Erasmus+ Call 2021Strategic Partnership for school education (KA220)
EARS - Educational Agreement as a Response to School-dropout
Grant Agreement No.: 2021-1-IT02-KA220-SCH-000032619

GREEN PAPER

on

Preventing School Leaving in Europe –

Lessons Learned from EARS Project

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1.   INTRODUCTION

1.1.   Overview of the importance of education for individual and collective growth.

Education is a fundamental pillar of personal and societal development. On an individual level, it serves as the foundation for acquiring knowledge, skills, and critical thinking abilities. These competencies not only shape one's career but also contribute to personal fulfilment and the ability to navigate an increasingly complex world. Education empowers individuals to pursue their passions, build a sustainable livelihood, and engage meaningfully in their communities. It fosters self-confidence, independence, and adaptability, equipping people to confront challenges with creativity and resilience.

On a collective level, education plays a crucial role in fostering social cohesion, economic development, and civic responsibility. A well-educated population is better equipped to tackle global issues like poverty, inequality, and environmental sustainability. Education promotes shared values and understanding, creating a more informed and empathetic society. It strengthens democratic processes by encouraging active participation and helping individuals make informed decisions that benefit both their personal lives and the broader community.

In a world that is constantly evolving, **education is the key to ensuring both individual success and the collective progress of society**. It creates a virtuous cycle—empowering individuals to contribute to the greater good, while a prosperous society, in turn, provides the resources and opportunities for personal growth.

Early school leaving is linked to unemployment, social exclusion, poverty and poor health. There are many reasons why some young people give up education and training prematurely: personal or family problems, learning difficulties, or a fragile socio-economic situation. The way the education system is set up, school climate and teacher-pupil relations are also important factors.

Since there are often complex, interconnected reasons for children not completing secondary schooling, policies to reduce early school leaving must address a range of issues and combine education and social policy, youth work and health-related aspects. Some of these challenges are outlined in an infographic provided by the Commission.

Education holds a central role in shaping both individual and collective growth within the European Union (EU). On a personal level, education equips individuals with the knowledge, skills, and competencies required to thrive in a rapidly evolving global economy. **It opens doors to a wide range of career opportunities, enhances employability, and fosters personal development.** The EU places a strong emphasis on lifelong learning, ensuring that individuals, regardless of their age or background, have access to education throughout their lives. This commitment empowers citizens to adapt to technological advancements, pursue higher qualifications, and improve their quality of life, contributing to both economic mobility and social inclusion.

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At a collective level, **education is the backbone of a prosperous and cohesive European society**. In the EU, education is seen as a tool for promoting solidarity and shared values across its diverse member states. By investing in quality education, the EU seeks to reduce inequalities, foster social inclusion, and promote cultural understanding. Education enables EU citizens to participate fully in democratic processes and to engage in cross-border collaboration, both within the EU and with global partners. It is also essential for building an innovative and competitive workforce that can address the challenges of the future, such as climate change, technological disruption, and demographic shifts.

Furthermore, **education strengthens the EU's economic growth and international standing**. A highly educated population drives productivity and innovation, which are crucial for maintaining the EU's position as one of the world's largest economic blocs. By promoting research, knowledge sharing, and collaboration across member states, education fosters an interconnected EU that can tackle regional and global challenges together.

Ultimately, education in the EU is not just a tool for individual advancement; it is a collective investment in the future of a united, inclusive, and prosperous Europe. Through education, **the EU cultivates a knowledge-driven society** that can meet the demands of a changing world, ensuring the well-being and progress of its citizens for generations to come.

1.2. Main objectives of the Green Paper: Advocacy at European Level

This Green Paper serves as a strategic document aimed at fostering comprehensive institutional engagement and policy dialogue on the issue of early school leaving within the European Union. It is designed to reach key stakeholders, ensuring that decision-makers and influential actors across the EU institutional landscape actively contribute to shaping effective responses to this challenge.

The primary audience includes relevant **Directorates-General of the European Commission, European Parliament Committees, and EU agencies**, which play a crucial role in policymaking, research, and program implementation related to education, social inclusion, and youth empowerment. Engaging these institutions ensures that early school leaving is addressed within a coordinated, cross-sectoral framework that aligns with broader EU objectives, such as the European Education Area and the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Beyond institutional stakeholders, the Green Paper also targets **educational networks, encompassing national education ministries, school authorities, research institutions, civil society organizations, and teacher associations**. By involving these networks, the document seeks to foster grassroots engagement and ensure that policy recommendations are informed by on-the-ground realities, best practices, and innovative solutions from diverse educational settings.

Furthermore, the focus on influential actors in Brussels highlights the importance of securing advocacy and thought leadership from **organizations that shape EU discourse, such as think tanks, NGOs, and academic institutions**. Their involvement can amplify the impact of policy proposals, drive evidence-

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based decision-making, and contribute to a broader consensus on tackling early school leaving through inclusive and effective education policies.

By targeting this wide spectrum of stakeholders, **the Green Paper aims to bridge the gap between high-level policymaking and local implementation, ensuring that strategies to combat early school leaving are both institutionally robust and practically viable.** Through this approach, it aspires to enhance EU-wide collaboration, foster knowledge exchange, and ultimately reduce early school leaving rates in a sustainable and measurable manner.

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2.   EXISTING EUROPEAN POLICIES ON EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

2.1.   Relevance of the topic within European policies: Sustainability Goals and Europe 2020 Strategy

The fight against school dropout is crucial for the EU, both to ensure the success of **SDG 4** and to achieve the overall success of the **Europe 2020 Strategy**. Policies and initiatives addressing this issue are vital to reducing inequalities, improving educational and professional opportunities, and promoting sustainable and inclusive economic growth across Europe.

§ Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4)

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, promoting learning opportunities for all. School dropout is one of the main obstacles to achieving this goal, as many young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, fail to complete their educational journey.

Reducing school dropout is essential to ensure that all young people acquire the skills needed to fully participate in society and the economy. The EU has identified school dropout as one of the main priorities for improving educational systems and ensuring that no young person is left behind. Efforts to reduce school dropout directly contribute to the SDG 4 goals, including:

- ✓ **4.1**: Ensure that all young people complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education.
- ✓ **4.5**: Eliminate gender disparities and ensure equal access to education for all.
- ✓ **4.6**: Ensure that all young people acquire the necessary skills, both educationally and professionally.

§ Europe 2020 Strategy

The **Europe 2020 Strategy** is the EU's agenda for smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth, and it includes specific goals to reduce early school leaving and increase educational attainment.

- ✓ **Target 1: Reducing Early School Leaving**: The Europe 2020 Strategy set a key target of reducing the school dropout rate to below 10% by 2020. This goal is meant to ensure that fewer young people leave school prematurely, which is considered essential for the competitiveness and social integration of the EU.
- ✓ **Target 2: Increasing Tertiary Education Completion**: Another key objective of Europe 2020 is to increase the proportion of young adults with tertiary education to at least 40% by 2020, promoting lifelong learning and reducing educational inequalities.

School dropout, therefore, not only compromises the right to quality education but also limits the ability of member states to achieve the growth and competitiveness objectives outlined in the Europe 2020 Strategy.

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2.2.   Existing European Policies to combat Early School Leaving

Within the context described above, the following section focuses on specific European policies and initiatives against early school leaving.

The EU has a comprehensive approach to combating early school leaving, with a variety of policies and initiatives targeting the issue at both the European and national levels. These policies focus on improving access to education, providing personalized support, reducing socio-economic inequalities, and ensuring that all young people have the opportunity to succeed. While progress has been made in reducing school dropout rates, continued efforts are required to address the diverse factors contributing to early school leaving and to ensure that every student receives the education and support they need to thrive. Below are key European policies and initiatives designed to combat school dropout.

§ The Current State of the Art

EU member states have made a commitment to reducing the proportion of early school leavers to under 10% by 2020[1]. The annual **Education and Training Monitor**[2] offers valuable data and analysis on trends related to early school leaving across the EU and its member countries.

To support this goal, EU education ministers endorsed a **Council Recommendation**[3] outlining policies to address early school leaving. This recommendation provides a framework for coherent, comprehensive, and evidence-based actions, encouraging collaboration among member states to share best practices and knowledge on effective solutions.

A working group focused on early school leaving has examined successful initiatives across Europe, facilitating the exchange of experiences and identifying key strategies to tackle this issue. Their **final report**[4] **presents 12 key recommendations for policymakers**, alongside practical tools such as a checklist for comprehensive policies and an annex featuring examples of best practices from various EU countries.

In addition, the Commission hosted a conference discussing policies to reduce early school leaving, followed by a review of policy developments in eight EU countries a year later. The Working Group on Schools Policy also developed policy messages highlighting essential conditions for implementing a whole-school approach and created an online European Toolkit for Schools.

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[1] Please see Annex 1: European Commission, Education and training in the EU: where do we stand?, 2020.

[2] The Education and Training Monitor is an annual report with the latest facts and figures about EU education systems. The monitor is a gateway into recent developments and trends on learning across the EU, from early childhood education and care to adult participation in education and training. https://education.ec.europa.eu/about-eea/education-and-training-monitor

[3] Council Recommendation of 28 June 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving Text (with EEA relevance) (GU C 191/01 of 01.07.2011).

[4] European Union – DG Education and Culture, *Schools policy: A whole school approach to tackling early school leaving. Policy messages*, Publications Office, 2015.

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The Council has endorsed **Conclusions**[5] aimed at both reducing early school leaving and enhancing school success. Moreover, the European Commission published an **Assessment**[6] evaluating the effectiveness of policies and practices adopted since 2011 across 37 European countries to combat early school leaving.

The study reveals that EU policy instruments have had a largely positive impact, with the early school leaving rate decreasing from 13.4% in 2011 to 10.2% in 2019. However, significant disparities remain between countries and demographics, with individuals from migrant backgrounds, young men, and those living in rural areas being more likely to leave school early.

Given the complexity of the issue, further action is needed. The study compares a selection of successful national practices and offers recommendations to guide future policy development in this area.

§ The European Education Area (EEA)

The **European Education Area** is a policy initiative that aims to foster a common space for education across the EU, making it easier for people to study, live, and work across borders. A part of this initiative focuses on reducing early school leaving and improving educational outcomes for all EU citizens.

- ✓ **Equal Access to Education**: The EEA emphasizes the importance of ensuring equal access to high-quality education for all students, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to reduce the risk of early school leaving.
- ✓ **Strengthening Education Systems**: The initiative promotes reforms in education systems, with an emphasis on reducing dropout rates by improving educational quality, providing targeted support, and addressing inequalities in education access.

§ The School Success Pathways Initiative

As part of the **Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025**[7], the Commission introduced a new initiative known as Pathways to School Success. This initiative aims to support all students in attaining a foundational level of proficiency in essential skills.

The initiative focuses on three key objectives:

- ✓ Ensuring that all young people acquire a basic level of proficiency in fundamental skills.

- ✓ Reducing the number of students who leave education without obtaining at least an upper secondary qualification.

- ✓ Promoting students' overall well-being within the school environment.

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[5] Council Conclusions on reducing early school leaving and promoting success in school (GU C 417/36 of 15.12.2015).

[6] European Commission: DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Donlevy, V., Day, L., Andriescu, M. and Downes, P., *Assessment of the implementation of the 2011 Council recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving – Final report*, Publications Office, 2019, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/88044

[7] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on achieving the European Education Area by 2025 (GU COM (2020) 625 final of 30.09.2020).

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For addressing these challenges, it includes:

✓ **Systemic approach:** simultaneously address underachievement in basic skills and early leaving from education and training, take action to promote students' and teachers' well-being, prevent bullying and favour a positive learning climate.

✓ **Integrated and comprehensive strategies:** develop or strengthen strategies that include prevention, intervention and compensation measures (but with a stronger emphasis on preventative actions) through all levels of school education.

✓ **Attention for groups at risk:** complement universal action with targeted and individualised provisions for learners requiring additional support in inclusive settings.

✓ **Data collection:** develop or improve data collection and monitoring systems at national, regional and local level.

To gather perspectives and insights on Pathways to School Success, a public consultation was scheduled for spring 2021, allowing stakeholders to contribute their views on the initiative.

§ The European Toolkit for Schools

To further support educational success and prevent early school leaving, the **European Toolkit for Schools**[8] provides a comprehensive collection of resources, best practices, and practical examples for policymakers and educators.

The Toolkit is structured around five thematic areas, each representing essential conditions for a whole-school approach to tackling early school leaving. These areas are expanded upon within the Toolkit, accompanied by practical strategies and measures.

§ The Youth Guarantee

The **Youth Guarantee** is a European Commission initiative aimed at ensuring that all young people under the age of 25 receive a good-quality offer of employment, education, apprenticeship, or traineeship within four months of leaving formal education or becoming unemployed.

✓ **Prevention of Early School Leaving**: The Youth Guarantee focuses on providing support to young people who leave school early, offering them opportunities to continue their education or training in various forms, such as apprenticeships or vocational training. The policy ensures that they are not left behind and have access to pathways that could help them reintegrate into education or the labor market.

✓ **Tailored Support Programs**: Youth Guarantee schemes in individual EU member states often include measures such as individualized counseling, mentoring, and guidance for young people at risk of dropping out, addressing both educational and socio-economic barriers.

§ Erasmus+ Program

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[8] Please see Annex 2: European Commission – School Education Gateway, European Toolkit for Schools.

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Erasmus+ is the EU's program for education, training, youth, and sport, which supports international mobility and cooperation. Although not specifically aimed at school dropout, it plays a role in enhancing education quality and inclusion, which can reduce dropout rates.

✓ **Promoting Mobility and Inclusiveness**: Erasmus+ provides funding for student exchanges, vocational training, and partnerships between schools and educational institutions across Europe. These opportunities can help engage students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, by providing access to a wider range of educational experiences and improving their future prospects.

✓ **Supporting Youth Education and Training**: Erasmus+ funds programs that support at-risk youth by helping them gain practical skills, build confidence, and increase engagement with education through non-formal and informal learning opportunities.

