

TACKLING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN EUROPE: DIFFERENT POLICIES

Early school leaving is a severe problem for any country to face. It is the result of a gradual disengagement process of students from school due to various interrelated factors that include lack of motivation, poor educational performance and delinquent behavior – often in connection with a difficult socio-economic background and certain school practices.

A direct consequence of early school leaving is a higher rate of youth unemployment, since only around one in ten available jobs are open to individuals who have not completed secondary education. Early school leavers (ESLs) are also more likely to be unemployed later in life and to have a lower income than their peers who have completed secondary or higher education.

In Europe, one in seven students is an early school leaver. The gravity of the situation has given rise to many attempts to combat this issue. In June 2011, the Council of the European Union issued a recommendation with regard to policies for reducing the number of early school leavers in its member states. After the European member states failed to reach the target agreed in 2003, i.e. to reduce the ratio of ESLs in the EU to below ten percent by 2010 (the actual figure for 2010 was 14 percent), it has now been made a priority under the Europe 2020 strategy and it is a headline target in terms of socio-economic development to reach this level by 2020. As of 2011, the ESL rate stood at 13.5 percent. Early school leavers are defined as all those who leave education or training with only lower secondary education or less, and are no longer in education or training.

Clearly, this issue has been made a priority partly due to the direct impact that a reduction in the number of ESLs would have on youth unemployment (for which there is a separate target in the Europe 2020 strategy). However, a progress report released by the European Commission in June 2012¹ states that even although there has been improvement, only 11 countries have achieved the ten percent target so far and the progress of many countries is so slow that it is jeopardising the prospect of reaching

the EU-wide target and all country-specific targets by 2020. Denmark, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Malta and Spain have been specifically called upon to address the problem of early school leaving.

Table 1 lists several policies that are implemented in European countries to tackle the problem of ESLs. There is a lot of literature on the effectiveness of various measures, which finds overall that the most successful measures are characterised by a multilevel approach to the issue (combining school, outside school and systemic factors). An example is the FAST program, which exists in a similar fashion in several European countries and takes account of the importance of a student's family background. Further such programs include the School Completion Program in Ireland and the Dropout Covenants in the Netherlands.

ESL Policies can be divided into those that are preventive (and thus address endangered students as early as possible) and those that are directed towards young people who have already left school without obtaining any qualifications and need to be reintegrated into the schooling system.

A hurdle many countries have to overcome before being able to design adequate policies is a lack of reliable data. To address this problem, many countries are aiming to construct detailed data bases that enable them to pin down exactly which students decide to drop out and, in some cases, include their reasons for doing so. Examples are the Dropout Explorer in the Netherlands, the Individual Pupil Number in the UK and the Life Course Survey in Hungary.

Finally, the importance of vocational education and training as measures of reintegration has also been recognised. Programs like Production Schools in Denmark, the KUTSE program in Estonia or Bildungsketten in Germany make use of this approach quite successfully.

A. K.

References

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¹European Commission (2012b).

Table 1
Policies implemented in European countries to tackle Early School Leaving

Country	Preventive measure	Description
Austria	Families & Schools Together	Family strengthening and parent involvement program to help children succeed in school. Parent identification and recruitment through home visits. Multifamily group sessions and monitoring by FAST Center staff.
Denmark	Reducing class size, student/pupil ratio	Reducing the student/pupil ratio within a year 8 classroom
	Youth Guidance Centres	Provide guidance for young people under 24 in their transition to the labor market .
	Production Schools	Provide young people under 25 who have not completed a qualifying education with a different learning experience through practical work in a binding real working community.
Estonia	KUTSE Program	Get students who had dropped out of vocational education to complete their studies by creating additional study places, launching a campaign to make young people interested in VET, giving study grants etc.
France	Zones d'Education Prioritaire	Resource channeling to schools in prioritized areas based on number of students from disadvantaged background
	Micro Lycées	Permanent structures attached to secondary schools that offer possibilities for early school leavers to finish upper secondary education.
Finland	Early Tracking	Placing students in well-defined separate segments in the education process, typically specializing in general and vocational education before upper secondary.
Germany	Participation in sports	Participation in sports activities.
	Families & Schools Together	s.a.
	Early tracking	s.a.
	Bildungsketten	Improve the transition between school and vocational education and training through individual guidance and help.
Hungary	Life Course Survey	Conducted annually since 2006, it tracks school careers of 10.000 students. Survey collects information on socio-economic status, ethnicity, family background and reasons for dropout. Students with low competence re-sults and Roma students are overrepresented in the sample.
	Tanoda Centres	Extra support for disadvantaged children (mainly but not exclusively Roma) and young people to complete schooling.
Ireland	School Completion Program	The program works in cooperation with school, parents and local communities, targeting each young person individually and supporting as early as possible.
	YouthReach	Promotes personal and social development and increases self-esteem, independence and active citizenship of 15-20-year olds who have left the mainstream school system with poor or no qualifications.
Italy	Early Tracking	s.a.
Luxemburg	Action Locale Pour Les Jeunes	Contacts young people who have dropped out of school and helps them develop educational perspectives.

Table continued

Country	Preventive measure	Description
Netherlands	Families & Schools Together	s.a.
	Early Tracking	s.a.
	Dropout Covenants	Financial incentives to regions to reduce number of dropouts: Ministry of Education offered contact municipalities 2000 € for each early school leaver less in 2006/2007 than in 2005/2006.
	Dropout Explorer (also: Early School Leaver Monitor)	Based on individual pupil numbers that allow tracking the educational development of all pupils, it offers reliable data on drop-out rates at various levels. At the aggregate level, individual data are linked to socio-economic data per region, city and district.
Norway	Certificate of Practice	2 year practice-based program upper secondary: enables students to leave upper secondary education early but with possibility of re-entry.
Russia	Families & Schools Together	s.a.
Spain	PROA program	Program provides extra resources to education establishments to address inequalities in education and to prevent social exclusion.
Sweden	Early tracking	s.a.
	Comprehensive VET	Comprehensive VET reform in 1990's; reduction of differences between vocational and academic tracks; prolonging and substantially increasing the academic content of VET track.
Switzerland	Early tracking	s.a.
UK	Families & Schools Together	s.a.
	Early tracking	s.a.
	Individual Pupil Number	Similar to dropout explorer in the Netherlands.
	EMA – Educational Maintenance Allowance	Means tested conditional cash transfer paid to 16-18 year olds for staying in full-time education.

Sources: Lyche (2010), European Commission (2012a).