



CONFERENCE REPORT: REDUCING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING: EFFICIENT AND EFFECTIVE POLICIES IN EUROPE

Brussels, 1 and 2 March 2012

1. BACKGROUND

Affecting one in seven young people, early school leaving (ESL) is one of the main educational challenges in Europe, and reducing its levels is a shared objective of EU countries. The conference organised by the European Commission on 1-2 March 2012 brought together more than 300 practitioners, researchers and policy makers to discuss ways of addressing early school leaving. Over two days participants had the opportunity to meet colleagues from different European countries, to share views on the most urgent needs for further policy development, to exchange experiences and practices and to see some concrete examples of successful initiatives. The four workshops addressed fundamental issues such as the challenges of developing a sufficient evidence-base for better targeted policies against early school leaving, of establishing cross-sectoral cooperation, of addressing drop-out from vocational education and training, and of promoting different forms of learning to retain disengaged young people in education and training. The conclusions of the workshops were discussed in a final panel debate. An exhibition of 22 concrete examples of successful initiatives took place in the evening of the first day.

The conference also marked the launch of a Thematic Working Group in this field, which will meet regularly to exchange experiences and good practice and to contribute to policy development at European level. Conference discussions were supposed to give additional input for the work of this group.

2. PLENARY SESSION 1 MARCH 2012

Jan Trzuszczński, Director General for Education and Culture, opened the conference by recalling the political context of the event. More than 14% of all 18 to 24 year olds in the EU finish their education and training with only lower secondary education or less; to reduce early school leaving is therefore one of the headline targets in the Europe 2020 strategy. By 2020, the average European early school leaving rate will be below 10% if the target is met.

The Council Recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving, which was adopted in June 2011¹, defines a common baseline for policy development. EU Member States agreed in this Recommendation to put in place comprehensive

¹ OJ C 191 2011

strategies against early school leaving by end of 2012; the annexed 'framework for comprehensive policies against early school leaving' argues strongly for a holistic approach and includes a list of recommendable and transferable measures for the analysis and monitoring, the prevention, intervention and compensation of early school leaving.

But despite the numerous measures already taken in Member States, progress in reducing early school leaving remains too slow. There is a need to increase efforts in order to reach the EU target and to provide more young people with better qualifications. Mr Truszczyński underlined that countries need to shift from implementing individual measures to introducing evidence-based, comprehensive and cross-sectoral policies, as set out in the Council Recommendation.

The European Commission supports this process in different ways: This conference is one important contribution to the development of efficient and effective policies against early school leaving. It is expected to be a lively forum for exploring new ideas and will feed into the work of the new Thematic Working Group on early school leaving. In turns, this group will contribute to the extension of knowledge on early school leaving processes, on efficient and effective policies against early school leaving and on methods of monitoring developments. It will feed its results into the regular discussion at policy level and publish its results.

But financial support is also crucial. Mr Truszczyński highlighted the role European Structural funds and the EU's programmes in education and training can play in supporting efficient and effective policies against early school leaving. Together with initiating more research and experimentation, the targeted use of European funding can make a difference.

The **Danish Minister for Education, Christine Antorini**, reminded the audience that early school leaving is not a new problem. Combating youth unemployment and early school leaving was also high on the agenda in the 1980s. But today politicians and practitioners in Europe are starting to work together and to share good practice. Denmark recently started a national campaign against absenteeism, one of the first signs that a student is at risk of early school leaving. While there are many reasons for absenteeism, such as poor results or family problems, Ms Antorini argued that the answer to it is better teaching: spell-binding, involving and well designed. Denmark therefore supports initiatives to improve teaching and to focus more on applied linguistics and applied mathematics. The Danish Presidency will also host a conference on entrepreneurial teaching methods.

In order to reduce drop-out in Denmark, the following measures are taken in general upper secondary education: identifying students at risk of dropping out, offering subject-related support as well as specifically targeted support from teachers to make sure that students understand the requirements, and providing counselors or mentors to help students to deal with difficulties. Absenteeism of a student triggers not only support, but can also lead to penalties such as forced examinations or loss of study grants.

With regard to drop-out in vocational education and training (VET), Denmark also introduced a set of measures which will better support students, but also improve the image and the quality of VET. A 'Quality Patrol' has already visited 75% of all VET colleges and supported the development and dissemination of good practices. A stronger focus on pupils with migrant backgrounds and cooperation with social partners are also expected to contribute to improving the results of VET colleges.

