



Questions and Answers on the Safe Schools Declaration

What is the Safe Schools Declaration?

The [Safe Schools Declaration](#) is an inter-governmental political commitment – championed by Argentina and Norway – that provides countries the opportunity to express political support for the protection of students, teachers, schools, and universities during times of armed conflict. To date, [108 countries](#) have joined the Declaration, including over half of the African Union and Organization of American States, and over two-thirds of the European Union.

Over the past five years, the Safe Schools Declaration has served as an effective tool for protecting students and educators from the attacks perpetrated by armed forces and groups. By joining the Declaration, states endorse and commit to use the [Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict](#), a practical guide on how to reduce the military use of educational facilities. Many endorsing states have also taken concrete action to implement the Safe Schools Declaration, as documented by GCPEA in [Practical Impact of the Safe Schools Declaration](#), saving lives and better safeguarding the right to education for all.

What are the benefits of education in conflict settings?

Safe schools provide life-saving information, mitigate the psychosocial impact of war, contribute to gender equality, and can protect children from trafficking, sexual violence, and recruitment by armed groups. Disruptions in education can reduce the likelihood of children, in particular girls, returning to school, even when they're open and, in the long term, can impact individual earnings and a country's ability to rebuild. Perhaps more important for a child, access to a safe space to learn offers a sense of normality, routine, and calm amid the chaos of war.

During the 2020 UN Security Council Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict: Attacks against Schools as a Grave Violation of Children's Rights, Henrietta Fore, the **UNICEF Executive Director**, urged that "all states endorse the Safe Schools Declaration...and take steps to fully live up to its commitments. There is no excuse. We must protect education from attack and end the military use of schools"

What do countries that endorse the Declaration agree to do?

By joining the Declaration, states commit to undertake several common-sense steps to make it less likely that students, teachers, schools, and universities will be attacked, and to mitigate the negative consequences when such attacks occur. These measures include:

- Collecting reliable data on attacks and military use of schools and universities;
- Providing assistance to victims of attacks;



Global Coalition to **Protect Education from Attack**

- Investigating allegations of violations of national and international law and prosecuting perpetrators where appropriate;
- Developing and promoting “conflict sensitive” approaches to education;
- Seeking to continue education during armed conflict;
- Supporting the UN’s work on the children and armed conflict agenda; and
- Using the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict* and bringing them into domestic policy and operational frameworks as far as possible and appropriate.

The Declaration is also a framework for collaboration and exchange, and endorsing states agree to meet on a regular basis to review implementation of the Declaration and use of the *Guidelines*.

The fourth International Conference on Safe Schools will be held on **25 – 27 October, 2021** in Abuja, Nigeria and virtually. The Conference will take stock and review progress made in implementing the Safe Schools Declaration and the [Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use During Armed Conflict](#), as well as encourage more Member States to endorse.

The overarching aim of the conference is to strengthen implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration by identifying and sharing good practice in implementing key commitments of the Declaration to inspire others to do the same within their own context; strengthen global coordination in protecting education and deterring military use of schools; and examining how to strengthen accountability and achieve justice for victims of attacks on education.

Since August 2016, the Peace and Security Council of the **African Union** has repeatedly encouraged all its Member States to sign the Safe Schools Declaration.

How does a country endorse the Declaration?

The Norwegian government is the depositary of endorsements. States can announce their endorsement at any time by sending a letter (sample letter available [here](#)) to the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs via its embassies or permanent missions or directly at: Seksjon.for.humanitaere.sporsmal@mfa.no.

In 2017, the **High Commissioner for Human Rights**, Mr. Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, issued a recommendation for all states to endorse the Declaration in his report on protecting the rights of the child in humanitarian situations.

What do the *Guidelines* say?

The *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict* urge parties to armed conflict (both state armed forces and non-state armed groups) not to use schools and



universities for any purpose in support of the military effort. A core aim of the *Guidelines* is to protect against the risk of armed forces and groups converting schools and universities into military objectives by way of military use and exposing them to the potentially devastating consequences of attack. While it is acknowledged that certain uses would not be contrary to the law of armed conflict, all parties should endeavor to avoid impinging on students' safety and education, using the *Guidelines* as a guide to responsible practice.

The **UN Committee on the Rights of the Child** has urged states "to fulfill their obligation ... to ensure schools as zones of peace and places where intellectual curiosity and respect for universal human rights is fostered; and to ensure that schools are protected from military attacks or seizure by militants."

What are the *Guidelines* aiming to achieve?

The *Guidelines* are not intended to be legally binding, but they complement existing international humanitarian and human rights law. The *Guidelines* do not change the law – they merely facilitate compliance with the existing law by effecting a change in practice and behavior. They are intended to be used as a tool to raise awareness of the military use of schools among parties to armed conflict, and to facilitate discussions of the broader issues of protection and education in conflict among military forces, governments, and NGOs. It is hoped that the *Guidelines* will encourage a change in mentality and shift in behavior regarding the military use of schools and universities, through integration into military policies and doctrine, and application of good practice. The implementation of the *Guidelines* should be context-specific and tailored to individual states.

