National Centre for Social Research -

General Secretariat for Vocational Education, Training, Lifelong Learning and Youth

Policy proposals for strengthening democratic decision-making in school and consolidating the functioning of democracy

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EUROPEAN YEAR OF YOUTH

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Policy proposals for strengthening democratic decision-making in school and consolidating the functioning of democracy

Within the framework of the project “Youth, Europe, Democracy", an online survey on students of the second and third grades of Upper Secondary School was implemented by the General Secretariat for Vocational Education, Training, Lifelong Learning and Youth (GS VETLL&Y), Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs (MER), in collaboration with the Institute of Political Research (IPR), National Centre for Social Research (NCSR). In total 4,818 questionnaires were collected, in a representative sample of 300 General and Vocational Upper Secondary Schools in Greece during the period November 2022 - January 2023.[1]

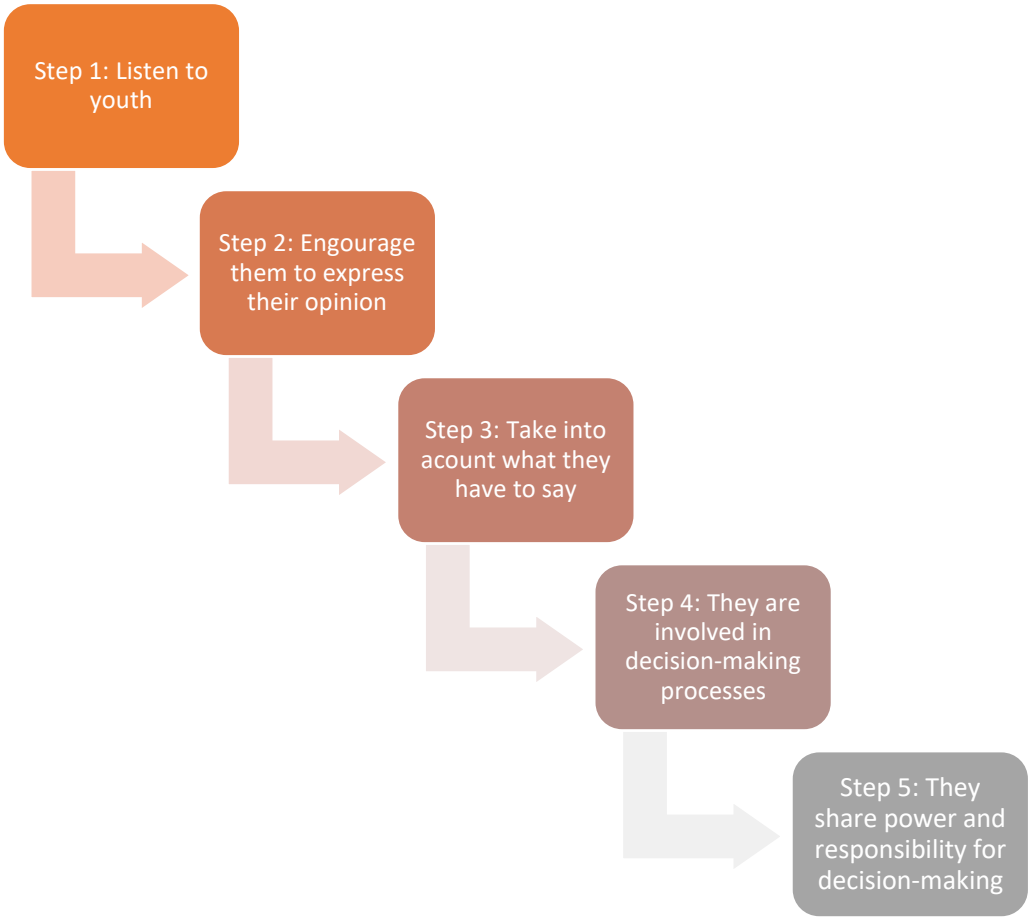
As the expressed aim of the project was to investigate students' perceptions of the operation of Student Councils (SC) and subsequently to make policy proposals for strengthening democracy in decision-making in schools, this report sets out some sets of proposals, as they emerged from the analysis and processing of students' responses and from the study of international good practices and relevant literature (see introduction in the final report) as well as proposals from other institutions[2].

The field of study of young people (youth studies), which discusses the strengthening of their political participation, uses Shier's classical scheme (2001) for participation levels. According to this, any effort to enhance youth participation should adopt the following steps (Figure 1):

[1] For more details on the research results and the methodology of implementation, see Iliou, K. Kakepaki, M., Klironomos, N., Perivolaraki, M. (2023). Perception of democracy in decision making in school. Final report. EKKE – GS VETLL&Y.

[2] See proposals from the Ombudsman: https://old.synigoros.gr/?i=childrens-rights.el.drastiriotites.376111

Figure 1: Levels of participation



Source: Shier, H. (2001).

