

STEPS



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# STEPS Handbook

Preventing Early School Leaving: Strategies,  
Best Approaches and Guidelines



**PODERIO**  
Training & Research



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# 1. Introduction

The phenomenon of **Early School Leaving (ESL)** continues to represent one of the most pressing challenges for education systems across Europe. Leaving education prematurely not only compromises young people's personal and professional development, but also perpetuates cycles of social exclusion, unemployment, and economic disadvantage. For this reason, reducing ESL is a central priority within the **European Education Area** and the **EU 2030 targets**, which aim to lower the rate of early leavers to below 9%.

The Erasmus+ project "**Supporting Educators to Combat the Phenomenon of Early School Leaving**" (2023-2-IT02-KA210-SCH-000179760) was created in response to this challenge. Its mission is to **empower educators** (teachers, school leaders, and staff) **with the knowledge, tools, and practical strategies needed to identify, prevent, and address ESL**. At the core of the project is a simple principle: *when teachers are supported, students stay engaged, motivated, and connected to learning.*

This **Handbook** has been developed as a key output of the project. . It combines **evidence-based research with real-world classroom practices**, offering you a clear roadmap to make a difference in your students' lives. It is designed not only as a reference document but as a **practical companion** that you can use to:

- Understand the factors that lead to early school leaving, and how to recognize the warning signs.
- Apply **innovative teaching methods** that make learning relevant, engaging, and inclusive.
- Use **early intervention tools, personalized learning plans, and collaborative strategies** to support at-risk students.
- Build positive school environments where every learner feels safe, valued, and motivated to succeed.

Preventing ESL is not about implementing one single solution, it is about creating an ecosystem of support where schools, families, and communities work together. As educators, you play the most important role in this process. With the right approaches, you can transform challenges into opportunities and **give every student a reason to stay and succeed.**

This handbook will guide you through practical steps, inspiring examples, and proven strategies from across Europe, ensuring that together we **build schools where no learner is left behind.**

## 2. Understanding the Phenomenon of Early School Leaving

Early School Leaving (ESL) refers to the situation in which young **people aged 18-24 leave formal education and training before completing upper secondary education, and are not enrolled in any further education** or training. It is both a cause and a consequence of social exclusion, with strong links to unemployment, poverty, and marginalisation. According to the latest Eurostat data, the average ESL rate in the EU reached **9.5% in 2023**, down from 11.8% in 2013. Despite this progress, the **2030 target remains below 9%**.

Among Member States, the lowest rates in 2023 were recorded in **Croatia (2.0%), Greece (3.7%), and Poland (3.7%)**; conversely, the highest were in **Romania (16.6%), Spain (13.7%), and Germany (12.8%)**. This variation underscores that ESL is not only a pan-European issue but also deeply influenced by national and local contexts.

### Causes and Contributing Factors

The causes of ESL are **complex and interlinked**, spanning individual, socio-economic, school-based, and systemic factors.

- **Individual and personal circumstances**, such as academic struggles, low motivation, or learning difficulties, can trigger disengagement.
- **Socio-economic disadvantages**, like poverty, unstable family situations, migration background, are identified as strong risk factors.
- **Educational system design**, including school climate, lack of supportive pedagogy, and rigid curricula, can disengage students, especially when teacher-student relationships are poor.

- Research also points to the **vicious social cycle** created when students leave early, leading to higher risks of unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion.

As a whole, **the EU recognizes that reducing ESL requires multi-sectoral strategies**, involving education, social welfare, health, and youth services, a “whole-school approach”

## The Impact of ESL

The consequences of ESL extend far beyond individual learners:

- For individuals, ESL limits job prospects, often leading to low-skilled work and higher risk of unemployment and poverty.
- For societies, it increases social costs, welfare dependency, poor health outcomes, and reduced economic productivity.
- For economies, ESL contributes to a shortage of skilled workers, hindering innovation and competitiveness.

Therefore, reducing ESL is not only an educational imperative, it is an investment in social cohesion and economic sustainability.

## Why Understanding ESL Matters

As educators, grasping the **multidimensional causes and consequences** of ESL is vital. Here’s why this knowledge matters:

- It empowers you to **identify early warning signs**, such as disengagement, chronic absenteeism, or behavioral shifts.
- It underscores the importance of **inclusive pedagogy**, strong relationships, and socio-emotional support in retaining students.
- It encourages **collaboration beyond the classroom**, with families, communities, youth services, and local authorities, to tackle underlying vulnerabilities.

This chapter lays the groundwork for the practical strategies that follow, equipping you with insight, awareness, and inspiration to support every learner’s success.

### 3. Policy Landscape and Institutional Framework

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.

**Greece** focuses on building inclusive, flexible learning pathways, with attention to vulnerable groups (e.g., migrants, Roma). While policies exist, coordination across services and data integration remains a challenge.