§ The Social Investment Package

The **Social Investment Package** is an EU policy framework aimed at encouraging social investment for the well-being of all EU citizens, particularly those at risk of social exclusion, including young people at risk of early school leaving.

✓ **Integrated Support**: The package emphasizes the need for integrated services, including education, training, employment, and social services, to prevent early school leaving. This ensures that young people receive holistic support that addresses both educational and socio-economic factors contributing to dropout.

✓ **Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion**: The package stresses the importance of reducing poverty and social exclusion, which are closely linked to higher dropout rates. By tackling these root causes, the EU aims to ensure that all young people have the opportunity to complete their education.

§ The European Pillar of Social Rights

The **European Pillar of Social Rights** (EPSR) is a set of principles that aims to ensure fair and well-functioning labor markets and welfare systems across the EU. It includes specific provisions on education and lifelong learning.

✓ **Right to Quality Education**: Principle 1 of the EPSR establishes the right to quality education, including equal access to education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. It emphasizes the importance of reducing educational inequalities, ensuring that every young person has the skills and qualifications necessary for participating in the labor market and society.

✓ **Education and Training for All**: The Pillar also stresses the need to invest in education and training systems that cater to diverse learners, including those at risk of dropping out, by improving teaching quality, enhancing inclusion, and fostering skills development.

§ National and Regional Policies

In addition to EU-wide policies, many individual EU member states have developed specific national and regional policies to combat school dropout. These can include:

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✓ **Early Warning Systems**: Some countries have implemented early warning systems that identify students at risk of dropping out. These systems allow schools to intervene early and offer support tailored to individual needs.

✓ **Alternative Education Programs**: Several EU countries provide alternative education options for students who are not succeeding in traditional educational settings, including vocational education and training (VET) programs and second-chance schools.

✓ **Support Services**: Some regions and countries provide additional support services, such as counseling, mentoring, and outreach programs to engage students and help them stay in school.

2.3. Best practices: Successful examples of programs and initiatives in EU

Several EU countries have implemented successful programs and initiatives aimed at reducing school dropout rates. These initiatives provide valuable insights into how targeted support, innovative approaches, and a multi-stakeholder approach can make a significant difference in keeping students in school. Below are some of the most effective examples:

1. The "Second Chance Schools" in Spain

Spain has implemented a well-established program called "Escuelas de Segunda Oportunidad" (Second Chance Schools) aimed at providing young people who have dropped out of formal education with another chance to complete their studies.

Target Group: Young people aged 16-24 who have dropped out of school early.

Program Features: These schools offer personalized education plans that combine academic studies with vocational training and soft skills development. The focus is on individual needs, offering a flexible curriculum, emotional support, and hands-on training.

Results: Many students have successfully completed their education, moved into stable employment, or continued with further studies. The program is particularly successful in engaging young people from marginalized backgrounds and helping them reintegrate into society.

2. The "School Completion Strategy" in Ireland

Ireland has implemented the "School Completion Programme" (SCP), which focuses on reducing early school leaving and promoting higher attendance and academic success.

Target Group: Students at risk of leaving school early, particularly those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

Program Features: The SCP is a multi-agency initiative involving schools, local communities, and social services. It provides various supports such as:

✓ Mentoring and individual support for students who are at risk.
✓ After-school programs to improve engagement.
✓ Parent involvement programs to enhance the role of the family in supporting education.
✓ Collaborations with community-based organizations that offer extracurricular activities.

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Results: The SCP has significantly reduced dropout rates in targeted schools. Evaluation reports show improved student engagement, increased graduation rates, and better social inclusion outcomes for students.

3. Finland's "Individualized Learning Plans"

Finland is known for its high-quality education system, and its approach to preventing school dropout focuses heavily on individualized learning plans and early intervention.

Target Group: All students, with a particular focus on those who might be at risk of academic failure or dropping out.

Program Features: In Finland, every student receives an individualized learning plan (ILP) that is tailored to their needs and aspirations. Teachers collaborate with other professionals (such as social workers and psychologists) to support students in overcoming barriers to learning.

- ✓ Early Identification: Teachers use various tools to identify students who might need additional support, whether due to academic difficulties, social issues, or personal problems.
- ✓ Flexible Learning Paths: Students who struggle in a traditional school setting are encouraged to participate in vocational education or other non-traditional pathways.

Results: Finland's approach has led to one of the lowest school dropout rates in Europe. By addressing issues early and offering alternative learning pathways, Finland ensures that every student has the opportunity to succeed, regardless of background.

4. The "Mentoring for Success" Program in Denmark

Denmark has implemented the "Mentoring for Success" program as a way to provide at-risk students with the guidance and support they need to stay engaged in their education.

Target Group: Students who are at risk of dropping out due to social, economic, or emotional challenges.

Program Features: The program pairs students with mentors who provide both academic and personal support. These mentors help students with schoolwork, build confidence, and act as role models. Mentoring sessions are individualized, focusing on the specific challenges the student faces.

Results: The program has shown positive results in terms of student retention, with mentored students more likely to stay in school and graduate. The initiative is a great example of how personalized, supportive relationships can positively influence student engagement.

5. The "Vocational Education and Training (VET)" Initiatives in Germany

Germany has a highly successful Vocational Education and Training (VET) system, which helps keep students engaged and prevents them from dropping out of school by providing practical skills and career pathways.

Target Group: Students who are at risk of dropping out due to a lack of engagement in traditional academic education.

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Program Features: VET programs combine in-class learning with apprenticeships, where students gain hands-on experience in their chosen field. This system helps students see the value of education in relation to their future career prospects.

- ✓ Dual Education System: Students spend part of their time in vocational schools and the rest working in businesses, providing them with real-world experience while completing their education.

Results: The VET system in Germany has a very low dropout rate, as students are motivated by the prospect of gaining tangible skills and entering the job market. The system also contributes to Germany's highly skilled labor force and economic stability.

6. "Inclusive Education Initiatives" in the Netherlands

The Netherlands has embraced inclusive education policies aimed at ensuring that all students, including those with special educational needs, stay in school.

Target Group: Students with disabilities, students from migrant backgrounds, and those who are socio-economically disadvantaged.

Program Features: Schools in the Netherlands focus on inclusive education practices, where students with diverse needs are integrated into regular classrooms with tailored support. Teachers receive training in inclusive education methods and adapt their teaching styles to meet the needs of all learners.

- ✓ Collaboration with parents and communities: Strong emphasis is placed on collaboration between schools, parents, and local communities to support students.
- ✓ Use of technology: The Netherlands also invests in assistive technologies to help students with learning disabilities succeed in school.

Results: These inclusive practices have led to a reduction in dropout rates, particularly for students who may have been marginalized in traditional educational settings. The Netherlands is seen as a leader in ensuring that all students, regardless of their backgrounds or needs, can succeed academically.

7. The "French Anti-School Dropout Program" (Plan de lutte contre le décrochage scolaire)

France has developed an anti-dropout program designed to support students at risk of early school leaving.

Target Group: At-risk youth, particularly those who are disengaged or struggling academically.

Program Features: The French government has implemented various strategies to address dropout rates, including:

- ✓ Personalized academic support for struggling students.
- ✓ Engagement of local communities in creating school-related initiatives.
- ✓ Partnerships between schools and businesses to provide practical, hands-on experience.
- ✓ Increased focus on vocational education.

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Results: The program has led to a noticeable reduction in early school leaving, with better retention rates and more opportunities for young people to re-enter education or training programs.

Conclusion

Across Europe, successful programs to combat school dropout have embraced a range of strategies, from vocational education and mentoring to inclusive education and flexible learning plans. These programs show that addressing school dropout requires a multifaceted approach, involving education systems, families, communities, and social services. By tailoring interventions to the needs of at-risk students and ensuring they have the necessary support, these countries are seeing reductions in dropout rates and improved outcomes for their youth.

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3. EUROPEAN TRENDS: KEY FACTORS AND FOCUS ON EARS PARTNERS COUNTRIES

3.1. European context

Despite its importance on the European political agenda and the legislative initiatives put in place, early school leaving remains a significant challenge across European countries, with varying rates and contributing factors observed across different regions. While substantial progress has been made in reducing early school leaving rates over the past decade, disparities persist both between and within EU member states.

§ Overall Trends in Europe

The European Union has made a strong commitment to addressing early school leaving, setting a target to reduce the rate to below 10% by 2020. By 2019, the average rate had dropped to 10.2%, marking significant progress compared to previous years. However, challenges remain, as some countries continue to experience higher-than-average dropout rates, particularly among specific demographic groups such as students from migrant backgrounds, young men, and those living in rural areas.

§ Variations Across Countries

The situation varies considerably among EU member states. Some countries, such as Sweden, Ireland, and the Netherlands, have successfully reduced early school leaving rates to well below the EU average. These countries have implemented strong educational policies, targeted support programs, and inclusive school environments that promote student retention.

On the other hand, several Southern and Eastern European countries, including Spain, Italy, Romania, and Bulgaria, continue to struggle with higher early school leaving rates. Economic factors, lack of access to quality education in rural areas, and socio-cultural barriers contribute to these challenges. In particular, regions with high youth unemployment tend to experience higher dropout rates, as students may leave school early to seek work or due to a lack of motivation stemming from limited career prospects.

§ Key Factors Influencing Early School Leaving

The phenomenon of early school leaving is influenced by multiple factors, including:

- ✓ **Socioeconomic Background:** Students from disadvantaged families are at a higher risk of dropping out due to financial pressures or a lack of academic support.
- ✓ **Educational Environment:** Schools with insufficient resources, low student engagement, and high rates of absenteeism are more likely to experience higher dropout rates.
- ✓ **Migration and Integration:** Students from migrant backgrounds often face language barriers and difficulties integrating into the education system, increasing their risk of early school leaving.

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✓ **Geographic Disparities:** Rural areas often have fewer educational opportunities, leading to higher dropout rates compared to urban centers with better infrastructure and support systems.

§ School Dropout Rates

According to the **European Commission** and the **Eurostat database**, the rate of early school leaving in the European Union (EU) has decreased over the past decade but remains a concern in several member states.

✓ **EU Average**: The average early school leaving rate in the EU was **10.2% in 2022**. This represents the percentage of people aged 18-24 who have not completed upper secondary education and are not in further education or training.

✓ **Target for the EU**: The EU set a target in the **Europe 2020 Strategy** to reduce the early school leaving rate to **less than 10%** by 2020. While progress has been made, many countries still fall short of this goal.

§ Country Differences

There are significant variations in dropout rates across EU member states. Some countries have managed to keep their dropout rates very low, while others continue to face higher challenges:

Lowest Dropout Rates

✓ **Finland**: Approximately **5%** early school leaving.
✓ **Croatia**: Around **4%**.
✓ **Poland**: Roughly **4.7%**.

Highest Dropout Rates:

✓ **Spain**: Around **16.6%**.
✓ **Portugal**: Approximately **14.4%**.
✓ **Italy**: Around **13.2%**.
✓ **Romania**: Around **15.6%**.

These countries often face challenges such as socio-economic inequality, regional disparities, and less robust support systems in education.

§ Gender Differences

Gender plays a significant role in school dropout rates across Europe, with notable differences between male and female students:

Boys tend to have higher dropout rates than **girls** across most EU countries.

✓ **EU Average (2022)**: The dropout rate for **boys** was **12.3%**, while for **girls** it was **8.1%**.
✓ **Countries with Larger Gender Gaps**: In countries like **Italy** and **Spain**, the gender gap is particularly evident, with male students at greater risk of dropping out.

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This gender disparity can be linked to various factors, including social expectations, school climate, and gender-specific challenges such as the underrepresentation of boys in higher education.

§ Socio-Economic Background

Students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to drop out of school. Various factors contribute to this phenomenon:

- ✓ **Students from low-income families** are more likely to face barriers to completing their education, including lack of academic support, financial difficulties, and the need to work while studying.
- ✓ **EU Data on Socio-Economic Disparities**: According to **Eurostat**, students from the lowest socio-economic quintiles are about **four times more likely** to leave school early compared to those from wealthier backgrounds.
- ✓ **Children with migrant backgrounds** or from minority ethnic groups also have higher dropout rates in many European countries. In particular, **Roma children** in several EU states face significant educational disadvantages, leading to higher early school leaving.

§ Age Differences

- ✓ **Late Adolescence (16-18 years)**: This age group is particularly vulnerable to school dropout. Many students tend to disengage from the education system as they approach the end of compulsory schooling, particularly if they have not yet found their educational path or feel disconnected from the system.
- ✓ **Early Adolescence (14-16 years)**: The drop-off in attendance begins in early adolescence, and students who fall behind academically or face personal challenges are at higher risk of leaving school before completion.

§ Regional Differences

Within countries, there are significant **regional disparities** in dropout rates. Rural areas, for instance, tend to have higher dropout rates than urban centers:

- ✓ **Rural vs. Urban**: Students in rural regions often face challenges such as limited access to educational resources, fewer extracurricular activities, and less access to higher education institutions. These factors contribute to higher dropout rates in rural areas compared to cities.
- ✓ **Northern vs. Southern Europe**: Northern European countries generally have lower dropout rates than their Southern counterparts. This is linked to differences in social safety nets, the availability of alternative education options, and the quality of teaching.

Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the issue of school dropout in Europe, particularly among disadvantaged groups:

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- ✓ **Remote Learning Barriers**: Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds faced challenges accessing online learning due to limited resources, such as lack of internet access, devices, or a quiet study space.
- ✓ **Mental Health and Well-being**: Prolonged periods of school closure, along with the socio-economic impact of the pandemic, led to increased anxiety, depression, and disengagement among students, contributing to higher dropout rates in many countries.

3.2. Specific Trends in EARS Partners Countries

Early School Leaving in Italy: Challenges and Progress

Early school leaving (ESL) remains a significant issue in Italy, although notable progress has been made in reducing dropout rates over the past decade. Despite efforts to align with the European Union (EU) target of keeping the ESL rate below 10%, Italy still faces higher-than-average rates compared to other EU member states.

