



Policy brief

REDUCING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING AND UNDERACHIEVEMENT

*Successful strategies for
inclusive and quality education
in Europe*



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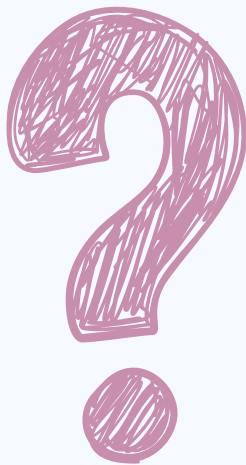
INTRODUCTION

Despite the progress in recent years, early school leaving 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.

According to 2024 Eurostat data,¹ 9.3 percent of young people in Europe ages 18 to 24 have left school early. This remains problematic as it is linked with lower employment chances, poverty, health problems, and reduced participation in political, social, and cultural activities. Despite progress, many children remain at risk of leaving school too early, with negative consequences across the life course. This is particularly notable for ethnic minorities, immigrant, and Roma students, who are disproportionately affected.²

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

The SCIREARLY project draws on human agency's potential to overcome structural constraints and positively contribute to students' capacity to succeed in school, mapping evidence-based strategies with proven social impact across European formal education systems.



The main question we tried to answer is:

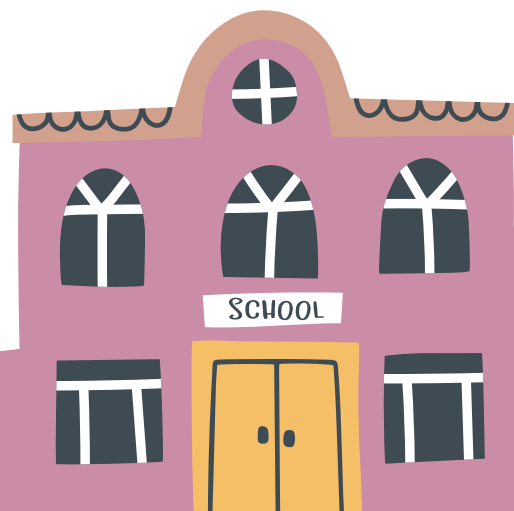
What factors and policy measures have been shown to overcome the risk of early school leaving and academic underachievement among young people in Europe, especially those in vulnerable situations?

[1] Eurostat. (2024, May). Early leavers from education and training. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Early_leavers_from_education_and_training#Early_leavers_from_education_and_training_.E2.80.93_today_and_a_historical_comparison

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

RESEARCH SHOWS:

- 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 early school leaving.
- 2 A comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach is crucial for quality and inclusive education.
- 3 A culturally sensitive and flexible curriculum can foster academic engagement and avert early school leaving among at-risk students.
- 4 Teachers play a key role in forming high expectations and inclusiveness that boost students' school engagement.
- 5 Policies informed by evidence and sound research increase the likelihood of having impact on students' learning.
- 6 Practices that involve 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.



EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL POLICIES

Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools - DEIS (Ireland): Introduced in 2005 DEIS represents Ireland's comprehensive national strategy to combat educational disadvantage. The programme consolidates multiple prevention and intervention measures within a single framework, targeting schools serving communities with high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage. Key components include the Home School Community Liaison programme; specialized literacy and numeracy programmes for students falling behind; reduced class sizes in primary schools; school meals programmes; and book grant schemes for families facing financial constraints. DEIS also prioritizes professional development for educators, while maintaining rigorous evaluation and monitoring systems.⁷

Learning Communities (Andalusia, Spain): Introduced in 2012 into the Andalusian regional education system, the benefits of a whole-school approach have been widely demonstrated. In particular, this project shares a comprehensive, whole-school strategy aimed at achieving enhanced learning outcomes and wellbeing for all.⁵ It is rooted in the vision of a school where every voice matters. Its key elements include inclusive participation, with families, associations, and volunteers actively contributing to both school management and student learning; collaborative decision-making, through mixed committees that bring together different sectors of the educational community; and continuous evaluation, with regular reflection and proposals for improvement to ensure the model remains effective and responsive.

Student Profile and Curricular Autonomy (Portugal): Portugal's innovative approach was developed with teachers, academics, families, students, and social representatives. The framework establishes a matrix of principles (inclusion, adaptability, boldness, sustainability), competencies (critical thinking, creativity, reasoning, problem-solving), and values (citizenship, participation, curiosity, reflection, innovation) that students should develop throughout their educational journey. Crucially, the initiative grants schools and educators significant autonomy in curriculum management and development, allowing them to make primary decisions about curriculum and pedagogical matters. This flexibility enables schools to provide learning tailored to their specific contexts and student needs, moving away from one-size-fits-all educational models.⁸

Dual Vocational Training Programme (Switzerland): Switzerland's prestigious Vocational Education and Training (VET) system is a unique model where two-thirds of Swiss adolescents choose vocational education after compulsory school. The system combines company-based practical education with theoretical education in vocational schools, offering over 230 different training programmes across sectors. VET is considered a pathway to successful careers rather than a second-choice option. Students spend part of their time in companies gaining real work experience and part in schools developing theoretical knowledge. The system equips learners with specific occupational skills and broader competencies spanning economic, environmental, social, and cultural domains, fostering lifelong learning dispositions and critical thinking abilities.⁶

[5] García-Carrión, R., & Díez-Palomar, J. (2015). Learning communities: Pathways for educational success and social transformation through interactive groups in mathematics. *European Educational Research Journal*, 14(2), 151-166. <https://www.juntadeandalucia.es/boja/2012/126/21>

[6] SCCRE. (2023). Report Switzerland 2023. Aarau: Swiss Coordination Centre for Research in Education.

[7] Department of Education. (2022) The refined DEIS identificatgion model. Social Inclusion Unit Department of Education.

[8] OECD (2018). Curriculum flexibility and autonomy in Portugal - an OECD Review.

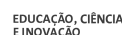
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Provide high quality and evidence-informed 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 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.

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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