The following National Legislation and Frameworks have been implemented in Greece in the past years:

- Strategic Framework for Education and Training 2021–2027: Aligns with EU goals, focusing on quality and inclusive education to prevent ESL.
- Law 4823/2021: Modernises the education system with emphasis on digital transformation, teacher training, and school autonomy.
- National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP): Provides targeted investments in digital tools, inclusive teaching, and support for disadvantaged students.
- Second Chance Schools (SDE): Offer adult learners aged 18+ the opportunity to complete compulsory education and reintegrate into society.
- School Units of Educational and Psychological Support (KE.D.A.S.Y.): Deliver support for students facing learning, emotional, or behavioural challenges.

**Italy** combines pedagogical innovation with social inclusion strategies. It prioritises early prevention, school-family-community cooperation, and the personalisation of learning to reduce dropout rates. 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, Frecuencia200, and Futuro Prossimo, which use workshops and community engagement to motivate students and support learning.
- Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza (PNRR) – Investment 1.4: Major national initiative to reduce ESL and territorial disparities through infrastructure, personalised learning, and community engagement.
- INVALSI (National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education and Training System): Monitors student outcomes and territorial inequalities to inform evidence-based policymaking.

**Spain** adopts a holistic strategy, focusing on equitable access, early intervention, and strengthening of VET pathways. Strong emphasis is placed on compensatory education and locally adapted actions.

- Legal Reforms, notably Organic Law 3/2020 'LOMLOE' (2020), which introduces equity-focused reforms and promotes preventive actions against ESL through flexible curricula and early detection as well as 2022 VET Law, promoting inclusivity and flexible pathways.
- Plan de Acción de Reducción del Abandono Educativo Temprano (AET): National action plan targeting prevention, intervention, and reintegration of early leavers.
- National Strategy for Inclusion of the Roma Population (2021–2030): Aims to reduce ESL among Roma youth through targeted support measures.
- Second-Chance Programs & FP Básica (Basic Vocational Training): Designed for students aged 15–17 to offer re-engagement routes with vocational and general education elements.

## 4. Novel Educational Approaches to Prevent ESL

Early school leaving (ESL) remains a significant challenge in the EU, although the average rate has shown a downward trend over the last decade, from 10.2% in 2021 to a target of below 9% by 2030. However, there are notable variations between Member States. Spain has achieved a considerable reduction, falling from 21.9% in 2014 to 13% in 2024, although it still remains the EU country with the second highest rate, surpassed only by Romania (16% in 2022). Italy also has figures above the European average, with 12% in 2022. In contrast, Greece is among the countries with the lowest ESL rates, registering 4% in 2022, which places it favourably in comparison with the European average and its southern European peers.

As we can see from these figures, school dropout is a persistent challenge affecting European education systems. To combat this, teaching methodologies have evolved, increasingly prioritising student-centred learning and inclusive pedagogy. Far from being isolated concepts, these two approaches are intertwined to create more relevant and equitable educational environments, which are essential for retaining students.

### **Student-Centred Learning: Role in Preventing Dropout**

Student-centred learning is a pedagogical approach that places the student as the active protagonist of their educational process, recognising their interests, rhythms, learning styles and prior knowledge. The latest trends in this area seek to maximise student engagement and the relevance of content:

- Project-based learning (PBL) and problem-based learning (PBL): Encourages students to acquire knowledge and skills through project work or solving real and meaningful problems. It increases intrinsic motivation by connecting learning to the real world, making content more relevant. It also develops cross-curricular skills (critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration) that empower them.

- **Game-Based Learning (GBL):** Integrates game elements (points, badges, levels, challenges, rewards) into the teaching-learning process to increase participation and motivation. It transforms the classroom into a more dynamic and engaging space, capturing the attention of students, especially those who are unmotivated by traditional methodologies.
- **Personalised and Adaptive Learning (with technological support):** Uses digital tools and AI platforms to adapt the pace, content and activities to the individual needs of each student. By allowing each student to progress at their own pace and receive the specific support they need, frustration from not understanding or feeling left behind is reduced, increasing the likelihood of academic success.
- **Flipped Classroom:** Reverses the traditional model: students access theoretical content at home (through videos, readings, podcasts) and use classroom time for practical activities, answering questions, debates and projects with teacher support. It promotes student autonomy and responsibility.
- **Development of social-emotional skills:** Explicit integration of skills such as self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, social skills and responsible decision-making into the curriculum. By feeling more emotionally prepared, students are better equipped to face the academic and personal challenges that could lead them to drop out.

## Inclusive Education: Trends and its Role in Preventing Dropout

Inclusive education seeks to ensure that all students, regardless of their characteristics, abilities or circumstances, have full access to quality education and actively participate in school life. It is an approach that addresses barriers to learning and participation and is essential to preventing school dropout.

