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Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe

Promising Practices Inside and  
Outside Formal Secondary Education

POLICY BRIEF 1

## Promising Practices Inside and Outside Formal Secondary Education

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## Executive Summary

This policy brief highlights inspiring school-based measures to prevent early school leaving (ESL) in regular secondary education, as well as compensatory measures provided by alternative learning pathways, often outside mainstream education. We have based our findings on the largest European comparative survey research and qualitative fieldwork ever conducted into the processes leading to early school leaving. The nine member states targeted in the RESL-EU study were chosen because of their contrasting percentages of early school leaving. This offered us a unique opportunity to learn from experiences and practices in countries with a relatively high and relatively low ESL rate.

This policy brief describes the various opportunities and challenges that school directors, teachers, support staff and pupils encounter when tackling early school leaving. First, we present several types of school-based prevention and intervention measures, which we have assessed according to a stakeholder-based evaluation that highlights the conditions required to make effective each type of measure for tackling early school leaving within mainstream education. The development of effective **early warning systems** can be seen as a first crucial step for schools to get a grip on ESL. Next, we present socio-emotional and behavioural support measures, career guidance measures and academic support measures to counteract ESL. We have also identified a list of contextual factors that are crucial to the effectiveness of the evaluated measures. **First of all**, in order to develop an effective instrument, **teaching staff must be trained** to systematically detect and compile at-risk indicators; **not only cognitive indicators, but also behavioural indicators and psychological indicators**. Next, the projects we evaluated underscore that **allowing pupils a say and a form of ownership** in the design and implementation of measures helps to make programs effective and is perceived as having a **positive effect on teacher-pupil relations**. School staff often pointed to a lack of parental involvement as a risk factor leading to ESL. We have singled out practices where the development of a more positive and inclusive approach towards parents, especially those from socially disadvantaged and/or ethnic minority backgrounds, fosters greater parental involvement in schools. Last but not least, a **flexible and individualized learning** approach was found to be crucial to tackling ESL. Mainstream education institutions in formal secondary education, however, are only providing such pathways to a limited extent. Instead, we discovered alternative learning pathways that are pursuing a more holistic approach and providing compensatory pathways for youngsters who have left formal education early.

Alternative learning pathways (ALP) have proven to be important instruments in the successful reintegration of young people into training and/or the labour market. Alternative learning arenas can offer important lessons for mainstream education as they are often more flexible in terms of the program they offer, provide more individual attention, and view the challenges that pupils encounter more holistically as they are often intertwined. Many successful measures outside regular secondary

## School-based Prevention and Intervention Measures

education to prevent and tackle early school leaving use a **holistic approach**. Such an approach helps pupils to reengage with school due to the use of a more flexible and personalized pedagogy, and a caring environment that goes beyond learning support. While such a caring approach is essential for regular education institutions, we encountered them more often in alternative learning pathways. **Work-based learning** approaches are another successful ALP. Unfortunately, these alternative learning arenas are often in the margins and pupils who attend them suffer from negative stereotypes. Closer cooperation between in-school and out-of-school measures with regard to guidance and direction could benefit both institutions and pupils at risk of ESL.

This section addresses the actions that education institutions can undertake to combat early school leaving within mainstream education. The RESL.eu research project includes inspiring examples of interventions and policy measures and a number of opportunities and challenges encountered by teachers, support staff, students and parents. We will address specific measures on the school level that we have encountered in most of our targeted countries regardless of the school system differences.

### 1. Early Warning Systems (EWS)

A starting point for developing and implementing measures to reduce early school leaving is to identify pupils' needs in order to implement the most suitable interventions in good time. Early Warning Systems (EWS) were therefore high on school staffs' lists of preventive measures for reducing early school leaving. The school staff we interviewed in-depth expressed a strong belief in the need for a detection and monitoring system using at-risk indicators. Most EWS focus on behavioural indicators, such as truancy and pupils' involvement in disruptive behaviour in class. EWS that are considered more effective also evaluate (sudden) dips in a pupil's study progress or forms of emotional disengagement, other than disruptive behaviour in class. **A major challenge of EWS is to train teachers, mentors and support staff to interpret such risk indicators correctly and to use EWS measures at an early stage, taking all pupils into account.**

