

A FAIR START FOR EVERY CHILD IN EUROPE

***First Years, First Priority* campaign Response to the
European Commission's Proposal for a Council Recommendation on
Pathways to School Success**

September 2022

Inclusive quality education for all children

The *First Years, First Priority* campaign welcomes the European Commission's Proposal for a Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success, published on 30 June 2022. **Quality education plays a key role in shaping children's lives, advancing equal opportunities and tackling social exclusion.** The Commission's proposal makes a significant contribution to the EU's ambition to improve education outcomes, address inequalities between and within countries, and foster social inclusion.

The Commission's Proposal rightly acknowledges the multiple factors that prevent many children from benefiting from quality education, and that lead to leaving school too early. We welcome the Proposal's focus on the **need to pay specific attention to children living in poverty, children with disabilities or with special educational needs, migrant and refugee children, and Roma and Traveller children.** Due to intersectional discrimination, these groups often experience a higher rate of exclusion in education. The recognition of the need for a cross-sector approach to groups at risk is welcome. We also welcome the Commission's acknowledgement of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it disrupted education, especially for vulnerable groups.

We also welcome the focus on promoting **inclusive education** as a key dimension of quality education - one that encompasses equity, engagement, respect for diversity, social and emotional development, well-being, physical and mental health and promoting a healthy lifestyle, as well as academic achievement. This is in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights, and the importance of guaranteeing a quality and inclusive education for all, and with the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, which recognizes that all children have the right to develop their competences and talents and to access inclusive, non-segregated, quality education. Ethnic segregation in educational settings, the lack of inclusiveness and the low quality of services are major hindering factors. For many families, such as those from ethnic minorities or migrant backgrounds, who are more frequently exposed to such issues, ECEC settings can feel unwelcoming.

The Commission's Proposal rightly acknowledges the role of poverty and exclusion, their profound effects on children's educational outcomes and the need for effective coordination across policy areas – including health, housing, social services, employment, justice, migration and integration.

The *First Years, First Priority* campaign has been calling for **integrated, multi-sector policies and approaches to tackle child poverty and exclusion, from children's earliest years**. The Commission's Proposal highlights the need for an integrated and comprehensive strategy for success at school, and the importance of the European Child Guarantee, the Pillar of Social Rights and the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. These must be urgently and effectively implemented by EU Member States for all children to realise their human rights, including their right to education.

In our submission to the Commission's consultation on this important Proposal, we highlighted the need for **more attention to, and investment in, public policies that support very young children and their families**, especially those facing inequalities and social exclusion from their earliest years and into their schooling. We also highlighted the importance of **improving access to high-quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)**, especially for children under three years of age and from groups that face particular barriers in accessing quality ECEC services.

Strengthening the Recommendation's approach to early childhood

The Proposed Council Recommendation could be strengthened by a greater acknowledgement of **the need to invest early, in nurturing care for all very young children**, as essential for their healthy development and for their lifelong learning. Nurturing care for very young children – including health, nutrition, early learning, responsive caregiving and safety and security – provides the foundation for children's growth and healthy development from birth, and enables them to reach their full potential, which shapes their preparation for school. The first 1,000 days of life are crucial in a child's development, highlighting the importance of such an early investment.

The Commission's Proposal asks Member States to develop or strengthen, by 2025, an integrated and comprehensive strategy towards school success. Such national strategies must include **increased public investment in children's early years** in order to provide access to the children in need for such services - children living in poverty, children with disabilities or with special educational needs, migrant and refugee children, and Roma and Traveller children. The ability of parents, families and caregivers to ensure that pre-school children benefit from play, from interactions with peers in a quality learning environment, from reading, experimenting, drawing, story-telling and other activities, is crucial for promoting early learning and school readiness, and for preventing early leaving from education. This requires Member States to take concerted action to **tackle child poverty and social exclusion from children's earliest years**, and to ensure adequate social protection systems that prevent family poverty and provide an effective safety net. This should be a public policy priority for governments, and is key to supporting children's learning, reducing inequalities and ensuring inclusive education.

The proposed Recommendation rightly emphasises the **need to ensure equitable access to high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC)**, with teachers and staff who have the required competences, appropriate working conditions and opportunities for continuous professional development, in order to enhance children's wellbeing and their cognitive, social and emotional development. Despite growing enrolment, many children still do not benefit from high-quality ECEC

services, especially those facing poverty and exclusion who often attend ECEC services of poorer quality. Public investment in ECEC remains lower than in other stages of education, impacting on access and quality. **Data analysis from the First Years, First Priority campaign** showed the need to guarantee universal access to ECEC services, particularly for children under three and those most in need, coupled with parental support.

The Proposal also asks Member States to develop or strengthen data collection and monitoring systems at the national, regional and local levels. Our evidence has highlighted **the scarcity of data regarding children in their early years** – especially children under three – and the need for disaggregated data on children living in extreme poverty, children with disabilities, refugee and migrant children (including undocumented children) and children from ethnic minorities (especially Roma children as the largest ethnic minority subject to exclusion) to assess whether they can access, and benefit from, ECEC.

We urge Member States to adopt an ambitious **Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success that includes a specific focus on children's very early years**, as a key opportunity to invest in early childhood development and enable all children to have the best start in life.

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