Symposium

Staying on track
Tackling early school leaving
and promoting success in school

Luxembourg, 9 and 10 July 2015

CONCLUSIONS

About 200 education experts from no less than thirty countries took part in the symposium "*Staying on track - Tackling early school leaving and promoting success in school*", organised by the Luxembourg Presidency on 9 and 10 July 2015. In the context of the mid-term assessments of the Europe 2020 strategy and the "ET2020" strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, and four years after the adoption by the EU Education Ministers of the Council Recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving, the symposium aimed to take stock of the measures initiated and the efforts still to be pursued by Member States with a view to reducing the rate of early school leaving. On the basis of the ideas and recommendations that emerged during the symposium, the Luxembourg Presidency intends to present a draft text for Council conclusions to be submitted to EU education ministers during the Council meeting on 23 November 2015. In this way the Presidency wishes to renew momentum on the subject at national and European levels.

Main outcomes

The Symposium confirmed that the aims and messages of the 2011 Council Recommendation are still relevant. This being said, implementation of the Council Recommendation has progressed at different speeds and discrepancies remain between countries, regions and types of education. Five main areas of improvement were mentioned during the discussions in order to encourage and enable more young people to stay at and succeed in school:

- coordinated measures at all levels (need for well coordinated strategies at national, regional, local and school level);
- cooperation in and around school: between all members of the school community, and between schools and stakeholders;
- development of the knowledge base (data collection and monitoring systems, studies and analyses on ESL and ingredients for school success);
- initial teacher education and continuous professional development of teachers;
- development of environments conducive to learning and implementation of inclusive approaches (in schools, education institutions, provision for early leavers).

In line with the 2011 Council Recommendation, experts agreed on the importance of putting in place **comprehensive national strategies** with a view to effectively tackling ESL and of keeping them high on the national policy agenda. To set up such strategies, countries that have not yet developed a coherent approach can learn from those who have already gathered some experiences during this process.

The need for **effective and sustainable cooperation and coordination arrangements** was highlighted at all stages: all relevant stakeholders need to be involved in the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and further improvement of these strategies. To ensure commitment during the first stage of development, it was recommended to set up a think tank of experts from different fields. For existing and future strategies to work, experts recommended that coordination platforms be appointed by public authorities, as appropriate in accordance with national contexts, to ensure the coherence of all measures as well as the involvement of all key stakeholders. It was emphasised that comprehensive and systemic policies should be learner-centred and cover all phases of development and schooling. They should take into account the different life environments of children and young people as well as the transitions between them. The roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders as well as the type of family/community involvement expected should be clarified. Establishing a relationship of trust between the stakeholders involved is important to allow them to act in concert and effectively.

The symposium also made clear that national strategies cannot stand alone. As some issues relating to early school leaving can be very specific for certain systems or regions, national approaches need to be accompanied by strategies at the appropriate levels. These strategies can be more flexible and adaptive and include for instance in-service training or educational projects related to current local challenges.

All strategies need to build on evidence on the scope and nature of early school leaving and its occurrence in different types and levels of education. There is a consensus at European level on the usefulness and added value of the European indicator on ESL, as defined in the framework of the labour force survey (LFS), which enables comparisons between countries and the monitoring of progress across countries. At the same time, national data collection and monitoring systems are needed to fully understand the phenomenon and inform policy development. Qualitative surveys and research at national, regional and/or local levels (such as studies on certain schools or specific groups), can complement quantitative information and allow for a deeper understanding of students' educational journeys and the reasons for dropping out. Furthermore, experts insisted on the importance of data sharing in cases where a student changes school. Sharing of this kind should be treated confidentially, require the learner's authorisation and avoid any loss of information. Peer learning and exchange at European level could support countries in developing their data collection systems and analyses on ESL. Greater attention should be paid to the situation of students who do not leave school prematurely, but who nevertheless cease to believe from a very early age in their ability to succeed at school. It was thus suggested that a precise map could be established in each country in order to identify risk and protective factors on the basis of the available studies and data from various policy fields.

