



**COUNCIL OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION**

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LEGISLATIVE ACTS AND OTHER INSTRUMENTS

Subject: COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on policies to reduce early
school leaving

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION

of

on policies to reduce early school leaving

(Text with EEA relevance)

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and in particular Articles 165 and 166 thereof,

Having regard to the proposal from the European Commission,

Whereas:

- (1) The term early school leaving is used in connection with those who leave education and training with only lower secondary education or less, and who are no longer in education and training.
- (2) Reducing early school leaving is essential for achieving a number of key objectives in the Europe 2020 strategy. The reduction of early school leaving addresses both the aims for "smart growth" by improving education and training levels and the aims for "inclusive growth" by addressing one of the major risk factors for unemployment, poverty and social exclusion. The Europe 2020 strategy therefore includes the headline target to reduce early school leaving to less than 10 % by 2020, from 14,4 % in 2009. Member States have undertaken to establish national targets, taking account of their relative starting positions and national circumstances.
- (3) The Guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States, contained in Council Decision 2010/707/EU¹, for the implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy call on Member States to take all necessary efforts to prevent early school leaving.
- (4) The flagship initiative A European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion sets a framework for action to ensure social and territorial cohesion, with a specific focus on breaking the cycle of disadvantage and stepping up preventive action. It addresses the Europe 2020 headline target to lift at least 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion in the next decade.

¹ OJ L 308, 24.11.2010, p. 46.

- (5) Youth on the Move, a flagship initiative within the Europe 2020 strategy, aims to "enhance the performance and international attractiveness of Europe's higher education institutions and raise the overall quality of all levels of education and training in the EU, combining both excellence and equity, by promoting student mobility and trainees' mobility, and improve the employment situation of young people".
- (6) The Council conclusions of 5-6 May 2003 on reference levels of European average performance in education and training (benchmarks) stated that the share of early school leavers should be below 10 % by 2010, defining early school leavers as persons between 18 and 24 years old with only lower secondary education or less and no longer in education or training. The benchmark was not attained. One in seven young people currently leave education and training before they have completed upper secondary education.
- (7) The Council Resolution of 15 November 2007 on the new skills for new jobs¹ stressed the need to raise overall skill levels and to give priority to the education and training of those at risk of economic and social exclusion, particularly early school leavers. They underlined the need to provide vocational guidance and personal training plans to job seekers and to develop the validation of learning outcomes acquired through formal, informal and non-formal learning.

¹ OJ C 290, 4.12.2007, p. 1.

- (8) The Council conclusions of 22 May 2008 on adult learning recognise the role of adult learning in addressing early school leaving by offering a second chance to those who reach adulthood without a qualification, focusing especially on basic skills, IT skills and language learning.
- (9) In its conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ("ET 2020") the Council agreed that, by 2020, the share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 10 %.
- (10) The Council conclusions of 26 November 2009 on the education of children with a migrant background noted that while large numbers of children with a migrant background succeed in education, students with a migrant background are generally more likely to leave school early. For migrants the average early school leaving rate across the Union is double that of native students. Available evidence indicates that early school leaving is even higher among the Roma population.
- (11) The Council agreed in May 2010 in its conclusions on the social dimension of education and training that the successful prevention of early school leaving requires the development of knowledge about groups at risk of dropping out at local, regional and national level, and systems for identifying early individuals who are at such risk, and concluded that comprehensive and cross-sectoral strategies should be implemented, which provide a range of school-wide and systemic policies targeting the different factors leading to early school leaving.