- **Universal Design for Learning (UDL):** A framework that guides curriculum design to be flexible and accessible from the outset for all students, offering multiple modes of representation (how information is presented), action and expression (how students demonstrate what they know), and engagement (how students stay motivated).
- **Learning Communities and Interactive Groups:** They transform the school into a community where not only students and teachers participate, but also families and other social agents. Interactive groups, in particular, are heterogeneous groups of students who work together with the help of an adult (volunteer, family member, teacher) to solve activities, promoting dialogic learning.
- **Co-teaching and co-learning:** Involves two or more teachers collaborating in the same educational space to plan, deliver and assess teaching to a heterogeneous group of students. Teachers can combine their strengths and specialities to address learning difficulties more effectively, offering multiple approaches and reducing the likelihood of a student feeling neglected and deciding to drop out.
- **Focus on Student Strengths:** Beyond identifying deficits, inclusive pedagogy focuses on recognising and enhancing the abilities, interests and talents of each student. By feeling valued for what they do know or can do, students are motivated to continue learning and participating, which counteracts the demotivation and feelings of inadequacy that can lead to dropping out.

- Use of Technology for Inclusion: Implementation of assistive technologies (screen readers, voice recognition software), augmentative and alternative communication tools, and digital platforms that facilitate accessibility and personalisation of learning for students with diverse needs.

School dropout is a complex phenomenon that requires multifaceted solutions. Student-centred learning and inclusive pedagogy, with their latest trends, offer a robust framework for addressing it. By personalising the educational experience, making it more relevant and motivating, and actively removing barriers that prevent the full participation of all students, educational institutions can build environments that not only prevent dropout, but also foster the comprehensive development and success of each individual.

The key lies in a paradigm shift: from a system that expects students to adapt to school, to a school that adapts to welcome and empower each student. The latest trends in education to combat school dropout converge on deeply student-centred learning and inclusive pedagogy.

This is reflected in the growing adoption of methodologies such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which creates flexible and accessible environments for everyone, and personalised and adaptive learning, which uses technology to tailor pace and content to individual needs. At the same time, project-based learning and gamification are being promoted, which increase motivation and the relevance of the curriculum by connecting the classroom with real-world challenges. Crucially, the development of social and emotional skills is integrated to strengthen students' resilience and self-management, while collaboration and community engagement (including families and co-teaching) build support networks that prevent isolation and disengagement, essential pillars for equitable education that retains all students. To prevent school dropout, various models of peer learning, mentoring, and coaching have proven effective in fostering student connection, support,

and engagement. In peer learning, cooperative work groups are often implemented, where students with different skill levels help each other understand concepts, or reciprocal teaching, where students take on rotating roles as teacher and learner to master content, creating a horizontal support environment.

In terms of tutoring, programmes stand out where senior or university students mentor at-risk secondary school students, offering personalised academic support and guidance on the future, or volunteer teachers devote extra time to students with specific difficulties, creating a bond of trust that goes beyond the curriculum. Finally, coaching is evident in initiatives where external mentors or trained educators work individually with students to develop their social and emotional skills, set personal and academic goals, and overcome obstacles.

A fundamental and growing trend in the fight against school dropout is the integration of social-emotional skills development. This approach seeks to strengthen students' resilience, self-management, empathy, and interpersonal skills. By equipping students with tools to understand and manage their emotions, cope with stress, resolve conflicts, and build positive relationships, their psychological well-being and ability to persevere in the face of academic and personal challenges are improved.

Current trends in career guidance and training pathway design in vocational training (VT) are evolving to become key tools in preventing school dropout. There is a strong push towards comprehensive and personalised guidance that starts early, helping students explore their interests and aptitudes in depth so they can make informed decisions about their educational and career future, thus avoiding failed enrolments.

In addition, the flexibilisation of VET pathways is emerging as crucial, offering a greater variety of cycles (Basic, Intermediate and Advanced), the possibility of moving between them and even the implementation of dual models that integrate training in the educational centre with practical experience in companies. This direct link with the labour market, together with greater personalisation of training that meets individual needs and fosters a sense of belonging, contributes significantly to increasing student motivation and reducing high dropout rates.

## 5. Tools, Methods & Models

Early warning systems (EWS) have become an essential tool for preventing school dropout, as they enable the identification of students at risk before they become completely disconnected from the education system.

These systems are based on the continuous monitoring of key indicators which, when combined or when certain thresholds are reached, trigger an alert. Among the most common indicators are academic performance (low or declining grades in key subjects), behavioural problems (discipline, conflicts, low school attachment), and, most notably, chronic absenteeism (frequent or prolonged absences).

