Commission launches action plan to reduce early school leaving

More than six million young people in the EU leave education and training with lower secondary level qualifications at best. They face severe difficulties in finding work, are more often unemployed and more often dependent on welfare benefits. Early school leaving hampers economic and social development and is a serious obstacle to the European Union's goal of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. The Commission today approved an action plan that will help Member States to achieve the Europe 2020 headline target of reducing the EU average rate of early school leavers to under 10%, from the current level of 14.4%, by the end of the decade.

José Manuel Barroso, the President of the European Commission, said: "Europe cannot afford that so many young people who have the potential to contribute to our societies and our economies are left behind. We need to realise the potential of all young people in Europe in order to recover from the crisis."

The European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, Androulla Vassiliou, added: "Reducing the share of early school leavers across Europe by just 1 percentage point would create nearly half a million additional qualified young people each year. Most EU countries have made progress in reducing the number of young people leaving school with low qualifications, but more needs to be done."

The Commission's new initiative outlines the situation across Europe regarding early school leaving, its main causes, its risks for future economic and societal development, and proposes ways to tackle the problem more effectively.

The accompanying proposal for a Council Recommendation contains guidelines to help Member States develop comprehensive and evidence-based policies to reduce early school leaving.
The situation across Europe

The current EU-average of 14.4% early school leavers masks considerable differences between countries:

- Seven Member States have already achieved the 10% benchmark: Austria, Czech Republic, Finland, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.
- Three Member States have rates higher than 30%: Malta, Portugal and Spain.
- Almost all countries have reduced their rates of early school leavers since 2000.
- Some countries with high rates have also achieved significant reductions: Romania, Malta, Italy, Cyprus and Portugal.
- Considerable progress has also been achieved by countries which already had low rates of early school leaving at the beginning of the decade, such as Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Poland.

Although there are some common features, Member States also face different situations with regards to the groups most affected, the highest level of education achieved by early school leavers and their employment status (for more details see MEMO/11/52).

How to tackle early school leaving

Early school leaving is a complex problem and cannot be solved by education policies alone. Efficient strategies to reduce early school leaving must address education, youth and social policies. They need to be tailored to local, regional and national conditions. They should include prevention, intervention and compensation measures.

- **Prevention** of early school leaving needs to start as early as possible by supporting children in their learning and by avoiding conditions which may trigger early leaving, such as making a pupil repeat a school year and failing to properly assist children with different mother-tongues.

- **Intervention** measures need to quickly and effectively address emerging difficulties such as truancy and low performance levels.

- **Compensation** measures need to offer 'second chance' learning opportunities including additional classes in school and possibilities for young adults to re-enter education and training.

Better co-operation between EU countries, the exchange of good practices and a more targeted use of EU funding can help to tackle the problem.

Next steps

The Commission's proposals will be discussed by Education Ministers during their Council meeting on 2-4 May in Brussels. Member States will be invited to adopt comprehensive strategies based on this framework by the end of 2012 and to implement them through their national reform programmes.
The Commission, for its part, will target funding through the Lifelong Learning Programme and the Research Framework Programme to create innovative ways to tackle the problem, and through the European Social Fund to finance national and regional measures to reduce early school leaving.

**To find out more:**

MEMO/11/52, including country-by-country statistics


Proposal for a Council Recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving [COM(2011)19], 31 January 2011


Staff working paper “Reducing early school leaving” [SEC(2011)96], 31 January 2011


European Commission: Early school leaving
Chart 1: Percentage of the population aged 18-24 with at most lower secondary education and not in education or training (2009) and evolution 2000-2009 (% relative change)

- Eurostat (Labour Force Survey); MK= former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia;
- Students living abroad for more than one year or more or conscripts on compulsory military service are not covered by the EU Labour Force Survey, which may imply higher rates than those available at national level. This is especially relevant for Cyprus.
- Data for Slovenia and Croatia lack reliability due to a small sample size; Bulgaria, Poland and Slovenia: evolution refers to the period 2001-2009; Czech Republic, Ireland, Latvia, Slovakia and Croatia: evolution refers to the period 2002-2009.
- In Finland, the educational attainment level is measured at the beginning of the year (register data). This implies overestimation of the indicator in the country.