



# KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL EDUCATION PATHWAYS FOR VULNERABLE YOUTH IN EUROPE

*Recommendations for  
policy-makers*



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EDUCAÇÃO, CIÊNCIA  
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## INTRODUCTION

Educational opportunity and success for young people is a cornerstone of inclusive societies. Learners from vulnerable backgrounds face disproportionate barriers to appropriate and relevant education pathways, hindering their ability to achieve their full potential.

The early and adolescent years represent a pivotal developmental window that shapes life trajectories. This period encompasses critical neurological, social, and personal growth that lay the foundation for later life outcomes. Access to quality education during this formative stage provides opportunity to develop important skills necessary for navigating an increasingly complex world. Equally vital are the relationships young people forge during these years - with peers who provide validation and feelings of belonging, with teachers who recognize and encourage potential, and with caring adults who model positive behaviors. These connections provide both emotional scaffolding and social capital that research consistently links to resilience and achievement.

Importantly, adolescence marks the crucial period for developing agency and identity, where young people begin to assert independence, exploring possible futures, and constructing a coherent sense of self that incorporates cultural background, personal values, and aspirations. When educational systems effectively support these intertwined dimensions of development - providing both knowledge and nurturing environments where young people feel valued, connected and empowered to shape their own paths - they create the conditions where even the most vulnerable youth can overcome adversity and build meaningful, successful lives.



## THE CHALLENGE: SUPPORTING VULNERABLE YOUTH THROUGH EDUCATION

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds navigate a complex web of challenges that can impede their educational journey. Family instability - including parental substance abuse, divorce or loss of a parent, and serious illness or other adversities - 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.

Despite these 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.

## EDUCATING YOUTH IN EUROPE AND SCIREARLY

The European Commission has long prioritized supporting vulnerable youth and reducing early school leaving as part of its broader strategy to build more equitable societies. The European Education Area framework,[1] along with initiatives like the Youth Guarantee [2] and the Child Guarantee, [3] demonstrates Europe's commitment to ensuring no young person is left behind due to circumstances beyond their control.

In the 2009 strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, the European Council agreed that by 2020, the share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 10%. [4] This goal was practically met in 2019 at the overall EU level. At the same time, not all member states have reached the goal, and the rate of early school leaving remains considerably higher than 10% amongst students from vulnerable backgrounds, who are socio-economically disadvantaged, migrants, or of Roma origin.

The EU did not achieve its target of reducing the share of 15-year-olds achieving low levels of reading, maths and science to less than 15% by 2020. The EU as a whole is lagging behind in all three domains: more than one in five 15-year olds cannot complete simple tasks in these subjects, and the results are strongly correlated with socioeconomic status. [5]

The SCIREARLY project identified transformative drivers in the educational life paths of youth belonging to vulnerable populations in eight countries. These populations include socioeconomically disadvantaged young people, young people from challenging home environments, and those from Roma, migrant, and refugee backgrounds. 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 formalized, enhanced and systematized through policy and practice.

The SCIREARLY project conducted research across eight European countries, including interviews with successful students from vulnerable backgrounds and the significant people who supported them. These 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.



[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](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](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](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC_2011_191_R_0001_01)

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

# EDUCATION PATHWAYS FOR POST-PRIMARY SCHOOL IN THE COUNTRIES OF STUDY: AN OVERVIEW

The following table summarizes the official educational pathways in the countries where these successful stories were analyzed. This information might help to better understand the findings by framing the critical incidents participants describe in the context of their experience.

