



## Early School Leaving: EU Recommendations and International Experience<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

The phenomenon of early school leaving has increasingly preoccupied education policy-makers in many countries in recent years. Their interest is linked to the fact that reducing the proportion of early school leavers is a particular education policy aim of the European Union: the Europe 2020 strategy includes a target of reducing the proportion of early school leavers to below 10% by 2020. Across the EU – in significant measure due to education policy efforts – the proportion of early school leavers has been in steady decline since 2000: from 17.6% in 2000 to 14.9% by 2008, 13.5% by 2011 and 12.9% by 2012. This last figure is still large in EU terms, representing 5.5 million young people. In 2012, 54.8% of young people classified as early school leavers were unemployed, as against the EU average of 22.8% for youth unemployment.

The degree of international attention paid to early school leaving is indicated by the publication of several detailed analyses of the problem in recent years, and by the setting up of the EU's Thematic Working Group on Early School Leaving to support education policy in the member states. This working group first met in December 2011, and produced its final report and recommendations in November 2013, at the end of its two-year mandate. The following is a brief summary of this report.

### Definitions and trends

The term "early school leavers" is used in the EU to describe those who have lower intermediate level qualifications or below, and have left education or training.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> What follows is a short version of the forthcoming report detailing international experiences. It is based primarily on the documents and findings of the Thematic Working Group on Early School Leaving, in particular the final report on the group's two-year project: Reducing Early School Leaving. Key Messages and Policy Support. Final Report of the Thematic Working Group on Early School Leaving, October 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Council recommendation, 28 June 2011 (1)

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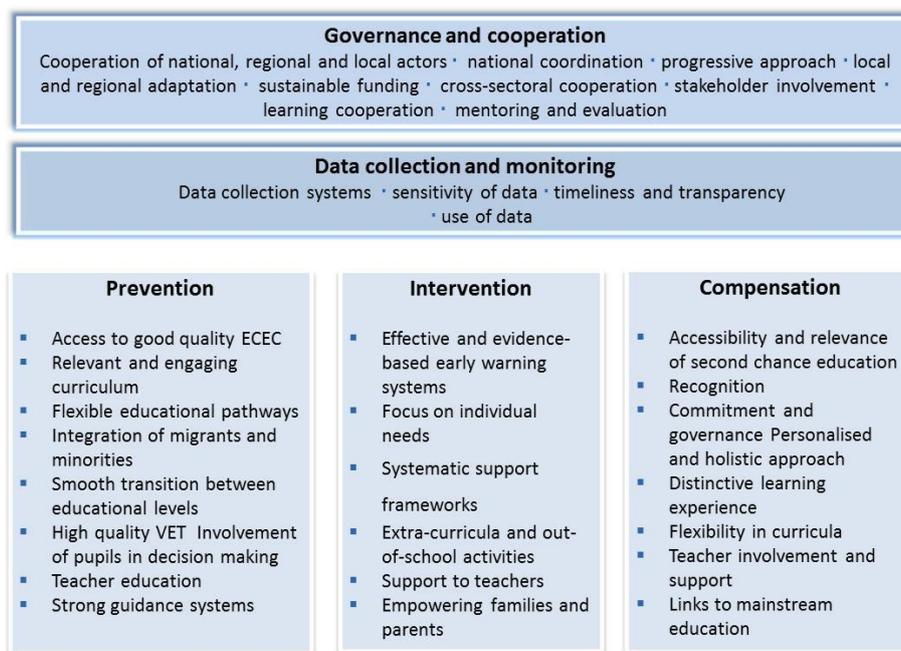


## Requirements for a successful policy to combat early school leaving

Early school leaving is a complex phenomenon which affects many areas outside the education and training system. Opportunities for intervention in these areas are limited, and it is extremely difficult to achieve lasting results. The following proposals are limited to the education and training systems.

Measures to reduce the number and the proportion of early school leavers should be targeted not only at those directly affected, but should involve the whole education and training system. In the case of education systems, there may be a need for fundamental changes which focus attention on those learning within the system, with schools becoming places which offer them security and support, and teachers having the necessary skills and autonomy to facilitate this.

