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Susan FLOCKEN

ETUCE-CSEE
Boulevard Bischoffsheim 151000
Brussels | BELGIUM
secretariat@csee-etu-ce.org
+32 2 224 06 92

ETUCE Position on the

“Pathways to School Success” – Fight against early school leaving and underachievement

Adopted by the ETUCE Committee on 15-16 November 2021

Background

The European Commission will propose a recommendation to the Education Council on reducing underachievement of pupils in basic skills (reading, mathematics and science) and to increase the attendance rate in upper secondary education by reducing early school leaving.

Following up on the [European Commission's Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025](#), the Education Council of the European Union adopted a [Council Resolution](#) on 19 February 2021 that establishes the European Education Area as the new strategic framework for the European cooperation in education and training for the period 2021-2030. This Council Resolution replaces the [ET2020 Strategic Framework](#) and sets up new targets, indicators and benchmarks for national education systems to be achieved by 2030. The Pathways to School Success initiative will provide policy recommendations to the EU Member States how to reach the following benchmarks of this Council Resolution by 2030:

- The share of low-achieving 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15%, by 2030.
- The share of low-achieving eight-graders in computer and information literacy should be less than 15%, by 2030.
- Reduce the share of early leavers from education and training to less than 9%.

The European Commission issued a [public consultation](#) which was open until 4 June 2021 accompanied by a [Roadmap](#) which explains the challenges the European Commission identifies on this policy and ideas for a policy initiative. The second phase of the public consultation was open between 24 June and 30 September 2021 [here](#).

The below reply considered ETUCE's [Embracing Diversity in Education research report](#) and [ETUCE's Factsheets on Key elements of Inclusive Education + Teachers' Training and Professional Development](#)

1. ETUCE which represents 127 education trade unions within 51 countries in Europe welcomes that the European Commission's initiative is a contribution to implement the 1st principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which states that: **“Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market”**.

2. Education is a **public good and a human right** and all children should have access to **free** quality and inclusive education. It is essential to enhance quality and inclusiveness in education in order to fight against early school leaving (ESL) and underachievement in learning. The European Commission should also underline within this initiative how high-quality education as a public good should be guaranteed to each pupil. We remind that 49 countries recently adopted the Rome Communiqué and its [Annex III on Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA](#). In order to ensure the implementation of these principles in higher education, effective education and social policies should guarantee inclusiveness from early age.

3. The European Commission's proposal for the Council recommendation should focus on the **roots of early school leaving and underachievement** of the children, and not only on their symptoms. In order to provide effective support to the children from an early age it is important that their living and learning environments are supportive and they feel valued and motivated in school. We remind that mostly socio-economic disadvantages result in low achievement in schools, thus this problem should be solved with effective government policies not only on education but also on housing, welfare, and healthcare. It is essential that the initiative recommends that governments set up **comprehensive policy measures** with strong cooperation among different ministries (education, employment and social affairs, finances, digitalization and innovation, etc) and with the **education social partners** to effectively fight against early school leaving and underachievement of the children.

4. [Inclusive education](#)¹ means allowing all learners to achieve their full potential by providing high quality education to all in mainstream settings with special attention to learners at risk of exclusion and underachievement. Actively seeking out to support them and responding flexibly to the circumstances and needs of all learners is key in a fight against early school leaving. Real inclusiveness in education needs to be based on **ensuring safe physical and social learning environments** and the **sense of belonging** to the school community and to a wider society. Inclusiveness needs to be well integrated into the **quality assurance and accreditation systems**. We believe that individual support to at-risk of drop-out students is important, but the most inclusive way of help is ensuring they are integrated within **group work**. The EU Member States should continue fight against **school segregation**.

