



KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL EDUCATION PATHWAYS FOR VULNERABLE YOUTH IN EUROPE

*Recommendations for
school leaders, teachers
and counsellors*



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EDUCAÇÃO, CIÊNCIA
E INOVAÇÃO



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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

[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] <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

¹ Mental health and psychosocial support

² 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.

For school administrators and leadership:

- Prioritize relationship-building in school improvement plans and staff development
- Create schedules that explicitly allocate time for relationship-building activities (advisory periods, mentoring sessions, community circles)
- Develop hiring practices that prioritize relational competence alongside academic expertise
- Implement regular relationship mapping exercises to identify students who may lack meaningful connections
- Establish school-wide norms for positive, respectful interactions among all community members
- Design physical environments that facilitate connection and community-building Reduce administrative burdens on teachers to create more time for student interaction
- Create structures that enable long-term relationships, such as looping (keeping students with the same teacher for multiple years)
- Use school data to identify patterns of disconnection and targeted interventions

"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

"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



For teachers:

- Begin each school day with relationship-building activities that help students feel welcome and connected
- Implement regular check-ins with individual students to build rapport and understand their needs
- Use classroom management strategies that emphasize relationship and restoration rather than punishment
- Share appropriate personal stories that help students connect and see you as approachable
- Learn students' names, interests, and strengths, using this knowledge to personalize interactions
- Create classroom routines that build community and mutual support among students
- Notice and acknowledge positive student behaviors and modest improvements
- Maintain high expectations while communicating unconditional positive regard
- Use collaborative learning strategies that build peer relationships while advancing academic goals
- Design assignments that incorporate students' cultural backgrounds and personal interests

For guidance counsellors^[6]

- Develop systematic approaches to identify students who lack strong relationships within the school
- Create tailored connection plans for students experiencing isolation or disengagement
- Train peer mentors to support relationship development, especially for new or struggling students
- Facilitate relationship-building groups for students with similar challenges or interests
- Coordinate with teachers to ensure consistent relationship-focused approaches
- Conduct professional development for staff on attachment theory and its implications for education
- Establish protocols for regular check-ins with highly vulnerable students
- Develop relationships with students' families or networks to strengthen school-home connections
- Create and maintain documentation systems that ensure relationship knowledge is preserved during transitions
- Advocate for school policies that prioritize relationships and connection

[6] We recognize that the term for this role may differ by country. In the UK, for example, this equates to “pastoral support.” Guidance counsellor is used here to indicate a school professional whose job it is to provide comprehensive support to students in their academic, social, emotional, and career development.



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

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.

For school administrators and leadership

- Develop formal partnerships between feeder/receiver schools to create seamless transition pathways
- Establish transition teams that include representatives from both sending and receiving schools
- Implement standardized information transfer protocols that ensure critical student information moves with them
- Schedule regular cross-school meetings focused on successful transitions
- Create shared professional development opportunities between primary and secondary teachers
- Design orientation programs that extend beyond the first days of school into the first semester
- Use data to identify patterns in transition success and challenges, particularly for vulnerable students
- Allocate resources specifically for transition support, including dedicated staff time
- Create early warning systems to identify students who may struggle with transitions
- Develop progressive orientation experiences that gradually introduce students to new environments

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



For teachers

- Collaborate with colleagues across educational levels to align (high) expectations and pedagogical approaches
- Prepare students explicitly for upcoming transitions through classroom discussions and activities
- Create classroom environments that balance consistency with gradual increases in autonomy
- Develop relationships with teachers at feeder/receiver schools to facilitate communication
- Share detailed information about individual student needs, strengths, and effective strategies
- Implement "warm handovers" where information is transferred personally rather than just on paper
- Maintain communication with former students during their transition period to provide continuity
- Use consistent language and expectations across educational levels where appropriate
- Create assignments that help students prepare for and reflect on their transition experiences
- Gradually introduce students to the academic and social expectations of their next educational level

For guidance counsellors

- Develop comprehensive transition assessment tools to identify student readiness and concerns
- Create individual transition plans for vulnerable students that address specific barriers and needs
- Facilitate transition-focused groups for students with similar concerns or challenges
- Organize visits between educational settings to familiarize students with new environments
- Coordinate with counterparts at feeder/receiver schools to ensure continuity of support
- Provide targeted support for parents and families during transition periods
- Develop transition mentoring programs pairing students with peers who have successfully navigated similar transitions
- Track and monitor student adjustment after transitions, with early intervention for signs of disengagement
- Create transition resource guides customized for different student populations and needs
- Facilitate professional development on developmental changes and needs during key transition ages

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.