- (12) The reasons for early school leaving differ widely from country to country and also within regions. Policies to reduce early school leaving need to be adjusted to the specific situation within a local area, region or country; there is no single solution for all Member States.
- (13) Despite the differences between countries and regions, there is strong evidence in all Member States that disadvantaged and vulnerable groups are more affected. In addition, young people with special educational needs are overrepresented among early leavers from education and training. Early school leaving both results from social disadvantage and perpetuates the risk of social exclusion.
- (14) Whilst fully respecting the principle of subsidiarity, a European framework for comprehensive policies on early school leaving can help Member States to review existing policies, to develop their National Reform Programmes under the Europe 2020 strategy, and to implement strategies with a high impact and a good cost-benefit ratio. It can also provide a basis for collaboration through the open method of coordination and a focus for the use of Union funding instruments.
- (15) Education reforms take time to have effect. In order to achieve a reduction of early school leaving rates within the next decade and reach the Europe 2020 target, comprehensive and cross-sectoral strategies on early school leaving need to be implemented as soon as possible,

HEREBY RECOMMENDS THAT MEMBER STATES:

Make use of the framework set out in the Annex to this Recommendation, according to national circumstances, in order to:

- (1) Identify the main factors leading to early school leaving and monitor the characteristics of the phenomenon at national, regional and local level as the foundation for targeted and effective evidence-based policies.
- (2) Ensure that comprehensive strategies on early school leaving are in place by the end of 2012, and that they are implemented in line with national priorities and the Europe 2020 objectives. Comprehensive strategies are taken to include prevention measures, intervention measures and compensation measures, the latter being aimed at re-engaging people who have dropped out of education.
- (3) Ensure that those strategies include appropriate measures for groups at increased risk of early school leaving in the Member State, such as children with a socio-economically disadvantaged, migrant or Roma background, or with special educational needs.
- (4) Ensure that those strategies address in a coherent manner both general education and vocational education and training, and the challenges specific to each.
- (5) Integrate measures which support the reduction of early school leaving rates in relevant policies targeted at children and young people, and coordinate activities among different policy sectors.

- (6) Whilst acknowledging the key role played by teachers, school leaders and other educational staff, ensure the involvement in those measures and activities of all relevant stakeholders to help people who are at risk of early school leaving, including those who have dropped out already.

INVITES THE COMMISSION:

- (1) Within the ET 2020, to contribute to the efforts made by Member States by monitoring developments at different education levels across Member States in order to identify trends.
- (2) To support Member States' strategies through the exchange of experience and good practice, and to facilitate effective peer-learning, networking and experimentation with innovative approaches among the Member States on measures aimed at reducing early school leaving and improving the educational outcomes of children from groups at risk of early school leaving.
- (3) To integrate measures which support the reduction of early school leaving rates in all relevant Union actions targeted at children and young adults.
- (4) To support the development of effective policies against early school leaving by launching comparative studies and research, and to encourage cooperation between the Member States in this area.

- (5) To ensure, in cooperation with the Member States, and without prejudice to the negotiations on the future financial framework, that the Union programmes in the fields of lifelong learning, youth and research, as well as the European Structural Funds, support and contribute to the implementation of Member States' strategies on early school leaving.
- (6) To report periodically on the progress towards the Europe 2020 target and on the implementation of Member States' strategies on early school leaving through the Annual Growth Survey and within the reporting arrangements under the ET 2020.

Done at ...,

For the Council
The President

ANNEX

A framework for comprehensive policies to reduce early school leaving

Strategies on early school leaving should be based on an analysis at national, regional and local level of the conditions leading to the phenomenon, as average rates often mask large differences between different regions or countries. Early school leavers are a heterogeneous group and individual motivations to leave education prematurely differ widely. Family background and wider socio-economic conditions such as pull from the labour market are important factors. Their impact is conditioned by the structure of the education and training system, by available learning opportunities, and by the learning environment. The coordination of policies addressing the well-being of children and young people, social security, youth employment and future career perspectives has an important role to play in reducing early school leaving.

1. Identification of main factors and monitoring

Early school leaving processes have complex and varied causes, but are often linked to socio-economic disadvantage, to low education backgrounds, to alienation from or poor achievement in education and training, to pull factors from the labour market, and/or to a combination of social, emotional and educational problems putting individuals at risk of dropping-out.

Account needs to be taken of the type of education in which students are enrolled. In some Member States, students who have encountered difficulties in general education often go into vocational education and training ("VET"). In such cases, vocational schools face a particular responsibility and challenge with respect to the reduction of early school leaving. Evidence-based policies require that particular attention be given to performance by sector of education or training.

