

EFEE Statement on the Commission's initiative for a Child Guarantee

3rd November 2020

Child poverty has become an issue for all Member States although its intensity varies within and among them. Even long before the crisis, in 2018, every fourth child in the EU was at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Today's COVID-19 crisis has aggravated this situation most likely even more, uncovering that so-far taken measures, such as the 2013 Commission Recommendation on "Investing in Children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage", have not fallen on fertile ground.

Child poverty is multidimensional, involving and effecting many different societal fields, the quality of education and lifelong learning. If no future actions are taken, child poverty, will have not only short-but also long-term impacts for today's children, their opportunity to thrive in society and consequently, society as a whole.

As a social partner representing European education and formal education providers of all levels of education from 23 European countries and strong supporter of the United Nations Agenda 2030, the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE) very much welcomes the Child Guarantee initiative. In the following, EFEE wishes to provide further insights regarding its support by answering the questions posed by the Commission on its background note for this hearing.

1. Do you agree that the challenges presented in the section 3 (such as cost, availability and outreach, as well as the fragmentation, lack of strategies, monitoring and data) impede access for the children in need to the services that are essential for their development and well-being?

We agree that the challenges addressed represent significant obstacles to children's development and well-being, therefore impairing their personal potential as responsible and active citizens and limits their integration in the labour market. In this regard, we would like to draw special attention to the field of childcare and early education where the impacts resulting out of these challenges have become significantly visible.

Despite the implementation of the Bologna targets in 2002, today, still not all children find themselves integrated in qualitative childcare systems in Member States. One major reason for this are, according to an OECD study published in June 2020, the high costs for childcare in some countries, which are often for low-income households, including single-parents and those of migrant background, barely affordable. This inequality regarding the access to qualitative childcare does not only impede socially disadvantaged children from acquiring essential basic skills they need for their personal and professional fulfillment. It also keeps parents, especially those of vulnerable groups and mothers, from re-integrating into the labor market. A study of the European Commission in 2018, shows that low female labour market participation creates a loss of 370 billion euro a year for Europe.

Also, when it comes to enjoying qualitative early school education, children from disadvantaged and marginalized background face significant disadvantages. Although in all Member States compulsory schooling is free of charge, formal education-related expenses such as books, canteen food and transport pose a notable burden on low-income households in many member states. It is to be expected that this burden has increased due to even lower incomes or salary losses in European households due to unemployment and short-time labor schemes as an economic reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to create an early childhood education and care system which is more in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Gender Equality Strategy, we need better data in order to assist Member States with regards to reforms and funding. In the light of this, we welcome the Child Guarantee bringing about a valuable contribution to the creation of more transparency not only when it comes to identifying disadvantaged children and their families. Also, since child poverty is a matter of multilevel-governance, it allows a more profound understanding of where investments is needed so that they can be allocated efficiently. In this regard, Operational Programs, reflecting the needs of Member States, will serve as crucial guidelines. We would like to stress once more the importance of providing necessary resources to formal education and care providers, public and private, in order to remove obstacles which impede children from succeeding in the entire process of lifelong learning, as soon as possible. Hence, we are enthused that ESI funds such as the European Regional Development Fund as well as the European Social Fund Plus provide for funding, also giving the multidimensional nature of child poverty. Furthermore, we would like to also draw attention to Recovery and Resilience Facility as well as the REACT- EU as latest and additional funding possibility to strengthen the urgency to act towards Member States.

2. Do you consider that an EU initiative in the form of a Council Recommendation on a Child Guarantee is the right instrument for improving access to services for children in need respecting their rights and specificities of each Member States?

Against the backdrop of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals, we have committed our work to making the access to quality education and care services more equal to all learners from the very start. Respecting the principle of subsidiarity, we, therefore, welcome the initiative. It represents a crucial step towards decoupling the socio-economic background of children from their opportunities to learn and become active participants in the social sphere. However, would like to stress that, in order to close existing gaps in the provision of services, greater synergies among already existing funding instruments in all fields of lifelong learning is vital. In this regard, we would like to mention the Youth Guarantee, the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived as well as the EU School Fruit, Vegetables and Milk Scheme under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) as examples of the shared management funding mechanisms. However, the risk of child poverty does not only vary within but also among Member States. Statistics show that children living in Nordic countries, such as Denmark or Finland, are exposed to a lower risk of suffering from poverty than those living in the South, particularly the Balkans. Against the backdrop of this, we emphasize that tailor-made approaches are necessary in order to guarantee a sustainable and effective allocation of investments. Consequently, a severe delay of their implementation after 1 January 2021 needs to be avoided in order to prevent ad-hoc investments of EU funds.

3. What elements should the Commission include in the initiative to ensure access for children in the need to the services that are essential for their development and well-being? In particular,

- a) *Do you share the above indication of categories of children being in need of extra support? Could such categorization help calibrate the specific measures facilitating access to services and enhance equal opportunities?***

We believe that inclusiveness is the key to tackling child poverty and promoting the well-being of all children enabling them to learn and mature developing their whole potential and becoming responsible and active citizens. Hence, we support the stated categorization as a responsive approach to the individual needs of vulnerable children.

b) *Do you share the above indication of the service areas to be covered in the initiative?*

As stated before, child poverty is multidimensional. Hence, for tackling it, a multidimensional approach is necessary. Therefore, we agree with the service areas covered by the initiative. Nevertheless, we would like to emphasize once more that the coordination of measures and funding taken in and among these service areas is essential for tackling existing inequalities related to early child education and care.

c) *Do you think there are specific elements of services that should be provided free of charge for children in need?*

d) We, as a social partner in education, strongly speak out for governments and especially local authorities to be empowered financially so that they can provide educational services free of charge to children in need. This includes, for example, the provision of Information and Communication technologies (ICT) and meals for students at home. In this regard, the COVID-19 pandemic has functioned as an eye-opener, showing once more the access to affordable education is a cornerstone for children's development. In this regard, we should take the pandemic as an opportunity to create the basis for a more inclusive European society.

e) *Do you think there are specific policy measures that we should include in the initiative to increase the outreach, take-up and inclusiveness of the mentioned services for children in need?*

As in the case of funding, we believe that policy measures taken should be overarching and interdisciplinary as child poverty itself affects and involves a variety of different social fields. However, also here, the coordination among the fields of inclusion is of the utmost importance to avoid duplication and, consequently, ineffectiveness. In this regard, policy instruments in the field of labor such as the Youth Employment Support Package, Youth Guarantee and European Skills Agenda ought to be coordinated with the ones in the field of education and care. Only in doing so can an overall sustainable and inclusive path in lifelong learning be achieved in the long-term view, being beneficial for all future learners to come.

4. In which ways can the Social Partners contribute to, and support the effective implementation of the Child Guarantee in the Member States?

As a social partner, EFEE has committed itself to strengthen social dialogue and collective bargaining regarding the challenges of today's society. We strive to turn these challenges into opportunities and create a more sustainable, inclusive and fair era. Thereby, we foster mutual learning by providing our members on national and regional level with the opportunity to exchange best practices and experiences regarding the effectiveness of measures taken. Also, we enable them to actively participate in the design of new policy directions. We do so, by monitoring and exchanging information in the framework of projects and feeding the results into the policy system on EU level.

