



Desk Research & Focus Group Report

TRANSNATIONAL SUMMARIZED REPORT





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Introduction

The aim of the STEPS project is to equip teachers, educators, and other teaching professionals with knowledge and innovative educational approaches in order to support them in their efforts to reduce the rates of early school leavers. To that end, the project targets the issue of early school leaving in Europe and promotes the exchange of good practices and the conceptualization of novel strategies so as to improve the competences of the participants and enable them to provide high-quality, inclusive education.

The Research Phase of STEPS Handbook is to map the status of Early School Leaving (ESL) in partner countries. The first part consists of the Desk Research, which aims to outline the rates, the many factors, causes and impacts of ESL in their countries (Italy, Spain, and Greece), as well as any gaps in the existing policies.

Review on the status of Early School Leaving (ESL) in partner countries

Statistical Overview of ESL in European countries

Over the past decade, Italy, Greece, and Spain have significantly reduced Early School Leaving (ESL) rates among young people aged 18 to 24, though each country faces distinct challenges.

Italy has seen a steady drop in ESL from 37.5% in 1992 to 10.5% in 2023. Despite this progress, the rate remains above the EU average and the 2030 target. While urban-rural differences are minimal, regional disparities are evident, especially in Southern cities. Boys are more likely to drop out than girls, and youth born outside Italy face a much higher ESL rate (over 25.5%). Additionally, 6.6% of students finish school without basic skills, highlighting the issue of implicit dropout.

Greece has one of the lowest ESL rates in the EU, falling from 11.3% in 2012 to 4.1% in 2022. The reduction has been especially strong in rural areas, though ESL remains slightly higher there than in urban settings. Gender differences are minimal, and overall, Greece shows strong results, though rural-urban gaps persist.

Spain reduced ESL from 28.2% in 2012 to 13.9% in 2022. Despite this progress, it still exceeds the EU average and target. Regional disparities are significant, with higher rates in the Balearic and Canary Islands and lower rates in Castilla y León.

In summary, all three countries show positive trends but need continued, targeted efforts to address inequalities and meet EU goals.

National Context

Statistical Overview of ESL in Italy

Italy has seen a steady and significant decline in early school leaving (ESL), with the rate dropping from 37.5% in 1992 to 10.5% in 2023. While this trend is encouraging, Italy's current ESL rate remains above the EU average (9.5%) and the 2030 EU target of below 9%. If progress continues, Italy is on track to meet this goal.



Nationally, there are no major differences between urban and rural areas in ESL rates, but stark disparities exist within urban areas—particularly between the Centre-North and the South. In large southern cities, ESL is significantly higher due to socio-economic disadvantages and lower parental education levels.

Gender disparities persist, with boys more likely than girls to drop out. In 2020, the ESL rate for males was 15.6% compared to 10.4% for females, and the gender gap in Italy exceeds the EU average. Additionally, dropout rates among foreign-born youth (25.5%) are nearly triple those of Italian-born peers (9.1%).

Beyond explicit dropouts, Italy monitors implicit school dropout—students who finish school without acquiring essential skills. This rate fell from 9.5% in 2019 to 6.6% in 2024. When combining explicit and implicit dispersion, around 18% of young people experience educational exclusion.

Italy's decreasing ESL trend reflects progress, yet persistent regional, gender, and socio-economic inequalities, along with skill deficits among graduates, highlight the need for comprehensive, evidence-based, and multi-level educational strategies.

Statistical Overview of ESL in Greece

Greece has made significant progress in reducing early school leaving (ESL) rates over the past decade. In 2022, the proportion of early leavers aged 18-24 was 4.1%, down from 11.3% in 2012, marking a 7.2 percentage point decrease. (Commission, Education and Training Monitor 2024 - Greece, November 2024)

The reduction in ESL rates in Greece has been substantial over the last decade. The share of early leavers from education and training decreased by 7.2 percentage points since 2012, with a notable decline in rural areas, where the reduction was 13.4 percentage points. (Commission, Education and Training Monitor 2024 - Greece, November 2024)

There are indeed significant differences between Urban and Rural Areas when it comes to early school leaving. In 2022, individuals aged 18-24 in rural areas were more likely to leave education and training early compared to their urban counterparts, with rates of 4.6% and 3.2% respectively. (Greece, 2022)

Regarding gender differences, in 2023, the difference in ESL rates between young men and women in Greece was minimal, with a difference of only ± 0.2 percentage points. (Charlie, 2024)

Overall, Greece's efforts have led to a significant reduction in early school leaving rates, achieving one of the lowest rates in the EU.