| Country      | Are there multiple options or pathways for secondary education?                                  | Who determines this pathway?                                                            | Age range of options                                                                          | Additional support in schools (e.g. MHPSS, counselors)                                                                                                      |
|--------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Denmark      | Yes, including preparatory, vocational, and specially planned pathways                           | Student (with inputs from guidance counsellors and council)                             | Typically 15 to 21, but some pathways have no age limit                                       | Basic counselling; Support to students with special needs; Mental health services provided through health system                                            |
| Ireland      | Yes, including junior certificate school, transition year, leaving, and vocational options       | Student; school (via national standards); combination of student, school and caregivers | 12 to 18 years old                                                                            | Support via program coordinators; school completion coordinators; learning support/SEN teachers; Special needs assistants; home school liaison coordinators |
| Greece       | Yes, including secondary education or night high-schools                                         | Student                                                                                 | 12+, no age limit                                                                             | n/a                                                                                                                                                         |
| Spain        | General secondary education                                                                      | Families                                                                                | 12 to 16 years old                                                                            | Support via counselling within schools                                                                                                                      |
| Finland      | Yes, via general secondary education or vocational secondary                                     | Students and parents                                                                    | 15 to 18 years old                                                                            | Support for learning and wellbeing provided if needed                                                                                                       |
| UK (England) | Yes, via secondary schools, sixth form colleges (often vocational), or special education schools | Students and parents                                                                    | 11 to 18 for secondary; 16 to 18 sixth form; 11 to 18 special education (dependent on school) | All schools have pastoral support teams and policies, including for students with special needs                                                             |
| Italy        | Yes, multiple formal secondary options; vocational options                                       | Students and Parents (and mandatory by law)                                             | 11 to 18 years old                                                                            | Support via special education, school psychologists, education/career guidance and tutoring; social and health services                                     |

<sup>1</sup> Mental health and psychosocial support

<sup>2</sup> Special educational needs

## RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- 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 standardized 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 programs that build meaningful partnerships between families, foster homes, schools, and community services.
- 4 **Prioritize 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.

## RECOMMENDATION 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.**

- Recognize and reward relationship-building in school evaluation frameworks, acknowledging that positive relationships are foundational to educational success
- Develop national standards for trauma-informed and relationship-centered education, with associated funding for implementation
- Create financial incentives for staff stability in schools serving vulnerable populations, including retention bonuses and improved working conditions
- Support research into best practices for relational pedagogy and its impact on educational outcomes for vulnerable students
- Establish national professional development programs focused on relational competence and social emotional intelligence for educators
- Review teacher education programs to ensure adequate emphasis on relationship-building skills and understanding of trauma impacts and other adversities on learning

*My mom pushed me to enroll in this school, mainly because of the good things she'd heard about the director. I didn't know ... but I liked her very much. And she has helped me so much, same as all the teachers here, they are very nice, very normal. There are no issues, no discrimination... we are all a team.*  
Young person, Greece.

*Later in my schooling, the vice principal noticed my frequent absences and arranged for me to meet a study counselor, instead of contacting my father. [The counselor] helped me transition to a continuation school and get into therapy... even visiting the schools with me.*  
Young person, Denmark





*"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

## RECOMMENDATION 2: BRIDGE EDUCATIONAL TRANSITIONS THROUGH STANDARDIZED SUPPORT SYSTEMS

**Develop coherent frameworks that ensure continuity of support as students move between educational levels and institutions.**

- Develop national transition frameworks that standardize information sharing between educational levels while protecting student privacy
- Mandate and support transition programs in all schools, with enhanced resources for areas with high concentrations of vulnerable students
- Create legal structures that facilitate data sharing while maintaining confidentiality
- Establish cross-sector working groups to address systemic barriers at transition points
- Develop quality standards and indicators for effective transition programs
- Support research to identify and disseminate effective transition practices, particularly for vulnerable populations
- Create funding mechanisms that incentivize collaboration between primary and secondary schools
- Establish national monitoring systems to track successful transitions and early identification and prevention of disengagement



*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*

*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*

## **RECOMMENDATION 3:** **EXPAND AND STRENGTHEN HOME-SCHOOL-** **COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS**

**Increase resources for programs that build meaningful partnerships between families, schools, and community services.**

