved in decisions affecting their professional practice, and be consulted on matters of education policy.

Strengthening these recommendations in 2024, the High-Level Panel on the Teaching Profession reaffirmed that "policies should ensure teacher agency and autonomy based on knowledge, competence and responsibility within education goals" and noted that "teacher status and dignity are also directly related to teachers' ability to influence policies regarding their work, including curricula and pedagogical practices" (Recommendation 15) (ILO, UN, & UNESCO, 2024, p.6).

In OECD countries, over 90% of teachers report having substantial autonomy in designing and planning lessons, and selecting teaching methods, and over 70% report having autonomy to choose assessment activities, implement the curriculum in flexible ways and select learning objectives. (OECD, 2025, pp.184-186). Yet instructional autonomy can be constrained if teachers need to cover a large, mandated curricula and prepare students for standardised assessments too regularly.

Teachers' influence on school policies is far more limited. Less than 40% of teachers are involved in defining school improvement priorities, 38% hold influence over policies on student diversity, only 6% of teachers are involved in decisions on budget allocation within a school, and virtually no teachers have significant involvement in staffing policies (OECD, 2025, pp.173-175).

Considered together, these findings indicate that teachers are often able and trusted to exert a degree of autonomy over policies and practices in their schools, particularly the practical, day-to-day pedagogical decisions focused on students. However, their influence over decisions that are directly related to their working conditions (such as teacher evaluation) and their involvement in decisions over school policies (such as budget allocation, staffing, school improvement policies) are limited. Concerningly, the involvement of teachers in school-level policy decisions affecting their practice is also declining over time in many education systems. For instance, in OECD education systems, teachers' involvement in setting student assessment policies declined by an average of 3 percentage points between 2018 and 2024 (OECD, 2025, p.170).

Beyond the school level, the agency of teachers diminishes significantly, and few teachers feel they have influence over education policy. In OECD countries, on average, only 24% of teachers agree that they can influence education policy in their country (OECD, 2025, p.240). Globally, unions report that governments consult with teachers' organisations only to some extent on the key policies affecting teachers including professional learning, curriculum, and teacher evaluation (Arnold and Rahimi, 2024).

Importantly, these findings have a direct impact on teacher job satisfaction and their intentions to remain in the profession. Research suggests that when teachers feel trusted and empowered to act, they are more likely to be professionally satisfied and engaged. Across nearly all OECD education systems, teachers who believe they can influence education policy in their country or region also report higher levels of job satisfaction. Furthermore, on average, teachers who agree that their views are valued by policymakers are around 35% less likely to want to leave teaching within the next five years (OECD, 2025, p. 240).

Professional autonomy in an increasingly politicised landscape

The professional autonomy of teachers is also directly impacted by the rapidly changing political climate in which teachers do their work. The World Report 2026 (Human Rights Watch, 2026) estimates that 72% of the world's population are living under autocracies.

Over the last decades, many education systems have made the values and promotion of democracy part of their core mission. Education for democratic citizenship and human rights is embedded as curricular aims and guiding principles in many systems. However, in today's turbulent political context, the erosion and contestation of democratic norms across contexts impact education in multiple ways, including through the politicisation of curricula, textbooks, and teaching, and attempts to restrict teachers' professional autonomy and freedom of expression. As a result, education has become a site where broader societal tensions play out, creating significant pressure for teachers working in these education systems. In such contexts, upholding democratic values in education is not only a pedagogical task for teachers, but increasingly a professional and ethical challenge.

Relatedly, teachers across multiple countries have reported intimidation, with far-right groups encouraging students to report teachers who express progressive viewpoints. A recent survey of over 1,000 teachers in Germany found that 22% of teachers experience right-wing extremist behaviour from pupils every week (GEW, 2025). Almost half have seen right-wing extremist pupils verbally attack classmates who think differently, and 9% of teachers have also experienced physical attacks. In a recent report from UNESCO, almost

half of the 2,000 teachers surveyed across the European Union had encountered students making Nazi gestures (44.2%) or drawing or wearing Nazi symbols (44.1%) (UNESCO, 2026, p.25).