Statistical Overview of ESL in Spain

Early School Leaving (ESL) in Spain, defined as the percentage of 18-24 year-olds who leave education without completing upper secondary education, remains a challenge despite significant progress over the past decade. The ESL rate has decreased from 28.2% in 2012 to 13.9% in 2022. While this marks a significant improvement, it still falls short of the EU's target of 9%.

In 2022, the early school leaving rate in Spain (18-24 year olds without completing upper secondary education) was 13.9%. This figure has decreased significantly from the 23.6% recorded in 2013, although it is still higher than the EU average (9%) and the European target of reducing this rate to below 10% by 2030. Rates vary between autonomous communities, being higher in regions such as the Balearic and Canary Islands, and lower in Castilla y León, highlighting regional inequalities in the education system.

Drivers And Contributing Factors

Early school leaving (ESL) in Italy, Greece, and Spain is shaped by a complex interplay of social, economic, educational, and territorial factors.

In Italy, ESL is deeply influenced by poverty, family background, and regional disparities, particularly in the South. Economic hardship, low parental education levels, and limited access to educational resources contribute significantly to dropouts. Educational inequalities, lack of school-to-work pathways, and outdated teaching methods also play a role. The family environment and teacher preparedness are crucial, while early labour market entry and inadequate public services in rural or deprived areas

worsen the problem. An integrated, cross-sectoral approach is essential, yet systemic evaluation of interventions is still lacking.

Greece faces similar challenges, with socio-economic vulnerability, weak family support, and geographical isolation affecting school retention. Economic crises have intensified these issues, leading many students—especially in rural or low-income areas—to prioritize work over education. The quality of schools, teacher effectiveness, and cultural values also impact dropout rates. Some local initiatives, like incentives for families to settle in rural areas, show potential in reversing these trends.

In Spain, ESL has decreased significantly, but structural issues remain. Socio-economic background, especially family unemployment and intergenerational low education, plays a central role. High grade repetition rates—among the highest in the OECD—discourage students, while regional inequalities and integration challenges, particularly in areas with high immigration, also contribute to early dropouts.

Across all three countries, early school leaving reflects deep-rooted social inequalities and calls for coordinated, inclusive, and well-evaluated policy responses.

National Programs and Initiatives Addressing ESL

Italy has implemented a range of targeted programs to combat Early School Leaving (ESL), focusing on after-school activities, vocational training (VET), tutoring/mentoring, and reintegration initiatives. Key initiatives include:

- **After-School and Extracurricular Programs** like *Arcipelago Educativo*, *Frequenza200*, and *Futuro Prossimo*, which use workshops and community engagement to motivate students and support learning.
- **VET Pathways**, especially three- and four-year regional courses, are effective for students with disabilities, non-Italian backgrounds, or those seeking second chances, although their availability is regionally uneven.
- **Tutoring and Mentoring**, including online platforms and individualized pathways, help at-risk students with guidance and support. The *Agenda Sud* focuses on Southern Italy's disparities.

- **Reintegration Initiatives** engage early school-leavers through partnerships with NGOs and local bodies. *CPIAs* and projects like *Mater Dei* provide customized support to reintroduce youth into education.

While some projects show positive impacts—such as improved re-entry and qualification rates—challenges persist, including system rigidity, unequal access, administrative constraints, and limited systematic evaluation. Greater coordination and structured impact assessments are needed for sustained success.

Greece has tackled ESL through:

- **Vocational and Alternative Education**, like *Second Chance Schools* and *Evening Schools*, which serve adult learners and vulnerable groups.
- **Mentorship Programs** such as *Stay Tuned* (URBACT III), which foster community-based support and inclusivity.
- Despite limited data on outcomes, Greece’s ESL rate dropped from 11.4% in 2016 to 4.1% in 2022, indicating progress.

