Policy Paper

RLCF

REGIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES & FACILITATORS

When We Share, We Win

Bildungsdirektion Steiermark

FRIDA utbildning
The Art Of Education

FUTURE BALLOONS
we take you higher!

bit management
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Introduction

War, pandemics, climate change – it seems that Europe and the world are in trouble right now. These unimaginable events show more than ever how important solidarity and cooperation are in today's society. To leave a liveable planet for future generations, all groups in society must do their part, including the education sector. This is exactly what the regional learning communities are doing.

Educating young people requires open-minded and open-hearted teachers. Living in different kinds of communities forces learning together. Looking and living without borders makes it possible to build a new strong future. Since ancient times, Europe has been known for its history and culture. Different languages, costumes, and traditions are still key elements of the European continent. Brussels is often used as a synonym for the European Union, and the national regions are often seen as opposites: One cannot exist alongside the other. But in reality, it is the other way round: a strong Europe needs strong regions and strong regions need a strong Europe. Instead of seeing the other as the enemy, it is necessary to work together and benefit from each other. Regional learning communities in a city or country help to implement and strengthen the European spirit at the regional level. They act as a bridge between the European and regional sectors and are therefore necessary to strengthen both identities.

To go a step further, regional learning communities also exist between different countries, which has a great impact on learning from other cultures, systems, and countries. Regional learning facilitators can be seen as ambassadors for their countries and/or regions and work together as equals.

The following document first presents the key and core messages of regional learning communities in theoretical form. After this basic information about the context and the key pillars, the arc is drawn to real-life application. To this end, some best practice examples are presented. Finally, there are reflections on the future with recommendations for the next steps for those responsible in different educational sectors: policymakers and school authorities, head teachers, or teachers.

As if to say:

When we share, we win!

Learning Communities and their Facilitators need to be at the heart of Education's Future Mindset and Policy

Insights and recommendations from an Erasmus+ cooperation between Austrian, Swedish, and Portuguese educational experts in 2023.

Key and Core Messages

1.

When we share, we win! – Current Global Problems and Challenges need Collaborative Power

2.

Schools that need to prepare for collective engagement are obliged to live in collaboration themselves.

3.

The effective and efficient tool of Learning Communities promotes and implements collaborative cultures that bridge the gap from information to action.

4.

Collaborative Cultures need to be developed by competent Facilitators who initiate, manage and promote Learning Communities.

5.

The project Regional Learning Communities and Facilitators developed a Curriculum for teachers and educational visionaries who want to realize the power of Learning Communities in reality.

6.

The curriculum and the project resources can be adopted from any continuous educational provider delivering training to teachers and school authorities.

7.

Learning communities guarantee the efficient use of European ideas and especially money because of transmitting information on implementation and learning opportunities.

8.

Political Decision Makers need to support Learning Communities and the Training of Learning Community Facilitators.

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Executive Summary

Collaboration is a Key Asset for the Professionalization of Education – a vision **for the European Educational Area and its Regions**

To meet the challenges of the current societal, economic, and environmental problems, collaboration in and of educational communities in the European Union has become one of the major forces for social change through educational initiatives. The mentality When we share, we win! is on the verge?? of spreading throughout the whole European Education Area.

Policymakers have recognized this change and have taken action to ensure that Learning Communities and their Facilitators can become effective instruments for the development of successful regions. They openly foster and support the Training of Learning Facilitators and the setup and management of their promoted communities.

Learning Communities, with their cooperative paradigm, have strengthened the conviction that the current global problems and challenges such as climate change, migration, wars, polarisation of societies, poverty, hunger, etc. need to be addressed by collaborative and inclusive power.

Need for Learning Communities

It is a common understanding that cooperation means success from an economic and societal perspective. Schools have substantial societal power as they are intended to reproduce societal values.

If we want to foster cooperation on a societal level, schools need to be frontrunners. While collaborative didactic and methodological approaches are already widespread, collaboration on a systemic level in the educational field is improvable.

The progressing digitalization created wonderful opportunities for sharing and collaboration but also increased the feeling of being overwhelmed through excessive access to information. A helpful approach to utilize, promote and support those opportunities are communities, existing of self-motivated people and institutions who relate to each other on a constant and sustainable basis, which help and inspire their members.

