

Protecting Education in Conflict: A Decade of the *Safe Schools Declaration*

May 2025

A Moment of Reflection and Momentum

Ten years after its launch in Oslo by the Government of Norway, the **Safe Schools Declaration** (the *Declaration*) stands as a significant milestone in the global movement to safeguard education during armed conflict. Since 2015, the *Declaration* has served as a political and normative anchor, encouraging states to take measurable steps to prevent attacks on education and limit the military use of schools. With 121 endorsements to date, it has evolved into an internationally accepted standard – reflected in policy, law, military training, and global discourse.¹

The tenth anniversary comes at a time of increasing need. Attacks on education are not only persisting – they are intensifying. Between 2022 and 2023, attacks on education increased 20% over the previous reporting period.² These numbers underscore why the *Declaration* remains indispensable: it provides a unifying framework to respond to threats, uphold international law, and protect the future of children caught in crisis.

Reframing Protection: The Impact of the Guidelines

At the heart of the *Declaration* are the **Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict** (the *Guidelines*) – an innovative and pragmatic tool to change the behavior of armed actors. These guidelines arose from a consultative process that involved militaries, governments, legal experts, and humanitarian actors.³ While non-binding, their power lies in their influence: they articulate a new norm that educational institutions should never be used to support military operations.

The *Guidelines* fill a critical normative gap. They make explicit what should be implicit – that schools and universities are civilian spaces, and any use of them for military purposes undermines their safety, their function, and their role in long-term peacebuilding. The *Declaration* has been instrumental in translating the spirit of the *Guidelines* into national and military policy. Endorsing countries have incorporated these principles into military doctrine, rules of engagement, and educational emergency response planning. Uptake of the *Guidelines* across varied conflict settings illustrates how they resonate with real-world military decision-making and legal interpretation.⁴

A Global Norm in Motion

Beyond policy, the *Declaration* outlines a broad set of commitments – financial, programmatic, and political – aimed at strengthening the protection of education and advancing international cooperation. It has become both a moral touchstone and a political standard, reflecting the global community's refusal to accept the normalization of attacks on education.⁵

As both a call to action and a practical framework, the *Declaration* has helped catalyze significant political progress. In 2018, the UN Security Council adopted **Resolution 2427**, condemning attacks and threats against schools and emphasizing the role of education in conflict zones.⁶ This was followed in 2020 by the UN General Assembly's unanimous decision to establish the **International Day to Protect Education from Attack**, observed annually on September 9.⁷ In 2021, the Security Council unanimously adopted **Resolution 2601** – the first Children and Armed Conflict resolution to focus explicitly on the link between education, peace, and security.⁸ Co-authored by Niger and Norway, the resolution referenced the *Declaration* and garnered an unprecedented 99 co-sponsors.

The reframing initiated by the *Declaration* has been transformative. Education is no longer viewed as peripheral or collateral in times of war – it is increasingly recognized as core civilian infrastructure, vital to peacebuilding and recovery. This shift has helped embed safe school principles into international legal discourse, peacekeeping mandates, and humanitarian coordination frameworks.

Driving Progress Through Partnership

From its inception, the *Safe Schools Declaration* has been defined by partnership. Though led, endorsed, and implemented by states, it has flourished thanks to the sustained collaboration between governments, civil society, and international organizations. This collective effort has ensured that the *Declaration* is more than a statement of shared values – it is a living instrument for protection and progress.

Central to its early success was a strong core group of committed states that championed the *Declaration's* development, universalization, and implementation. These states not only shaped the text but worked actively to broaden its reach, encourage endorsement, and integrate the *Declaration's* aims into other initiatives.⁹ Sustained and multi-faceted engagement by states like Norway has been essential, providing funding for research and programming and other measures to keep safe schools on the global agenda. Framing the *Declaration* simultaneously as an education initiative and a civilian protection mechanism has proven effective in galvanizing cross-sectoral support.

As the *Declaration* has matured, more states have taken leadership roles – hosting conferences, launching bilateral dialogues, and forming regional coalitions. Diverse perspectives – from troop-contributing countries to conflict-affected states – have added credibility and practical relevance. These layered partnerships – across sectors, regions, and organizations – demonstrate how shared ownership can transform a declaration into a durable framework for safeguarding learning in crisis.

Translating Commitments into Action: Implementation of the *Declaration*

From the outset, the *Safe Schools Declaration* was conceived not only as a statement of principles, but as a framework for action. Building on the strong uptake of the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use*, states now have access to a growing body of practical tools to support implementation. These include the *Toolkit for Collecting and Analyzing Data on Attacks on Education* (2023) and *Enhancing Accountability for Attacks on Education: Guidance on Investigating and Prosecuting Education-Related Crimes* (2024).

