Tackling early school leaving

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The Committee on Culture and Education adopted the own-initiative report drafted by Mary HONEYBALL (S&D, UK) on tackling early school leaving (ESL).

Firstly, Members recall that rates of ESL vary across EU Member States. In 2009, the average ESL rate stood at 14.4 %. 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 or equivalent level of education to at least 40%.

The report notes that:

- linguistic support should be provided for students from a migrant background;
- steps must be taken to enable **Roma** children and children with no identity papers to attend school;
- ineffective work-life balance policies increase the prevalence of ESL and academic failure in general and that there is a need to step up efforts to improve such policies;
- family structures have a significant influence on children’s ability and motivation to succeed at school;
- according to the OECD, socio-economically disadvantaged students are often at a double disadvantage because they attend schools affected by various types of socio-economic disadvantage and in which there are fewer and less well-qualified teachers.

Members focus specifically on the following issues:

The need for a personalised approach: Members stress that equality of opportunities and choice in education, and access to high-quality education for individuals from all social, ethnic and religious backgrounds, regardless of gender or disability, is vital for creating a fairer, more equal and inclusive society that is vibrant, innovative and cohesive. School education is one of the best ways of giving everyone an equal chance of success. In this regards, Members call for a **personalised and inclusive approach to education**, beginning with early school education and care, which includes targeted support for individuals at risk of ESL where necessary.

The report:

- calls for greater efforts to be made to ensure that this personalised approach specifically benefits those pupils suffering from learning difficulties caused by dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, attention deficit or hyperactivity, for example;
- encourages an early response to emerging learning difficulties;
- considers that parental advisory services should be offered, in view of the influence that the family has on the educational and social development of pupils;
- advocates better careers guidance and high-quality work-experience schemes, as well as cultural and educational visits and exchanges, organised by schools;
- recognises the need for clear-cut policies to integrate students with sensory disabilities in ordinary schools, and calls on the Member States to abandon policies based on separate special education;
- recommends that mentoring schemes be set up in schools to provide pupils with exposure to former pupils in particular in order to exchange views on possible study and career options;
- points out that information and communication technologies (ICT) can have positive effects under structured teaching conditions and can encourage motivation and learning;

- calls on the Member States to provide financial support for parents who devote time and love to bringing up young children and provide future benefits to society by investing in a human capital whose value is often underestimated;
- points out that additional support should be offered to persons with disabilities, in order to reduce the risk of their leaving school early and ensure that they obtain a proper qualification;
- calls for special efforts to be made to **prevent and address bullying** and violence at school.

Shared responsibility: Members emphasise that there are many actors who can take steps to prevent children from leaving school prematurely. In this connection, they stress the importance of student grants which enable children from disadvantaged backgrounds to enjoy the same opportunities as others. They note that a **'joined-up' approach** can be effective in helping the individuals concerned to overcome multiple barriers to educational achievement and employment. In this connection, they stress the importance of student grants which enable children from disadvantaged backgrounds to enjoy the same opportunities as others.

The report stresses the need to **strengthen the special relationship between parents and children**, since it is vital to children's development and future stability and their smooth progress through school. It stresses that young people, including early school leavers themselves, must be involved in discussions about the design and implementation of ESL policies and programmes. It suggest that Member States should make **parents responsible for their children's education until the latter reach their 18th birthday**, thus extending compulsory school attendance by two years from the child's 16th to his or her 18th birthday or up to the end of secondary education.

Members recognise that mapping the interventions provided in Member States by different actors can be difficult, but should be encouraged with the aim of exchanging good practices. Members States should invest in teacher training and qualified staff for both pre-school and compulsory education, and regularly to review and update educational systems and programmes for the continuous development of teachers' skills. They highlight the importance of appropriate class and group sizes and a stimulating and inclusive learning environment for young people. On the other hand, they point out that **frequent changes in class teachers**, the use of a two-shift school system and poor timetabling also have an a**dverse effect on students' ability to learn**.