In both reports, teachers expressed a clear need for training and support in dealing with right-wing extremist attacks on democracy. Tellingly, 12% of teachers are already concerned about openly promoting democratic values in class because they fear negative reactions from right-wing extremist circles (GEW, 2025).

Hate speech, misogyny, xenophobia, racism, and other forms of discrimination have already permeated schools and educational institutions. Limitations and restrictions can already be seen in teachers' rights and professional autonomy, as well as in school curricular practices, particularly with regards to climate change education, citizenship education, and comprehensive sexuality education. Violations of professional autonomy and teachers' freedom of expression are only increasing with the global rise of the far right.

Accountability systems that recognise and enhance teacher professionalism

Safeguarding professional autonomy requires accountability systems that strengthen, rather than constrain, teacher professionalism.

Research demonstrates that when accountability is narrowly tied to performance indicators, particularly standardised test results, it risks undermining the very professional autonomy that international standards recognise as essential to quality education. Performance-based accountability systems tend to limit teachers' agency and decision-making power and encourage performativity. Unintended consequences such as teaching to the test and the narrowing of the curriculum are most often found in systems where test scores are used to evaluate teachers or determine promotion (Parcerisa et al. 2022). These effects are most pronounced in market-oriented accountability models, where competition and quantifiable results drive policy decisions. Such approaches risk constraining teachers' professional autonomy, weakening collaboration and trust within schools, and undermining education quality by shifting focus from holistic student development to measurable outcomes.

Evidence from the OECD's TALIS further highlights the pressures associated with these forms of accountability. Almost half (45%) of the surveyed teachers report that being held responsible for their students' achievement is a significant source of stress (OECD, 2025, p.129).

The concerns raised by these models are not new. In response, the 1966 ILO/UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers established a clear international standard, stating that "any systems of inspection or supervision should be designed to encourage and help teachers in the performance of their professional tasks and should be such as not to diminish the freedom, initiative, and responsibility of teachers." (ILO, 2016, p.33).

Other forms of accountability also play an important role in teachers' perceptions of demands, as, on average, 40% of teachers in OECD countries report being held responsible for students' social and emotional well-being is a source of stress. Moreover, addressing parents' concerns is a source of stress reported by 42% of teachers (OECD, 2025, p.129).

Taken together, these figures illustrate the intensity of demands placed on teachers, particularly when responsibility is not matched with trust, autonomy, and adequate support.

Encouragingly, TALIS also points to a slight shift: since 2018, 16 education systems reported a significant decrease in the use of external student results, such as national exam results, in formal teacher appraisal processes (OECD, 2025, p.94). This trend suggests a growing recognition that formative, practice-based evaluation methods are more aligned with strengthening professional practice than high-stakes external metrics.

To enhance teachers' professional practice, accountability systems should be grounded in trust in the profession and co-designed with teachers and their unions through meaningful social dialogue. Trust in the profession must be embedded structurally, including through the recognition of teacher-led professional standards and codes of ethics. The 1966 Recommendation is explicit on this point, affirming that "professional standards relating to teacher performance should be defined and maintained with the participation of the teachers' organizations." (ILO, 2016, p.34) and noting that "codes of ethics or of conduct should be established by the teachers' organizations, since such codes greatly contribute to ensuring the prestige of the profession and the exercise of professional duties in accordance with agreed principles." (ILO, 2016, p.34).

In 2024, the Recommendations of the High-Level Panel on the teaching profession further amplify that it is the responsibility of governments to ensure that "teachers and their organizations can engage in social dialogue, including collective bargaining, and policy dialogue on all matters affecting the profession" (Recommendation 15) (ILO, UN, & UNESCO, 2024, p.6). In Recommendation 30, the Panel also states that "methods of assessing teacher performance that consider the complex role of teachers in diverse settings should be established, with the aim of developing and improving the quality of teaching and its effective impact on learning through formative support" and points out that "teacher and student organizations should take the lead in defining and demanding quality teaching" (ILO, UN, & UNESCO, 2024, p.8).

