European Education Area Strategic Framework

Working Group on Schools, Sub-group on Pathways to School Success

Input paper: The Pathways to School Success initiative

The Pathways to School Success initiative

1. The context

The importance of ensuring better educational outcomes for all learners has long been recognised at the highest EU political and strategic levels[1]. **Raising the level of proficiency in basic skills** (literacy, mathematics and science) and **reducing early leaving from education and training** feature prominently among the EU strategic priorities outlined in the new strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)[2] and its accompanying EU-level targets. In particular, Member States have agreed that by 2030 the share of low-achieving 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15% and committed to reducing the share of early leavers from education and training to less than 9%.

Despite sustained efforts and improvements, underachieving in basic skills and early leaving from education and training continue to be two important challenges in the EU.

- The early leaving from education and training rate has steadily decreased in the EU over past years, but considerable differences still exist across and within countries and inequalities persist among specific population groups (e.g. migrants, young men, learners living in rural areas). Today, **early leavers represent 9.9% of young people** (18-24 years old) in the EU and only 84.3% (of the 20-24 years old) have completed upper secondary education.

- The results of the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 reveal a deteriorating trend in the performance in basic skills over the period 2009-2018. Today **one in five 15-year old Europeans still lack adequate reading, maths or science competences**. The results of the International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS)[3] 2018 show that a fifth of young people in the EU do not possess basic digital skills.

The latest PISA results also indicate that **pupils' sense of belonging at school is declining and bullying/cyberbullying is widespread**. Research underlines that school bullying has devastating consequences on learners' health and academic achievements and increases the risk of leaving school prematurely[4]

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[1] In line with existing literature and policy development, educational outcomes are defined here in terms of both **educational attainment** and **educational achievement**. Educational **attainment** refers to the successful completion of specific education levels while **achievement** focus on learners' learning progress and on their actual functional literacy, like reading, writing and numeracy abilities. In the context of Pathways to School Success, attainment is measured by the EU indicator on the early leavers from education and training – ELET and by the complementary indicator on upper secondary completion, while achievement is measured through the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which shows 15 year-olds' ability to use their basic skills (reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills) to meet real-life challenges,

[2] Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030) of 19 February 2021, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/document-library/council-resolution-strategic-framework-european-cooperation-towards--european-education-area-2021-2030_en

[3] https://www.iea.nl/news-events/news/icils-2018-results

[4] Around 20% of school children are experiencing mental health problems during their school years, in particular anxiety and depression, with heavy consequences on their educational performance and general well-being. Schools and teachers are not sufficiently prepared to deal with these issues. See https://www.oecd-forum.org/posts/can-children-believe-in-us-to-invest-in-mental-health

Poverty and socio-economic factors, as well as discrimination, continue to be the strongest determinant of educational achievement and attainment, and a poor social, economic and cultural status contributes to lack of well-being and mental health issues.

The **Covid-19 crisis** had made these challenges even more urgent, as its consequences have hit the most vulnerable students the hardest. Existing inequalities have been exacerbated and new ones have emerged[5]. As a result, the share of underperforming students in Europe is likely to have risen considerably during the pandemic. Similarly, the rate of early leavers from education and training is expected to increase in the coming years, even though this will only be reflected in statistics in a few years[6].

These trends clearly show that it is not enough to ensure that young people remain in education if, after obtaining an upper secondary qualification, they do not possess at least a minimum level of basic skills and key competences necessary to thrive in work and in life. At the same time, they indicate that it is not enough to retain young people in school if their school environment is not safe and supportive enough, since this can have detrimental effects on their mental health and well-being and, ultimately on their educational outcomes.

In this context, **reducing early leaving** from education and training, albeit an important objective, **must be complemented with actions targeted at tackling underachievement in basic skills, improving student well-being and mental health**, and **promoting young people's social and emotional competence**.

2. Lessons learnt

Extensive work has already been done at European and national level, in particular following the adoption of the 2011 Council Recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving, the 2015 Council Conclusions on reducing early school leaving and promoting success in school and the 2018 Council Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning. Since then, many earlier findings have been detailed and complemented through peer learning and exchanges of good practices between Member States. A wide range of resources and examples of successful measures have been made available online through the European Toolkit for Schools , the Compendium of Inspiring Practices on Inclusive and Citizenship Education and Cedefop's VET toolkit for tackling early leaving and Inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices .

An independent assessment of the implementation of the 2011 Council Recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving draws an overall positive picture regarding the impact and influence of the 2011 Council Recommendation and associated EU policy instruments (monitoring and reporting mechanisms, mutual learning and collaboration between Member

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[5] Several studies suggest that the crisis and the prolonged physical school closures witnessed in this period have hindered learners' progression and increased the likelihood for those at risk of disconnecting from school to actually drop out, while at the same time having detrimental effects on their mental health and well-being. Socio-economically marginalised children, that already had lower average achievements before the pandemic, are the ones that were likely to suffer most during the lockdowns.

