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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

Tackling early school leaving: A key contribution to the Europe 2020 Agenda

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Tackling early school leaving: A key contribution to the Europe 2020 Agenda

Early school leaving¹ is a complex phenomenon and reducing it requires strong political commitment. This Communication analyzes the impact of early school leaving on individuals, society and economies, outlines its causes, and gives an overview on the existing and forthcoming EU-level measures to tackle it. It is accompanied by a proposal for a Council Recommendation and by a Staff Working Document that present a framework for comprehensive policy approaches which Member States can use for effective policies in reducing early school leaving, and detailed examples of actual policy measures.

1. EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING HINDERS SMART, SUSTAINABLE AND INCLUSIVE GROWTH

Europe's future depends largely on its young people. Through its **Europe 2020 strategy**, the European Union aims to support young people better and to enable them to fully develop their talents to their own as well as to their economy's and society's benefit. One of the headline targets agreed by the European Council is to reduce the share of early school leavers to less than 10% and to ensure that at least 40% of the younger generation have a tertiary qualification or equivalent². Improving the educational achievement of young people addresses both the aims for 'smart growth' by improving skills levels and for 'inclusive growth' by tackling one of the major risk factors for unemployment and poverty.

'**Youth on the Move**'³, one of the Europe 2020 flagship initiatives, emphasises the need to improve quality and equity in education and training, to provide more young people with the skills to become lifelong learners and the chance to experience learning mobility. Drastically reducing the numbers of young people leaving school early is a key investment not only in the prospects of each and every one of its young people but also in the future prosperity and social cohesion of the EU in general.

Reducing early school leaving is also a gateway to reaching other Europe 2020 targets. By impacting directly on the employability of young people, it contributes to increasing integration into the labour market and so to the achievement of the headline target of 75% employment rate for women and men aged 20 to 64. At the same time, it is a significant contribution to breaking the cycle of deprivation which leads to the social exclusion of so many young people. It is therefore a key measure in reaching the target of lifting at least 20 million people out of the risk of poverty⁴.

In 2009 more than six million young people, 14.4% of all 18 to 24 year olds, left education and training with only lower secondary education or less. Even more worrying, 17.4% of

¹ The term 'Early School Leaving' includes all forms of leaving education and training before completing upper secondary education or equivalents in vocational education and training.

² COM(2010) 2020.

³ COM(2010) 477.

⁴ Conclusions of the European Council, 25/26 March 2010.

them completed only primary education⁵. Early school leaving represents missed opportunities for young people and a loss of social and economic potential for the European Union as a whole.

At **individual level** the consequences of early school leaving affect people throughout their lives, and reduce their chance to participate in the social, cultural and economic dimensions of society. It increases their individual risk of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion. It affects their lifetime earnings, their wellbeing and their own health and that of their children. And it reduces their children's chances of succeeding at school.

Youth unemployment is running currently at 20.0%⁶ and early school leaving contributes directly to it. Employability depends strongly on the level of qualification achieved. In 2009, 52% of early school leavers in the EU were unemployed or outside the labour market⁷. Even when they are in work, they earn less, tend to be in more precarious jobs, and are more often dependent on social assistance. They participate less in lifelong learning and thus re-training. Their educational disadvantage can create a growing handicap for them.

At the **level of economy and society at large**, high early school leaving rates have long-term effects on the societal developments and on economic growth. Early leavers tend to participate less in democratic processes and are less active citizens⁸. Innovation and growth rely on a skilled labour force, not only for high-technology sectors but throughout the economy. The Europe 2020 flagship initiative 'An agenda for new skills and jobs' stresses the need to empower people by developing their skills throughout life and to increase labour market participation. **To reduce the average European early school leaving rate by just 1 percentage point would provide the European economy each year with nearly half a million additional qualified potential young employees.**

Since 2000 the average European early school leaving rate has declined by 3.2 percentage points, but progress has been insufficient to reach the 10% target by 2010 as initially agreed within the Council. In addition, the average masks large differences between Member States. Seven Member States have already achieved the 10% benchmark, while three have rates higher than 30%. Looking at the relative performance of Member States, there are reasons for optimism. All but three have reduced their rates of early school leaving since 2000, some very significantly.