These provisions position teachers and their organisations as active actors responsible for defining and upholding the standards of their profession. Professional standards and codes of ethics constitute a form of teacher-led accountability, reinforcing both public trust and the status of teachers while respecting professional autonomy.

Trust-based accountability also requires strong pedagogical leadership. School leaders who are themselves pedagogically trained and committed to collaborative professional cultures can use appraisal processes as tools for reflection, feedback, and continuous improvement. Formative classroom observation, peer collaboration, and professional learning communities support teachers to enhance their practice without reducing their work to numerical indicators. In this sense, accountability becomes a mechanism to strengthen teachers' professional practice and confidence.

Reframing accountability in this way recognises that quality education depends on supported, valued, and trusted professionals. Systems that align accountability with professional autonomy, teacher-led standards, formative evaluation, the meaningful participation of teachers in decision-making processes and robust social dialogue mechanisms are better positioned to enhance both teacher professionalism and student outcomes.

Promoting collaborative professional communities

Teacher professionalism is not exercised in isolation. Safeguarding professional autonomy and reframing accountability

around trust must be accompanied by sustained commitment to fostering collaborative professional communities. High-quality education systems ensure that teachers have the time, resources, and enabling school cultures necessary to collaborate meaningfully with their peers.

Collaboration is a core dimension of teacher professionalism. Professional learning that is teacher-led, practice-based, and embedded in school communities reinforces both professional agency and collective responsibility for education quality. However, collaboration requires supportive working conditions. Teachers must have dedicated time within their workload to engage in professional exchange, and school leadership must foster cultures of trust, openness, and shared purpose. In systems where workload pressures are high and collaboration is marginalised, opportunities for collective professional growth remain limited.

Evidence from the OECD's TALIS reinforces the value of collaborative practice. Teachers who engage in collaborative professional learning, including team teaching, joint activities across classes, and participation in collaborative professional learning communities, are more likely to report using cognitively activating and adaptive teaching strategies. Collaboration is also associated with higher levels of job satisfaction and professional confidence (OECD, 2025, p.211). These findings confirm that collaborative cultures are directly linked to education quality and teacher well-being.

At the same time, access to high-quality professional development, including collaborative professional learning opportunities, remains uneven (OECD, 2025). Where sufficient professional learning opportunities are not systematically provided, education unions step in to fill the gap. EI has documented how unions promote collaboration through union-led professional development initiatives that are grounded in teachers' lived realities and responsive to emerging social and pedagogical challenges (Campbell et al. 2024; Education International, 2026).

Where education systems have not sufficiently supported professional development on key societal issues, unions have mobilised to ensure teachers are equipped to respond. In one such case, the Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ) established the "ACTES Mouvement" which facilitates teacher collaboration and learning opportunities focused on education for democracy, peace, and climate justice. Union-led collaboration can strengthen teachers' capacity to address complex global challenges while reinforcing shared professional values.

Research shows that when collaborative professional development is properly funded and resourced, teacher-led learning communities foster reflective dialogue, peer support, and professional agency. When teachers are provided with time, facilitation, and union-supported structures for collaboration, they report meaningful professional learning that is relevant to their classroom practice and strengthens their confidence as professionals (Campbell et al. 2024).

Collaborative professional communities also contribute to strengthening democratic governance within education systems. TALIS findings indicate that schools characterised by strong collaborative cultures are more likely to foster innovation, teacher self-efficacy, and collective responsibility for student learning (OECD, 2025). When teachers collectively reflect on practice and support one another's learning, accountability becomes embedded in professional ethics and peer dialogue rather than external compliance mechanisms.

Promoting collaborative professional communities therefore requires deliberate

policy choices. Governments must ensure adequate resourcing, protected time for collaboration within teachers' working hours, and school leadership that promotes participatory professional cultures.