In addition, Denmark invests strongly in guidance. Guidance is seen as a continuous process throughout the educational system. It starts already from the 8th grade and continues to the 10th grade. Youth guidance centers provide guidance services up to the age of 25 years. Their focus is on the transition from compulsory education to upper secondary education or, alternatively, to the labour market.

In his speech on "the crisis of schooling in the age of learning: the growing menace of school disengagement, failure and leaving", **Mariano Fernández Enguita** (University of Salamanca, Spain) urged the audience to reflect on a number of factors, common to all educational systems and revealing the inadequacy of the school institution in the age of information, knowledge and learning society.

While information becomes more abundant, widespread, accessible and cheap, knowledge becomes scarce, more valuable and unequally distributed. Comparable to the Matthew-Effect, a situation in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, Prof Fernández Enguita sees a growing gap in European societies between the 'logorich' and the 'logopoor'. Failure in education, which was not regarded as a serious problem until some decades ago, today equates to a ticket for exclusion. Disadvantaged and vulnerable groups are more likely to experience failure in education and more affected by early school leaving. This is linked to weaknesses in education systems such as poor teaching quality, academically biased curricula or the overuse of grade repetition (repeating school years). However, the problem of schooling in the age of learning is more profound.

He pointed to a new 'economy of attention', where school is no longer the window to the world, but seeks to keep pupils' allegiance in an increasing competition for attention. Despite the growing importance of skills and qualifications for finding a good job, schooling is losing instrumental and expressive [?] perceived value for young people. Schools no longer have a monopoly on learning, which now takes places in a range of more diverse ways. There is a growing divide between old ways of accessing information and knowledge and new forms of learning emerging around ICT, new media and social networks, hiding maybe a third order digital divide between institutions and society, the teaching profession and its public. The bias of the composition of teaching professionals (in terms of gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background) might accelerate this development.

Prof Fernández Enguita sees school systems called into question by new movements of home schooling, by failure, drop-out and disengagement of too many young people and by different forms of learning not linked to the traditional education institutions. Against this background he argued for opening classrooms and better integrating schools into society.

Royston Maldoom, world-known British choreographer, who has for a long time developed dance projects with disadvantaged young people (including youngsters in prisons) all over the world, recalled that children are to be at the centre of all actions, and that the glance we cast on them at a very early stage will strongly affect the way their personalities develop. Having worked many years with youngsters at risk of dropping out, or already excluded from mainstream education, he sees low self-esteem and low ambition as the main problem, which can in turn generate a number of negative or disruptive attitudes (inability to cope with failure, lack of empathy and respect for others, poor discipline).

He pointed to some of the school's most urgent challenges: curricula not reflecting the children's interests; a lack of choice; a timetable in which the flow of teaching is constantly interrupted; simplistic and rapid diagnostics labelling children. He stressed the fundamental role for all those involved in education is recognising and trusting children's potential and helping them discover and cultivate their own talents and qualities. Teachers should help children expand their horizons and feel ownership of their own learning. Mr Maldoom stressed the hard mental, emotional and physical work involved; achievement comes as the result of challenging and expanding oneself, not through lower standards. Dance, and all forms of creativity and art, can be a powerful tool to help children become conscious of their physical, emotional, social abilities, to encourage them to engage and to feel positive and proud of their achievements.

3. WORKSHOPS

The workshops focussed on the critical policy areas in the context of early school leaving. Participants were invited to reflect on their own practices, to learn from experiences in other countries, to look at different policy options for combating ESL and to provide inputs for the Thematic Working Group on ESL. The Workshops conclusions were structured around three questions: 1) new ideas I can use in my country; 2) main policy implications; 3) recommendations for the Thematic Working Group.

3.1. Workshop 1: Who leaves why and when? – Evidence-based approaches towards reducing early school leaving

The workshop presented different approaches to collect data and information on early school leavers and early school leaving processes.

Suzanne Dannenburg-Bijl, Ministry of Education of the Netherlands, showcased the **Drop-out explorer (NL)**. The Drop-out Explorer is based on individual pupil numbers that allow tracking the educational development of all pupils in the Netherlands. Linked to a nation-wide IT system, it offers complete and reliable figures on drop-out rates nationally, regionally and at the municipal and school levels. Individual data contain information on age, gender, address, ethnic origin, education type and school history. At the aggregated level, data is linked to socio-economic data per region, city and district. This creates very relevant and valuable information at hand for implementing policy and adjusting it when necessary. In addition, the Drop-out Explorer can compare ESL figures between regions or educational institutions, show multiple school years side by side and detect trends in ESL.