We know from previous research that young people's participation in political processes is further enhanced when they feel that what is being done "concerns" them personally (Pandelidou-Malouta, 2015), whilst the use of social media is an appropriate means of inclusion and greater participation (Pickard & Bessant, 2018). Assessments of the operation of the Student Councils so far agree that, although the process as it operates so far involves young people in decision-making (Step 4) and provides responsibilities for their implementation (Step 5), it does not have clear mechanisms and ways of expressing their views (Steps 1 to 3).

At the same time, to support equal opportunities among students in the election process, and also in the outcome of the representative process, the school climate needs to cultivate interpersonal relationships through learning processes. Contemporary pedagogical approaches emphasize inclusive education practices,

which focus on ensuring equal access of all students to the educational good, the elimination of segregation and any form of exclusion from the pedagogical and socializing processes that occur in the school environment. Consequently, in contemporary schools, teaching practices need to adopt (as far as possible) cooperation between students to achieve student goals (e.g., group projects). Other, non-didactic activities with collaborative practice would also help to cultivate and multiply students' interpersonal relationships, even between classes (e.g., collaborative actions for school or other collective benefit goals).

Studies about the school climate also confirm the positive relationship between a school environment that fosters free dialogue and allows students to contribute to the formation of school decisions, and to their future political and social participation (Flanagan 2013, Nieuwelink et al., 2016). Therefore, any effort to enhance the participatory predisposition of young people should include sets of measures that:

- enhance dialogue within the school community
- broaden the fields in which students can play a role in co-shaping relevant decisions

Attempting to explore the above, we asked several relevant questions in order to detect the current situation. According to the students' responses in the survey, **there is an established belief that Student Councils are the most suitable bodies for mediation and collective requests to the school** (Graph 1 in Appendix).

However, although student councils appear to be perceived as necessary by students, since only a minority would *not* be bothered by their abolition (Graph 3 in Appendix), some weaknesses and malfunctions are noted. More specifically, **quite a sufficient percentage of students considers** that there is not ***enough information to understand their function***, while, although there is an estimate that ***assemblies are held quite often and hours are given to present the candidates'* views,** a significant percentage does not agree with the above. A lack of **awareness of the election process** is noted, as more than half of students do not consider it sufficient. (Graph 2 in Appendix).

Also, the **perception that *decision-making in Student Councils influences final decisions in school*, although it has the highest** percentage of agreement, there is still a sufficient percentage of students who do not agree with the above. Similar views are recorded on whether *Student Councils strengthen the democratic functioning of schools* (Graph 3 in Appendix).

Regarding the **issues that the Student Councils *do not*** deal with, although there is a willingness to take more initiatives on issues of coexistence and entertainment (e.g., excursions), there is clearly a need to extend them to issues such as: a) improving the way of teaching, b) bullying and racist attitudes, and c) helping students in need (Graph 5 in Appendix).

Another important dimension concerns equal opportunities for election to Student Councils. A proportion of respondents claim that boys have more opportunities than girls to be voted (Graph 4 in Appendix), which is more often expressed by girls, but also by boys to a lesser extent. Therefore, if Student Councils constitute an exercise in democracy in adolescence, it is very important that they concern everyone and that they operate without exclusions, which may also be a preface to future perceptions of political engagement as a more "male" privileged arena.

Students strongly support participation in decision-making processes at school, as well as the effectiveness of active participation in collective decisions (Graph 6 in Appendix). We also have **indications of positive intention of adolescents to participate in decision-making** at school: The dominant **criteria** that they admit to influence their individual choice for representatives in the Student Councils prevail those that have a **collective perspective**, which suggests that the **institution operates validly in terms of its objectives** (consolidation of the values of democracy at school). However, interpersonal contacts also play an important role in choosing representatives, as many state that they vote for their friends. **Interpersonal relationships constitute** therefore a 'political' asset for candidates (Graph 8 in Appendix).

At the same time, the students' answers underline the emphasis that the school community places on the operational goal of success of students in the Panhellenic exams, possibly due to their attendance in the last two grades of Upper Secondary

Schools. Respondents are also ambivalent about *teachers encouraging students to express their opinion*. The l**ack of opportunities to discuss current political and social issues, but also to express an opinion,** is a significant deficit in the background for democratic competence and political conscientiousness (Graph 7 in Appendix).

Finally, an open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire (which gave participants the opportunity to comment on the survey) showed that students want to have some more systematic mechanisms to record their opinions, but even more **they need to see that this recording also leads to decisions with visible and tangible results** (Students' suggestions in Appendix). This is the main way of consolidating the essence of the democratic process through representatives, which is largely based on the fundamental concept of responsiveness and accountability (Przeworski, Stokes & Manin, 1999).

Policy recommendations

Drawing from the above, the proposals to improve the functioning of the Student Communities and enhance the sense of responsiveness and effectiveness of collective processes are clarified in the framework of three (3) central objectives and nine (10) sub-proposals.

STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF STUDENT COUNCILS

Rationale and documentation: The substantial strengthening of Student Councils must be accompanied by comprehensive information on their role, expansion of their responsibilities, and measurement of the impact of the actions they undertake.

