



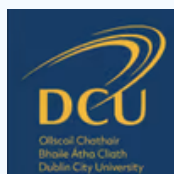
Policy brief

REDUCING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING AND UNDERACHIEVEMENT

*Successful actions for inclusive
and quality education in Europe*



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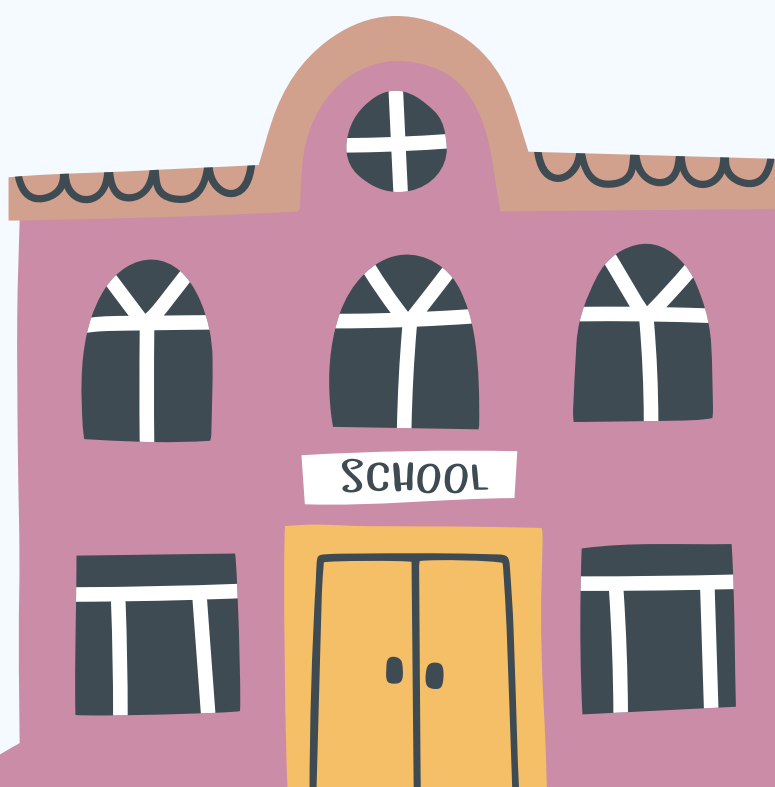


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite the progress in recent years, early school leaving (ESL) and underachievement continue to affect many children in Europe, especially the most vulnerable. Not only do these issues lead to employment challenges but also negatively impact the overall well-being of individuals and countries.

This policy brief summarizes the work of the project SCIREARLY to tackle these complex issues from a transformative perspective, drawing on scientific evidence and co-creation strategies to identify specific elements and initiatives that have proven to increase the likelihood of students staying and thriving in school.



KEY FINDINGS

- 1 **The educational involvement of vulnerable families (such as those from ethnic and minority groups and low socioeconomic status) is key to preventing and reducing underachievement and ESL.**
- 2 **A comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach is key for quality and inclusive education.**
- 3 **A culturally sensitive and flexible curriculum can foster academic engagement and avert ESL among at-risk students.**
- 4 **Teachers play a key role in forming high expectations and inclusiveness that boost students' school engagement.**
- 5 **Policies based on scientific evidence and sound research increase the likelihood of having impact on students' learning.**
- 6 **Practices based on segregation (such as grouping students into different education tracks based on their perceived academic performance) undermine achievement and well-being.**
- 7 **Personalised guidance and counselling increase students' chances of academic success.**

DATA

This policy brief is informed by a systematic literature review on the social determinants of early school leaving, a secondary statistical analysis, a policy review of national, regional, and local policies, and a process of consultation and co-creation with the wider community, including stakeholders from disadvantaged backgrounds.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 **Provide high quality training for educational staff to better prepare them for working with vulnerable and diverse communities.**
- 2 **Promote the active involvement of students, parents, teachers, and the community in the co-creation of policies, especially the most vulnerable.**
- 3 **Implement educational policies with proven social impact as informed by solid scientific evidence and continuous evaluation.**
- 4 **Revise and adjust the curriculum to the needs of learners and ensure that it is culturally sensitive.**
- 5 **Promote school desegregation and combat discrimination in educational settings consistently and comprehensively.**



CONTEXT

According to 2022 Eurostat data [1], almost ten percent of young people in Europe ages 18 to 24 have left school early. This remains a problem, especially that it is linked with lower employment chances, poverty, health problems, and lower participation in political, social, and cultural activities.

Despite the progress made in recent years, many children are still at risk of leaving school too early, with negative consequences across the life course as influenced by institutional, social, economic, cultural, and educational structures. This is particularly notable in the case of ethnic minorities, immigrant, and Roma students, who are disproportionately affected and more likely to leave school early than their native peers [2].

