Early school leavers and the role of parents

What is Early School Leaving?

Early school leaving (ESL) can be understood as young people leaving school before the legal school leaving age and/or leaving school with limited or no formal qualifications. For a vast majority of young people ESL is a result of psychological, educational and social problems.

According to the latest figures, early school leaving stands at 14.4% in the EU 27 (2009) of students leaving school prematurely or with low to no qualifications. Consequently, reducing ESL to less than 10% by 2020 is a headline target for achieving a number of main objectives in the Europe 2020 strategy.

In 2009, 52% of ESL were unemployed or outside the labour market. Moreover, early school leavers from migrant backgrounds are more marginalised, at EU level, and the average ESL rate is almost doubled. This trend is even higher among disadvantaged ethnic minorities such as the Roma.

Why tackling Early school leaving is key?

ESL has numerous aftermaths on the individual’s economic and social life. Studies show that most ESL comes from a lower socio-economic status, vulnerable groups or disadvantaged minorities and they often have to contribute to the income of the family or care for other family members. The level of ESL is often higher in segregated countryside areas in some European countries. Early school leaving also frequently relates to the quality of schools and education systems.

Before stressing the role of parents, it is important to highlight other policies COFACE supports which aim the prevention of ESL. These policies should consider among many the following ones: raising the education limit to 18 in the EU, ensuring that timetables are appropriate, recognising the equal importance of formal education, non-formal and informal education, providing remedial help for students and stationing preventive security agents on main roads leading to the schools.

Family background and parents’ role

Up to now many studies have been done on the subject of parents and their role in relation to their children’s success at school. Therefore COFACE maintains that the family context plays a crucial role in the future of academic success of children.
COFACE’s recommendations regarding parents’ role

The issue of early school leaving and school drop outs is the result of a process during which the child or the adolescent loses his/her motivation, develops a phobia, a depression, enters into strong opposition and goes through a major discrepancy between his/her school and family life. It is thus necessary to rethink pedagogy with inclusion as the final objective. The following recommendations aim at the need to develop EU and Member State prevention policies in this field:

1. Promote healthy parental behaviour and family life: a positive parenting experience. Support services helping and giving advice on how to raise and educate a child, how to deal with early school leaving. Beyond the advice, good practices such as the “parents voice group”, for instance, during which parents share experiences and are considered as capable to find solutions to their own parental problems collectively should be promoted.

2. Promote social assistance, life long learning opportunities and labour market reintegration for vulnerable, low educated and/or unemployed parents. COFACE supports the effective implementation of social policies aiming at fighting against social exclusion through life long learning education, social support and reintegration in the labour market.

3. Reconcile the professional and private life of working parents. The prerequisite for good parenting including following a child’s academic career is the actual, physical presence and involvement of parents in children’s lives. Reconciliation of professional and family life is of utmost importance.

4. Enhance and facilitate the dialogue between parents, schools and other services. National authorities should define the standard requirements for a communication and interaction between school authorities and parents/carers of students. Schools must provide for ways in which both parents and children take part in the decision-making process of the school, via parent or student councils for instance.

5. Special attention needs to be dedicated to more vulnerable families such as families with children with disabilities or immigrant families. Pupils with disabilities and their parents should be fully involved in the personal learning programme throughout elaboration, implementation and evaluation. Parents should be recognised as skilled partners with whom teaching staff can share knowledge to ensure improved educational assistance. To promote this involvement, parents should be made welcome, have their expectations studied, and be supported. Moreover, organisations of families of persons with disabilities play a key role where awareness raising, information and support in the field of inclusive education are concerned: they should be involved in framing new laws, policies and practices, and they should be financially supported.

6. Actively engage with Family Organisations in policies aiming at preventing early school leaving. Parents and the family context play an essential role in early school leaving and family organisations are key stakeholders in this respect.

7. EU Policy dimensions. Projects focusing on information to parents, adult education, parenting and home-school dialogue should be developed by the EU, in close cooperation with family organisations, contributing to providing the essential family perspective on these matters. Furthermore, the Open Method of Coordination in education and training needs to be reinforced.

What is COFACE? The Confederation of Family Organisations in the European Union (COFACE) is a pluralistic organisation, at the heart of civil society, which aims to promote family policy, solidarity between generations and the interests of children within the legislation, programmes and initiatives of the European Union (“Family mainstreaming”).

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COFACE is supported by the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity - PROGRESS (2007-2013): http://ec.europa.eu/progress. This document is produced with the support of the European Commission but does not necessarily express its views.