In addition, factors such as over-age (being two or more years above the expected age for the course), previous educational history (repeating a year, history of dropping out), and socio-economic or family aspects are also considered. The integration of this data, often with the support of technology and artificial intelligence, allows teachers and management teams to intervene proactively and in a personalised manner, offering academic, psychosocial or financial support to reconnect students and ensure their retention.

Individualised Learning Plans (ILPs) are a fundamental strategy for combating school dropout rates, as they focus on adapting the educational process to the specific needs, pace and learning styles of each student. These plans, designed in collaboration with the student, their family and the teaching team, enable the establishment of personalised learning objectives, the provision of differentiated educational support (such as reinforcement in specific areas or alternative methodologies), and the proposal of flexible training pathways that are tailored to the student's interests and talents. By recognising and addressing student diversity, PAI increase motivation, a sense of belonging and self-efficacy,

reducing the frustration and disinterest that often lead to disengagement and, ultimately, early dropout from the education system.

The European Union, in its efforts to combat early school leaving and ensure social and labour inclusion, has actively promoted reintegration and second chance education programmes. Initiatives such as the 'Second Chance Schools' (E2O), which emerged with the support of the European Commission in 1997, are designed to offer personalised, flexible and attractive educational pathways to young people who have left the education system without qualifications.

These programmes focus on the development of basic and job-related skills, emotional support and the acquisition of transferable skills, often with strong links to the business world to facilitate professional integration. In addition, programmes such as the Youth Guarantee Plus developed in Spain also include measures to increase the employment opportunities of these young people, offering training in key subjects and supporting access to professional certificates, with the aim of enabling them to resume and complete their studies or acquire a qualification relevant to the labour market.

### **Good Practices in the EU for Addressing Early School Leaving**

Early school leaving (ESL) is a persistent challenge in the European Union, with significant socio-economic implications. To combat it, several countries have implemented innovative and multifaceted strategies that have proven effective. These good practices often focus on prevention, intervention and compensation, adapting to the specific needs of students at risk.

- **Finland:** A Preventive and Early Support Approach Finland, with one of the lowest ESL rates in Europe, is distinguished by its equitable education system and strong emphasis on individualised support from the earliest stages. Finnish schools have multidisciplinary teams (including school psychologists, social workers and nurses) that proactively identify and address the needs of students at risk. Curricular flexibility and student-centred pedagogy allow teaching to be adapted to different learning rhythms, preventing the accumulation of failures that can lead to dropout.
- **Portugal:** Second Chance Programmes and Vocational Qualifications Portugal has made significant efforts to reduce its ESL rate, partly through the development of second chance programmes and a strong commitment to vocational training (VET). Initiatives such as the 'Youth Education and Training Courses' (CEF) and the 'Adult Education and Training Courses' (EFA) offer young people who have dropped out of school the opportunity to acquire professional qualifications or complete their secondary education. These programmes are often more flexible, practical and tailored to the needs of the labour market.
- **Netherlands:** Cross-sectoral coordination and early detection The Netherlands stands out for its system of early detection and intensive follow-up of students at risk. There is strong coordination between municipalities, schools and social services to identify young people with absenteeism or underachievement problems. Regional Coordination Centres (RMCs) play a crucial role, offering personalised guidance and support to reconnect students with education or vocational training.
- **Germany:** Dual Vocational Training and Career Guidance The German Dual Vocational Training system is a benchmark in ESL prevention. By combining theoretical training at school with practical experience in a company, a direct link is created between education and employment. This not only provides young people with skills that are in high demand in the labour market, but also offers them a clear perspective for the future and a sense of purpose, which significantly reduces the likelihood of dropout.

- **Spain:** Accompaniment and Guidance Units (UAO) In the Spanish context, initiatives such as the Accompaniment and Guidance Units (UAO), financed with European funds, are being promoted. These units offer individualised support to students at risk of repeating a year or dropping out of school, working closely with families and teachers. Their aim is to provide academic, socio-emotional and guidance support to enable students to overcome their difficulties and remain in the education system. In addition, second chance programmes are being developed and vocational training pathways are being made more flexible.

Good practices in the EU show that combating early school leaving requires a holistic and collaborative approach. The key lies in early detection, individualised support, educational flexibility and strong links between the education system and the world of work. By investing in prevention, reintegration and skills programmes, countries not only improve the future prospects of their young people, but also strengthen their societies and economies. The experience shared between EU Member States is essential for further developing and implementing strategies that ensure no young person is left behind.

In summary, as we have seen above, the prevention of early school leaving relies on a variety of tools and resources for educators and trainers.

These include early warning systems that monitor risk indicators such as absenteeism, poor academic performance, and behavioural problems. In addition, individualised learning plans are used to adapt the curriculum and methodologies to the specific needs of each student. Digital platforms and artificial intelligence are emerging as innovative tools for personalising learning, providing continuous feedback and detecting risk patterns. Ongoing teacher training in inclusive pedagogies, the development of social and emotional skills in students, and the implementation of tutoring and coaching programmes are also essential tools that empower educators to create more engaging, supportive and relevant learning environments, promoting student retention and success.

