

Tackling Early School Leaving in Europe

ESN Policy Statement

20 June 2011

ESN is the independent network for social services in Europe. Our mission is to help change the lives of the most vulnerable in society through the delivery of quality social services. We bring together the people who are key to the design and delivery of vital care and support at the local level to learn from each other and contribute their experience and expertise to building effective European and national social policy.

ESN welcomes the publication of the European Commission's Communication on Tackling Early School Leaving and the accompanying Proposal for a Council Recommendation. Given the target to reduce the early school leaving rate Europe-wide to below 10% and the concurrent Europe 2020 targets on poverty and employment, **ESN considers this to be a valuable initiative**. It provides valuable policy knowledge and guidance to national and sub-national governments in the Member States.

A number of ESN's 80 Member Organisations across Europe directly manage **specialist public social services for children and families**, including child protection responsibilities, at local or regional level. ESN set up a working group on children and families in 2008-09 which published the short report 'Breaking the Cycle of Deprivation'. The group was composed of managers of children's services (mainly specialists in child welfare and protection) in local government, government advisors and researchers.

Local authorities in different countries are responsible for a **varied mix of universal and specialist services** for children and families, including:

- Early intervention measures for mothers and infants
- Children's and family allowances
- Support for parents and children with mental health problems or disabilities
- Child protection assessments and placements for 'children at risk' in foster care, adoption or residential care (besides the concurrent legal process of placing children in public care)
- Universal early childhood education and care in nurseries and family centres
- Infrastructure planning for housing, schools, transport, health services

In many cases, families whose material situation is difficult often seek help and support first and foremost from a local authority or other local actors.

In line with its Members' particular responsibilities, ESN has a concern for '**children at risk**' (i.e. those on official registers due to concerns for their safety and welfare) and '**children in public care**' (i.e. those legally in the care of State authorities). The former two groups of children may well be among the children counted in the ESL rates across the Member States. Probably, they would form a small share of the children concerned, but have very high welfare needs, as would perhaps the families (even the communities/ neighbourhoods) around them.

As the Commission communication points out, "**early school leaving is strongly linked to social disadvantage**", thus also hinting at a strong cross-over with 'children at risk'. It goes on to say that early school leavers "are over-represented among pupils with disabilities and are more likely to show emotional and behavioural problems, or specific learning difficulties." The Roma population is another group noted to be disproportionately affected. Schools should be encouraged to become an inclusive environment for children with disabilities, those from minority groups and children in public care. Measures to prioritise access to good schools for these children should also be considered. Where measures are targeted at children from a disadvantaged background, care should be taken to reduce the risk of stigmatisation to which children may be subjected and to promote awareness among (other) pupils about issues such as disability, social deprivation and poverty.

All of these groups would potentially have **some contact with specialist social services** managed by ESN Members in local and regional government. However, the ESL communication does not refer to the broader groups of 'children at risk' and 'children in

care', nor to those children living in institutions, particularly large 'orphanages' in parts of Central and Eastern Europe). There may of course be some overlap here with groups mentioned by the Commission (e.g. children with learning difficulties, Roma children). Although official Europe-wide data about the numbers of children in these groups are not – to our knowledge – available, it would be worth investigating whether these children are more likely to leave school early.

Even if particular categories of children can be identified as being especially at risk, **the importance of an individual approach** to each child's situation should be at the heart of practical support at the local level. According to the Commission, "[ESL] is a process rather than a one-off event." Across all its areas of work, ESN has emphasised the importance of individual multi-agency needs assessments, that would seek to prevent the 'process' of ESL from progressing. Schools should have a policy to recognise and mitigate the risk of pupils' exclusion from school on the grounds of behavioural problems or persistent absenteeism. Schools could draw in specialist support for such pupils and their families, e.g. through counselling or anger management.

The Commission also notes the high incidence of ESL in remote areas and disadvantaged city neighbourhoods. ESN has also consistently advocated for **strategic assessment of needs of the whole population** in a given locality. We are pleased to see that this is consistent with the Commission view: "Strategies for combating ESL have to take as a starting point an analysis of the main reasons behind ESL for different groups of pupils, regions, localities or schools..." ESN believes that local authorities/municipalities are well-placed to carry out such an analysis, bringing together the knowledge and experience of local partners, services and citizens to create adequate strategies, on the basis of a legitimate local democratic process.

The Commission is, in ESN's view, right to point out that "**ESL is not just a school issue** and its causes need to be addressed across a range of social, youth, family, health, local community, employment, as well as education policies." ESN believes that its Members, which design and provide specialist child welfare and protection services, besides generic early childhood education and care services (depending on the country's system) should be closely involved in tackling early school leaving.

Difficulties at school often have their roots outside. Problems at school cannot therefore be solved without tackling their root causes outside. **Successful measures need to provide a holistic solution** by involving different actors and supporting the whole individual and the family around them. Such approaches depend on partnerships between different public and community/civil society groups – something that requires strong local leadership and political support.

Extra-curricular activities such as breakfast, home-work, sports clubs and other community clubs can have benefits for children's learning and development that not every child may receive at home. Initiatives that reach out to parents, perhaps helping them catch up on their education, are also valuable and may reinforce learning at home with their children. Here, partnerships are essential: allowing educators and community groups to use school premises may help build a sense of belonging to the local community and help individuals overcome a certain reluctance in regards to (formal) education.

Schools reflect the socio-economic and ethnic composition of the area they serve. Some schools may have served a mixed population but others may serve an area characterised by high levels of deprivation, whether in terms of employment, health, education or income. Schools in such areas tend to be identified as having higher rates of below-average attainment and educational failure¹. ESL should be addressed by responsible local authorities within broader strategies on socio-economic, urban and rural development.

Overall, the Commission communication makes a strong case for tackling early school leaving. The estimate that reducing ESL “by just one percentage point would provide the European economy each year with **nearly half a million additional qualified potential young employees**” will certainly focus policy-makers’ minds. Considering the potential positive impact on child poverty rates (also a concern at European level within the social OMC) and preventing intergenerational transmission of poverty, this is a policy strand that is well worth pursuing. Social and health services could be an employer of the additional potential workforce resulting from effective ESL policies, given concerns about meeting the future care needs arising from demographic ageing trends.

ESN supports the Commission’s communication on Tackling Early School Leaving as a contribution to policy-making in this area. There are issues of particular concern to ESN Members managing specialist child welfare and protection services at local level. ESN therefore wishes to call on Member States to incorporate the following points in the final version of the Council recommendation which they adopt:

- A. Children at risk (i.e. those on official registers due to concerns for their safety and welfare), children in public care and children living in large institutions may need special support to help them complete school education – particular attention should be paid to these children across all three elements described below and support given on the basis of a holistic assessment of their needs.
- B. ESL strategies should take as their starting point an analysis of the main reasons behind ESL for different groups of pupils, regions, localities or schools. Local and regional authorities should play a major role in carrying out this analysis and developing ESL strategies to meet the needs of their locality or region.
- C. Specialist child welfare and protection services should be closely involved in the development of all elements of ESL strategies to ensure that those children with the highest welfare needs (notably children at risk and children in public care) also benefit from these approaches.

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See also ESN’s policy brochure ‘Breaking the Cycle of Deprivation’: <http://www.esn-eu.org/get-document/index.htm?id=366> and resources from ESN’s children & families working group: <http://www.esn-eu.org/children-and-families/index.htm>.

¹ Alex Hugh David, The ‘collateral impact’ of pupil behaviour and geographically concentrated socio-economic disadvantage, British Journal of Sociology of Education, Vol. 31, p.261-276.