In the light of such evidence, strategies should identify clear and targeted actions at system and school levels, with a strong focus on measures and factors which have proved effective in supporting success at school (such as, for instance, the systematic involvement of parents and families in their children's learning). Specific attention should also be given to **possible obstacles and critical moments** embedded in the education systems, such as transitions between different educational levels, which often represent a considerable challenge to learners in terms of adaptation. If reforms are introduced at system level, it is important to consider which new measures could replace obstacles that have been identified (such as grade repetition). Finally, precise profiles of achievement can help guiding students to choose their future educational pathways and prepare accordingly.

Many measures integrated in ESL strategies place high demands on teachers, school heads and staff in general and call for **enhanced initial teacher education and the continuous professional development of teachers** and school staff. Initial teacher education should for example raise awareness on ESL mechanisms and its risk factors, and should prepare teachers to detect rapidly disengagement and learning difficulties and to diagnose special needs that learners may have (such as dyslexia, dysorthographia, developmental coordination disorder, or dyscalculia). It should also cover other pedagogical aspects that are likely to affect pupil's trajectories, such as academic and career guidance. In addition, coaching and mentoring for teachers and school leaders on preventing early school leaving should ideally be offered within schools. The competences and skills of teachers, school leaders and other educational staff should be reinforced and continually developed when it comes to effectively embracing and valuing diversity in schools. At the same time, training for educational staff, including teachers and school leaders, should foster an understanding of teaching as a cooperative rather than an isolated process. The EU should enable the exchange of best practices and encourage Member States and education institutions to take into account issues relating to early school leaving in the field of professional training.

Action at national, local and at school level should contribute to **developing a collaborative culture in and around school** ('whole school approach') involving pupils, parents and school staff and the community at large, as well as an "inclusive approach" adapted to each student. Experts stressed the importance of

supporting schools with a view to **creating learning environments conducive to diversity**, including support for pupils at risk and for those whose native language is not the language of instruction. At the same time, "inclusive schools" are dependent on inclusive societies: diversity should be embraced not only within school systems but also, for example, in the labour market. Specific attention should be given to the linguistic diversity of citizens and job seekers, which also needs to be fostered in educational environments. While it is important to develop students' proficiency in the language of instruction, the language profiles of all learners should be appreciated and enhanced. This would entail making all students' languages visible and equally valuable and adopting an open language policy. Experts also suggest embedding the whole school approach in legislation and practice, including by granting schools more freedom in setting their own priorities when it comes to fostering educational success. School improvement could be supported by school development and quality assurance mechanisms at school level and by reinforcing school leadership.

In their efforts to tackle early school leaving, schools should **work together with partners** from other domains such as social work, employment, career guidance, NGOs, local authorities, businesses or other training providers. Experts pointed out that in order to make these partnerships work, it is important to build teams working with young people within a country-wide action plan. Sustained financial support is necessary to ensure continuity of cooperation.

Involving parents and families in students' learning processes can considerably improve educational outcomes and pupils' overall well-being. Experts suggested that specific spaces should be created for the involvement of parents in school settings, allowing families to feel welcome and acknowledged as partners in their children's learning. Regular dialogue and building relationships with parents based on trust can strengthen the interpersonal links between family and school that are essential for students to see the importance of their educational achievements. Parents also need to be involved in the efficient guidance of their children with regard to their future learning pathways. Parental involvement programmes can strengthen this partnership by providing external supports, specific training and clarification of roles.

Generally speaking, **positive and strong interpersonal relations between students and school staff** can significantly enhance educational success. Responsibility lies with all school staff, including teachers and other professionals, who are able to tackle related challenges such as bullying at school. In general, students' sense of belonging to and identification with the societal values which are represented in schools are crucial factors in their educational success. In this respect, education also needs to convey the skills and knowledge necessary for young people to thrive in democratic societies, allowing them to develop open and critical mindsets, able to progress responsibly and autonomously. School should also aim at supporting each pupil's autonomy and at strengthening their sense of belonging to the school, for example by introducing peer learning, portfolio approaches or IT means.

To **reconcile early school leavers**, and especially young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs), with school, it is important to listen to the individual, strengthen the relevance of education and restore their faith in the benefits of learning in general. High quality second chance schemes should be available and offer an alternative way to re-engage in education and training and acquire qualifications. Cultural projects can also promote alternative approaches to learning, especially for students who do not feel at home in conventional school settings. At the same time, effective mentoring and guidance (showing concrete perspectives) and the provision of flexible training opportunities as well as systems enabling the recognition of non-formal and informal learning should be provided.