Spain’s approach includes:

- **Action Plans** with measures like a *School Vulnerability Index* and teacher training.
- **Legal Reforms**, notably LOMLOE (2020) and the 2022 VET Law, promoting inclusivity and flexible pathways.
- **Support Programs** like *PROA+* target disadvantaged schools with personalized and extracurricular support.
- **Curricular Flexibility** and national promotion of VET to reduce dropout rates.

Challenges and Barriers to Reducing ESL

Early school leaving (ESL) in Italy, Greece, and Spain remains a persistent and complex issue shaped by territorial inequalities, socioeconomic factors, and structural weaknesses within the education systems. Despite ongoing efforts, progress is uneven

and hindered by a range of challenges that affect students' access to and engagement with education.

In **Italy**, the reduction of ESL is significantly obstructed by stark disparities between northern and southern regions. Educational poverty, closely tied to economic disadvantage, continues to be a major barrier, particularly in the South. The lack of coordinated and targeted interventions in high-risk areas, coupled with fragmented educational services, further complicates efforts to address ESL. A particular concern is the phenomenon of “implicit dispersion,” where students earn qualifications but fail to acquire essential competences. This issue is exacerbated by a misalignment between school assessments and national standardized tests such as INVALSI, making it difficult to monitor learning outcomes effectively. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened these existing inequalities, especially in disadvantaged areas. Although the return to in-person learning and new initiatives by the Ministry of Education have helped mitigate some learning gaps, several systemic barriers remain. These include limited funding, which restricts access to quality after-school programs and vocational training, and the geographical isolation of rural areas, where inadequate infrastructure and difficult weather conditions hinder continuous education. Moreover, the lack of robust data systems and teacher training in managing diversity further complicates Italy’s response to ESL.

In **Greece**, the government has introduced multiple strategies to combat early school leaving, including Second Chance Schools, Evening Schools for adult learners, and vocational pathways such as EPAL, which serve students less inclined toward academic tracks. Community-based programs like “Stay Tuned” also aim to reduce ESL by at least 15% through mentorship and reintegration activities. Greece has achieved notable progress, with the ESL rate declining from 11.4% in 2016 to 4.1% in 2022. However, challenges remain, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged areas where students face reduced access to resources and support. While digital tools like the “Myschool” platform are used to monitor absenteeism and ESL patterns, inconsistencies in data collection limit the ability to fully understand and address the problem.

Spain has taken significant legislative and policy steps to tackle ESL. The 2020 Education Law (LOMLOE) and the 2022 Vocational Training Act support inclusive, flexible pathways, particularly through vocational education and training (VET). National plans include 44 targeted measures such as a School Vulnerability Index and improved teacher training in socio-emotional skills. Programs like PROA+ aim to support schools with high levels of need. Despite these advancements, several issues persist. Regional disparities in funding and outcomes lead to unequal educational opportunities across the country. The lack of adequate socio-emotional training for teachers, persistent school segregation based on socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, and the high repetition rates continue to put students at risk of disengagement and dropout. Evaluations and policy recommendations from the European Commission and OECD have helped guide Spain's reforms, but long-term success depends on overcoming these structural barriers.

In conclusion, while Italy, Greece, and Spain have made efforts to reduce early school leaving through a mix of legislative reform, vocational education, and targeted support programs, they continue to face significant systemic challenges. Addressing ESL requires a multifaceted approach that includes adequate and equitable funding, improved data monitoring systems, inclusive teaching practices, and tailored interventions that consider the unique needs of at-risk populations. Without such comprehensive efforts, ESL will remain closely linked to limited employment opportunities and heightened risks of social exclusion for those who leave school prematurely.

Results of the Focus Group

Focus Group in Italy

The focus group discussion aimed to explore the complex phenomenon of early school leaving (ESL) through a structured dialogue grounded in the shared experiences within the Italian school system and specifically within the participants' own school context. The group began by identifying the most common causes of ESL, including low student motivation, serious family issues, logistical difficulties, inadequate school environments, inappropriate educational choices, performance anxiety, and negative relationships with teachers or peers. Broader societal factors, such as a shift away from

viewing school as a central place for learning and a perceived disconnect between education and the labor market, were also noted as contributing to dropout rates.