## 6. Guidelines for Implementation

*(Examples of what you can include)*

- *Step-by-step strategies for schools and educators*
- *Multistakeholder collaboration models (school-family-community)*
- *Building inclusive learning environments*
- *How to design and run local projects tackling ESL*
- *Training and capacity-building guidelines*
- *Monitoring and evaluating impact*

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## 6. Guidelines for Implementation

These guidelines aim to provide teachers with practical tools and effective strategies to identify, support and reintegrate students at risk of dropping out of school, promoting an inclusive and motivating learning environment.

### 1. Early Warning Systems and Indicators

Understanding the phenomenon of early school leaving (ESL) is essential to preventing it. ESL can be the result of three distinct processes: **expulsion** (where the school pushes the student away), **dropout** (linked to external personal factors such as financial situation, family, employment, health, and peers), and **withdrawal** (which reflects the interaction between the student and the school, including academic success, motivation, and sense of belonging).

Factors that can contribute to dropout include an unfavourable school climate, teaching that is not focused on pupils' needs, inadequate awareness of disadvantage, incidents of violence and bullying, an unconstructive relationship between teachers and pupils, and methods and programmes that are perceived as irrelevant. Individual factors such as low involvement in school, difficulties in managing time and resources, low self-motivation and previous relationship difficulties increase the risk of dropout. The transition from one school cycle to another (e.g. from primary to secondary school) is also a critical moment for young people at risk.

It is crucial to identify students at risk of ESL at an early stage through monitoring systems that are sensitive to the realities of educational marginalisation. These systems should be based on a wide range of indicators covering the different focal points associated with the processes of distancing, dropping out and withdrawal.

For example, the Ministry of Education in Italy (MIM) has databases to support the development of policies and actions aimed at reducing early school leaving and monitoring its progress.

Early identification of students at risk is crucial. Teachers should be trained to recognise early signs of academic, behavioural and emotional disengagement.

- **Key indicators:**

- **Chronic Absence:** Persistent absence is one of the most obvious indicators. In the UK, a persistent absentee is someone who has more than 20% absences.
- **Behavioural Problems:** Ongoing problematic behaviour may indicate potential risk.
- **Academic Disengagement:** Poor academic performance, disinterest in educational activities and lack of participation, difficulty in finding the most appropriate study method for one's cognitive and learning styles.
- **Personal factors:** Low self-esteem, health problems, lack of motivation, negative group dynamics (e.g. bullying) and peer group influences.
- **Family and social factors:** Socio-economic difficulties, problematic family environment, linguistic and cultural disadvantage.

- **Identification tools:**

- **Data Monitoring:** Use of effective systems for collecting and analysing data on student attendance, performance and behaviour. (e.g. electronic register)
- **Questionnaires and Screening Tools:** Anonymous questionnaires to identify individual and class needs (as developed by the University of Florence) to support identification and targeted intervention.

- **Observation and Teacher-Student Relationship:** The quality of the relationship between teachers and students is a significant predictor of dropout. Strong support from teachers is essential. (e.g. tool: grids, daily notes based on indicators)

## 2. Individual Learning Plans (ILPs)

The personalisation of learning pathways is a key strategy for combating early school leaving and promoting educational success. This approach involves the **definition of individualised programmes** aimed at students with greater learning difficulties, from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, with special educational needs (SEN) or with a migrant background.

The **Individualised Education Plan (IEP)** is a fundamental tool in this regard. It is a planning document in which the school defines the measures to be implemented, taking into account the assessment of the student's disability and functioning profile, with particular regard to facilitators and barriers in the learning environment. The PEI must specify the educational and teaching objectives, tools, strategies and methods for creating an inclusive learning environment in terms of relationships, socialisation, communication, interaction, guidance and autonomy. It is essential that the assessment is personalised according to the PEI, indicating the subjects for which special teaching criteria are adopted and the integrative and support activities carried out.

For students with a migrant background or who have just arrived in Italy, working with flexible and dynamic tools, such as digital story maps, can facilitate the personalisation of the study method. The Guidelines for Integration (2014) emphasise the need to take into account the learning path of individual students and to encourage, through personalised strategies and pathways, the possible adaptation of programmes, ensuring assessment that takes into account previous school history and the characteristics of the schools attended.

Teachers can work on individual motivation and aptitude for study, helping students to manage their own learning and monitor their comprehension, processing and problem-solving skills.

Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) are essential for responding to the specific needs of students at risk or with difficulties.

