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and Children

European Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Working Group

Peer Learning Activity

States' and municipalities' role in the leadership of preschools

20-22 May 2025

Reykjavík, Iceland

SUMMARY

Questions related to this PLA can be addressed to
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To support Member States in implementing the 2019 Council recommendation on high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) systems and the European Quality Framework for ECEC, the European Education Area Working Group (WG) on ECEC is working towards identifying best practices and ideas that can support efficient reforms. For its 2024-25 work cycle, the group focuses on leadership in ECEC, with three topics and a set of key questions:

1. Leadership in ECEC: models and practices across Europe

- What are the main **functions and tasks** associated to centre leaderships?
- What are the main **structures of leadership** in place (*i.e. hierarchical/distributed, support structure, role of providers, local authorities,…*)?

2. How to train, recruit and motivate leaders in ECEC

- What are the **competence requirements/professional profile** for ECEC centre leaders?
- What are **initial and in-service training** programmes provided?
- Which **career pathways** are currently available *(i.e. from being a practitioner to become a leader)*?

3. From centre leaders to ECEC system leadership

- How can **network leadership** support **integrated work across sectors** *(horizontally)?*
- as well as **across different levels of education** *(vertically), i.e.* 0-3/3-6 in split systems, ECEC/primary schools in integrated systems?

The Peer Learning Activity (PLA) in Iceland was jointly organised by the European Commission and the Icelandic Ministry of Education and Children to discuss the responsibility of states and municipalities in the leadership of preschools. It welcomed 35 participants from Belgium, Czechia, Georgia, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Norway, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, the Alliance for childhood, the European Public Service union (EPSU) and the International-Step-by-Step association (ISSA), as well as speakers and guests from Iceland. The discussions were held around the following guiding questions:

- How do the various levels of governance and leadership work together in managing the best preschool experience for every child?
- What are the obstacles and opportunities?
- How do we secure that national legislations and curriculum have an impact in the classrooms?

In this context, the PLA revolved around three core themes:

1) ECEC leadership at the national and municipal level with a focus on governance and funding;
2) Interplay between the state, local authorities, and ECEC centre leaders with a focus on curriculum development, implementation and evaluation;
3) Leadership for inclusion with a focus on the role of local authorities in sustaining cross-sectoral collaboration.

Discussions focused on centre-based provision of ECEC, and the full ECEC age range was covered – from birth to the start of primary schooling. To encourage interaction and facilitate peer learning, the PLA included a mix of presentations from the host and the WG members, as well as time for discussion, reflection, and for sharing knowledge and experiences. Participants could also attend several insightful site visits in municipalities and ECEC centres in Reykjavík and its neighbourhood.

The ECEC system in Iceland

The ECEC system of Iceland was presented by the **Ministry of Education and Children**, including references to key legislations and policies. The system is characterised by municipally run preschools known as playschools for children aged 0-6, guided by a curriculum that emphasises play-based learning, inclusion, and democratic values, and supported by a national education policy focused on well-being, quality, and equal opportunities. Recent reforms

include strengthened preschool teacher training and a three-tiered model for integrated child and family services. An associate professor from the **university of Akureyri** explained how educational leadership is shaped by national, municipal, and school-level policies and contexts, and how these leadership practices influence school operations. An ECEC head teacher from the **municipality of Kópavogur**, shared about the structure, working environment and the latest changes in the pre-school sector in Kópavogur municipality. **Reykjavík's department of education and youth** presented about the development and implementation of the local curriculum in Reykjavík. Preschool and special education teachers/directors presented how the **municipality of Akranes** has been implementing the Children's Prosperity Act of Iceland, highlighting the importance of integrated work across services.

European perspectives

- The **Czech** Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs presented the role of municipalities and the toolkit to support municipalities in Czechia, while the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports shared about the 'Middle point of support' pilot and follow-up project that aims to improve the quality of ECEC through a comprehensive system of support for schools in managerial and non-teaching work.
- The **Norwegian** Ministry of Education and Research presented two examples of implementing regulations aimed at promoting good practices in kindergartens in Norway, and their evaluations. The first example was the new framework plan for kindergartens introduced in 2017 that was implemented with significant support from national authorities. Whereas the second example was Chapter VIII of the Kindergarten Act which was introduced on 1 January 2021, including new regulations on a safe and good kindergarten environment. Core conclusions were that there should be coherence between all levels.
- The **Portuguese** Ministry of Education explored how the national, municipal, and preschool-level leadership interact in Portugal through the educational decentralisation process in the country. Mechanisms for collaboration, challenges in governance, and opportunities for stronger local leadership were all highlighted in the presentation.
- The **Irish** Department of Education and Youth shared about the role of the state in the leadership of ECEC through introducing the national quality and curricular frameworks – namely the Síolta (meaning seeds) and the Aistear (meaning journey).
- The **International Step by Step Association (ISSA)** presented the Early Childhood Development Toolbox for local governments, which aims to strengthen local governments' capacity to ensure quality, equitable and comprehensive services for young children and their families. The toolbox has various tools to be used by local governments to work in an integrated way across sectors and address the needs of specific categories of vulnerable groups. The tools rely on involving leaders of services who are bringing the voice of children, families, and professionals in the discussions about local action plans aimed at improving the access to quality of services.

