

FOR POLICY MAKERS: POLICIES AND PRACTICES FOR HIGH QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

European countries have made substantial progress in formulating and implementing effective policies and practices aimed at reducing early school leaving (ESL) and addressing underachievement. This document reflects good examples of evidence-based policies and practices across Europe focusing on early childhood education and care (ECEC) as a strategic approach to tackling ESL.

2	ECEC as part of State-wide Strategies for Student Success To reduce ESL and underachievement risks, comprehensive prevention, intervention and compensation strategies consolidating multiple initiatives, including those specifically targeting ECEC within one framework, are essential, especially to address socio-economic disadvantages.
5	Policies conceptualizing ECEC as a fundamental right for all children A rich early start is key to reducing ESL and underachievement. Strengthening ECEC quality and provision is critical. Boosting children’s basic skills, such as maths, literacy, and science, as well as digital competence and wellbeing from an early age is essential. Policies conceptualizing ECEC as a fundamental right for all children, mandating both access and quality, and emphasizing family support mechanisms are essential to ensure that every child receives a strong early foundation.
9	Policies targeting vulnerable children Europe is multicultural and multilingual. To support every child's learning and growth, especially those facing challenges, good early education policies need to celebrate this diversity and provide fair, tailored support for all. Comprehensive policies and practices that recognize minority population needs and implement state-level inclusion strategies, supported by targeted outreach, funding, and family assistance programs are essential. Such crucial measures as cultural and language integration classes, strong home-school partnerships, personalized learning approaches, and fostering inclusive school cultures further ensure equitable access and support for all children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds
13	Policies Targeting Student Wellbeing Supporting students’ mental health and emotional development is a key pillar of inclusive and equitable education. It can be achieved by recognising a child’s legal right to counselling and investing in support professionals to provide timely and effective guidance.
14	Caregiver-Centered Policies: Tailored Education for Family Success Providing educational opportunities for caregivers, such as parenting programmes, digital skills training, or workshops on learning support as well as involving them into decision-making empowers families to more confidently engage in their children’s education.
16	ECEC High-quality Teachers High-quality early childhood education depends on well-qualified, supported, and motivated teachers. Teachers are the key to student success, and policies should prioritize high teacher qualifications, comprehensive initial education, wellbeing and ongoing professional development. Effective systems for teacher education, evaluation, autonomy, recognition, wellbeing and leadership support ensure educators are well-prepared, motivated, engaged and able to adapt teaching to meet diverse student needs.
19	ECEC Quality Assurance Ensuring high-quality and inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care requires robust and systematic quality assurance mechanisms. These include regular monitoring, external inspections, and participatory approaches that actively involve teachers, families, and communities in the continuous improvement of educational environments.

Ireland: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)

Ireland's DEIS is a national programme designed to address educational disadvantage through a holistic, evidence-based approach. It focuses on improving literacy, numeracy, school retention, and progression in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities.

DEIS uses a multi-faceted model involving schools, families, and communities, with initiatives like the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme promoting parental engagement.

Supports include smaller class sizes, school meals, book grants, and targeted learning interventions. Teacher professional development is prioritised, alongside student well-being programmes such as Friends for Life and priority access to psychological services. At post-primary level, DEIS provides enhanced guidance counselling and alternative curricular pathways (e.g., JCSP, LCA) to support school completion. The School Completion Programme (SCP) complements these efforts, and all DEIS schools develop context-specific action plans with measurable goals, reinforcing the programme's systemic and interagency approach to educational equity.

Poland: Strategy for the Development of Human Capital (SDHC)

Poland's Strategy for the Development of Human Capital (SDHC), launched in 2013, aimed to improve quality of life through investment in education, skills, and employment, in line with the Europe 2020 agenda.

Key objectives included boosting employment, increasing tertiary education participation, and reducing poverty. Despite its many limitations, the SDHC marked a shift toward integrated, cross-sectoral policy-making, underscoring the need to align education, social, and economic strategies to support inclusive, long-term development.

Regulations, Policy Directives & Legislation on Early Access and Quality ECEC

Regulations, policy directives, and legislation have been key drivers in expanding access and improving standards.

For instance, England ensures universal access by funding ECEC schemes for all three- and four-year-olds, while Poland introduced the Education Act of 2013 and the Law on School Education in 2016 to strengthen early provision.