For school administrators and leadership

- Allocate dedicated time and resources for staff to engage with families and community partners
- Create welcoming physical and procedural environments that invite family participation
- Develop communication systems that accommodate diverse languages, literacy levels, and technology access
- Prioritize and model high expectations for all students by embedding them into leadership practices, staff professional development, and family engagement initiatives to foster a shared commitment to student success
- Establish regular community mapping activities to identify and engage local resources
- Implement family feedback mechanisms that inform school improvement planning
- Create flexible scheduling for family meetings and events to accommodate working parents
- Develop clear referral pathways to connect families with external support services
- Establish regular cross-agency meetings to coordinate support for high-need students and families
- Create staffing structures that allow personnel to specialize in community and family engagement
- Open spaces for active engagement of diverse families in decision-making processes and offer training based on their particular interests
- Develop school-based services that address common barriers to attendance and engagement

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

For teachers

- Adopt a strength-based approach to family communication, highlighting student progress and achievements
- Consistently communicate high expectations for all students' learning and behavior, while building strong, strength-based partnerships with families to support and reinforce these expectations
- Develop relationships with families early in the school year, before challenges arise
- Create accessible explanations of classroom expectations, curriculum, and how families can support learning
- Use multiple communication channels that respect family preferences and circumstances
- Implement regular, brief updates rather than relying solely on formal conferences
- Learn about community resources to make appropriate referrals when needs arise
- Engage in home visits or community-based meetings when appropriate and possible
- Incorporate family and community knowledge and expertise into curriculum and classroom activities
- Create classroom activities that recognize and value students' home cultures and languages
- Develop family engagement strategies that acknowledge diverse family structures and circumstances

For guidance counsellors

- Develop and maintain comprehensive community resource directories for student and family referrals
- Create effective case management systems to ensure follow-through on referrals and recommendations
- Facilitate family support groups for those facing similar challenges
- Provide training for families on navigating educational and social service systems
- Establish relationships with key contacts at community agencies and services
- Develop programs that help families understand and support their children's educational journeys
- Create transition supports for families moving between educational levels or institutions
- Implement culturally responsive family outreach approaches
- Provide consultation to teachers on effective family engagement strategies
- Coordinate multi-agency support teams for students with complex needs

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.

For school administrators and leadership:

- Develop whole-school attendance strategies that address both universal and targeted approaches
- Implement data systems that provide early warning of attendance problems and facilitate rapid response
- Create attendance teams with clear roles and responsibilities for outreach and intervention
- Develop protocols that focus on problem-solving rather than punishment when addressing attendance issues Review and revise disciplinary policies that may inadvertently reduce attendance (e.g., suspensions for minor infractions)
- Create flexible scheduling options for students with significant family responsibilities without minimizing quality standards
- Implement positive incentive systems that recognize and celebrate improved attendance
- Ensure physical environments are welcoming and conducive to attendance
- Develop re-engagement strategies for returning students who have been absent for extended periods
- Create partnerships with local businesses and organizations to address common attendance barriers