Key take aways

The core themes revolved around challenges and inspiring practices to provide high quality ECEC through integrated work across different levels of governance, leadership and sectors. It was also discussed how the impact of national legislations and curricula can be ensured and enhanced in the classrooms.

Across Europe, **local authorities** are often in charge of managing ECEC provision, overseeing the number of places, infrastructure, staffing, and quality, though their influence varies depending on national funding models and governance structures. While decentralised systems offer autonomy and tailored implementation to local authorities, they also face challenges such as resource disparities and fragmented quality assurance. Whereas centralised models may limit local responsiveness but ensure more consistent standards.

In most countries, the national government defines the core **ECEC curriculum**, while local authorities and preschools adapt and implement it based on local needs. Evaluation practices vary, with centralised systems relying on national oversight and decentralised ones using self-evaluation and internal monitoring. Challenges in striking a balance between top-down and bottom-up processes include limited time and capacity for staff, disparities in implementation, lack of coordination, and complex or overly ambitious curricula. Promising practices to address these issues include national training programmes, peer learning communities, dedicated time for professional development, municipality-

led innovations, mentoring systems, and tools for self-evaluation. Some countries also emphasise parental and community engagement and the use of digital resources to support curriculum implementation.

Participants mapped the **services/organisations in** their **local communities** around ECEC which are summarised in the word cloud below. In this figure, the larger the mapped service is, the more times it was highlighted by the participants. Health, welfare, social, and child protection services, cultural institutions, libraries, parental organisations, schools, parents, and sports clubs were all noted as key actors among others. Leadership needs to be created at the level of ECEC centres, but also at the level of local municipalities, and of cross-sectoral collaboration across ministries. The methodological discussions can help create a common understanding of the decisionmakers at different levels of the system, contributing to better collaboration.

Delivering high-quality preschool experiences for every child requires a strong, coordinated governance across all levels – national, regional, local, and institutional. This involves clearly defined roles, shared long-term strategies, and a common vision centred on the needs of children and families. Effective governance is built on trust, open communication, and shared responsibility, supported by adequate time, funding, and infrastructure for collaboration. A balanced mix of top-down and bottom-up approaches is essential, with centre leaders empowered and supported by other governance levels. Professional learning communities and training on governance principles further strengthen collaboration.

Obstacles to achieve this include limited time and resources, fragmented systems, political and financial constraints, and disparities between regions and service types. Overlapping policies and unclear funding mechanisms can create confusion, while resistance to responsibility and lack of coordination skills hinder progress. Despite these challenges, **opportunities** were also identified: the subsidiarity principle enables local solutions, and existing research, toolkits, and peer learning can guide improvements. Technology, democratic participation, and cross-sectoral collaboration also offer promising pathways for more effective governance.

To **ensure national legislation and curricula have a real impact** in classrooms, it is crucial to involve practitioners in policy design and implementation. Legislation must be clear, coherent, and accessible, with strong leadership at the centre level and robust monitoring mechanisms. Adequate financing, staffing, and professional development are foundational, as is meaningful and well-defined parental involvement. Strategic leadership should connect policy to practice, and efforts must be made to bridge divides between public and private provision.

Ultimately, participants highlighted that **municipalities play a pivotal role in translating national frameworks into meaningful local action**, shaping long-term visions for children and families. Governance should be seen as a dynamic process, requiring sustained commitment, experimentation, and adaptation. A shared vision across governance levels, supported by institutionalised dialogue and stakeholder engagement – including children, families, and professionals – is essential for participatory and responsive decision-making. Continuous professional development of ECEC staff is critical, not only for technical skills but also for strengthening professional identity and reflective practice. Universities, mentoring programmes, and inter-professional learning communities all contribute to building the capacity of ECEC professionals. Effective ECEC systems also depend on cross-sectoral collaboration, requiring time, mutual understanding, and shared goals across education, health, and welfare sectors. To ensure sustainability, infrastructure for coordination and shared responsibility must be in place, with clear mandates and tools. Curricula should be treated as evolving frameworks, co-constructed and informed by practice. Finally, political and strategic support is vital. Policymakers must be equipped to understand and shape education systems, and aspirations must be grounded in clear, actionable policy frameworks.