What are Learning Communities

Learning Communities are groups of people, organizations, and institutions who learn from and with each other. They gather to cooperate on a constant and sustainable basis, with openness and willingness to share expertise, information, and experience. They share the idea that cooperation is one of the most powerful tools for professionalization, development, and innovation. Learning communities meet online and/or offline. Through its grassroots character, its geographical range and reach depend majorly on the people involved and their ambitions.

As such Learning Communities may exist between two or more schools from the same city, two or more schools from different regions, or even two or more schools from different countries. And as Learning and Education cannot be seen as isolated from other stakeholders or other parts of society, it is not only schools who participate and contribute to Learning Communities but also companies, non-governmental or non-profit organizations, cultural institutions, civil society organizations, etc. Their boundaries are defined by the Learning Communities themselves, as well as their thematic focus. It may be that a Learning Community has a special thematic interest, but not necessarily. Those people who initiate, promote and manage such communities are called Learning Community Facilitators.

1.

"When we share, we win" – Current Global Problems and Challenges need Collaborative Power

2.

When Schools need to prepare for Collective Engagement, they need to live Collaboration themselves

3.

Learning Communities are an effective and efficient tool to promote and implement Collaborative Cultures, which bridge the gap from information to action.

What are Learning Community Facilitators

Learning Community Facilitators can be seen as collegial partners within a community who take action and for their peers achieve to create synergies and commitment to actively participate in cooperation.

As Learning Communities are typically not formally initiated by an authority but rather come into being as grassroots initiatives, they are usually started by teachers who wish to connect and cooperate with others. As teachers very often haven't had the chance to develop skills during their academic training relevant to community building, moderation, and organizational development, a Curriculum has been developed in the Erasmus+ funded project "Regional Learning Communities and Facilitators" for such enthusiastic teachers, but also for regions that want establish and foster a learning community culture regularly.

An all-free offer for Educational Institutions and Teachers

The Curriculum of the project is all open access. The curriculum has been developed with a 4 ECTS blended learning architecture, half of which consists of self-learning units and the other half of face-to-face training, preparing teachers to become facilitators. Educational Institutions of all kinds that engage in the field of teacher training can use the curriculum together with the self-learning learning portal, the workshop designs, and further implementation information.

The vision of the project is indeed that we educate as many Regional Learning Community Facilitators so that they start building their own communities. A midterm vision is to later connect those regional Facilitators so that they start networking on a European level. As this larger vision is integrated into the network, there will be clear support for all kinds of cooperative institutions seeking help. The training could also be a basic training for all kinds of European teacher academies.

European Programs have a key momentum in cooperation – as such, they can benefit from Learning Communities

The European Union has launched many programs and learning opportunities. The European Social Fund, Creative Europe, Horizon, and especially Erasmus+ and the Solidarity Corps offer so many opportunities for collaboration to professionalize teaching and learning. Learning communities make a double contribution: firstly, they facilitate collaboration and secondly, they ensure that outcomes and learning experiences are sustainable.

What is Needed from Policy Decision Makers and School Authorities – Support for Learning Communities Facilitators

As learning communities are very often grassroots initiatives and self-organized engagement from teachers themselves, everything needs to be done, that this engagement is supported and not limited. By acknowledging the motivation of teachers who get active as Facilitators there might be also momentum for others to become active. Policy Decision Makers and School Authorities should do everything to promote the concept of Learning Communities and motivate institutions involved in the continuous training of teachers to provide offers. In doing so they contribute to the development of a cooperative learning environment.

Nevertheless, the consortium members will host and offer the curriculum as KA1 program within Erasmus+. Policy Decision Makers and School Authorities can accept the program as a recognizable continuous training offer with associate credit and workload.

4.

Collaborative Cultures need to be developed from competent Facilitators, who initiate, manage, and promote Learning Communities

5.

The project "Regional Learning Communities and Facilitators" developed a Curriculum for Teachers and educational visionaries who want to realise the power of Learning Communities

6.

