

Key Characteristics of Successful Education Pathways for Vulnerable Youth in Europe

Recommendations for policy-makers, school leaders, teachers and counsellors



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*"It is so impactful...when you have someone to help you motivate to get back into school and stay there."
Young person, UK*

Educational opportunity and success for young people is a cornerstone of inclusive societies.

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds navigate a complex web of challenges that can impede their educational journey. Family instability creates emotional turmoil that can impact concentration, engagement, and attendance. Economic hardship forces many to prioritize immediate survival needs over educational aspirations. Cultural and linguistic barriers, particularly for refugees, migrants, and Roma youth, can lead to feelings of exclusion and not belonging within educational institutions.

For many of these students, school becomes not just a place of learning but potentially a critical lifeline. Under optimal conditions, it can provide stability, recognition, and opportunities that may be scarce elsewhere in their lives. However, without appropriate support and understanding, these same institutions can inadvertently reinforce marginalization through low expectations, cultural insensitivity, or rigid structures that fail to accommodate the complex realities these young people navigate daily.

The EU has long prioritised equitable education and reduced early leaving. The European Education Area strategic framework sets the direction, complemented by the Youth Guarantee and the Child Guarantee to ensure no young person is left behind.^{1,2,3}

The progress is real but incomplete. The European Union's benchmark that fewer than 10% of young people should leave education and training early by 2020 was nearly reached at EU level in 2019. Yet several Member States remain above the target, and rates are markedly higher among socio-economically disadvantaged, migrant and Roma students.^{4,5,6}

The EU also fell short of keeping low achievement in reading, mathematics and science among 15-year-olds below the 15% target; more than one in five struggle with basic tasks, closely linked to socio-economic status.⁷

Europe has the tools to prevent early school leaving and underachievement. Yet too many vulnerable young people are still slipping through the cracks. Closing that gap is urgent, feasible, and already mandated by EU frameworks.

Despite challenges, many young people demonstrate remarkable resilience, finding pathways to educational success via a combination of personal determination and external support. Understanding these success factors is essential for developing policies and practices that can help more vulnerable students thrive.

*"I work in primary education, and the contact with families is close and constant. However, once students step up to secondary education, this close connection disappears... and in this impasse, we lose many of them."
Teacher, Spain*

[1] <https://education.ec.europa.eu/about-eea/strategic-framework>

[2] https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/eu-employment-policies/youth-employment-support/reinforced-youth-guarantee_en

[3] https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/social-protection-social-inclusion/addressing-poverty-and-supporting-social-inclusion/investing-children/european-child-guarantee_en

[4] Council recommendation of 28 June 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC_2011_191_R_0001_01

[5] European Union (2024). Education and Training Monitor 2024.

[6] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2021). Roma in 10 European countries: Main results.

[7] <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0625>

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS FOR TRANSFORMING EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS

The SCIREARLY project identified transformative drivers in the educational life paths of youth belonging to vulnerable populations in eight countries. The project sought to identify and better understand the elements that may reduce and prevent early school leaving and underachievement among these groups.

By examining the success stories of those who have overcome significant challenges, we gained valuable insights into factors that enable resilience and achievement. This strengths-based approach shifts the focus from deficits to supportive elements that can be formalised, enhanced, and systematised through policy and practice.

Findings were then validated through workshops with diverse stakeholders - participants themselves, students, teachers, school leaders, parents, and community representatives – to co-design recommendations for policy and practice.

*"Standardising transitions would really help us understand who's coming into our secondary schools and what supports need to be in place."
Deputy principal, Ireland*

- 1 **Strengthen relationship-building as the foundation of educational success.**
Create school cultures where every student feels seen, valued, and supported through meaningful relationships with educators and peers.
- 2 **Bridge educational transitions through standardised support systems.**
Develop coherent frameworks that ensure continuity of support as students move between educational levels and institutions.
- 3 **Expand and strengthen home-school-community connections.**
Increase resources for programmes that build meaningful partnerships between families, foster homes, schools, and community services.
- 4 **Prioritise attendance and engagement through flexible and responsive approaches.**
Develop school-wide strategies that emphasize the importance of attendance and engagement while responding compassionately to barriers or specific situations students face.

5

Create safe, supportive, and inclusive social spaces that foster belonging and peer connection.

Design physical environments and structured opportunities that enable positive peer relationships and a sense of belonging.

6

Integrate cultural representation and visibility in educational spaces.

Ensure curriculum, staffing, and school environments reflect and affirm the diverse identities of all students, particularly those from cultural minorities.

7

Expand alternative pathways (and access to them) and recognize diverse forms of success.

Develop, support, and promote multiple pathways to success that are equally valued and visible.

8

Provide mental health and psychosocial support resources in schools.

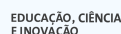
Significantly increase access to school-based mental health services and emotional support for students and staff.

"These [young] people have talents, and the longer that we can keep them within the system - in order to show them respect and love and imagination - the more chance they have."
Deputy Principal, Ireland

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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