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EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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Proposal for a

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION

On policies to reduce early school leaving

SEC(2011) 98 final
SEC(2011) 97 final
SEC(2011) 96 final

EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM

1. CONTEXT OF THE PROPOSAL

In June 2010, the European Council adopted the Europe 2020 Strategy, based on three mutually reinforcing priorities for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. One of its five headline targets is to reduce the rate of early school leaving¹ in the EU to less than 10% by the year 2020. Currently, around 6 million young people in the EU leave school with only lower secondary education or less. We cannot afford to allow this to continue. Preventing early school leaving is particularly important both in order to combat the negative consequences of poverty and social exclusion on the child's development and in order to empower children and break the intergenerational inheritance of disadvantage.

As the EU emerges from economic crisis, the motor for growth will be increasing skill levels and there will be fewer and fewer jobs for the low-skilled. High rates of early school leaving are a bottleneck for smart and inclusive growth. They impact negatively on youth employment and increase the risk of poverty and social exclusion. Early school leaving represents missed opportunities for young people as well as a loss of social and economic potential. Drastically reducing the numbers of young people leaving school early is a key investment in the future prosperity and social cohesion of the EU.

Early School Leaving is not a new problem, but it is becoming more acute. Nearly a decade ago, Education Ministers in the Council set themselves the objective to reduce the rate of early school leaving, reflecting a policy priority across all Member States. There has been progress, from 17.6% in 2000 to 14.4% in 2009², but this is not enough and the rate of improvement is not fast enough to reach the 2020 target. There are many examples of good practice in Member States, but the overall policy approach is not effective enough nor sufficiently strategic in most countries. The EU can add value by helping Member States to develop more effective policy approaches and so to accelerate the process of improvement.

Although the reasons to leave education and training prematurely are highly individual, early school leavers are in general more likely to come from socio-economically disadvantaged and low education backgrounds. Vulnerable groups and young people with special educational needs are overrepresented among early leavers from education and training. Boys are much more likely to leave school early than girls. The EU average early school leaving rate is double for migrant first generation youth than for natives; in some countries more than 40% of migrant youth are early school leavers. Early school leaving among Roma is running at even higher levels.

Students who have encountered difficulties in general education often go into vocational education and training (VET). For this reason, vocational schools face a particular responsibility and challenge with respect to the reduction of early school leaving. VET can increase the motivation to learn, can offer students more flexibility, a more appropriate pedagogy and can target directly the labour market aspirations of young people.

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 Eurostat, Labour Force Survey 2010.

Despite slow aggregate progress across the EU in reducing early school leaving, some Member States have been highly successful. However, both the joint work within the Open Method of Coordination, comparative data and analytical research suggest that the key issues for successful policies include a strong evidence base on the drivers and incidence of early school leaving, the consistency and coherence of measures taken against it, the cross-sectoral nature of collaboration and the comprehensiveness of the approach. Early school leaving needs 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.

Given the strong subsidiarity in the area of education and the diversity of education systems, it would be neither possible nor desirable to impose a single solution common to all Member States. Continuing with the status quo has led to only limited progress far short of the ambition jointly expressed by Ministers of Education and confirmed by the European Council. The Commission therefore judges that a Council Recommendation is the most effective way of providing a framework for the development of such a comprehensive approach in Member States to support the Europe 2020 headline target.

The Recommendation will add value to Member States' efforts by supporting them in developing policies that identify the causes of and address early school leaving in a lifelong learning perspective, shift from implementing individual measures against early school leaving to introducing comprehensive strategies, tackle it as a phenomenon that cuts across several related policy areas, involve all stakeholders, and make policy interventions more systematic and consistent.

It sets out basic guidelines for coherent, comprehensive and evidence based policies against early school leaving and aims:

- to provide a reference framework to assist Member States to develop more effective policies against early school leaving,
- to support Member States in their implementation, and so
- to lead to a significant reduction in the rate of early school leaving in all Member States.

2. RESULTS OF CONSULTATIONS WITH THE INTERESTED PARTIES AND IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

The proposal is based on the work of Member States under the Open Method of Coordination focusing on "Access and social inclusion in lifelong learning", between 2006 and 2010. The substance of the policy framework has been subject of extensive consultation with stakeholders from a variety of backgrounds: education ministries, European stakeholder organisations in school and vocational education, organisations for children's rights and well-being, for migrants and Roma. The topic of early school leaving has also been addressed in two public consultations, 'Schools for the 21st century' (2007) and 'Migration and Education' (2008). Stakeholders strongly supported the idea of EU level action to underpin national efforts and underlined the urgency of the problem in times of economic crisis. Most recently, the Ministerial Seminar organised under the Belgian Presidency in July 2010 stressed the need

to intensify the exchange of experiences and good practice among Member States and welcomed suggestions that the Union should provide a flexible policy framework, building on experience on issues such as the common European definition of key competences for school education.

