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Education & Training 2020

Schools policy

A whole school approach
to tackling early school leaving
Policy messages

Education and
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DG Education and Culture

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A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH
TO TACKLING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

Key statements

The school is a key actor to tackle early school leaving but it cannot work in isolation, as there are factors outside the school that will influence a learner's level of engagement and success. Therefore, a 'whole school approach' to early school leaving is needed. In this approach the entire school community (school leaders, teaching and non-teaching staff, learners, parents and families) engages in a cohesive, collective and collaborative action, with strong cooperation with external stakeholders and the community at large.

A whole school approach enables schools to respond adequately to new and complex challenges schools are facing, linked to the increasing diversity in society.

Effective leadership and governance is essential. It is needed to promote a positive school culture, teamwork and collaborative practices within the school community. It is also needed to bring school actors and stakeholders together to ensure educational success and prevent early school leaving.

School development and improvement processes should include targets to address the underlying factors of early school leaving. They should also involve the entire school community, stakeholders, multi-professional teams, external local services, parents and families.

There needs to be a commitment towards investment for continuous professional development of school leaders, teachers and other school staff with a focus on awareness of early school leaving processes, and on the competences and skills needed to address educational disadvantage and student disengagement.

Ensuring each child and young person has an equal chance to access, participate and benefit from high quality and inclusive education is a must. Engaging and relevant curriculum together with inspiring and dedicated staff is the most effective way to prevent early school leaving and social exclusion.

All learners and their diverse needs should be at the centre of education. They should be actors of their own learning and be surrounded by appropriate support and services. The school should offer a caring, stimulating and conducive learning environment and set high expectations for all learners to reach their full potential.

Education is a shared responsibility between parents and the school – it must be built on a relationship of mutual trust and cooperation between the two.

A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH
TO TACKLING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

POLICY MESSAGES

Introduction

Early school leaving (ESL)[1] is a pressing concern for the individual, for society and the economy. The skills and competences gained in upper secondary education are seen as the minimum credentials for successful labour market entry and as the foundation for further learning and training opportunities. These skills and competencies help prepare young people for life, developing the potential in every person so that they become fulfilled and active citizens. Yet 11.1% of 18 to 24 year-olds have left education and training without completing an upper secondary programme according to Eurostat 2014 data[2]. Those born abroad are on average twice as likely to leave the education and training system early when compared to native-born individuals[3]. About 60% of these early school leavers are either unemployed or inactive and face long-term social and economic disadvantage. It is well documented that early leaving from education and training leads to reduced employment opportunities and increased likelihood of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion[4].

The complexity and multi-faceted dimension of early leaving from education and training is widely acknowledged and requires an equally multi-dimensional approach to adequately address its diverse causes. Many of its triggers are linked to the effects of wider societal factors outside the education system. Early school leaving is most often the **result of a combination of personal, social, economic, educational and family-related factors**, strongly intertwined and leading to **cumulative disadvantage**. In many cases early school leaving is the result of a process of progressive disengagement from education, linked to underachievement, whose roots may lie in early years. Research shows that the socio-economic status and the educational attainment of parents are among the strongest determinants of early school leaving.

In addition, certain **features of our education and training systems** may exacerbate educational disadvantage, create additional barriers for learners who are struggling and hinder their educational pathways. Research shows that systems characterized by grade retention, early tracking[5], insufficient support for learners, lack

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[1] The terms early school leaving (ESL) and early leaving from education and training (ELET) are used interchangeably in this document. Both refer to a common definition of early school leavers as those aged 18 to 24 with lower secondary education attainment at most (ISCED 0, 1, 2 or 3c short) and currently no longer in formal or non-formal education and training.

[2] All measurements come from the EU Labour Force Survey 2014.

[3] Data for foreign-born individuals have to be interpreted with caution, as they are not available for all the Member States, but only some of them. Also, sample sizes used are often too small to be fully reliable (see European Commission, Education and Training Monitor 2015, forthcoming).