Current Situation and Trends

Italy has historically struggled with high early school leaving rates, though recent data indicate a gradual decline. According to Eurostat, the percentage of early leavers from education and training in Italy has decreased but remains above the EU average. The issue is more pronounced in specific regions, particularly in the southern part of the country, where socioeconomic challenges and limited educational resources contribute to higher dropout rates.

Key Factors Contributing to Early School Leaving in Italy

Several interrelated factors influence early school leaving in Italy:

- ✓ **Regional Disparities:** Southern regions, such as Sicily, Calabria, and Campania, have significantly higher dropout rates compared to northern and central Italy due to economic instability, lower investment in education, and social inequalities.
- ✓ **Economic Hardship:** Financial difficulties within families often push students to leave school early to enter the labour market, particularly in economically disadvantaged areas.
- ✓ **Low Engagement and Motivation:** A rigid and traditional educational system, with limited student-centred learning approaches, contributes to disengagement and lack of motivation among students.
- ✓ **Insufficient Career Guidance and Vocational Pathways:** The transition from school to work is often unclear, and vocational education and training (VET) options are not always well-integrated into the education system, leading some students to drop out.
- ✓ **Vulnerable Groups:** Migrant students and Roma communities face higher risks of early school leaving due to language barriers, social exclusion, and lack of targeted support.
- ✓ **Weak Connection between Education and Employment:** Many students perceive education as disconnected from real job opportunities, discouraging them from completing their studies.

Measures and Policies to Address Early School Leaving

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Italy has taken various steps to reduce early school leaving, both through national initiatives and EU-supported programs:

- ✓ **Strengthening Vocational Education and Training (VET):** Expanding vocational programs and improving their quality has been a priority to provide alternative learning pathways for students at risk.
- ✓ **National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP):** As part of the EU-funded NextGenerationEU recovery plan, Italy has allocated significant resources to modernizing education, reducing dropout rates, and improving school infrastructure.
- ✓ **School-Wide Support Programs:** Initiatives such as tutoring, mentoring, and psychological support services aim to prevent school disengagement.
- ✓ **EU-Funded Projects:** Italy benefits from EU initiatives, including *Erasmus+*, the *European Social Fund (ESF)*, and the *European Education Area* framework, which support policies for educational inclusion and dropout prevention.
- ✓ **Regional and Local Initiatives:** Specific programs tailored to high-risk regions help address localized challenges through targeted interventions and community-based support.

Future Challenges and Opportunities

While Italy has made progress, further efforts are needed to bridge regional disparities, enhance vocational education, and improve student engagement. Investing in modern teaching methods, digital education, and inclusive policies for disadvantaged students will be crucial. Additionally, closer collaboration between schools, businesses, and policymakers can strengthen the link between education and employment, ensuring that young people see the value in completing their studies. By continuing to implement comprehensive and inclusive educational policies, Italy can further reduce early school leaving and create better opportunities for its youth, contributing to long-term social and economic development.

Early School Leaving in Greece: Challenges and Progress

Early school leaving (ESL) in Greece has been a significant challenge but has shown notable improvement over the years. The country has made progress in reducing dropout rates, aligning with the broader European Union (EU) efforts to lower the percentage of students leaving education and training prematurely. However, disparities persist, particularly among specific demographic and socioeconomic groups.

Current Situation and Trends

In recent years, Greece has achieved a considerable reduction in its early school leaving rate. According to Eurostat data, the percentage of early leavers from education and training has remained below the EU average. While Greece has successfully lowered its ESL rate, challenges remain, particularly in rural areas, economically disadvantaged communities, and among certain vulnerable groups, including students from migrant backgrounds and the Roma community.

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Key Factors Contributing to Early School Leaving in Greece

Several factors contribute to the phenomenon of early school leaving in Greece, including:

- ✓ **Economic Hardship:** The financial crisis that affected Greece for over a decade led to increased financial pressures on families, forcing some students to prioritize work over education.
- ✓ **Unemployment and Lack of Career Prospects:** Limited job opportunities, particularly for young people, can reduce motivation to complete education, as students may feel that obtaining a degree does not guarantee employment.
- ✓ **Educational Challenges:** Insufficient resources in certain schools, outdated curricula, and a lack of individualized support for students at risk contribute to disengagement from education.
- ✓ **Demographic Disparities:** Higher dropout rates are observed among students from marginalized communities, including Roma populations and migrant youth, who may face language barriers, social exclusion, and economic difficulties.
- ✓ **Geographical Inequalities:** Rural and remote areas tend to have fewer educational opportunities and limited access to specialized support services, increasing the risk of early school leaving.

Measures and Policies to Address Early School Leaving

To combat early school leaving, Greece has implemented several measures and participates in EU-wide initiatives. Key efforts include:

- ✓ **Strengthening Vocational Education and Training (VET):** Expanding vocational pathways provides alternative learning opportunities for students at risk of dropping out.
- ✓ **EU-Supported Programs:** Participation in European initiatives, such as *Erasmus+* and the *European Social Fund (ESF)*, has supported educational reforms and inclusion projects.
- ✓ **Support for Vulnerable Groups:** Targeted interventions, including language support for migrant students and initiatives to improve Roma inclusion, aim to reduce disparities in school completion rates.
- ✓ **Modernization of Education:** Efforts to update curricula, integrate digital learning tools, and promote student-centered teaching approaches seek to increase student engagement and retention.

Future Challenges and Opportunities

Despite progress, continued efforts are needed to address remaining disparities in early school leaving rates across Greece. Strengthening school support systems, enhancing teacher training, and ensuring equal access to quality education for all students will be critical. Additionally, aligning education with labour market needs and providing clearer career pathways can help motivate students to complete their studies. By maintaining its focus on inclusive education policies and leveraging EU support, Greece can further reduce early school leaving and promote long-term educational success for all young people.

Early School Leaving in Spain: Challenges and Progress

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Early school leaving (ESL) has been a persistent challenge in Spain, although the country has made significant strides in addressing the issue in recent years. Spain has historically had one of the highest early school leaving rates in the European Union (EU), but various national and regional efforts, as well as EU-supported initiatives, have contributed to a gradual reduction in the dropout rate. Despite these improvements, significant disparities still exist, particularly among disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.

Current Situation and Trends

According to Eurostat data, Spain's early school leaving rate has steadily decreased over the past decade, bringing the country closer to the EU target of reducing ESL to below 10%. However, Spain's ESL rate still remains higher than the EU average, with particular concern in certain regions such as Andalusia, Extremadura, and the Canary Islands. While national policies have contributed to improvements, regional disparities remain a significant issue.

In 2020, the early school leaving rate in Spain was estimated to be around 16%, which, while an improvement from previous years, is still relatively high compared to other EU countries like Denmark or Germany. In addition, students from certain socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, such as Roma communities and migrant youth, continue to be at a much higher risk of leaving school early.

Key Factors Contributing to Early School Leaving in Spain

Several factors contribute to the relatively high rate of early school leaving in Spain:

- ✓ **Socioeconomic Inequality**: Students from low-income families are at higher risk of dropping out due to financial pressures. Many students are forced to work to help support their families, which compromises their ability to stay in school.
- ✓ **Regional Disparities**: There are significant differences in educational quality and opportunities between Spain's regions, with rural and less economically developed areas experiencing higher dropout rates. For instance, students in southern and southwestern regions are more likely to leave school early compared to those in wealthier, urban areas like Madrid and Barcelona.
- ✓ **Educational System and Structure**: The structure of the Spanish education system can contribute to early school leaving. While Spain has made efforts to make education more flexible, students often face challenges in adjusting to the rigorous academic requirements. The lack of individualized support and guidance for struggling students can increase the likelihood of disengagement.
- ✓ **Vocational Education and Training (VET)**: Although Spain offers various vocational education pathways, many students perceive vocational education as less prestigious, leading to lower enrollment rates in these programs. This lack of engagement in VET often results in students abandoning their education altogether.
- ✓ **Migrant and Roma Communities**: Migrant students, particularly those from non-Spanish-speaking backgrounds, face language barriers and difficulties integrating into the education system. Similarly, Roma students face high levels of discrimination and social exclusion, contributing to their higher dropout rates.

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✓ **Mental Health Issues and School Environment**: Growing mental health challenges, bullying, and a lack of emotional support can drive students away from school. Additionally, a rigid, one-size-fits-all approach in some schools does not cater to the diverse needs of students, which can foster disengagement.

Measures and Policies to Address Early School Leaving in Spain

Spain has introduced several initiatives to reduce early school leaving, with both national policies and EU-supported programs aimed at tackling this issue:

✓ **The *Ley Orgánica de Mejora de la Calidad Educativa (LOMCE)***: The Spanish education system underwent reforms under the LOMCE, which sought to improve the quality of education and reduce dropout rates. This law introduced measures to improve vocational education and focused on providing personalized support to at-risk students.

✓ **Increased Focus on Vocational Education and Training (VET)**: Spain has worked to increase the attractiveness of VET by aligning curricula with labor market needs and offering apprenticeships. The aim is to provide students with practical skills and better job prospects, thereby reducing the desire to drop out of school.

✓ **Regional Programs**: Many regions in Spain have developed their own regional initiatives to address early school leaving. For example, Andalusia has implemented programs aimed at providing students with more comprehensive guidance and support services to keep them engaged in school.

✓ **EU-Funded Initiatives**: Spain participates in several EU programs, such as *Erasmus+* and the *European Social Fund (ESF)*, which provide funding for initiatives focused on reducing early school leaving. These programs help improve educational resources, train teachers, and support the inclusion of marginalized groups.

✓ **Early Intervention and Dropout Prevention Programs**: Spain has implemented early warning systems in schools to identify students at risk of dropping out and provide targeted interventions, including personalized tutoring, psychological support, and extracurricular activities to engage students.

✓ **Support for Vulnerable Groups**: Various initiatives focus on reducing early school leaving among specific groups, such as Roma students, migrant children, and those with disabilities. These programs offer tailored support, including language classes, mentorship, and social inclusion efforts.

✓ **Strengthening Teacher Training**: Teacher training programs have been enhanced to ensure that educators are equipped to deal with diverse classrooms, including students with special needs or those facing socio-economic challenges.

Future Challenges and Opportunities

While Spain has made progress in reducing early school leaving, the country faces several challenges moving forward:

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✓ **Regional Inequality**: Addressing the disparities between different regions of Spain will be essential for reducing overall dropout rates. Ensuring that rural and economically disadvantaged areas receive adequate educational resources and support will be key to closing this gap.

✓ **Integrating Migrant and Roma Students**: Spain must continue to improve the integration of migrant and Roma students into the education system, providing language support, cultural sensitivity training, and personalized guidance to help these groups succeed.

✓ **Mental Health Support**: As mental health issues among young people grow, it will be crucial for schools to develop more comprehensive support systems, including counseling and mental health resources, to help students stay engaged and overcome personal challenges.

✓ **Strengthening Vocational Education**: To combat early school leaving, Spain will need to continue to improve and promote vocational education, ensuring that it offers high-quality training opportunities and is seen as a legitimate and valuable alternative to academic education.

By addressing these challenges and continuing to focus on inclusive, flexible, and student-centered education, Spain can further reduce early school leaving and create better opportunities for all its young people.

Early School Leaving in the Netherlands: Progress and Remaining Challenges

The Netherlands has been one of the most successful European Union (EU) member states in reducing early school leaving (ESL). Through comprehensive policies and targeted interventions, the country has consistently maintained a dropout rate below the EU average. However, challenges remain, particularly among specific demographic groups and in addressing new social and economic factors influencing school disengagement.

Current Situation and Trends

The Netherlands has made significant progress in tackling early school leaving. Over the past two decades, the country has successfully reduced the ESL rate, reaching levels well below the EU target of 10%. According to Eurostat, the percentage of early leavers from education and training has remained relatively low compared to other European countries.

This success is largely attributed to strong government policies, a well-developed vocational education system, and close cooperation between schools, municipalities, and employers. However, some groups remain at higher risk of dropping out, including students from disadvantaged backgrounds, migrant communities, and those facing mental health or personal difficulties.

Key Factors Influencing Early School Leaving in the Netherlands

While the Netherlands has achieved a low ESL rate, some factors continue to contribute to school dropouts:

✓ **Socioeconomic Disparities:** Students from low-income families face higher dropout risks due to financial stress, lack of parental support, or lower academic expectations.

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- ✓ **Migrant Backgrounds:** Young people from non-Dutch-speaking families may experience difficulties integrating into the education system, leading to disengagement.
- ✓ **Mental Health and Well-being:** Increasing cases of stress, anxiety, and mental health challenges among students have contributed to school disengagement in recent years.
- ✓ **Mismatch Between Education and Career Aspirations:** Some students, especially in vocational education, struggle to see the relevance of their studies to their future career goals, leading to dropout decisions.

Policies and Measures to Reduce Early School Leaving

The Netherlands has implemented various strategies to prevent early school leaving and support at-risk students:

- ✓ **The "MBO" Vocational Education and Training (VET) System:** A well-developed vocational pathway provides alternative routes for students who may not thrive in traditional academic settings. The system is highly integrated with the labour market, ensuring that students see clear career opportunities.
- ✓ **Close Monitoring and Early Intervention:** Schools and municipalities track students at risk of dropping out, offering personalized support and intervention programs to help them stay in education.
- ✓ **Compulsory Education and Qualification Obligation:** Education is compulsory until the age of 16, and students are required to attain at least a basic qualification (MBO level 2, HAVO, or VWO diploma) before leaving school.
- ✓ **Strong Cooperation Between Schools, Employers, and Municipalities:** Local governments, businesses, and educational institutions collaborate to provide career guidance, apprenticeships, and real-world learning experiences to keep students engaged.
- ✓ **Targeted Support for Vulnerable Groups:** Programs addressing the needs of migrant students, low-income families, and those with learning difficulties help reduce dropout rates.