The curriculum and the project resources can be adopted from any continuous educational provider delivering training to teachers and school authorities

7.

The European Union has released multiple programmes and learning opportunities on different levels of education. Learning communities are an important tool to implement the programmes and connect their users in order to guarantee efficient use of European ideas and money.

8.

Political Decision Makers need to support Learning Communities and the Training of Learning Community Facilitators

1. When we share, we win! – Current Global Problems and Challenges need Collaborative Power

Understanding the context

The project "Regional Learning Communities and Facilitators" was initiated to scale a good-practice format from the regional school authority Styria (Austria), which started with Regional Learning Events in 2017. Regional learning events were basically thought to be networking and sharing events for teachers who were active with Erasmus+ through mobilities and partnerships. They soon became established as an ongoing format, developing a community that regularly gets together to share, motivate and inspire each other with impressions and insights of their stays abroad and also regional aspects. Soon independent communities were built by teachers themselves, which caused the conclusion that networking and collaboration is something far too little acknowledged in the context of school and education, and what teachers are desperately missing.

As networking and collaboration as such is not yet a central aspect of the school sector and teacher training, the Styrian Regional School Board has joined forces with a school network, an EdTech technology partner from Portugal, and an Austrian general educator from the field of vocational and adult education to strengthen and professionalize the idea of learning communities and to develop a curriculum for facilitators who initiate and lead such communities, as these skills and competences also need to be trained.

Collaboration and networking must not be seen as a means to an end, i.e. a means to greater efficiency and effectiveness in planning, designing, evaluating, and improving educational provision, to make it more convenient for teachers and school staff, or to create a ‚cozy' organizational culture. Collaboration and networking are skills and competencies that belong to the future competencies and need to be considered as educational goals themselves. Our current social, economic, and environmental problems are far too complex to be solved by individuals alone. The interdependencies of the individual areas of social life require a multi-level perspective that calls for multi-professional analysis and solution finding.

We need to equip future generations with skills so that they are not lost in an increasingly complex society. Together with the speed at which our society acquires knowledge, we see a continuous trend towards specialization and the development of expertise, which requires collaboration to address these issues at a sufficiently complex level. From another perspective, specialization stands for differentiation. To ensure that our societies do not drift apart, the importance of cooperation and networking as key competence for peace and collective participation cannot be underestimated. As the European Union stands for unity in diversity, participation, and cooperation must occupy a central place on the educational agenda of policymakers. Therefore, the consortium of the project „Regional Learning Communities and Facilitators" has developed the following vision.

The vision of Regional Learning Communities

To meet the challenges of our current societal, economic, and environmental problems collaboration in and of educational communities in the European Union has become one of the major forces for social change through educational initiatives. The mentality of "when we share, we win" is on the verge of spreading throughout the whole European Education Area.

Therefore, political decision-makers have understood and taken action so that Learning Communities and their Facilitators have become a powerful function in the development of successful regions. They openly foster and support the Training of Learning Facilitators and the setup and management of their promoted Communities.

Learning Communities with their cooperative paradigm have strengthened the conviction that the current global problems and challenges such as climate change, migration, wars, polarisation of societies, poverty, hunger, etc. need to be addressed by collaborative and inclusive power.

2. Schools that need to prepare for collective engagement are obliged to live in collaboration themselves.

Schools have substantial societal power as they are intended to reproduce societal values. It is a common understanding that cooperation means success from an economic and societal perspective. If we want to foster cooperation on a societal level, schools need to be frontrunners. While collaborative didactic and methodological approaches are in the meantime widespread, collaboration on a systemic level in the educational field is improvable.

Digitalization created wonderful opportunities for sharing and collaboration but also increased the feeling of being overwhelmed through excessive access to information. A helpful approach to utilize, promote and support those opportunities are communities, existing of self-motivated people and institutions who relate to each other on a constant and sustainable basis, which help and inspire their members.

While in other educational settings, the inter-collegial exchange is often institutionalized, in schools a strong lone-warrior mentality is prevailing. The exchange within or across schools is not built on institutionalized forms of mutual support, but a selective exchange dependent on mutual sympathy. The potential of guided and structured cooperation is not exploited in this way, which also leaves many teachers feeling left alone. Much of the work is done in multiple ways, which would be eliminated by better networking and mutual support, leaving more time for pedagogical work with the pupils.