There are annual publications of ESL figures, factsheets for every region and every secondary vocational school, detailed tables for regions and schools and a monthly report for municipalities and schools. Information is also used to target resources aimed at reducing ESL.

Michael Stark from the UK described briefly a comparable approach introduced in the UK as early as 1986. Every pupil receives an **individual pupil number** which is kept throughout his or her entire school career. The National Pupil Database collects all information in an anonymous format and in this way provides a wealth of

information on the school education system. Mr Stark underlined that the system is easy to develop; interested countries can contact him in order to get support in establishing it in their country.

Gábor Halász from the Hungarian Institute for Educational research and Development reported on a **life course survey** which is conducted annually since 2006 and tracks the school career of 10 000 students. They were in eighth-grade in May 2006 (ISCED 2 end). The survey collects, among others, information on socio-economic status, ethnicity, family background, and reasons for drop-out. In the sample, students with low competence results are over-represented, and the sample also contains a 1000-person sub-sample covering SEN students. About 8-10% of the students are Roma. First results show the increased risk of Roma students to drop out or to have to repeat school years. Dropping out and year repetition is also especially high at vocational schools.

The study provides useful information on school progression and selection processes in the school education systems. Results are extensively used by academics, but not yet turned into a policy response.

The **Action locale pour Jeunes (LU)**, introduced by **Casimir Pich**, Ministry of Education Luxembourg, contacts young people who have dropped out of school and helps them to develop new educational perspectives. While supporting transition processes, interviews with early school leavers provide information about their reasons for dropping out, their motivation to re-engage in education and training and their educational and professional interests. This information is systematically collected and analysed. In Luxembourg, many young people leave school to circumvent the language learning requirements and go instead to schools in Belgium and Germany.

Christoph Meng from the Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market of Maastricht University (NL) has conducted research among early school leavers in the Netherlands since 2007: **The Early School Leaver Monitor**. The main instrument of the monitor is an annual large scale survey among early school leavers. They are asked to respond to a questionnaire approximately one year after dropping out. The findings of the survey complement the Dutch Drop-out Explorer and help to better understand early school leaving and to adapt solutions to the interests, needs and motivation of young people.

According to his findings, there is no single reason for young people to drop out; most have several reasons for their decision. With 27% the 'wrong study choice' is mentioned as the most important reason, followed by (mental) health problems (20%) and attraction of the labour market (15%). There is a difference between male and female respondents with young men more often motivated to drop-out due to wrong study choice (31%) and young women more often referring to health problems (23%).

1.5 years after leaving school, 43% of the young people in the Netherlands work, 33% continue studies, 6% combine working and studying. The majority of young people do not regret leaving school (56%). Only 16% state that they would not do it again, 27.8% state that they had no other choice at that time. Also, 46% of those drop-outs who are inactive after leaving school do not regret that they left school.

The discussion made clear that the motivation of young people to leave school differs between countries. Several participants stated that in their countries, labour market pull is not the first reason for dropping out as it is difficult for early school leavers to find jobs. Other conditions such as the home environment determine the decision to continue education or to drop-out.

The workshop also discussed the relevance and difficulties in publishing data on early school leaving. While transparency can be helpful, it can also lead to stigmatisation of certain schools or areas. Approaches such as the Drop-out Explorer need to be adapted to the school education system. In addition, databases containing information on individuals can create problems in data protection. It was however noted that the UK system has never encountered problems of this sort and has a high level of data security.

Other aspects concerned the development of early warning systems, need for improved guidance to avoid wrong study choices, regional involvement and support for teachers and parents.

The participants concluded on the following points:

3.1.1. New ideas:

- Development of comparable databases
- Focus on data that are collected by an independent body and can be used/adapted across sectors
- Need for longitudinal research
- Early warning and prevention in the education system (from the early years onwards)
- Career guidance – including reaching out to families

3.1.2. Main policy implications:

- Clear definition of the problem and of the responsibility of all actors
- Coordination between different levels and sectors
- Databases that follow ESLs individually – issues of transparency and privacy
- The importance of teacher education

3.1.3. Recommendations for the Thematic Working Group:

- Give a clear distinction between ESL and drop-out
- Comparison of existing data bases, policies and practices
- European survey on ESL particularly focusing on motivation

3.2. Workshop 2: It takes a village to raise a child - cross-sectoral and local cooperation

The workshop discussed forms of cross-sectoral cooperation in municipalities and regions, focussing on structures which are sustainable and mainstreamed and include a wide range of stakeholders.