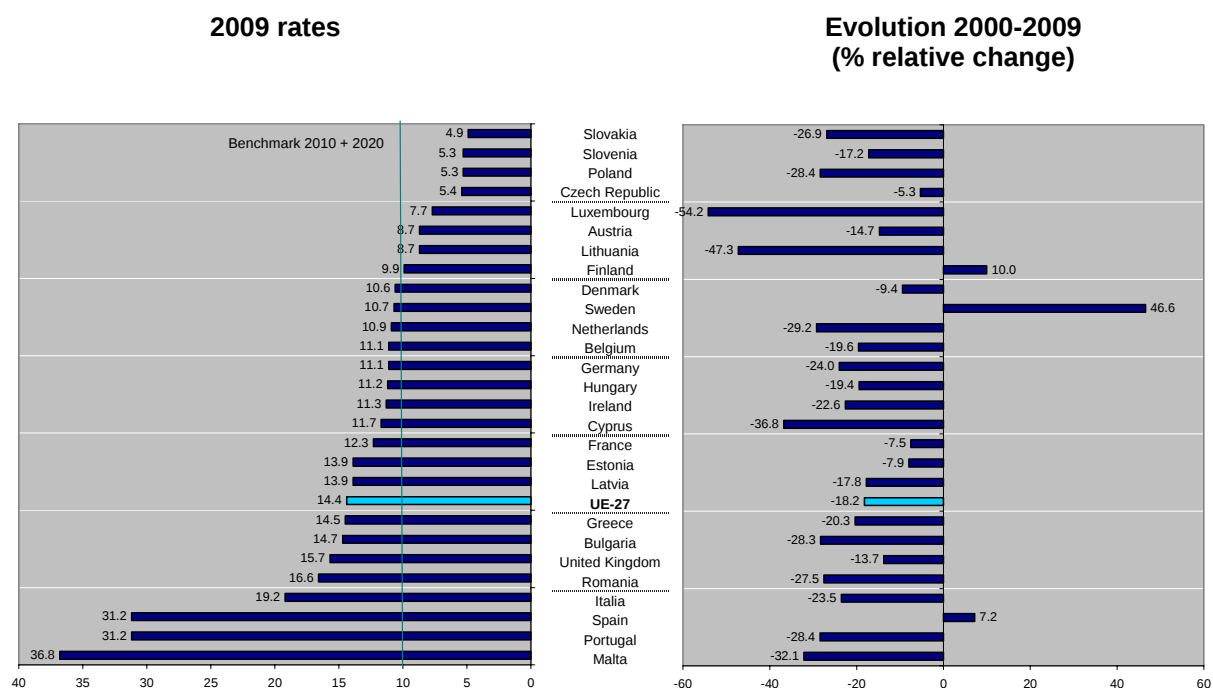
⁵ Eurostat, Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2010.

⁶ Eurostat, Communiqué de Presse 162/2010, 29 October 2010.

⁷ Eurostat, LFS 2010.

⁸ NESSE (2009), p. 31. See also Shell "Jugendstudie 2010" (2010).

Chart 1: Percentage of the population aged 18-24 with at most lower secondary education and not in education or training (2009) and evolution 2000-2009⁹



2. EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IS CAUSED BY A MIX OF INDIVIDUAL, EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS

The reasons why young people leave education and training prematurely are highly individual. Nevertheless it is possible to identify some recurring characteristics. Early school leaving is strongly linked to social disadvantage and low education backgrounds. Children of parents with low levels of education and from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to leave education and training before completing upper secondary education levels than other young people.

Some groups in society are especially affected by early school leaving, particularly those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds and vulnerable groups, such as youth from a public care background and persons with physical and mental disabilities or other special educational needs (SEN)¹⁰. As young people with a migrant origin are often concentrated in lower socio-economic groups, their average rate of early school leaving is double that of native youth (26.4% vs. 13.1% in 2009). The rate is even higher for Roma populations, who tend to be among the most socially excluded members of society¹¹. Such groups tend to suffer from weaker family support from their families, face discrimination within the education system and have more limited access to non-formal and in-formal learning opportunities outside compulsory schooling.

⁹ Eurostat, LFS 2010.

¹⁰ "Active inclusion of young people with disabilities or health problems. Background paper", European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2010.

¹¹ Eurostat, LFS 2010.

