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DRAFT REPORT

on tackling early school leaving
(2011/2088(INI))

Committee on Culture and Education

Rapporteur: Mary Honeyball

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MOTION FOR A EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RESOLUTION

on tackling early school leaving (2011/2088(INI))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union,
- having regard to Article 14 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union,
- having regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, in particular to Articles 23, 28 and 29,
- having regard to Decision No 1720/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 November 2006 establishing an action programme in the field of lifelong learning¹,
- having regard to the Commission Communication entitled ‘Tackling early school leaving: A key contribution to the Europe 2020 Agenda’ (COM(2011)0018),
- having regard to the Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving (COM(2011)0019),
- having regard to the Commission Communication entitled ‘Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow’ (COM(2011)0066),
- having regard to the Commission Communication entitled ‘Youth on the Move: An initiative to unleash the potential of young people to achieve smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in the European Union’ (COM(2010)0477),
- having regard to the Commission Communication on equity and efficiency in European education and training systems (COM(2006)0481),
- having regard to Council conclusions of 11 May 2010 on the social dimension of education and training²,
- having regard to the Council Conclusions of 26 November 2009 on the education of children with a migrant background³,
- having regard to the Council Conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (‘ET 2020’)⁴,

¹ OJ L 327, 24.11.2006, p. 45.

² OJ C 135, 26.5.2010 p. 2.

³ OJ C 301, 11.12.2009, p. 5.

⁴ OJ C 119, 28.5.2009, p 2.

- having regard to the Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council of 21 November 2008 on preparing young people for the 21st century: an agenda for European cooperation on schools¹,
 - having regard to its resolution of 12 May 2011 on early years learning in the European Union²,
 - having regard to its resolution of 23 September 2008 on improving the quality of teacher education³,
 - having regard to Rule 48 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Culture and Education (A7-0000/2011),
- A. whereas young people, in order to participate fully in society, must possess a broad spectrum of knowledge and essential skills, including effective communication, problem-solving and the ability to critically evaluate information,
 - B. whereas rates of early school leaving (ESL) vary across EU Member States, as well as between towns and regions, and are influenced by a range of complex factors,
 - C. whereas one of the five Europe 2020 headline targets is to reduce the proportion of early school leavers to less than 10 % and to increase the share of the younger generation with a degree or diploma to at least 40 %,
 - D. whereas the 10 % target was previously agreed by Member States in 2003 but only seven of them managed to reach this benchmark, and in 2009, the average rate of early school leavers stood at 14.4 %,
 - E. whereas 24.1 % of all 15-year olds within Member States are low performers in reading literacy,
 - F. whereas ESL has severe consequences not only for the EU's economic growth, the European skills base and social stability but also for the career paths and well-being of young people, as lack of education is also a key cause of poverty,
 - G. whereas ESL is a fundamental contributing factor to social exclusion in later life,

Characteristics of early school leaving

1. Highlights that the foundations for a child's future educational career are laid in the early years of childhood, and reiterates the call contained in its resolution on Early Years Learning in the EU for the development of a European framework for early childhood education and care services;

¹ OJ C 319, 13.12.2008, p. 20.

² Texts adopted, P7_TA(2011)0231.

³ OJ C 8 E, 14.1.2010, p. 12.

2. Notes that ESL is particularly pronounced among children from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds and children from migrant families;
3. Notes the existence of an intergenerational cycle, i.e. the strong tendency for children of early school leavers to become early school leavers themselves; stresses that family structure has a huge impact on children's ability to succeed at school;
4. Underlines that ESL is more common among boys than girls;
5. Recalls that ESL can have a detrimental effect on access to high-quality lifelong learning;