[4] See for example OECD (2012) Equity and Quality in Education (http://www.oecd.org/education/school/50293148.pdf), or European Commission (2011) Commission staff working paper 'Reducing early school leaving' - accompanying document to the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving (http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52011SC0096&from=EN)

of quality vocational education and training (VET) and limited provision of early childhood education and care are faced with stronger social inequalities in educational achievement and attainment. **At the school level**, school and classroom practices, teachers' attitudes and teaching styles also affect children and young people's motivation and commitment towards education: an unfavourable school climate, a lack of learner centeredness, inadequate awareness of educational disadvantage, violence and bullying, poor teachers-pupils relationships, and teaching methods and curricula which are perceived as irrelevant are some of the factors that can contribute to the decision to leave education prematurely[6].

Policy response at EU level

At a European level, the need to reduce early school leaving has been highlighted in the Europe 2020 strategy[7]. One of its five headline targets is to reduce the ESL rate to less than 10% by 2020. In 2011 the Council adopted a Recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving[8]. It invites Member States to implement **evidence-based and comprehensive strategies**, addressing all levels of education and training and comprising the right mix of prevention, intervention and compensation measures. To support the implementation of the Recommendation, policy cooperation between European countries started through a Thematic Working Group on early school leaving[9].

Building on the results of this group, a new Education and Training 2020 Working Group on Schools Policy was launched in 2014, composed of policy makers from almost all EU Member States, Norway, Serbia and Turkey, and of representatives of European social partners. Whilst reaffirming the need for a comprehensive and long-term policy framework in which preventative, intervention and compensatory actions are articulated consistently, the WG on Schools Policy has focused on **prevention and early intervention of early school leaving at the school and local level**. Through peer learning, analysis of case studies, mapping (of school governance arrangements and of practices to support learners), inputs from international research, dialogue with experts, and in-depth country-focused workshops, the Working Group has looked at how more **holistic and collaborative approaches to early school leaving** can be implemented. Through the development of a dedicated online 'European Toolkit for Schools for inclusive education and early school leaving prevention'[10], the Working Group has sought to provide concrete support to schools to prevent drop-out, respond quickly and appropriately to first signals of disengagement and to ensure every learner can succeed.

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[5] The term refers to situations in which the learners and their families are required to make obligatory choices between different educational tracks at an early age.

[6] For a recent overview of reasons for ESL, see Eurydice and Cedefop (2014) Tackling early leaving from education and training in Europe – Strategies, policies and measures, http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/thematic_reports/175en.pdf

[7] Europe 2020. A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, COM (2010)2020. More information at http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_en.htm

[8] http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1441711487189&uri=CELEX:32011H0701(01)

[9] http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/index_en.htm The Final Report of the Thematic Working Group, published in November 2013, includes key messages for policy makers, a checklist on comprehensive policies and an annex with practice examples from several EU countries: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/index_en.htm

[10] The 'European Toolkit for Schools' will be available at the School Education Gateway (http://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/index.htm); the pilot version will be available by end 2015.

Recently, the Luxembourg Presidency of the European Union placed early school leaving high in its agenda, injecting new and fresh momentum to the debate around this issue. The Symposium organised in Luxembourg in July 2015 and the proposal for Council Conclusions to be adopted by Education Ministers in November 2015 confirm and reinforce the conclusions reached by policy cooperation on this issue.

This paper summarises the main conclusions of the Working Group on Schools Policy and identifies **key conditions for collaborative approaches** against early school leaving and educational disadvantage at school and local level. This paper is addressed to educational authorities at national, regional and/or local level, as appropriate and relevant according to the national context, as well as to schools. It accompanies and complements the forthcoming 'European Toolkit for Schools'.

A 'Whole School Approach' to tackling early school leaving

Policies to reduce early school leaving should be embedded in an **overall inclusive learner-centred vision of education**, in which high quality education is accessible to all**.** In such a vision, schools have a crucial role to play to ensure that all learners reach their full potential for growth irrespective of individual and family-related factors, socio-economic status and life experiences. Schools should be safe, welcoming and caring learning environments, striving for learners' engagement, in which children and young people can grow and develop as individuals and members of the community, feel respected and valued and recognised in their specific talents and needs.

