The impact of COVID-19 closures of educational, cultural, youth and sports activities on children and young people in the EU

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The European Parliament adopted by 522 votes to 12, with 79 abstentions, a resolution on the impact of COVID-19 closures of educational, cultural, youth and sports activities on children and young people in the EU.

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, Europe's youth face a mental health crisis. The closure of early childhood education and care provision facilities, schools, universities, spaces for youth welfare and youth work, as well as of extracurricular activities, cultural spaces and sports facilities, has denied children and young people the opportunity to participate in activities which are essential for their overall development, their learning progression, their intellectual, physical, emotional and mental health and well-being, and their social and professional inclusion.

This report emphasises the need for **multi-faced and holistic European action**, to promote mental health in children and young people. Educational, culture, youth, and sports facilities should be involved in ensuring the positive development of mental health in children and young people.

Increased funding

The resolution called on the Member States and regions to provide sufficient financial support to mainstream **education institutions**, in particular through significant investment in public education, and to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers and education personnel, in order to ensure that the pedagogical, psychological, physical, emotional, cognitive and/or social development of young people is increasingly promoted in a satisfactory way.

Member States are urged to substantially increase public spending in **education and training to above the EU average** (5 % of GDP in 2020).

Funding should also be increased for Erasmus+, Creative Europe and the European Solidarity Corps to enhance mobility experiences which contribute to the development of useful and necessary social skills for the future personal and professional growth of the younger generations. **Funding for these programmes should be increased in the next revision of the multiannual financial framework.**

The Commission and the Member States are called on to support and adequately fund small local cultural initiatives, **sports clubs**, leisure facilities, youth organisations and youth welfare institutions to carry out the leisure, non-formal and informal learning activities that play an essential role in the development and well-being of young people and their families, by providing material and psychological support resources, including for young people with fewer opportunities or facing discrimination.

Holistic understanding of health

Parliament called for a **holistic understanding of health** that includes overall physical, mental and social well-being and requires comprehensive prevention and healing strategies, including cultural and sporting activities, and promoting the development of creative and social skills. Highlighting the key role that a **healthy and balanced diet** plays in the mental health of children and young people, Member States

should implement Child Guarantee Recommendation 4 asking, among other things, for **free access to at least one healthy meal each school day**.

Research and innovation

Parliament reiterated the importance of investing in innovation and research in education, enabling the state education system to have access to a 'culture of innovation' across the EU and to ensure that high-quality learning materials, pedagogical approaches and tools are accessible and available **free of charge** to all.

Member States are urged to promote science and research on young people's mental health and to **assess the long-term impact of closures**, particularly of prolonged remote learning, isolation and uncertainty, on knowledge acquisition, neurological development and socio-emotional skills, and to develop targeted measures to support those most affected in order to combat and prevent long-term mental health problems.

Digital technology

According to Parliament, efforts should be undertaken to generalise digital literacy at all levels of society, enabling the proper use of digital tools and infrastructures. On the other hand, the Commission is urged to raise awareness should be raised among young people regarding the **benefits and risks** associated with digital technology, ensuring not only their access to technological tools, but also their ability to use them safely and properly. The resolution stressed that prolonged periods spent in the digital environment can have far-reaching mental health and safety impacts on children and young people, such as screen fatigue or **internet addiction**, and also exposure to **online violence and harassment**, as well as to fake news, which can lead not only to depression, anxiety and social exclusion, but also to **suicides** among young people.

European year of mental health

Lastly, the report called on the Commission to:

- designate a European Year of Mental Health and to develop a European plan for the protection of mental health in education, vocational training, and informal and non-formal learning;

- propose examples of good practice and create incentives for Member States to put in place dedicated actions and training modules, thereby equipping teachers, trainers, educators, youth workers and employers with the necessary skill set to recognise early signs of burnout, stress and psychological stress in learners, young people and young interns, or young people on vocational training, with a view to activating targeted prevention measures;

- continue developing mitigating measures with regard to the negative consequences of COVID-19 closures on children and young people throughout 2023, and to make use of this year to propose a robust legacy of the European Year of Youth 2022 for the future.