### 2. Socio-Emotional and Behavioural Support

#### INCLUSIVE INCENTIVES TO COUNTERACT TRUANCY

Our study shows that interventions to deal with truancy are predominantly punitive. Yet, our talks with a wide range of stakeholders show that this punitive approach, particularly the exclusion of pupils from school, can further increase the risk of early school leaving. In our research, we often witnessed an escalation of both punitive measures at school and increased truancy and misconduct of pupils to the point where it seemed that neither the staff nor the youngsters were motivated to restore the relationship. In most cases, schools invested more in isolating at-risk pupils from the others than putting effort into keeping them enrolled in school. This spiral was found to be difficult to break. Hence a more **inclusive approach, which also considers the views of the pupils**, can increase pupils' ownership of both disciplinary actions and remedies for potential causes of misconduct. Helping pupils who are often absent to reintegrate into their class by providing incentives for attendance could be another way to positively tackle the problem of truancy.

### COUNSELLING, COACHING AND MENTORING

School staff and other stakeholders stated that personalized one-on-one emotional and behavioural support is a key instrument for tackling both motivational and behavioural problems. Yet most schools predominantly respond to visible symptoms (such as absenteeism) by taking reactive and punitive measures rather than by giving pro-active emotional and behavioural support. The individualized care provided by schools is extremely diverse, ranging from highly-structured weekly care team meetings that include cross-sectorial partnerships to ad hoc reactions to students' needs, which are noticed inadvertently rather than through systematic early warning systems. The level of professionalization of support staff poses major challenges, varying from regular teaching staff not receiving specific training to a lack of care professionals such as student counsellors, social workers and school psychologists. Access to and availability of funding for professional support is considered essential by school staff, who are the designers and implementers of the measures. Our study, however, indicated that pupils often prefer to receive more proactive care from a teacher whom they recognize as a person they trust.

### 3. Career Guidance Support

Both teachers and pupils argue that it is crucial that pupils receive high-quality career guidance on their future educational and professional options. However, more personalized career guidance that addresses pupils in a direct and relevant manner was rather scarce. An integrated, more long-term approach towards career guidance has also been found to be influential. Taking a long-term approach would make the success of career guidance less dependent upon the willingness and commitment of specific staff members. Once more, this requires the availability of sustainable funding for career guidance. Sees

### 4. Academic Support

#### ADDITIONAL TUTORING SUPPORT MEASURES

This was a prominent measure in almost all the schools we studied. It demonstrates the high awareness and level of commitment of schools and educational staff to supporting disadvantaged children. One of the main challenges of such measures is posed by the fact that students usually participate in this form of support on a voluntary basis. This means that the pupils who are most likely to profit from these measures often do not participate in this type of remedial support. At the same time, voluntary participation in these measures is often precisely what makes them successful. Schools have learned that the way in which they approach pupils is crucial to their willingness to participate. Another challenge for tutoring measures is that due to budgetary constraints, teachers often take up these additional tutoring tasks on a voluntary basis on top of their 'regular' teaching tasks. These constraints make tutoring all too often dependent upon the willingness of the stakeholders involved.

However, in some countries the figure of the teacher-tutor has been implemented at a national level, reducing the negative effects that budgetary constraints have upon the implementation of such measures.

#### FLEXIBLE LEARNING PATHWAYS

Individualized learning is the new buzz word in education. The RESL.eu study found increasingly often that a standardized set of learning methods and requirements leaves too many students poorly served. This is especially true of schools with a high number of at-risk pupils from disadvantaged families. Many educational institutions we visited therefore work with flexible programs and adaptive teaching styles, individualizing the curriculum to the specific learning needs and ability levels of their pupils. Usually it is staff members who decide which pupils should be selected for a more flexible program. We saw that programs that also allow pupils to be involved in these decisions often had positive results. Flexible learning paths also work well together with peer tutoring.

#### SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION SUPPORT (SEN)

School responses to special educational needs (SEN) discussed in this policy brief are restricted to accommodating SEN students within a regular school context. An increasing number of schools are integrating children with special needs into regular schools. This can only be successful if a number of measures are implemented: extra support; a reduced student-teacher ratio; a flexible curriculum based on the pupils' special needs, and providing teachers with better training and support for working with special-needs pupils. In many RESL.eu countries, the major challenge facing SEN is a lack of funding due to cutbacks in government spending. This often results in teacher burnout and inadequate support for SEN students.

## Contextual Factors Required For the Prevention and Intervention Measures to Succeed

In the following section we list the contextual factors which were found to be necessary to the success of the aforementioned school-based measures to counteract ESL.

