EFEE Statement on a Proposal for a Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success

Brussels, 4 June 2021

With long-term closures of schools across European countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has put an additional toll on students especially those who already belonged to the group of disadvantaged learners before the pandemic. Against this backdrop, European education systems are now facing the risk that the alarming percentage of early leavers from school and training as well as underachievers amongst pupils, as presented in the PISA 2018 study, will increase significantly.

The European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE), representing 60 institutions responsible for management of education systems at all levels of education from 26 countries, is, thus, enthused of the Commission's Proposal for a Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success.

EFEE invites the European Commission to take the following points into consideration to further improve the proposal initiative:

Early school leavers, meaning pupils "who have only achieved pre-primary, primary, lower secondary or a short upper secondary education of less than 2 years (…..) and include those who have only a pre-vocational or vocational education" (see European Commission) frequently show a great lack of basic skills and competences, such as digital literacy and numeracy. Against this backdrop, the expected rising numbers of early school leavers triggered by COVID-19 circumstances represents an obstacle not only for the long-term recovery of European economies, which are in need for skilled workers to manage the twin transition successfully. Moreover, early leavers from education and training themselves face significant difficulties not only in the labour market but also in daily life due to their limited education. Consequentially, early school leavers are exposed to a greater risk of poverty and social exclusion as NEETs than their peers completing a higher level of education.

Against this backdrop, we warmly welcome this objective set in the framework of this initiative, renewing the commitment of the 2011 Recommendation of the Council of the European Union on policies to reduce early school leaving as well as ET 2020 strategy goal of "reducing the proportion of 18- to 24-year-olds leaving education and training early to below 10%" by 2020. Further, it strengthens the ambition of the Council Resolution on the European Education Area (EEA) of February 2021 emphasizing that "*efforts must continue to bring down the rate of early leaving from education and training and aiming for more young people to obtain an upper secondary education qualification*".

Studies, such as those published in the framework of the Education and Training Motor (ETM) 2020, have shown that a possible causality exists between the socio-economic background of a pupil and their decision to become an early school leaver. It was found that school students with, for instance, a migrant or refugee background or coming from lower-income and education families, are more likely to leave school earlier than their peers from higher-income and non-migrant families. Another socio-factor influencing early school leaving as well as underperforming is gender. PISA results have shown boys are more frequently amongst the underachievers than girls, making it more likely that they will

become early school leavers than their opposite sex due to a lack of motivation. In turn, fewer girls than boys acquire basic STEM skills and competences in schools. The result of this still ongoing trend is portrayed on the labour market where women still find themselves underrepresented in STEM related fields such as engineering and computing.

In light of this, we encourage the Commission to take the following measures into account, focusing specifically on the pillars of monitoring, prevention and intervention:

- **Monitoring**

  The collection of solid data represents a crucial basis in order to be able to address early school leaving and underperformance amongst pupils in education and training efficiently. This is especially true as the degree of prominence of the above-mentioned factors contributing to pupils' performances and decisions to leave school early vary among European countries. While in countries such as Germany, Sweden, Estonia and Slovenia pupils with a migrant background do not face major difficulties with regards to acquiring basic skills, the performance gap "remains (..) wide between native-born peers (…) and non-migrant pupils" (see European Commission) Also within European countries the geographical location influences the performance of pupils. Schools in rural areas struggle more frequently than those in urban areas "to provide quality education due to their geographical isolation and small size, which increase the risks of suffering from insufficient infrastructure, a limited educational offer and a lack of experienced teachers".

  Against this backdrop, we warmly welcome the Commission's proposition to include the further fostering of the development of national, regional and local data collection systems in the Recommendation. In this regard, we encourage the Commission to emphasis the need that these systems should follow a holistic and inclusive approach when collecting data.

  Further, we encourage the Commission to emphasize the need for strengthening the dialogue between the national and EU level, for instance when it comes to, for instance, the communication of the evaluation of the data collected. The sheer collection of data is not enough to be able to tackle early school leaving and underperformance efficiently. In the end, all comes down to people, creating trust and transparency through dialogue in a long-term run. In this regard, we, as social partners in education, consider it as of utmost importance to foster the dialogue between employers, school leaders and others at all levels of governance in order to facilitate peer learning and the therewith bound exchange of information and best practices.

