



**COUNCIL OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION**

Brussels, 27 April 2011

9043/11

**EDUC 79
SOC 343**

NOTE

from: General Secretariat of the Council
to: Permanent Representatives Committee (Part 1) / Council
No prev. doc.: 8750/11 EDUC 71 SOC 324

Subject: Prevention policies to combat early school leaving aimed at children with socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, including Roma
- *Policy debate*
(Public debate pursuant to Article 8(2) CRP [proposed by the Presidency])

Following consultation of the Education Committee, the Presidency has drawn up the attached discussion paper to serve as the basis for the policy debate on the above subject during the EYCS Council meeting on 19-20 May 2011.

**Presidency discussion paper in preparation for the
Council meeting (Education, Youth, Culture and Sport) on 19-20 May 2011**

***Prevention policies to combat early school leaving
aimed at children with socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, including Roma***

Introduction

The *Europe 2020* strategy¹ puts forward three mutually reinforcing priorities: smart growth, sustainable growth and inclusive growth based on a higher level of employment, social and territorial cohesion. The strategy recognises that education policies have a role to play in establishing the foundations for structural reforms, complementing growth-enhancing measures and reinforcing social cohesion. The *Europe 2020* headline targets in the field of education and training reaffirm that the future must be based on the development of human resources.

The "ET 2020" strategic framework² identifies as its third strategic objective the promotion of equity, social cohesion and active citizenship. It aims at enabling all citizens, irrespective of their personal, social or economic circumstances, to acquire, update and develop the skills and the key competences needed for lifelong learning, their employability and personal fulfilment. Education and training systems should aim to ensure that all learners — including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with special needs and migrants — complete their education.

¹ *EUROPE 2020 A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth* [COM(2010(2020 final]

² Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ("ET 2020") - *OJ C 119, 28.5.2009, pp. 2–10.*

The economic and social integration of Roma is crucial for the present and the future of our societies' competitiveness and our citizens' well-being. The majority of Roma people living in the EU suffer from social exclusion, discrimination, segregation and deep poverty. The educational attainment of Roma children often remains below the average.

On 9 March 2011 the European Parliament adopted a *Resolution on the EU strategy on Roma inclusion*³, in which it called on the Commission to propose, and on the Council to adopt, an EU strategy on Roma inclusion as an EU-wide, indicative, inclusive and multilevel action plan which will be prepared and implemented at all political and administrative levels.

The Commission communication on *an EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020*⁴ issued on 5 April 2011 calls for a targeted approach for a more effective response to Roma exclusion by setting EU-wide goals for integrating Roma based on four pillars: education, employment, health and housing, whilst acknowledging the Member States' primary responsibility in this regard. The communication was presented to the ministers responsible for justice and home affairs on 11-12 April 2011, and will be presented to education ministers on 20 May 2011.

[The EPSCO Council discussed and adopted Council conclusions on the basis of the Commission's communication on 19 May 2011. The Council conclusions on an EU framework for National Roma Integration Strategies underline the crucial role of access to quality education, with particular reference to early childhood education and care, the elimination of segregation at school, the completion of primary and secondary education, participation in higher education, the prevention of early school leaving and ensuring successful transitions from school to employment.]

The results of the ministerial debates, together with the adopted Council conclusions, will feed into a Presidency report to be submitted to the General Affairs Council on 23 May 2011, followed by the European Council which will endorse the conclusions at its meeting on 24 June 2011.

³ European Parliament Resolution of 9 March 2011 on the EU strategy on Roma inclusion [2010/2276(INI)].

⁴ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - *An EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020* [COM(2011) 173 final].

Prevention policies to combat early school leaving

As part of the *Europe 2020* strategy, European headline targets have been set. A benchmark on combating early school leaving⁵ has been incorporated into the *Europe 2020* strategy as a headline target. High rates of early school leaving are a bottleneck for smart and inclusive growth. There is a wide consensus that early school leaving constitutes a problem for both individuals and society at large. Early school leavers tend to participate less in democratic processes and are less active citizens. Early school leaving creates and perpetuates socio-economic inequality, has a negative effect on levels of qualification, youth employment and mobility, and increases the risk of poverty and social exclusion. Early school leaving most frequently occurs among socio-economically disadvantaged groups⁶. Children of parents who themselves have low levels of education, or who are from disadvantaged backgrounds - including migrant or Roma backgrounds - are more likely to leave education and training before completing upper secondary education⁷.

Roma suffer from social exclusion because many of them live in extreme poverty and in territories with limited access to quality services, including in the field of education (e.g. lack of quality schools and limited access to early childhood education). The average number of Roma children learning in special schools or classes is much higher than that of non-Roma children, and Roma children are more often exempted partly or fully from attending school⁸.

⁵ The share of early school leavers has to be reduced to less than 10% on average across the EU. This emphasises the role of education and training in promoting equity and ensuring that every citizen acquires the basic skills needed to succeed in life and increasing the share of citizens having higher than secondary level qualifications.

⁶ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - *Tackling early school leaving: A key contribution to the Europe 2020 Agenda* [COM(2011) 18 final].