Clare Ryan (National Educational Welfare Board) presented the **School Completion Programme (IE)**. Designed for areas of lower socio-economic status, the SCP aims to have a significant positive impact on levels of young people's retention in primary and secondary level schools and on the numbers of pupils who successfully complete upper secondary level education. The 124 SCP projects in Ireland work in cluster arrangements, comprising in total 464 primary and 224 post-primary schools. The work follows principles such as working in partnership with schools, parents and local communities, targeting each young person individually and supporting them as early as possible. The programme also favours a "whole school approach" in order to minimise the stigmatisation of young people at risk of early school leaving and also offers continuous support also outside school hours. It is supported by Local Management Committees which involve different local agencies and help deliver integrated services to marginalised children and their families.

Also thanks to the programme, upper secondary completion rates in Ireland increased by 6.4 percentage points from 2001/2002 to 2009/2010.

John Winter Knudsen introduced the **Youth Guidance Centres (DK)**. The Centres provide guidance for young people under 24 as well as trainee periods to support transition to the labour market. According to data from the Ministry of Education in Denmark, 10% of the Danish students face severe problems in their education and training career. The centres contact drop-outs, organise support to address their specific problems, and try to find adequate solutions for their personal and professional development. Their work relies heavily on cooperation with other stakeholders, such as social and employment services. In Copenhagen, all students are asked to prepare an 'educational plan' during the transition phase from school to work or further training. In addition, their competences and maturity are assessed by a counsellor in cooperation with the school. All young people in Denmark have to be involved either in education, work or other activities. In order to achieve this, social services, employment services and the guidance centres cooperate.

Nikoletta Olah (Roma Education Fund) presented the **Tanoda Centres (HU)** which provide disadvantaged children and young people, mainly but not exclusively Roma, with the extra support to complete schooling. They aim to reduce the effects of social disadvantage and strengthen cultural identity. They provide young people with tutoring in specific subjects, help to increase school success and to avoid truancy and drop-out, and support the development of skills, competences and talents. They also organise leisure activities such as handicraft classes, drama groups or excursions. On average, each Tanoda centre involves 35 children or young people. They also aim to involve parents, schools, local employment services, etc.

Asunción Manzanares (University of Castilla La Mancha) reported on the **PROA programme (ES)**. Focused on students who do not receive sufficient support from their social environment and family, and on schools with high proportions of such students, the programme provides extra resources to education establishments to address inequalities in education and to prevent social exclusion. It works together with pupils, families and the local environment and offers extra support for

individual pupils facing difficulties as well as targeted support for primary and secondary schools hosting large numbers of pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

During the discussions, the following success factors were identified:

- flexibility; solutions need to be adapted to the specific social, cultural, economic contexts;
- broad partnership and cooperation between different agencies and at different levels (local, regional or national);
- involvement of parents;
- cooperation is a tool, not the aim of the projects;
- variety of options for students to engage;
- multidisciplinary teams; motivated, trained and supported staff;
- early intervention, although there is a risk of "labelling" or "stigmatizing" children and young people.

Participants identified preconditions for effective cross-sectoral and local cooperation, such as sufficient funding, political commitment, involvement of and incentives for schools, action and quality school plans, committed leadership in schools, evaluation and monitoring (internal/external).

Among the most significant challenges are:

- data protection, risk of "social control",
- shift from individual measures against early school leaving to embedding measures into the daily work of schools, ensuring the sustainability of measures,
- understanding of the consequences of early school leaving as a social inclusion problem,
- ensuring that children and young people are part of the solution and acknowledged as partners.

The participants concluded on the following points:

3.2.1. New ideas:

- Overarching strategies that include and respect the roles of children, parents, school community
- Multidisciplinary teams as a success factor
- Ensuring that a child is at the centre

3.2.2. Main policy implications:

- Targeting, monitoring and evaluation
- Outreach to children, parents and community
- National/regional government commitment through cross-departmental policy/cooperation (education, health, justice)

- Funding/resourcing – ring-fenced at national/regional level

3.2.3. *Recommendations for the Thematic Working Group:*

- Getting national/regional governments to commit themselves to the issue and get involved in projects
- Go on the publicity offensive
- Consider the new ideas that came out of our work and discussion

3.3. **Workshop 3: Challenge and opportunity – Vocational education and training and ESL**

Anne-Mari Nevala (GHK Consulting) provided an **overview of the current situation** in vocational education and training and the challenges and opportunities with regard to early school leaving. She underlined that, despite the fact that drop-out rates are higher in VET than in general upper secondary education, data on early school leaving in VET is scarce. New OECD data confirms that fewer young people complete vocational courses than general upper secondary education within the planned time. According to a study on AT, EN, FR, DE and IE, apprenticeship completion rates differ between 67% and 86%.