In Recommendation 27, The High-Level Panel on the Teaching Profession asserts that "policies should promote teaching as a collaborative profession, with adequate space, time and resources for collaborative planning, communities of practice, and reflective and reflexive practice by and among teachers, within and beyond their education institution." (ILO, UN, & UNESCO, 2024, p.7). Social dialogue mechanisms should also extend to the design of professional learning frameworks, ensuring that teachers and their unions have a meaningful voice in shaping the structures that support their development.

Collaboration strengthens instructional practice, enhances job satisfaction, and reinforces professional confidence. In alignment with international standards on the status of teachers, investing in collaborative professional communities is not only desirable, but a central component of policies that aim to support, value, and trust teachers and secure quality education for all.

Reflection questions

- *How can systems encourage, support, and ensure the professional autonomy of teachers?*
- *How can education systems reduce the governance distance between classroom practice and policy-making, so that teachers, like other professionals, play a meaningful role in shaping the standards, decisions, accountability and appraisal systems, and evaluation policies that directly affect their work?*
- *How can systems and teacher unions proactively defend and reinforce the democratic mission of education in a context where both curricula and teaching are increasingly politicised?*
- *What structural changes, through legislation, collective bargaining, or social dialogue, are needed to guarantee protected time, resources, and supportive leadership for collaborative professional communities in every school?*

Sub-theme 3 Artificial intelligence and educational technology

Teachers in the lead

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) is becoming ubiquitous across the world, and the education sector is no exception. Evidence from the OECD's TALIS indicates that the use of AI is already becoming part of teachers' professional practice. Around one in three teachers report having used AI in their work, while 40% of teachers agree that AI helps them support students individually (OECD, 2025, p.59). However, the rapid integration of AI into education systems presents both significant opportunities and profound challenges.

Despite its antiquity, the 1966 Recommendation on the Status of Teachers includes language on teaching aids which stands the test of time and can be applied to new technologies in education, including AI. The recommendation underscores a few basic principles: teachers must be involved in the development of new aids; new aids will never replace teachers but must support them to provide quality education; and teachers should be involved in researching and evaluating new aids (ILO, 2016, articles 62, 88). Taken together and applied to AI, these principles underscore that AI is a tool that can be used to support teachers, but teachers must always be in control, their professionalism respected.

The Santiago Consensus mirrors this central concern of ensuring teachers are in the lead in relation to new technologies. It recognises that education technologies should be "co-created and utilized by teachers to amplify the relational and affective dimension of learning without replacing the creativity, core competencies, and pedagogical knowledge of teachers." (UNESCO and Government of Chile, 2025, article e).

Teacher autonomy on when, how, and whether to use AI tools in their teaching is critical. According to TALIS, half of teachers believe AI should not be used in teaching (OECD, 2025, p.60). This statistic suggests widespread rejection of AI amongst the profession. Some might suggest that this reflects teachers' lack of knowledge about the potential for AI tools to enhance teaching practice, and would therefore prescribe training programmes. However, evidence on the risks of AI call for caution: emerging research shows that AI risks undermining students' cognitive, social, and emotional development, degrades trust in education, threatens students' safety, erodes students' autonomy and agency, and deepens equity divides (Burns et al., 2026). It is imperative that the professional judgment of teachers is respected.

For unions, social and policy dialogue and collective bargaining are key tools to ensure that the cognitive and social-emotional needs of students are safeguarded and the professional rights of teachers are protected. Education unions assert "the need for the teaching profession to provide thought leadership on how AI can be harnessed to strengthen the equity, inclusion and quality of education", and call upon governments "to ensure that the teaching profession is represented in all decision-making

processes regarding the use of AI in the education and research sector" (Education International, 2026).

The centrality of social dialogue and teacher involvement is echoed by the High-Level Panel on the Teaching Profession, which recommends that "governments should develop policies through social dialogue around the use of education technology. Such policies should ensure sustainable and equitable procurement and deployment of technology; autonomy with respect to content; and the involvement of the teaching profession and student organizations in the design, piloting, and evaluation of artificial intelligence tools considered for use in education" (ILO, UNESCO and the UN, 2024, Recommendation 46). Co-designing AI tools with the teaching profession can help ensure that they are both pedagogically appropriate and culturally relevant. Involving teachers in evaluating AI needs to be done intentionally, for example through establishing professional learning networks to solicit feedback on a tools' utility and advice on what applications should be useful for teachers in the future, ensuring that teachers have the enabling working conditions (such as time, workload) to facilitate their participation in such networks (EI and OECD, 2023, guideline 3). Practice-engaged research projects can also be used to evaluate and document the conditions under which technology use works and for whom (EI and OECD, 2023, guideline 6).

