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Meeting of the Stakeholder Group on Early Childhood Education and Care and Early School Leaving

European Commission, DG Education and Culture, Brussels, 9 October 2013

Carine De Smet, EUNEC secretariat, Boglarka Budai, intern, and Koen Stassen, Flemish Education Council, participated at this event.

* 1. **State of play in the field of early childhood education and care**

Presentation by Nora Milotai, European Commission, DG Education and Culture

European cooperation in E&T is possible through three strands:

* Programmes and funding
* Political cooperation, within the Europe 2020 Strategy and the Education and Training 2020 Strategy. New governance under the European Semester.
* Open Method of Coordination (soft law) : common objectives, EU reference tools, monitoring of progress, peer learning activities.

The basis of the work on ECEC is the Communication of the European Commission (February 2011) and the Council Conclusions on ECEC (May 2011). In these documents, the focus is on improving accessiblity and quality. There is a holistic approach to children, from birth to compulsory school age, the wole spectrum of early years.

State of play of the thematic working group on ECEC:

* Participation of 25 Member States (+ Norway and Turkey).
* Participation of representatives from different backgrounds, including ETUCE, Eurydice and strong links with OECD.
* The group will be active until Spring 2014.
* 6 peer learning activities have been organized, 2 are forthcoming.
* Methodology: look at the existing international research and do additional mapping and analyses.
* Different subgroups.

The main aim is to make a proposal for a EU policy framework on ECEC, to provide a tool that can help to generate a culture of providing accessible high-qualtiy ECEC at European level. The group wants to describe policies that work and provide guidance in implementation. The framework can help to monitor the Member States in the future, when they have to respond to recommendations (European Semester).

The difficulty in the work on ECEC is how to identify exactly those quality aspects that really make a difference for children. In the mean time, five broad priority areas have been identified:

* Access
* Professionalization of the ECEC workforce
* Curriculum
* Evaluation and monitoring
* Governance involving all interested stakeholders

For each of the five priority areas, the working group is aiming to produce statements.

The state of play of the work of the thematic group is demonstrated for two quality-related features, for which a set of statements is already elaborated: accessibility and curriculum.

1. Accessibility

Literature review, results of a survey and results of the peer learning activities show low universal access for the under three years old, and better universal access for the over three years old (in most countries there is an additional compulsory year; other countries increase access in terms of entitlement). For both groups there are often specific policies for disadvantaged groups.

Five main barriers for access have been identified:

* Financial barriers
* Training level of staff
* Cultural barriers
* No coherence between the levers of power (good local projects are not upscaled)
* Lack of data and monitoring

Building on these results, a number of statements are identified, and discussed during this meeting.

* The ECEC system should promote attendance and inclusion; collaborate with parents whilst respecting and reflecting their beliefs, needs and cultures; cooperate with other organizations in the neighbourhood or community in order to reach this goal.
* The ECEC system should be regulated and monitored systematically and progress should be reported regularly.
* The ECEC system should be available to all children and affordable for all families.

2. Curriculum

In a similar way, a number of statements are identified in the field of curriculum, and discussed during this meeting.

* The ECEC system should set high expectations for children’s care and education. These expectations should be supported by actions which promote children’s growth, development, learning and overall well-being in a holistic and continuous way.
* The ECEC system should be subject to on-going improvement based on the outcomes from self-monitoring and external review, based on the views of children, parents and staff.
* The curriculum should be relevant, support children as they move from home to ECEC and from ECEC services to school, and meet the current and future needs of children and their families.
* The curriculum should be designed and developed collaboratively.

Next steps

In the near future, the working group will

* Try to identify good practices
* Finalize a glossary
* Make country fiches

The results of the work of the group will be presented at a Presidency Conference under the Greek Presidency in June 2014.

* 1. **State of play in the field of early school leaving**

Presentation by Suzann Conze European Commission, DG Education and Culture

The recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving (June 2011) is the basis for all the activities. A lot of elements of the recommendation are in the report of the working group. The recommendation defines a common framework for comprehensive policies to reduce early school leaving, and invites Member States to ensure that such strategies are in place by the end of 2012 (!).

Basic facts about the group:

* 27 Member States plus Norway, Turkey and IS, with the involvement of national and EU stakeholders
* 7 meetings in Brussels
* A big conference in March 2012
* A peer review in March 2013
* Two peer learning activities

The group has come up with a report, which is not finalized yet.