Because of the multi-faceted nature of the issue, schools cannot address early school leaving and educational disadvantage alone. Different stakeholders and services, inside and outside the school, need to collaborate and integrate efforts. The school is the logical site to initiate community collaboration. This calls for a '**whole-school approach**'.

A 'whole school approach' is an ecological way of viewing a school. The school is seen as a multidimensional and interactive system that can learn and change; an open learning hub which provides support to its neighbourhood and receives support from the community.

Developing a 'whole school approach' to reducing early school leaving means that the objective of eliminating drop-out and encouraging school success for all should be promoted consistently and systematically across all those dimensions of school life which may have an impact on educational achievement. In a 'whole school approach', **all members of the school community** (school leaders, middle management, teaching and non-teaching staff, learners, parents and families) feel responsible and play an active role in tackling educational disadvantage and preventing drop-out. The entire school community engages in a cohesive, collective and collaborative action, based on multi-disciplinarity and on differentiation[11], and aimed at supporting each learner in the most appropriate way. A 'whole school around a whole learner' culture and climate is in place, with a view to improving the learners' educational

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[11] 'Differentiation' refers to the process of tailoring teaching approaches to the specific needs of an individual or group of learners, and/or to specific circumstances. It requires that educators are able to select from a wide variety of teaching techniques and lesson adaptations in order to work with a diverse group of students, with diverse learning needs, in the same course, classroom, or learning environment.

achievement, behaviour and supporting their emotional, social and psychological well-being.

A 'whole school approach' also implies a **cross-sectoral approach** and **stronger cooperation with a wide range of stakeholders** (social services, youth services, outreach care workers, psychologists, nurses, speech and language therapists, guidance specialists, local authorities, NGOs, business, unions, volunteers, etc.) **and the community at large**, to deal with issues, which schools do not (and cannot) have the relevant expertise for. The concept of a 'whole school approach' allows for the entire system of actors and their inter-relationships in and around schools to be considered, acknowledging that each stakeholder has a part to play in supporting the learners' educational journey and nurturing their learning experience.

A 'whole school approach' will be beneficial to all learners, not only to those at risk. It will also help schools tackle a wide range of complex issues, which schools are increasingly confronted with. Challenges associated with the growing diversity, inequalities and social exclusion in society, and with the recent increase in migration flows all place new demands on schools and call for systemic, collaborative responses.

Developing collaboration takes time and requires a change of approach and mind-set. It requires individuals to have both the capacity and capability through innovative approaches to work in cross-disciplinary settings. More time and space for dialogue and cooperation, more learners' participation, stronger involvement of parents and families are also needed.

Schools need to be enabled to develop and implement a 'whole school approach'. Specific support should be provided to schools with high early school leaving rates or located in areas with high levels of socio-economic exclusion. This support might include, for example, extra financial and human resources support, or additional support for continuous professional development of staff, coupled with continuous monitoring. Support structures and mechanisms should also be in place to ensure there is a dialogue and reciprocal flow of information between the school, its stakeholders and public authorities at relevant levels (depending on national circumstances and fully respecting the subsidiarity principle) to ensure the day to day reality of the school is understood at policy levels. Systematically involving schools in policy-making would be of help in this respect.

The **key conditions for a 'whole school approach' to early school leaving** have been organised around five thematic areas, which are strictly interconnected with each other. Each area is further elaborated in the 'Toolkit for Schools' and complemented with practical examples and measures. In some areas, further work at a European level should be considered:

1. School governance

2. Learner support

3. Teachers

4. Parents and families

5. Stakeholder involvement

1. School governance

Competent and effective school leadership and governance are necessary to promote a positive and collaborative culture and ethos, which involves all school actors and to establish strong bonds with the community around the school. The following aspects are essential:

- Greater flexibility/autonomy to schools: The complexity of early school leaving requires more flexible and innovative approaches. More flexibility should be granted to schools with regards to school governance arrangements, teaching practices and curriculum implementation (with enhanced scope for experimental approaches to school drop-out) for example. Enhanced school autonomy, coupled with strong accountability enables schools to identify the most appropriate solutions to complex situations and to best provide for the specific needs of the school community.