Future Challenges and Opportunities

Despite its achievements, the Netherlands must continue addressing emerging challenges, such as the impact of digital learning, growing mental health concerns among students, and ensuring that vocational education remains attractive and relevant in a changing labor market. Additionally, special attention is needed to further support students from migrant backgrounds and those facing socioeconomic hardships. By maintaining its strong policies and adapting to evolving educational challenges, the Netherlands can continue to serve as a model for reducing early school leaving in Europe, ensuring that all students have access to quality education and future career opportunities.

Early School Leaving in Romania: Challenges and Measures

Early school leaving (ESL) remains a significant issue in Romania, with the country consistently reporting one of the highest dropout rates in the European Union (EU). Despite efforts to reduce ESL and align

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with EU targets, persistent socioeconomic inequalities, regional disparities, and structural challenges in the education system continue to hinder progress.

Current Situation and Trends

Romania has struggled to meet the EU's objective of reducing early school leaving below 10%. According to Eurostat data, the country's ESL rate remains among the highest in Europe, often exceeding 15%. While some progress has been made, the rate of improvement has been slow, and dropout rates remain particularly high in rural areas and among disadvantaged communities.

Key Factors Contributing to Early School Leaving in Romania

Several interconnected factors contribute to the high rate of school dropouts in Romania:

✓ **Poverty and Economic Hardship:** Many families in low-income communities struggle to afford education-related costs, leading children to leave school early to support their families through work.

✓ **Urban-Rural Disparities:** Access to quality education is significantly lower in rural areas, where schools often lack proper infrastructure, qualified teachers, and modern educational resources.

✓ **Lack of Educational Support and Inclusion:** Students from marginalized communities, including Roma populations and those with disabilities, face discrimination, inadequate support, and barriers to equal educational opportunities.

✓ **Weak Early Childhood Education Participation:** Many children, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, do not attend preschool, leading to difficulties in primary education and increasing their risk of dropping out later.

✓ **Migration of Parents:** Many Romanian children are left in the care of relatives or guardians due to parental migration for work abroad. The absence of parental support often negatively impacts academic performance and school engagement.

✓ **Low Engagement in Vocational Education and Training (VET):** While vocational programs are available, they are often perceived as low-quality, leading many students to leave the system without acquiring relevant skills for the labour market.

Policies and Initiatives to Combat Early School Leaving

Romania has taken several steps to address ESL, with both national and EU-backed measures aiming to reduce dropout rates:

✓ **National Programs to Support Disadvantaged Students:** Initiatives such as free school supplies, meal programs, and financial incentives (e.g., the *Euro 200* program for purchasing educational materials) have been introduced to support low-income families.

✓ **Second-Chance Education Programs:** Designed for students who have left school early, these programs allow them to re-enter the education system and obtain qualifications.

✓ **Expansion of Early Childhood Education:** Efforts to improve preschool participation aim to ensure that children develop foundational learning skills, reducing the risk of later dropouts.

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- ✓ **EU-Funded Educational Projects:** Romania benefits from funding through the *European Social Fund (ESF)* and *Erasmus+*, which support initiatives for reducing ESL, improving teacher training, and modernizing education infrastructure.
- ✓ **Strengthening Vocational Education and Training (VET):** Efforts have been made to improve the attractiveness and quality of vocational education to provide students with practical skills and career opportunities.

Future Challenges and Opportunities

Despite ongoing efforts, Romania still faces considerable challenges in tackling early school leaving. Greater investments in education, particularly in rural areas, improved teacher training, and targeted support for at-risk students are necessary to achieve sustainable progress. Strengthening collaboration between schools, social services, and local authorities will also be key to reducing dropout rates and ensuring inclusive education for all. By continuing to address these structural challenges and leveraging EU support, Romania can improve educational outcomes and create better opportunities for its youth, ultimately contributing to the country's social and economic development.

Early School Leaving in Poland: Current Situation and Efforts to Combat It

Early school leaving (ESL) in Poland has been a significant issue, but the country has made substantial progress over the past decade in reducing dropout rates. While Poland's early school leaving rate is relatively low compared to the EU average, it still faces challenges related to socio-economic disparities, regional differences, and the need to modernize certain aspects of the education system.

Current Situation and Trends

Poland's early school leaving rate has improved significantly over the years. According to Eurostat, the dropout rate in Poland has steadily decreased and is now below the EU average, reflecting the country's commitment to education and its various reforms. However, some challenges persist, particularly in rural areas and among certain vulnerable groups, such as students from migrant backgrounds, those with disabilities, and children from lower-income families. These groups continue to face higher risks of dropping out.

Key Factors Contributing to Early School Leaving in Poland

Several factors contribute to early school leaving in Poland:

- ✓ **Socioeconomic Disparities:** Students from low-income families are more likely to leave school early due to financial pressures, lack of academic support, and fewer opportunities for extracurricular activities.
- ✓ **Geographic Disparities:** Students in rural areas face additional challenges, such as limited access to quality educational facilities, insufficient resources, and fewer opportunities for vocational training.
- ✓ **Quality and Accessibility of Vocational Education and Training (VET):** While Poland offers vocational education options, they are sometimes perceived as inferior or not aligned with the

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needs of the labour market, which leads some students to disengage or leave school before completing their studies.

✓ **Migrant Backgrounds:** Students from migrant families may struggle with language barriers, integration issues, and cultural differences, which can contribute to their higher likelihood of dropping out.

✓ **Mental Health and Well-being:** Increasing mental health challenges, particularly anxiety and stress, can affect students' ability to succeed academically, leading some to disengage from education.

Measures and Initiatives to Reduce Early School Leaving

Poland has implemented a range of measures to tackle early school leaving:

✓ **Compulsory Education Laws**: Education is compulsory in Poland for children up to the age of 18, which helps ensure that students stay in school for a longer period. The country has taken steps to enforce this policy, especially in rural areas.

✓ **Educational Reforms:** Over recent years, Poland has undertaken significant educational reforms to improve the quality of teaching and make education more inclusive. This includes modernizing curricula and adopting more student-centred approaches to learning.

✓ **Vocational Education and Training (VET) Enhancements:** Poland has made efforts to enhance its vocational education system, making it more relevant to the labor market and improving the status of vocational qualifications. This includes closer ties between schools and employers, which helps students understand the real-world value of vocational education.

✓ **Support for Vulnerable Groups:** There are several programs aimed at supporting disadvantaged students, including scholarships, free school supplies, and additional tutoring for students at risk of early school leaving.

✓ **EU-Funded Programs:** Poland participates in EU initiatives such as Erasmus+ and the European Social Fund (ESF), which provide funding for projects that focus on reducing ESL, improving school infrastructure, and supporting inclusive education for at-risk groups.

✓ **Youth Career Guidance:** Schools are increasingly offering career counselling and guidance to students, helping them understand the connection between their education and future employment opportunities. This support helps students see the value in completing their education.

Future Challenges and Opportunities

Although Poland has made significant progress in reducing early school leaving, there are still challenges that need to be addressed. Continued investment in rural education, strengthening vocational training programs, and providing targeted support for students with migrant backgrounds will be key to further reducing ESL. Additionally, improving mental health support and addressing bullying or other factors that may affect student well-being are areas for improvement. Poland also has the opportunity to leverage EU funding and educational collaboration to improve teacher training, expand inclusive education practices, and enhance digital learning. By focusing on these areas, Poland can continue to

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ensure that all students, regardless of their background, have the opportunity to succeed in education and beyond.

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4.   GAP ANALYSIS: CHALLENGES IN ACHIEVING THE SET GOALS AND REASONS FOR THE LACK of success

4.1.   The Key Factors of Early School Leaving

Despite the significant efforts made by the European Union (EU) and its member states to combat school dropout rates, several challenges persist, preventing the full achievement of the established goals. These challenges can be attributed to structural, social, economic, and policy-related factors. Below are some of the key reasons why European policies on school dropout have not yet been fully successful:

1. Socio-Economic Inequality and Poverty

One of the most significant barriers to achieving the goals of reducing school dropout rates is **socio-economic inequality**. Many students come from disadvantaged backgrounds where the immediate necessity of contributing to family income or dealing with poverty may push education into the background.

- ✓ **Impact on Education**: Poverty affects a student's ability to access educational resources, participate in extracurricular activities, and receive emotional and material support from their families.
- ✓ **Gap in Policy**: While policies like the **Europe 2020 Strategy** and **SDG 4** aim to promote inclusive education, there remains a significant gap in addressing the root causes of poverty that lead to early school leaving. Without tackling the wider issue of socio-economic inequality, dropout rates will likely remain high in economically marginalized regions.

2. Insufficient Personal and Family Support

A lack of **personalized support** and **family involvement** is a critical factor influencing school dropout. Although there are programs aimed at providing academic support, many students lack the emotional or familial encouragement needed to remain in school.

- ✓ **Impact of Family Dynamics**: Students from unstable or unsupportive family backgrounds are more likely to drop out. Family support in education is crucial for student engagement and persistence in school.
- ✓ **Gap in Policy**: While some EU countries have introduced initiatives for **parental engagement** and **family-centered programs**, these efforts are not consistently implemented or accessible to all students. In some regions, schools struggle to engage parents due to cultural or language barriers, or they lack resources to offer family support services.

3. Variability in Education Quality and School Infrastructure

There are significant disparities in the quality of education and the resources available to schools across the EU. Schools in rural or economically disadvantaged areas often lack the infrastructure and educational tools required to keep students engaged and on track.

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✓ **Impact on Education**: **Underfunded schools**, outdated teaching materials, lack of digital resources, and overcrowded classrooms can contribute to disengagement and frustration among students, ultimately leading to early school leaving.

✓ **Gap in Policy**: Although policies exist to promote equality in educational outcomes, they often fail to address **regional disparities** in the resources available to schools. The EU's investments in education infrastructure have not always reached the most vulnerable schools, where the dropout rates are highest.

4. Limited Access to Vocational and Alternative Education Pathways

The lack of accessible and high-quality **vocational education and training (VET)** programs remains a significant barrier. Many students at risk of dropping out do not see the relevance of academic education and fail to connect it to future job opportunities.

✓ **Impact on Engagement**: A **rigid educational system**, which prioritizes traditional academic paths over vocational training, can alienate students who are more inclined towards hands-on or technical learning. These students may feel disconnected from the educational system, leading to disengagement and, eventually, dropout.

✓ **Gap in Policy**: Though the EU has recognized the need for more **vocational education options**, many countries still lack a **comprehensive VET system** that is both inclusive and accessible to all students. There is often a stigma attached to vocational education, which leads to its underutilization and a lack of career prospects for students who do not attend university.

5. Lack of Early Intervention and Personalized Learning

While early intervention is a well-documented solution to reducing school dropout, it is not always effectively implemented across all EU member states. **Personalized learning** pathways, which can cater to the unique needs of at-risk students, are still insufficient in many schools.

✓ **Impact on Students**: Early signs of disengagement or academic struggle often go unnoticed, leading to students slipping through the cracks. **Tailored learning plans**, including **mentoring**, **tutoring**, and **psychological support**, are critical but often lacking.

✓ **Gap in Policy**: Despite policies advocating for early detection and intervention, many schools struggle with limited resources, staff, or training to implement **personalized education plans**. This leads to a failure to adequately support students before they reach the point of dropping out.

6. Cultural Attitudes towards Education

Cultural and social attitudes towards education vary significantly across the EU. In some regions, education is not seen as a priority, particularly among families facing social and economic difficulties.

✓ **Impact on Motivation**: In certain communities, there may be a **lack of trust in the educational system**, or the perceived value of education may be low. Students from these backgrounds are more likely to abandon their studies prematurely.

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✓ **Gap in Policy**: Policies aiming to improve educational outcomes often fail to address deeper **cultural norms** and attitudes. **Community engagement** and **social mobilization** efforts are often insufficient in changing the negative attitudes toward education in certain socio-cultural groups.

7. Inconsistent Implementation and Monitoring of Policies

While many EU policies are well-intentioned, their **implementation** can be inconsistent, especially in different member states or regions.

✓ **Impact on Effectiveness**: Disparities in the implementation of school dropout prevention programs, particularly in regions with fewer resources, mean that some students do not benefit from the support or interventions provided by EU initiatives.

✓ **Gap in Policy**: There is often a lack of coordination between EU-level strategies and local-level execution. Even when best practices are identified, scaling them across regions or countries can be difficult without strong, centralized oversight and consistent monitoring.

8. Inadequate Data Collection and Analysis

One of the challenges in addressing school dropout is the **insufficient data collection** and **monitoring** of the issue at a detailed level across the EU.

✓ **Impact on Policy**: Without accurate, comprehensive data on who is dropping out, why, and where, it is difficult for policymakers to tailor their interventions effectively.

✓ **Gap in Policy**: While the EU has made strides in data collection, gaps still exist in terms of collecting real-time data that can guide quick interventions. There is also a lack of standardized data across countries, making it difficult to compare and learn from successful initiatives.

Conclusion

While the EU has made significant progress in addressing school dropout through various policies, the full achievement of these goals remains elusive due to structural inequalities, inconsistent implementation, and socio-cultural barriers. To bridge these gaps, EU countries need to focus on targeted, personalized interventions, invest more in vocational education, ensure consistent policy implementation, and address socio-economic disparities to create a more inclusive and effective educational system for all students.

4.2. Proposal of possible solutions: the EARS consultation

As known, a green paper aims to stimulate discussion on given topics at European Union (EU) level. It invites the relevant parties (bodies or individuals) to participate in a consultation process and debate on the basis of the proposals it puts forward.

In our case, it was not possible to carry out such a broad public consultation; however, the EARS Project conducted quantitative and qualitative research by interviewing teachers from partner and associated schools. In doing so, it was possible to collect an initial consultation, which presents interesting elements, also with a view to the future.

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This quantitative and qualitative research was conducted by the EARS Partnership[9].