Structure of the report:

* Key policy messages
* Early school leaving in Europe: data on the current situation, the progress
* Conditions for successful policies against early school leaving
* Evidence-based policies against early school leaving
* Prevention, intervention and compensation measures
* Annexes: a checklist on comprehensive policies (= a tool on which member states can assess, measure their progress and analyze their situation) and a series of practice examples (not necessarely evaluated to be good examples).

The key messages

* Ensure long-term political and financial commitment to reducing ESL, and keep it high on the political agenda.
* Put children and young people at the centre of al policies aimed at reducing early school leaving. Ensure their voice is taken into account when developing and implementing such policies. There is little information on the motivation why youngsters drop out (= relevant for the approach during the EUNEC conference).
* Develop and implement a sustainable national strategy to reduce ESL addressing all levels of education and training and encompassing the right mixture of preventative, intervention and compensation measures.
* Invest in the knowledge base of ESL, through regular and timely collection of reliable and accurate data and information. Ensure that data and information on ESL is accessible and used effectively in policy development. Ensure monitoring and evaluation of measures steers policy development.
* Ensure policy development and implementation is based on strong, long-term cooperation between national, regional and lcoal authorities and stakeholders and between different

policies, for example through establishing a coordinating body or organization. Cross-sectorial cooperation!

* Remove obstacles within the school education system that may hinder young people in completing upper secundary education. Ensure smooth transition between different levels of education, the accessibility and availabilty of high quality education (including ECEC), and the provision of high quality VET.
* Support schools to develop conducive and supportive learning environments focusing on the needs of the individual pupils.
* Promote a curriculum that is relevant and engaging. Promote multi-professional teams in schools to address ESL.

(The last two recommendations are crucial, and not fully covered yet by the work of the thematic working group.)

* Support cooperation between schools, local communities, parents and pupils in school development and in initiatives to reduce ESL. Promote strong commitment of all stakeholders at local levels, including local employers and businesses, to reduce ESL.
* Promote the understanding of ESL in initial education and continuous professional develpment of school staff and especially teachers. Support their efforts to provide differentiated learning support for pupils in an inclusive and individualized way.
* Strengthen guidance and counselling systems to ensure that young people are aware of the different study options and employment prospects available to them.
* Reinforce accessibility to second chance schemes for all young people. Make second chance schemes dsitinctive and ensure they provide a positive learning experience. Support teachers in second chance in their specific role and needs.

In the thematic working group, participants discussed aspects that are missing in these key messages.

Issues which need further reflection

* VET and ESL
* Targeted support for children with migrant/minority background
* Involvement of parents
* Support of teachers

Next steps

* Dissemination of the report
* Continuation of the discussion within a new technical working group on school education
* Report from the Commission of the Recommendation and on policy development in the Member States (end 2014 or 2015)

**8.3 Thematic working groups under the Open Method of Coordination**

There is a discussion to improve work under the Open Method of Cooperation. At the moment, there are about 11 or 12 thematic working groups, but they are not so well coordinated; their work has to be streamlined. Moreover, there is no clear view on how these groups promote policy development in the Member States

As a result, the decision has been taken that there will only be five technical working groups from the end of 2013 that will cover the four main strands in education.

* School education (first topics in the focus will be ESL and teachers)
* VET
* Adult education
* Higher education
* Transversial skills (languages, entrepreneurship and digital skills)

There will be a different understanding on how to establish a stronger link between the work of these groups and Europe 2020. The basic idea is that the groups will look more concretely to the recommendations under the European Semester, and the groups will support the Member States to implement the recommendations.

The groups will be more focused on cooperation with Ministries than in the past. Participation of stakeholders in these groups will be limited. At the moment, the Commission sent out invitations to the Ministries and to social partners to nominate the representatives. This procedure has to do with the European Semester, and the governance linked to Europe 2020 (which is a governemental programme).

One of the main questions is now how to make sure that nevertheless the stakeholders view is taken into account. The working group discusses on how to consider a parallel process of consultation and debate in order to complete the work of the technical working group.

Some elements of the discussion:

* A parallel process? Back to back meetings of the technical working groups and the stakeholder groups, followed by bigger events, with the participation of both groups.
* Stakeholders would have to be involved at the beginning of the process (setting the agenda) and at the very end.
* Face to face meetings can be combined with online consultations. In both cases preparation is key. Meeting documents have to be communicated well in advance so that the network can be consulted for input; for online consultation a realistic delay for responding has to be respected.
* Why will social partners be involved in the technical working groups, and ‘school partners’ not?
* Please use the potential of the stakeholders in reporting progress, instead of just taking into account the progress report made by one single person within the Ministry?