Proposal 1.1: INFORMATION FOR STUDENT COUNCILS

Inclusion of an information campaign on the responsibilities and operation of the Student Councils long before the election process, with the appointment of a responsible teacher who will supervise the process and act as a consultant to the school community. It is proposed to distribute to the classrooms the Law governing the operation of Student Communities.

Proposal 1.2: EXPANSION OF THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF STUDENT COUNCILS

Expansion of the responsibilities of the 15-members Councils and targeted interventions (preventive and/or mediation) especially on issues concerning school bullying and racism.

Proposal 1.3: ACHIEVING GREATER REPRESENTATION IN STUDENT COUNCILS

Establishment of gender quotas in the composition of Student Councils, with prior information on the need and positive effects of such measures.

Proposal 1.4: MECHANISM FOR RECORDING THE IMPACT OF STUDENT COUNCILS' ACTIONS

Implementation of a stable mechanism for collecting students' views through anonymous questionnaires and measuring the impact of the actions implemented by the Student Councils.

2 WIDER CONSULTATION WITHIN THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Rationale and documentation: The following sets of proposals are recommended to make use of wider consultation possibilities throughout the school community using the Internet (e.g. through electronic voting, platforms, etc.), so as to enable greater involvement of students and expression of the opinion of the entire school community and not only their elected representatives.

Proposal 2.1: THE CLASS TIME

Establishment of school hours that students will have the opportunity to elaborate on socio-political issues and exchange views on them.

Introduction of the institution of "class time" (Alexander, J.J., 2020), when students will have the opportunity to get to know better each other, discuss issues that concern them and work on socio-political issues and exchange views on them.

Proposal 2.2: SCHOOL DIALOGUE

Establishment of the institution of "school dialogue" where, through an exercise in the juxtaposition of viewpoints, arguments will be exchanged on specific issues of school life.

Proposal 2.3: SCHOOL REFERENDUM

Establishment of the institution of "school referendum" on any issue that may affect the operation of the school unit, so that students can practice the functioning of democracy in the context of a collective process, which can produce immediate, visible, and tangible results.

3 DIGITAL NETWORKING OF SCHOOLS FOR THE EXCHANGE OF GOOD PRACTICES

Rationale and documentation: This objective aims at the networking of schools and the exchange of good practices between Student Communities in the country with different needs and characteristics.

Proposal 3.1: DIGITAL PLATFORM

Digital networking of Student Councils - with the creation of a relevant platform - in order to exchange ideas on activities to strengthen interpersonal relationships in school life.

Proposal 3.2: PLENARY MEETING

Establishment of the institution of the "Annual Plenary Meeting of Student Councils". Student Communities can present their activities and exchange ideas and good practices in a two-day/daily virtual or face-to-face meeting.

Proposal 3.3: STUDENT COUNCIL OF THE YEAR

Establishment of the institution of the “Student Council of the Year”. Through an annual online vote, the Student Council that contributed with actions and initiatives to the consolidation of democracy in schools will be selected.