The research conducted on school dropout involved teachers from six countries: Italy (30), Greece (32 respondents), Romania (30), Spain (27), Poland (30), and the Netherlands (9). Of the 158 participants, 39.2% were men and 59.5% were women. The majority (46.2%) were over 45 years old, and 57% had over 15 years of teaching experience. Regarding qualifications, 51.9% had a Master's Degree, and 74.1% were teachers. Most respondents worked in urban schools (51.3%), with 935 public schools and 7% private schools. School types included Junior High (34.2%), Senior High (26.6%), and VET Schools (18.4%).

§ Systemic Factors contributing to school dropout.

Participants identified **factors contributing to school dropout**. The most commonly agreed reasons were family issues (50.6%) and absenteeism (43.7%). Other factors mentioned included bullying, pregnancy, work obligations, lack of social policies, and financial issues. Respondents identified groups at higher risk of dropping out, such as Roma students (43.7%) and those facing social difficulties (48.7%). Additionally, 44.3% agreed that students at high risk of dropping out do not belong to a particular group.

Regarding prevention programs, 42.4% of respondents reported no specific activities for at-risk groups. However, 50% indicated their schools offered general academic help and alternative education access. Only 11.4% had programs for specific ethnic or poverty-stricken groups.

Lastly, when asked about the support needed to prevent school dropout, the highest demand (73.4%) was for "Family Engagement/Community Outreach." Other areas needing support included "Tutoring/Mentoring for Students" (63.9%), "Counseling/Interventions" (63.3%), and "More Alternative Education Options" (62.7%).

In relation to the **best practices for preventing school dropout at the school unit level**, the survey revealed some key findings:

- ✓ **Prevention Programs:** Half of the respondents (50%) stated that their school offers general academic help, alternative education access, or school-level specific programs. However, only 11.4% mentioned programs targeting racial, ethnic groups or students in poverty. Almost half (42.4%) reported that their school does not offer specific activities for different student groups.
- ✓ **Effective Practices:**
  - o Parent Communication: A high percentage (around 80%) emphasized the importance of communication with parents, indicating its central role in supporting student progress.
  - o Individualized Plans and Interventions: 45% of schools employ individualized plans, interventions in school subjects, extracurricular activities, and innovative school activities to reduce dropout rates.

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[9] Please see PR3. EARS Impact Research, led by SISERA (Greece), available on the official website of the project and on the Erasmus+ Project Results Platform.

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- o Student Education on Graduation: 56% of respondents highlighted the effectiveness of educating students on the benefits of graduating from high school, even for those not planning to attend university.

✓ **Career Path Support:** Many schools offer practices to guide students toward career success:
  - o Job and Career Awareness: 45% of respondents indicated that their schools use methods like project-based learning, career education, internships, job shadowing, career fairs, and counseling to prepare students for their professional paths.
  - o Additional Practices: Qualitative responses mentioned a variety of activities such as sports, reinforcement classes, educational projects, music lessons, support teaching, mobility projects, personal development workshops, and pedagogical circles aimed at preventing school dropout.

These findings indicate that while some schools successfully implement effective dropout prevention strategies, there remains a gap in targeted programs for at-risk student groups. Greater efforts are needed to expand and standardize these best practices across districts to ensure broader accessibility and impact.

In relation to a **possible lack of adoption of good practices or programs** that effectively deal with the phenomenon of school dropout, the survey revealed some key findings:

A percentage of 50% interviewees answered that their school offers general academic help, alternative education access or school-level specific programs, only a percentage of 11,4% stated that their school have activities or programs for racial, ethnic student groups or special programs for students in poverty, whereas almost the half of them (42,4%) responded that their school does not offer any specific activity or program for different student groups.

The practice "communication with parents" concentrates a very high percentage (almost 80%).

Other practices with a significant role in reducing the school dropout rates are "Individualized plans", "Interventions in school subjects", "Extra-curricular activities" and "Innovative school activities" (approximately 45%).

The research's findings indicate that educating students on the benefits of graduating from high school—regardless of whether they plan to attend university—remains an effective strategy for reducing dropout rates. This approach received strong support from respondents, with nearly 56% rating it highly.

One of the most significant concerns for students is their future career path, which was further explored in the following question. To address this, school staff implement various initiatives to inform students about job opportunities and support them in building successful professional careers. According to the survey, 45% of participants reported that their schools frequently engage in career-oriented practices. These include project-based learning, career and technical education, school-to-work programs, job experience credits, internships, job shadowing, counselling, and access to college and career centres. Additionally, schools organize career fairs, invite guest speakers, arrange business and college visits, and incorporate career education into the curriculum to better prepare students for their future careers.

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Moreover, the research highlights a diverse range of educational and extracurricular activities, including sports programs, reinforcement classes, educational projects, multidisciplinary initiatives, music lessons, and support teaching activities. Additionally, schools implement mobility projects, personal development workshops, case studies, educational visits, collaborative meetings, and pedagogical circles to enhance student engagement and learning experiences.

§ Teacher's training needs for responding to school dropout.

The survey also examined teachers' training needs in addressing school dropout. The hypotheses suggested that teacher training on dropout prevention is generally insufficient and that there is a growing demand for professional development in key areas. The findings are summarized as follows:

Overall Training Needs:

A significant portion of respondents expressed the need for additional training in effective dropout prevention strategies. Among the most pressing areas for support were:

- ✓ Family Engagement/Community Outreach – the highest demand for training (73.4% of respondents).
- ✓ Tutoring/Mentoring for Students – 63.9%
- ✓ Counseling/Interventions – 63.3%
- ✓ More Alternative Education Options – 62.7%
- ✓ Work Experience/Career and Technical Education – 61.4%
- ✓ Personalized Learning – 60.1%
- ✓ Parent Training/Parent Club – 60.1%

Confidence in Communication Strategies:

Conversely, when it comes to communication methods, the majority of teachers felt capable of implementing them without additional training. As a result, they either disagreed or remained neutral regarding the need for further support in these areas:

- ✓ Home Visits – 64.6% felt confident.
- ✓ Email, Texts, School Website – 63.9% felt confident.
- ✓ Phone Calls, Newsletters, Letters – 62.7% felt confident.

These findings suggest that while teachers acknowledge the need for professional development in student support and intervention strategies, they feel more confident in their ability to manage communication-related tasks without further training. Addressing these training gaps could strengthen schools' ability to prevent dropout and better support at-risk students.

The survey explored teachers' training needs in addressing the issue of school dropout. To analyze the empirical data, it formulated two research hypotheses:

- ✓ Teacher training on school dropout prevention remains at low or moderate levels.
- ✓ There is a significant need for additional training for teachers and student support staff on the following key areas:

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- o Organization and management of school dropout issues
- o Communication with students
- o Knowledge deepening on the subject
- o Cooperation with the family
- o Cooperation with the community
- o Technical-Digital skills
- o Services provided to students

A broad analysis of the response rates reveals that a significant percentage of participants feel the need for support across all strategies aimed at preventing school dropout. The strategy with the highest demand is "Family Engagement/Community Outreach", with 73.4% of respondents expressing the need for additional training. Other key strategies with considerable support needs include:

- ✓ Tutoring/Mentoring for Students – 63.9%
- ✓ Counselling/Interventions – 63.3%
- ✓ More Alternative Education Options – 62.7%
- ✓ Work Experience/Career and Technical Education – 61.4%
- ✓ Personalized Learning – 60.1%
- ✓ Parent Training/Parent Club – 60.1%

Conversely, when it comes to communication strategies, most respondents feel confident in their ability to implement them without additional support. As a result, they either disagreed, strongly disagreed, or remained neutral about needing further training in these areas:

- ✓ Home Visits – 64.6% confident
- ✓ Email, Texts, School Website – 63.9% confident
- ✓ Phone Calls, Newsletters, Letters – 62.7% confident

These findings suggest that while educators recognize the need for further professional development in student support and intervention strategies, they feel adequately prepared to handle communication-related tasks independently.

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5.   RATIONALE FOR A GENERAL CONSULTATION

5.1.   Why is early school leaving an urgent issue at the European level?

As illustrated above, early school leaving school is an urgent issue for Europe because it threatens social cohesion, economic competitiveness, and the well-being of future generations.

The main reasons are:

Impact on the right to education

Reason: School dropout undermines the fundamental right of every individual to access quality education. Every young person who leaves school without completing their educational journey loses the opportunity to acquire essential skills for their professional and personal future. This significantly limits their chances of having a stable and fulfilling career.

Consequence: Social and economic inequalities

Students who drop out of school often come from disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds. This phenomenon amplifies inequalities because those who do not complete their education tend to remain in poverty and hardship. School dropout perpetuates a cycle of intergenerational poverty, where families in difficult conditions see their children repeat the same struggles.

Impact on the economy and labour market

Reason: A high dropout rate contributes to the shortage of skilled workers. People who do not finish school have fewer opportunities to find well-paid, stable jobs, which negatively impacts the economy. Low education levels are associated with higher unemployment rates and less potential for economic growth for individual EU member states.

Consequence: Challenge to European competitiveness

The EU faces global competition, and a well-prepared, highly skilled workforce is essential for maintaining competitiveness. School dropout prevents young people from acquiring the necessary skills to fully participate in an increasingly globalized and digitalized economy. Dropouts are less likely to have the skills required by the modern labour market, reducing Europe's ability to stay competitive on a global scale.

Negative effects on social well-being

Reason: School dropout is often associated with negative phenomena such as long-term unemployment, crime, social marginalization, and a loss of trust in institutions. Furthermore, a high dropout rate leads to lower social cohesion, with increased divisions between social and cultural groups.

Consequence: Long-term costs for society

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The phenomenon of school dropout also incurs significant long-term economic costs. People with lower education levels are more likely to need social assistance, and society as a whole faces additional costs related to unemployment, crime, and social welfare. Investing in the prevention of school dropout represents an opportunity to save on long-term social costs and improve the overall quality of life.

5.2. The social and economic consequences for the European Union and Member States

The social and economic consequences of school dropout for the European Union and its member states are significant and multifaceted. These consequences not only affect individuals but also impact societies at large, influencing long-term economic stability, social cohesion, and the overall well-being of the population. Below are the key social and economic consequences of school dropout:

§ Economic Impact

Labor Market and Skills Shortage

Dropouts often lack the skills and qualifications necessary to participate in a competitive labor market. This contributes to a shortage of skilled workers, which in turn hampers economic growth and innovation within the EU. Countries with high dropout rates may struggle to fill positions in industries that require specialized knowledge, particularly in the growing sectors of technology and digital services.

Lower Productivity and Wages

Individuals who drop out of school tend to earn lower wages compared to those with higher education. This results in a less productive workforce, as those without qualifications are more likely to work in lower-paying and less stable jobs. Consequently, the EU and its member states face a decrease in overall productivity, which limits economic expansion.

Higher Unemployment Rates

Dropouts are more likely to experience unemployment, particularly in a highly competitive and increasingly skilled job market. Unemployment among school dropouts can lead to greater reliance on social welfare systems, increasing the financial burden on governments and taxpayers. This problem exacerbates the economic challenges faced by both the EU and individual member states.

§ Social Consequences

Increased Social Inequality

School dropout disproportionately affects young people from disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds. As a result, it exacerbates social inequalities within EU countries, as those who drop out are less likely to access opportunities for upward social mobility. This leads to entrenched poverty, with families passing on these disadvantages to future generations, creating a cycle of poverty and exclusion.

Social Exclusion and Marginalization

Dropouts are more likely to experience social exclusion, as they may struggle to find meaningful employment and engage in social activities that contribute to a sense of belonging. This can lead to

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feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, and lack of confidence, resulting in further social challenges. Additionally, dropout rates can increase the likelihood of involvement in criminal activities, contributing to higher crime rates and social instability.

Decreased Social Cohesion

High school dropout rates contribute to reduced social cohesion, as it creates divisions between different social, economic, and cultural groups. Individuals who drop out of school often struggle to integrate into society and the labour market, leading to greater disparities between different sectors of society. This can affect national unity and create tensions between groups with different levels of education and wealth.

§ Long-Term Costs for the EU and Member States

Increased Welfare and Social Support Costs

Dropouts are more likely to depend on social assistance programs, which leads to higher public spending on unemployment benefits, social security, and other forms of financial aid. Over time, this places a significant strain on national budgets, diverting resources from other important areas such as healthcare, infrastructure, and public services.

Negative Impact on Public Health

School dropouts often face higher rates of physical and mental health issues, partly due to economic stress and social exclusion. Health-related costs increase, as dropouts are more likely to require medical attention, counselling, and other forms of healthcare, which adds to the financial strain on public health systems.

Lost Tax Revenue

Individuals without qualifications tend to have lower-paying jobs, which results in lower tax contributions. This reduces the overall tax revenue collected by governments, which can lead to budget shortfalls and less funding for essential public services such as education, healthcare, and social security. The EU and its member states lose potential income that could otherwise be reinvested into the economy.

§ Negative Effects on Future Generations

Intergenerational Cycle of Poverty

The children of school dropouts are more likely to experience poverty and face barriers to education themselves. As a result, the cycle of poverty and school dropout is passed on to the next generation, perpetuating inequalities. This reduces the overall socio-economic mobility within countries, limiting the ability of young people to improve their living conditions and prospects.

Loss of Potential Talent

School dropouts represent a loss of potential talent that could have contributed to economic development, innovation, and cultural enrichment. By failing to retain young people in education,

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societies lose out on individuals who could have made significant contributions to their communities and the economy. This represents a missed opportunity for personal and societal growth.

§ Impact on the European Union's Competitiveness

Inability to Compete Globally

As the global economy becomes more knowledge-based and digital, countries with higher dropout rates face a disadvantage in maintaining competitiveness. The EU's ability to compete globally in sectors such as technology, research, and innovation relies on a highly educated and skilled workforce. High dropout rates undermine this ability and threaten the region's economic standing on the global stage.

Challenges in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4)

School dropout is a significant barrier to achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all. High dropout rates in the EU prevent the region from meeting its international commitments to reduce inequality and promote sustainable development.

