



STATEMENTS on 'Early School Leaving'

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EUNEC

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STATEMENTS

1 Early school leaving can be the ending point of a complex educational, personal and societal development

A lack of qualifications penalizes life opportunities on the long term from different angles. One of the causes of a low level of qualifications is early school leaving.

Low qualification levels lead towards weaker job prospects and lower incomes over the whole life span. It results in taking up less learning opportunities and thus endangers the further personal and professional development. People meet more difficulties to participate and assume civic responsibilities in the modern society. Educational failure imposes also high costs to society. It limits the capacity for economic innovation and development, damages social cohesion and imposes additional costs on public budgets when dealing with the social consequences of school failure.

Early school leaving is a phenomenon that can be described from different perspectives. In these statements EUNEC considers early school leaving from a holistic perspective. The focus is on the effect of early school leaving (poor competence levels) and on the different processes related to learning difficulties and school defiance. Early school leaving is one amongst other manifestations of inadequate socialization processes and school failure. For most pupils it is part of many multilevel and multidimensional problems. Being at school without real learning outcomes is a worrying consequence of

the same problem.

From an **education perspective** early school leaving is one aspect of a broader process of school failure. School failure can be defined as when a school system fails to provide services leading to successful student learning, or when a student is failing to advance to the next grade, and eventually becomes a dropout, both aspects being intrinsically linked (OECD, 2010). Other aspects of school failure are grade retention and lack of substantial learning outcomes. Dead ends in learning pathways and early tracking linked to a lack of social esteem for vocational pathways harm motivation and commitment of students.

Early school leaving is an ending point of a process of pupils letting the school patterns go. This process is caused by a combination of

- accidents in a pupil's personal life and characteristics of his personality;
- push and pulls factors in the school system;
- features rooted in the social, economic and cultural background.

The concrete incident that causes early school leaving is the culmination point of more fundamental and longer lasting phenomena. This is certainly the case if the education system puts the accent on learning or personal deficits. Early school leaving is a process of dropping out from the point of view of the pupil; it is a process of pushing out from the perspective of the education system.

From **the labor market perspective** a student's choice to leave the school system, can be a rational choice for another career development, a choice for quick gains on the short term. This becomes more rational in the case the school system can no longer guarantee more or broader learning outcomes. The labor market can also offer new learning opportunities by breaking with a school approach and offering settings to learn on a non-formal and informal basis. A workplace based approach can be an alternative for formal professional development.

From **the perspective of the individual** early school leaving can be a rational choice or the ending of a process of loss of perspective. If the individual experiences a continuing chain of failure, of being not able to experience success and a deficit approach, he loses motivation and enthusiasm to learn and to grow. In some cases there is an overlap between early school leaving and special educational needs. For other students there is a deep socio-cultural rift between the culture at home and the school culture and language. In every case school leaving has severe psychological impact and it induces a culture of social deprivation (the perception to be a "loser").

From **the perspective of the society** early school leaving has roots in social deprivation and causes deprivation. It is linked to social problems and lack of perspectives in some isolated regions and/or the characteristics of major cities.

2 High quality and inclusive education is the best prevention

It is obvious that prevention of early school leaving and learning thresholds should be at the heart of every policy.

Prevention is a better option than to cure the deficits by intervention and compensation because it effects less the development and identity of the learner, his future chances. It is also more cost efficient from the point of the society. This is the fact from the perspective of the cost efficiency of educational resources, from a macro-economic perspective of societal cost and from the perspective of the individual and his chances on

participation in different aspects of the society.

Prevention is above all offering good quality education provisions to all learners. Mainstreaming and inclusion of all learners is a main strategic objective for schools and other educational provisions. Building inclusive education settings with high quality means that education systems have to overcome sterile structural debates and improve school climate, class climate, learning process. Raising the level of learning of all learners despite of their personal characteristics (special education needs), SES background and life path is at the heart of prevention of early school leaving. Prevention is also based on a wide scope of learning opportunities, including attractive and highly respected vocational education and training. As long as vocational pathways are seen as second choice and as of a lower prestige, pupils will lose interest, wellbeing, self-esteem and commitment necessary for effective learning.

Good quality education focuses on a strong and challenging curriculum appealing towards different talents of learners. But a major factor that keeps students on board at school is the perception of relevance and meaningfulness of the competences learned for the future life and different experiences of success.

For these reasons the curriculum construction is a balance between a development oriented approach and compelling aims. The following aspects are part of such curriculum development. A high level of proficiency in literacy/numeracy is the basis. But these functional approaches are not enough. To function in our society on a durable basis pupils need a mastery of the different fields in key competences. For EUNEC members 'Bildung' should be the outcome of all ambitious curriculum development. 'Bildung' is both content (reference framework) and process (pupils will discover for themselves what they consider to be of value). In that sense extracurricular activities in different sectors offer opportunities for a broad development of the pupil and stimulate multiple forms of intelligence and talents. Professional qualifications and learning by creating or manufacturing offer alternative and for some pupils very motivating strands to learn, to develop and to grow.

But a challenging curriculum is only one aspect of a quality strategy of education and of schools. The learning climate, the school organization and the interaction between teachers and learners should contribute to motivation and commitment of learners to their learning and development process. Reflection and self-steering competences need to be developed.

Schools and teachers should facilitate learning processes balancing between challenges and high expectations on the one hand and a realistic and feasible approach on the other hand.