Early school leaving is influenced by educational factors, by individual circumstances and by socio-economic conditions. It is a process rather than a one-off event. It often starts already in primary education with first experiences of school failure and growing alienation from school. Transitions between schools and between different educational levels are particularly difficult for pupils at risk of dropping out. Mismatches between education and training curricula and labour market needs can increase the risk of educational failure as pupils lack prospects within their chosen educational pathway. Education and training systems often do not provide sufficient targeted support for pupils to cope with emotional, social or educational difficulties and to remain in education and training. Responding to the different learning styles of pupils and helping teachers to address the variable needs of mixed ability groups of students is still a challenge for schools. Personalised and flexible learning arrangements are especially important for those who prefer 'learning by doing' and are motivated by active forms of learning.

Early school leaving is also a gender issue which requires more attention. In the EU, 16.3% of boys are early school leavers, compared to 12.5% of girls¹². During compulsory education, boys tend to experience more difficulties than girls in adapting to the school environment and generally have lower achievement levels. They are over-represented among pupils with disabilities (61%) and are more likely to show emotional and behavioral problems, or specific learning difficulties (65%)¹³.

Member States experience different challenges with regard to early school leaving. In some, early school leaving is a predominantly rural phenomenon, has high incidence in remote areas and can be linked to insufficient access to education. In others it mostly affects disadvantaged areas in big cities. Some regional and seasonal labour markets (e.g. tourism, construction) can attract young people out of school into unskilled jobs with poor prospects. The availability of such jobs and the prospect of earning money early, either to improve the economic situation of the family or to enable the young person to become more independent, motivates many young people to leave education and training prematurely. Some countries experience high levels of early school leaving in certain vocational settings, while others register lower early school leaving in, for instance, apprenticeship tracks¹⁴.

All such conditions must be taken into account when supporting pupils at risk of dropping out. However, only few Member States follow a consistent and comprehensive strategy to reduce early school leaving. Many initiatives against early school leaving are not sufficiently linked to other policies addressing young people. There is also often a lack of sound analysis of the specific problems within a region or target group.

3. EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING CAN BE PREVENTED THROUGH SYSTEMATIC EVIDENCE-BASED POLICIES

Strategies for combating early school leaving have to take as a starting point an analysis of the national, regional and local specificities of the phenomenon. Data should allow for the analysis of the main reasons behind early school leaving for different groups of pupils, regions, localities or schools which are especially affected by early school leaving. Strong

¹² Eurostat, LFS 2010.

¹³ Data refer to 2008; SEC(2009) 1616, p. 85.

¹⁴ GHK (2005), "Study on Early School Leavers, Final Report", p. 77, Sally Kendal, Kay Kinder (2005), "Reclaiming those disengaged from education and learning – a European Perspective", p. 15.

disparities in rates of early school leaving might indicate structural problems in certain geographical areas or educational tracks.

Policy design needs to be based on precise information in order better to target measures; a system to monitor developments in early school leaving can help to constantly adapt them, based on information such as individuals' reasons for leaving education and training early¹⁵.

Individual student numbers

The UK introduced in 1997 the 'unique pupil number' (UPN) which provides a rich source for analysis and helps target school policy more effectively also in fields other than early school leaving. Other countries introduced 'individual education numbers', data collections based on individual pupil data, or national student registers (e.g. the Netherlands, Germany, and Italy). For the Netherlands the introduction of the 'individual education number' and the on-line monitoring of early school leaving are regarded as main success factors in the reduction of early school leaving.

Comprehensive policies against early school leaving should focus on **prevention, intervention and compensation**.

Prevention seeks to avoid the conditions from arising where processes leading to early school leaving can start: Increasing participation in good quality early childhood education and care has been identified as one of the most effective measures to give children a good start in education and to build their resilience. However access to high-quality early childhood education and care services needs to be improved. Other preventive measures address questions such as systematic language support for children with a migrant background, an active desegregation policy which improves the social, ethnic and cultural mix in schools, allows for better peer learning and helps integration, or the targeted support of disadvantaged schools. Additional potential obstacles to successful school careers can be removed by increasing the permeability of educational pathways and increasing the quality and status of vocational education pathways.

Desegregation policies aim to change the social composition of 'disadvantaged' schools and to improve the educational attainment of children from socially disadvantaged and low-education backgrounds. Active desegregation programmes in Hungary and Bulgaria improved on regional level the educational achievement of Roma pupils by supporting schools which integrate Roma pupils and at the same time foster school quality by e.g. extracurricular activities and targeted academic support.