- Selection, support and training for school heads: School heads have a crucial role to play to develop and implement 'whole school approaches', in particular by adopting a more distributed leadership style and by creating space and time for cooperation. Schools need dedicated, value-led, competent and highly motivated school heads; they need leaders with a clear vision, sense of organisation, capacity to take on new responsibilities, share authority and power, involve and promote dialogue between all school actors and with other stakeholders around a set of shared goals and responsibilities. School heads are key to facilitate a supportive environment for teachers, where teacher-teacher learning, time for feedback, reflection and networking within and between schools is encouraged. They also have an essential role to play in providing opportunities and environments for practice-oriented initial teacher education (ITE) and research-based continuous professional development (CPD) which must include a focus on early school leaving. A reflection on the competences and training requirements for school heads is needed. To be effective, school heads need to be appropriately selected, prepared and supported. Initial and continued professional development for new, established and aspiring school heads should, in particular, raise awareness on early school leaving mechanisms and on the importance of leadership and of collaboration (including with families and the community at large). Several countries have implemented or are implementing advanced training for future and/or in-service school heads, and some have started to develop competence frameworks for school heads.

- Distributed leadership: Implementing a distributed leadership model in school with an objective that is focused on improved learning requires developing a reflective practice and sharing tasks and responsibilities across the entire school community. School heads should be in a position to encourage teachers to take on leading roles in a particular area of expertise, assume responsibility and take initiatives as individuals or groups; they should promote teamwork, multi-disciplinarity and professional collaboration among teaching and non-teaching staff, other stakeholders, professionals and services. Adopting a distributed leadership model also requires enhancing learners' and families' participation in school life and in formal and informal decision-making processes.

- Whole-school improvement processes: A whole school approach aims to raise quality and standards across the entire school. For this approach to be effective, schools need to identify and address the needs of the school community and engage in continuous, cyclical processes for improvement. Schools that actively use school planning and school (self-)evaluation will be in a stronger position to

eradicate early school leaving. In doing so, school development plans and self-evaluation processes should include targets that address the underlying factors of early school leaving and promotion of educational success, taking into account national, regional and local standards. Whole school improvement processes should be characterised by openness and transparency; they should be developed and implemented in a participatory way by the entire school community (including learners, parents and families) and with stakeholders, multi-professional teams and external local services. They should be based on common goals and clearly defined roles and responsibilities; clear indicators, based on risk and protective factors, should be established to monitor improvements. Support measures for school staff, including for example structured induction programmes and continuing professional development, should be fully embedded in school development plans.

▪ <u>External monitoring and assessment (quality assurance) mechanisms</u>: based on quantitative and qualitative measures that reflect the diversity of activities for which schools are responsible, and the different starting point/contexts in which schools operate (e.g. trying to measure the school's 'added value'), quality assurance mechanisms can play an advisory and supportive role to schools in implementing their early school leaving strategies. Their purpose is to highlight successful change and development processes within schools. Qualitative indicators, in particular, can help schools reflect on measures that are in place or that can be developed to address early school leaving. Quality assurance mechanisms seem to be most effective when both their 'summative' function (related to accountability, control and compliance check) and their 'formative' function (related to improvement and development) are complementary and mutually reinforcing[12].

▪ <u>Networking between schools</u>: cooperation and networking between schools of different types and levels which are located in the same catchment area can facilitate exchange of practices, and help make the crucial transitions from early childhood education and care to primary schools, and from primary to secondary education easier for learners and their families. Local authorities may have a key role to play in promoting this cooperation. Networking and multi-professional learning communities at regional, national and international levels should also be encouraged to promote mutual learning and circulation of practices.

2. Learner support

A stimulating and conducive learning climate, which sets high expectations for all learners, is essential. The school should provide all learners with an environment that caters for their diversity, maximises their learning potential and is aligned with their learning needs. As part of the policy/mission statement of the school, there should be a strong focus on the prevention of early school leaving. Despite what learning difficulties and early signs of disengagement are identified, schools should react fast. Targeted intervention as part of a systemic support framework to help pupils at risk is essential.