- Increase home-school-community liaison positions, with specified ratios based on school vulnerability profiles
- Create cross-departmental frameworks that facilitate better coordination between education, health, social, and community services
- Develop policy guidelines that recognize diverse family structures and cultural approaches to education
- Establish home-school-community partnership policies that ensure high expectations for all students are actively promoted and communicated as a central element of family engagement strategies
- Support family resource centers co-located with schools in high-need communities
- Create national standards for family engagement that reflect cultural responsiveness and strength-based approaches

- Revise teacher education requirements to include comprehensive training in family engagement strategies
- Establish grants for innovative school-community partnership programs with rigorous evaluation components
- Develop data systems that allow appropriate information sharing between schools and support services

*When parents feel you're not there to judge them, but rather to be a partner in supporting them, that makes a real difference in their engagement.*

*Deputy Principal, Ireland*

*Distribution of work and responsibilities taking into account the profile of the teachers, while recognizing that there is the need to increase the possibility of having multidisciplinary teams, and other staff such as mediators.*

*Workshop participant, Portugal*



## RECOMMENDATION 4: PRIORITIZE ATTENDANCE THROUGH FLEXIBLE AND RESPONSIVE APPROACHES

**Develop school-wide strategies that emphasize the importance of attendance while responding compassionately to barriers students face.**

- Reform attendance policies to emphasize support and engagement rather than punishment
- Provide support for innovative approaches to addressing systemic attendance barriers (transportation, health services, flexible scheduling)
- Develop national guidelines that balance attendance expectations with compassionate approaches to diverse life circumstances
- Establish attendance policy frameworks that allow for appropriate flexibility while maintaining educational standards
- Provide resources for additional support staff specifically dedicated to attendance improvement in high-need schools
- Create data systems that help identify patterns and root causes of absenteeism
- Review and revise child welfare and juvenile justice responses to truancy to emphasize support over punishment
- Support research to identify most effective practices in improving attendance among vulnerable populations
- Create incentives for cross-sector collaboration to address community-level attendance barriers
- Prioritize afternoon services' schedules (psychology, social services, etc.) to allow students to attend classes and then their appointments

*Every school says attendance is important—and it is. It's the biggest predictor of engagement. But at the same time, schools often put structures in place that make it harder for students to attend.*

*Deputy principal, Ireland*

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

*Young person, UK*



## RECOMMENDATION 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.**

- Develop architectural guidelines for school design that incorporate inclusive social spaces
- Support school renovation projects specifically focused on creating welcoming, accessible common areas
- Establish policies that protect time for social connection and community-building within the school day
- Embed high expectations for all students into school climate policies, ensuring they are reflected in classroom practices, peer interactions, and whole-school culture as essential components of belonging and inclusion. Provide resources for extracurricular and co-curricular activities with specific inclusion measures
- Enable peer support programs in all schools, with enhanced resources for high-need communities
- Develop national standards for school climate and belonging, with associated measurement tools
- Support research into effective practices for building peer connection across diverse groups
- Create funding streams dedicated to innovative social inclusion programs and their evaluation
- Develop policies that explicitly value and measure student well-being and sense of belonging



*"That's the real challenge for schools - how do we bridge that gap between families and the education system? How do we help our students feel like they truly belong in that context? They don't have the dinnertime conversations about college or careers that other families might. They're not being socialised into the system in the same way, and we need to find ways to give them that kind of social capital."*  
*Guidance counsellor, Ireland*

*I think we are losing students who feel so isolated within the classroom, and they think 'Why would I bother being here'? It is small interactions that I see are so important... in the staff room we are having conversations about how we treat our students. [We ask ourselves 'What kind of environment do we want to create in our schools?'*

*Guidance counsellor, Ireland*

## **RECOMMENDATION 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**

- Develop curriculum frameworks that incorporate diverse histories, cultures, and perspectives
- Create recruitment and retention initiatives to increase diversity in the teaching workforce
- Provide resources for the development of inclusive teaching materials that reflect diverse backgrounds and experiences
- Establish requirements for pre-service and in-service teacher training on cultural responsiveness
- Create structures for meaningful community input in curriculum development
- Support programs that bring diverse role models into schools, particularly in STEM fields
- Develop measurement tools that assess cultural inclusivity in school environments
- Establish policies that protect expressions of cultural identity in school settings
- Support research on effective practices for culturally responsive education
- Create incentives for schools to develop innovative approaches to cultural inclusion