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

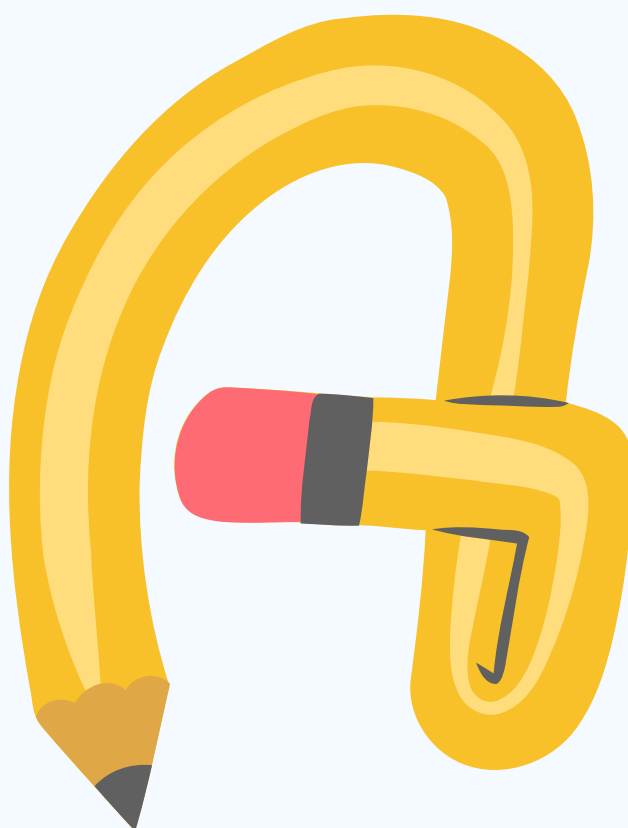
For teachers

- Create classroom environments where students feel safe, valued, and missed when absent
- Implement engaging instructional strategies that make students want to attend school
- Develop consistent routines for welcoming students back after absences without shame or punishment
- Keep accurate and timely attendance records to enable early intervention
- Communicate clearly with students and families about how absences impact learning
- Provide accessible ways for absent students to keep up with learning
- Collaborate with colleagues to identify patterns in subject-specific or time-specific absences
- Develop relationships with chronically absent students to understand underlying causes
- Implement flexible assessment approaches that allow students to demonstrate learning despite absences
- Communicate appreciation when improved attendance is observed

For guidance counsellors

- Develop systematic approaches to identifying root causes of attendance problems
- Create individualized attendance improvement plans that address specific barriers
- Facilitate support groups for students with similar attendance challenges
- Coordinate with community resources to address non-school factors affecting attendance
- Provide counseling interventions that address underlying emotional or psychological barriers
- Train staff on understanding and addressing the complex reasons behind chronic absence
- Develop re-engagement strategies for students returning after extended absences
- Create family outreach approaches that build partnerships around attendance
- Implement regular check-ins with students who have a history of attendance problems
- Develop transition supports for students moving between schools or educational levels

*"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.

For school administrators and leadership

- Allocate physical space for informal social interaction that is accessible to all students
- Examine and address scheduling that may limit opportunities for social connection
- Implement school-wide programs that explicitly foster inclusion and belonging
- Create systems to identify and support students who may be socially isolated
- Develop a diversity of clubs, activities, and programs to meet various student interests and needs
- Implement peer mentoring programs, particularly during transition periods
- Train all staff in recognizing and addressing social exclusion and bullying
- Involve students in designing and implementing inclusion initiatives
- Create structures for cross-age and cross-cultural interaction within the school community
- Ensure extracurricular activities are accessible regardless of financial or transportation constraints

"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



For teachers

- Create classroom layouts and routines that foster interaction and collaboration
- Implement regular community-building activities within classroom settings
- Use collaborative learning strategies that build positive peer relationships
- Teach explicit social skills that help students build and maintain positive relationships
- Create opportunities for students to share their interests, cultures, and identities in the classroom
- Actively monitor and address social dynamics that may lead to exclusion
- Design assignments that require positive interdependence among students
- Provide structured opportunities for students to practice inclusive behaviors
- Create space for student voice and leadership within the classroom community
- Develop protocols for helping new students integrate into established classroom communities

For guidance counsellors

- Co-develop systematic approaches with former students and other services to identify socially isolated or excluded students
- Create social skills groups for students who struggle with peer relationships
- Implement school-wide programs that promote inclusive social norms
- Train peer mediators and ambassadors to support positive social environments
- Provide targeted support for students from minority or marginalized groups
- Coordinate with teachers to implement classroom-level inclusion strategies
- Create transition activities that help students build social connections in new environments
- Develop family education about supporting healthy peer relationships
- Implement restorative practices that maintain community when conflicts arise
- Create resources for students to develop self-advocacy and social navigation skills