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[12] European Commission(2015), Comparative study on quality assurances in EU school education systems (http://bookshop.europa.eu/en/comparative-study-on-quality-assurance-in-eu-school-education-systems-pbNC0415279/)

- Engaging and stimulating curricula and effective teaching approaches: While setting high expectations for all learners, curricula should allow for personalised forms of teaching and learning and for different assessment styles. They should place a greater focus on formative assessment, to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and development of skills and competencies to the best ability of each child, while preserving the quality of the curriculum content. They should connect with real life and diversity in society and ensure continuity with subsequent levels of education and training, or with alternative training pathways. They should allow for more learner-centred teaching approaches and more collaborative teaching and learning. Opportunities for the validation of non-formal and informal learning should also be available.

- The learners' well-being: While keeping a strong focus on teaching and learning, the well-being of learners should be nurtured. In addition to creating a safe and welcoming environment, schools can also play an important role in detecting situations of bullying, victimisation, violence or abuse happening within and outside school. Developing strategies to deal with bullying prevention are essential in this respect. A wide range of activities, support and counselling, including emotional and psychological support to address mental health issues (including distress, depression, post-traumatic disorders), should be available to learners in the school and where applicable, in connection with local agencies and services.

- Early detection mechanisms: It is important that early signals of disengagement, including school absenteeism and inappropriate behaviour, are detected rapidly and that quick responses are in place. Early warning systems could be established, based on recommendations from national or local authorities, as appropriate.

- A systemic support framework: Rapid identification of learning difficulties or other issues should trigger a reaction through a systemic support framework within the school. Targeted intervention for learners at risk should be provided in an inclusive way; it will be more effective if carried out by multi-disciplinary teams in schools, and/or by bringing external professionals in schools, and with the involvement of all those interacting with the learners, be it family members, siblings, volunteers, etc. The development of an individual support plan, agreed with the learner and his/her family, setting clear and achievable goals, can be very helpful.

- Specific support for non-native speakers: Learners whose native language is not the language of instruction should receive additional and appropriate support according to their needs, preferably outside school time and avoiding any type of separation or segregation practices. The competences and proficiency in their native language should be appreciated and used as a resource for the whole class. Parents may also benefit from language support – here schools could work in partnership e.g. with NGOs to support language learning for parents from a migrant background. Other forms of support should also be available, especially for newly arrived migrants, either in the school or outside, in cooperation with local agencies and services.

- The learners' voice and participation in school life: Learners need to feel ownership of their learning and be given the possibility to voice their views. Being part of the life and activity of the school increases motivation and sense of belonging[13]. There

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[13] Child participation is right recognised by Article 24 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (OJ C 364, 18.12.2000, full text available at http://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text_en.pdf) as well as article 12 of the 1989 United Nations Convention of the rights of the child.

should be sufficient time for dialogue in classrooms, through student councils or consultations to enable learners to raise issues related to their learning experience. Interactive teaching and dialogic learning (for example in small groups) could increase opportunities for learners to talk with greater ease about issues impacting on their learning; internal/external methods of consultation could also be used to seek the views of learners. Participation in school projects that focus on specific issues (such as environmental awareness), including by making full use of possibilities offered by Erasmus+ and eTwinning, can help promote student participation. Schools should also promote the meaningful participation of learners in school decision-making processes (e.g. through representation on school boards/councils) and in school evaluation and improvement processes. While all learners need to be supported so they can actively participate in school life, a proactive focus on engaging marginalised pupils and ensuring their voices are heard is essential.