*Sofia struggled from 7 to 21 years old with her identity as a Roma. She describes how she was afraid of discrimination. Living in both cultural places, she could not understand if she was Roma or not, or if she was Roma and non-Roma at the same time. Therefore, she often hid her ethnicity at school. Sofia described a landmark event for her identity as Roma and her process of acceptance: She had a teacher with whom she felt a lot of trust from the very first lesson, and she decided to share her ethnicity with him. The teacher challenged her to do a project on Brazil, [focusing on] its history and its relationship with the Roma: "It was in this work that I forced myself to do research, and that my identity crisis disappeared... I began to know more about history. I began to realise where I came from and where the traditions came from".*

*Roma participant, Portugal*

*I'll always remember that student. She absorbed so much knowledge. The students thought she was different, and I wanted to show them that you can be different and still achieve. She should be proud of being a Traveler. At first, she seemed embarrassed about it, but over time, that changed.*

*Teacher, Ireland*



## RECOMMENDATION 7: EXPAND **ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS** AND RECOGNIZE DIVERSE FORMS OF SUCCESS

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

- Reform qualification frameworks to create parity of esteem between academic and vocational pathways
- Develop national initiatives that highlight and celebrate diverse forms of post- secondary success
- Invest in modernizing vocational, technical, and applied learning opportunities
- Create funding structures that adequately resource alternative educational programs
- Develop policy frameworks that facilitate smooth transitions between different educational pathways
- Reform assessment and accountability systems to recognize diverse forms of achievement
- Create incentives for business and industry partnerships with alternative educational programs
- Support research on outcomes from various educational pathways, particularly for vulnerable students
- Develop mechanisms for recognizing skills and competencies gained through non-traditional routes
- Establish scholarships and financial supports specifically for students in alternative pathways

*I look at 14-year-old students in my school today and think: my biggest job is to keep them [in school]. The longer they're in school, the more maturity they gain to survive in the outside world... [Leaving Certificate Applied (an option in Ireland)] provides a route for several of those students to develop the maturity needed to survive in the world.*

*Deputy principal, Ireland*



*If you come from a background where you have a hard time at home, I think folk high school would help a lot. You meet new people to learn from, you talk to other students about what they chose to study and why they chose it. When you come from places like I do, it is not common to meet so many people who are ambitious. It means a lot who you surround yourself with these people, because then you are aware of what opportunities are available to you... There are many opportunities to get an education and to get support for it, so I think it is about presenting these opportunities to the young people.*

*Young person, Denmark*



## **RECOMMENDATION 8:** **INVEST IN MENTAL HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL** **SUPPORT RESOURCES**

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

- Establish minimum ratios of mental health professionals to students, with enhanced ratios for high-need schools
- Develop sustainable funding mechanisms for school-based mental health services
- Create cross-departmental frameworks for integrated mental health support in educational settings
- Provide resources for universal, early intervention, and targeted programs for mental health in schools



- Establish national standards for trauma-informed educational practices
- Develop professional standards that recognize the importance of staff well-being and self-care
- Create funding structures for innovative approaches to promoting mental health and emotional resilience
- Implement data collection systems that help identify mental health needs and service gaps
- Support research on effective school-based mental health interventions, particularly for vulnerable populations
- Develop policy frameworks that address structural determinants of poor mental health (poverty, discrimination and social exclusion)

*If we are meant to take care of complex situations, we need a kind of backup to guarantee that we ourselves are in the position to do it properly, without putting at risk our own health.*

*Teacher, Spain*

*There should be a psychologist in every school in Ireland, yet we don't have that. Guidance counsellors need more training, and career guidance teachers should not be expected to take on the role of full-time psychologists. Right now, they are filling gaps in psychological and social support, which is not fair to them or the students who need professional help.*

*Teacher, Ireland*