In the RLFC project, we've worked by comparing best practice examples of successful learning communities' success factors.

Best practice examples of networking between teachers and stakeholders at an international, national, regional and local level have been collected to identify success factors for cooperative structures. The goal is to identify forms of cooperation of an informal and formal nature and to draw conclusions as to why the principle of cooperation is of central importance and benefit to the actors involved.

Conclusion International Level

The three mentioned examples, LinkedIn, EPALE, and eTwinning, are all internet-based platforms, however, the networks differ.

Based on the success factors described in Hargreaves & O'Connor (2018), we can state that for the examples presented, it is primarily the following principles of collaborative professionalism that characterize them; collective autonomy, joint initiative, mutual dialogue and the opportunity to get an overview and access to the field's so-called big picture.

Success factors

The decision to attend a course is individual. The courses are actively sought by the individual or suggested according to relevance for and interests of the person. There is no higher authority deciding. All courses are virtual but only a few participants need to be online simultaneously with the trainers, the rest can participate afterward and hence the information is shared easily. You receive the certificate of achievement immediately after the course which is something sought after. Getting immediate confirmation is considered a sign of efficiency. You learn together with many other colleagues in an international context leading to cooperative work on many levels. This way of organizing training enables a continuation on national, regional, or local levels and in a local context at your school, trying out new things. The way of learning together with others also encourages the sharing process. You continue the dialogue and share your knowledge and ideas with your colleagues locally and are encouraged to share with colleagues at other schools too. An ongoing online course that runs longer than just one training event will automatically invite the participants to put the practice into their everyday work life.

Conclusion National Level

The presented examples show that some common characteristics appear across national borders and in the Steiermark/Štajerska example also in between two countries. With the support of Hargreaves & O'Connor (2018), the following principles emerge as success factors: common goals, cooperative work, collaboration with students, and building collective capacity through collaborative investigation.

The organizational structure is important for a good and efficient environment for learning whether for collaborative professionalism and, as the Portuguese example shows, for a wider perspective of a learning community.

The appreciation of the members in such a network is also the basis for success. A mutual understanding of the educational system or equivalent is needed. This goes along with an open mind and ability to see things from different perspectives as it may be difficult for the members of the learning community to see the learning potential at the beginning of the process as you are new to the model and the group constellation. You need patience and to earmark, i.e., set aside time, when introducing a new system, model, or method for learning to group members not previously involved in similar activities or learning communities. Flexibility, spontaneity, creativity, and a broad horizon are other qualities that are success factors to develop such networks. Everyone can be a member of a learning community. Teachers can be learners too. Learning takes place also on a meta-level.

Conclusion Regional Level

The examples described in the chapter for the regional level are mainly from the region of Styria in Austria. There are four success factors linked to the principles for collaborative professionalism that emerge as a common pattern in these regional projects: collective autonomy, joint initiative, mutual dialogue, and cooperative work.

There is a desire to learn and to share knowledge. It seems this desire and the eagerness to contribute and come up with individual initiatives such as organizing events for learning and sharing, permeate the region. Professional exchanges – both formal and informal – of knowledge and skills, are carried out on all levels. It is enabled by ongoing close contact and the provision of forums for dialogues with the community members and the extended network on different regional levels, from the individual member, via the organizing institution, to universities and research institutions.

Conclusion Local level

The examples presented from the local level clearly show that when approaching the classroom level, two principles dominate, namely: collaboration with students and collective capacity. Together, they are supported by three other principles in the reported projects, namely: common goals, collaborative investigation and the opportunity to get access to the so-called big picture.

Including more actors can support the active learners in the process. The bigger network and inclusive learning environments where the whole community plays an important role described in the Portuguese class example are easily transferable to other learning communities.

The variation of work methods and how to structure the learning has a direct impact on the results. Varying the methods and work constellations from Individual to in Pairs or All together (the IPA model) make learning more fun, interesting, and less repetitive or even boring for the community members.