  As a subsequent step to the collection of data and evaluation, we encourage the Commission to outline the importance of the coherence of already existing financial mechanisms such as the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, Recovery and Resilience Facility and to ensure an adequate distribution of these funds on a need-based approach. In doing so, a crucial contribution is made to decouple the geographical location of

a school from its ability to provide qualitative and inclusive education for every learner on the basis of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

- **Prevention and Intervention**

Preventive measures against low-achievement and early leaving from education and training are key and should be taken from the earliest stage possible of an individual's learning career. Furthermore, the coherence and stringency of such measures taken within and amongst different learning stages, from early childhood education and care to upper secondary education, is crucial in order to ensure an effective prevention framework.

As one of the most effective basic principles underlining prevention and intervention measures, we consider it crucial to bear in mind that the central mission of education is not only to provide students with the skills needed to enter the labor market. Instead, education also accompanies young people on their journey of becoming active, responsible citizens who perceive lifelong learning as an enriching source for their individual lives. They perceive learning not as a burden but as enriching and as a crucial part of their personal and professional development. Consequently, a student who is motivated and perceives school learning not as a burden but rather an enrichment to his personal life will automatically perform better and will be less likely arrive at the decision to leave school before finishing upper secondary education. Thus, the key to motivation lies in establishing a personal attachment between school education and the pupil itself.

We, therefore, welcome the Commission's proposal to foster new ways of learning and teaching by adapting therewith bound fundamental components such as curricula, teacher education, pedagogies and learning environments in accordance with the needs of students, especially those belonging to the disadvantaged groups of learners with a higher risk for underperforming and early school leaving as indicated above. In this regard, we deem it crucial to emphasize that the implementation of extra-curricular activities should be strengthened in curricula to illustrate to pupils the significance of the acquisition of certain skills, such as in the field of STEM, for their lives. Furthermore, we consider such extracurricular activities as an opportunity to direct attention to the formation of pupils' transversal competences such problem solving, conflict resolution, consensus building, information management, interpersonal expression, and critical and creative thinking, being equally important to basic skills.

Aside from the design of curricula, the role of the teacher is decisive when it comes to overcoming reducing the number of underperforming students and early school leavers. Teachers are in day-to-day interaction with students, taking the place as role models for their students. They not only convey knowledge but also inspire and motivate, and in doing so, shape their students' perceptions and actions towards learning in a long-lasting way. Having this in mind, we consider it crucial to adapt initial and continuous teacher education and training to the needs of specifically disadvantaged groups of learners. In this sense, we encourage the Commission to foster the role of female teachers teaching STEM courses in

order to overcome skill stigmatization and motivate especially girls to acquire basic STEM skills. Further, we also deem it crucial to facilitate the entry of interested outside professionals as well as migrant teachers into the teaching profession. In doing so, we consider it likely that the teaching profession would automatically experience a boost of attractiveness, tackling the issue of teacher shortage across many European countries.

Lastly, we encourage the Commission to highlight in its proposal the need to further strengthen the dialogue in the school eco-system on the one hand and between education institutions and external actors on the other hand. As representatives of education and training providers as well as social partners in education, EFEE plays a crucial role as we not only foster cooperation between school heads, teachers and students but also facilitate the communication between the school system with its external community of stakeholders, such as researchers, ministries, public employment services and NGOs. By strengthening the cross-sectoral collaboration between education stakeholders and those from the labour market in particular, we ensure that a mismatch of needs and expectations with regards to competencies and skills is prevented on both sides.

In this regard, we would like to highlight several relevant projects, which we have been conducting since 2009 in cooperation with ETUCE. Of particular interest for this initiative are, for instance, our projects "EU CONVINCE – EU Common Values Inclusive Education", "European Sectoral Social Partners in Education promoting effective integration of migrants and refugees in education" and "e-Speed–European Social Partners in Education Embracing Digitalisation: Challenges and opportunities for European education trade unions and employer organisations in the digital era". Further, the richness of expertise that our membership covers from early childhood to adult education has fed directly into the work of the ET 2020 Working Groups, including the one of Schools. We therefore encourage the Commission to build on these successful joint efforts and continue involving our expertise in the field of inclusive sustainable qualitative school education and management in the framework of this new proposal and the envisioned expert group on the one hand as well as the new Working Group of Schools in the framework of achieving the European Education Area 2025 on the other hand.

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