- **Personalisation of Learning:**

- **Personalised Plans:** Develop personalised learning plans (ILPs) and differentiated teaching, tailored to the needs of individual students, to promote engagement and academic success.
- **Supplementary Academic Support:** Offer tutoring, mentoring, and additional instructional support to overcome barriers to learning.
- **Counselling Services:** Provide counselling and psychological support services to address students' emotional and mental well-being.

- **Inclusive Teaching Strategies:**

- **Relevant and Engaging Curricula:** Promote a curriculum that is relevant to students' lives and motivates them to learn.
- **Active methodologies:** Use teaching methodologies that encourage active involvement, such as "learning by doing", project-based activities, and the use of music, art and theatre.
- **Soft Skills Development:** Integration of activities for the development of transferable skills such as team building, team working and communication.
- **Self-entrepreneurship development:** developing skills through creativity and business idea workshops to encourage even hidden entrepreneurial tendencies. Networking business idea programmes with start-up investors. Financial education with case simulations.

### 3. Reintegration and Second Chance Education Programmes

For students who have already dropped out of school, it is essential to offer pathways for reintegration into the education system or the labour market.

In addition to prevention and early intervention, policies against early school leaving must include **compensatory** measures. Compensation refers to situations where education has not worked as intended and aims to provide a second chance at learning or to increase opportunities for lifelong learning.

These programmes are designed to reintegrate those who have dropped out into education and training pathways. The PON 'Per la scuola' and PNRR projects in Italy have adopted an integrated approach that includes both prevention (avoiding the creation of conditions conducive to early school leaving) and compensation (offering opportunities for those who have dropped out). This can be achieved through the retraining of adults with low educational qualifications or reintegration pathways for dropouts.

Examples of such initiatives include vocational training, extracurricular activities and psycho-pedagogical support, promoted especially in rural areas or areas with a significant Roma population. A national project for the inclusion of Roma, Sinti and Camminanti children had the explicit objective of acting in a joint and integrated manner both within schools (improving the school climate through cooperative learning, learning by doing and workshop activities) and in residential contexts (promoting the overall well-being of the child and their family). Such programmes can also be promoted by third sector organisations and voluntary organisations, in collaboration with schools and local authorities, offering personalised and 'second chance' programmes.

- **Second Chance Schools:**
  - **Tailor-made programmes:** These schools offer flexible and personalised educational programmes designed to overcome the reasons for dropping out. (e.g. evening schools)

- **Holistic Approach:** They often provide not only training but also social, legal, financial and therapeutic support. (e.g. advice centres)
- **Qualification Recognition:** They offer pathways to formal qualifications or to prepare for a return to mainstream education.
- **Re-entry programmes:**
  - **Return Incentives:** Active measures and incentives to re-engage young people in education and training. Examples of active measures: Dual training (see Germany), early school and career guidance (workshops, meetings with professionals, company visits to motivate and guide choices; coaching to develop soft skills and awareness of one's own aptitudes), recognition of informal skills acquired outside school.  
Examples of incentives: Scholarships or training vouchers (financial aid for attending courses or purchasing school materials; awards for attendance and merit (bonuses, training credits or recognition for those who attend regularly or achieve objectives); subsidies for families (financial contributions linked to children's school attendance (e.g. in low-income families). Easier access to transport and canteen services (free or reduced rates to support physical participation in educational activities).
  - **Connection with the world of work:** Integration of vocational education and training (VET) pedagogies, such as work-based learning, company visits and practical training in laboratories. (e.g. questionnaires to companies to identify their training needs in hard and soft skills, as well as the needs for professional figures to guide training after school dropout aimed at figures needed in the production system)

#### 4. Flexible Learning Environments and Collaboration 🍌

**Flexible Learning Environments:** Creating a welcoming, stimulating and supportive learning environment is essential for all pupils to realise their full potential. This implies greater flexibility in the choice of subjects/courses and the availability of learning support. Teachers must be supported in developing and adapting different methodologies and skills to respond to the individual needs of pupils, strengthening their role as 'learning facilitators'.

An inclusive learning environment goes beyond the needs of the individual student, involving the whole class and the school. This can take the form of reorganising learning spaces, for example the layout of desks, the use of different areas within the school (library, playground, art room) and innovative management of working time during the day. The school must ensure that interventions in the environment remove or reduce identified barriers, encouraging everyone to participate.

The adoption of digital tools, such as **interactive whiteboards**, tablets, smartphones and audiobooks, can make teaching more inclusive and engaging, activating pupils through visual, auditory and tactile stimuli and providing support to students with learning disabilities or special educational needs. These tools allow students to be actively involved, to participate in the co-construction of the lesson and to feel responsible for the learning project, thus enhancing different cognitive and learning styles. Interaction with digital books, enriched with multimedia content, and the ability to create concept maps from any digital medium also contribute to a more flexible and dynamic learning environment.

Creating a school environment that is supportive, inclusive and adaptable to individual needs is essential for school retention.