The cooperative learning work with students presents an opportunity for meta-learning and to reflect - individually, in groups, or all together – upon the specifics and success factors of the collaboration itself. Apart from the psychological aspects of learning, there are also success factors depending on the organization or set-up of the physical learning environment.

The development of the learning community members' inner motivation and drive to learn, collaborate and share their knowledge and learning experience with others is dependent not only on the setup or the organization of the learning community itself, the support for the participants in all stages of the learning and sharing and how the learning is organized and structured play a role. The organization of the learning space, whether digital for virtual learning communities or the physical setup, choice of furniture, decorations, etc. in a classroom, or the equivalent on-site environment is equally important.

3. The effective and efficient tool of Learning Communities promotes and implements collaborative cultures that bridge the gap from information to action.

Learning communities are groups of people, organizations, and institutions that learn from and with each other. They come together to collaborate on a constant and sustainable basis with openness and willingness to share expertise, information, and experience. Moreover, they share the idea that collaboration is one of the most powerful tools for professionalization, development, and innovation. Learning communities meet online and/or offline. Due to their grassroots nature, their geographical extent and reach depend primarily on the individuals involved and their ambitions.

Learning communities come in different forms: they can be composed of two or more schools from different cities, regions, or even countries. And since learning and education cannot be considered in isolation from other actors or other parts of society, there are not only schools that participate and contribute to learning communities, but also companies, non-governmental or non-profit organizations, cultural institutions, civil society organizations, and so on. Their boundaries are defined by the learning communities themselves and by their thematic focus. It may be that a learning community has a particular thematic interest, but it does not have to. The people who initiate, promote and manage such communities are called Learning Community Facilitators. When we speak of regional learning communities, we have a broad picture of what it meant. The basic understanding of regional in the context of learning communities means anything beyond the scope of a single school, which by definition suggests openness to collaboration.

The idea of regional learning communities emerged after various Erasmus mobilities of different people who used their acquired knowledge and competencies to further develop their educational institutions, teaching methods, and learners. The experience of immersion in other countries and cultures was the breeding ground for such a project. As a result, there are a variety of networks between different actors, e.g. schools, cultural institutions, and artists. A regional education ministry involved in a variety of Erasmus projects established learning communities with other Austrian schools and a network of education ministries across Europe. Currently, all KA1 projects are accompanied by learning communities to ensure efficient and transparent management.

4. Collaborative Cultures need to be developed by competent Facilitators, who initiate, manage, and promote Learning Communities.

As Learning Communities are typically not formally initiated by an authority but rather come into being as grassroots initiatives, they are usually started by teachers who wish to connect and cooperate with others. Teachers very often have not had the chance to develop skills relevant or community building, moderation, and organizational development during their academic training. So there is a need to fill this competence gap.

The primary goal for the education of teachers is, in a broader sense, to enable them to manage their classes and especially to enable them to convey knowledge and build competencies with their students. As facilitators, their primary goal is not to convey knowledge or build competencies, but to develop a community that comes together on a voluntary and regular basis, solely upon their intrinsic motivation. Communities live from the active participation of their members and their willingness to contribute.

This willingness and participation in voluntary networks do not come naturally. Finding common goals, interests, and needs and addressing those commonalities with motivating exchange formats to differ from what is needed to achieve classroom excellence, even if there might be common success factors. Communities as such work differently than classes as social systems. Usually, classes and schools in our traditional educational framing through our European political context have a clear boundary and a clear "membership concept". It is clear who belongs to a class and a school, and this membership relation is stable. The objectives that schools need to achieve are defined through primarily exogenous factors. So they cannot – by regulatory conditions – be too individualistic in paying respect to the group's interest. Communities, from a systemic perspective, on the other hand, have a more fluid identity concerning their boundaries, and members, and define their objectives through endogenous variables. Managing and dealing with heterogeneity and the openness of such communities requires other approaches.

The cohesive glue for communities is culture. Culture summons all the soft factors that create meaning for the individual and evoke the feeling of belonging. The cultural dimension ensures that people participate and that they are willing to contribute. In this matter, it is one of the main responsibilities of facilitators to create the atmosphere and cultural conditions that ensure collaboration. Cultural awareness and modeling the culture of a community is everything else than trivial, especially for open systems such as learning communities.