The nature of the problem is complex. Its causes are linked to the student profile, but also to the lack of counselling and career guidance support, to the structure of VET pathways and their responsiveness to the needs of young people and employers, to the shortage of study and apprenticeship places in many countries and to insecure employment prospects.

Member States take different measures to reduce early school leaving in VET. These measures range from asking VET institutions to develop action plans against drop-out, increasing the availability of support for VET students, improving guidance and career counselling, increasing work-based learning opportunities and enhancing the permeability of educational pathways.

Ms Nevala underlined that exploring the scale and the nature of the problem is a key starting point. There are several measures which proved to be successful, such as providing extra support for VET students at risk of dropping-out, improving career guidance and psychological counselling, enhancing work-based and other practical learning opportunities and improving the climate in VET institutions to nurture supportive and positive learning attitudes, high educational expectations and mutual respect. Also VET trainers and teachers need to be adequately trained to support young people at risk of dropping out.

Erik Sandvik, Ministry of Education and Research Norway, presented the "**Practice Certificate**", a two-year pilot scheme for young people who are interested in vocationally orientated learning but have problems following existing school-based VET programmes. Norway is facing high drop-out rates in VET; one of the reasons is that upper secondary VET lasts four years with the first two years focussing on classroom based learning.

The new 'practice certificate' can be achieved in two years and is a 'reduced craft certificate', not giving the young person the full qualification mainstream VET

students acquire. It offers instead a different approach to pedagogy and was built to act as a stepping stone for those who are unable to complete the traditional form of upper secondary education. Students spend four days a week at a workplace carrying out on-the-job training and one day a week in a VET school studying general, compulsory subjects.

The results of the first pilot were promising with a low drop-out rate and 70% of the graduates who went on to complete the full VET qualification after taking part in the programme. Success factors were the strong orientation on work-based learning and the chance to gain self-confidence in own abilities, and the selection of teachers and training firms willing to work with difficult students. Programmes such as the 'practice certificate' need strong support by social partners, which is not always given. Funding limitations as well as difficult economic circumstances (high unemployment and non-availability of training places in companies) are additional obstacles.

The **KUTSE programme**, introduced by **Aivi Virma**, Ministry of Education and Research Estonia, was created during the economic crisis to invite students who had dropped out from vocational education to return back to school to finish their studies. Each year around 5,500 VET students in Estonia drop out, constituting around 15% of the VET student population. The programme focussed on creating additional study places, launching a campaign to make young people interested in returning to VET, offering study grants, the reimbursement of travel costs and free lunch and giving access to career guidance. There was also the opportunity for young people to gain recognition for their skills and competences gained in a workplace or in another non-formal and informal context.

During the first year the results were not as good as hoped. A new approach introduced VET courses for adults (25+ year olds). Entry requirements for these courses were lowered and most importantly, pedagogical approaches were changed. A flexible curriculum was introduced to allow people who are still working or have family responsibilities to take part in the programme. Forty VET schools are participating in this revised programme.

One of the key lessons is the importance of career guidance given that VET students in Estonia tend to have a poor understanding of labour market needs and of the importance of qualifications in the labour market.

YouthReach (IE), presented by **Mary Gordon**, is the principal national response in Ireland to the difficulties faced by young people who have left school early. It is an education and training programme targeting in particular those between 15 and 20 years of age who have left the mainstream school system with poor qualifications or none. The programme aims to promote personal and social development and increase self-esteem as well as independence, personal autonomy, active citizenship and a pattern of lifelong learning. The programme is delivered through a national network of 150 local centres. They are small out-of-school units and intended to be dynamic studio or laboratory type settings able to adapt to the needs of young people.

At the core of the programme is a series of guidance interventions which aim to increase personal awareness, social competence and practical life skills and to address the individual difficulties that the learners may be facing in their lives. It

invites the young person to talk about his or her life, to identify problems, but also to talk about desires and dreams. Dreams help to set goals and motivate for action and change. Based on this the young person draws up an individual action plan to achieve the goals.

The '**Bildungsketten**' initiative (DE), presented by **Jens Peschner** from the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, Germany, aims to improve the transition between school and vocational education and training.