The solutions we are looking for in the project SCIREARLY draw on the potential of human agency to overcome structural constraints and positively contribute to students' capacity to succeed in school. For this reason, we endeavour to map and identify existing evidence-based strategies with proven social impact across European formal education systems with the end goal to make them scalable and replicable.



The main question we tried to answer is:

What factors and policy actions have been shown to overcome the risk of early school leaving and the difficulties in meeting academic expectations among young people in Europe, especially those in vulnerable situations?

KEY FINDINGS

1 The educational involvement of vulnerable families is key in preventing and reducing underachievement and early school leaving.

Research demonstrates the fundamental role of families' involvement in school across different educational stages, especially for vulnerable students such as those with ethnic, minority, and immigrant backgrounds and/or low socio-economic status [3]. Early numeracy and literacy programs that include families' inputs have proven to enhance young children's academic outcomes while increasing prosocial behaviour among children [4]. Particularly when the school context includes different cultures and ethnicities, the involvement of families in school increases the cultural capital of the educational setting, alleviating the effects of poverty or marginalisation [5]. In addition, families' involvement in a school's decision-making process is key to ensuring equal participation in defining educational practices.

2 Community involvement and multi-stakeholder approach mitigate the risk of early school leaving and underachievement.

Actions that involve the whole community in school decision-making and learning enhance children's well-being and human development [6]. This measure effectively improves school climate and academic performance, reverses the effects of absenteeism, counteracts the tendency to drop out of school after secondary education, and even mitigates social isolation and marginalisation. Most importantly, a comprehensive approach to the prevention of early school leaving has lasting effects on communities [7].

3 A culturally sensitive and flexible curriculum can foster academic engagement and

Having fixed or traditional curricula that do not take into account the cultures embedded in the school environment is a negative factor influencing the learning outcomes of young students from disadvantaged backgrounds. For instance, it has been shown that when the school curricula do not acknowledge the culture and traditions of the Roma community, underachievement and ESL rates among Roma students increase [12]. On the other hand, a curriculum design rooted in a critical pedagogical approach, context-relevant contents, and opportunities for comprehensive extracurricular activities emerged as drivers to fostering academic engagement and averting ESL among at-risk students. Additionally, the policy review and stakeholder discussions revealed the importance of reputable vocational learning schemes that need to be offered to the traditional schooling paths at all stages. The availability of reputable alternative curriculum and various opportunities for re-entry into the education system is important to ensure that at-risk students continue learning.

Successful policy **Schools as Learning Communities**

The concept of ‘Schools as Learning Communities’ [8] was initially put into practice in compulsory education in 1995 in Spain, leading to approximately 80 schools adopting the learning community approach. A substantial body of scientific evidence has since been accumulated, demonstrating the efficacy of this approach as a comprehensive, whole school strategy that has led to improvements on learning outcomes for all students, including increased student confidence, motivation and wellbeing, improved social cohesion, and greater involvement of families and the community in the educational process. A systematic review has analysed 60 scientific papers reporting these impacts [9]. It has also been acknowledged by the European Commission’s Pathways to School Success [10], a Recommendation that calls for an integrated and holistic approach. The Community of Research on Excellence for All (CREA) [11], has extended the concept of Learning Communities to all levels of education, encompassing early childhood, primary, and secondary schools. These schools implement a set of successful educational actions identified and robustly validated by the FP6 INCLUDED project that have proven effective in promoting academic achievement and social cohesion across diverse educational contexts. Examples include the implementation of interactive groups, dialogic literary gatherings, extended learning time, tutored libraries, family education, community educational involvement, dialogic model for conflict prevention and resolution, and dialogic teachers’ training. These actions have been tested by subsequent research (FP7 SALEACOM, H2020 REFUG

4 Teachers play a key role in forming high expectations and inclusiveness that boost students’ school engagement.

In addition to positive familial and sociocultural expectations, teachers’ interest in students’ learning process and having high expectations are positively correlated with academic achievement. Teachers’ way of interacting with students was found to be an asset to enhance students’ motivation and sense of belonging in school - two important elements that are directly associated with lower risk of underachievement and early school leaving. A secondary data analysis of PISA results also shows that there is a strong relationship between the students’ perception about their teachers’ attitudes and behaviours at school and their academic performance. Thus, it is important that teachers engage in continued professional development to address the diverse needs of students in the classroom and enhance their sense of belonging. There is also a need for a culturally and gender diverse teacher workforce.

Successful policy **Dual Vocational and Training Programme**

In Switzerland, the VET system includes both dual vocational programmes (company-based practical education combined with theoretical education in vocational schools) and full-time school programmes [13]. The VET programmes are prestigious and provide a solid base for a successful professional career. Approximately two-thirds of Swiss adolescents attend a form of vocational education after compulsory school; with an extensive selection of over 230 training programmes and 80% of adolescents in the vocational track choose a dual training programme. VET is the mainstream upper secondary programme, serving 70% of Swiss young people. The VET programme endeavours to equip learners with the specific qualifications necessary to competently and confidently engage in their chosen occupations. They are also given knowledge and skills spanning economic, environmental, social, and cultural domains, fostering their ability to contribute to sustainable development. Through the curriculum a disposition for lifelong learning is instilled in the learners, empowering them to exercise independent critical judgment and make informed decisions.