One aspect that adds "width" to the competence scope of Regional Learning Facilitators is the term "regional". While the predominant concept of school considers the entity of a building or place, with teachers and students, the outreach to other stakeholders or the community is something that is included in a more progressive picture. The term regional learning community evidently opens up this framing and suggests a more interconnected vision of the school, which is embedded into something bigger, not standing solely for itself. Collaboration and participation thus also need to be seen in a broader context. In such a broader vision school actors need to reach out to the community, suddenly dealing with the expectations, ideas, agendas, and logic of other system actors and institutions. These interfaces may be overwhelming for some. But facilitators who can manage these interfaces create synergies and commitment to a common goal.

The curriculum and the corresponding learning opportunity that prepares teachers to be such competent facilitators will be presented here in the next step.

5. The project Regional Learning Communities and Facilitators developed a curriculum for teachers and educational visionaries who want to realize the power of Learning Communities in reality.

The Erasmus+ funded project "Regional Learning Communities and Facilitators" has developed a curriculum for a course that intends to reach out to teachers who want to engage as Learning Facilitators, who develop collaboration opportunities in their communities.

The course is divided into two parts (module 1 and module 2), each designed in a blended learning architecture. Thus, each module covers two phases, an e-learning phase which is followed by a workshop phase. While the e-learning phase emphasizes the building of theoretical knowledge, the workshop phase is intended as skill training. The physical workshops, each 5 days long, will give the participants the opportunity for face-to-face interactions with other course members. The 4 modules are considered to cover 25 hours each with 20 content units, summing up to 100 learning hours or potentially 4 ECTS.
The two modules and even the e-learning modules can be accomplished independently. Even though they are designed sequentially, they do not need prior knowledge. The focus of module 1 is to provide a general overview and to lay the foundation for engagement as Regional Learning Facilitator. The focus of module 2 is to deepen the knowledge and expertise on special issues, such as dealing with difficult situations or various formats online and offline.

Module 1 **Phase 1** The first phase of module 1 is meant as an introduction to the program. The participants get to know the structure of the program, the responsibilities of facilitators and the services they provide, and the definition of Regional Learning Communities. Furthermore, learners will get to know some best practice examples of local, regional, national, and international learning communities and develop an idea of how they want to engage. A more thorough understanding will be developed with theoretical considerations on communities and systems theory. Finally, principles of leadership will be discussed so that the participants can build on them in person during phase 2.

Module 1 **Phase 2** In phase 2, the participants will, in person, train everything needed to organize Learning Community events. They will learn about the importance of clarity as a motivational factor for various exchange formats and what they can do to ensure the participation of community members. Further, a major aspect will be covered by developing knowledge of cooperation and hands-on skills on how to promote cooperative cultures.

Module 2 **Phase 1** Phase 1 of module 2 lets the participants dive deeper into theories of networks and how Learning Community Facilitators open up to the broader community. Following that, the course will address one of the most essential skills that facilitators need to have, namely dealing with resistance and other barriers. Building on the existing digital knowledge and skills, a focus will be laid on the individual digital toolset that the facilitators can use for preparation, organization, conduction, and reflection of learning community events. Since these skills are essential for facilitators, the final part of the e-learning module will provide opportunities for reflection and recapitulation of personal skills and knowledge gained over the course of the program.

Module 2 **Phase 2** Phase 2 of module 2 covers the usability of offline and online meetings and workshop formats and thus event management expertise. The learners will be inspired and taught how to plan, organize, conduct, and evaluate meetings. To help participants feel comfortable and confident with the digital toolset, it will be trained and applied in practice. While in the prior phase barriers and resistance have been theoretically covered, at this stage the emphasis will be put on practical exercises on how to deal with difficult situations.

6. The curriculum and the project resources can be adopted by any continuous educational provider delivering training to teachers and school authorities

The central vision of the project is to spread the idea and the products of "Regional Learning Communities" as bricks for the European Education Area. To reach this target, everything developed over the course of the project can be utilized by any educational institution. This holds for all the components of the project. They can be adapted or enriched solely under the condition of creative commons.