The need for a personalised approach

6. States that equality of opportunities in education for individuals of all backgrounds is vital in creating an equal society;
7. Calls for a personalised and inclusive approach to education which includes targeted support where necessary;
8. Suggests that each secondary school set up a counselling service to enable students with personal problems to talk them through in confidence; stresses that staff providing counselling must have adequate training;
9. Encourages a more hands-on learning approach, and suggests that efficient early-warning mechanisms and follow-up procedures be put in place to prevent problems from escalating; points out that, in order to achieve this, two-way communication and closer cooperation between schools and parents are crucial;
10. Encourages better career guidance and work experience schemes at school, in order to demystify the world of work for pupils and motivate them to set realistic goals;
11. Suggests that mentoring schemes be set up in schools to provide students with exposure to high-achieving individuals, especially if they were formerly at their educational institution;
12. Notes that financial pressures on disadvantaged families can force students to leave school early in order to enter the labour market; calls on Member States to consider introducing a system of means-tested financial support for those who need it;
13. Suggests that other redistributive measures be introduced, such as the provision of free school meals and school books for disadvantaged groups, to reduce the impact of social inequality and to minimise ESL;
14. Emphasises the crucial importance of state schooling systems of the highest quality;

Shared responsibility

15. Highlights that a variety of agents in society are responsible for children leaving school prematurely, including not only parents and schools but also local authorities, and calls for closer cooperation between all these actors, together with local health and social services;

notes that a ‘joined-up’ approach can be effective in helping individuals overcome multiple barriers to educational achievement and employment;

16. Recognises that mapping the interventions provided in Member States by different sectors of the community can be difficult; stresses the need for better EU-wide coordination between these various services, as well as better coordination within Member States;
17. Encourages Member States to invest in qualified and well-trained staff for both preschool and compulsory education; suggests that teaching assistants be employed in schools to work with struggling pupils and to assist classroom teachers in their work;
18. Notes that students must be made aware of the range of career options open to them and suggests that schools forge partnerships with local companies and organisations, enabling students to meet professionals from different fields;
19. Highlights the importance of appropriate group sizes and a stimulating learning environment for young people;

Non-traditional learning

20. Recognises the entitlement of all to lifelong learning, which includes not only formal but also non-formal and informal education;
21. Stresses the importance of varied educational pathways for students, combining academic and vocational skills training, and calls on schools, where possible, to match educational programmes with labour market demand;
22. Calls on Member States to take steps to raise the status of vocational qualifications so that they are seen as a viable option for students of all abilities;
23. Stresses that the principle of ‘learning to learn’ should be at the heart of all school curricula; notes that this is vital in engaging more young people in the process of learning;

Second-chance solutions

24. Calls on Member States to develop a means of reintegrating early school leavers into the school system, such as through ‘second-chance’ schools;
25. Calls on employers, where possible, to recognise and support the right of young people who do not hold higher secondary education qualifications to time off work to study and train;

EU policies

26. Welcomes the Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation on policies to reduce ESL, which proposes a framework for comprehensive policies in this area;
27. Notes, however, that in order to analyse the reasons underlying ESL, more comprehensive, consistent and coherent data from Member States is needed;

28. Calls for more funds for the EU's Lifelong Learning Programme, which increases pupils' and teachers' mobility, enhances the exchange of best practices and contributes to improving teaching and learning methods;

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29. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission and the governments and parliaments of the Member States.

EXPLANATORY STATEMENT

Introduction

Early school leaving (ESL) is a complex phenomenon and a huge challenge facing Europe. Consequently the EU has begun putting in place numerous measures and tools to better support Member States in developing efficient and effective national policies to tackle it. They include the Commission Communication on Tackling Early School Leaving, a new proposal for a Council Recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving, and the Commission's flagship initiative 'Youth on the Move'.

The Europe 2020 Strategy, in addition, outlines six headline targets for Member States, one of which is to reduce ESL to 10 % by 2020. This 10 % target was previously agreed by Member States in 2003, however only seven of them managed to reach the benchmark. In 2009 the rate of ESL for all 18 to 24-year-olds in Europe stood at 14.4 %.