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6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1. The areas of investigation

This last paragraph would like, on the basis of the excursus so far, to indicate possible pathways of investigation for a future public consultation, to be conducted at European level among citizens and stakeholders, on the phenomenon of early school leaving.

From what has emerged so far, the areas for consultation can be:

A. **Individual factors:** psychological motivations, lack of family support, school difficulties.
B. **Socio-economic factors:** poverty, inequalities, difficulty of access to education.
C. **School factors:** quality of teaching, inadequate school facilities, lack of guidance and psychological support.
D. **Cultural and environmental factors:** social norms, family and community attitudes towards education.
E. **Technologies and digital inequalities**: impact of technologies on school access and engagement.

A. INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

The phenomenon of school dropout is influenced by various individual factors that significantly contribute to a student's decision to leave the education system. These factors can be psychological, social, and academic in nature, often intertwining with one another. Below is an analysis of some of the primary individual factors contributing to school dropout.

1. Psychological Motivations

Psychological factors play a major role in determining whether a student remains engaged in school. Students who experience certain emotional or mental health challenges may be at a greater risk of dropping out.

✓ **Low Self-Esteem and Motivation**: Students who struggle with low self-esteem or a lack of confidence in their academic abilities may not feel motivated to continue their studies. The perception of failure can discourage students from pursuing education further.

✓ **Mental Health Issues**: Conditions such as **depression**, **anxiety**, or **stress** can create barriers to academic success. Students dealing with mental health struggles may find it difficult to concentrate, complete assignments, or engage with peers, leading to disengagement from school.

✓ **Sense of Alienation or Disconnection**: Many students feel isolated or disconnected from their school environment, whether due to bullying, difficulties forming social connections, or feeling that their education is irrelevant to their personal interests. This sense of alienation can push them to drop out, as they do not perceive school as a place where they belong or can succeed.

2. Lack of Family Support

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Family support is a key element for student success, and a lack of it can significantly increase the likelihood of school dropout. The family environment can either be a source of encouragement or a major challenge to educational achievement.

✓ **Financial Struggles**: Families facing economic hardships may not have the resources to support their children's education, such as purchasing school supplies, affording extracurricular activities, or even providing a stable home environment conducive to study.

✓ **Parental Education and Engagement**: Parents with low levels of education may not feel equipped to help their children academically. In some cases, parents may be less involved in their child's school life, either due to a lack of time or an inability to understand the importance of education. Without the encouragement, guidance, and monitoring that supportive parents can provide, students may be more likely to disengage from school.

✓ **Family Instability**: Issues such as domestic violence, divorce, substance abuse, or mental health challenges within the family can create an unstable environment for students. When students face emotional stress or neglect at home, they may withdraw from school as a coping mechanism or due to an inability to focus on their studies.

3. Academic Difficulties

Students who struggle academically are at a higher risk of dropping out. Difficulty in learning, not being able to keep up with the pace of the curriculum, and a lack of academic support can all lead to disengagement.

B. SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS

Socio-economic factors play a critical role in the phenomenon of school dropout. Poverty, inequalities, and difficulties in accessing education can create significant barriers for students, increasing the likelihood that they will disengage from school. Below is an analysis of some of the primary socio-economic factors that contribute to school dropout:

1. Poverty

Poverty is one of the most significant socio-economic drivers of school dropout. Children from low-income families face numerous challenges that can affect their ability to succeed in school and remain engaged in their education.

✓ **Lack of Financial Resources**: Families living in poverty often struggle to provide basic needs such as food, housing, and clothing, making it difficult for them to afford educational expenses like school supplies, extracurricular activities, or even transportation to school. This financial strain can force students to abandon their studies to help support the family or because they cannot access necessary resources for their education.

✓ **Health Issues and Stress**: Poverty is closely linked to poor health and higher levels of stress. Students from low-income households are more likely to experience poor health due to inadequate nutrition, lack of access to healthcare, and living conditions that promote illness. Chronic illness and

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stress can result in higher absenteeism and lower academic performance, leading some students to drop out.

✓ **Psychological Impact**: Growing up in poverty can have a psychological toll, including feelings of hopelessness, frustration, and a lack of self-worth. Students may begin to view education as unattainable or irrelevant to their circumstances, and they may drop out as a way of coping with these emotional challenges.

2. Inequalities in Education

Disparities in educational opportunities based on socio-economic status contribute significantly to school dropout rates. Inequality in access to quality education creates barriers for students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

✓ **Access to Quality Education**: Students from low-income families often attend schools with fewer resources, outdated materials, and larger class sizes. These schools may lack essential programs such as tutoring, career guidance, or after-school activities that could engage students and help them succeed academically. The lack of resources often results in a lower quality of education, making it difficult for students to keep up with their peers and leading to disengagement.

✓ **Educational Attainment of Parents**: The educational level of parents is a key factor in determining a child's academic success. Parents with lower levels of education may not be able to provide the academic support or encouragement that their children need to succeed. Additionally, they may not fully appreciate the importance of education, further diminishing the chances of academic achievement and increasing the likelihood of school dropout.

✓ **School Facilities and Infrastructure**: Students in socio-economically disadvantaged areas may attend schools that are poorly equipped, with inadequate facilities such as outdated classrooms, lack of technological resources, or insufficient space for learning. This environment can hinder students' educational experience, contributing to a lack of motivation to stay in school.

3. Access to Education

Difficulties in accessing education—whether due to geographic, economic, or institutional barriers—are key contributors to school dropout.

✓ **Geographical Barriers**: In rural or remote areas, students may have to travel long distances to reach school. This may not only be a logistical challenge but also a financial one, as transportation costs can be prohibitive for low-income families. In some cases, students may be forced to drop out because they cannot afford the cost of traveling to school or because the nearest school is simply too far away.

✓ **Cultural and Linguistic Barriers**: Students from immigrant or minority ethnic backgrounds may face cultural or linguistic barriers in the education system. They may struggle to adapt to an unfamiliar curriculum, language, or teaching style, leading to academic difficulties and ultimately school dropout. Additionally, if the school environment does not provide a sense of inclusion, these students may feel disconnected and less motivated to stay in school.

✓ **School Fees and Costs**: In many countries, although primary and secondary education is officially free, there may still be hidden costs associated with schooling—such as uniform requirements, school

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materials, extracurricular fees, and even school lunches. For students from low-income families, these costs can be a significant barrier to continued education, particularly if the family is already struggling to meet basic needs.

4. Unemployment and Economic Pressure

The economic context within a country also affects school dropout rates. High levels of youth unemployment and economic instability increase the pressure on young people to leave school and enter the workforce at an earlier age.

✓ **Youth Unemployment**: In regions with high levels of youth unemployment, students may perceive education as a less viable pathway to financial stability compared to entering the job market early. The lack of job opportunities for graduates can make students question the value of continuing their education, especially if they see others who leave school to work and earn money sooner.

✓ **Economic Pressure on Families**: In households where parents are unemployed or underemployed, the financial burden can push older students to find work and contribute to the household income. This often means sacrificing education for short-term economic gain, as young people may drop out of school to help support the family financially.

5. Social Inequality and Marginalization

Social inequality, including discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, or disability, can contribute to a student's decision to leave school.

✓ **Racial and Ethnic Discrimination**: Students from minority or marginalized groups may face systemic discrimination, either overt or subtle, within the education system. This discrimination can manifest in lower expectations from teachers, fewer opportunities for advancement, or social exclusion, all of which can lead to frustration and disengagement from school.

✓ **Gender Inequality**: In some cultures, gender inequality may limit the educational opportunities available to girls. In these cases, girls may be expected to take on household responsibilities or get married at an early age, rather than completing their education. This is particularly evident in some rural or conservative communities, where girls are more likely to drop out of school due to societal pressures.

✓ **Disability and Special Needs**: Students with disabilities or special educational needs may face challenges in accessing appropriate learning resources or support. Schools may not have the infrastructure to cater to these students' needs, leading to exclusion, frustration, and a higher likelihood of dropping out.

Conclusion

Socio-economic factors, including poverty, inequality, and difficulties in accessing education, are major contributors to school dropout. These factors create significant barriers for students, often leading to disengagement and the eventual decision to leave school. Addressing these socio-economic disparities requires targeted policies and interventions that provide support to disadvantaged students, ensure equitable access to quality education, and help mitigate the impact of economic hardship on educational

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outcomes. Reducing socio-economic inequality in education is critical to preventing school dropout and promoting equal opportunities for all students.

C. SCHOOL-RELATED FACTORS

School-related factors are critical contributors to school dropout rates, as they directly affect the student's educational experience, motivation, and ability to succeed. Below is an analysis of key school-related factors that lead to higher dropout rates:

1. Quality of Teaching

The quality of teaching is a fundamental factor in a student's decision to remain in or leave school. If students perceive their education as irrelevant, unengaging, or inadequate, they are more likely to disengage and eventually drop out. Several aspects of teaching quality influence school retention:

✓ **Teaching Methods:** Inflexible or outdated teaching methods may not meet the diverse learning needs of students. A one-size-fits-all approach often fails to engage students, particularly those with different learning styles, academic abilities, or interests. When students do not feel challenged or supported, their motivation to continue their studies can diminish.

✓ **Teacher-Student Relationship:** Positive teacher-student relationships are crucial in fostering an environment where students feel supported and valued. In cases where teachers lack the necessary interpersonal skills or where students experience a lack of respect or understanding from teachers, students may become alienated and lose interest in school.

✓ **Teacher Expectations:** Teachers' expectations can significantly influence students' academic outcomes. If teachers have low expectations for certain students—often based on stereotypes related to socio-economic background, ethnicity, or gender—students may internalize these expectations, leading to a lack of effort and eventual disengagement from school.

2. Inadequate School Infrastructure and Facilities

The physical environment of a school plays a key role in creating a conducive atmosphere for learning. Inadequate facilities can have a direct impact on student engagement and academic success, contributing to a higher likelihood of school dropout.

✓ **Outdated or Insufficient Resources:** Schools that lack basic educational resources, such as up-to-date textbooks, learning materials, and technology, create barriers to effective learning. Students in these environments may find it harder to keep up with the curriculum or may feel that their education is not taken seriously.

✓ **Poorly Maintained or Unsafe Facilities:** A school's physical infrastructure—classrooms, hallways, restrooms, etc.—must be maintained to ensure a safe and comfortable learning environment. Overcrowded classrooms, poor ventilation, lack of heating or cooling, and dirty or unsafe facilities can make it difficult for students to focus on learning, leading to frustration, poor academic performance, and eventually, dropout.

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✓ **Accessibility Issues:** In some cases, schools may not be accessible to students with physical disabilities or special educational needs. Lack of ramps, elevators, or appropriate classroom accommodations can further isolate these students, leaving them with no other option but to leave school.

3. Lack of Career Guidance and Counselling

Career guidance and counselling services play a crucial role in keeping students engaged in school. They help students understand the importance of education, explore potential career paths, and identify strategies for overcoming academic challenges. A lack of these services can contribute to school dropout in the following ways:

✓ **Lack of Career Orientation:** When students are not provided with information on potential career paths or the connection between education and future employment, they may fail to see the value of completing their studies. Without clear guidance on how education can shape their future, students may lose interest in school and disengage.

✓ **Inadequate Academic Support:** Schools with limited or no counselling services may fail to recognize when students are struggling with their academic performance or personal issues. Early interventions, such as tutoring or academic mentoring, are critical to preventing students from falling behind. When this support is absent, students may become discouraged and drop out.

✓ **Emotional and Psychological Support:** Students often face personal or emotional challenges that can affect their ability to focus on their studies. Without access to psychological counselling, students may struggle with mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, or stress, which can contribute to a lack of motivation and eventual dropout. Schools that lack trained counsellors or fail to address students' emotional needs may see an increase in dropout rates.

4. Inadequate Support for At-Risk Students

✓ **Students who face academic challenges,** behavioural issues, or social problems require tailored interventions to help them succeed in school. A lack of appropriate support for at-risk students can significantly increase the likelihood of school dropout.

✓ **Failure to Address Learning Difficulties:** Students with learning disabilities or those who struggle academically may not receive the individualized attention or accommodations they need. Without appropriate support, these students may fall behind in their studies, leading to frustration, low self-esteem, and the eventual decision to drop out.

✓ **Behavioural Issues and Discipline:** Schools that focus primarily on discipline without offering alternatives such as behavioural interventions, mentorship, or conflict resolution programs may push students toward disengagement. Students with behavioural issues or those who experience disciplinary action may feel isolated, punished, or rejected, which increases their likelihood of dropping out.

✓ **Social Support Networks:** Schools that fail to create a supportive and inclusive environment for students with social issues—such as bullying, peer pressure, or family problems—may see these students withdraw from school. Without a sense of belonging, these students may lose interest in continuing their education and may choose to drop out.

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5. Curriculum Rigidity and Lack of Flexibility

A curriculum that is rigid and does not cater to the diverse needs of students can lead to disengagement, especially among students who do not fit the traditional mood.

✓ **Lack of Personalization:** Students who do not feel that the curriculum is relevant to their lives or learning styles may struggle to stay engaged. A standardized, one-size-fits-all curriculum can be especially difficult for students who are at different levels of academic ability, making it harder for them to keep up.

✓ **Lack of Alternative Educational Pathways:** Some students may thrive better in vocational or technical education, but traditional schools may not offer sufficient alternatives. The absence of tailored educational pathways, such as technical training or apprenticeships, may result in students feeling that traditional education does not serve their interests, leading them to drop out.

Conclusion

School-related factors, including the quality of teaching, inadequate facilities, lack of career guidance, and insufficient support for at-risk students, all contribute to the problem of school dropout. A failure to address these factors can cause students to feel disengaged, unsupported, and disconnected from their education, leading to an increased likelihood of leaving school. To combat school dropout, schools must ensure that they provide high-quality teaching, adequate facilities, and comprehensive support services that address the academic, emotional, and career needs of all students. These interventions are crucial in helping students overcome barriers to success and stay on track to complete their education.

D. CULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

Cultural and environmental factors play a significant role in shaping students' attitudes toward education and, ultimately, their likelihood of dropping out. These factors are deeply influenced by social norms, family attitudes, and community values, which can either encourage or hinder academic success.

✓ **Social Norms and Cultural Attitudes Toward Education:** The societal perception of education greatly impacts how students view the value of schooling. In many cultures, education is seen as a key to upward mobility and social integration, while in others, it may not hold the same level of importance. Cultural values related to education shape students' aspirations and their commitment to completing their schooling.

✓ **Influence of Media and Technology:** In today's digital age, media and technology can have a profound influence on students' perceptions of education and success. Social media, in particular, can create unrealistic expectations and portray alternative lifestyles that do not involve education.

✓ **Impact of Social Media:** The increasing use of social media among young people has led to a rise in distractions and a shift in priorities. Students who spend significant amounts of time on social media may develop unrealistic views of success and self-worth, which do not necessarily align with academic achievement. This distraction can lead students to disengage from school, contributing to dropout rates.

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✓ **Technology in Education**: While technology has the potential to enhance learning, there is also the risk of technological divides in certain communities. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may lack access to digital tools and resources, further hindering their educational success. In such cases, students may feel disconnected from the mainstream educational experience and may choose to leave school.

Conclusion

Cultural and environmental factors, such as societal norms, family attitudes, peer influence, and community support, play a vital role in shaping students' educational journeys. When these factors create an environment that undervalues education, or when students face stigma and discrimination, they are more likely to disengage from school and ultimately drop out. Addressing these cultural and environmental causes requires a holistic approach that includes fostering a positive school culture, involving families in the educational process, and creating supportive community environments that encourage educational success for all students.

E. TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITAL INEQUALITY- IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY ON ACCESS AND SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

The role of technology in education has become increasingly significant, particularly in recent years, as digital tools and platforms have become an integral part of the learning process. However, the increasing reliance on technology also brings to light issues of digital inequality, which can contribute to higher school dropout rates. The gap between students who have access to the necessary technology and those who do not can lead to significant educational disadvantages, making it an important factor in understanding the causes of school dropout.

1. Digital Divide: Inequities in Access to Technology

One of the primary factors contributing to school dropout rates is the "digital divide" – the gap between students who have access to modern digital tools, such as computers, internet connectivity, and learning platforms, and those who do not. This gap is particularly prevalent in lower-income households or rural areas, where students may lack the resources to participate fully in digital learning environments.

✓ **Access to Devices**: In many schools, the use of digital devices like laptops, tablets, or smartphones is crucial for completing assignments, accessing educational resources, and engaging in remote learning. Students who do not have access to these devices may struggle to keep up with their peers, leading to frustration, disengagement, and, ultimately, the decision to drop out.
✓ **Internet Connectivity**: Reliable internet access is essential for students to engage in online learning, conduct research, and submit assignments. However, students in areas with limited or no internet connectivity are at a significant disadvantage. This disparity can hinder their academic progress and exacerbate feelings of isolation from their peers, leading to increased dropout rates.
✓ **Educational Platforms and Software**: Many schools have adopted digital platforms for teaching and learning, such as online classrooms, virtual labs, or collaborative software. Students who are unable

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to use these platforms effectively due to lack of access or insufficient digital literacy may fall behind academically. This gap in access to learning tools can lead to disengagement from school activities, increasing the risk of school dropout.

2. Digital Literacy and Skills Gap

A lack of digital literacy—the ability to effectively use technology for educational purposes—can also be a significant barrier to student engagement and success. Students who do not have the skills to navigate digital platforms may struggle to complete assignments, understand online materials, or participate in virtual classroom discussions.

✓ **Inadequate Digital Skills**: Students who are not taught how to use technology effectively or who have limited exposure to digital tools outside of school may face challenges in engaging with schoolwork. Without basic digital literacy skills, these students may feel overwhelmed by the demands of modern education, leading to disengagement and eventual dropout.

✓ **Inequalities in Digital Literacy Education**: The gap in digital literacy education is often linked to socio-economic factors. Students from wealthier families may have greater opportunities to develop digital skills at home, through access to technology and parental support. In contrast, students from lower-income households may not have the same opportunities, exacerbating the digital divide and increasing the likelihood of educational disengagement.

3. Impact of Remote Learning on Engagement

The shift to remote learning, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, has brought to light the extent of digital inequality in education. While online learning offers flexibility, it also presents challenges for students who do not have the necessary technology or a suitable learning environment.

✓ **Increased Disparities During Remote Learning**: During periods of remote learning, students without access to computers or the internet were often left behind. This gap in access has been particularly pronounced among disadvantaged groups, such as students from low-income families or rural areas. These students may have struggled to attend online classes, participate in group work, or complete assignments, leading to disengagement and academic failure.

✓ **Lack of Face-to-Face Interaction**: Remote learning also lacks the face-to-face interaction that many students rely on for motivation and support. Students who may be struggling academically or emotionally might not have access to the same level of in-person help and encouragement from teachers and peers, increasing the likelihood of them falling behind and dropping out.

4. Emotional and Psychological Impact of Digital Inequality

The digital divide can also have emotional and psychological consequences for students. Those who lack access to technology may feel stigmatized or marginalized, leading to a sense of isolation and a decreased sense of belonging within the school community.

✓ **Feelings of Exclusion**: Students who are unable to participate fully in digital learning environments may experience feelings of exclusion from their peers, who are able to access the same

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resources and opportunities. This sense of exclusion can contribute to a lack of motivation to stay engaged with school, which can increase the likelihood of dropout.

✓ **Frustration and Anxiety**: Struggling to keep up with digitally-based assignments, especially when technical issues arise, can cause significant frustration and anxiety for students. Without adequate support or resources, students may feel overwhelmed by these challenges, leading to disengagement and ultimately dropping out of school.

5. Long-Term Educational and Career Implications

The lack of access to technology and the digital skills gap can have long-term consequences for students, both in terms of their educational trajectory and future career prospects.

✓ **Limited Access to Higher Education**: As educational institutions increasingly rely on technology, students who do not have digital skills may find it difficult to access higher education opportunities. Many colleges and universities now require students to submit applications and complete assignments online. Students who are not digitally literate may struggle to meet these requirements, limiting their chances of pursuing further education.

✓ **Reduced Career Opportunities**: In the modern job market, digital literacy is increasingly a requirement for most employment opportunities. Students who lack the necessary digital skills may find themselves at a disadvantage when applying for jobs, limiting their career prospects and contributing to a cycle of poverty and unemployment.

6. Strategies for Addressing Digital Inequality

To combat the impact of digital inequality on school dropout rates, various strategies can be implemented:

✓ **Providing Access to Technology**: Schools and governments can work to ensure that all students have access to the necessary technology and internet connectivity. This may involve providing devices such as laptops or tablets to students who do not have access to them at home and ensuring that students in rural areas have reliable internet access.

✓ **Digital Literacy Programs**: Schools can offer digital literacy training to help students develop the skills needed to navigate digital platforms. This could include providing basic computer skills workshops, training on specific educational platforms, and offering support for students who may struggle with technology.

✓ **Hybrid Learning Models**: Offering a blend of in-person and online learning can help bridge the digital divide by providing flexibility for students who may face challenges with remote learning. Hybrid models can also ensure that students still have access to face-to-face support while engaging with digital tools.

✓ **Providing Emotional Support**: Schools should recognize the emotional and psychological impact of digital inequality and provide support for students who may feel excluded or marginalized. This could involve offering counseling services, peer mentoring programs, and creating a supportive online learning environment that encourages collaboration and interaction.

Conclusion

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Technology and digital inequality are increasingly important factors contributing to school dropout rates. Students who lack access to technology, struggle with digital literacy, or face barriers to online learning are at a significant disadvantage. To address these issues, it is crucial to ensure that all students have equal access to the tools and skills necessary for success in the digital age. By reducing digital inequality, schools can improve student engagement, reduce dropout rates, and better prepare students for future educational and career opportunities.

6.2. A Proposal

To effectively combat school dropout due to individual factors, a **holistic, student-centered approach** is required. This involves **enhancing psychological support, improving academic interventions, fostering positive social environments, providing career guidance, and engaging families and communities**. By addressing these key areas, schools can create **a more inclusive and supportive learning environment**, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to thrive and complete their education.

With reference to the factors identified above, we list possible proposals.

A.	INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

1.   Psychological and Emotional Support

✅ Solutions:

✓ **Expand access to school psychologists and counselors** to provide mental health support and personalized interventions.

✓ **Implement social-emotional learning (SEL) programs** to teach students coping mechanisms, resilience, and emotional regulation.

✓ **Introduce peer mentoring and support groups** to create a sense of belonging and reduce feelings of isolation.

✓ **Provide stress management and mindfulness training** to help students navigate academic and personal pressures.

2.   Strengthening Family Involvement and Support

✅ Solutions:

✓ **Develop parent education programs** to help families understand the importance of education and how to support their children's learning.

✓ **Create school-family collaboration initiatives**, such as regular parent-teacher meetings, workshops, and home visits.

✓ **Offer flexible learning options** for students from challenging home environments, such as online learning or part-time schooling.

✓ **Connect at-risk students with community mentors or social services** to provide additional emotional and financial support.

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3. <u>Addressing School-Related Difficulties</u>

✅ Solutions:

- ✓ **Implement personalized learning plans** that cater to different learning styles and abilities.
- ✓ **Offer tutoring and remedial education programs** to support students struggling with coursework.
- ✓ **Promote active and engaging teaching methods**, such as project-based learning and interactive lessons, to make education more appealing.
- ✓ **Establish early warning systems** to identify and intervene when students show signs of disengagement.

4. <u>Creating a Supportive and Inclusive School Environment</u>

✅ Solutions:

✓ **Enhance anti-bullying policies** and create safe spaces for students to express concerns.

✓ **Encourage extracurricular activities** (sports, arts, clubs) to boost student engagement and social connections.

✓ **Foster positive teacher-student relationships** by training educators in mentorship and motivational strategies.

✓ **Ensure culturally inclusive and diversity-friendly education** that reflects the backgrounds and experiences of all students.

5. <u>Providing Career Guidance and Future-Oriented Education</u>

✅ Solutions:

✓ **Introduce career exploration programs** early to help students set academic and professional goals.

✓ **Expand vocational education and apprenticeship opportunities** for students interested in practical, hands-on learning.

✓ **Increase job shadowing, internships, and mentorship programs** connecting students with real-world career experiences.

✓ **Provide entrepreneurship training** to equip students with skills for self-employment and financial independence.

B. SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS

1. <u>Financial Support for Low-Income Families</u>

✅ Solutions:

✓ **Expand scholarships, grants, and financial aid programs** for students from low-income backgrounds.

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✓ Provide free or subsidized school supplies, uniforms, and transportation to remove cost-related barriers.

✓ Introduce conditional cash transfer programs that provide financial incentives for school attendance and performance.

✓ Increase funding for free school meal programs to ensure students receive proper nutrition, which supports learning and school engagement.

2. Ensuring Equal Access to Quality Education

✅ Solutions:

✓ Increase public investment in education, particularly in disadvantaged communities, to improve infrastructure, teacher training, and access to learning materials.
✓ Expand the reach of schools in rural and marginalized areas, including mobile schools and community-based learning centers.
✓ Leverage digital and remote learning solutions, such as online education platforms, radio, or television-based instruction, to reach students in remote regions.
✓ Promote inclusive education policies that ensure equal opportunities for all students, regardless of socio-economic background.

C. SCHOOL-RELATED FACTORS

1. Improving the Quality of Teaching

✅ Solutions:

- ✓ Invest in continuous professional development for teachers to enhance their skills in student-centered and innovative teaching methods.
- ✓ Promote active and engaging learning techniques, such as project-based learning, interactive lessons, and digital tools.
- ✓ Provide teachers with better resources, including updated textbooks, technology, and classroom materials.
- ✓ Encourage mentorship and peer learning among teachers to exchange best practices and improve instructional quality.
- ✓ Implement regular teacher evaluations and feedback systems to ensure high standards of teaching effectiveness.

2. Upgrading School Infrastructure and Learning Facilities

✅ Solutions:

- ✓ Increase public investment in school infrastructure, ensuring classrooms, libraries, and laboratories are well-equipped.
- ✓ Ensure all schools have access to modern technology, including computers, internet connectivity, and digital learning platforms.

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✓ Improve physical conditions in schools, such as sanitation, lighting, heating, and ventilation, to create a comfortable learning environment.

✓ Expand extracurricular facilities, including sports, arts, and cultural activities, to make school more engaging for students.

✓ Ensure schools are safe and inclusive, with anti-bullying policies, gender-sensitive facilities, and accessibility for students with disabilities.

3. <u>Strengthening Psychological and Emotional Support Services</u>

☑ Solutions:

✓ Expand school counseling and psychological services to provide mental health support for students in need.

✓ Train teachers to recognize and respond to student emotional and behavioral challenges in a supportive way.

✓ Introduce social-emotional learning (SEL) programs to help students develop resilience, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills.

✓ Create peer mentoring and support groups to foster a sense of belonging and reduce feelings of isolation.

✓ Develop crisis intervention teams in schools to address urgent psychological and social issues affecting students.

4. <u>Enhancing Career Guidance and Future Planning</u>

☑ Solutions:

✓ Expand career counselling services to help students explore different educational and professional pathways.

✓ Integrate career education into the curriculum, providing exposure to various industries and job opportunities.

✓ Offer job shadowing, internships, and apprenticeships to give students real-world experience.

✓ Develop partnerships with local businesses and vocational training centers to provide students with clear career progression opportunities.

✓ Introduce entrepreneurship education to equip students with skills for self-employment and business development.

5. <u>Creating a Positive and Inclusive School Climate</u>

☑ Solutions:

✓ Implement anti-bullying and discrimination policies to ensure that all students feel safe and respected.