[6] According to the European Statistical Recovery Dashboard, the proportion of young people neither in employment nor in education or training (NEET) has increased since the beginning of the pandemic from the historical low of approximately 12.5% at the end of 2019 to over 14,6% by mid-2020. After a slight improvement, the rate has increased again reaching 13.8% in the first quarter 2021.

States, funding, in particular through Erasmus+ and the European Structural and Investment Funds, investment in research and dissemination). It concludes that the implementation of the Council Recommendation has contributed to a decrease of the rate of early leavers at EU level. However, the assessment also highlighted some gaps and areas in which further work is needed, calling for comprehensive and integrated policies, a stronger focus on prevention, enhanced cross-sectorial cooperation and dialogue with stakeholders, as well as addressing well-being, including the voice of key stakeholders and promoting a systemic, whole school approach.

3. Pathways to School Success

The European Commission is going to submit a proposal for a Council Recommendation on 'Pathways to school success' in the first semester 2022. The proposal will outline policy guidance for Member States on concrete strategies and actions based on research to support all children and young people in completing their education successfully and obtaining the required academic and social and emotional competences in order to lead productive, active, healthy and happy lives as EU citizens.

This new initiative builds on the 2011 Council Recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving, on policy cooperation with Member States, extensive consultation with Members States, stakeholders, researchers and practitioners, as well as on the latest insights from research. It also tries to establish synergies with other Council Recommendations and Commission initiatives.

Compared to the 2011 Council Recommendation, Pathways to School Success proposes a broader vision for promoting positive system change for inclusion and aims at addressing simultaneously the two ET2030 EU-level targets on basic skills and early leaving from education and training and at promoting well-being at school. Promoting inclusion at systems level involves framing these objectives in positive terms as three intertwined conditions - engagement, achievement and well-being - that, when enhanced simultaneously, promote better educational outcomes for all children and young people and increase their chances to succeed in education and in life.

4. A new framework for action

The proposed Recommendation will include a **new framework for action,** outlining a set of policy measures, which include monitoring, prevention, intervention and compensation (with a stronger focus on prevention and early intervention).

Key principles:

- A **broad and inclusive vision of school success**, addressing simultaneously the existing challenges (underachievement and early leaving from education and training) and fully embedding the well-being dimension;
- **A systemic approach to school success at all levels** (whole school, whole-system approaches); based on cross-disciplinarity, partnership and cooperation between all actors and levels of actions and addressing all the dimensions that may have an impact on the entire learning experience;
- Focusing on all **actors** (Ministries, local authorities, NGOs, school leaders and teachers, parents and carers, learners) and on the **levels of action** (EU level, national/regional, local, school, classroom level) and the connections between them;
- Combining **universal approaches** that promote quality education for all with additional **targeted** actions to address the specific needs of learners who share similar difficulties and more **individualised measures** for those with complex needs;
- A specific focus on the **most vulnerable groups** and learners with multiple and complex needs;
- Need for **overarching integrated strategy at national/regional level** (as appropriate) supported by effective data collection and monitoring and including a mix of prevention, intervention and compensation measures.

THE 'PATHWAYS TO SCHOOL SUCCESS' APPROACH

- Integrated and comprehensive strategy
- Data collection and monitoring
- National authorities
- EU-level support

- Community outreach
- Outdoor activites
- Social services
- Youth services
- Sports centres
- Outreach care workers
- Psychologists
- Nurses
- Speech & language therapists

- Aprenticeships
- Social and emotional support
- Career Guidance specialists
- Local authorities
- NGO's
- Unions
- Volunteers
- Businesses
- Libraries, museums

KEY ENABLERS

SYSTEM LEVEL

LOCAL LEVEL

SCHOOL LEVEL

Teachers
Trainers

Learners

Aimed at improving:

ENGAGEMENT

WELL-BEING   ACHIEVEMENT

Benefiting from measures of different type and reach:
- Prevention, intervention, compensation
- Universal, targeted, individualised

- Anti-segregation
- Inclusion in mainstream education
- High quality ECEC
- Language Awareness in schools
- Blended learning
- Ministries
- National agencies

- Grade Repetition
- Transitions
- Permeability of educational pathways
- High quality VET
- Link with employment
- Teacher education and training (ITE and CPD)

- Social & emotional learning
- Bullying prevention
- Support for disadvantaged learners
- Learner-centered curriculum and assessment
- School Leaders

- Multi-disciplinary practices
- Networking between schools
- Communication and engagement with families
- Other educational and professional staff
- Parents and families

LEGEND
- Areas for action and issues
- Actors
- Level of action