The initiative focuses on avoiding school drop-out, preventing waiting loops before entering vocational education and training and supporting young people to complete VET. It has three core components: analysis of a pupil's potential, professional orientation measures and individual guidance and help. Pupils in their 7th or 8th grade of secondary school (aged 13 or 14) are supported in identifying their strengths and skills, but also their weaknesses. Individual guidance includes support to successfully complete lower secondary education, to develop personally and reach the maturity needed for starting vocational education and training, to select the right profession and to find an apprenticeship. Currently 1000 lower-secondary schools are involved in the programme.

More than 1200 senior experts complement this endeavour on a voluntary basis. They are retired, but have experience in their profession and provide individual support for young people at risk of dropping out of VET. They accomplish a variety of tasks: mediation between companies and apprentices in case of conflicts as well as accompanying and actively helping young people to finish their education.

The discussion raised also the following points:

- VET has a dual mission: to provide excellence and contribute to social inclusion goals.
- Many VET students are already 'second chancers'. Different VET pathways and arrangements might be needed for different groups of students.
- Successful approaches to VET and ESL adopt a well balanced approach to theory & practice. Absence of employer involvement in VET is a significant challenge for work-based learning.
- VET students should be given opportunities to gain international experiences, e.g. student exchanges.
- There is a need to advertise the benefits of VET to young people and their parents; VET should not be seen as a second tier system.
- Good teachers are those who are motivated, trained and supported. They need time, resources and tools to help young people. All teachers need to be trained on how to deal with vulnerable young people.
- Need to better involve parents in the education of their children.
- Availability of one-to-one mentoring is important for at risk youth. Peer mentoring helps young people to understand that they are not alone.
- All young people should have the right and opportunities to 'dream' about their professional future, their skills and opportunities.

The participants concluded on the following points:

3.3.1. New ideas

- Introduce a continuous vocational dimension in education from the start (develop work awareness from early stage)
- To develop an ongoing and holistic monitoring system which starts early and is adapted to different modes of education (VET has different learning environments, such as workplaces, classrooms, practical workshops, simulations, etc. to take into consideration)
- Ensure involvement and cooperation of all stakeholders (social partners, employers, politicians, parents, educators, young people)
- Child-centred approach (ownership of personal development plan by young people)

3.3.2. Main policy implications

- Initial and continuous teacher training, which incorporates not only syllabus but also social, practical labour market and modern pedagogical elements (VET teachers need to be able to present topics in a work relevant context)
- New models of integrated employment & training that take into consideration small businesses (new economic context)
- Flexible education system to allow individuals to change pathways (permeability) and to adapt their own personal development plan accordingly
- Funding systems can be used to motivate individual learners

3.3.3. Recommendations for the Thematic Working Group

- Definition of a new 'social contract' (all stakeholders involved in re-building of the link between education, training and employment)
- Make recommendations on the creation of flexible education systems that empower children to make their own well-informed decisions about their future
- To work with all 'social members' to transform the image and show the real value of VET

3.4. Workshop 4: Learning differently

The workshop concentrated on intervention measures at school level: how schools can reduce ESL by e.g. supporting pupils at risk of dropping out, changing teaching styles, offering new learning opportunities and increasing the commitment of pupils to their school and its success. It also looked at second chance education to get an insight into what second chance education does differently.

Tom Canning (Headteacher) presented the **Tollgate Primary School**. With a pupil population characterised by high diversity (minorities, pupils with special needs) Tollgate has been very proactive in making education inclusive, positive and

culturally relevant to the wide multicultural community that the school serves. Changes in curriculum and teaching styles have made education more relevant for the children and helped them to understand its value. Cooperation with the neighbouring secondary school, and provision of adult learning and other community services on the school site, as well as the active involvement of parents in social and informal learning activities, help students to see learning as a life long continuum. Tollgate's key word is raising the children's and parents' self-esteem: children with low self-esteem are the ones who will be underachievers, and who are likely to leave school early.

Cordula Heckmann (Headteacher) introduced the **Campus Rütli**. Located in a disadvantaged area in Berlin, Campus Rütli is based on a new and sustainable educational concept which includes the creation of a collective and integrated social space where the entire spectrum of care, guidance and educational institutions for young people collaborate and jointly shoulder responsibility. Integration between schools (from 1st to 13th grade), and between schools and youth clubs, sports and other extra-curricular activities, individualised learning, age mixing, cooperation with local institutions (libraries, theatre, etc.) are some of the distinctive features. Pupils develop their own 'learning portfolio', and twice a year they present their portfolio and achievements to parents and teachers. As part of the individualised approach, children can skip a year or repeat a year if needed. Parents are invited to school twice a month, and a parents' centre is located in the same building.

