

Research for CULT Committee – The European Schools System: State of Play, Challenges and Perspectives

KEY FINDINGS

- After introducing the competence-based approach, the ESS still needs to update its monitoring and evaluation indicators for pedagogical quality assurance and develop a continuous professional development (CPD) offer for teachers.
- Language learning is seen by many stakeholders as the strongest side of the ESS, especially the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) method. However, it is heavily impacted by staff shortages and COVID-19 after-effects.
- While the current ESS mission and objectives are still seen as relevant today, they need to be broadened and include more explicit references to the values of diversity, inclusion, cooperation, and tolerance.
- The current ESS governance and funding setup limits the system's ability to respond to challenges. This can be alleviated by higher delegation and transparency standards, feasible cost-sharing alternatives and strengthened employment package for teachers.



This study focuses on the European Schools System (ESS), an inter-governmental system of educational establishments – both traditional and accredited European Schools – that offers multicultural and multilingual education to children across EU Member States. This study assesses the ESS progress since a comprehensive assessment by the European Parliament in 2011. Below is the summary of the study's findings and key recommendations for both educational and operational aspects of the ESS.

The present document is the executive summary of the study on “The European Schools System: State of Play, Challenges and Perspectives”. The full study, which is available in English can be downloaded at: <https://bit.ly/3NxNPXS>

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PE 699.647 - June 2022

Educational aspects

The ESS educational system generally functions well. Nevertheless, it faces particular challenges in pedagogical quality assurance, language learning, and education for sustainable development.

In terms of **pedagogical quality assurance**, the ESS is finalising the implementation of a competence-based approach to learning. While there is already a solid institutional framework in place, it could further benefit from improvements in two areas: (1) updating relevant quality assurance indicators, as they are currently not fit for effective monitoring and evaluation; and (2) establishing a continuous professional development (CPD) offer for both seconded and locally recruited teachers.

Language learning was assessed positively by many stakeholders with Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) often cited as a good practice example. However, both Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated the existing shortage of teachers in the ESS. As a result, some Schools are forced to mix age groups and language levels, potentially causing learning problems. Proposed remedies include digitalising language learning for some languages, at least in the secondary cycle, mitigating staffing shortages, enriching connections between both traditional and accredited Schools, and better reflecting the needs of multi-lingual pupils. This can also increase the flexibility of language learning in the ESS.

Sustainability topics have recently received more attention, both from the central administration as well as from the management of individual Schools. This has led to improved practice. However, topics relating to environmental sustainability are not yet fully reflected in the competence-based approach. This makes coverage of these topics too fragmented and incoherent within the secondary cycle of education. They therefore need to be properly integrated via a central document.

The idea of a **European dimension** to the education offered also represents one of the strongest aspects of the ESS. It is based not only on the curriculum but also via extracurricular activities such as study trips, EU models, and inter-Schools competitions as well as the multicultural educational environment. There is evidence of high-quality educational resources developed across several Schools. However, these resources are not always sufficiently well distributed. Better inter-school exchange systems could enhance resource sharing to the benefit of all.

Despite a rapid response across the system to the **COVID-19 pandemic**, teaching and administrative processes have still been undermined. Some Schools were underprepared for digital transitioning. Nevertheless, overall, there was an increase in the pace of digitalisation. This trend needs to continue and be coupled with mental and physical health support measures to ensure effective learning and student well-being.

Operational aspects

Many operational aspects of the ESS need to be reassessed considering the rapid expansion of the system and the drastically changing reality in which it operates.

The **ESS identity**, as formulated in its mission and objectives, needs to be at the heart of the system. The mission of the ESS, first defined in 1957, continues to be perceived by stakeholders as relevant and reflective of the Schools' identity today. However, many of them also argue that the mission statement needs to be broadened and include more explicit references to values such as diversity, inclusion, cooperation, and tolerance. This includes more emphasis on the accommodation of multilingual pupils and social diversity, reduction of exclusivity of the ESS and better integration with the AES and more diversified educational offer, especially for pupils with special educational needs, and pupils who do not necessarily wish to follow an academic education path.

ESS **governance** is perceived to be overly complex, bureaucratic, and inefficient, with insufficiently defined roles and responsibilities amongst a number of entities. This compromises the system's ability to respond to challenges. A new, comprehensive scheme of delegation needs to be developed, which guards against conflicts of interest, for example through the use of information barriers where appropriate. This is likely to raise educational standards across the system. Furthermore, there is a clear need for more transparency. Parents and teachers still feel insufficiently involved in the ESS decision-making process, while conflict resolution processes were reported to be lengthy and complex. Governance transparency can be increased by establishing clear channels of communication together with guidance/support that enables effective stakeholder involvement. There should also be a focus on enabling effective mediation to avoid formal legal procedures.

The **funding** mechanism of the ESS, its governance and, consequently, the Schools' HR policies, are closely intertwined. The current cost-sharing mechanism was reported to be highly problematic. It has led to two major issues the traditional ES face – teacher shortages and a poor infrastructure. Many MSs continuously fail to meet their obligations for secondments, while host MSs are not always willing to allocate funds for infrastructure maintenance and upgrades. Teacher shortages are a major challenge across all Schools, resulting in a decreased quality of education. Exploring alternatives to the current cost-sharing mechanism (e.g. contribution-per-student) and strengthening the employment package for teachers (e.g. via the introduction of equal employment conditions, appropriate teacher support structures and better training opportunities) could be plausible avenues for development.

This study identified significant disparities within the daily **management** of individual Schools: some Schools are perceived to be managed relatively well, while others tend to struggle; likewise, the infrastructure in certain Schools is satisfactory, while in others it is much less so. Such heterogeneity does not ensure pedagogical consistency across the ESS. For example, a lack of physical space negatively affects the quality of education and a pupil's readiness to learn. However, an overall key issue for most parents, teachers, and pupils across the ESS is communication – they feel that their complaints are not being heard and/or solved effectively. In addition to the above-mentioned scheme of delegation, clear channels of communication and the more frequent use of mediation, a more decentralised approach to School management should be introduced. This needs to be coupled with stronger management competences in Schools and increased financial autonomy to make necessary changes, particularly in the area of infrastructure development, as well as an investment into the educational and psychological support of pupils.

Finally, when it comes to the **growth and expansion** of the ES, expanding and promoting the system through the AES should be adapted as a policy priority. The number of pupils is growing faster than can be supported by the current model, and the AES offers an attractive alternative. However, stronger, and more consistent pedagogical quality assurance processes need to be put in place centrally, as well as embedded within individual Schools, to ensure that the ESS can grow sustainably.

Further information

This executive summary is available in the following languages: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. The study, which is available in English, and the summaries can be downloaded at: <https://bit.ly/3NxNPXS>

More information on Policy Department research for CULT: <https://research4committees.blog/cult/>



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