The development of evidence-based and cost-effective policies to combat early school leaving requires gathering and maintaining data on the phenomenon. This should allow analysis at local, regional and national levels. It may contain information on early school leaving rates, on transitions between educational levels, enrolment rates and completion rates of upper secondary education, as well as on school absenteeism and school-avoiding behaviour.

- Collection of information should allow for the analysis of the main reasons underlying early school leaving for different groups of pupils, schools, types of education and training institution, municipalities or regions.
- The combination of data on early school leaving and contextual data such as socio-economic information can help in the targeting of measures and policies. Gathering and analysing information on the motivation of early school leavers, their employment and career perspectives can also help in the targeting of measures and policies.
- Evaluation of the effectiveness and efficiency of existing policy measures aimed at reducing early school leaving is an important basis for improving strategies and programmes for increasing pupils' chances of school success.

2. Policy framework

Comprehensive strategies on early school leaving comprise a mix of policies, coordination across different policy sectors and the integration of measures supporting the reduction of early school leaving into all relevant policies aimed at children and young people. In addition to education policies that promote high-quality school systems, these are principally social policy and support services, employment, youth, family, and integration policies. Horizontal coordination between different actors and vertical coordination through different levels of government are equally important. Strategies on early school leaving should comprise prevention, intervention and compensation elements.

Member States should select the detailed components of their strategies according to their own circumstances and contexts.

2.1 PREVENTION POLICIES aim to reduce the risk of early school leaving before problems start. Such measures optimise the provision of education and training in order to support better learning outcomes and to remove obstacles to educational success.

They aim to lay a solid early foundation for children to develop their potential and to integrate well into schools. Prevention policies could include:

- (1) Providing high-quality early childhood education and care is beneficial for all children and especially relevant for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, including migrants and Roma. It enhances physical well-being, social and emotional development, language and basic cognitive skills. Provision should be high-quality, affordable, adequately staffed and accessible to families with a disadvantaged background.

They address the organisation of education and training systems, the resources available to schools, the availability, permeability and flexibility of educational pathways. They also address the gender gap, the support of children from disadvantaged backgrounds or with a different mother tongue. Prevention policies could further include:

- (2) Increasing the educational offer by providing education and training opportunities beyond the age of compulsory education can influence the behaviour of young people and their families and lead to higher rates of completion of upper secondary qualifications.
- (3) Promoting active anti-segregation policies and providing additional support for schools in disadvantaged areas or with high numbers of pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds help them to diversify their social composition and enhance their educational offer. This improves the educational achievements of pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and reduces their risk of early school leaving.
- (4) Emphasising the value of linguistic diversity and supporting children with a different mother tongue to improve their proficiency in the language of instruction and, where appropriate, in the mother tongue, as well as supporting teachers to teach children with different levels of linguistic competence, can improve the educational achievements of children with migrant background and reduce their risk of early school leaving.

- (5) Enhancing the involvement of parents, reinforcing their cooperation with the school and creating partnerships between schools and parents can increase learning motivation among pupils.
- (6) Increasing the flexibility and permeability of educational pathways, for example by modularising courses or alternating school and work, supports in particular pupils with lower academic performance, and can motivate them to continue education and training which is better adapted to their needs and abilities. It also helps to address gender-specific reasons for early school leaving, such as joining the labour market early or teenage pregnancy. In addition, limiting the repetition of school years and replacing this with flexible individual support has been associated with lower early school leaving.
- (7) Strengthening high-quality vocational pathways and increasing their attractiveness and flexibility provide pupils at risk with credible alternatives to early school leaving. VET provision which is well integrated into the overall education and training systems allows for alternative pathways into upper secondary and tertiary education.
- (8) Strengthening the link between education and training systems and the employment sector, in order to emphasise the benefits of completing education for future employability. This could be in the form of work experience placements or greater employer engagement in schools and colleges.