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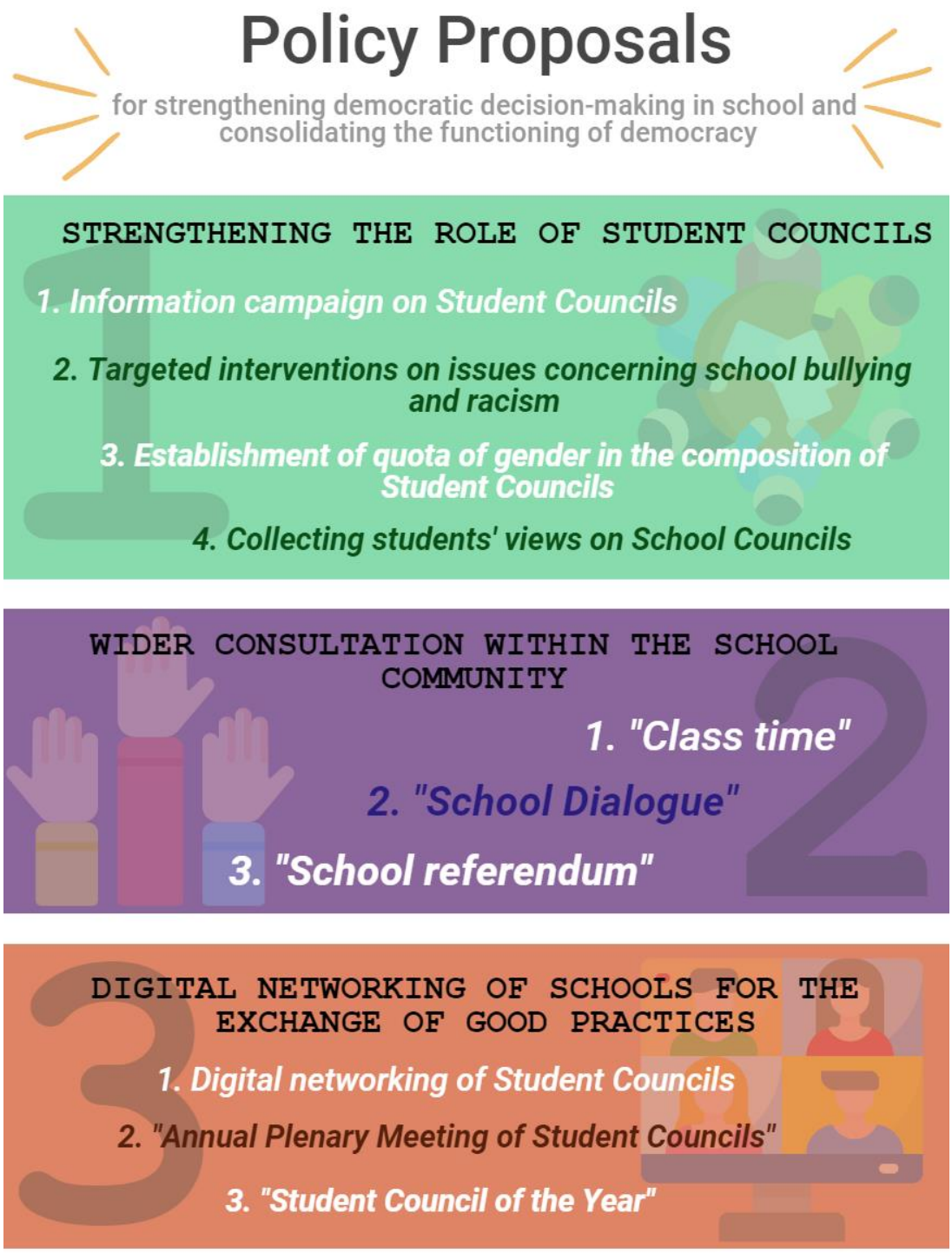
VISUALISATION OF PROPOSALS



APPENDIX

Students' suggestions:

"The 15-members Council could be strengthened if they had the right to call for a referendum from their classmates on some serious issue".

"Such questionnaires need to be done more often in order to fully make the voice of students heard".

"I think at school we should talk more about such current issues. Not all parents are educated, or even in the years they grew up, they didn't have the opportunity to get an education, even if they wanted to."

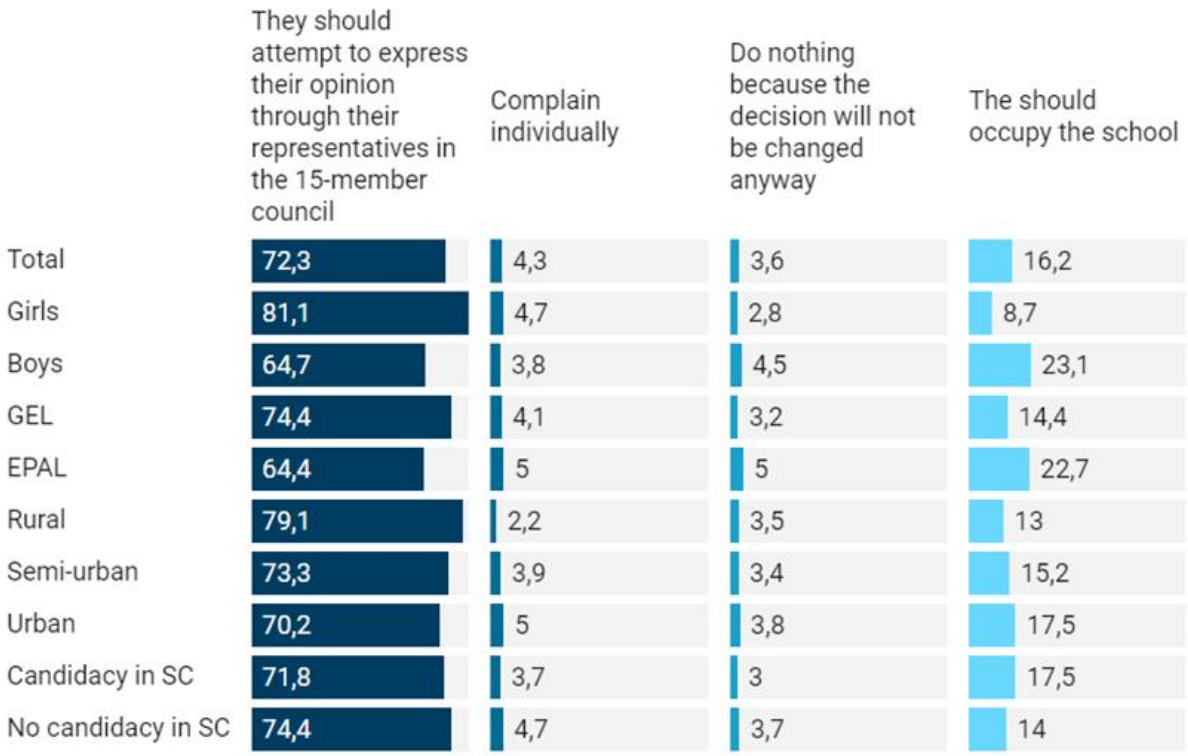
"The survey rather helped me process and revise my way of thinking on some issues. This survey can contribute to a smoother and more democratic life in a free society."