Most EU countries have made at least some progress in reducing the number of young people leaving school early or with low qualifications, and there has been a noticeable and positive change in how they approach early school leaving; yet this report argues that far more needs to be done

Who are 'early school leavers'?

In order to identify those who already fall into the category of 'early school leavers' and those who are potential school leavers, it is imperative to define early school leaving. However, there is no single overarching definition of the term that can be easily applied to all EU Member States, organisations and individuals. The Commission, in its Communication on Tackling Early School Leaving, refers to early school leavers as individuals between the age of 18 and 24 who have left education and training with only lower secondary education or less. For the purpose of consistency and clarity, the Commission's definition of the term will be applied throughout this report.

There is no such a thing as a typical early school leaver, nor is there a standard predictor for those people who are more likely to drop out early. Early school leavers are a diverse group, and not all of them leave school early for negative reasons. Nevertheless, this report notes that there are some groups that are considered to be more at risk than others.

Low achievement is one predictor of ESL. In the early years of schooling, differences in the educational achievements of pupils are less pronounced. However, as these differences become more marked in the later stages of their education, those who are struggling become in some cases increasingly less motivated to stay in school. Pupils with a strong academic record, by contrast, tend to stay in school regardless of outside factors or circumstances.

Importantly, underachievement cannot be viewed in isolation, as it is inextricably linked to other factors such as poverty, abuse and family background. Studies have shown for instance that the students of parents who are low-qualified, or who have a low-skilled job, are more likely to become early school leavers. Where the family unit provides a stable environment in which children can grow, learn and develop, students have a far greater probability of continuing on in school. Conversely, where families do not encourage young people and do not support their learning, ESL

becomes more likely.

There are other discernable commonalities amongst early school leavers, such as regional disparities in rates of ESL and rural-urban divides. ESL rates are also much higher among ethnic minority and immigrant populations, particularly the Roma. What is more, ESL has been shown to be a gendered phenomenon, with girls far less likely to leave school early than boys (rates are 13 % and 17 % respectively).

The consequences of early school leaving

The social and economic implications of high rates of ESL are stark. ESL negatively impacts on economic growth, driving economic and social instability. Interventions to harness the energy and develop the skills of young people are therefore crucial for the future economic and social development of Member States. It is thought that reducing the share of early school leavers across Europe by just 1 % would create nearly half a million additional qualified young people each year.

It has been shown that the lifetime earnings of those who leave school without an upper secondary education are considerably lower than those who leave school with one. Educational qualifications (or a lack of them), are a notable predictor of poverty. Since early school leavers finish school with fewer skills than those who stay on, they have considerably fewer options when it comes to entering the labour market and often end up taking low-paid, precarious jobs, with little possibility for development. Therefore preventing ESL has the potential to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty, and to improve overall economic growth.

ESL also has more immediate interdependent societal consequences, as it is associated with higher rates of antisocial behaviour, teenage pregnancy and drug abuse.

This report recognises that there is no simple ‘cure all’ solution to the problem of early school leaving. It is a complex issue which must be tackled by a range of interventions and initiatives. No one single measure will be effective unless it is complemented by other measures.

The need for a personalised approach

A variety of agents may be called upon or compelled to address ESL, but it is likely that it will be viewed differently by the student, their school teachers, their parents, and others who take an interest. This report stresses that the perspective and best interest of the student should take priority when measures to combat ESL are determined.

Interventions must be sensitive to the complexity of an individual’s needs. Many youngsters choose to leave mainstream education for personal reasons such as bullying at school, whilst others may be suffering from social problems such as drug addiction or homelessness. This report recommends that every secondary school sets up a counselling service, to enable students with personal problems to talk them through and to find solutions. Schools not only have an educative role; they also have a duty to provide pastoral care. Recognising this supportive function can be a key step towards addressing ESL.

