



International  
Parliamentary  
Network for  
Education



© UNICEF/UN0459565/Marish

## Protecting education from attack A briefing for parliamentarians

**On October 25 - 27, Nigeria will host the Fourth International Conference on the Safe Schools Declaration, in collaboration with the African Union, Argentina, Norway, Spain, and the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA).**

The Conference will provide a key opportunity to share good practices in keeping education safe during armed conflict, and moving from commitment to practice, the theme of the Conference.

The Conference will also provide an opportunity for more countries to announce their endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration and commit to safeguarding education, joining 111 countries that have so far endorsed the Declaration.

This briefing sets out what members of parliament can do to encourage their government to sign the Declaration and strengthen its implementation ahead of the Safe Schools Conference.

## Education under attack

Every child and young person has the right to education. Yet in conflict zones around the world, schools and universities are under attack. Every day students and educators are killed, raped, and abducted, while schools and universities are occupied, bombed, and destroyed.

Attacks on education include the destruction of educational infrastructure and military use of schools and universities, attacks on students and staff, and the recruitment of children into armed forces and groups, as well as targeted attacks on girls and women.

Attacks on education not only deny children and students their right to education, they regularly breach international humanitarian and human rights law and constitute war crimes.

## Attacks on the rise, despite school closures

In 2020, the [Global Coalition for Protecting Education from Attack \(GCPEA\)](#) identified more than [2,400 reports of attacks](#) on education and military use of schools and universities, a 33 percent increase over 2019.

This uptick occurred even as the Covid-19 pandemic forced the prolonged closure of education facilities around the world. This trend, which follows an already alarming figure of [11,000 reported attacks](#) on education between 2015 and 2019, demonstrates the pressing need to protect education in conflict.

Attacks have continued in startling numbers in 2021. For example, in Afghanistan, [GCPEA identified](#) that explosive weapons were used to attack about 40 schools during the first six months of 2021 as Taliban forces took over key territories. Most of the 185 students and teachers killed or wounded in these attacks were girls and women.

## Destroying more than classrooms

Attacks on education damage and destroy educational facilities, kill and injure, inflict lasting trauma, and lead to student drop out, teacher loss, and school and university closures.

Attacks on education have disproportionate impacts on girls and women, and other marginalised groups. [GCPEA reports](#) found that girls and women often suffered long-term consequences after targeted attacks due to their gender, such as lost education, early pregnancy, child and forced marriage, and stigma associated with sexual violence. In some contexts, armed groups threatened teachers, students and families against educating girls.

The destruction of schools and universities also have long-term consequences for whole communities, depriving communities of the foundations upon which to build their futures. In times of crisis and conflict education is often the first service suspended and the last to be restored.

Attacks on education continue to destroy not just school infrastructure, but the hopes and ambitions of a whole generation of girls and boys.

## Keeping schools safe

To prevent and end attacks on education and the military use of schools and universities, GCPEA calls on all states to endorse and implement the [Safe Schools Declaration](#).

The Safe Schools Declaration (SSD) is an inter-governmental political commitment to protect students, teachers, schools and universities from the worse effects of armed conflict.

In endorsing the Declaration, countries commit to take measures to strengthen the protection of education from attack, restrict the use of education facilities for military purposes, and ensure the continuity of safe education during armed conflict.

The Declaration was opened for endorsement in May 2015, and as of August 2021, had been [endorsed by 111 countries](#).

## The Safe Schools Declaration: From Commitment to Practice

Attacks on education and their devastating impacts have received increased attention in recent years, with the Safe Schools Declaration serving as an effective tool for protecting students and educators from attack.

With more than half the membership of the United Nations, African Union, and the Organization of American States, and over two-thirds of the European Union having endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration, many states have demonstrated concrete actions on implementation, as documented in GCPEA's [Practical Impact of the Safe Schools Declaration](#) and [Implementation Resource Bank](#).

Despite this progress, attacks on education have persisted during the pandemic and demonstrated again the vulnerabilities of vacant schools being used for military purposes. As a result, the right to education is not realized for millions of children in conflict-affected areas.

On October 25-27, Nigeria will host the [Fourth International Conference on the Safe Schools Declaration](#) in collaboration with the African Union Commission, Argentina, Norway, Spain, and GCPEA. The conference will take place in Abuja and virtually.

The Abuja Conference will provide a key opportunity to share good practices in keeping education safe during armed conflict, and moving from commitment to practice, the theme of the Conference. The Conference will also provide an opportunity for states to announce and encourage new endorsements.

**Ahead of the Abuja Conference, parliamentarians have a critical role to encourage their government to commit to safeguarding education from attack through:**

- Endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration
- Implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration

## 1. Endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration

The Abuja Conference provides an opportunity for more countries to announce their endorsement of the Declaration and commit to safeguarding education.

