



Fédération des Centres
sociaux et Socioculturels
de France [FCSF]

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Student Protests: Democracy Cannot Respond to Its Young People This Way

As secondary school students took to the streets across France yesterday, the French Federation of Social and Sociocultural Centres (FCSF) calls on public authorities to listen to their demands, safeguard their freedoms, and move away from a primarily security-driven response to a democratic mobilisation.

Since 21 September, secondary school students across the country have been describing the same reality: teachers absent and not replaced, a lack of school nurses, closed toilets, overcrowded classrooms, deteriorating school buildings that become unbearable as soon as temperatures rise, excessively long school days, and anxiety about educational and career choices. These voices come from schools in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, where feelings of exclusion are particularly strong. They also come from schools in city centres, rural areas, and even the private education sector. These are the everyday realities experienced by students, and they must be taken seriously.

The government is inviting students to express themselves within an “organised democratic framework”. Such a framework already exists, but it is not working. Student councils, which are supposed to represent students’ voices, are too often confined to a merely formal role. The FCSF has long observed that a participatory body that produces no tangible results is not a democratic space. Instead, it fuels distrust. If young people are taking to the streets today, it is primarily because their voices are not being heard elsewhere.

The FCSF condemns the decision to respond primarily through security measures to a movement that calls, above all, for a political response. According to *Le Monde*, more than 6,000 people have been arrested since the beginning of the movement, including 4,400 minors placed in police custody. Ten investigations have been opened by the French National Police Inspectorate (IGPN). The FCSF unequivocally condemns violence against individuals and damage to property. It also emphasises that the students taking part in the protests are themselves the first to reject such acts. Ensuring everyone’s safety is essential. However, this does not justify the disproportionate use of force or the widespread detention of minors in police custody. Reducing this movement to incidents of unrest, or portraying it as manipulated, amounts to refusing to recognise young people as citizens capable of thinking independently, organising themselves, and putting forward their own demands.

As organisations committed to popular education, social centres witness this every day: young people's capacity to act cannot simply be declared; it must be nurtured. It grows wherever their voices are taken seriously and lead to meaningful change. A generation that learns that taking collective action leads to a police station does not learn respect for the rules. It learns that democracy is not meant for them.

For years, we have lamented young people's disengagement. Yet here they are: engaged, organised, and putting forward clear and specific demands. A society that asks its young people to get involved owes them the means to do so: decent schools, spaces where they can gather, accessible educational professionals, and youth policies that are not treated as an adjustment variable in the next budget. We need policies that truly seek to tackle educational inequalities, starting with those most directly affected: young people and their families.

Two years ago, our network committed itself to several priorities aimed at transforming society alongside local residents: giving young people a greater role, tackling educational inequalities, and strengthening residents' capacity to act in order to improve their living conditions. The current student protests reinforce the relevance of these priorities for our network, but they also speak to society as a whole. Social centres therefore have an essential role to play at this moment: listening to young people's voices, creating spaces for debate, supporting their initiatives, and facilitating dialogue with institutions.

It is not up to young people to find their way back into the democratic framework. It is up to the democratic framework to find its way back to young people.

The Board of Directors
of the French Federation of Social
and Sociocultural Centres (FCSF)