The Impact Assessment Board provided a first opinion on the Impact Assessment on 24 September 2010 and gave a positive opinion on the revised Impact Assessment Report on 22 October 2010. The final version of the Impact Assessment Report has taken the comments of the Board into account.

3. LEGAL ELEMENTS OF THE PROPOSAL

Summary of the proposed action

The Recommendation sets out the main elements of a coherent, comprehensive and evidence based policy against early school leaving. These include prevention, intervention and compensatory measures. They address all levels of education and training, structural aspects in education and training systems, the possible interventions at school level and support schemes for individual pupils at risk of dropping out.

The Recommendation reflects the fact that early school leaving is a complex phenomenon and that its characteristics differ from country to country, between and sometimes even within regions. This requires not only close monitoring of the problem, but tailored action, in line with the subsidiarity principle. The Recommendation also aims to provide a focal point for further exchanges of good practice and for policy development within the open method of coordination.

The Recommendation invites Member States:

- to identify main factors leading to early school leaving and monitor developments at national, regional and local level,
- to develop and implement comprehensive and cross-sectoral policies against early school leaving, based on their specific conditions.

The Recommendation invites the European Commission to support policies at national level by:

- monitoring developments across Member States and supporting peer learning and exchange of good practice between them,
- supporting policies to reduce early school leaving in all relevant activities managed by the Commission which are targeted at children and young people and promoting cross-sectoral cooperation,
- launching studies, comparative research and cooperation projects.

Legal basis

According to article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the Union shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between

Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and complementing their action. Article 166 TFEU refers to implementation of a vocational training policy which shall support and supplement the action of the Member States. The proposed Recommendation aims to strengthen Member State efforts to combat early leaving from education and training. It supports Member States by providing a framework for the development of targeted and comprehensive policies against early school leaving.

In line with Article 9 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, which requires the Union to "take into account requirements linked to the promotion of a high level of employment, the guarantee of adequate social protection, the fight against social exclusion, and a high level of education, training and protection of human health" in its policies and activities, the proposed Recommendation emphasizes the need to combat early school leaving in the policies and programmes supported by the Commission and by the Member States.

Subsidiarity, complementarity and proportionality principles

The proposed Recommendation is intended to contribute to the quality of education and training by facilitating the work to which Member States have committed themselves within the Europe 2020 strategy. It supports policy development within Member States and learning from good practice in order to help Member States to create comprehensive strategies to reduce in a sustainable way early school leaving and the number of low skilled adults. The Recommendation establishes a framework within which Member States can more effectively develop policies to reduce early school leaving. The choice of policy measures to be adopted remains theirs, adapted to the specific conditions which obtain in the Member States. Therefore, this proposal conforms to the principle of subsidiarity.

It is intended to enhance political commitment for reforms that cannot be achieved by using only the EU education and training programmes or Structural Funds. Moreover, it emphasizes the need for policy coordination and for actions from several policies, thus moving beyond the strict focus on education policies within the open method of coordination ET2020. However, the implementation arrangements remain the responsibility of the Member States, at the appropriate level and in accordance with national, regional and/or local circumstances, and are therefore in conformity with the proportionality principle.

4. BUDGETARY IMPLICATION

The proposal has no implication for the EU budget.

5. OPTIONAL ELEMENTS

N/A

Proposal for a

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION

On policies to reduce early school leaving

(Text with EEA relevance)

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and in particular Article 165 and 166 thereof,

Having regard to the proposal from the European Commission,

Whereas:

- (1) Reducing early school leaving³ is essential for achieving a number of key objectives in the Europe 2020 strategy⁴. It addresses both the aims for 'smart growth' by improving education and training levels and for 'inclusive growth' by addressing one of the major risk factors for unemployment and poverty. The Europe 2020 strategy therefore includes the headline target to reduce early school leaving to less than 10% by 2020, from 14.4% in 2009. Member States have undertaken to establish national targets, taking account of their relative starting positions and national circumstances.
- (2) The Integrated Guidelines for the implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy call on Member States to take all necessary efforts to prevent early school leaving⁵.
- (3) The flagship initiative "A European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion"⁶ sets a framework for action to ensure social and territorial cohesion, with a specific focus on breaking the cycle of disadvantage and stepping up preventive action. It addresses the Europe 2020 headline target to lift at least 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion in the next decade.
- (4) 'Youth on the Move', a flagship initiative within the Europe 2020 Strategy, aims to "enhance the performance and international attractiveness of Europe's higher education institutions and raise the overall quality of all levels of education and training in the EU, combining both excellence and equity, by promoting student mobility and trainees' mobility, and improve the employment situation of young people"⁷.