✓ Promote student participation in decision-making, allowing them to voice concerns and contribute to school improvement.

✓ Develop mentorship programs that connect students with teachers, older students, or professionals for guidance and support.

✓ Encourage schools to foster strong relationships with families and communities to create a broader support system for students.

✓ Provide targeted support for at-risk students, such as additional tutoring, mentorship, and personalized learning plans.

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D. CULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

1. Changing Social Norms and Attitudes Toward Education

✅ Solutions:

- ✓ Launch awareness campaigns that emphasize the importance of education for all children, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic status.
- ✓ Engage community leaders, religious figures, and local influencers to advocate for education and challenge harmful stereotypes.
- ✓ Promote success stories of individuals from similar backgrounds who have benefited from completing their education.
- ✓ Encourage youth participation in education-related discussions to shift peer attitudes and foster a culture of lifelong learning.

2. Strengthening Family Engagement and Support

✅ Solutions:

- ✓ Implement parent education and literacy programs to help families understand the long-term benefits of education.
- ✓ Organize regular school-parent meetings and workshops to strengthen family involvement in their child's academic progress.
- ✓ Provide financial incentives for families (such as conditional cash transfers or tax benefits) to encourage school attendance.
- ✓ Develop culturally sensitive outreach programs that respect traditions while promoting education.

3. Enhancing Community Involvement in Education

✅ Solutions:

- ✓ Establish community learning centers that provide after-school tutoring and mentorship.
- ✓ Foster partnerships between schools and local organizations, businesses, and NGOs to offer resources, scholarships, and vocational training.
- ✓ Encourage volunteering and mentorship programs where community members support at-risk students.
- ✓ Develop local role models and mentorship initiatives to inspire students through real-life examples.

4. Addressing Cultural and Gender-Based Barriers

✅ Solutions:

- ✓ Implement legal frameworks and policies that prohibit child marriage and enforce school attendance.
- ✓ Promote gender-sensitive education policies, ensuring that girls and boys have equal access to schooling.
- ✓ Create safe spaces for girls in schools, including separate sanitation facilities and mentorship programs.

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✓ Introduce flexible schooling options for students who face cultural barriers, such as evening classes or distance learning.

5. **Promoting Alternative Learning Pathways**

✅ Solutions:

✓ Expand vocational education and skills training programs tailored to local employment needs.
✓ Develop flexible education models, such as part-time schooling or online learning, for students with work or family obligations.
✓ Encourage apprenticeships and community-based learning opportunities that integrate practical skills with formal education.
✓ Introduce second-chance education programs to help school dropouts return to learning.

E. TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITAL INEQUALITY - IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY ON ACCESS AND SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

1. **Expanding Access to Digital Devices and Internet Connectivity**

✅ Solutions:

✓ Provide free or subsidized laptops, tablets, and mobile devices for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
✓ Expand broadband infrastructure in rural and underserved areas through public-private partnerships.
✓ Offer free Wi-Fi hotspots in schools, community centers, and public spaces to ensure all students can access online resources.
✓ Introduce data subsidy programs to help low-income families afford internet access.

2. **Improving Digital Literacy for Students and Educators**

✅ Solutions:

✓ Integrate digital literacy into school curricula, teaching students essential tech skills such as online research, cybersecurity, and media literacy.
✓ Provide professional development for teachers on using digital tools effectively in classrooms.
✓ Develop parental training programs to help families support their children's digital learning.
✓ Encourage peer learning and mentorship programs where tech-savvy students assist their classmates.

3. **Ensuring Inclusive and Engaging Digital Learning**

✅ Solutions:

✓ Adopt interactive and adaptive learning technologies that adjust to students' individual learning needs.
✓ Encourage blended learning approaches, combining face-to-face instruction with digital tools to maintain student interaction.

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✓ Ensure accessibility of digital resources for students with disabilities through assistive technologies and inclusive design.
✓ Develop engaging educational content, such as gamified lessons, interactive simulations, and virtual labs.

4. <u>Strengthening School and Community Digital Support</u>

✅ Solutions:

✓ Establish school-based tech support centers where students can receive assistance with digital tools.
✓ Create partnerships with tech companies and NGOs to provide digital resources and training.
✓ Encourage digital mentorship programs, where students can receive guidance on using technology for learning.
✓ Offer after-school digital learning hubs where students can access computers and high-speed internet.

5. <u>Addressing the Risks of Technology Overuse and Digital Disengagement</u>

✅ Solutions:

✓ Implement responsible technology use policies, promoting balance between digital and in-person learning.
✓ Train teachers on strategies to keep students engaged in virtual settings, preventing passive learning.
✓ Educate students about online safety and digital well-being to prevent cyberbullying and social media distractions.
✓ Encourage structured screen time limits at home and school, balancing technology use with physical activities.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Psychological and Emotional Support

2. Strengthening Family Involvement and Support

3. Addressing School-Related Difficulties

4. Creating a Supportive and Inclusive School Environment

5. Providing Career Guidance and Future-Oriented Education

6. Financial Support for Low-Income Families

7. Ensuring Equal Access to Quality Education

8. Improving the Quality of Teaching

9. Upgrading School Infrastructure and Learning Facilities

10. Strengthening Psychological and Emotional Support Services

11. Enhancing Career Guidance and Future Planning

12. Creating a Positive and Inclusive School Climate

13. Changing Social Norms and Attitudes Toward Education

14. Strengthening Family Engagement and Support

15. Enhancing Community Involvement in Education

16. Addressing Cultural and Gender-Based Barriers

17. Promoting Alternative Learning Pathways

18. Expanding Access to Digital Devices and Internet Connectivity

19. Improving Digital Literacy for Students and Educators

20. Ensuring Inclusive and Engaging Digital Learning

21. Strengthening School and Community Digital Support

22. Addressing the Risks of Technology Overuse and Digital Disengagement

Education and training in the EU: where do we stand?

The EU works with the Member States to make education systems fit to give all Europeans the best start in life. The 2020 edition of the Education and Training Monitor, published during the unprecedented disruption caused by the corona-virus crisis, shows the importance of digital skills. As the last edition of the Monitor under the outgoing Education and Training 2020 cooperation frame-work, it highlights the successes and remaining challenges of the past decade of policy efforts.

The Education and Training Monitor

The Education and Training Monitor is the EU's flagship publication that analyses how education and training is evolving in the EU and its Member States.

Over the past nine years, the Monitor has been instrumental in driving education reform by fostering dialogue with and between Member States, and highlighting policy measures that have delivered results on the ground.

Each year, the Monitor tracks progress towards the Europe 2020 headline targets, the benchmarks adopted under the EU cooperation policy framework Education and Training 2020, and other important indicators in the sector.

This year's focus: digital skills

The COVID-19 crisis demonstrated the importance of stepping up the readiness of digital solu-tions for teaching and learning in Europe and also pointed to where the weaknesses lie. The digital infrastructure of schools developed significantly in the past decade, yet large disparities persist in many countries. The share of students attending highly digitally equipped and connected schools differs widely across Europe. It is highest in Nordic countries, and ranges from 35% (primary) to 52% (lower secondary) to 72% (upper secondary). However, only 8% of students attend schools located in a village or small town which has access to a high-speed Internet above 100 Mbps.

In addition, teachers were not adequately prepared to use digital technologies in the classroom before the crisis. On average in the EU, fewer than half of teachers (49.1%) report that ICT was included in their formal education or training. Moreover, while a growing number of teachers participate in continued professional development (CPD) programmes related to the use of digital technologies, this does not always translate into teaching practices.

Pupils' digital skills are improving, but they need to be developed further. Contrary to the com-monly held view that today's young people are a generation of 'digital natives', the International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS) results indicate that young people do not devel-op sophisticated digital skills just by growing up using digital devices. Underachievement, in the sense of a failure to understand and perform even the most basic ICT operations, is widespread in the EU. In 2018, as many as 62.7% of Italian pupils did not manage to pass the underachieve-ment threshold (however the pupils tested were on average one year younger than in other coun-tries). Neither did 50.6% of pupils in Luxembourg, 43.5% in France, 33.5% in Portugal, 33.2% in Germany, 27.3% in Finland and 16.2% in Denmark.
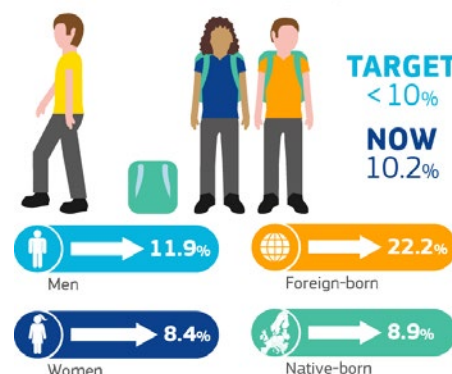
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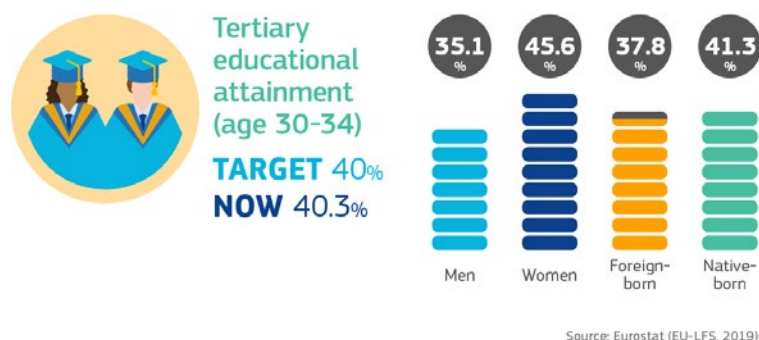
Education and Training

How has the EU performed
against the 2010-2020 education targets?

The target on **early leavers from education and training** stood at 10.2% in 2019, only 0.2 percentage points from the target. This represents progress of 4 percentage points over the past decade. Fewer girls are early leavers (8.4%) than boys (11.9%). These figures hide sizeable differences between countries, varying between 3% in Croatia and 17.3% in Spain. Some countries have made considerable progress, particularly Portugal (20.3%), Spain (13.6%) and Greece (10.1%). There has been a persistent gap in the rate of early leavers between the foreign-born (22.2%) and the native-born (8.9%).

Early leavers from education and training (age 18-24)

TARGET <10%

NOW 10.2%

Men 11.9%

Women 8.4%

Foreign-born 22.2%

Native-born 8.9%

Source: Eurostat (EU-LFS, 2019)

Tertiary educational attainment (age 30-34)

TARGET 40%

NOW 40.3%

35.1% Men
45.6% Women
37.8% Foreign-born
41.3% Native-born

Source: Eurostat (EU-LFS, 2019)

Tertiary educational attainment has seen its target value of 40% reached. In 2019, the EU-27 had 40.3% people aged 30-34 with a tertiary degree. This means the EU-27 has raised the TEA rate by 9.2 percentage points in the past decade.

Participation in **early childhood education** is high but uneven access and quality remain a challenge. On average in the EU, participation in early childhood education (4+) stood at 94.8% in 2018 (latest available data), just 0.2 percentage points below the target. However, some Member States have not made sufficient progress and stayed well below the 2020 benchmark, notably Greece (75.2%), Croatia (81.0%), Slovakia (82.2%), Bulgaria (82.4%) and Romania (86.3%).

Early childhood education (age 4+)

TARGET 95%

NOW 94.8%

Source: Eurostat (UOE, 2018)

Underachievement in

reading **22.5%**

maths **22.9%**

science **22.3%**

TARGET below 15%
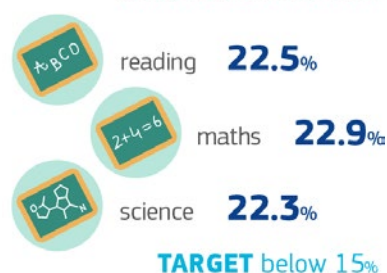
Source: OECD (PISA, 2018)

However, the EU has not met its target to reduce **underachievement in basic skills** to less than 15% and little progress has been achieved over the past decade. The underachievement rate stood at 21.7% in **reading**, 22.4% in **mathematics**, and 21.6% in **science** in 2018, the year of the latest PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) test. That means that Europe faces a persistent challenge with more than one-fifth of 15-year-olds demonstrating underperformance in basic skills that bodes ill for their chances in professional and private life. In reading, only four EU Member States met the 15% ET2020 benchmark: Estonia (10.2%), Denmark (14.6%), Poland (14.7%) and Finland (15.0%). At the other end, the underachievement rate exceeded 30% in Romania (46.6%), Bulgaria (44.4%), Cyprus (36.9%), Greece (35.8%) and Malta (30.2%).

European Toolkit for Schools

Promoting inclusive education and tackling early school leaving

- **Do you want to improve attendance or reduce drop-out?**

- **Are you lookiwng for ways to improve the involvement of parents in your school?**

- **Are you considering introducing more collaborative approaches to teaching and learning?**

Then you may benefit from using the **European Toolkit for Schools**. The Toolkit promotes a whole school approach to **improve inclusiveness** and **prevent early school leaving**. It can help school heads, teachers and others identify the needs in prevention of early school leaving and find suitable solutions. The Toolkit collects evidence, documents and good practices of collaborative approaches in and around schools that can be implemented, in different school contexts.

The Toolkit is divided in 5 areas

1. School governance	2. Teachers	3. Support to learners	4. Parental involvement	5. Stakeholders involvement

Each of the **areas** describes the challenges and **proposes actions** to introduce at school level. This is underpinned by research evidence, and followed by documents and examples from practice. Examples include detailed descriptions of change processes and materials such as manuals, videos or websites. Search and filtering tools can allow to find specific examples.

An **on-line questionnaire** allows users to identify their points of interest and receive a tailored report with selected resources (documents and practices). Users are invited to submit new resources through the **online form**; good practices from schools introducing successful initiatives are especially welcome. An Editorial Board supports the selection and updating of the **Toolkit resources**.

https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/europeantoolkitforschools

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