Positive discrimination measures such as zones of educational priority (Cyprus) and programmes which provide targeted support to school in disadvantaged areas (France, Spain) improve their educational offer, provide additional support to their pupils and create innovative learning environments adapted to their specific needs. Positive discrimination measures are often combined with active networking and strong cooperation of the schools involved.

¹⁵ All policy examples are taken from the SWD 'Reducing Early School Leaving' - SEC(2011) 96. It contains additional information on the policy examples as well as more detailed information on early school leaving, its causes and successful strategies to reduce it.

Flexible educational pathways to combine general education, vocational training and first practical work experience target students who might be discouraged by low academic achievements and want to start working as early as possible. It allows them at the same time to continue general education. Several Member States (e.g. Luxembourg, Italy, and Denmark) have used this approach to help previously disengaged pupils to get a leaving certificate while gaining valuable and motivating experiences in work.

Intervention addresses emerging difficulties at an early stage and seeks to prevent them from leading to school drop-out. Intervention measures can focus on the whole school or training institution or can address individual pupils who are at risk of discontinuing their education or training. Whole school measures aim at improving the school climate and the creation of supportive learning environments. Early warning systems and better cooperation with parents can be an efficient form of help for pupils at risk. Also networking with actors outside the school and access to local support networks tends to be highly efficient in providing relevant support. Student-focused measures focus on mentoring and tutoring, personalized learning approaches, improved guidance and financial support such as education allowances. Labour market institutions should also be more involved in providing vocational orientation for young people.

Schools as 'learning communities' agree on a common vision, basic values and objectives of school development. It increases the commitment of pupils, teachers, parents and other stakeholders and supports school quality and development. 'Learning communities' inspire both teachers and pupils to seek improvement and take ownership of their learning processes. It creates favourable conditions also for reducing school drop-out and for helping pupils at risk of dropping out.

Networking with actors outside school enables schools to support pupils better and tackle a range of problems that put children in difficulty, which can include drug or alcohol use, sleep deficits, physical abuse and trauma. Programmes such as the School Completion Programme in Ireland favour strongly cross-community and cross-sectoral approaches. Schools are linked up with youth agencies, social services, local development agencies, drug task forces, etc.

Involving regions more strongly in the development of measures against early school leaving, giving them financial support and setting incentives has proven to be successful in some countries, e.g. the Netherlands. Municipalities, schools and care institutions can decide themselves on the measures to be implemented. Via the local governments, schools can also call on the services of care institutions, the police and judicial authorities.

Open Schools such as the 'scuole aperte' in Naples (Italy) aim to tackle disengagement of pupils by running a huge variety of projects in association with local civil society. Activities are organised outside school hours and are open for all children, including those who have already abandoned mainstream education. They provide a way to re-engage them and also many children who were at risk of dropping out in learning.

Compensation measures offer opportunities for education and training for those who dropped out. They can take the form of financial or other types of support. They aim to help young people to re-enter mainstream education or provide a so-called "second chance". Successful approaches in second chance institutions differ therefore considerably from mainstream schools by addressing the difficulties pupils had in mainstream schooling. Nevertheless there is evidence that prevention of early school leaving shows better results than compensating the negative effects of early school leaving. The experience of failure, a lack of self-confidence in

learning and increased social, emotional and educational problems after dropping-out reduce the likelihood of achieving a qualification and completing education successfully¹⁶.

Re-entering mainstream schooling requires often a transition period between the previous failed school experience and a more successful new start. Programmes last from at least three months up to one year, depending on the expectations and motivation of participants. Due to the complex multi-faceted problems faced by the target group, alternative pedagogical and counselling methods are needed to re-integrate them into education and training. One success factor is the provision of an individualised, supportive learning environment and a flexible approach tailored to the needs of each young person. Programmes such as 'Project learning for young adults' in Slovenia, the transition classes in France or the SAS centres in Belgium give an opportunity to young people at risk to gradually regain confidence, catch up on missed learning and re-enter mainstream education.

Too often projects and initiatives to reduce early school leaving exist in parallel, with no links to other initiatives¹⁷. Despite their reported success, their impacts too often remain at the local or regional level. Given the urgency of reducing early school leaving, the main requirement is to shift from implementing individual measures to introducing a comprehensive policy against early school leaving. The elements of such policies have to be adapted to the concrete situation within the Member States.