The curriculum provides both an overview of concrete learning objectives and descriptions of more detailed learning objectives. Institutions could decide to use the curriculum as inspiration for their own needs or even directly take over the curriculum.

All the content developed is available for free as a pdf. The theoretical part and the workshop part are elaborated in a way that the resources can be used straight away. For the workshops, practical information on the content units for workshop trainers is provided and includes handouts for participants. On the project's website, further information for learners on how to get accounts for the learning management system can be found. The advantage of the learning management system is that learners can use the recap and reflection questions to see for themselves if they have understood the theoretical part and how they might integrate the knowledge and experience themselves.

Apart from its ambition of scaling the training offer beyond the project duration, the consortium of "Regional Learning Communities" is open to advising on the implementation of the program and to consult if the program should be adapted to the individual needs of institutions.

7. Learning communities guarantee the efficient use of European ideas and especially money because of transmitting information on implementation and learning opportunities.

As indicated in the Treaty of Lisbon, solidarity is one of the key elements of the European Union. Therefore, it is clear that cooperation also plays an important role in all European programs in general as in the herein project of Regional Learning Communities in particular.

To reach sustainability several goals are set:

First of all, Regional Learning Communities permit the connection of people, organizations, and institutions. Therefore, all parties can share information and profit from other experiences.

Secondly, Regional Learning Communities promise a constant exchange of different European ideas constructively. Responsible partners from different institutions and organizations reflect on the latest findings concerning the European project and its impacts on the future of the continent and the whole world. Consequently, Regional Learning Communities also focus on innovation to create a strong and sustainable future for Europe.

This second argument leads to another important point regarding Regional Learning Communities. Talking about a strong Europe means talking about strong regions. The European Union is often made a scapegoat for a wide range of (national) problems. One reason for that is a lack of information on European working methods and responsibilities. Regional Learning Communities are a perfect place to clean up such misunderstandings and to disseminate correct information to promote the European spirit in regions.

In addition, Regional Learning Communities guarantee the correct and efficient use of European funds which is essential to be recognized as a transparent and trustful organization. Stakeholders can share their knowledge to promise an appropriate use of money and European ideas.

Finally, Regional Learning Communities contribute to another important aspect, if not THE most important one: the prevention of frustration. Starting a European project is often related to a lot of work on complicated topics. Sitting alone in front of one's computer and being faced with obstacles, such as writing an application or a budget request without being able to talk to another person, often means the end of great ideas about Europe and its future. Regional Learning Communities offer support in various areas. Regular meetings enable people to get in contact with each other and provide help where it is needed.

8. Political decision-makers and school authorities need to support Learning Communities and the training of Learning Community Facilitators

Learning Communities gain their vitality and activity through the engagement and participation of teachers. Political decision-makers and school authorities need to understand that it is their responsibility to provide a cultural environment in which teachers and the broader ecosystem of schools are ready to share and collaborate. At a strategic level, there are generally two approaches that can be taken: Bottom-up and top-down, which need to be linked.

Top-down processes: Political decision-makers and school authorities shall develop their own strategies on how to initiate teacher engagement. Such strategies must reflect the everyday needs and problems of teachers, acknowledging their effort and motivation for professionalization in teaching and learning. To do so, they can communicate the importance of sharing and collaboration on a steady base and directly address schools with the possibility of creating Learning Communities. Concrete next steps for the single stakeholders in the educational environment can be seen below.

Bottom-up processes: Political decision-makers and school authorities need to acknowledge any form of teacher motivation and engagement in creating and participating in Learning Communities. Teachers who wish to initiate Learning Communities as a kind of grassroots initiative need to find the resources, conditions, and support to become active. This might include being more flexible about working hours outside of a classroom, providing space and infrastructure for meetings and events, as well as advocating when bureaucratic or administrative support is needed from the teachers.

Our recommendations ↳

Top-Down Strategies

Establishing consciousness by spreading the idea of collaboration and well-managed learning communities on different levels as a highly efficient instrument for developing quality in education and educational management.

Informing the executive pedagogical departments about the necessity and efficiency of Learning communities and their facilitators.