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

For school administrators and leadership

- Conduct systematic review of existing curriculum, library resources, and educational materials to assess their representation of diverse perspectives and their alignment with principles of inclusivity
- Implement hiring practices aimed at increasing staff diversity
- Create professional development focused on cultural responsiveness and anti-bias education
- Develop partnerships with cultural organizations and community leaders
- Establish regular cultural celebrations, decided and designed collaboratively with the community and events that authentically honor diverse traditions
- Create visual environments that reflect the cultures and identities of the student population
- Implement policies that explicitly protect expressions of cultural identity
- Develop mechanisms for student and family input on cultural inclusivity
- Create mentoring programs connecting students with role models from similar backgrounds
- Establish regular review processes for school policies and practices through an equity lens

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



For teachers

- Audit personal teaching materials and classroom libraries for cultural representation
- Incorporate diverse perspectives, authors, and examples across all subject areas
- Create lesson plans that highlight contributions from various cultural traditions
- Use teaching examples and references that reflect students' diverse backgrounds
- Invite guest speakers who reflect the diversity of the student population
- Create assignments that allow students to explore, share and celebrate their cultural identities
- Address stereotypes and biases in educational materials when they are encountered
- Provide opportunities for students to see themselves in aspirational roles
- Learn about the cultural backgrounds and traditions of your students
- Create classroom displays that reflect diverse cultural traditions and contributions

For guidance counsellors

- For guidance counsellors
- Develop resources highlighting diverse role models in various career fields
- Create exploration activities that challenge stereotypes about "appropriate" career paths
- Create opportunities for students to engage with and learn from professionals representing diverse and underrepresented communities
- Develop resources for students struggling with cultural identity and belonging
- Provide counselling approaches that are culturally responsive and affirming
- Organize college and career fairs that include diverse institutions and professionals
- Create materials that show pathways to success featuring people from a wide range of socio-cultural and ethnic backgrounds
- Facilitate groups for students who may benefit from identity-affirming spaces
- Provide consultation to staff on addressing cultural identity development issues
- Advocate for policies and practices that protect students' expressions of cultural identity



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

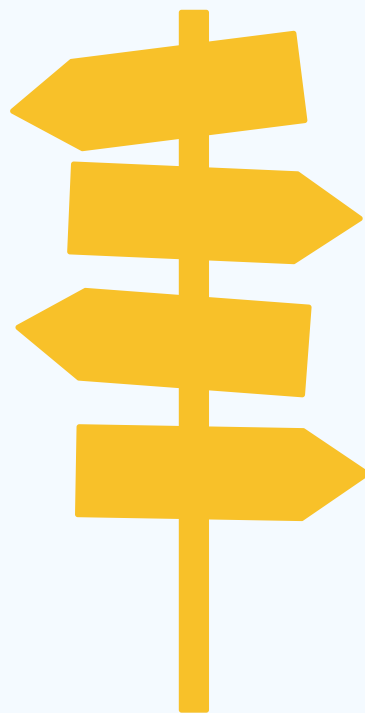
Develop, fund, and promote multiple pathways to success that are equally valued and visible.

For school administrators and leadership

- Ensure all staff are knowledgeable about the full range of educational pathways available to students
- Create information systems that present all post-secondary options with equal prominence
- Implement early identification systems for students who might benefit from alternative approaches
- Develop partnerships with local businesses, trade unions, and technical training providers
- Create opportunities for students to explore diverse career options through visits and experiences
- Implement celebration and recognition events that highlight achievement across all pathways
- Ensure school activities and displays represent diverse career and educational options
- Develop data systems that track success across various post-school destinations
- Create alumni networks that showcase diverse educational and career journeys
- Implement work-based learning opportunities within varied sectors and industries

