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ETUCE Position

on improving access to and quality of early childhood education within the European Care Strategy

Adopted by the ETUCE Committee on 7-8 November 2022

Background

On 8 September 2022, the European Commission presented its [European Care Strategy](#). The Commission is proposing “concrete actions to support Member States in increasing access to high-quality and affordable care services, while improving working conditions and work-life balance for carers.”

The Strategy is accompanied by two proposals for Recommendations to Member States [on the revision of the Barcelona targets on early childhood education and care](#), and [on access to affordable high-quality long-term care](#).

Both recommendations will be adopted on the Council of ministers responsible for employment and social affairs in their meeting on 8-9 December 2022.

Concerning early childhood education (ECE), which is a term the European Commission uses as “early childhood education and care (ECEC)¹, the Commission proposes to the Council of ministers to review the [Barcelona targets](#) (2002)²: to become

- **50% of children³ below the age of 3 are in early childhood education and care;**
- **96% of children⁴ between the age of 3 and the starting age for compulsory primary education are in early childhood education and care.**

The EU Member States are also invited to ensure that ECE is available to allow participation of children, which could gradually increase with the age of the child, of:

- **at least 25 hours per week for children below 3 years of age; and**
- **at least 35 hours per week for children from the age of 3.**

These targets, according to the European Commission, will contribute to ensure more available and affordable places for the children of those 7.7 million women who are out of the labour market because they did not find ECE places as these are not available or too expensive.

The Recommendation will ask Member States to present their action plan within 12 months after the adoption of the proposal and report to the Commission on their achievements within 5 years. The European Commission will monitor the implementation within the European Semester process.

¹ “The term ‘early childhood education and care’ should be understood as defined in the *Council Recommendation on High Quality ECEC*, as referring to any regulated arrangement that provides education and care for children from birth to the compulsory primary school age — regardless of the setting, funding, opening hours or programme content — and includes centre and family day-care; privately and publicly funded provision; and pre-school and pre-primary provision.” See: [Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on the Revision of the Barcelona Targets on early childhood education and care](#) (2022)

² Barcelona Targets: “Member States should remove disincentives to female labour force participation and strive, taking into account the demand for childcare facilities and in line with national patterns of provision, to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age”

³ Currently the rate of children of below age 3 in ECE differs between 6% (Czech Republic) and 66% (Denmark). See: [Communication from the Commission on the European care strategy – COM\(2022\) 440 \(2022\)](#)

⁴ Currently the rate of children aged between the age of 3 and the starting age for compulsory primary education differ between 57% (Croatia) and 99% (Belgium). See: idem



The following position paper represents the views of ETUCE – which represents 125 education trade unions within 51 countries – on the proposal for a *Council Recommendation to EU Member States on the revision of the Barcelona targets on early childhood education and care*.

1. ETUCE reminds that **education is a human right and a public good**. The right to quality and inclusive education for all children has been laid down in Principle 1 and 11 of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) and of the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the United Nations (UN)**, namely the SDG1 which aims to reduce the number of children in poverty, and SDG 4 on quality education. Therefore, we welcome the Commission’s intention to ensure legal entitlement to access ECE from the early age in every country, which is only available in 7 EU countries at the moment⁵.
2. Education is a fundamental right of any child that must be protected. Early childhood education must be a **universal and free entitlement** for all children in Europe as it plays a crucial role in developing the full potential of children and countering economic and social inequalities. **All children** should be guaranteed the right to equal access to high-quality and inclusive ECE from birth. In order to allow all children to avail of this entitlement governments need to ensure appropriate infrastructure, highly qualified staff and quality provision in ECE. We welcome that the proposal for the Council Recommendation has the approach to make ECE more inclusive as recent [European data](#) unveils the impact of the COVID pandemic on provision of early childhood education. The social and economic crisis also exacerbated existing inequalities and increased the number of people at **risk of poverty and social exclusion** resulting in many children being deprived of their fundamental right to high-quality education. We support that the Recommendation puts emphasis on ensuring equal access to ECE for children in the urban and rural areas of Europe.
3. **Sustainable public budget, attractive salaries and decent working conditions** are of utmost importance to ensure accessible and high-quality early childhood education for all. We remind that countries are struggling to attract skilled and motivated ECEC staff to the sector⁶. The majority of ECE staff, fewer than two in five is satisfied with their salary. The average salaries of pre-primary teachers are substantially lower than those of full-time, full-year workers with tertiary education. In some EU countries⁷, pre-primary teachers’ salaries are less than 60% of those of tertiary-educated workers on average. In many countries, salaries for teachers in ECE are particularly uncompetitive.⁸ ETUCE believes that the low salaries for such an important profession is unjust. ECE teachers and staff who educate and protect children in their daily

