Early years learning in the European Union

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The Committee on Culture and Education adopted unanimously the own-initiative report by Mary HONEYBALL (S&D, UK) on Early Years Learning in the European Union.

Recognising that early childhood education and care (ECEC) is provided in different ways in different EU Member States and that often there is a clear link between a poor and disadvantaged background and low educational achievement, members propose the establishment of an education strategy that places the needs and best interests of the child at the centre of ECEC policies.

Members' views may be summarised as follows:

Child-centred approach: Members note that the early years of childhood are critical for cognitive, sensory and motor development, affective and personal development and language acquisition, and also lay the foundations for lifelong learning. They also recognise that ECEC supports children's healthy mental and physical development, enabling them to become more balanced human beings; recommends, therefore, that the Member States consider introducing **a compulsory year of nursery schooling before the start of schooling proper**. In Members' view, the adoption of healthy lifestyle behaviours can have a profound impact on children's physical and mental development, including the acquisition of knowledge, particularly of languages. They encourage the introduction and retention of innovative pedagogical models for language teaching, particularly **multilingual crèches and nursery schools**.

Universal provision of ECEC: to reduce inequalities in the area of early childhood education, quality education services and support should be available to all. They suggest, in particular: i) additional help for disadvantaged groups, ii) specific help for children with disabilities, and iii) pluralist approaches in the context of the pre-school curriculum.

Engagement with parents: stressing that parents, both mothers and fathers, are equal partners in ECEC; Members recognises that ECEC services should be fully participative, involving all staff, parents and, where possible, children themselves. They encourage the Member States to invest in parental education programmes and, where appropriate, to provide other forms of assistance, such as home visiting services, for parents who need additional help. They stress, furthermore, that parents should be provided with **free, low-threshold, on-site access to advisory services in crèches**. Members also stress that cultural activities develop a spirit of openness and tolerance. They call on the Member States to grant the **children of asylum seekers**, **refugees and persons with subsidiary protection status**, or leave to remain on humanitarian grounds, **access to early childhood education**, so as not to restrict their life chances at the outset.

Better integration of services: Members encourage Member States to integrate ECEC services and to support their creation. These ECEC services need to develop autonomously for the well-being of children. In this context, Member States are urged to promote and finance measures and projects to provide ECEC services to children from disadvantaged social groups. Members call for **the development of a European framework for ECEC services** that respects the Member States' cultural diversity and highlights shared goals and values.

Economic benefits: Members stress that in an unstable economic climate we must not neglect to invest substantially in ECEC services. It has been observed that investment in ECEC has been proven to have subsequent economic and social benefits, such as increased tax contributions through a strengthened workforce, along with reduced future health costs, lower crime rates and fewer instances of antisocial

behaviour. They recognise that **quality early years education can help reduce early school leaving**. For Members, high-quality ECEC services are a complement to, rather than a substitute for, a strong welfare system.

Staff and quality services: Members stress that staff working with pre-school children must have appropriate qualifications. They call on the Member States to raise professional standards **by introducing recognised qualifications for those working in the ECEC field**. They also note that other factors, including staff-to-child ratios, group sizes and curriculum content, can also affect quality. Members call on the Member States to develop mechanisms for evaluating ECEC provision and ensuring that quality standards are met, in order to improve ECEC services. In the context of the implementation of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), Members call for account to be taken of the quality of education and thus of learning outcomes. Member States are urged to provide continuous training for those working in the ECEC field in order to increase and update their specific skills and to ensure that all **qualified ECEC staff are ideally paid a salary in line with that of primary school teachers**.

Research and exchange of best practice: Members stress that there is stilla need for a better understanding of childhood development in early years education. They call forfurther investigation and research across the EU,and for an EU-wide exchange of results, takinginto account the cultural diversity of the Member States. They regret that EU structural funding and schemes such as Comenius, which allow educators to participate in EU-wide exchanges, are not used enough and call on the Member States to increase **awareness of such schemes and funds among ECEC educators**.