- Career education and guidance: The role of career education and guidance to prevent early school leaving is widely acknowledged. Research suggests that students who have a career plan are more likely to remain in school and engage more positively in education. Systematic career education and guidance can also help smooth the often critical transitions to other levels and pathways of education and training or to work. Effective study skills and career education should be fully integrated in the curriculum from early stages of education and help learners understand their strengths and talents. Career education may be taught as a compulsory topic; it may be a separate subject, or may be embedded in the curriculum as a cross-curricular subject. Effective lifelong guidance tends to combine a wide range of curricular and extracurricular activities, including for example, work experience programmes, job shadowing, career games, or taster courses in other types of education. Whilst teachers have an important role to play in empowering the learners in the acquisition of skills to pursue their interests, competences and career aspirations, effective career education also needs to mobilise a wide range of stakeholders (e.g. school counsellors, parents and employers).

- Extra-curricular activities: Extra-curricular and out-of school educational opportunities, including sports, arts, culture and other activities, compatible with educational aims, may provide additional opportunities for young people to 'shine' and can increase their motivation and a sense of belonging with the school. These activities should be coherently designed to complement curriculum delivery and to maximize pupil participation and social inclusion; they could be considered in the learners' overall assessment. Such activities could be developed in cooperation with parents, cultural institutions, sports and youth organisations, local services and NGOs, and with the involvement of volunteers from the community.

3. Teachers

Teachers are the key factor of children's and young people's learning at school and one of the major agents for educational success. Research shows that a supportive relationship between the teacher and learner is the strongest predictor of school engagement and achievement. It is essential that teachers understand that they are crucial resource persons for learner, who can make a real difference in their educational trajectory; it is equally important that they are aware that helping all learners fulfil their potential is a shared responsibility of all teachers and of the school community as a whole. Faced with new challenges, the role of the teacher is

broadening and becoming more demanding. While recognising the importance of teachers' professional judgement, new skills and competences are required which need to be addressed by initial teacher education (ITE) and continuous professional development (CPD).

▪ Understanding early school leaving: A focus on understanding school drop-out mechanisms and educational disadvantage, including possible risk and protective factors, should become a core element of both ITE and CPD programmes. It is essential that all teachers understand their key role in supporting the continuity of children's development and learning: teachers are in an advantaged position to detect school disengagement and the existence of learning difficulties at a very early stage and thus can help take immediate action to address the situation. They need to be aware that their expectations, attitudes and language may have a significant impact and influence on pupils and families; they need to acknowledge the role which parents and families play in the learning process and be enticed to reap the benefits of parental involvement.

▪ Teachers' competences: Measures and support structures (ideally available at local levels) should be in place to facilitate the lifelong career development of teachers. Initial teacher education and continuous professional development with a focus on drop-out prevention should help teachers practice differentiation and active learning. It should prepare them to effectively use competence oriented teaching and formative assessment, and to apply more project-based and cooperative teaching and learning. It should reinforce relational and communication expertise (including techniques/methods to engage with parents and external partners), and provide teachers with classroom management strategies, diversity management strategies, relationship building, conflict resolution and bullying prevention techniques.

▪ Building teacher leadership capacity: Teacher leadership can be characterised by a collaborative effort in which teachers develop expertise and promote professional development to improve educational practice. Teachers should be encouraged and supported to be leaders within and beyond the classroom. Teachers participating in collaborative leadership processes contribute to school effectiveness, teaching quality and improvement in student performance.

▪ Work-experience: As part of ITE, it is important that all student teachers are given practical opportunities to enhance their understanding of the nature, causes, and extent of early school leaving and educational disadvantage, and its effects on learning and demands it has on them as teachers. Student teachers should be offered practical exposure to the everyday reality of early school leaving, e.g. through participation in work placements in schools with high drop-out rates or high levels of socio-economic exclusion or in supervised activities with vulnerable families. This would provide student teachers with the opportunity to consider their role as teachers and how they address the educational needs of children at risk.

▪ Peer learning: In-school training to develop and promote a culture of peer-to-peer learning (among teachers, but also with pupils) and peer observation is essential. Peer supervision could also be encouraged, both within the school and in cooperation with other schools; schools of various types and levels should serve as resource for each other through school networks whereby schools can work and learn from each other. IT tools and collaborative platforms such as eTwinning can be very effective to support these forms of cooperation.