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



For teachers

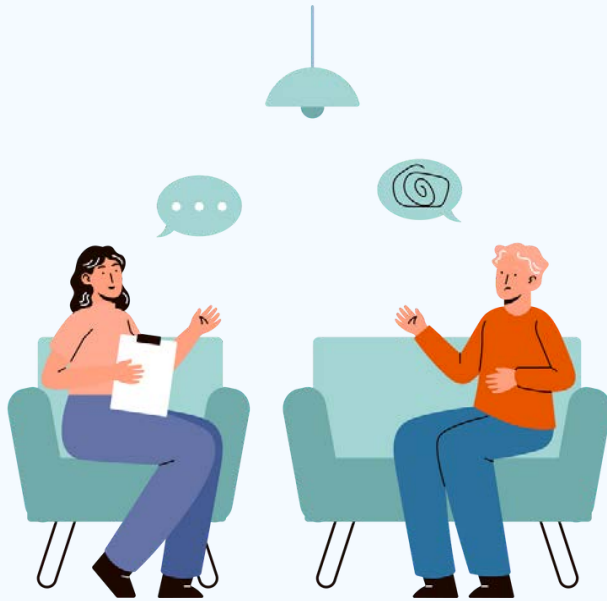
- Actively challenge the narrative that university is the only valid measure of success
- Incorporate examples and role models from diverse career paths in regular teaching
- Develop assignments that allow exploration of multiple career and educational options
- Create learning experiences that connect academic content to real-world applications
- Highlight the skills and competencies valued across different sectors and industries
- Use inclusive language that doesn't privilege one pathway over others
- Provide opportunities for experiential learning that connects to various career sectors
- Create authentic assessment approaches that recognize diverse strengths and aptitudes
- Develop connections between curriculum content and various career contexts
- Ensure that classroom resources represent diverse educational and career pathways.

For guidance counsellors

- Develop comprehensive knowledge about the full range of post-secondary options
- Create career exploration activities that expose students to diverse pathways
- Implement assessment approaches that help students identify strengths and preferences
- Provide balanced information about the benefits and challenges of different pathways
- Develop resources showcasing successful individuals from various educational routes
- Create opportunities for students to meet professionals who followed diverse paths
- Implement career and educational planning that begins early and continues throughout schooling
- Provide targeted support for students transitioning to alternative educational settings
- Create family education programs about diverse post-secondary options
- Develop specialized knowledge about pathways particularly relevant for vulnerable students

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



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

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.

For school administrators and leadership

- Integrate mental health support into core school improvement planning
- Create staffing structures that prioritize adequate mental health personnel
- Implement school-wide approaches to fostering positive mental health and well-being
- Develop clear referral systems for students needing different levels of support
- Establish staff well-being programs and supportive supervision structures
- Create physical spaces designed specifically for mental health support and emotional regulation
- Implement trauma-informed approaches throughout all school policies and practices
- Develop data systems to identify patterns in student mental health needs
- Establish crisis response protocols that balance safety with supportive, non-punitive approaches
- Create partnerships with external mental health providers to expand available services

For teachers

- Develop classroom practices that support emotional regulation and well-being
- Implement regular check-ins to monitor student emotional health
- Create predictable routines and environments that help students feel safe and secure
- Recognize signs of emotional distress and follow appropriate referral procedures
- Develop trauma-sensitive approaches to classroom management and instruction
- Implement teaching strategies that build emotional literacy and self-regulation
- Create opportunities for students to express and process emotions appropriately
- Participate in professional development on mental health literacy and support
- Develop sustainable self-care practices to maintain personal well-being
- Build supportive collegial relationships to prevent isolation and burnout

For guidance counsellors

- Develop tiered systems of mental health support with clear protocols for each level
- Create comprehensive assessment approaches for identifying student mental health needs
- Implement evidence-based interventions for common mental health challenges
- Develop expertise in trauma-informed counseling approaches
- Create efficient case management systems that ensure follow-through and coordination
- Establish regular consultation with teachers about supporting student mental health in classrooms
- Develop family education and support programs focused on mental health and well-being
- Create self-help resources for students to develop coping skills and emotional resilience
- Implement group interventions that address common challenges and build peer support
- Develop professional networks and supervision structures to support counsellor well-being

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