Verner Ljung from the Association of Danish Production Schools and **Gert Møller** from the Production School in Korsør reported on the concept of **Production Schools in Denmark**. Production schools address young people under 25 who have not completed a qualifying education and are not sufficiently qualified to start a further training or education. Their main purpose is to provide them with a different learning experience through practical work in a binding real working community.

Students can develop their competences by working in different workshops covering a wide range of skills and products (e.g. metal, carpentry, textile work, but also media, theatre and music). They work with trained craftsmen on real life production tasks, as all workshops produce goods or services which are traded and used. Students are paid for their work at the school, treated as responsible persons and expected to be responsible for themselves.

The improvement of basic skills is integrated in the working day; the development of competencies is recognised and documented in a production school certificate. 80% of all students in Production Schools continue education, work or other activities after finishing the production school. In cooperation with vocational schools they can also complete a vocational education course at the production school and achieve a basic vocational qualification.

Jérôme Teillard, Ministry of Education France, presented the **Micro Lycées (FR)**. Micro Lycées are permanent structures, attached to secondary schools, which offer possibilities for early school leavers to finish upper secondary education. They are at the same time experimental structures and often developed as a part of an action-research project by teachers. They use innovative teaching methods, adapted to the

needs and backgrounds of the young people, applying a holistic and student-centred approach and providing tailored support for their students.

Micro-lycées such as the one in Créteil have up to 80 students. Young people can enrol at anytime; timetables are negotiated and drawn up in a contract. Students also develop a personal training plan. They can receive individual tutoring and additional targeted support. The school tries to support commitment and ownership by having weekly meetings, involving students in the collective management of the premises, and creating new facilities together with the students.

The micro-lycée model is currently in the process of evaluation with the view of having at least one of this type of school in each region.

During the workshop discussions, the following success factors were identified, which could be generalised to help young people to re-engage in learning:

- Sense of ownership, active involvement, feeling to have a choice and a say in learning and school management;
- Learning which is learner-centred, relevant, practical, individualised, flexible, interactive, supported through peer learning across age groups, and fun;
- Supportive, motivational teachers, seen as coaches rather than assessors;
- Involvement of parents and of the local community;
- A community centred approach, with many interesting learning (formal, informal, non-formal) opportunities integrated in the same location.

To change learning environments at school, some preconditions need to be in place: funding, strong partnership between all levels concerned, more school autonomy (financial, organisational and curricular), stable and inspirational leadership, a shared vision between staff, highly motivated teachers, and above all a strong confidence in the pupils' ability.

The participants concluded on the following points:

3.4.1. New ideas:

- Parental involvement
 - From early years
 - Removing any fear of school – making school a place for them
 - Social settings, drop-in coffee mornings
 - The school principal becomes a community figure
 - Parents support groups
 - Language courses for parents
- The holistic approach
 - Not just the academic side of the child
- Raising the self-esteem and morale of teachers and support staff, too
 - Teachers need to feel secure

- Working in teams, having support of colleagues

3.4.2. *Policy implications:*

- The importance of the small, community school
- The school needs curricular, budgetary and organisational autonomy
- Schools taking responsibilities for outcomes
- Politicians must acknowledge and support teachers' role – parents need to believe in teachers
- The right balance between autonomy and local support
- Focus on progress/achievement rather than attainment only
- The importance of student involvement in the learning process

3.4.3. *Input for Thematic Working Group*

- Promote a holistic, child-centred approach, the involvement of all stakeholders and of the whole community
- Research and data-based policy suggestions to be made available at European level on how to increase motivation
- Raise awareness on the need for increased autonomy of schools (e.g. recruitment/ creation of teaching team with shared values; involvement in partnership with other community actors, etc), coupled with accountability

4. **PLENARY SESSION 2 MARCH 2012**

The panel debate presented four speakers from very different backgrounds:

Pedro Cunha, Deputy Director-General for Innovation and Curriculum Development in Portugal, summarised the six lessons learned from reducing early school leaving in his country: 1) There is no unique model for preventing drop-out; the specific context of a school matters. 2) Education systems need to allow freedom for schools, teachers, parents and students to initiate change. 3) School drop-out is a process and prevention has to start early; early childhood education and care is key. 4) Curricula have to be relevant, flexible and student focussed. 5) School is only a part of the life of young people; non-school aspects have to be taken into account when trying to reduce early school leaving. 6) And finally, a social disadvantage does not necessarily lead to early school leaving. There is a correlation, but there should be 'zero tolerance' for early school leaving in all parts of society.