- **Embrace diversity**: Where schools work actively to embrace differences of both its staff and learners, evidence of sustained school improvement can be found. Teachers' knowledge, competences and skills related to understanding diversity in all its forms, intercultural education, multilingualism and teaching to second language learners should be embedded within ITE and reinforced through CPD. Teaching as a profession should be further promoted in order to attract a large number of candidates, representing the whole society, and to recruit the best of them, whilst retaining a strong cohesion around the school's fundamental values and objectives that society and stakeholders at large share and approve.

- **Additional support to teachers**: Adequate recognition and support to teachers working in schools with high early school leaving rates or with high levels of socio-economic exclusion should be considered, e.g. in the form of incentives for CPD, sabbaticals for professional development, additional teaching or non-teaching resources, etc.. The emotional well-being of staff should also be catered for.

4. Parents and families

Parental involvement is a key factor for educational success: a stimulating home environment and parental engagement is crucial for a child's learning and cognitive, social and emotional development. However, the relationship between schools, parents and families may be challenging. On the one hand, this may be due to parents' previous education experiences, educational, cultural and socio-economic background, different parenting styles and a sense of distance from the school 'culture' and 'language'. On the other hand, this may be linked to teachers' perception of parents as passive, opportunistic or intrusive, and to lack of time and experience in reaching out to parents and engaging with them effectively.

- **Education as a shared responsibility**: Parents and families have the most direct and lasting impact on children's learning and development. All parents and families need to be recognised and adequately supported as co-educators in their children's learning, starting from an early age. Schools and other educational and non-educational stakeholders can develop measures to help families establish home environments that encourage learning and provide information and ideas about how to help children at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities.

- **Trust and cooperation:** Effective family-school partnerships need to be based on mutual respect and acknowledgement of the assets and expertise of each. A culture of mutual trust and understanding between schools and families is essential. A school in which parents from all backgrounds and educational levels feel welcome and are considered as a resource for schools should be promoted. This can be achieved, for example, by offering designated time and spaces for parents to meet and support each other, inviting parents to share their skills and expertise as volunteers in educational activities within the classroom (e.g. reading to the class, give additional support to individuals, lead small groups) or in other in-school activities (both curricular and extra-curricular). Where necessary, other services, NGOs and professionals (cultural mediators, mentors, social workers, etc.) can be involved to help build positive relationships with parents, especially those from more disadvantaged backgrounds and/or those who have negative experiences of school in the past. Cultural events/festivals and outreach activities can help develop cultural bridges in order to reach out to marginalised and ethnic minority parents.

- Participation in school decision-making and school life: Wide parental participation in decisions on issues related to learning, the organisation of school and school activities promotes transparency and better adjustments to the actual needs of the community and creates a greater sense of shared responsibility around education. A proactive focus on supporting all parents' participation in school activities and governance is needed. Marginalised parents in particular, need to be helped to take part in school decision-making processes. The role of parents in the school organisation should be clearly laid out. Parental involvement should be fully embedded in school evaluation and monitoring processes. The concept of 'family' needs to be broadened to include members of the extended family involved in the education of the child.

- Parent access to information: Learners and their parents, in particular those from a migrant background, should have the possibility to access clear information on the educational system of the country and the school options available; they should have the chance to understand the implications of these choices for the learner's studies and future options. School-specific issues concerning the provision of guidance and counselling services, student welfare and support services should be explained to learners and their parents.

- Enhancing communication: Improving and opening up channels of communication between schools and families can help to build trust and mutual understanding. Communication strategies need to fit context and parental needs. Both formal (e.g. parents evenings) and informal (e.g. social events) methods of communication can be used to build fruitful relationships. Special outreach activities, for example through intercultural mediators, may be necessary to reach parents who are not proficient in the language of instruction. For some schools, improving communication involves technology such as emails/SMS, interactive phone systems, newsletters and interactive websites. It is important to ensure that structures are in place to facilitate and encourage feedback from parents, and that this is taken into account.