2.2 INTERVENTION POLICIES aim to avoid early school leaving by improving the quality of education and training at the level of the educational institutions, by reacting to early warning signs and by providing targeted support to pupils or groups of pupils at risk of early school leaving. They address all educational levels, starting from early childhood education and care to upper secondary education.

At the level of the school or training institution strategies against early school leaving are embedded in an overall school development policy. They aim at creating a positive learning environment, reinforcing pedagogical quality and innovation, enhancing teaching staff competences to deal with social and cultural diversity, and developing anti-violence and anti-bullying approaches. Intervention policies at the level of the school or training institution could include:

- (1) Developing schools into learning communities based on a common vision for school development shared by all stakeholders, using the experience and knowledge of all, and providing an open-minded, inspiring and comfortable environment to encourage young people to continue in education and training.
- (2) Developing early-warning systems for pupils at risk, which can help to take effective measures before problems become manifest, pupils start to alienate from school, play truant or drop out.

- (3) Networking with parents and other actors outside school, such as local community services, organisations representing migrants or minorities, sports and culture associations, or employers and civil society organisations, which allows for holistic solutions to help pupils at risk and eases the access to external support such as psychologists, social and youth workers, cultural and community services. This can be facilitated by mediators from the local community who are able to support communication and to reduce distrust.
- (4) Supporting and empowering teachers in their work with pupils at risk, which is a pre-requisite for successful measures at school level. Initial teacher education and continuous professional development for teachers and school leaders help them to deal with diversity in the classroom, to support pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and to solve difficult teaching situations.
- (5) Extra-curricular activities after and outside school and artistic, cultural and sport activities, which can raise the self-esteem of pupils at risk and increase their resilience against difficulties in their learning.

Intervention policies at individual level aim to provide a set of support mechanisms for individual students at risk of dropping-out which can be tailored to their needs. They focus both on personal development in order to build resilience for students at risk, and on redressing concrete difficulties which can be of a social, cognitive or emotional nature.

Intervention policies at individual level could include:

- (1) Mentoring supports individual pupils to overcome specific academic, social or personal difficulties. Either in one-to-one approaches (mentoring) or in small groups (tutoring), pupils receive targeted assistance, often provided by education staff by community members or by their peers.
- (2) Tailoring teaching to pupils' needs, strengthening individualised learning approaches and providing support for pupils at risk helps them to adapt to the demands of formal education and to overcome barriers created by the education and training system, and can thus contribute to limiting the repetition of school years.
- (3) Strengthening guidance and counselling supports students' career choices, transitions within education or from education to employment. It reduces poor decision-making based on false expectations or insufficient information. It helps young people to make choices which meet their ambitions, personal interests and talents.
- (4) Ensuring that young people whose economic circumstances may result in their dropping out of education are given access to appropriate financial support. Where considered appropriate, such support might be subject to conditions or might be linked to social benefits.

2.3 COMPENSATION POLICIES aim to help those who left school prematurely to re-engage in education, offering routes to re-enter education and training and gain the qualifications they missed. Compensation policies could include:

- (1) Successful second chance education programmes, which provide learning environments which respond to the specific needs of early school leavers, recognise their prior learning and support their well-being. These programmes are different from schools in both organisational and pedagogical approaches and are often characterised by small learning groups, by personalised, age-appropriate and innovative teaching and by flexible educational pathways. As far as possible, they should be easily accessible and free of charge.
- (2) Various routes back into mainstream education and training, the provision of which is important. Transition classes with a strong emphasis on guidance can help to bridge the gap between previous school failure and re-entering mainstream education.

- (3) Recognising and validating prior learning, including competences achieved in non-formal and informal learning, which improves the confidence and self-esteem of young people and facilitates their re-entry into education. It can motivate them to continue education and training, helps them to identify their talents and to make better career choices.
 - (4) Targeted individual support, which integrates social, financial, educational and psychological support for young people in difficulties. It is especially important for young people in situations of serious social or emotional distress which hinders them from continuing education or training.
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