"I hope my answers and my classmates' answers will be taken into account!!!!"

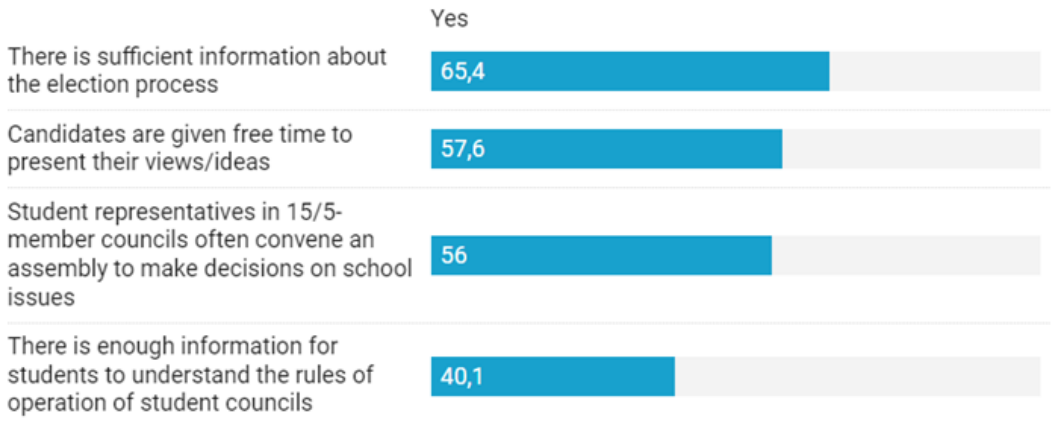
"I appreciate the opportunity to answer these unique questions, let alone anonymously because I have the opportunity to freely answer something that my family environment does not allow me."

Graphs

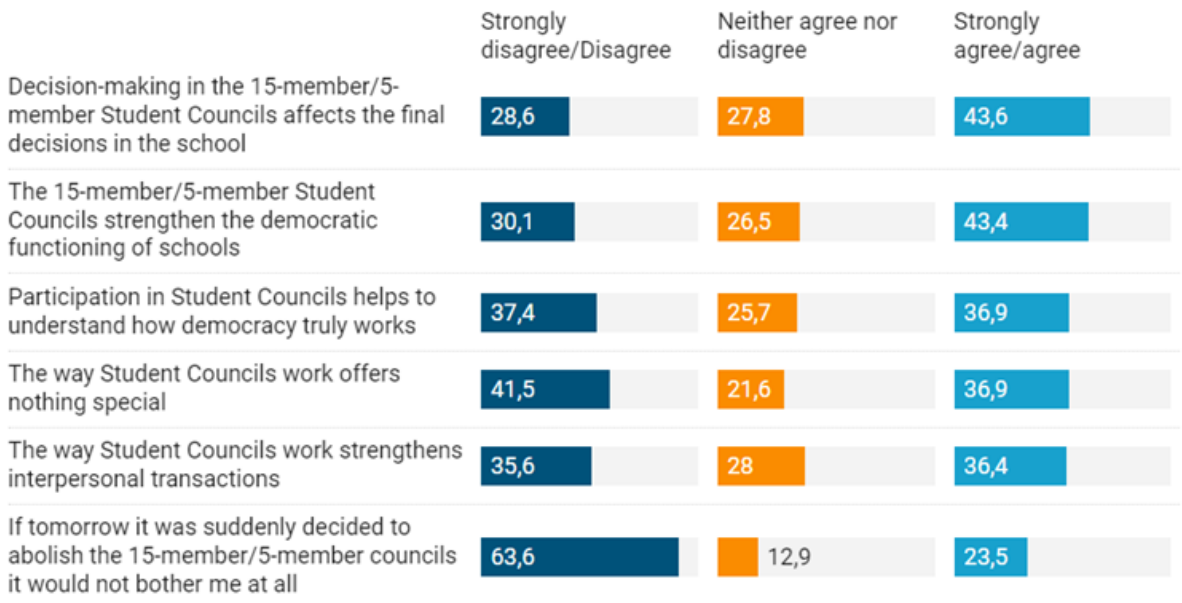
Graph 1: In case the school takes a decision than many students disagree with, what do you think they should do? (%)