3 Inclusion and intervention at a very early stage

Prevention in the sense of good education is not enough. The preventive action should be closely linked to a policy to pick up early signals of pupils in danger of disconnecting with school and/or learning and of early intervention. It is important to consider both the pull and the push mechanisms within the school to react adequately to these early warnings. Sometimes a policy to tackle early school leaving is too exclusively focused on the factors that initiate problems instead of focusing on the factors that enhance the (intrinsic) motivation of students. For EUNEC it is clear that schools should pay more attention to learning and improvement of learning rather than on the output as such. Learning

environments based on the needs of the pupil might be a solution for students with special needs or students at risk. Different countries have realized improvement with stimuli for extracurricular activities and learning outside the school setting (e.g. work place based learning).

This approach should be systemic and coherent and involve all aspects of the school environment. This approach has to be focused on the school level but have an impact at the individual level of students at risk.

Therefore schools need to build strong guidance and counseling provisions. These provisions are aimed at the whole person of the pupil and support pupils to deal with social problems, emotional and mental health, learning and life choices (study, HE, labor market). Guidance should mediate between the pupil and his needs, the school system and the welfare services supporting the families. A strong guidance and intervention system is also relevant to combine and redefine learning pathways to relevant qualifications.

This counseling and intervention policy should be an obligation for the whole school team. It is not realistic to expect this competence level of every individual teacher. It is part of the human resources policy of the school to attract competent staff members to underpin this approach.

4 Compensatory policies

Once the school is left, it is necessary to tackle the consequences within a global concept of LLL policies. Every country needs second learning facilities to reconnect pupils with learning. This goes beyond learning at school. Because of a negative spiral of experiences of early school leavers, creating other learning facilities out of the traditional school context is necessary: work based learning, time-out settings, ICT related learning.

EUNEC insists on the need for compensatory policies that aim at different perspectives of education both to get a relevant qualification and to reach a relevant level of competence to function at a satisfactory level in social life. Durable social integration is based on numeracy, literacy and key competences such as entrepreneurial skills, reflection, learning to learn and to develop, flexibility.

5 How to realize these key policy lines?

5.1 A broad understanding of quality improvement and school accountability

Quality is more than competence levels, more than academic achievement levels. It should embrace the wellbeing of learners, their development, their inclusion and social promotion and emancipation and lead to a preventive mainstream education policy. The commitment of the school to early interventions and to keep learners on board should be valorized at the same level as academic achievement.

This quality concept should be considered as a mission statement that colors all aspects of school life including planning, didactic processes and evaluation, class organization and school climate, relationship and interaction between members of a school team and between teachers and pupils.

It is necessary to translate these strategic options into concepts of quality and of quality

assurance. School quality in this approach is very related to school autonomy and the schools project. The school teams, the national quality assurance agencies (e.g. inspectorate) and the broader society need to invest in a broad common understanding of quality as a balance of high standards and developmental needs of children. It should be integrated in the models, reference frameworks and instruments used by national quality assurance agencies.

5.2 Teacher professionalism remains a key factor

There is hardly a policy debate on innovation in education that can ignore the competences of teachers as a crucial and undeniable factor of success. This is certainly the case for adequate policies on early school leaving and school failure. A warm and supportive relationship between teachers and pupils is identified as one of the most powerful instruments to keep students at risk on board. Teachers should have strong diagnostic competencies to identify thresholds in the learning process and development of a pupil. Dealing with cultural diversity and multiple identities is also a key competence.

Within the roles of the "teacher" it is better not to put all the pressure on one person but to develop a team oriented human resources policy. Competency profiles of teachers should define the role of teachers as part of school teams. Schools should dispose of the autonomy to define a specific HRM-policy that suits the school culture and the project of the school. In this regard investing in high quality school leadership is a necessity.

But innovative teachers practice requires professional autonomy. Teachers should share a common understanding of didactic and pedagogic approaches at school level. They need the space to adapt their acting to the specific environment, context and needs of pupils. Autonomy and shared responsibilities should become more balanced.

Investing in the reduction of early school leaving and the underlying concept of inclusiveness and quality in schools requires strong teacher training (both initial and in service training). There is an urgent need to close the gap between educational research and school practice. Teachers should become more reflective practitioners.

5.3 Participatory policies

A common understanding of what is going on in the hampering development of youngsters is essential for prevention, early intervention and inclusive school policies. The sense giving of youngsters to what is happening in their lives offers solid starting points for every effective support.

Parents are the key persons in the child's life and they are privileged witnesses of problems of children. Their motivational role cannot be overestimated. Therefore an effective school policy should be based on a partnership between schools, pupils and parents and social actors. A common commitment is essential for success.

5.4 A common commitment to a sustainable social policy

Tackling early school leaving should be part of a multi-institutional and inter-institutional approach that puts the school in the center of a chain of public and social services. It is about a common approach between the society outside the school and the community within the school. Family and social services, community centers and labor market services are involved. An effective policy to reduce early school leaving calls for an active commitment of social partners. Employers should become more aware of their responsibility for sustainable employability of youngsters attracted to quick wins at the labor market.

But this collaboration should not hinder the pedagogic and developmental approach of schools. Schools are no community centers or labor market actors as such: the educational focus is the main one. Social or psychological assistance are subsequent to these missions. A good understanding of each other's professionalism is the basis for a sound collaboration.