Preventing School Failure

Final Summary Report

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The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) is an independent and self-governing organisation. The Agency is co-funded by the ministries of education in its member countries and by the European Commission via an operating grant within the European Union (EU) Erasmus+ education programme (2014–2020).

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INTRODUCTION

Building school capacity and combating school failure are crucial for inclusive education systems. In recent years, member countries of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) have prioritised the issue of preventing school failure. In the 2015 Country Survey, Agency Representative Board members requested a project focusing on school failure and inclusion. In response, the Agency created a thematic project entitled **Preventing School Failure: Examining the Potential of Inclusive Education Policies at System and Individual Levels** (PSF). This project built upon existing Agency work on issues related to school failure.

The PSF project gives a comprehensive overview of available policy and research literature related to preventing school failure. It aims to highlight the features of inclusive policy frameworks that can help prevent school failure and improve school systems' ability to meet diverse learner needs.

Project activities ran from 2018 to 2019. They examined whether inclusive education policies have the potential to prevent school failure – both in relation to individuals and the overall system. The following key project questions guided the project activities:

1. What does research literature say about the relationship between preventing school failure and inclusive education systems?

2. How do Agency member countries' policies for inclusive education understand and deal with preventing school failure in relation to whole-system issues and individual learners?

3. What inclusive policy elements and frameworks appear to be necessary to prevent school failure?

The project team carried out desk research along two parallel activity strands to address the questions. The first strand reviewed and analysed European and international research literature on the prevention of school failure in relation to inclusive education. The second strand analysed European and international policy literature. It also examined existing national policy measures for preventing school failure. This involved collecting information from Agency member countries through a project country survey, in an effort to identify their policy approaches to dealing with school failure. Fourteen countries provided reports for analysis: Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Malta, Serbia, Slovakia, Sweden, United Kingdom (Northern Ireland) and United Kingdom (Scotland).

The project focused on primary up to the end of upper-secondary education, i.e. **International Standard Classification of Education** levels 1–3. The main target group for the project outputs are national, regional and local policy-makers for inclusive education.

PROJECT CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Definition of school failure

Because school failure is a complex issue, it is important to clarify and define the term within the project context.

According to the **PSF Literature Review** (European Agency, 2019a), research on school failure has focused on two main perspectives: the individual perspective (how individuals might fail within the school system) and the organisational perspective (how the school system might fail in relation to individual learners).

Policy literature frequently mentions the importance of the organisational perspective of preventing school failure. However, it is only an aside in international and European policy documents exploring early school leaving (see European Agency, 2016; 2017a; European Commission, 2015) or school effectiveness and improvement (see European Commission, 2017).

Taking the above into account, the PSF project defines school failure as follows:

School failure occurs when a system fails to provide fair and inclusive education services that lead to successful learning, engagement, wider participation in the community and transition to a stable adulthood (European Agency, 2019b, p. 22).

Thus, preventing school failure involves developing an inclusive system where all learners – including those at risk of failure and most vulnerable to exclusion – receive a high-quality education. This leads to raised achievement and successful completion of compulsory education. It also goes beyond school organisation, aiming to address inequity to assure wider community participation and transition to a stable adulthood (European Agency, 2019b).

A systemic approach to preventing school failure

The project conceptual framework emphasises the systemic perspective and supports a **human rights approach**. According to this, education systems should enable schools to support the right to high-quality education for all learners.

This entails:

> *… moving from a focus on individual support and compensatory approaches (i.e. based on a medical diagnosis or labels), to more preventive measures and pro-active forms of teaching and learning* (European Agency, 2017b, p. 19).

This approach seeks to meet the needs of all learners. It aims to identify and overcome institutional barriers at all levels that might cause school failure, promoting a system that ensures both equity and excellence.

Inclusive education systems are most effectively supported by policy actions that emphasise prevention, rather than intervention and compensation. The PSF project acknowledges that compensatory measures may be necessary for some learners and, therefore, are commonly used by countries. However, compensatory policy actions and measures should be a last resort. Countries should prioritise preventive approaches.

School failure could be prevented through a combination of national/regional and local policies, school organisation, and understanding and responding to individual circumstances. The PSF Literature Review outlines a conceptual model for preventing school failure that includes those elements, building on previous Agency work on early school leaving (European Agency, 2016; 2017a). According to this model, there is a **series of forces in the learner's life (risks and protective factors) and external forces that policy-makers and various education professionals can influence (preventive strategies and interventions).**

The model illustrates how various forces push and pull the learner between the desired outcome of successful completion of secondary education, raised achievement and transition to a stable adulthood, and the undesired outcome of school failure. These forces are at play within the community, school and individual (European Agency, 2019a). Within this model, the ecosystem in which the forces operate is important (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