³ 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.

⁴ COM(2010) 2020.

⁵ OJ L 308, 24.11.2010, p. 50.

⁶ COM(2010) 758.

⁷ "A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth" - COM(2010) 2020.

- (5) The Council conclusions of May 2003 adopting the work programme Education and Training 2010⁸ stated that the share of early school leavers should be below 10% by 2010, defining early school leavers as persons between 18 and 24 years old with only lower secondary education or less and no longer in education or training. The benchmark was not achieved. One in seven young people currently leave education and training before they have completed upper secondary education.
- (6) The reasons for early school leaving differ widely from country to country and also within regions. Policies to reduce early school leaving need to be adjusted to the specific situation within a region or country; there is no single solution for all Member States.
- (7) Despite the differences between countries and regions, there is strong evidence in all Member States that disadvantaged and vulnerable groups are more affected. Also young people with special educational needs are overrepresented among early leavers from education and training. Early school leaving both results of social disadvantage and perpetuates the risk of social exclusion.
- (8) The Council conclusions of 26 November 2009 on the education of children with a migrant background⁹ noted that while large numbers of children with migrant background succeed in education, students with migrant background are generally more likely to leave school early. For migrants the average early school leaving rate across the EU is double that of native students. Available evidence indicates that early school leaving is higher still among the Roma population.
- (9) The Council Conclusions of 22 May 2008 on adult learning¹⁰ recognise the role of adult learning in addressing early school leaving by offering a second chance to those who reach adulthood without a qualification, focusing especially on basic skills, IT skills and language learning.
- (10) The Council Resolution of 15 November 2007 on 'New skills for new jobs'¹¹ stressed the need to raise overall skill levels and to give priority to the education and training of those at risk of economic and social exclusion, particularly early school leavers. They underlined the need to provide vocational guidance and personal training plans to job seekers and to develop the validation of learning outcomes acquired through formal, informal and non-formal learning.
- (11) The Council agreed in May 2010 in its conclusions on the social dimension of education and training¹² that the successful prevention of early school leaving requires the development of knowledge about groups at risk of dropping out at local, regional and national level, and systems for identifying early individuals who are at such risk, and concluded that comprehensive and cross-sectoral strategies should be implemented, which provide a range of school-wide and systemic policies targeting the different factors leading to early school leaving.

⁸ Council Conclusions of 5-6 May 2003 on reference levels of European average performance in education and training (Benchmarks) (doc 8981/03).

⁹ OJ C 301, 11.12.2009, p. 5.

¹⁰ OJ C 140, 6.6.2008, p. 10.

¹¹ OJ C 290, 4.12.2007, p. 1.

¹² OJ C 135, 26.5.2010, p. 2.

- (12) Education reforms take time to have effect. In order to achieve a reduction of early school leaving rates within the next decade and reach the Europe 2020 target, comprehensive and cross-sectoral strategies to reduce early school leaving need to be implemented as soon as possible.
- (13) A common European framework for comprehensive approaches to reduce early school leaving can help Member States to review existing policies, to develop their National Reform Programmes under the Europe 2020 strategy, and to innovate and develop new strategies with a high impact and a good cost-benefit ratio. It can also provide a basis for collaboration through the Open Method of Cooperation and a focus for the use of EU funding instruments,

HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT MEMBER STATES:

Make use of the framework set out in the Annex to this Recommendation in order to:

1. Identify the main factors leading to early school leaving and monitor the characteristics of the phenomenon at national, regional and local level as a precondition for targeted and effective evidence based policies.
2. Adopt by the end of 2012 and ensure the implementation of comprehensive strategies to reduce early school leaving, in line with national Europe 2020 targets; these strategies should include prevention, intervention and compensation measures.
3. Ensure that these strategies include appropriate measures for groups at increased risk of early school leaving in the Member State, such as children with a socio-economically disadvantaged, migrant or Roma background, or with special educational needs.
4. Ensure that these strategies address both general education and vocational education and training and the challenges specific to each.
5. Since early school leaving is a complex phenomenon that cannot be tackled by education and training alone, integrate measures which support the reduction of early school leaving rates in all relevant policies targeted at children and young people and coordinate activities among different policy sectors and stakeholders to help people who are at risk of early school leaving, including those who have dropped out already.

