Tackling early school leaving

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PURPOSE: tackling early school leaving in the context of the Europe 2020 Agenda.

BACKGROUND: in 2009, more than six million young people, 14.4% of all 18 to 24 year olds, left education and training with only lower secondary education or less. Even more worrying, 17.4% of them completed only primary education. Early school leaving represents missed opportunities for young people and a loss of social and economic potential for the European Union as a whole:

- at **individual level** the consequences of early school leaving affect people throughout their lives, and reduce their chance to participate in the social, cultural and economic dimensions of society. It increases their individual risk of unemployment, their lifetime earnings, their wellbeing and their own health and that of their children. The Commission indicates that, in 2009, 52% of early school leavers in the EU were unemployed or outside the labour market;
- at the **level of economy and society at large**, high early school leaving rates have long-term effects on the societal developments and on economic growth. Early leavers tend to participate less in democratic processes and are less active citizens. The Commission indicates that **to reduce the average European early school leaving rate by just 1 percentage point would provide the European economy each year with nearly half a million additional qualified potential young employees.**

It is important to take action at the appropriate level. This is why the Commission is proposing a strategy designed to tackle early school leaving as part of Europe 2020.

CONTENT: this Communication analyses the impact of early school leaving on individuals, society and economies, outlines its causes, and gives an overview on the existing and forthcoming EU-level measures to tackle it. It is accompanied by a proposal for a Council Recommendation and by a Staff Working Document that present a framework for comprehensive policy approaches which Member States can use for effective policies in reducing early school leaving, and detailed examples of actual policy measures.

The reasons for early school-leaving: the reasons why young people leave education and training prematurely are highly individual. Some groups in society are especially affected by early school leaving, particularly those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds and vulnerable groups, such as youth from a public care background and persons with physical and mental disabilities or other special educational needs (SEN) and young people of migrant origin. Early school leaving is influenced by educational factors, by individual circumstances and by socio-economic conditions. It is a process rather than a one-off event. It often starts already in primary education with first experiences of school failure and growing alienation from school. Transitions between schools and between different educational levels are particularly difficult for pupils at risk of dropping out. Education and training systems often do not provide sufficient targeted support for pupils to cope with emotional, social or educational difficulties and to remain in education and training. Early school leaving is also a gender issue which requires more attention. In the EU, 16.3% of boys are early school leavers, compared to 12.5% of girls. Member States experience different challenges with regard to early school leaving. In some, early school leaving is a predominantly rural phenomenon, has high incidence in remote areas and can be linked to insufficient access to education. In others it mostly affects disadvantaged areas in big cities.

Given the range of causes, strategies for combating early school leaving have to take as a starting point an analysis of the national, regional and local specificities of the phenomenon. Strong disparities in rates of early school leaving might indicate structural problems in certain geographical areas or educational tracks.

Strategy to tackle early-school leaving: according to the Commission, comprehensive policies against early school leaving should focus on **prevention, intervention and compensation**:

> **1. prevention**seeks to avoid the conditions from arising where processes leading to early school leaving can start: Increasing participation in good quality early childhood education and care has been identified as one of the most effective measures to give children a good start in education and to build their resilience. However access to high-quality early childhood education and care services needs to be improved. Other preventive measures address questions such as **systematic language support** for children with a migrant background, an active desegregation policy which improves the social, ethnic and cultural mix in schools, allows for better peer learning and helps integration, or the targeted support of disadvantaged schools. Additional potential obstacles to successful school careers can be removed by increasing the permeability of educational pathways and increasing the quality and status of vocational education pathways;
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> **2. intervention** addresses emerging difficulties at an early stage and seeks to prevent them from leading to school drop-out. Intervention measures can focus on the whole school or training institution or can address individual pupils who are at risk of discontinuing their education or training. Whole school measures aim at improving the school climate and the creation of supportive learning environments. Early warning systems and better cooperation with parents can be an efficient form of help for pupils at risk. Also networking with actors outside the school and access to local support networks tends to be highly efficient in providing relevant support. Student-focused measures focus on mentoring and tutoring, personalized learning approaches, improved guidance and financial support such as education allowances;
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> **3. compensation** measures offer opportunities for education and training for those who dropped out. They can take the form of financial or other types of support. They aim to help young people to re-enter mainstream education or provide a so-called “second chance”. Successful approaches in second chance institutions differ therefore considerably from mainstream schools by addressing the difficulties pupils had in mainstream schooling. Nevertheless there is evidence that prevention of early school leaving shows better results than compensating the negative effects of early school leaving. The experience of failure, a lack of self-confidence in learning and increased social, emotional and educational problems after dropping-out reduce the likelihood of achieving a qualification and completing education successfully.

To support Member States better in developing efficient and effective national policies against early school leaving, several measures and tools, offering a comprehensive approach to this multifaceted challenge, will be put in place:

- the **proposed Council Recommendation** on policies to reduce early school leaving, accompanied by a Staff Working Document of the Commission, is designed to help Member States innovate and develop strategies with a high impact and a good cost-benefit ratio. It is proposed that the Recommendation should set a common European framework for effective and efficient policies against early school leaving and that Member States should adopt comprehensive national strategies against early school leaving by 2012, in line with their national targets;
- the **forthcoming Commission Communication on early childhood education and care**, to be adopted in 2011, will underline that early childhood education and care systems can help to establish the basis for lifelong learning, as the most powerful way to combat disadvantage through education, and so effectively prevent much school drop-out. The Communication will set out key issues for reinforcing quality and access in early childhood education and care;

- the Commission will present in 2011 a **Communication on a New European Agenda on Integration** to support Member States' integration policies. To support the educational attainment of students with migrant background, the need to address early school leaving should also be taken into account in this context;
- **vocational education and training** (VET) has the potential to be an important vehicle to prevent young people from leaving education early. Following the Commission Communication 'A new impetus for the European cooperation in Vocational Education and Training to support the Europe 2020 strategy', Education Ministers agreed an ambitious VET modernisation agenda, including specific action to reduce drop-out from VET;
- a **benchmark to measure the employability of young people** will be proposed by the Commission in early 2011. Increasing their employability is crucial for improving young people's prospects for employment and for their future careers, and so for engaging them fully in education and training;
- in order to target policy developments most effectively and to accelerate the process of mutual learning, a **European level group of decision-makers** will accompany the implementation of the Council Recommendation and support the Commission and Council in monitoring the developments in Member States and at European level. It will help in identifying effective policies and practices to tackle shared challenges across the Member States, support the exchange of experience and help to formulate better targeted policy recommendations;
- **ministerial and high level official discussions** will continue, as well as high-profile events such as Commission or Presidency **conferences.** They will provide important input into the ongoing discussions and improve the uptake of effective new policy approaches and measures;
- the **Lifelong Learning Programme** as well as the **research and innovation related programmes** will be more intensively used to support experimentation and innovative approaches to reduce early school leaving. It allows for exchange of experiences and good practice on the level of education and training institutions and promotes the development of effective and efficient support measures for pupils at risk of dropping out. Funding priorities for 2011 include reducing early school leaving, improving the learning of students with a migrant background and promoting gender equality and inclusive approaches to learning;
- the **European Structural Funds**, especially the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund, are very important sources for financing national and regional measures to reduce early school leaving. The common European policy framework contained in the Council Recommendation will add focus and rigour to investments under the European Structural Funds and so strengthen their cost-effectiveness in combating early school leaving.