The **International Committee of the Red Cross** has stated:

"The ICRC supported the process of drafting the *Guidelines* by contributing to the substance of the document... We consider that the *Guidelines* are not legally binding in themselves and that they do not propose to change existing law. We understand them as intended to lead to a shift in behavior in practice that may lead to a reduction in the military use of schools and universities... We also perceive the draft Safe Schools Declaration in this sense... We consider that the *Guidelines* can provide valuable practical guidance for those involved in the planning and execution of military operations in relation to decisions over military use and targeting of institutions dedicated to education. We therefore also encourage our staff to consider using the *Guidelines* as a reference, among others, and have actively disseminated the *Guidelines* among our delegations."

How are countries already implementing the Declaration?

Many states are already implementing the commitments in the Safe Schools Declaration, and this is having a positive effect. Examples include:



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- Several endorsing states have already made explicit their plans to use and implement the *Guidelines*, including Chile, Italy, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, and Slovenia.
- Following the Central African Republic's endorsement of the Declaration, the UN peacekeeping mission there issued a directive drawing upon the text of the *Guidelines*, stating that "the use of a school or university by a party to a conflict is not permitted." They have since taken efforts to ensure that schools being occupied by armed groups have been vacated.
- In July 2017, the Sudanese Armed Forces circulated a command order to all divisions to prohibit the military use of schools and guidance on schools in areas of active conflict. The SAF has begun the process of evacuating and rehabilitating schools that have been in use by the National Intelligence Security Services.
- In Somalia, in 2017, in the context of implementing the Declaration, AMISOM handed a number of educational buildings back to the authorities, rehabilitating them first, and working with UN and other partners to ensure the grounds were clear of explosive remnants.
- In Afghanistan, the Minister of Education has used their endorsement of the Declaration and *Guidelines* to advocate for the removal of military checkpoints and bases from schools and education centers.
- Endorsing states have supported efforts to collect reliable, relevant data on attacks on and military use of schools. For example, endorsing states are supporting the Global Education Cluster and the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) on grave violations of children's rights in situations of armed conflict.
- As an example of ensuring the continuation of education during armed conflict, in Niger, alternative education is delivered via a radio program for children who cannot travel to school due to insecurity.
- Nigeria is implementing several measures to enhance school security, such as: constructing ditches around schools; installing security lighting throughout school compounds; deploying armed military personnel to carry out vehicular and foot patrols; and setting up roadblocks on access roads. Acknowledging, as stated in the *Guidelines*, that the presence of military personnel within schools could place children at risk, roadblocks are positioned in the area surrounding schools rather than within school compounds.
- In 2018, the Security Council adopted resolution 2427 under the Presidency of Sweden, and with support from fellow endorsing states and Council members Côte d'Ivoire, France, Kazakhstan, Netherlands, Peru, Poland, and the United Kingdom. In the resolution, the Council expressed deep concern that the military use of schools in contravention of applicable international law may render schools legitimate targets of attack, thus endangering the safety of children. It encouraged states to take concrete measures to deter such use of schools by armed forces and armed groups.
- Endorsing states have also committed to meet on a regular basis, to review and share practices regarding the implementation of the Declaration and *Guidelines*. Regional workshops of



endorsing states have been held to exchange practices and experiences in Addis Ababa in 2016, and in Panama City in 2017. In April 2018, Spain announced that it will host the Third International Safe Schools Conference in 2019.

In a survey conducted in 2016 of members of the **Education Clusters** working in conflict-affected countries around the world, the Safe Schools Declaration was the resource most often rated as “very useful” to their work of ensuring the provision of education in times of crisis.

Why is it important to work with non-state armed groups?

The Safe Schools Declaration is a political document through which states express support for the protection of education during armed conflict and formally endorse the *Guidelines*. The *Guidelines* themselves, however, are a practical tool that is available to all. They can be used by any interested actor outside the framework of the Safe Schools Declaration, for instance by non-state armed groups.

The *Guidelines* apply to all parties fighting in armed conflicts and not just the armed forces of states. Many armed conflicts today are non-international (internal) and involve non-state armed groups. Consequently, it is vital for non-state armed groups to be familiar with the *Guidelines* and to integrate them into their military rules. Geneva Call, an organization that works with non-state armed groups to ensure their compliance with international humanitarian law, is already training such parties, including members of opposition groups in Syria, on how to implement protection for schools from attack and military use.

The **Inter-American Commission on Human Rights** has stated “that schools should serve as shelter for children and provide them protection. Therefore, their use for military purposes places children in a situation of risk of attacks and impedes the exercise of their right to education.”