In addition to coping with personal difficulties, the world of work can prove to be a daunting prospect for students. This report therefore recommends that student-centred support networks be set

up to provide career guidance and advice, including goal setting, job training and career counselling. This will not only demystify the world of work for students, but will motivate them to set goals and to work towards achieving them. One good practice example comes from the UK, where the highly successful Connexions Service was set up in 2001. The aim of this organisation, which combines youth services and a careers service, is to provide personalised advice and support for young people. It has introduced a range of innovations in its approach to young people, notably widespread use of online services.

This report makes clear that the process of reintegrating disillusioned young people back into education must start as early as possible. Truancy, behavioural problems and other issues have to be addressed as soon as they arise. Such difficulties cannot be underestimated or ignored.

School reforms

In some cases, young people decide to withdraw from the education system because they do not consider the curriculum to be responsive or relevant to their lives. Every student is unique and not all respond to the same teaching methods. Consequently this report calls for schools to move away from traditional testing, where the future prospects of an individual depends on their performance on one day, and to try to find ways of assessing pupils on a continuous basis.

It is clear that not all young people are attracted by the more traditional academic subjects and qualifications, and those who lack an interest in the traditional school curriculum have been shown to be at greater risk of dropping out. To combat this, Member States should take steps to innovate and diversify the national curriculum by extending the variety of educational options open to pupils. Structural reforms are important for giving young people the skills and training that they need to make a smooth transition into the world of work. These include problem solving, critically evaluating information, and communicating effectively. One option, which has already been piloted in Spain, is to encourage stronger links and partnership agreements between schools and local companies. Schemes like this, which offer students a taste of working life, can also give them a sense of direction and motivate them to work harder.

It is crucial that schools encourage students' mobility between the different educational streams, be it academic, vocational and so on. Offering students a wider choice at school is not only important for increasing their motivation to stay on, but also for providing them with the broad spectrum of knowledge and essential skills necessary for finding employment later. The Rapporteur believes that the principle of 'learning to learn' should be at the heart of all school policies and curricula.

Another recommendation is for schools to work towards improving pupil-teacher ratios, particularly when it comes to pupils of a lower educational ability. Small class sizes for students with special educational needs or behavioural problems can have a positive impact on rates of ESL. They often require the use of teaching assistants, who work alongside classroom teachers. Teaching assistants have become extremely popular in several EU Member States, since they allow greater attention to be devoted to pupils who need extra help, leaving time free for classroom teachers to work with other pupils.

Finally, as the Rapporteur has also stressed in her report on Early Years Learning in the EU, the provision of high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services for children aged 0-6 is a vital component in tackling ESL. Children's early learning lays the foundation for their

successful lifelong learning and investment in ECEC services brings greater returns than investment at any other stage of education.

Links with parents and with the community

Schools are not the only bodies with responsibility for implementing policies and programmes to prevent ESL. This report argues that responsibility also extends to the local community. There needs to be clear links between social and welfare services, NGOs, private organisations, schools and parents, as well as intersection between national policies and local, small-scale approaches. Establishing a network made up of actors from different areas of the community will make it easier for individuals to overcome multiple barriers to education. Parents, particularly of children with disabilities, should also be recognised as skilled partners who can work with teachers. All parents should be allowed to play a fully collaborative role in their child's schooling.

In the UK, the voluntary and community sector has been particularly successful in raising the attainment of young people from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. Local interventions often use innovative and alternative methods to motivate disengaged youth, such as through music, drama, dance and sport.

'Second chance' solutions

For those who leave school early, a system is required for reintegrating them back into the education system. Encouraging Member States to set up 'second chance' or 'alternative' schools is one solution. These must be sensitive to the needs of individuals, many of whom will have dropped out in their younger years after becoming disillusioned with the education system. They must also be flexible, allowing individuals to fit their education commitments around their work and family responsibilities.

While preventing ESL in the first place is far more effective in the long term, second chance solutions must nonetheless remain an integral part of Member States' strategies for dealing with ESL.