

**Message from Ms Audrey Azoulay,  
Director-General of UNESCO,  
on the occasion of International Day of Education**

**24 January 2024**

Hatred starts with words: words that discriminate, divide and dehumanize; words that undermine democracy, spread ignorance, instil fear, and can even precede the worst of crimes. When these words go unchecked – when gender-based, racist, antisemitic and xenophobic hate speech is allowed to proliferate – they pose an existential threat to human rights, democracy and peace.

In recent years, hate speech and online falsehoods have gained ground with the expansion of social media. Last year, a study conducted in 16 countries reported that 67% of Internet users had encountered online hate speech. Some 85% of respondents expressed concern about the impact and influence of disinformation on their fellow citizens.

However, we are not powerless in the face of disinformation and hate speech. We have education – to fight hatred at its roots, develop critical thinking, and build the defences of peace in the minds of women and men, in line with UNESCO's Constitution. This year, the International Day of Education on 24 January is dedicated to the crucial role of teaching and learning in promoting lasting peace – and the ways in which education must adapt in order to address current global challenges.

The UNESCO Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development adopted by our 194 Member States in November 2023, is a major milestone in this regard. This global standard-setting instrument, the only one of its kind, is a roadmap for re-thinking and re-designing education systems to prepare learners to collectively shape more just, sustainable, healthy and peaceful futures for all. UNESCO looks forward to supporting education reforms based on this Recommendation across the world.

In 2023, UNESCO also published the guide “Addressing hate speech through education” to help decision-makers strengthen their public policies in this area. In addition, we are stepping up our efforts to promote anti-racist guidelines and address racism in textbooks, as well as implementing a global initiative to combat antisemitism in and through education.

To equip those on the front lines – teachers, educators and school leaders – UNESCO is offering an online masterclass on “Deconstructing Hate Speech”. After the English-language training held in October 2023 attended by over 700 teachers, French-speaking educators now have the opportunity to interact with experts on effective pedagogies to prevent and counter hate speech in and outside of the school environment and to promote more inclusive and tolerant societies.

Because if hatred starts with words, peace starts with education. What we learn changes how we view the world and influences how we treat others. Education must therefore be at the heart of our efforts to achieve and maintain world peace. On this day, your commitment to defending the right to a quality education – one that recognizes the human rights of each and every individual – means committing to a peaceful future for all, where everyone is able to live a life of dignity, with mutual understanding and respect.