Why are students, teachers, schools, and universities being attacked?

Students, teachers, schools, and universities have been attacked by armed non-state groups and government armed forces for various purposes, including:

- To destroy symbols of government control or demonstrate control over an area by an anti-government group;
- To block the education of girls, or any type of education perceived to teach or impose alien religious or cultural values, biased history, or an unfamiliar language of instruction;
- To restrict teacher trade union activity and academic freedom;
- To abduct children for use as combatants, sex slaves or logistical support in military operations, or abduct students and teachers for ransom;
- Because the school or university was being used for military purposes by opposition forces; and
- Due to indiscriminate and/or disproportionate attacks.



How are schools and universities used for military purposes?

During armed conflicts, schools and universities are often used by armed forces and non-state armed groups as bases, barracks and temporary shelters, defensive and offensive positions or observation posts, weapons stores, and detention and interrogation centers. Classrooms, school grounds, and lecture halls are also used for military training and to forcibly recruit children into armed groups. Sometimes schools and universities are taken over entirely, and students are pushed out completely. At other times, education facilities are partially used for military purposes.

The **UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations** requires infantry battalions to comply with the requirements that “children should not be put in danger” and states that “schools shall not be used by the military in their operations.”

What are the consequences when schools and universities are used for military purposes?

The presence of troops and weapons inside a school can turn the school into a target for attack by opposing forces. In addition to the risks of death or severe injury from attacks, students may be exposed to recruitment or sexual violence perpetrated by soldiers, they may witness violence, and their safety may be jeopardized by the presence of weapons or unexploded ordnance. All of these risks can have a significant psychological impact on students and teachers. The use of schools for military purposes can also result in infrastructure being damaged or destroyed and education materials lost, impacting the quality of education. The IASC Global Education Cluster estimated that the cost of repairing damage to schools from military use in South Sudan was approximately \$67,000 per school. The military use of schools can lead to lower rates of enrolment and transition to higher grades, and increased teacher absenteeism. Students may drop out or experience interruptions to studies or may transfer to other schools, frequently resulting in overcrowding. Girls can be disproportionately affected as parents are often particularly wary of sending daughters to schools occupied by armed men.

The military use of schools can also have significant disadvantages for armed forces. Use of a school by military personnel is easily portrayed by the local community and the international community as abusive towards local children and education efforts. This, in turn, can be exploited by opposing forces within negative information operations. Moreover, in countries where the UN Security Council’s Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism has been established, groups that use schools for military purposes will have such use reported on in the UN Secretary-General’s annual report to the Security Council on children and armed conflict, thus exposing the group to negative public attention, and the potential for further international response.



In July 2018, the **United Nations Security Council** again expressed “deep concern that the military use of schools in contravention of applicable international law, recognizing that such use may render schools legitimate targets of attack, thus endangering children’s and teachers’ safety as well as children’s education,” and “encourage[d] Member States to take concrete measures to deter the use of schools by armed forces and non-State armed groups.”

What is the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack?

The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) was established in 2010 by organizations from the fields of education in emergencies and conflict-affected fragile states, higher education, protection, international human rights, and international humanitarian law who were concerned about on-going attacks on educational institutions, their students, and staff in countries affected by conflict and insecurity. GCPEA is comprised of international organizations that include: Cara (Council for At-Risk Academics), Human Rights Watch, Institute of International Education/IIE Scholar Rescue Fund, Norwegian Refugee Council, Education Above All through its program Protect Education in Insecurity and Conflict, SAIH (the Norwegian Students’ and Academics’ International Assistance Fund), Save the Children, Scholars at Risk Network, UNESCO, UNHCR, UNICEF, and War Child Holland. GCPEA is a project of the Tides Center, a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization.

Protections for education have a **long history**. As early as 333AD, Roman Emperor Constantine decreed that professors of literature be free from having to receive quartered soldiers “so they may more easily train many persons in the liberal studies.”

Where can I get more information?

A variety of resources on the Declaration and *Guidelines* are available on the website of the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, particularly on this page: www.protectingeducation.org/ssd

- A [framework for action](#) provides governments with suggestions, recommendations, and examples of good practice to assist them in implementing the Declaration.
- To facilitate gender-sensitive implementation of the Declaration, GCPEA has produced a set of [recommendations](#) for states to consider when seeking to implement each commitment in a way that will better protect women and girls.
- A [toolkit](#), produced through a partnership between GCPEA and the Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, guides understanding and implementation of the *Guidelines*.
- A [menu of actions](#) provides guidance to ministries to assist their efforts to protect education from attack and schools and universities from military use.
- [Education under Attack 2020](#), GCPEA’s flagship report, is a global study of attacks on schools, universities, their students and staff. The report shows that the number of countries experiencing attacks on education has increased in recent years with more than 22,000 students, teachers, and academics injured, killed, or harmed between 2015-2019.