



Research brief

IDENTIFYING WAYS TO PREVENT EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING AND UNDERACHIEVEMENT IN EUROPE



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RESEARCH FINDINGS

This brief explains the findings from the EU project SCIREARLY which aims to identify effective ways to reduce early school leaving (ESL) and underachievement. The project synthesises the latest scientific evidence and examines and replicates successful learning environments in 10 countries across Europe to provide tools and recommendations for policy and practice. Schools that have been successful in reducing ESL and underachievement are characterised by having a dual focus on students' learning and on supporting their wellbeing simultaneously. Usually, these schools have developed a whole school approach to reducing ESL that is consistent and systematic across all dimensions of school life, which may affect educational achievement. Our case studies of successful learning environments located in **Ireland, the UK, Malta, Finland, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, Denmark, and Belgium** covered a number of important commonalities:

1- Engaging and inclusive classroom practices

Pedagogies and classroom structures and strategies used a variety of methods that maximised peer dialogic interaction, parental involvement, and teacher autonomy and make learning challenging and engaging. Practices that are child-centered and foster inclusion can increase engagement and enhance a sense of belonging in school.

'That's what I love to see: the mix of cultures. Maybe a Roma mother comes who doesn't read at home and then she comes and shares the book with her daughter and says her piece. It's great, and they keep coming back'
(Teacher, Spain)

2- Positive relationships between school staff and students

The teacher-child relationship is a strong facilitator of children's wellbeing, particularly in culturally diverse settings and for vulnerable children. Positive relationships can encourage school engagement and motivation, feelings of emotional safety, and a sense of belonging. Creating opportunities for dialogue can create trust and help students to feel valued and included.

'Maria (the teacher) has taught us to learn to respect and help each other... with Maria I have learnt so many things this year'
(Roma student, Spain)

3- Positive peer relationships

Positive peer interactions were instrumental to children's wellbeing and engagement with school. Dialogic learning that can encourage productive interactions for learning and human development has been shown to strengthen social and academic outcomes¹. Successful learning environments encourage all children to interact in meaningful and respectful ways.

1- García-Carrión, R., Lopez De Aguilera, G., Padrós, M., & Ramis-Salas, M. (2020). Implications for social impact of dialogic teaching and learning. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 140. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00140>

'We have lots of really helpful projects that help the children to build empathy, to build friendships, and to support each other. So, what we try to support in the school is building the whole person. And when you can help the children in all of these emotional areas, learning is a much easier task for them'
(Teacher, Ireland)

4- Supportive leadership

Effective school leadership was one of the key factors in creating and maintaining positive and successful learning environments. Effective school leadership fosters a supportive and inclusive culture within the institution, which in turn cultivates motivated teachers and engaged students.

'We have to make sure that children are ready to learn, children have to feel safe and secure and happy and confident before their brains are ready to take anything in'
(School leader, UK)

5- Availability of guidance, counselling and wellbeing support

These services play a vital role in helping students make informed choices and navigate transitions in their educational journeys and empowering learners to make decisions to continue and succeed in higher education, enhancing their college aspirations and efficacy². The availability of support teams and services in school can also help maintain students' health and wellbeing and remove barriers to learning.

'... the school has guidance counsellors as well... the fact that they're there is really comforting. You have somebody to turn to if you're stressed about education, college, what to do with your future, or your mental health'
(Student, Ireland)

6- Community engagement with schools and education

Cross-sectoral collaboration and cooperation with a wide range of stakeholders help schools to support families and children with issues that schools cannot tackle alone, such as health or the effects of poverty. Involving families, carers, and community members in children's education has proven to enhance academic outcomes, and their participation in decision-making can support equitable educational practices in schools.

'One of the main things we worked on was encouraging families to come to the school and building a relationship between the school and the families of the children. We found this to be very essential and thanks to that, absenteeism decreased, the relationship between parents and the school improved, we found more collaboration, and the mentality of parents towards their children's education also changed significantly'

(School leader, Malta)

2- O'Sullivan, K., Mulligan, R., Kuster, M., Smith, R., & Hannon, C. (2017). A college focused mentoring programme for students in socio-economically disadvantaged schools: The impact of mentoring relationship and frequency on college-going confidence, application efficacy and aspirations. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 19(2), 113-141. <https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.19.2.113>

Ways to prevent Early School Leaving and Underachievement in Europe

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS

- 1 **Schools should be supported to promote both the learning and the wellbeing of their students simultaneously** - Some suggestions for how this could be done include:
- 2 **Schools should be encouraged to engage their communities and collaborate with local stakeholders.** Some suggestions for how this could be done include:
- 3 **More opportunities should be provided for schools to learn from each other and share best practices.** Some suggestions for how this could be done include:

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOLS

- 1 **Prioritise the development of positive and supportive relationships with parents and carers, between school staff and students, and between peers.** Some suggestions for how this could be done include:
- 2 **Implement inclusive classroom pedagogies that are dialogic, culturally sensitive, and child-centred.** Some suggestions for how this could be done include:
- 3 **Work with stakeholders to ensure a full range of support is available to students and families that need it in order to promote social, emotional and physical health and remove barriers to learning.** Some suggestions for how this could be done include:
- 4 **Ensure staff are aware of the challenges faced by some students and are supported to implement research-informed pedagogies and ways of working.** Some suggestions for how this could be done include:

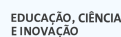
CONCLUSION

The SCIREARLY project has demonstrated that a comprehensive approach to education, which prioritises both academic achievement and student wellbeing, is crucial in reducing early school leaving and underachievement. The successful learning environments identified in our research across ten European countries share common characteristics such as inclusive classroom practices, positive relationships, supportive leadership, availability of guidance and wellbeing support, and active community engagement. By implementing these practices and fostering collaboration among various stakeholders, schools can create nurturing environments that support all students. The forthcoming toolkit, based on these findings, will offer practical resources and strategies to educators and policymakers, contributing to more effective and inclusive educational practices across Europe.

LEARN MORE

This document is an abbreviated version of a policy brief based on the SCIREARLY project's research mapping early childhood education and care provision across Europe, developed through co-creation with children, families, and schools.

The full policy brief can be found on the SCIREARLY IMPACT Platform: www.scirearly.eu



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