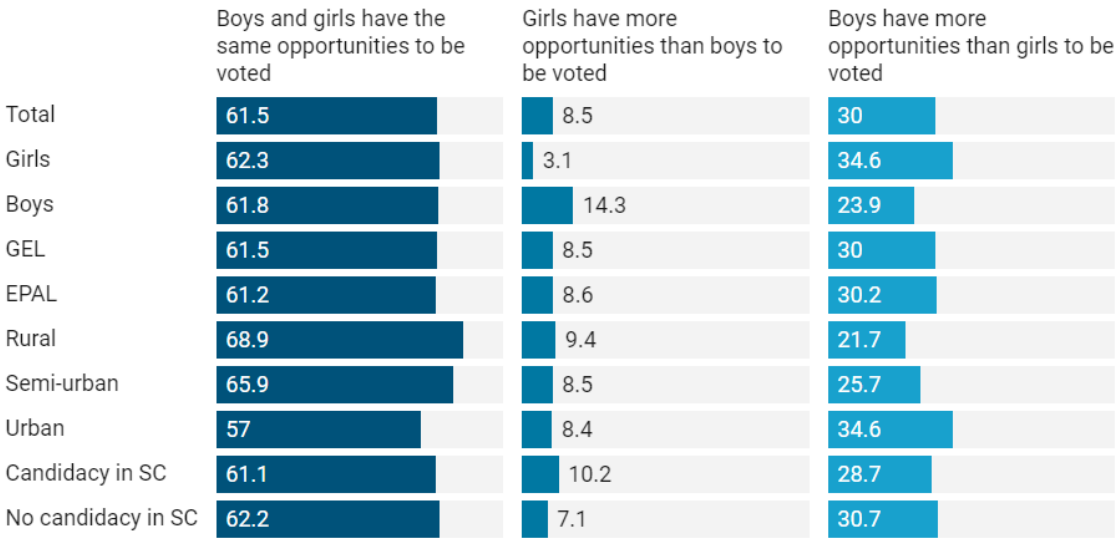
Graph 2: What about the following concerning the elections and the function of student councils at your school? (%)



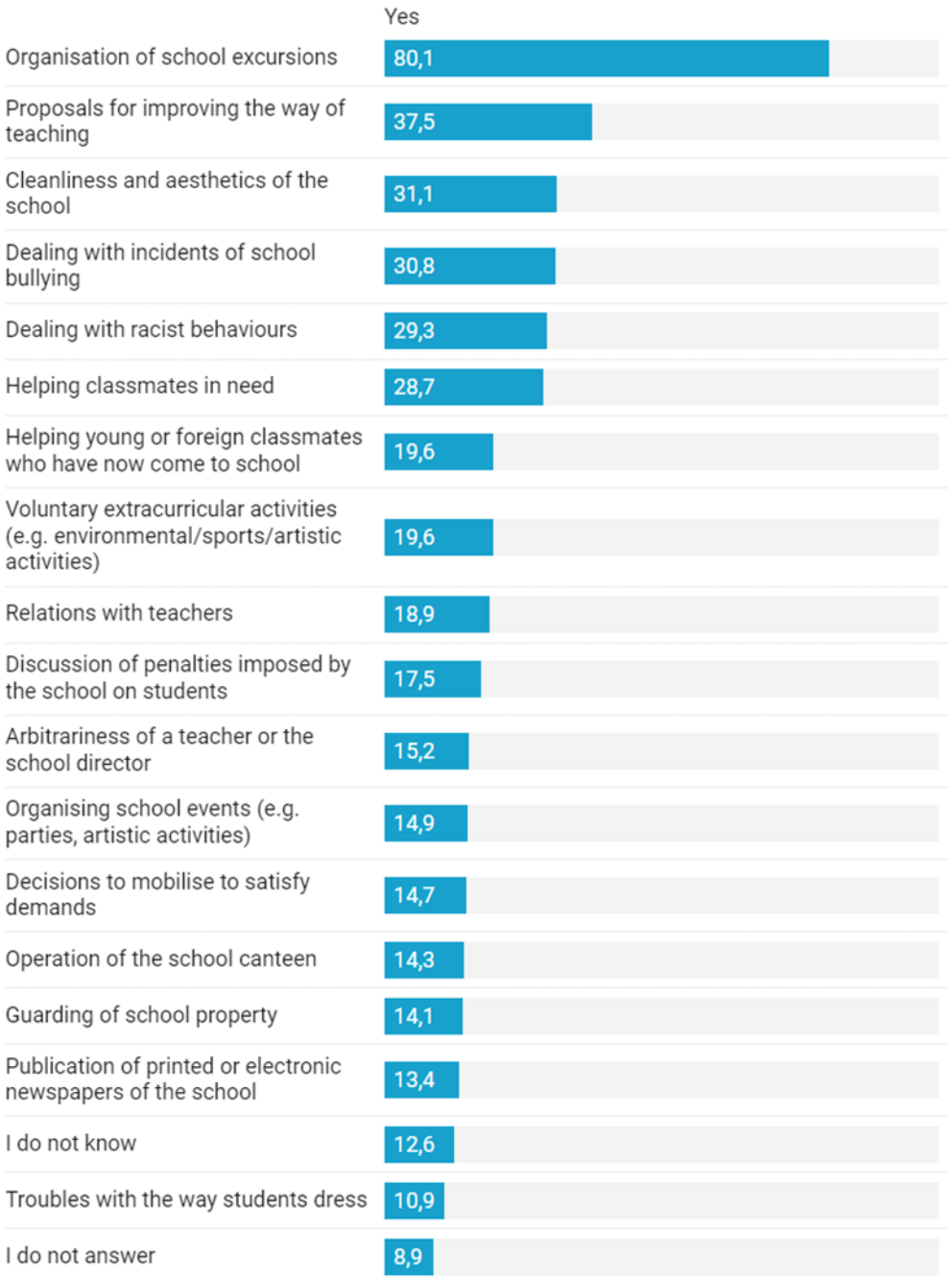
Graph 3: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (%)