5. The initiative should encourage the EU Member States to ensure **sustainable national public investment** to education which is an essential prerequisite to fight against early school leaving (ESL) and underachievement of the students. Public investment to reduce early school leaving and underachievement needs to be ensured from early ages of the children as early school leaving means high societal and economic costs. Research shows that "leaving education early can lead to an increased likelihood of **unemployment, socio-economic disadvantage, and health issues**. Furthermore, ESL is associated with lower participation in social, political and cultural activities as well. This in turn can also affect the children of early school leavers, thus continuing the cycle."² Effective support to children at risk of drop-out and reintegration of the early school leavers to education are

¹ ETUCE's [Embracing Diversity in Education research report](#) and [ETUCE's Factsheets on Key elements of Inclusive Education + Teachers' Training and Professional Development](#).

² European Parliament Research for CULT Committee - How to tackle early school leaving in the EU, 2019

essential to quality life and to reduce **poverty**. It is important to invest in the **reintegration** of young people with the support of practical learning and apprenticeship. This is why we welcome the European Commission's plans that the European Semester process will provide targeted recommendations to countries to invest to fight against ESL and that EU funds (Erasmus, ESF+, RRF) will further support this.

6. In order to provide quality education for all and to fight effectively against early school leaving and underachievement, it is essential to ensure better **career opportunities, high job security and social protection, and decent salary for teachers**. Reinforcement of **collective bargaining** is essential as a prerequisite to guarantee decent salaries, pensions and decent working conditions for an attractive and rewarding teaching profession. Thus, the initiative should recommend to the Member States the essential involvement of education trade unions in the framework of effective **social dialogue in designing and implementing** the necessary educational reforms that this policy will entail. Educational professionals should not be just 'informed' but should be a key partner in shaping educational frameworks and strategies.

7. **Democratic governance of education and collaborative leadership** in schools are fundamental requirements of high-quality education systems to fight against early school leaving and underachievement. Effective **cooperation** of various education stakeholders (teachers, academics, school leaders, other education personnel, students, families, and the broader school community) is necessary.

8. **Teacher shortage** is also a key problem which needs to be addressed in relation to early school leaving and underachievement of the pupils. Education institutions with many students coming from vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds find it difficult to recruit teachers, which makes these schools even more disadvantaged and unattractive. Supportive incentive mechanisms to reinforce the attractiveness of the teaching profession, especially in these settings are needed. We request that the initiative should contribute to the implementation of the [Council conclusions on European teachers and trainers for the future](#) (2020).

9. We welcome that the initiative will focus on learning environments which need to be **supportive working environments** and need to ensure **good working conditions for the teachers**. In addition, it is important that the initiative proposes suggestions to the EU Member States on how to **prepare teachers** well for the profession and how to make the teaching profession **attractive**. Continuous professional development should be available for all levels of education during working hours and free of charge. Initial teacher training and continuous professional development should sufficiently include real life practice in education institutions and train all teachers up to a Masters level. It is crucial to improve the quality of initial teacher training and continuous professional development of all teaching professionals (including school leaders) reflecting priorities to accommodate working in a diverse education setting which is a serious problem when staff work with disadvantaged groups. Both initial teacher education and continuous professional development are

critical to ensure that teachers acquire the competences, skills and knowledge that allow them to respond to diversity in the classrooms and implement inclusive education.³

10. It is important to clearly **define the role of the teachers** and education support personnel in supporting children at risk of dropping out. ETUCE member organisations in several countries have already demanded that the governments ensure additional lessons for the teachers to deal with those at-risk of early school leaving and underachieving students who did not have appropriate access to IT equipment and internet during the **COVID-19 crisis**. It is important to ensure paid additional working time of the teachers to help with students to catch up.

11. We require that the initiative encourage countries to ensure that every school has **education support personnel such as psychologist and education counsellors** who can provide targeted support to children at risk of ESL and underachievement and helps pupils with mental disorder, depression and to fight against harassment and bullying. A comprehensive support system for teachers and other education personnel, including leadership in education institutions is necessary to implement inclusive education. This includes education support personnel (including teacher assistants, psychologists and linguistic support personnel, remedial teachers) as well as support mechanism (including support in identifying learners' needs, opportunities for mutual learning and exchange). The number of students per teacher need to be reduced to enable the possibility to meet specific needs of students in an appropriate way.