In practice, it is common for teachers to be sidelined when it comes to decisions on using AI in education. EI's 2024 Congress Resolution on technology, AI and the future of the teaching profession points out that "policies on the introduction and use of new technologies in education institutions have too often been developed without consulting the teaching profession and without adequate understanding of effective teaching and learning practices" (Education International, 2024, article 5). The Resolution goes on to assert that teachers and education support personnel must be proactively involved in the development of educational technologies and the assessments of them to ensure these tools are pedagogically sound and meet the practical needs of teachers, education support personnel, and education institutions (Education International, 2024, article 19).

Top-down imposition of AI education policies builds mistrust and stifles teacher agency. A recent study found almost universal distrust of big tech companies, their leaders, their motivations, their interactions with schools, and the AI tools themselves (Burns et al., 2026, p.86). Mandated use of AI causes alarm amongst teachers not only because it overrides their autonomy, but also because its imposition can strengthen commercialisation in education, lead to data privacy infringements, or even enable surveillance. When it comes to teacher evaluation, participants at EI's Global AI conference argued that there must be transparency in the use of AI and that teachers should have the right to opt out.

One of the greatest casualties of AI may be the way it has eroded trust within schools and education systems (Burns et al., 2026, p.83). When introduced without guardrails, it can lead to teachers' work being devalued by students, parents and communities, teachers' relationship with students being damaged, and an antagonistic relationship between management and the workforce. Teacher leadership, professional autonomy and social dialogue with teachers in relation to AI is critical if AI is to live up to its promise of enhancing educational quality and equity.

Human-centred teaching and learning

Emerging research highlights that properly integrated AI tools may help advance educational equity by supporting

differentiated instruction and facilitating access to learning resources. AI tools can assist teachers to support personalised learning pathways, identify and tailor to student needs, adapt learning materials, and reduce time spent on repetitive administrative tasks (Burns et al., 2026). Reducing teachers' planning and administrative burdens can lessen their high workload and allow them to dedicate more time to professional tasks such as relationship building, formative feedback, and differentiated instruction (Burns et al., 2026). However, these benefits depend on systems that place pedagogical expertise at the centre of implementation.

Underscoring that AI should enhance, not replace the relational and social dimensions of teaching, the High-Level Panel stressed that "artificial intelligence must be pedagogically harnessed by teachers and integrated through active and human-centred teaching and learning methods and practices" (Recommendation 43) (ILO, UNESCO and the UN, 2024, p. 10).

The use of AI in education must be grounded in a human-centred approach that positions technology as a tool to support teaching and teachers, not as a substitute for them. Teachers and their unions coming together at Education International's Global Conference on Artificial Intelligence called explicitly for "a human-centred, ethical, and rights-based approach to AI - one that ensures transparency, mitigates bias, guarantees child safety, protects privacy and safeguards educational equity and quality" (Education International, 2026, p.1). The digital transformation must strengthen the status, agency, and professional judgement of teachers.

When overused or used without guardrails, AI tools can also diminish learning and risks undermining student cognitive development. A reliance on generative AI tools will necessarily mean that students engage differently with the learning process. Through what is termed "cognitive offloading" (Burns et al., 2026, p.61), students can outsource some elements of what constitutes a quality education, ranging from basic skills like reading and writing to more complex tasks, such as critical thinking and problem-solving. Importantly, these are also tasks through which students develop a sense of self and of their capabilities. Beyond the obvious risks related to learning, it raises questions about the purpose of education and what students understand as important in life and society more broadly.