The group discussed how certain students are more vulnerable to ESL. These include those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, students from migrant families, those with learning difficulties (diagnosed or undiagnosed), and pupils in poorly structured class environments. Warning signs of potential dropout were identified, such as chronic absenteeism, lack of interest in lessons, emotional distress, and disengagement from both curricular and extracurricular activities.

Teachers face several challenges in addressing ESL, including the need for better training in pedagogical and digital innovation, managing workload and bureaucracy, and helping students recover gaps in foundational skills. Effective teaching methods mentioned include experiential and lab-based approaches, mind maps, and personalized learning strategies, all aimed at maintaining student engagement.

The discussion emphasized the importance of external collaboration. Schools must work closely with community organizations, NGOs, and local authorities to build inclusive learning environments. These partners provide valuable resources, support networks, and policy frameworks to combat the root causes of ESL. Community organizations help bridge the gap between families and schools; NGOs offer student support through mentoring and life skills programs; and local authorities contribute by addressing structural inequalities and improving service access.

In terms of solutions, participants agreed that targeted, individualized interventions are essential. These strategies include academic support, emotional and psychological counseling, family engagement, motivational and career orientation activities, and peer-led conflict mediation. Progress is monitored through behavioral observation, performance reviews, and regular feedback from students and families.

Some of the most effective approaches include involving students in meaningful extracurricular roles, offering career guidance and study support, and providing clearer pathways from education to employment. The "School4Life" project, which connects at-risk students with businesses and mentors, was cited as a successful model. It supports

students and their families while promoting STEM education, particularly among girls, to reduce gender disparities and align education with labor market demands.

Overall, the discussion highlighted the need for a holistic, collaborative, and context-sensitive strategy to prevent early school leaving—one that combines tailored teaching methods, emotional support, and strong community partnerships.

Focus Group in Greece

The focus group held in Greece proved to be highly productive, engaging 11 participants from diverse educational and social backgrounds. The discussion followed the structure of the guiding questions and centred on deepening the understanding of early school leaving, identifying obstacles to re-entering education or training, and exploring targeted and feasible solutions.

I – Understanding the Problem

Participants began by exploring the root causes of early school leaving in the Greek context. They pointed out a mix of systemic, social, and individual factors. Among the most common reasons mentioned were low academic motivation, lack of relevance of the school curriculum to students' real-life aspirations, poor relationships with teachers, and bullying. Family-related issues such as economic hardship, parental neglect, or lack of support were also emphasised. Participants noted that the Greek school system often struggles to adapt to the diverse needs of students, especially those from marginalised backgrounds, including migrants and Roma youth.

II – Contextualizing the Problem: School Environment and Support Systems

The conversation then moved towards the broader school environment and the support structures available. Teachers shared their concerns about the rigid curriculum, insufficient training on inclusive education, and the lack of time and resources to provide tailored support. Participants noted that emotional well-being and mental health challenges among students are often overlooked, contributing to disengagement. Furthermore, the school system was seen as unprepared to reintegrate students once they had dropped out, with few second-chance opportunities and limited bridging programmes.

III – Sharing Experiences and Methodologies: Teaching Methods and Student Involvement

When discussing effective methodologies to retain students, participants highlighted the need for a shift toward more experiential, student-centred, and project-based learning. Teaching methods that involve active student participation, such as group projects, fieldwork, and community engagement, were seen as promising. Educators also suggested that greater flexibility in teaching methods, personalised learning plans, and the integration of digital tools could help sustain student interest. Social and emotional learning was considered crucial, particularly in the early stages of schooling.

IV – External Cooperation and Support

Participants strongly agreed on the importance of a holistic and collaborative approach. They stressed the value of connecting schools with local stakeholders—municipal services, youth centres, NGOs, and social workers. These actors can offer practical assistance, psychological support, and access to extracurricular activities that foster inclusion and boost confidence. Some participants highlighted successful local initiatives that provided tutoring, mentorship, and basic needs support to at-risk youth, though these were often underfunded or not widely known.

V – Solutions and Future Prospects

To address early school leaving more effectively, participants proposed several solutions. These included expanding second-chance education centres with flexible schedules, offering vocational pathways linked to local labour markets, and providing stronger guidance and counselling services starting from lower secondary education. There was also a call for more structured cooperation between schools and families, especially in communities with high dropout rates. A national framework for monitoring early school leaving was recommended, alongside localised strategies that reflect the specific needs of different regions and student groups.