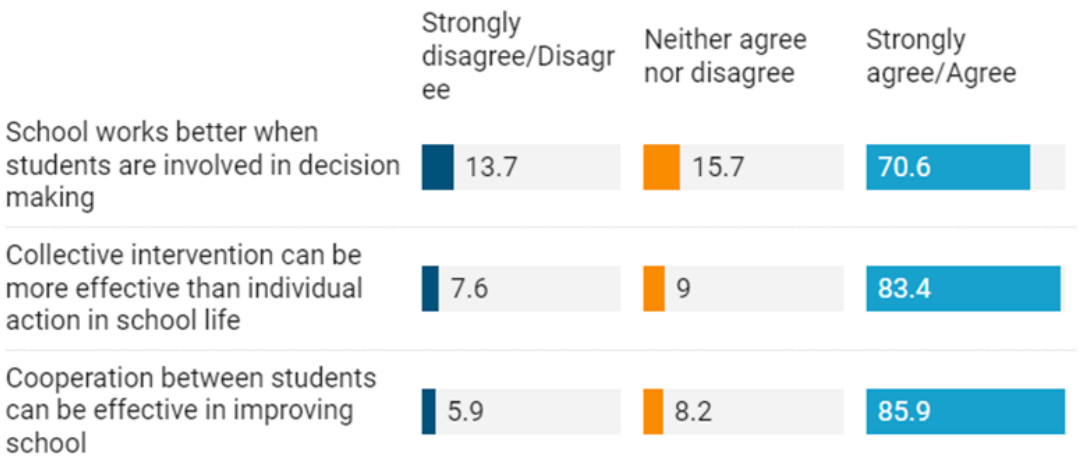
Graph 4: Are there equal opportunities between two genders to be voted as representatives in the Students Councils? (%)



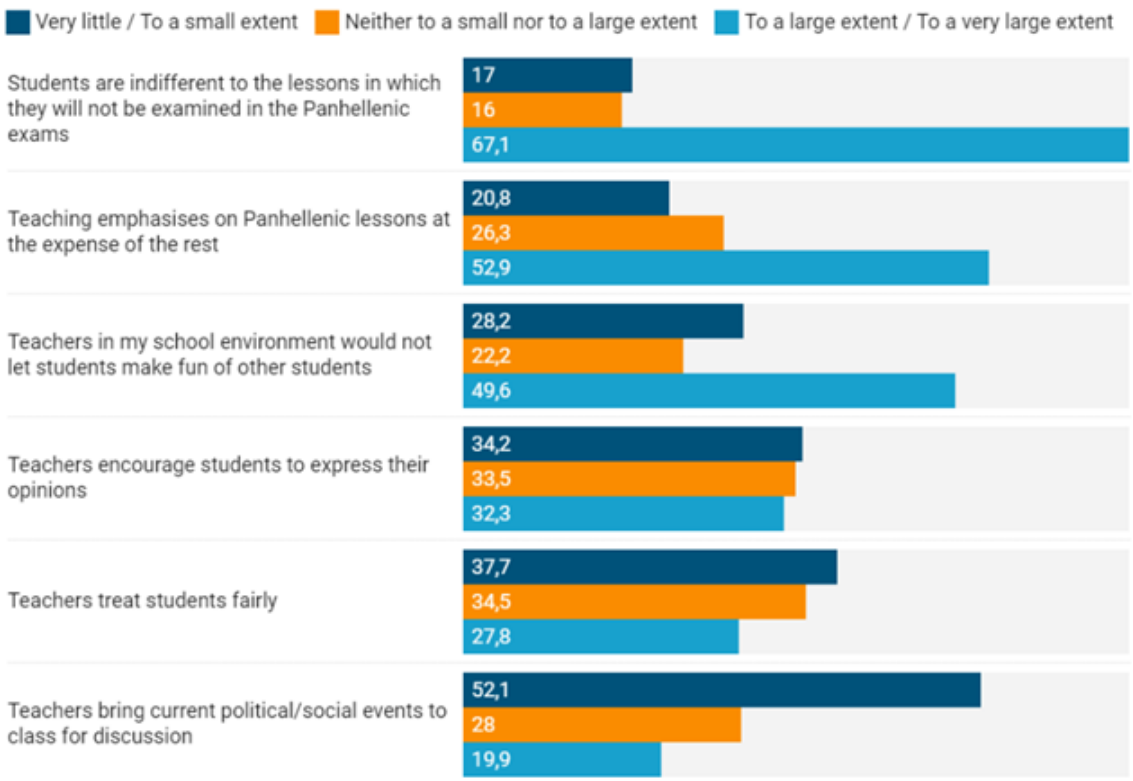
Graph 5: Which are the main issues that the 15/5-members council in your school do not deal with, but you would like to address? From the following, select up to 5 and put them in order of priority (%)