⁵ Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Latvia, Slovenia, Finland and Sweden. See: [Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on the Revision of the Barcelona Targets on early childhood education and care](#) (2022)

⁶ OECD: Good Practice for Good Jobs in Early Childhood Education and Care (2019)

⁷ Eg in Hungary and Slovakia

⁸ OECD: Education at a Glance (2022) - [Education at a Glance 2022: focus on teachers working conditions and the impact of COVID-19 - European Trade Union Committee for Education \(csee-etu.org\)](#)



work need to be better remunerated and valued. ETUCE member organisations strongly believe⁹, after having investigated all existing research on this topic, that “high and attractive starting salary levels need to be ensured for all teachers; improving salary and career progression would increase the recruitment and retention of young teachers. Salaries should be linked to qualifications obtained. The principle of equal pay for equal work and work of equal value needs to apply. All teachers should have the **highest level of qualifications and be paid appropriately**. [...] The status of early childhood teachers, and the value placed on their education, should be at an equal level with other teachers, with equal rights and entitlements.”

4. Public investment to ECE needs to be improved because the EU countries invest at the moment only between 0.7% and 1.7% of their GDP to ECE¹⁰. We welcome that the European Commission motivates the EU Member States to increase their public investment in ECE. However, we have strong concerns about increasing private funds to ECE as it reduces the chance of equal access and often the quality of ECE. In addition, private ECE institutions often do not comply with national requirements of quality assurance and accreditation which contributes to decreasing the quality of ECE.
4. We remind that ECE should be **free for all children** and it should not be seen as a commodity. **Privatisation trends** of ECE should be discontinued as a matter of policy. Since ECE is a human right, ETUCE calls on the EU Member States and the European Union institutions to ensure the provision of sustainable public budget for the early childhood education sector, including through funding within the National Recovery and Resilience Facility, and to guarantee free access to high quality ECE for all children regardless of their socio-economic background. In cases where ECE is not free, ministries and education authorities together with the social partners need to start a constructive dialogue about the socio-economic imperative of free access to quality ECE. We welcome that the Member States will be asked to ensure a **clear regulatory environment** that takes into account the social value of care services and the need to uphold the fundamental rights of persons.
5. ETUCE warmly welcomes that the objective of the initiative is to support the access of women to the labour market by ensuring children’s broader access to **high quality and inclusive** early childhood education (ECE). Concerning **the new benchmarks** of participation of children in ECE, we are concerned that the EU target participation rate in some countries is below the present existing participation rate. We are also concerned if the objectives of the Recommendations can be sufficiently achieved when the benchmark concerning the weekly

⁹ ETUCE [Policy Paper on Raising the Status and Improving the Attractiveness of the Teaching Profession](#) (2022)

¹⁰ See: [Communication from the commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the European care strategy – COM\(2022\) 440 \(2022\)](#)

participation rates of children younger than 3 years (25 hours) and older than 3 years (35 hours) are too low to allow parents to work full time. It is important that the maternity and parental leave and free and quality ECE efficiently support children's needs, their well-being, as well as fair employability of the parents.

6. We support the setting up of **National Quality Frameworks** to ensure high quality ECE in the EU Member States, but we reiterate that these need to be developed together with the trade unions of the ECE sector. ETUCE requests this because we do not find the descriptions of the quality indicators in the proposal satisfactory and effective. Developing comprehensive indicators can be included in the European Semester, however these cannot provide a clear picture to what extent the Member States are improving the quality of ECE in relation to well-being and development of the children and working conditions of the staff.
7. We underline that in order to achieve the targets set up in the proposal it is essential to ensure that the ECE sector remains attractive for ECE staff and that fair recruitment and retention policies are established with the involvement of their trade unions so that all ECE institutions are well equipped with highly qualified staff. Concerning the implementation of the proposal, **social dialogue** with education sector trade unions needs to be ensured in countries when the **national action plans** are developed.
8. The objectives of the recommendations should be achieved in line with improving the **working conditions and contractual situation of ECE staff**. We welcome that the Recommendation mentions [the ILO policy guidelines on the promotion of decent work for early childhood education personnel](#) as a guidance to EU Member States on the possible implementation of the recommendations concerning professional and career development, appropriate remuneration, including equal pay, sustainable employment and working conditions, as well as the promotion of social dialogue in this sector. However, ETUCE asks for the effective implementation of these guidelines by the EU Member States. ECE teachers should have the same employment protection rights as teachers in other sectors and should also have broad career opportunities within the sector.
9. ETUCE welcomes that the European Commission underlines the **importance of collective bargaining and social dialogue** in ensuring good working conditions for ECE sector workers. We also welcome the increasing capacity building at national level for ECE staff. It is essential to engage the employers in the sector and to strengthen **collective bargaining**. At the same time, ETUCE believes that education and care cannot be separated from each other, this is why the staff issues regarding early childhood education and care workers are discussed within the European Sectoral Social Dialogue for Education. Education and care are integral to ensuring high-quality educational and learning experiences for children in the early years.
10. In some Member States reforms and increased investment have been put in place to tackle the issue of the insufficient levels of provision of early childhood education, but the difficulties