The participants expressed a strong desire for more systemic support, targeted teacher training, and innovative learning environments. The group concluded that tackling early school leaving in Greece requires both preventive and remedial strategies, built on collaboration, flexibility, and student empowerment. The focus group ended with a shared sense of urgency and commitment to continue the conversation at local and national levels.

Focus Group in Spain

Groups of Pupils Most at Risk of Early School Leaving

In our area, the main groups facing challenges that increase the risk of early school leaving include:

- **Minority groups:** Pupils from ethnic or cultural minority backgrounds who may experience discrimination, language barriers, or social exclusion.
- **Children from vulnerable households:** Those affected by financial hardship, unstable family environments, or other socio-economic difficulties.
- **Children with behavioral or learning difficulties:** Including those with diagnosed or undiagnosed conditions, such as delinquent behavior, attention disorders, or other learning challenges that hinder academic progress.

Warning Signs That a Student Is at Risk of Dropping Out of School

Early identification of students at risk of early school leaving is crucial for providing timely support. Key warning signs include:

- **Frequent and increasing absence:** Unexplained or repeated truancy, arriving late, or showing disengagement from school activities.
- **Lack of engagement in learning:** Difficulty focusing, low motivation, refusal to participate in class activities, or showing frustration with schoolwork.
- **Struggles with peer and teacher relationships:** Difficulty forming friendships, conflicts with classmates or teachers, or a general reluctance to interact.

- **Social isolation:** Withdrawal from group activities, avoidance of social situations, or expressing feelings of loneliness.
- **Declining academic performance:** Sudden drops in grades, incomplete assignments, or repeated failure in subjects.
- **Behavioral changes:** Increased aggression, defiance, apathy, or signs of emotional distress such as anxiety or depression.
- **Family-related challenges:** Unstable home environments, lack of parental support, or responsibilities at home that interfere with education.

Capacity of School and teaching staff

The capacity of schools to support pupils at risk of early school leaving varies widely, but there are several common challenges:

1. Lack of Material Infrastructure

- **Overcrowded classrooms:** High student-to-teacher ratios make it difficult to provide individualized support.
- **Limited learning spaces:** Some schools lack specialized rooms for counseling, quiet study areas, or alternative learning environments.

2. Insufficient or Undertrained Staff

- **Not enough specialized staff:** Many schools lack dedicated social workers, psychologists, and special education teachers to handle the variety of student needs.
- **Limited teacher training:** Teachers may not be adequately trained in recognizing and addressing learning difficulties, behavioral issues, or emotional distress.

3. Systemic Challenges

- **Rigid curricula:** Standardized education models may not accommodate diverse learning needs.
- **Limited cooperation with families:** Some schools struggle to engage with parents, especially in disadvantaged communities.

- **Lack of early intervention programs:** Schools may lack structured programs to identify and support at-risk students before they disengage completely.

Recommendations and Future Directions

Recommendations in Italy

To address early school leaving in Italy, several strategic recommendations have emerged from official documents. A key priority is investing in early childhood education (ages 0–6), particularly by improving access for vulnerable and migrant families and reinforcing the presence of qualified staff. Early and ongoing educational guidance, starting in primary education, is seen as essential, with the establishment of dedicated support desks in schools serving as a strategic measure.

Strengthening secondary prevention within schools is also crucial. This includes structural and pedagogical reforms to make teaching more engaging and supportive of students' well-being. Training for both teaching and non-teaching staff on early school leaving and educational success is emphasized as a necessary investment.

Tackling territorial inequalities is another major goal, especially through actions outlined in Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRP). These actions include personalized learning pathways, extended school hours, and the use of digital tools for tutoring. Enhancing cooperation between schools, families, and local services—and providing concrete support to struggling parents—is also seen as vital.

Collaboration across local networks, including partnerships with third-sector organizations and adult education centers (CPIA), is encouraged to create synergies and share best practices. Community educational pacts are proposed as a way to enrich educational offerings and increase community engagement.