Diverse learning approaches: Members call on Member States and regional governments with powers in the area of education to recognise and validate knowledge acquired in a non-formal and informal way. They recognise the benefits of sport, cultural activities, volunteering and active citizenship in providing a forum for non-formal education and lifelong learning.

The report stresses the importance of **varied educational pathways** for schoolchildren, combining general and vocational training, and is convinced that it is a judicious blend of the two, based on a pupil's age and strengths, that offers them the best chance of a securing a high quality job. Member States should also take account of the requirements of the labour market and to take steps to raise the status of vocational qualifications, while also strengthening cooperation between vocational institutions and businesses.

The report recognises that in all EU Member States **adequate levels of literacy and numeracy** are rarely reached by all school students, which contributes to ESL. It emphasises that Member States should, as a matter of urgency, set targets to ensure that all pupils leave primary school with the ability to read, write and perform arithmetic at an appropriate level for their age.

Second-chance solutions: the report calls on Member States to find ways of reintegrating early school leavers into the school system by implementing suitable programmes, such as **'second-chance' schools**, which provide a suitable learning environment that enables young people to rediscover confidence in themselves and in their capacity to learn. It stresses that the highest reintegration rates are achieved by

programmes which address the individual needs of early school leavers. Members emphasise the need to organise activities at local level to encourage people to return to school and to promote a positive environment for people who left school early and intend to return. Member States are urged to set up more second-chance schools, strengthening the content of their curricula and their material and technical equipment and boosting the capacity of the teaching staff available.

Education system and employment: Members reiterate that a reduction in ESL to no more than 10 %, meeting the EU 2020 headline target, would have an effect in reducing youth unemployment and in improving the employment rate, since currently 52% of school leavers are unemployed and, according to academic estimates, the number of jobs available for low-skilled or unskilled labour will decline even further in the coming years. They point out that **reducing the ESL rate by only 1% could boost the number of qualified potential employees by 500 000**. They consider that the European countries cannot afford this enormous waste of talent. The report highlights the link between ESL and youth unemployment.

The report also notes that the long-term economic and social effects of ESL create a significant risk of poverty and that combating ESL is a way to prevent social exclusion among young people. It therefore considers reducing the number of early school leavers to be a key measure in reaching the target, under strategies at both national and European level, of lifting at least 20 million people out of the risk of poverty, and urges the Member States **not to reduce the statutory school-leaving age**.

It is equally important to:

- adapt education systems to meet the requirements of the labour market;
- expand the scope for taking company traineeships in parallel with continuing school education;
- promote vocational education and training and taking measures to ease the transition between education and the labour market;
- pay special attention to boys who have difficulties adapting to the school environment and not to lower the compulsory school-leaving age;
- make efforts to enable early school leavers to return to the labour market invariably go hand in hand with additional training programmes to improve their future employment prospects;
- upgrade the skills provided in technical vocational training;
- recommend that training in NITC (new information and communication technologies), as well as in language technologies.

EU policies: Members welcome the Commission proposal for a Council recommendation on policies to reduce ESL. They believe that, while respecting the principle of subsidiarity, a **European framework for comprehensive strategies to tackle ESL** could provide a useful guide for Member States in ascertaining the correct approach to upgrading existing policies and developing their National Reform Programmes.

Members warn that the possible public spending cuts in the education sector on account of the economic crisis and the budgetary austerity policies being implemented in Member States will have adverse effects, in that they will further increase the numbers of early school leavers in the EU. They stress that investing more money in combating ESL can have the long-term effect of preventing young people from becoming dependent on social security. They advocate the targeted, efficient and coherent deployment of the Structural Funds, especially the European Social Fund, with a view to the full implementation of the Youth strategies, in particular for early school leavers, in order to promote social inclusion under specific programmes in each Member State, ensure high-quality education for all and prevent ESL and truancy.

Lastly, the report calls for:

- **more funds and improved accessibility for the EU's Lifelong Learning Programme**;
- the promotion of the visibility of the Comenius action programme on individual pupil mobility, which can contribute to reducing ESL.