INVITE THE COMMISSION TO:

1. Contribute to the efforts made by Member States by monitoring developments across Member States to determine tendencies.
2. Support the development of national strategies and the exchange of experience and good practice, and facilitate effective peer-learning among Member States on measures to reduce early school leaving and to improve educational outcomes of children from groups at risk of early school leaving.
3. Integrate measures which support the reduction of early school leaving rates in all relevant EU actions targeted at children and young adults.
4. Support the development of effective policies against early school leaving by launching comparative studies and research.

5. Ensure that, in cooperation with the Member States, the EU's Lifelong Learning Programme and the European Structural Funds and the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation support and contribute to the implementation of national strategies.

6. Report periodically on the progress towards the Europe 2020 target on early school leaving through the Annual Growth Survey, and on the implementation of national strategies within the reporting of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020), for the first time as part of the joint progress report 2015.

Done at Brussels,

For the Council
The President

ANNEX

A framework for comprehensive policies to reduce early school leaving

Strategies to reduce early school leaving should be based on an analysis at national, regional and local level of the conditions leading to the phenomenon, as average rates often mask large differences between different regions or countries. Early school leavers are a heterogeneous group and individual motivations to leave education prematurely differ widely. Family background and wider socio-economic conditions such as pull from the labour market are important factors. Their impact is conditioned by the structure of the education and training system, by available learning opportunities, and by the learning environment. The coordination of policies addressing the well-being of children and young people, social security, youth employment and future career perspectives has an important role to play in reducing early school leaving.

1. IDENTIFICATION OF MAIN FACTORS AND MONITORING

Early school leaving processes have complex and varied causes, but are often linked to socio-economic disadvantage, to low education backgrounds, to alienation from or poor achievement in education and training, to pull factors from the labour market, and/or to a combination of social, emotional and educational problems putting individuals at risk of dropping out.

Account needs to be taken of the type of education in which students are enrolled. In some Member States, students who have encountered difficulties in general education often go into vocational education and training (VET). For this reason, vocational schools face a particular responsibility and challenge with respect to the reduction of early school leaving. Evidence-based policies require that a particular attention be given to performance by sector of education or training.

The development of evidence-based and cost-effective policies to combat early school leaving requires gathering and maintaining data on the phenomenon. This should allow analysis at local, regional and national levels. It may contain information on early school leaving rates, on transitions between educational levels, as well as on school absenteeism and school avoiding behaviour.

- Collection of information should allow for the analysis of the main reasons underlying early school leaving for different groups of pupils, schools, types of education and training institution, municipalities or regions.
- The combination of data on early school leaving and socio-economic data can help in the targeting of measures and policies. Gathering and analysing information on the motivation of early school leavers, their employment and career perspectives can also help in the targeting of measures and policies.
- Evaluation of the effectiveness and efficiency of existing policy measures aimed at reducing early school leaving is an important basis for improving strategies and programmes for increasing pupils' chances of school success.

2. POLICY FRAMEWORK

Comprehensive strategies comprise a mix of policies, coordination across different policy sectors and the integration of measures supporting the reduction of early school leaving into all relevant policies aimed at children and young people. These are principally social policy and support services, employment, youth, family, and integration policies. Horizontal coordination between different actors and vertical coordination through different levels of government are equally important. Strategies against early school leaving should comprise prevention, intervention and compensation elements. Member States should select the detailed components of their strategies according to their own circumstances and contexts.

2.1 Prevention policies aim to reduce the risk of early school leaving before problems start. Such measures optimise the provision of education and training in order to support better learning outcomes and to remove obstacles to educational success.

They aim to lay a solid early foundation for children to develop their learning potential and to integrate well in schools.

- (1) Providing high quality early childhood education and care is beneficial for all children and especially relevant for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, including migrants and Roma. It enhances physical well-being, social and emotional development, language and basic cognitive skills. Provision should be high quality, affordable, adequately staffed and accessible to families with a disadvantaged background.

They address the organisation of education and training systems, the resources available to schools, the availability, permeability and flexibility of individual learning pathways. They also address the gender gap, the support of children from disadvantaged backgrounds or with a different mother tongue.