of the sector remain relevant in many countries¹¹ as highlighted in the Country Reports of the European Semester 2022. This is often also a result of the pandemic that has hindered participation in ECE for a large number of children. ETUCE supports the **funding of quality ECE and training for teachers** as the solution to overcoming the existing inequalities in the access to ECE.

11. We welcome the intention to **improve data collection on participation rate of the children in ECE and on working conditions of ECE staff**. ETUCE would like to support the work of the European Commission in this process. In general, it is essential to support ECE by quality public **research** to improve quality and inclusiveness of learning and teaching methods with the involvement of the ECE teachers and staff. We welcome further cooperation between EU-based research on ECE with OECD and other research.
12. We agree that Member States need to take effective steps to **reduce staff shortages** in the ECE sector. We support the proposal that this can be achieved by “improving working conditions, career prospects and adequate remuneration, regular up- and reskilling possibilities, developing creative recruitment strategies, and calling on different under-represented groups [in ECE] to join the ECEC workforce.” However, **national qualification requirements** of ECE staff need to be respected and strengthened. We support the Council Recommendation to simplify the qualifications recognition mechanism within the Directive 2005/36 and to ensure more rapid access to employment for **ECE staff fleeing the war in the Ukraine**.
13. ETUCE stresses that it is of utmost importance to provide **teachers and other staff** in ECE with adequate and **up-to-date initial and continuous professional development** to respond to the specific needs of children. This should entail training and additional support to develop pedagogical methods and tools, including through digital technologies, to address the need of multicultural and diverse learning environments as well as classes and settings with children with special needs. In this regard, cooperation of ECE teachers and staff with other specialists such as social workers, therapists, mediators and psychologists is essential. Moreover, we suggest providing ECE teachers with the professional autonomy to decide on the most appropriate approach to best meet local conditions and individual needs of children. We welcome that the European Commission plans to support professional development of ECE staff via the **Erasmus+ programme**, but we underline the need for sustainable public investment in the sector and caution against a short-term project-based approach. Also, **mobility of ECE staff** is constrained in many countries because of shortage of teachers and lack of replacement during mobility periods.
14. ETUCE supports the intention in the Recommendations to combat gender stereotypes in the early childhood education sector. It is important to fight against gender-based stereotypes

¹¹ AT, DE, FI, HU, LU, MT, PL, PT, RO, SK



and to ensure higher value of the teaching profession in the ECE sector. Ensuring **gender balance** among the professionals in ECE is significant for reaching the new targets of the Recommendations in the attendance rate of the children in ECE and for making the sector more attractive to highly qualified ECE professional. The overwhelming majority of early childhood teachers are women (over 90%) and like in many other predominantly female professions, early childhood teachers are often underpaid.

15. When talking about increasing quality of ECE, we need to underline that the ECE curriculum should be holistic and structured around a **play-based learning method** that allows children to develop their emotional and cognitive abilities and their social identity in a healthy way. It is important that early intervention in ECE should not be understood as developing specific skills, assessing individual children's performance and measurable competencies, as this approach can stand in the way of the desire for inclusion. Education that takes culture into account and communicates values as a basis for social integration may be given too little attention when specific skills development becomes the overriding and decisive factor for the individual's future life opportunities. Rather than measuring and mapping specific skills, ECE should work to focus on the **child in play through which children develop their skills, aptitudes and dispositions, building a foundation for further learning**. We ask that the initiative should take into consideration the [*European Commission's Key Principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care*](#) to which ETUCE actively contributed.