- **Flexible Physical and Psychological Environments:**
  - **Classroom Design:** Design classrooms that encourage greater movement, collaboration and comfort (e.g. flexible furniture, different seating options).

- **Inclusivity:** Ensure that all students feel seen, heard and have equal opportunities to contribute. (e.g. in addition to personalised teaching already in place + IT tools for facilitation, circle time, educating the class about diversity through intercultural workshops organised by the students if there are foreign students, networks with social services, centres for minors, local associations).
- **Technology:** Invest in technology to support personalised and flexible learning experiences (e.g. e-learning, multimedia resources).
- **Supportive School Culture:**
  - **Promoting a Sense of Belonging:** Creating an environment where students feel safe, supported and part of a community.
  - **Effective Communication and Relationships:** Develop effective communication skills with students and parents, promoting their involvement. Train students in interpersonal relationships (e.g. circle time, role playing, workshops on emotions, cooperative and non-competitive games, mindfulness and group relaxation techniques, volunteer projects and active citizenship).
  - **Multi-professional teams:** Encourage collaboration between teachers, support staff, psychologists and social workers within the school. (e.g. multidisciplinary working groups such as regular meetings with teachers, psychologists, educators, social workers and administrative staff or as an exchange of information on complex cases, planning coordinated interventions; network protocols and collaboration agreements such as a protocol for reporting students at risk of distress; psychological help desk; others are already in place)

## 5. Good practices and success stories in the field

The effective implementation of strategies requires inspiration from proven models.

- **Case studies and real-life experiences:** Collect and share success stories from schools and teachers who have reduced early school leaving through the application of these guidelines.
- **Regional and international networks:** Participate in networks such as those promoted by the European Commission or regional associations (e.g. the AER with its handbook on good practices) to exchange experiences and strategies.
- **Partnerships with Businesses and Communities:** Involve local businesses and community organisations to create pathways to employment, internships and practical learning opportunities (e.g. social farming as an emerging model).

**Criteria and Characteristics of Good Practices:** To be considered 'virtuous', practices against early school leaving must meet specific criteria:

- **Student involvement:** The practice must have the capacity to actively and meaningfully involve students in the learning process.
- **Innovation:** It must introduce new elements or creative approaches, transforming educational techniques and environments, and even traditional roles.
- **Measurability:** The results and effectiveness of the practice must be quantifiable, both through subjective indicators (such as the significance and satisfaction of participants) and objective indicators (such as the number of beneficiaries, the levels of learning achieved and the costs).
- **Transferability:** The practice should be adaptable and replicable in different contexts, while recognising the importance of the specific context in which it was originally developed.
- **Recipient satisfaction:** It must be perceived as useful and satisfying by students and families.
- **Sustainability:** The practice must be able to evolve over time and not depend exclusively on temporary resources.
- **Added value:** It must bring a tangible and measurable benefit.

It is essential that good practices are not limited to the internal dynamics of the school, but respond coherently to the broader social context in which the school is located. The ability to involve the entire school and local community, the construction of a collaborative network with external partners working in synergy, and the explicit definition of objectives, tools, resources and evaluation criteria are distinctive features of a quality practice. In addition, good practice may include specific training for teachers and the activation of resources outside the school.

**Examples and Positive Results:** Research and initiatives in the field offer numerous examples of successful good practices, some of which are reported below in Italy:

- **My Story Map:** This project represents an innovative approach to combating early school leaving through digital story mapping, a tool that aims to stimulate motivation and self-awareness among students at risk. The approach is cross-sectoral, involving schools, vocational training institutes, lifelong learning centres and youth organisations. It is based on learner-centred strategies, exploiting the motivational potential of new media and young people's media preferences. Students are actively involved, using their own experience and creativity to build their own learning process and create multimedia products such as photos, videos, digital stories and presentations. This process promotes responsibility for learning, confidence in one's own abilities and the ability to work in a team. Digital story maps offer highly personalised learning paths. The experiment showed an improvement in students' ability to face challenges, ask for help, manage time and achieve quality goals. In addition, the use of maps encouraged the analysis of causes and the search for logical solutions, valuing individual contributions in group work. The teachers involved found the tool accessible and effective in dealing with teaching in a flexible way.

- **National project for the inclusion of Roma, Sinti and Camminanti children:** This project stands out for its joint and integrated approach, which acts both within the school (improving the school climate through cooperative learning, learning by doing and workshop activities) and in the home environment (promoting the overall well-being of the child and their family). It has involved professional educators of Roma origin in teaching, generating a positive effect on students.
- **Project 'Riuscire D+ Insieme' (Bagnolo):** This project provides individual or small group afternoon courses, with the support of professional educators, for students identified by class councils. The initiative also includes support for students in their transition to secondary school.
- **Project 'La staffetta della legalità' (The relay race for legality) (Strambino Middle School):** This project aims to educate students about legality and help them understand the rules of coexistence and mutual respect through classroom activities, in-depth studies on bullying, activities on intergroup relations and a public march.