- Offering opportunities for parents' education: Research shows that family education can provide a range of benefits for parents and children including improvements in reading, writing and numeracy. Raising the educational level of parents is one of the successful actions to prevent early school leaving. When parents engage in educational activities for themselves a series of cultural and educational interactions are promoted within the family. Parents benefit from self-efficacy, empowerment, and greater involvement in their child's school as well as greater parental confidence in helping their child at home. This leads to increased pupils' engagement in school and better educational achievements. Opening up school facilities outside school hours for language support and other classes for parents can be highly advantageous, particularly for parents who may be overwhelmed by their school system. This helps to break down barriers schools face when working to increase parental engagement. However, for parents with very negative experiences of school in the past, working in partnership with NGOs would help create other opportunities to foster parental education in different locations.

5. Stakeholders involvement

The multi-faced nature of early school leaving requires a multi-faceted response, involving a wide range of stakeholders, professionals and services. Different stakeholders can bring diverse and complementary perspectives in understanding the problems; they can offer solutions which are tailored to the specific needs of the learners. Cooperation may take different forms and happen at different levels, according to national circumstances, ranging from more formalised structures to more flexible networking arrangements.

Building trustful relationships and cooperation between different stakeholders may take time, nurturing and requires adjustments. But it also has the potential to bring about positive change. Depending on the national context, local authorities or indeed school heads are best placed to support these processes and have a key role to play in promoting cooperation between schools, making partnerships, coordinating services, facilitating implementation, etc.

- Involvement of stakeholders: It is important that all relevant local key stakeholders are identified and involved in the process from the start. A wide range of stakeholders and professionals should be considered: social workers, youth services and organisations, outreach care workers, , psychologists, nurses and other therapists (speech and language), child protection services, guidance specialists, police, unions, business, intercultural mediators, migrants associations, NGOs and other community based organisations from sport, cultural environment and active citizenship sectors, etc. The choice of stakeholders has to be appropriate and relevant to local circumstances and context. Cooperation with social partners and local businesses is very important as it can help increase the work-related relevance of curriculum and make it more attractive to young people. The involvement of stakeholders should allow for continuous feedback, adaptation and change of involvement as appropriate. Recognition of the value and contribution stakeholders offer should also be encouraged.

- Support and leadership: There must be political support to promote and organise cooperation and networking at the local level, and clear and strong leadership to steer the process. Guidelines from the appropriate policy level may be an option. Mechanisms should be in place to ensure a reciprocal flow of information between the school, its stakeholders and the relevant authorities, as appropriate and according to national circumstances. Good practices and information should be shared at local, regional, national (as appropriate) and international levels.

- Common strategy: A common strategy/action plan, based on clear and shared goals and a common understanding of the challenges, can help structure cooperation between stakeholders. The strategy/plan should be focused on the needs of the learner, and be based on a truly multi-agency approach, whilst respecting the differing perspectives and missions of each stakeholder. It is important that roles, responsibilities and structures are clearly defined and agreed from the start, possibly through contractual arrangements, in accordance with local circumstances. The creation of a central coordination point may be an option that can help overcome inevitable frictions but can also serve as a central place of assistance for stakeholders, coordinate information flows, services and systems to support early school leavers. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be established, allowing for continuous feedback, adaptation and change of involvement as appropriate. Guidance/indicators should be developed to facilitate self-evaluation where appropriate.

Concluding remarks

This paper brings to a conclusion the work on early school leaving of the Working Group on Schools Policy. It offers policy messages for a consolidated conceptual and pragmatic framework for action to tackle the issue of early school leaving. It proposes a paradigm for a sustained action that would enable the European Union to reach its headline target of reducing early school leaving to less than 10% by 2020. But more than this, it provides guidelines that could help Member States to develop collaborative approaches when dealing with early school leaving.

These policy messages give guidance on how different stakeholders can be empowered and supported to participate in a 'whole school approach' to tackling early school leaving. This is done in the belief that collaborative approaches will have a ripple effect on other aspects of the lives of citizens and communities across Europe. Finally, this document sets the policy background for the online European Toolkit for Schools, which will continue to gather good practices from European countries. Policy cooperation on schools policy will continue across the European Union and will offer further opportunities for peer learning and exchange of practices.