The table below shows the most important elements of the comprehensive policy recommended by the European Union.



### Governance

An effective policy targets every level of the education system, and has an inter-sector approach which involves experts from other areas (e.g. youth and social policy, health, employment) in the development process.

In order to develop a comprehensive policy, there is a need for long-term commitment and continuity in governance, and for the development of vertical coordination between the various levels and horizontal coordination between the various actors. It is also important to make both the actors and the public aware of the importance of the issue.

A national-level strategy is important in order to develop and maintain coherence in interventions, and for better exploitation of resources and exchange of experiences. Such a strategy can help with the division of roles between national, regional and local levels, and promote coordination within the overall strategy. Some important elements in a comprehensive and sustainable strategy are:

- Coordinating body
- Progressive approach
- Principle of subsidiarity
- Increased awareness
- Sustainable financing
- Monitoring and evaluation

### **Cooperation between sectors**

In order to tackle the issue of early school leaving, a wide range of interested parties should be actively and responsibly involved at regional, local and institutional level. Schools, parents, students, teachers, teaching assistants, advisory centres, trade unions, employers, experts and society are all affected, and should all be fully involved from the start. Various policy areas (e.g. employment, youth, health and social policy) can all contribute their own resources to the prevention of early school leaving.

Cooperation can take many forms at national, regional, local and institutional levels, depending on the governance and structure of the education system. It can include various forms of teamwork, networking, and cooperation between various sectors. Ideally the various forms of cooperation complement and help each other. Organising this represents a major challenge in many countries, because cooperation is typically weak or non-existent. A national-level coordinating body can provide significant support in the development and maintenance of cooperation between individual sectors and actors. Inter-sector cooperation can be built into the practice of professionals working with young people. Some important elements of successful cooperation are:

- Local level agreements between institutions
- Central role of schools
- Inter-sector cooperation
- Cooperation to support learning

### **Evidence-based policies to prevent early school leaving**

Early school leaving is a complex phenomenon, and in order to develop opportunities for intervention, precise knowledge of those affected (the target group) is extremely important, as is a clearer and deeper understanding of the reasons and processes resulting in early school leaving. In order to achieve this, data collection is required. Regular collection and analysis of data can help uncover problems, promote transparency, follow trends continuously, develop targeted and effective interventions and policy responses, and achieve aims by identifying and reaching the young people

affected. Data collection must extend to every level and type of education, including the private sector, institutions for students with special needs, and vocational training.

At the most general level, precise quantitative data are required about the number of early school leavers and of those in danger of becoming early school leavers. In order to develop suitable interventions it is also important to find out the characteristics of early school leavers (e.g. age, gender, address, home language, ethnic origin, programme on which they are enrolled, etc). It is worth paying particular attention to uncovering factors which might play a part in early school leaving (e.g. academic attainment or deviant behaviour in relation to school type or region, etc). In this regard it may also be important to interview the young people affected and find out their views. Possession and analysis of precise information will make it possible to develop targeted interventions. The specific recommendations are:

- Development of systems for data collection
- Large-scale empirical research studies
- Small-scale qualitative research studies

Experience shows that the existence of data in itself is not always enough for the development of well-founded, evidence-based education policies. Other conditions are also important, for example provision of up-to-date information on a regular basis, data security, transparency, and the method of publication. Following the publication of the data and analyses based on them, it is expedient to make a decision on the necessary interventions as soon as possible, for which it may be necessary to provide support for the local authorities, schools and affected groups.

### **Prevention, intervention, compensation**

The development of a comprehensive policy must involve the whole of the education system, and must include the development of opportunities for differentiated interventions, paying attention to opportunities both for prevention and for rapid intervention and compensation. Although preventive measures primarily work at system level and interventions at individual school level, it is often not easy to separate the two concepts. It is worth coordinating individual opportunities for intervention in an effective and transparent manner in order to avoid omissions and overlaps. An education policy which is successful at preventing early school leaving places the emphasis on preventive measures.