## 6. Tools for Educators, Youth Workers and School Staff

**Training and Support for School Staff** An essential factor in combating early school leaving is the development of school staff's ability to create and manage learning environments that support pupils at risk. Teachers, in particular, need support to develop and adapt different methodologies and skills in order to respond to the individual needs of pupils.

**Continuing education** for teachers is essential to address rapid social change, renew teaching content and methodologies, and promote a vision of education that integrates technical education and relational training. Such training should include updating on different languages, educational guidance aimed at engaging the emotional, physical and motor spheres of children, and a specific focus on emotional intelligence.

It should also prepare teachers for personalised teaching, the use of formative assessment and project-based and collaborative methodologies. It has been found that inadequate refresher and training courses have led to gaps in teachers' professional skills in many EU countries.

It is desirable to create a 'curricular' space for teachers responsible for work-based learning, with certification of competence and a reduction in teaching activities to enable them to carry out this task. Another important aspect is the comprehensive training of school leaders and teachers.

**Digital Tools and Innovative Methodologies.** The integration of technology and innovative methodologies is crucial to engage students and support their learning. The My Story Map module highlights the importance of digital tools such as PCs, interactive whiteboards, tablets, smartphones and audiobooks to facilitate the teaching/learning process, particularly for students with learning disabilities or special educational needs. These tools make it possible to:

- Engage the whole class, activating pupils through visual, audio and other aspects that facilitate learning.
- Develop multimedia materials that promote maximum student engagement and motivation.
- Save and send all information displayed on the IWB to support revision, reworking and provide useful materials for future lessons.
- Allow students to be actively involved in co-constructing the lesson, feeling responsible for the learning project.
- Value different cognitive and learning styles, offering support to students with special needs.

The **digital story-mapping** methodology is a concrete example of an innovative approach that transforms maps into multimedia content organisers (online resources, digital books, in-depth maps, audio, video, digital stories, multimedia presentations). This promotes self-directed learning, where students rework a topic

through digital means of expression, learning to deconstruct a set of information and reconstruct it based on their own logical connections and insights. This flexibility allows students to avoid following 'well-trodden paths' and to express their creativity.

Other effective innovative methodologies include:

- **Cooperative learning and learning by doing:** These contribute to improving the school climate and strengthening student engagement.
- **Reading aloud integrated with a narrative orientation path:** Encourages exchange and discussion, helping students to reflect on the causes and consequences of behaviour.
- **Workshop activities:** These promote practical learning and the overall well-being of students.
- **Peer education/tutoring:** Direct involvement of students, including those with a migrant or second-generation background, to provide support and guidance to their peers.

**Role of the teacher as facilitator.** In the context of ASP prevention, the role of the teacher evolves and takes on a prominent role as **facilitator**. This implies the ability to:

- Build 'useful' interpersonal relationships and create collaborative contexts that foster harmonious personal development and peaceful learning.
- Set clear learning objectives, helping students understand the value of educational choices as tools for meeting their needs and goals.
- Consider the different backgrounds and experiences of each student when communicating performance expectations.
- Adopting a more 'coaching' approach, giving students more and more space for self-determination and fostering a relationship based on good interaction and mutual gratification.
- Prepare clear instructions and teaching materials, allowing students freedom to present the results of their assignments.
- Promote a sense of responsibility and ownership of the learning content and experience among students.

Provide concrete tools for implementing strategies.

- **Continuing Education:** Offer training and professional and personal development courses for all school staff on dropout prevention, inclusive teaching methods, and the use of early warning systems.
- **Educational Materials:** Develop specific educational materials (such as this handbook) and repositories of activities to support teachers.
- **Formative Assessment Tools:** Acquire knowledge about modern meanings and types of assessment, models, techniques and tools for formative assessment in the classroom, which are also useful for preventing dropout.
- **Needs Analysis Tools:** Use tools such as SWOT analysis and questionnaires to identify the needs of the school community and develop project ideas.
- **External Resources and Cooperation:** Provide guidance on external resources and support (social and health services, CTS/CTI, associations) with which the school can collaborate to support students.

## Conclusions

Tackling early school leaving requires a systemic and integrated approach. Schools must become the hub of a network that actively involves various actors, including local authorities, third sector associations, families and the community. Coordination between education policies and broader social policy is essential. Investment in quality education from early childhood, personalised support, continuous and targeted teacher training, the adoption of innovative teaching methods and the promotion of flexible learning environments are all key elements in ensuring that every student has the opportunity to realise their potential and does not drop out of education early. This joint commitment aims to build a 'good school' that is 'good for all and attentive to each individual'.

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