In Greece, compulsory and free preschool begins at age four for two years, complemented by subsidized private options and extended-hours kindergartens under Law 4521/2018.

Portugal offers non-compulsory places from age three, and Ireland guarantees universal ECEC between the ages of three and five, although provision is mostly private [[link](#)].

ECEC as a Fundamental Right

Conceptualising ECEC as a fundamental right ensures that all children, regardless of their socioeconomic background, have equal opportunities from the earliest years of life.

For example, Malta provides a legal entitlement to ECEC from age 2 years and 9 months, covering children from 0–5 years, even though participation is not compulsory. Similarly, in Poland and Finland children aged 3 and above have the legal right to attend pre-school, helping to reduce inequalities and support child development from an early age.

Compulsory Foundation and Reception Programs

Early interventions that help to bridge developmental gaps, promote school readiness, and foster equal learning opportunities from the outset are vital for ensuring a smooth transition into formal education, particularly for children from disadvantaged or minority backgrounds.

In Poland, a key example is the one-year compulsory pre-school program for six-year-olds, which serves as a foundational stage before entering primary education.

In Finland, all children begin free, mandatory pre-primary education in August of the year they turn six. These programmes help to better prepare all children, regardless of background, for successful integration into the school system.

Free Access to Kindergartens and ECEC

When ECEC is not only available but free of charge, it removes financial barriers that often exclude the most vulnerable, reinforcing the idea that early education is a public good and a fundamental right.

Countries like Greece have recognized this by making pre-school compulsory and free of charge through Law 4521/2018, ensuring universal access regardless of family income.

Similarly, Spain has made the second cycle of ECEC free by law, enabling more children to benefit from structured early learning environments without cost being a limiting factor. These policies highlight the importance of public investment in early education, not as a luxury, but as a critical foundation for lifelong learning, inclusion, and social justice.

Policies recognising Minority Population Needs and Status

Recognizing and addressing the specific needs of minority populations is a critical aspect of promoting equity, inclusion, and social cohesion in increasingly diverse societies. Several European countries offer strong examples of good practice in this area. In Greece, Special Education Priority Zones (ZEPs) support schools in disadvantaged areas with high numbers of minority students, providing additional resources to improve educational outcomes.

Portugal implements Educational Territories for Priority Intervention (TEIP), which offer targeted support to marginalized communities through coordinated efforts between schools and local stakeholders.

In Switzerland, while the Roma are not legally recognized as a national minority, they receive social recognition, reflecting an inclusive approach that acknowledges cultural identity beyond legal definitions.

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Funding

Adequate funding and targeted financial support are critical to ensuring that disadvantaged children can fully benefit from ECEC.

In England, programs like Family Hubs and Start for Life offer coordinated ‘one-stop shops’ where families receive practical advice on infant feeding, mental health, parenting, and health visits. England’s Pupil Premium Grant offers additional resources to schools to support underprivileged pupils, enhancing educational outcomes. England also provides vouchers to help cover pre-school costs, easing the financial burden on families.

Similarly, Romania and Greece implement targeted funding schemes designed to support those most in need, ensuring that no child is excluded due to cost.

In Poland, targeted financial aid is provided to disadvantaged students to improve their access and participation. Meanwhile, Malta’s Scheme 9 helps cover essential school costs like lunches and stationery, easing the financial burden on families.

ECEC Attendance Boost Programs

Policies targeting school attendance, including in early years, are critical to reducing ESL. Many disadvantaged students face significant barriers to accessing education, including hunger, lack of proper clothing, and insufficient school materials.

These basic needs, when unmet, can severely hinder school attendance, concentration, and overall academic performance. Therefore, policies addressing the provision of targeted aid is essential. In England, the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme addresses these challenges by offering free meals and enriching activities to eligible children during school holidays.

Romania's Healthy Meal Programme similarly offers daily nutritious meals to support the health, attendance, and learning of disadvantaged students. It also offers targeted assistance including social grants, free transport, and school supply stipends, ensuring that economic hardship does not prevent children from participating in education.

Malta supports equity through means-tested stipends for migrant learners, helping them to overcome both financial and integration-related challenges.

Recognising children's Right to Counselling

Recognising children's right to counselling is a fundamental component of inclusive and supportive education systems while access to high-quality educational guidance and counselling helps students navigate academic, social, and emotional challenges, supports their well-being, and informs their future educational and career pathways.