By endorsing the Declaration, countries commit to undertake a range of measures to protect students, teachers, schools and universities from attack and military use, including:

- Incorporating the [Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict](#) into domestic policy and operational frameworks;
- Collecting reliable data on attacks on education facilities, the victims of attacks, and military use of schools and universities;
- Ensuring accountability for attacks on educational facilities, students and staff;
- Developing and promoting “conflict sensitive” approaches to education;
- Supporting the continuation of safe education during armed conflict and restoring access to safe education after attack.

As of August 2021, the Declaration had been [endorsed by 111 countries](#).

**Encouraging your government to endorse the Declaration will help protect the right of every child to go to a school safe from conflict and violence. As a member of parliament you can:**

1. Ask your government to endorse the Safe Schools Declaration and participate in the Abuja Conference, taking place in Abuja and virtually on October 25-27.
2. Write to your ministers of education, defence, and foreign affairs setting out the case for endorsing the Declaration, and encourage your colleagues from as many different political parties to add their names to show bipartisan support.
3. Table a motion in your parliament setting out your concerns about the impact of attacks on education and the importance of endorsing the Safe Schools Declaration.
4. Identify gaps in legislation to protect education from attack and introduce legislation where a change in law is required.
5. Encourage or facilitate a discussion on protecting education from attack across the parliamentary committees on education, defence and foreign affairs.

If you are in a country that has endorsed the Declaration, you can encourage your Ministry of Defence and Foreign Affairs to speak to their peers in countries that are yet to endorse to raise awareness and encourage universal endorsement.

## 2. Implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration

Endorsement alone isn't enough. Following endorsement, countries should adopt legislation, policies, and practices to implement the commitments within the Declaration. Effective implementation of the Declaration saves lives and better safeguards the right to education.

A key aim of the Abuja Conference is to strengthen implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration by identifying and sharing good practice in implementing key commitments of the Declaration.

In the short time since the Declaration was launched in 2015, a range of good practice in implementing the Declaration has emerged:

- Over a dozen countries have revised laws or military guidance to reflect their commitments. Denmark, Ecuador, New Zealand, and Switzerland have updated their military manuals to include explicit protections for schools from military use. The United Kingdom and Norway have updated their military policies to reflect their commitments.
- The government of Nigeria, on 6 September, 2021, released a [National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools](#) and [Minimum Standards for Safe Schools](#).
- The government of Ukraine, in August 2021 launched an Action Plan for the implementation of the Declaration, which amongst other actions creates a monitoring mechanism for attacks on educational institutions and aims to ensure a systematic approach to the protection of education in armed conflict.

**To safeguard the right to education, MPs in endorsing countries should ensure the Declaration is fully implemented. You can ask your government to:**

1. Participate in the Abuja Conference and share good practice on implementing the Declaration at the national level.
2. Ensure there are provisions in domestic legislation, national military law, or current military policies or practices that explicitly prohibit attacks on education and the use and requisition of educational facilities by armed forces during conflict.
3. Establish monitoring systems that collect and report data that is disaggregated by type of attack on education, gender, age, location, perpetrator, and number of days the school was closed in conflict areas where national armed forces are deployed.
4. Support or implement contingency plans to reduce risks for educational facilities located in conflict-affected areas and to restore access to education and/or provide quality alternative education for students whose schools are no longer functioning due to attack, military use, or general insecurity in conflict-affected areas.
5. Put mechanisms in place to ensure coordination and information sharing between the ministries of defence, education, and foreign affairs to better safeguard education.

## Strengthening political support to safeguard education

Universal endorsement and implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration will go a long way to ending impunity for attacks on education. It is therefore crucial that all countries endorse and implement the Declaration, regardless of whether they are conflict-affected or presently involved in hostilities.

Please encourage your government to also take the following measures to strengthen political support for the protection of education from attack:

- Consistently raise the importance of protecting education from attack in statements delivered in multilateral fora, referencing or announcing endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration and steps taken in implementation;
- Raise awareness of the Declaration and the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict* in discussions with other states;
- Support international accountability mechanisms for attacks on educational facilities, students and staff, including through the International Criminal Court, the Security Council and the Human Rights Council;
- Encourage regional and international bodies to incorporate the commitments of the Safe Schools Declaration into operational frameworks and rules of engagement;
- Develop and promote “conflict sensitive” approaches to education in international humanitarian and development programmes, and at a national level.

## Additional resources

[Education Under Attack 2020](#) - Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA)

[Questions and Answers on the Safe Schools Declaration](#) - GCPEA

[The Safe Schools Declaration: A framework for Action](#) - GCPEA

[Commentary on the “Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict”](#) - GCPEA

[The Impact of Explosive Weapons on Education: A Case Study of Afghanistan](#) - GCPEA

## Further information

For more information or any questions about the issues raised in this briefing, or to become a member of the International Parliamentary Network for Education, please contact:

Oliver Mawhinney – Advocacy Officer, IPNEd – [oliver.mawhinney@ipned.org](mailto:oliver.mawhinney@ipned.org)