There are some fundamentally important principles which affect all three types of measure. First and foremost, the desire is that education should focus on the students, and that processes in schools should be developed with due attention to their individual opportunities and needs. Secondly, students need a friendly, open learning environment which offers them opportunities, builds their confidence and makes them want to learn. The third important principle is that those who work in education must be fully aware of the background and direct causes of problems associated with early school leaving.

Schools and teachers must be prepared for this, and must be provided with support to enable them to offer each student the support most suited to him or her.

### **Policies for prevention**

Policies aimed at prevention must strive to provide a stimulating learning environment within the education and training system to all students, not just those in danger of becoming early school leavers. The point of regulations aimed at prevention is to reduce the risk of students dropping out of school before the problem actually arises. Such measures optimise education and training in order to improve results and to remove barriers to success in education. Regulations aimed at prevention deal with the organisation of education and training systems, the resources available to schools, and the accessibility, feasibility and flexibility of individual learning pathways. They also deal with gender inequality and support for disadvantaged children or those with different home languages.

At system level the following structural changes and reforms may help remove barriers to attaining full secondary level qualifications:

- Providing access to high quality early years education
- Ensuring that throughout the education system the curriculum is relevant, coherent and motivating for students, is able to respond to their differing interests, and can be adapted to their ambitions
- Providing flexible learning pathways; avoiding early selection points in the education system, using targeted support instead of making students repeat a year, and giving broad access to higher intermediate level education
- Supporting the integration of migrant students
- Supporting students in the transition between different levels of education
- Developing a range of high-quality, attractive vocational training courses which offer good prospects in the employment market
- Involving students and their parents in decisions made by schools
- School-based approaches
- Training teaching staff and providing for their continuous professional development
- A strong and highly developed advisory system

### **Policies for intervention**

Policies for intervention essentially aim to deal at an early stage with problems which involve a risk of early school leaving. Regulations involving intervention aim to improve the quality of teaching and training *at institutional level*, to react to signals given by the early warning system, and to give targeted support to individual students and groups of students at risk in order to prevent them dropping out of school. They deal with every level of education, from early years to higher intermediate level. *At the level of the*

*individual*, the regulations aim to offer students at risk of dropping out of education support mechanisms which can be tailored to their individual needs. These focus both on personal development – increasing the flexibility of students at risk – and on solving any social, cognitive or emotional problems they may have.

Possible institution-level interventions:

- Early warning systems
- Paying increased attention to the students' individual needs
- Using a school-based approach
- Augmenting the range of courses on offer with extra-curricular activities
- Supporting teachers and developing the skills of the school's staff
- Giving families and parents guidance on home support for students' learning
- Making parents aware of the problem of early school leaving and of early signs to look out for

### **Policies for compensation**

The aim of compensation is to bring young people who have already dropped out back into the education system or offer them a second chance; it gives them the opportunity to return to education and obtain the qualifications they lack.

Although policies for compensation have many common elements, the opportunities they provide may differ in terms of emphasis and orientation. Some promote the acquisition of formal qualifications while others support integration with and ways into the employment market. They may also differ in terms of how and to what extent they take account of young people's individual needs. The following elements may form part of successful policies offering a second chance:

- Ensuring accessibility and relevance
- Developing a learning environment which is different from the formal education system and allows students to gain positive learning experiences
- Ending discrimination against those who obtain qualifications by alternative routes
- Commitment and strong governance open to external links
- Stimulating physical learning environment
- Individualised approach
- Flexible curriculum
- Involvement and support from teachers
- Ensuring links between institutions offering a second chance and the mainstream system

## **Summary**

Many of the EU member states working to achieve the Europe 2020 target of reducing the proportion of early school leavers to below 10% have achieved significant successes. However, the pace of change varies between countries, and in a few cases the situation worsened by 2012. The Thematic Working Group's project has confirmed the finding that in order to reduce early school leaving it is important to develop a comprehensive strategy, to maintain strong and continuous commitment, and to implement the aims on multiple levels. The report summarising the main findings of the work done between 2011 and 2013 also emphasises that work to reduce early school leaving has not stopped with the publication of the report, but will continue into the future.