12. **Professional autonomy and flexibility of the curriculum** is essential to support schools and teachers to combat early school leaving. As the European Commission's initiative foresees to suggest reforms to the EU Member States on curricula, pedagogies, assessment, and enhancing teachers' ability in tackling educational disadvantage, we remind that **curricula design, pedagogical and assessment requirements** are national competence. Principles on curricula design need to allow flexibility for the teachers to adjust the teaching and assessment to the needs of the learners. We underline the importance that the EU initiative should not only focus on measurable **basic skills** (reading, mathematics and science) of the OECD PISA survey, but it should be broadened to enhance teaching and learning on **key competences** in line with effective implementation of the of the [Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning](#)⁴. The 8 key competences include the basic skills, and all together are essential for personal fulfilment, health, employability, and social inclusion. We remind the importance of **multilingualism, democratic citizenship** and European values, learning to learn, and creativity among the key competences which are also vital to focus on within this initiative. It is important to recognise a **holistic approach** and that the sense of belonging is as important as basic skills. The European Commission should examine under the new initiative what kind of **support teachers and education staff** have received to include **key competences** in their teaching since the [2018 Council Recommendation](#) and what additional support they need. It would be essential to identify if initial education and continuous professional

³ ETUCE's [Embracing Diversity in Education research report](#) and [ETUCE's Factsheets on Key elements of Inclusive Education + Teachers' Training and Professional Development](#).

⁴ The 8 key competences according to the 2018 Reference framework: (1) Literacy competence; 2) Multilingual competence; 3) Mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering; 4) Digital competence; 5) Personal, social and learning to learn competence; 6) Civic competence; 7) Entrepreneurship competence; 8) Cultural awareness and expression competence

development of the teachers in each education sectors have been adequately improved to fit to prepare teachers to classroom work.

13. ETUCE believes that this initiative should also take into account the impact that the use of **digital technologies and ICTs** in education have on underachievement and early school leaving. On the one hand, digital technologies have the potential to foster inclusive education⁵ and address the variety of needs of diverse teaching and learning environments (e.g. teachers and students with special needs, migrant teachers and students as well as ethnic minorities). On the other hand, as the experience of emergency online and remote teaching during the COVID-19 crisis has shown, an uncontrolled digital transition can further deepen the existing social divide, thus leading to educational exclusion, loss of sense of belonging and higher rates of dropping out of school. There are already attempts to replace **in-presence teachers** in rural schools with teachers connecting to the lessons online. There are also policy discussions in several countries to reduce education budget by **closing schools and reducing the number of teachers in schools** and making teachers provide online teaching for several schools. We demand to end these policies because these cannot be the solution of reducing teachers' shortages in Europe. These practices will rather contribute to more precariousness of the teachers, a major decrease of the quality of education, and in the increase of early school leaving and underachievement of the students. We remind that in-presence education is the most important tool to ensure physical contact between and among teachers and students and to reduce underachievement and early school leaving.

14. It is still essential to ensure that all students have access to digital tools, but these should be the tool and not the aim of teaching and learning. The European Commission should call on the Member States to ensure sustainable public funding to provide all the students with equal access to **digital infrastructures** (e.g. internet connection, digital devices) and adequate support to integrate in the digital education environment. In addition, conducting further research and collecting data to assess the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the educational achievements is of the utmost importance. Besides, ensuring that teachers and education personnel are well-trained and technically assisted to integrate digital tools within their lessons and pedagogical methods is essential to support students and enhance their educational achievements. Therefore, digital skills should be integrated within **teachers' initial education**. Accessible and free continuous professional development on using digital technologies and promoting inclusive education should be guaranteed to teachers at all levels of education.

⁵ ETUCE's [Embracing Diversity in Education research report](#) and [ETUCE's Factsheets on Key elements of Inclusive Education + Teachers' Training and Professional Development](#).