At the same time, a growing proportion of AI tools are developed to mimic genuine human interaction, so called anthropomorphic AI. These come with a sales pitch of being particularly well placed to engage with students and facilitate their learning, as they are designed to interact with users in a conversational style, seemingly expressing both empathy and encouragement. This risks becoming both confusing and manipulative, undermining student well-being, safety and privacy, and interfering with human relationships at school. Research warns of the dangers of "artificial intimacy", as anthropomorphic AI mimics human connections but in fact hinders real-world social development (Burns et al., 2026, p.77).

Given the hype around the potential of these tools, many teacher unions are debating whether these systems should be banned from schools. The example below shows the decision language currently being considered by the Alberta Teachers' Association:

> *"that anthropomorphic artificial intelligence (AI) tools, including AI companions and other AI systems designed specifically to simulate friendship, counselling or intimate relationships, not be deployed or introduced into any Alberta K–12 learning environments or support settings."*

Government policy is slow to catch up with rapid innovations in the field of AI.

However, some countries are starting to put safeguards in place for children, for example mandating age verification systems for websites and apps that might expose children to harmful content.

On average, around 40% of teachers agree that AI tools may amplify biases, reinforce student misconceptions, or compromise data privacy and security (OECD, 2025, p.59). In fact, designing AI systems for children requires embedding privacy and safety protections directly into the architecture of technology, ensuring that student-facing products actively safeguard users (Burns et al., 2026, p.90). Furthermore, half of teachers report that digital tools can distract students from learning (OECD, 2025, p.56). Around seven out of ten teachers believe that AI could enable students to misrepresent others' work as their own (OECD, 2025, p.59). These concerns reflect legitimate professional apprehensions about the ethical, pedagogical, and developmental implications of rapid technological adoption.

Furthermore, recent findings warn that sustained offloading of tasks to AI can risk eroding the very cognitive and professional expertise that defines teaching, if systems rely too heavily on automation without reinforcing and supporting teachers' core instructional work and professional growth (Ahmed, 2026).

Equally significant is the issue of professional readiness. Three in four teachers report that they lack the knowledge or skills to teach using AI (OECD, 2025, p.60). A similar need for training in teaching with digital technologies was identified by teacher unions globally (Arnold and Rahimi, 2024). This highlights a clear gap between technological advancement and system preparedness.

Developing critical AI literacy is essential for teachers. Teaching with and about AI requires strong initial and continuous teacher education, grounded in human rights, democratic values, and sound pedagogy, so that teachers are equipped not only to use AI tools effectively, but also to critically assess their limitations, identify bias and misinformation, understand data governance implications, and engage responsibly in shaping the technologies that increasingly influence education and society.

Moreover, AI must not erode the relational core of education. Teaching is fundamentally a social and human endeavour. While AI tools can assist with information processing, content adaptation, and administrative efficiency, it cannot replicate the trust, empathy, and professional judgement that define high-quality teaching. As the High-Level Panel on the Teaching Profession underscores in Recommendation 47, "technological learning practices must be supplemented by special attention to the development of learners' social and emotional skills" (ILO, UNESCO and the UN, 2024, p. 10).

In this context, the central policy question is how AI in education can be governed in ways that uphold professional autonomy, safeguard equity, and strengthen public education. Systems that invest in teacher training, protect data privacy, ensure transparency in algorithmic design, and embed AI tools within pedagogically sound frameworks are better positioned to harness its benefits while mitigating its risks.

Human-centred teaching and learning requires a commitment to democratic governance, professional trust, and rights-based implementation. By grounding AI policy in social dialogue and professional standards, education systems can ensure that technological innovation serves the public good and reinforces the status and dignity of the teaching profession.

Reflection questions

- *What safeguards are in place to protect students' well-being and mental health in your education system?*
- *To what extent do teachers in your country have a say over the AI policy in education and the AI they use at work?*
- *How should the drive for innovation be balanced with the need to take caution when the full effects of AI on child development are still unknown?*
- *Should anthropomorphic AI tools be banned in early childhood, primary, and secondary education?*

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Personal notes

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