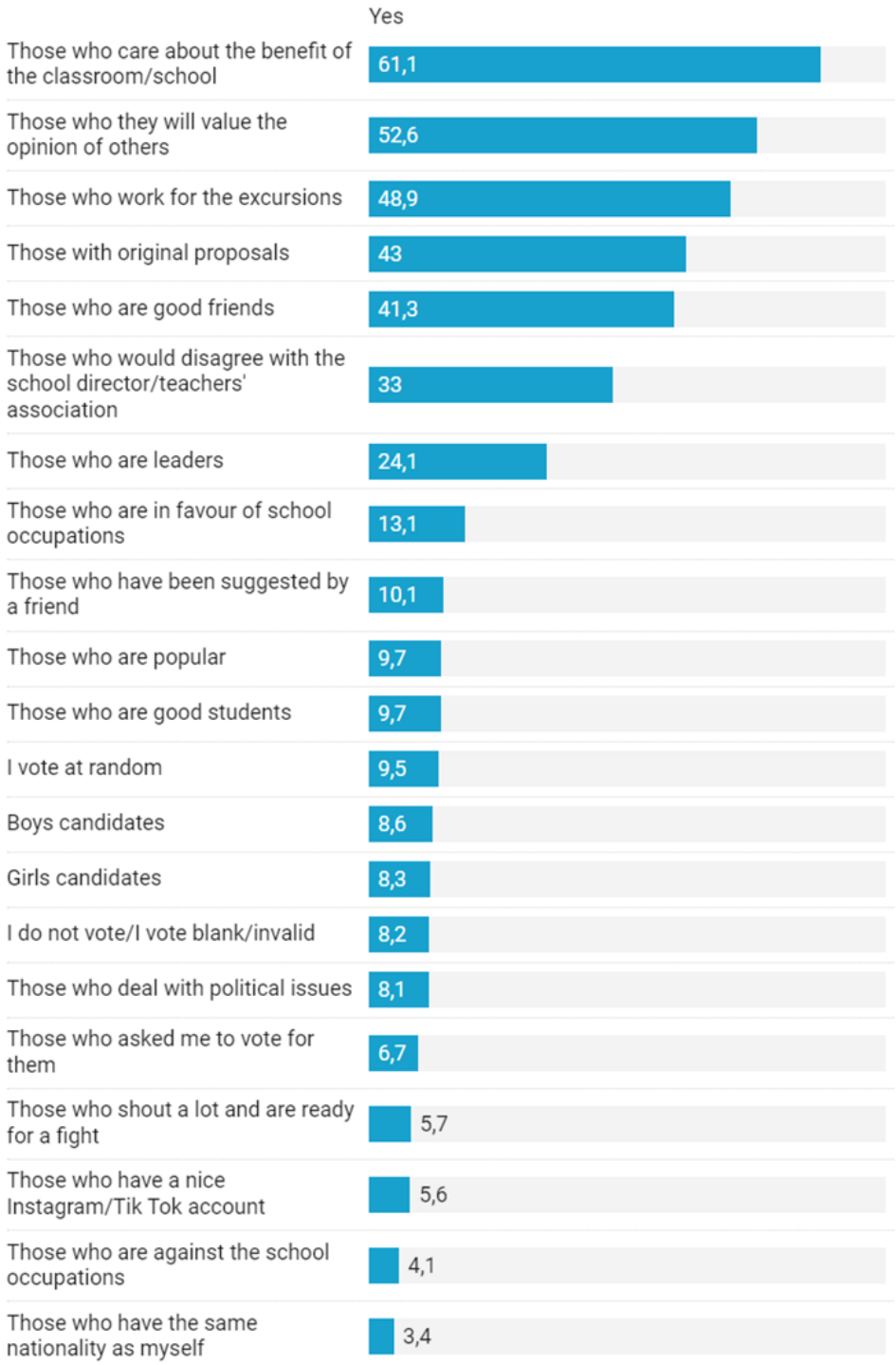
Graph 6: Should students participate collaboratively in school decision? (%)



Graph 7: To what extent, in your opinion, does the following occur in the teaching of lessons in your school? (%)



Graph 8: Which students do you usually vote as representatives for the 5-member and 15-member Student Councils? From the following, select up to 5 and put them in order of priority (%)



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