Implementation has become a defining pillar of the *Declaration's* impact. This is exemplified by the State-led **Implementation Network**, launched by the Government of Norway in 2021 during the *Fourth International Conference on the Safe Schools Declaration* in Abuja, Nigeria. The Network promotes cooperation, peer-to-peer exchange, and applied learning among endorsing states. A digital platform forms the backbone of this effort – facilitating confidential dialogue, knowledge sharing, and collaboration between governments and technical experts. Participants contribute experiences, share resources, and help ensure the *Declaration* evolves in step with realities on the ground.¹⁰

One of the Network's earliest activities was an international training series convened by the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation, with support from the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack. The sessions brought together representatives from 20 countries – including members of armed forces – for interactive discussions on the *Declaration's* implementation, the *Guidelines*, and accountability mechanisms.¹¹

Momentum continued in 2024 following a regional workshop in Senegal, where the *Safe Schools Declaration* Committees of Burkina Faso and Mali expressed a desire to deepen cross-border learning.¹² With the financial and technical support of partners, this vision became reality through the Network's first ministerial exchange visit. The visit underscored strong national commitments and growing regional cooperation toward fully implementing the *Declaration*.

International conferences on the *Safe Schools Declaration* are key milestones for tracking and advancing implementation. Like its predecessors, the 2025 conference, hosted by the Government of Kenya, is an opportunity to assess progress and renew global commitment to the *Declaration's* goals. The collective action and inspiration fostered at the conferences are pivotal in enabling the *Declaration* to translate promise into practice – building lasting infrastructure to protect education in times of conflict.

Building Continuity and Resilience

While international humanitarian law provides foundational principles for protection, including rules on the targeting of military objectives, the *Safe Schools Declaration* raises the bar. It urges restraint and foresight – especially regarding the long-term educational, psychological, and social toll of transforming schools into militarized spaces. Attacks on educational institutions often violate international human rights law, including the right to education, protections for children, and nondiscrimination.¹³

The *Declaration* has demonstrated how education can be protected and delivered even in fragile settings. From contingency plans and community-led safety committees to digital platforms and alternative learning spaces, states and partners have embraced innovative models to ensure that education continues – even amid insecurity.

Advocates have rightly emphasized that education in emergencies must be guided by a human rights-based, gender-responsive, and disability-inclusive approach. This requires listening to the voices of affected communities, incorporating the needs of girls, children with disabilities, and other marginalized groups, and rebuilding trust in learning environments damaged by violence and occupation.¹⁴

Conflict-sensitive education programming now integrates early warning systems, school safety assessments, and emergency re-enrollment strategies. In countries like Nigeria, national policies have begun to institutionalize such approaches, drawing directly from *Declaration* principles and using them to inform cross-sectoral strategies that merge education, security, and humanitarian protection.¹⁵

The Next Chapter: Institutionalizing and Scaling Impact

Looking ahead, the *Declaration's* promise rests in how deeply it can be embedded in institutions. This means more than endorsement. It calls for legal codification, operational guidance, staff training, and accountability systems that deter attacks and facilitate redress. The *Declaration* can play a growing role in transitional justice and peace processes. As education becomes more frequently referenced in ceasefire agreements, reparation schemes, and post-conflict reconstruction plans, it is recognized not only as a right – but as a requirement for sustainable recovery.¹⁶

A forward-looking vision of the *Declaration* also includes greater accountability in the form of increased investigations and prosecutions of attacks on education, recognition of trauma, and survivor assistance. Support for psychosocial services, re-enrollment, and community trust-building are vital. National education plans must be inclusive of these components, supported by predictable and sustainable funding.

States should be encouraged by implementation progress to date. The *Declaration* is an effective tool and response to the disregard by bad actors for the protection of civilians and other humanitarian principles. Coalitions of states and civil society must continue to assess and update finance, education, military and judiciary policies to reflect safe school commitments.

A Declaration with Enduring Purpose

Perhaps the most powerful testament to the *Declaration's* legacy is how it has altered the way education is viewed within the broader landscape of protection and peacebuilding. It has helped shift assumptions within military culture, guided legal interpretations, and shaped the rhetoric of international diplomacy.¹⁷

The *Declaration's* first decade has proven that norms can shift and behaviors can adapt. The presence of a child in a classroom during conflict is not only a human right – it is an act of resilience and defiance. Schools symbolize stability, and their protection offers a path to healing and peace.

As the world confronts intersecting crises, from conflict and climate change to displacement and disinformation, the *Declaration* reminds us that, together, we have the tools to make progress possible. Ten years on, the *Safe Schools Declaration* is not merely a document. It is a platform – for solidarity, for reform, and for the right of every child to learn in safety.

Endnotes

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Global Coalition to
Protect Education from Attack