- (1) Increasing the educational offer by extending the duration of compulsory education or by providing education and training guarantees beyond the age of compulsory education can influence the behaviour of young people and their families and lead to higher rates of completion of upper secondary qualifications.
- (2) Implementing active desegregation policies and providing additional support for schools in disadvantaged areas or with high numbers of pupils from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds help them to improve their social composition and their educational offer, so lifting the educational achievements of pupils from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds and reducing their risk of early school leaving.
- (3) Supporting children with a different mother tongue to improve their proficiency in the teaching language and supporting teachers to teach children with different levels of linguistic competence improve the educational achievements of children with migrant background and reduce their risk of early school leaving.
- (4) Increasing the flexibility and permeability of educational pathways (e.g. by modularisation of courses or alternation of school and work), supports especially pupils with lower academic performance, can motivate them to continue education and training which is better adapted to their needs and abilities. It also allows to address gender specific reasons for early school leaving such as joining the labour market early or teenage pregnancy.

- (5) Strengthening vocational pathways and increasing their attractiveness and flexibility provide pupils at risk with credible alternatives to early school leaving. VET provision which is well integrated into the overall education and training systems allows for alternative pathways into upper secondary and tertiary education.

2.2 Intervention policies aim to avoid early school leaving by improving the quality of education and training at the level of the educational institutions, by reacting to early warning signs and by providing targeted support to pupils or groups of pupils at risk of dropping out. They address all educational levels, starting from early childhood education and care to upper secondary education.

At the level of the school or training institution strategies against early school leaving are embedded in an overall school development policy. They aim at creating a positive learning environment, reinforcing pedagogical quality and innovation, enhancing teaching staff competences to deal with social and cultural diversity, and developing anti-violence and anti-bullying approaches.

- (1) Developing schools into learning communities based on a common vision for school development shared by all stakeholders, using the experience and knowledge of all, and providing an open-minded, inspiring and comfortable place for learning to encourage young people to continue education and training and become successful learners.
- (2) Developing early-warning systems for pupils at risk can help to take effective measures before problems become manifest, pupils start to alienate from school, play truant or drop-out.
- (3) Enhancing the involvement of parents, reinforcing their cooperation with the school and creating partnerships between schools and parents encourage family support for successful education and training. It can be facilitated by mediators from the local community who are able to support communication and to reduce distrust.
- (4) Networking with actors outside school such as local community services, migrant or minority community organisations, sports and culture associations, employers and civil society organisations allows for holistic solutions to help pupils at risk and eases the access to external support such as psychologists, social and youth workers, cultural and community services.
- (5) Supporting and empowering teachers in their work with pupils at risk is a pre-requisite to successful measures at school level. Targeted teacher training helps them to deal with diversity in the classroom, to support pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and to solve difficult teaching situations.
- (6) Extra-curricular activities after and outside school and artistic, cultural and sport activities can raise the self-esteem of pupils at risk and increase their resilience against difficulties in their learning.

Intervention policies **at individual level** aim to provide a set of support mechanisms for individual students at risk of dropping out which can be tailored to their needs. They focus both on personal development in order to build resilience for students at risk and on redressing concrete difficulties, which can be of a social, cognitive or emotional nature.

- (1) Mentoring supports individual pupils to overcome specific academic, social or personal difficulties. Either in one-to-one approaches (mentoring) or in small groups (tutoring), pupils receive targeted assistance, often provided by education staff or by community members.
- (2) Strengthening personalised learning approaches and providing learning support for pupils at risk helps them to adapt to the demands of formal education and to overcome barriers created by the education and training system.
- (3) Strengthening guidance and counselling supports students' career choices, transitions within education or from education to employment. It reduces poor decision-making based on false expectations or insufficient information. It helps young people to make choices which meet their ambitions, personal interests and talents.
- (4) Financial support measures such as study allowances respond to financially motivated early school leaving. Such support might be conditional on regular attendance or might be linked to families' social benefits.

2.3 Compensation aims to help those who left school prematurely, offering routes to re-enter education and training and gain the qualifications they missed.

- (1) Successful second chance programmes provide learning environments which respond to the specific needs of premature leavers, recognise their prior learning and support their well-being. They are different from schools in both organisational and pedagogical approaches and are often characterised by small learning groups, personalised and innovative teaching and flexible learning pathways. They need to be easily accessible and free of charge.
- (2) It is important to provide different routes back into mainstream education and training. Transition classes can help to bridge the gap between previous school failure and re-entering mainstream education.
- (3) Recognising and validating prior learning including competences achieved in non-formal and informal learning improves pupils' confidence and self-esteem and facilitates re-entry into school. It can motivate them to continue education and training, helps them to identify their talents and to make better career choices.
- (4) Targeted individual support integrates social, financial, educational and psychological support for young people in difficulties. It is especially important for young people in situations of serious social or emotional distress which hinders them from continuing education or training.