Germaine Noonan, Programme Manager of Business in the Community in Ireland, asked if business could assist in reducing early school leaving. Cooperation between education and business could help young people reach their potential. This cooperation has to be built on a common vision, common funding of initiatives, trust and open dialogue. Positive experiences of Business in the Community can be spread to other countries, but critical for each country is to analyse the problem carefully, to take a whole school approach in helping young people and to have the political will to address early school leaving.

Jean-Louis Mucchielli, Rector of the Académie d'Amiens in France, reported on the new approach in France to collect data on early school leavers, to track their development and to enforce cooperation at local level between the different stakeholders working with young people. He also underlined the need of a good analysis of the early school leaving problem and the importance of prevention, for example through better personalisation (or individualisation) of learning pathways. Young people with low basic skills need extra support.

Piet Boekhoud from Rotterdam Offensief, an organisation supporting young drop-outs, underlined the crucial role of the teacher. In order to motivate young people, teachers need to be inspiring and they need teacher education and support to fulfil this role and be able to inspire their students. He gave the example of a new training programme for teachers in Rotterdam and stressed that teachers can have/present? a real chance to re-motivate young people.

Slavica Černoša, Boris Jokic, Costas Ieridis and **Arlette Delhaxe** presented the main results of the four workshops (see above). Across all workshops, the following points were raised as crucial pre-conditions to successfully reducing early school leaving:

- Policies to reduce early school leaving need to take a holistic approach by looking at all the different obstacles to school success. While young people at risk of early school leaving face not only educational, but also social and emotional problems, targeted support to continue education and training has to address the entire situation of the young person. This requires the involvement of all stakeholders, of different services and multidisciplinary teams. At a policy level, it requires the setting up of overarching strategies, the support of whole school approaches, and the outreach to groups not yet sufficiently involved.
- The involvement of the local community and especially of parents were mentioned by several speakers and also highlighted in the workshop discussions.
- Children and young people need to be at the centre of all activities and need to be involved as competent partners in policy development against early school leaving. They need to feel ownership with regard to education and their school and having a choice and a say in their learning process. To integrate their perspective is crucial as measures have to respond to their specific needs; without motivating and convincing them to remain or re-engage in education and training all measures to reduce drop-out will fail.
- Teachers play an important role in reducing early school leaving, but they need time, support and training to work with young people at risk of dropping out. At the same time, schools also need the autonomy to change teaching and learning patterns and provide their pupils with better and more targeted learning support.

- Monitoring and evaluation of the nature and level of early school leaving are essential for understanding the phenomenon and its causes and finding solutions; early identification of signs and symptoms is crucial for rapid and preventative intervention, though any stigmatisation (of pupils/schools/areas) should be avoided.

These points were also confirmed by many speakers during the plenary discussion.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND FOLLOW-UP

Xavier Prats Monné, Deputy Director General for Education and Culture, closed by giving an outline of forthcoming European policy initiatives in the area of early school leaving. He underlined that policy can make a difference. Looking only at the costs of early school leaving shows that reaching the European target of lowering the ESL rate by more than 4 percentage points will create massive economic, educational and social benefits.

The unemployment of young people currently costs the EU more than two billion Euro per week. More than 100 billion Euro per year – that corresponds to 1% GDP or the annual EU budget. In order to reduce youth unemployment and improve the education outcomes of young people it is crucial to invest in better policies against early school leaving. The exchange of good practice and peer learning helps countries to invest better. Peer reviews can, in addition, help assess the performance of countries and help understand better how to improve national policies to reduce early school leaving.

Mr Prats Monné underlined in this context the important role of the Thematic Working Group on early school leaving, which has to take a critical look at the ongoing policies and identify policies that work.

He concluded his speech by highlighting the European funding available and how it can efficiently support the objective of reducing early school leaving. The European Commission has proposed for the new financing period (2014 – 2020) that the use of Structural Funds such as the European Social Funds should be better linked to the objectives of the Union. In case of early school leaving that could mean that EU financed measures against early school leaving have to be part of a comprehensive and evidence-based strategy. They have to prove their potential to improve educational attainment and to have a sustainable impact in providing young people with better education and training.

In its proposal for the new financing period, the only area in which the Commission proposed a significant budget increase (70%) was in education and training, in the form of the proposed new European education programme 'Erasmus for All'. The challenge was now to design the programme so as to maximise its impact on quality in European education and training systems, so that a euro spent at EU level has a better effect than one spent at national level or not spent at all. Erasmus for All should be an important tool in stimulating innovation and helping to tackle the strategic challenge of early school leaving.