### Promoting Professional Development and Support of School Staff

School staff emphasized that tackling ESL requires **staff to be able to detect and monitor early signals of risk**. Many staff members indicated that they did not feel equipped to take up this role. **Further professionalization and in-service training is needed**. However, such services are often restricted due to financial cutbacks.

### Promoting the Pupils Voice and Ownership

Our findings show that **pupils are often left out** of the design and implementation of measures, yet it is important to understand whether they share a similar view on the scope and aims of the measures since the **effectiveness of measures improves when pupils are motivated to participate**. Several focus schools gave us interesting examples of how giving pupils a say and ownership made the measure more effective. This finding suggests that moving towards a more participatory educational system could have beneficial effects for all pupils.

### Promoting Supportive Teacher-Pupil Relationships

Teachers are still the most important actors in their pupils' educational trajectory. Schools that invest in teacher-pupil relationships tend to introduce regular one-on-one talks between pupils and specific teachers or support staff members in the form of regular feedback, interviews with classroom teachers, and talks with mentors, youth coaches and student counsellors.

### Incentives to promote parental involvement

Taking a **more positive and less stigmatizing approach** proved to be a successful way of promoting parental involvement in schools. Some schools have been able to engage parents more successfully by being more pro-active and inclusive. This has also had a positive effect on their children's school involvement.

## Compensatory Measures: Alternative Learning Pathways

### Taking on a Holistic Multi-Professional Approach

A comprehensive approach can be instituted by not only responding to cognitive and behavioural risk factors, but also by targeting potential emotional disengagement from school. Holistic policies are more recommendable as they do not approach ESL as a rational decision made by an individual, but as a process leading up to a potential ESL decision that is always embedded within a broader and more complex context. Our findings show that it is important not to lose sight of the influence of other dimensions on the institutional and structural level. Furthermore, the most elementary contextual precondition for schools to keep pupils on track to attain an educational qualification is to ensure that **basic human needs such as nourishment and shelter are provided for**. Some schools argue that the poor living conditions of some pupils made this factor an important precondition for successfully supporting their educational attainment. We found that “**alternative learning pathways**” make a crucial contribution to establishing a caring environment and providing for basic needs due to their flexible and individualized approach.

Alternative learning pathways provide alternative means of acquiring educational qualifications outside of regular secondary schools. In this section we will present two groups of alternative learning approaches we have come across that offer compensatory pathways for young people who left regular education without an upper secondary educational qualification.

### Work-based Learning Approaches

Dual learning pathways (i.e. part-time school in combination with part-time work-based learning, apprenticeships, etc.) are an important preventive and compensatory tool for combatting early leaving from education and training. Work-based learning pathways usually have a dual aim: to provide opportunities for gaining professional skills and to work towards an educational qualification. Most work-based learning pathways are, however, perceived as “second best” or “last resort” options in most of the countries involved in the RESL.eu study, as they are frequently chosen following negative experiences in mainstream education. Often they compensate for the lack of practical training and individualized support in mainstream education systems. Both pupils and project staff of such programs said often and emphatically that schools did not provide sufficient and correct information about dual learning options and their labour market opportunities. Our study showed that work-based learning pathways could provide a good alternative for pupils who are more interested in practical learning and gaining work experience.

### Innovative Pedagogical Approaches

Pedagogical approaches used in regular secondary education often do not meet the needs of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. While more pupils could benefit from more innovative pedagogical approaches, it seems that particular groups encounter many difficulties in ‘fitting’ into the rather rigid structure of regular secondary schools. Therefore, many of the innovative approaches used in alternative learning arenas introduce flexibility to learning pathways and focus more explicitly on experiences of success. They also provide more practical learning methods and access to the transferable skills, such as communication, presentation, leadership skills or networking skills that young people need in order to be able to continue their education and succeed in the labour market.

The goal of these innovative pedagogical approaches is to increase pupils’ motivation and ownership by giving them a say in the learning process. In general, such measures have been relatively successful in reaching out to vulnerable youth yet they are frequently associated with negative stereotypes and are assigned a lower status by society in general than other educational programs or institutions.

## For Further Reading

If you would like more detailed information on the school-based prevention and intervention measures we studied or **Alternative Learning Approaches**, please see the following RESL.eu Publication:

Nouwen, W., Van Praag, L., van Caudenberg, R., Clycq, N., Timmermann, C. (2016). **School-based Prevention and Intervention Measures and Alternative Learning Approaches to Reduce Early School Leaving**, RESL.eu Publication 3, University of Antwerp.



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