⁷ OECD: *No More Failures: Ten Steps to Equity in Education*, OECD, Paris 2007. ISBN: 9789264032606

⁸ Open Society Institute, EU Monitoring and Advocacy programme: *Equal Access to Quality Monitoring Reports on Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Serbia, 2007*.

http://www.soros.org/initiatives/roma/articles_publications/publications/equal_20070329

The disadvantages facing Roma children in school tend to be higher than those facing non-Roma children with similar social and family backgrounds. The fact that their participation in secondary school is much lower than that of their non-Roma peers, and that drop-out rates before completing school education are higher, also limits their access to higher education.

Pupils with disadvantaged backgrounds often do not receive sufficient support from their families and peers, and often have limited access to high quality education or additional educational support. Evidence suggests that school failure and early school leaving can be successfully tackled but that this requires coordinated efforts and comprehensive approaches. Since early school leaving is a process and the result of a combination of factors leading to dropping out, especially in the case of the disadvantaged, effective policies are needed which propose strong preventive measures and seek to avoid the conditions leading to early school leaving⁹.

Pupils with disadvantaged backgrounds generally participate less in early childhood education and care (ECEC), despite evidence to suggest that they would benefit the most from this. Participation in high-quality ECEC is positively associated with the long-term cognitive, social, emotional development of children, with readiness for school and with enhanced school performance. ECEC is recognised as a crucial stage of education with significant long-term benefits. ECEC is also helpful in detecting early learning difficulties and the need for early intervention¹⁰.

Providing strong and solid foundations for future learning in terms of basic skills and key competences, and ensuring a certain flexibility in curricula, can make a difference. Policies aimed at providing high-quality, inclusive, non-segregated education, offering targeted support to improve school environments, as well as teaching and learning achievements, and removing potential obstacles to successful school careers by increasing the flexibility of educational pathways and transitions between them, can all facilitate integration and support pupils at risk of dropping out of school¹¹.

⁹ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - Tackling early school leaving: A key contribution to the Europe 2020 Agenda [COM(2011) 18 final].

¹⁰ Communication from the Commission - Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow [COM(2011) 66 final].

¹¹ Council conclusions on increasing the level of basic skills in the context of European cooperation on schools for the 21st century - *OJ C 323, 30.11.2010, pp. 11–14.*

The provision of basic skills, key competences and a broader curriculum based on alternative programmes can improve students' progress. However, teachers need to be prepared to cope with new demands and, through continuous professional development, need to take account of issues such as teaching in more heterogeneous, multicultural classes, adopting more diverse teaching styles and especially developing more personalised teaching methods¹².

Early school leaving can decrease if there are links between academic and vocational courses. Some pupils may find themselves following classes that are not suitable for them, either because they failed to achieve the level required for their preferred option, they received insufficient information or because they were not ready to make an occupational choice at the critical moment. Providing guidance throughout the transitions plays an essential role. Good quality guidance and counselling services help students to make educational and career choices¹³. High-quality vocational tracks are also very important, as is the removal of obstacles to entering upper secondary education, whether academic or vocational. The transition between schools and between different education levels is particularly difficult for pupils at risk of dropping out. Mismatches between education and training curricula and labour market needs increase the risk of educational failure as pupils lack prospects within their educational pathways¹⁴.

There are many examples of special schemes under which direct additional resources have been targeted on schools or school areas serving disadvantaged pupils, or under which extra resources are used to assist those most in need. At the same time, it is important to improve inclusive education and to promote inclusive settings, in order to avoid labelling certain schools as "disadvantaged", as this may be discouraging to children, teachers and parents. Experienced teachers are an important resource for schools with high numbers of disadvantaged pupils.

¹² Council conclusions of 26 November 2009 on the professional development of teachers and school leaders - *OJ C 302, 12.12.2009, pp. 6–9.*

¹³ A.G Watts (National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling, Cambridge, UK) : *The relationship of career guidance to VET.* OECD Paris 2009.

¹⁴ OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training - *Learning for Jobs*, OECD, Paris 2009. ISBN: 9789264087460 Publication

There should be incentives for them to work in these schools. Compensating for regional economic inequities, earmarking grants to improve access to educational services, or providing special additional services such as language courses could make a difference¹⁵.

Greater parental involvement encourages more positive attitudes towards school, improves learning habits, reduces absenteeism and dropping out, and enhances achievement. Many disadvantaged parents are not able to help their children with their learning activities. The engagement of families is needed to develop partnerships and cooperation between school and the home. Many children from deprived backgrounds or with low-income parents do not make informed decisions and have low expectations about schools. They often opt for tracks with lower status and frequently do not follow a track that their educational results would have permitted. On the other hand, providing greater school choice may result in an increasing imbalance in school intake. Better-off parents have the resources to exploit choice, which tends to accelerate the progress of those who already gained the best start in life from their parents¹⁵.

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In the light of the above, Ministers are invited to consider the following three questions for discussion:

- 1. What approaches and measures do you think can help to prevent early school leaving among children with socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, including Roma, and to improve their educational prospects?*
- 2. What mechanisms can best ensure that measures aimed at groups most at risk of early school leaving achieve their goals?*
- 3. How can European cooperation support Member States in implementing effective policies aimed at reducing early school leaving?*

¹⁵ *No More Failures: Ten Steps to Equity in Education*, OECD, Paris 2007. ISBN: 9789264032606