This right is particularly important for students from disadvantaged or minority backgrounds, who may face additional barriers and require tailored support.

In Spain, this right is upheld through legislation that entitles all students to educational guidance and counselling as part of their schooling experience. This includes support for academic planning, emotional development, career guidance and transitions between educational stages.

Educational Opportunities for Caregivers

Family guidance plays a crucial role in promoting educational inclusion, particularly for families facing socio-economic hardship or caring for children with additional needs. By mandating and supporting schools in offering individualized support to families, including training programs that help families navigate the education system, and supporting schools in actively strengthening home-school relationships, policies can ensure that children receive the resources and encouragement necessary for success.

In Ireland, the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) program delivers customized support to disadvantaged students and their families, addressing academic, social, and emotional needs through targeted school and community-based interventions.

In England, guidance programs offer specialized assistance to families of pre-school children with special needs, helping them access early interventions and better prepare for formal schooling.

By tailoring support to the unique circumstances of each family, such programs strengthen parental engagement, reduce barriers to access, and promote equitable learning outcomes.

Co-Constructing Educational Policies

It is essential to actively include caregivers in policy discourse and recognize them as key protagonists in shaping educational outcomes. Caregivers, whether parents, guardians, or extended family, play a critical role in children's development and learning.

The SCIREARLY innovative approach demonstrates how co-creation helps to consolidate all stakeholders' voices, needs, and experiences to create effective, inclusive, and sustainable support systems. SCIREARLY shows that when caregivers are included in decision-making, they can contribute meaningfully to the co-creation of supportive learning environments and help drive positive change in both home and school settings

Initial Teacher Education

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) plays a vital role in equipping educators with the skills and knowledge needed to meet the diverse needs of today's classrooms and to help prevent early school leaving.

Recognizing this, many European countries are undertaking ongoing reforms to improve the quality and relevance of ITE.

In Spain, to help teachers cope with new educational challenges, the Primary Education Bachelor's curriculum is being revised to increase credits for Inclusion and Diversity, make key subjects mandatory, and emphasize digitalisation, personal skills, and sustainability. These reforms focus on strengthening the connection between theory and practice, enhancing teachers' ability to respond to student diversity, and promoting reflective, student-centred teaching approaches.

Teacher Qualifications

Robust qualification requirements across Europe reflect a shared commitment to ensuring high-quality early childhood education by recognizing the essential role of well-prepared educators.

In England, early years staff must hold at least a Level 2 qualification, while teachers require a degree and specific certifications. Greece mandates a 4-year degree from specialized ECEC institutes. In Ireland, most staff hold Level 4 qualifications, with many reaching Level 6.

Malta requires post-secondary qualifications for educators working with children under three, and specialized certificates or diplomas for those teaching ages 3–5. Poland requires a bachelor's degree for kindergarten teachers, while Portugal expects a bachelor's degree plus a master's in Pre-school or Primary Education.

In Romania and Spain, teachers must hold bachelor's degrees focused on early education. These standards highlight the importance of equipping educators with strong academic and pedagogical foundations to effectively support young children's development.

Professional Development for Teachers

Ongoing professional development is crucial for maintaining high teaching standards and addressing the evolving needs of diverse student populations.

In England, funding such as the Catch-up and Recovery Premiums supports staff training and targeted interventions to help students overcome learning gaps.

Switzerland's QUIMS program provides tailored support to schools with high numbers of disadvantaged, immigrant, or multilingual students, ensuring professional development is context-sensitive and needs-based.

In Spain, dialogic professional development fosters evidence-based teaching practices through collaborative learning among educators.

These initiatives demonstrate the importance of continuous, responsive training to enhance teacher effectiveness and promote inclusive education.

Quality standards

In Greece, municipal authorities centrally oversee quality standards, while Ireland's Department of Education conducts inspections of public pre-primary programs.

In Malta, the Directorate of Quality and Standards carries out external evaluations to ensure compliance and improvement. Poland uses a dual oversight model, with both the Ministry of Education and local authorities supervising ECEC settings. Portugal relies on two national bodies for evaluating school performance, whereas Romania involves multiple agencies to assess quality in early education. Spain employs a decentralized system, with both state and regional bodies responsible for educational evaluation.

In England, Ofsted plays a central role in maintaining ECEC quality by conducting regular inspections of early years providers. These evaluations assess compliance with national standards and support providers in improving educational outcomes.