

# **ERISEE and CEP Regional Conference: *Stay@school* The Challenges We Face - Early School Leaving and Drop Out in SEE December 11-12, 2013, Belgrade, Serbia**

## **General Report**

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### **Introduction**

Centre for Education Policy/ERI SEE Interim Secretariat, organised a regional conference entitled “Stay @ school: The Challenges We Face - Early School Leaving and Drop Out in SEE” that took place on December 11-12, in Belgrade. The conference gathered around one hundred participants from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo\*, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia. The national delegations included decision makers, representatives from ministries and other relevant state institutions, representatives of research community and academia, teachers and school principals, as well as representatives from numerous international organizations (RCC, ETF, and Tempus office in Serbia). All conference materials including the presentations and list of participants are available at the [ERI SEE web page](#).

The main objectives of the conference were:

- ✓ to look into the current 'state-of-play' in different countries with regard to early school leaving and drop out – facts and figures
- ✓ to address key challenges and possible solutions
- ✓ to facilitate peer-learning among countries on successful models towards combating early school leaving and drop out
- ✓ to discuss on different policy approaches for addressing the early school leaving and drop out issues
- ✓ to exchange the information on governmental/local policies/initiatives and measures respond to the identified state of play as well as on projects and initiatives implemented

Early school leaving (ESL) and dropping out of school are complex social phenomena and global challenge for governments. All countries face the trend of increased demand for higher educated and skilled labour force. Still there is a lot of room for manoeuvre in setting the measures for decreasing the number of pupils that leave education without qualifications. Efficient prevention of ESL and drop out can enhance economic growth, employment and social development. As such, it stands for one of the greatest educational challenges in the region, and reducing ESL and drop-out is a shared objective of SEE countries. Tackling ESL and drop out require multi-level interventions and cross-sectoral cooperation.

### **Struggle with Definitions**

The EU definition of ESL implies people aged 18-24 who achieved pre-primary, primary, lower secondary or a short upper secondary education of less than 2 years, i.e. who attained less than

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\* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence

ISCED 3. Various definitions of ESL and drop out are present in the regional legislative frameworks, but they are usually referring to primary education since it is compulsory. Besides, definition of drop out sometimes also comprises the coverage, i.e. children that are not covered by education system. Some countries even do not recognize ESL as such, but only recognize drop out. Drop out from education can occur at any level of education and can be experienced by different age groups. Thus, defining the issue is particular challenge for policy makers since it has implications on setting the indicators, prospective measures and their successful implementation.

### **Data and evidence for policy**

Generally, Southeast Europe countries still miss sufficient data on the issue, both quantitative and qualitative. The lack of systematic research is not surprising having in mind problems with definitions and, consequently, problems with measurement systems, as well as with monitoring and evaluation systems. These circumstances lead to non-existence of evidence that can properly inform national policies and assist in setting the monitoring system. Although many state institutions are more or less collecting some type of data, there are different methods in place, and thus limited use of even available data. Also, at level of school, there is no clear reporting system established that can identify pupils under risk of drop out and quickly provide assistance and support.

### **Factors that lead to ELS and drop out**

The pupils at risk may encounter factors influencing ESL and drop out at all levels:

- System level factors (social and/or community factors), including cultural and welfare characteristics of local community;
- School factors such as quality of education, physical conditions in schools etc;
- Family factors, especially socio-economic status of the family and education level attained by parents and
- Individual factors such as motivation, personal traits and similar.

### **Who drops out?**

There was the common understanding among conference participants that dropping out from school is the process, rather than one time conscious decision. It can start in primary education with first experience of failure within school, but for some children that process can start even before they enroll compulsory education, depending on birth and growth in unfavorable conditions. Pupils that drop out usually belong to vulnerable groups - it is more likely that pupil will drop out if he or she belongs to low income families, rural and remote families, special education needs pupils, children that did not attend any sort of preschool education, ethnic minority (especially Roma ) etc.

When discussed about pupils from low income families, participants underlined the necessity to mention micro culture and perception of education importance among persons who are close and significant to the pupil. If micro culture and perceptions of education are not in favor of nurturing education, they may have stronger influence on the duration of pupils' education trajectory than financial deprivation.

Opposite from some time ago when girls were not supposed or allowed to attend schools, now boys are more endangered by risk of early school leaving, especially at high schools.

### **Current measures are not satisfactory**

Southeast Europe governments are becoming aware of the problem and sense of urgency for tackling the issue is gradually increasing. However, many SEE countries reported that existing legislation in this area is still fragmented and insufficient, pointing out the lack of comprehensive strategy. Measures for reducing ESL can be divided on three levels, depending on the period in the process of ESL on which they are focused:

- Prevention (access to quality education, especially to early child education and care, smooth transition between education levels, teachers competencies, flexible education pathways, involvement of pupils in decision making, relevant and engaging curricula, integration of vulnerable groups, strong guidance system etc);
- Intervention (effective and evidence based early warning system for identification of pupils at risk of drop out and proper action, focus on individual needs, empowering family and pupils, extracurricular and out of school activities etc);
- Compensation (accessibility and relevance of second chance education, personalized and holistic approach, flexibility in curricula, links to mainstream education etc).

While there are some measures in place, they usually refer to intervention or compensation measures, rather than focusing on prevention. Besides, there is no strong political commitment followed by adequate financial allocations directed at systematic combating early school leaving. Intersectoral cooperation is not yet strong enough to approach the problem from all angles and to comprehend all dimensions. Above all, the unique understanding of the issue and its importance yet has to be achieved by all relevant actors on both national and local levels, as well as among actors in various sectors.

There are some national projects engaging both governmental and non-governmental sectors, usually donor driven, that were conducted recently or are ongoing. It is important to integrate their results and lessons learned in the system. During the conference participants also had opportunity to hear about good international practice from Holland and Ireland (here can be found all presentations <http://www.erisee.org/node/295>).

### **Conclusions**

The participants concluded that affirmative and positive approach is needed in all stages of combating early school leaving and dropping out. The participants identified the following activities as priorities:

- Systematic resolving of issues connected to data and its collection, such as adjustment of definitions, clear set of indicators and variables for measurement, reliable sources of information, unified methodology that allows comparison, providing qualitative data as support to quantitative data, timely collection of data etc.
- Reaching common understanding of the problem and achieving satisfactory level of intersectoral cooperation are essential in successful prevention of ESL and drop out. Only limited results can be expected until all actors in charge start to use the „common language“ and to validate all aspects of the issue, especially its complexity and connection to overall national growth and increased social inclusion.
- Raising awareness at all levels to tackle the variety of factors influencing ESL have to be done through various campaigns that are conducted regularly.

- The conference participants highlighted the necessity of individual approach to every pupil in need. Numbers are illustrating a lot, but not sufficient, information to understand personal situations, reasons for ESL and drop out and to reveal particular obstacles. When deciding about set of measures, it is crucial to provide flexibility for recognition of personal circumstances and to tailor the approach to the very child.