5

Policies based on scientific evidence and sound research increase the likelihood of having impact on students' learning.

According to the results of our analysis, successful educational policy measures share one common feature: they are based on scientific evidence. Best practices are informed by solid qualitative and quantitative data generated by an international community of researchers. These measures incorporate universal knowledge and expertise valid for all learning contexts dealing with underachievement issues. Countries should pursue evidence-informed policy-making with proven social impact, underpinned by rigorous scientific inquiry and input from the stakeholders. However, the potential of such educational initiatives to enhance equitable success for all student cohorts underscores the importance of continuous monitoring and evaluation to gauge their transformative impact.

Successful policy ***Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools***

The Delivery Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme in Ireland [14] represents a comprehensive strategy of prevention measures that consolidate multiple initiatives within its framework to address issues related to underachievement, engagement, and early school leaving resulting from socioeconomic disadvantages. Introduced in 2005 based on the recommendations of the Educational Disadvantage Committee (EDC), the DEIS programme was envisioned as a pivotal strategy to effectively combat challenges in literacy, numeracy, unqualified school leaving, and educational advancement for disadvantaged students. It offers a wide-ranging intervention cum prevention strategy that emphasises enhanced collaboration among schools, parents, and the community, exemplified by the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL). Furthermore, it provides literacy and numeracy programmes tailored to support the learning needs of students falling behind, implements smaller class sizes in primary schools to facilitate one-on-one teacher–student interactions, administers school meals programme, and offers school book grants to assist students who face financial constraints. The programme also prioritises increased access to professional development opportunities for school leaders and teachers within DEIS schools, including participation in the Incredible Years Programme. As recommended by the EDC, the DEIS programme underwent multiple evaluations conducted by the Education Research Council (ERC) and rigorous monitoring by the School Inspectorate within the Department of Education. The outcome of these evaluations indicated that the DEIS Programme has achieved success in enhancing student retention rates and academic achievement. Notably, progress continues to be observed among students in DEIS post-primary schools.

6

Practices based on segregation undermine achievement and well-being.

Different levels of analysis (institutional, socioeconomic, linguistic) have shown that educational practices based on segregation have devastating consequences for both academic achievement and well-being. For instance, tracking policies and practices, where students are placed in different groups according to their perceived academic performance, have resulted in increased achievement gaps between students and intensified conflicts and social cohesion problems. In addition, tracking practices have been found to hamper students' self-esteem, motivation, and school engagement. According to a secondary data analysis of PISA results, those students who had repeated a grade twice or more showed lower expectations of achievement and less confidence in their learning capacity and its influence on their professional development.

7

Personalised guidance and counselling increase students' chances of academic success.

Guidance and counselling services play a vital role in helping students make informed choices and navigate transitions within their educational and training journeys, including the transition from education to employment. It has been found that students between 14 and 16 years old acknowledge the value of accessible counseling services and guidance in the school setting in helping them consider different options as they shape their academic paths [15]. On the other hand, when this service is not available, students reveal a feeling of lack of choices to direct their learning trajectories from a more flexible and needs-based perspective. These services minimise the risks associated with inadequate information and unrealistic expectations, empowering learners to make decisions aligned with their interests, abilities, and future career aspirations. Furthermore, for individuals who have prematurely discontinued their education or training, guidance, and counselling can provide valuable assistance in facilitating their re-entry and successful completion of upper secondary education.

Successful policy

Student Profile at the End of Compulsory Education and Curricular Autonomy and Flexibility

Portugal introduced the 'Profile of the Student at the End of Compulsory Education, ' [16] and it also granted schools greater autonomy in curriculum management and development to address the factors contributing to underachievement. As a first step of these initiatives, a diverse array of stakeholders, including teachers, academics, families, students, and social representatives, were involved in extensive deliberation and consultation. The outcome was the establishment of a comprehensive matrix comprising principles, values, and competency domains that students are expected to acquire and develop throughout their educational journey. These encompass principles such as inclusion, adaptability, boldness, and sustainability, a range of competencies including critical thinking, creativity, reasoning, and problem-solving, as well as values like citizenship, participation, curiosity, reflection, and innovation. In pursuit of this objective, as outlined in the 'Profile of the Student at the End of Compulsory Education, ' it stipulates that primary decisions concerning curriculum and pedagogical matters are entrusted to schools and educators. Curricular autonomy and flexibility, along with the guidelines for their implementation in schools particularly focusing on differentiation, an interdisciplinary approach, and project-based learning, have been supported by scientific evidence as pedagogical approaches that lead to increased student engagement and improved outcomes.

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