Creating and implementing a learning community themselves and using collaborative tools at the level of educational deciders. Organising Regional Learning Events to develop strategies.

Convincing universities to install teacher training courses for Learning Communities by using material and curriculum developed in the Erasmus Project RLCF.

Inviting experts from the field who engage in Learning Communities as speakers and trainers in conferences for educational deciders.

Choosing persons in recruiting processes who have approved competencies in collaborative working and learning.

Installing well-functioning international offices that help your schools use opportunities of European and international learning communities, such as Erasmus, eTwinning, School Education Gateway, Eurydice, UNESCO, and OECD.

Supporting the community through lobbying the conviction that sharing and collaboration need to be at the core of the educational agendas of policymakers in these challenging times.

Including Collaborative Learning and **Learning Communities** as items in evaluation programs.

Bottom-Up Strategies

Identifying the extent to which learning communities already exist in your area of impact.

Promoting and encouraging existing Learning Communities by recognizing their engagement

through financial contributionsthrough personal participation in their activities

through integrating powerful learning communities in processes of decision making

through highlighting their work in speeches, in press releases, social media, etc.

Establishing consciousness by spreading the idea of collaboration and well-managed learning communities on different levels of the educational community as a highly efficient instrument for developing quality in education.

Informing your school community (staff, students, parents) about the necessity and efficiency of Learning Communities and their facilitators

Organising your school following the principles of a Learning Community.

Inviting experts in the field of Learning Communities to speak at pedagogical conferences.

Organizing workshops for your teachers to familiarise them with the basic terms and tools of Learning Communities.

Inviting and encouraging teachers to attend ongoing teacher training on the topic of Learning Communities.

Establishing Learning Communities as one of the principal instruments of learning and teaching in your institution.

Informing newly arrived teachers about Learning Communities as a quality tool at your institution.

Organizing training if necessary.

In recruiting processes, **supporting persons who have approved competencies** in collaborative working and learning.

Starting every school year with **a week of collaboration** where teachers, pupils, and other staff members set up the structure of collaborative learning and working for the months to come.

Equipping your school with furniture and digital opportunities that welcome and encourage collaboration, sharing, and learning communities.

Honouring well-functioning learning communities by using their findings, giving them autonomy, and awarding them.

Encouraging your school community to participate in European Learning Communities such as eTwinning, Erasmus, and School Education Gateway.

Inviting international experts to your institution via Erasmus who monitor the collaborative quality at your institution.

Evaluating the results of collaboration at your institution and implementing a strategy of collaboration.

Establishing consciousness by communicating the idea of collaboration and well-managed Learning Communities at your institution as an efficient instrument for developing quality in education and educational management.

Informing the executive departments about the necessity and efficiency of Learning Communities and their facilitators.

Creating and implementing a learning community and the use of collaborative tools at the level of your strategic work yourself.

Encouraging your teaching staff to incorporate the idea of learning communities as an integral part of every course.

Making sure that in initial teacher training collaborative learning and **learning communities are introduced as crucial tools** for efficient and effective teaching and learning.

Adding at least a **basic course** on the topic of "Learning Communities" to the teacher training curricula.

By using the curriculum developed in the Erasmus KA2 Project RLCF, **implementing an ongoing teacher training course** that forms facilitators of learning communities.

Creating a service section on the homepage that offers a download of materials and tools for collaborative learning, the development of Learning Communities, theoretical and practical background information on the topic as well as current training courses and opportunities, and a service hotline.

Making sure that the topic of Learning Communities is part of the training of school leaders and educational supervisors.

The Project

Our project vision is to create vibrant local, regional and European learning communities, fueled by Regional Learning Facilitators. We need new organizational concepts and ownership of issues and concerns from the crowd. Our approach lies in analogue and digital networking and support structures that take into account the value of informal networks. The key message of the project is:

"When we share, we win"

Results

1	**2**	**3**	**4**
REPORT AND POLICY PAPER on the future vision on European cooperation in school education	An INNOVATIVE CURRICULUM for learning community facilitators	LEARNING MATERIALS for learning community facilitators	A UNIQUE MATCHING and COLLABORATION PLATFORM for regional learning peers

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