Improving basic skills among adults is another focus, with suggestions to expand CPIA training programs and pre-professional courses. There's also a proposal to link benefits like the Citizenship Income to participation in educational activities.

A coordinated national governance structure is recommended to oversee efforts against early school leaving, supported by integrated data systems for monitoring and

policy evaluation. The National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education and Training System (INVALSI) is expected to play a key role in tracking regional disparities and student competencies.

The NRP is viewed as a historic opportunity to boost investment in education and research. At the European level, support from the EU and other international donors is considered important for funding programs, sharing best practices, and providing technical assistance.

In conclusion, a comprehensive and integrated national strategy—tailored to regional needs, focused on vulnerable students, promoting collaboration across sectors, and supported by robust monitoring—is essential to effectively reduce school dropout rates in Italy.

Recommendations in Greece

To further reduce Early School Leaving (ESL) in Greece and similar Mediterranean countries, a comprehensive strategy addressing identified gaps is essential. Key recommendations include:

1. Increase Investment in Vocational Training

Enhancing vocational education and training (VET) programs can provide alternative pathways for students, aligning education with labor market needs. Investments should focus on modernizing curricula, improving facilities, and fostering partnerships between educational institutions and industries to ensure relevant skill development.

2. Focus on Early Intervention

Implementing early detection systems to identify students at risk of dropping out is crucial. Schools should establish support mechanisms, such as counseling services and personalized learning plans, to address academic or personal challenges promptly.

3. Address Gender-Specific Barriers

Targeted initiatives are necessary to overcome cultural and societal norms that hinder educational attainment, especially among girls. Programs promoting gender equality and community awareness can encourage higher retention rates.

4. Revitalize Rural Communities

Addressing demographic challenges in rural areas can mitigate ESL by ensuring access to quality education. Community Initiatives can support this effectively. Innovative partnerships, such as those in the Greek village of Fourni, have successfully attracted families by offering financial incentives, leading to increased school enrollments and community revitalization. Moreover, investing in educational infrastructure and transportation in remote areas ensures that students have access to schools, reducing dropout rates due to logistical challenges.

Recommendations in Spain

To address the identified gaps in reducing early school leaving (ESL) in Spain and Mediterranean countries, it is crucial to implement structural and collaborative measures involving both national and international actors. These actions should focus on the expansion of vocational training, early intervention, the elimination of gender-specific barriers and the strengthening of international cooperation.

First, it is essential to expand and modernise vocational education and training (VET) to make it more attractive and relevant. Increasing investment in infrastructure and programmes that reflect the needs of today's labour market, such as digital and green transition skills, is essential. In this regard, fostering public-private partnerships can facilitate the creation of internships and job opportunities that directly connect students to the labour market. In parallel, awareness-raising campaigns can help reduce the stigma that often surrounds technical and vocational education, especially in comparison to traditional university pathways.

Secondly, early intervention must play a central role. Ensuring universal access to quality early childhood education can reduce inequalities from the earliest years. Tools such as the School Vulnerability Index in Spain can identify students at risk of dropping out, facilitating personalised interventions before problems escalate. In addition, school

support programmes such as PROA+ can reinforce learning in disadvantaged contexts. A complementary aspect is teacher training, so that teachers can manage diverse classrooms and support students' socio-emotional needs.

School drop-out also presents gender-related challenges. In the case of boys, who often leave school for low-skilled jobs in traditional sectors, mentoring and career guidance programmes are needed to show them viable long-term alternatives. For women, especially in areas where their participation is low, such as STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) disciplines, it is key to encourage initiatives that overcome gender stereotypes and broaden their academic and employment horizons.

At the international level, bodies such as UNESCO and EU agencies can play a crucial role in providing technical and financial resources. Support from donors and entities such as the European Investment Bank can finance infrastructure improvements in disadvantaged regions. In addition, cooperation between Mediterranean countries can facilitate the exchange of best practices and successful strategies, such as models of inclusive education or financial incentives for at-risk families. Coordinated attention to migration challenges is also essential, through language integration programmes and equal access to education.

In conclusion, to reduce early school leaving, a multi-faceted approach combining strategic investments, inclusive education policies and international collaboration is needed. These actions can not only close current gaps, but also ensure equitable opportunities for young people, fostering sustainable development across the region.

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