Experiences of Member States, comparative data and analytical research suggest that the key issues for successful policies include the cross-sectoral nature of collaboration and the comprehensiveness of the approach. Early school leaving is not just a school issue and its causes need to be addressed across a range of social, youth, family, health, local community, employment, as well as education policies. Also extended educational concepts such as cultural education, cooperation with businesses or other outside school actors, and sports can play an important role in reducing early school leaving by promoting creativity, new ways of thinking, intercultural dialogue, and social cohesion.

4. EU-LEVEL COOPERATION ADDS VALUE IN REDUCING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

As part of the Europe 2020 strategy, Member States have agreed at the highest political level to set **national targets** on reducing early school leaving, taking into account their starting position and national circumstances. Early School Leaving will be addressed in the framework of their National Reform Programmes (NRP) describing the strategies and actions they will undertake to meet their national targets. National targets on the reduction of early school leaving rates will foster policy development in this area and increase the pressure for efficient and effective policies. Reporting on the national Europe 2020 targets through the Annual Growth Surveys will put more weight on the monitoring of the effectiveness of policies, their successes and shortcomings.

The existing strategic framework for cooperation in education and training, **Education and Training 2020**, its tools and reporting mechanisms will support the implementation of effective and efficient policies against early school leaving. It will provide a platform for highlighting Member States' progress, supported by the availability of solid and comparable statistics via Eurostat.

¹⁶ NESSE (2009), p. 45.

¹⁷ Frank Braun: Einleitung, in "Schulabbrüche und Ausbildungslosigkeit", München 2007.

To support Member States better in developing efficient and effective national policies against early school leaving, several measures and tools, offering a comprehensive approach to this multifaceted challenge, will be put in place:

- The proposed **Council Recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving**, accompanied by a Staff Working Document of the Commission, is designed to help Member States innovate and develop strategies with a high impact and a good cost-benefit ratio. It is proposed that the Recommendation should set a common European framework for effective and efficient policies against early school leaving and that Member States should adopt comprehensive national strategies against early school leaving by 2012, in line with their national targets.
- The forthcoming **Commission Communication on early childhood education and care**, to be adopted in 2011, will underline that early childhood education and care systems can help to establish the basis for lifelong learning, as the most powerful way to combat disadvantage through education, and so effectively prevent much school drop-out. The Communication will set out key issues for reinforcing quality and access in early childhood education and care.
- The Commission will present in 2011 a **Communication on a New European Agenda on Integration** to support Member States' integration policies. To support the educational attainment of students with migrant background, the need to address early school leaving should also be taken into account in this context.
- **Vocational education and training** has the potential to be an important vehicle to prevent young people from leaving education early. Following the Commission Communication 'A new impetus for the European cooperation in Vocational Education and Training to support the Europe 2020 strategy'¹⁸, Education Ministers agreed an ambitious VET modernisation agenda, including specific action to reduce drop-out from VET.
- A **benchmark to measure the employability of young people** will be proposed by the Commission in early 2011. Increasing their employability is crucial for improving young people's prospects for employment and for their future careers, and so for engaging them fully in education and training. The benchmark will offer better opportunities to monitor the situation and support the exchange of good practices and experiences of Member States.
- In order to target policy developments most effectively and to accelerate the process of mutual learning, a **European level group of decision-makers**, representing different Member States, will accompany the implementation of the Council Recommendation and support the Commission and Council in monitoring the developments in Member States and at European level. It will help in identifying effective policies and practices to tackle shared challenges across the Member States, support the exchange of experience and help to formulate better targeted policy recommendations.
- In addition **ministerial and high level official discussions** will continue, as well as high-profile events such as Commission or Presidency **conferences**. They will provide important input into the ongoing discussions and improve the uptake of effective new

¹⁸ COM (2010) 296.

policy approaches and measures. They will highlight both good practices in Member States and increase the understanding of differences in national performance against targets and thus support Member States in their efforts.

- The **Lifelong Learning Programme** as well as the **research and innovation related programmes** will be more intensively used to support experimentation and innovative approaches to reduce early school leaving. It allows for exchange of experiences and good practice on the level of education and training institutions and promotes the development of effective and efficient support measures for pupils at risk of dropping out. Funding priorities for 2011 include reducing early school leaving, improving the learning of students with a migrant background and promoting gender equality and inclusive approaches to learning.
- The **European Structural Funds**, especially the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund, are very important sources for financing national and regional measures to reduce early school leaving. The common European policy framework contained in the Council Recommendation will add focus and rigour to investments under the European Structural Funds and so strengthen their cost-effectiveness in combating early school leaving.

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