The PSF project emphasises this ecosystem perspective to further explore system-level approaches to school failure. It examines preventing school failure in the context of the **Ecosystem of Inclusive Education Model**. It builds upon and extends recent Agency work, such as **Inclusive Early Childhood Education**, **Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education** and **Supporting Inclusive School Leadership**. The ecosystem framework aims to help education decision-makers to identify key areas for local, regional and/or national review.
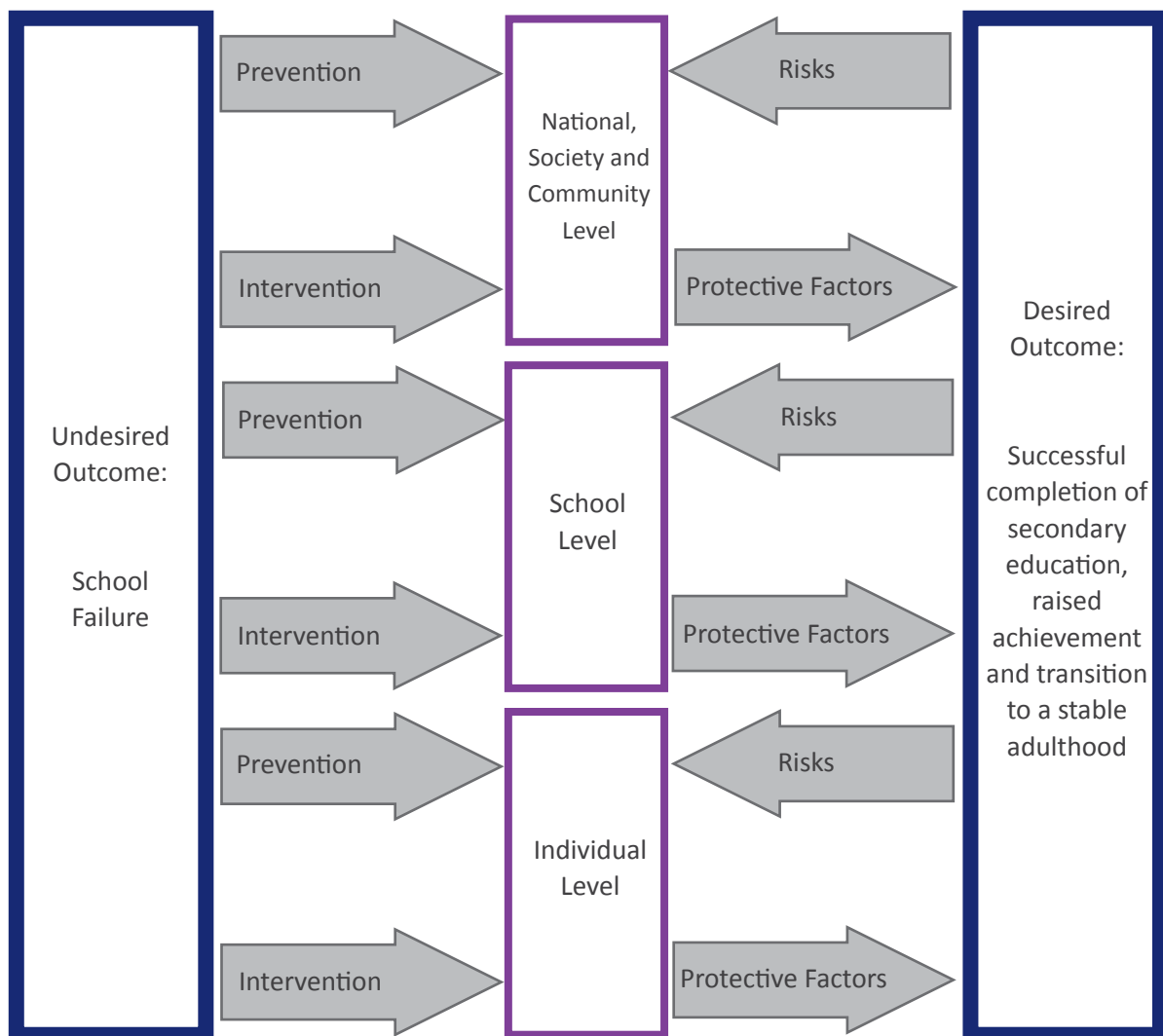

Figure 1. Combined eco-systemic and force-field analysis model of factors influencing school failure (adapted from European Agency, 2017a)

The ecosystem model consists of the following inter-related systems:

- The **micro-system** includes processes within the school and learner interactions with peers and adults. In the context of this project, the micro-system considers whole-school approaches and learner-centred practices that can increase school attendance and engagement.

- The **meso-system** reflects inter-connections within the micro-system that influence school structures and systems. For this project, the meso-system encompasses school-level interactions that can help to tackle school failure.

- The **exo-system** encompasses the community context, which may influence other levels. In this project, the exo-system focuses on local community actions that can contribute to preventing school failure.

- The **macro-system** represents the wider social, cultural and legislative context that encompasses all other systems. In the context of this project, the macro-system includes national/regional actions for preventing school failure and promoting inclusiveness.

The different system components and the relationships between them affect schools' capacity to accept and include all learners. If a school system is unable to provide equitable opportunities for every learner to successfully complete school prepared for adult life, it is 'failing'.

The ecosystem model emphasises the inter-relation and inter-dependency of the system levels. Thus, any effort to change one element of a system must consider the impact on the other elements (European Agency, 2019a).

The model identifies factors both internal and external to the individual. Therefore, it moves away from the dichotomous question of whether learning and inclusive outcomes depend on the individual or on the context. Each factor is always located in relation to the learner's educational ecosystem. Thus, by placing the learner at the centre, the ecosystem model supports the human rights approach (ibid.).

FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH LITERATURE

The **first strand** of project activities reviewed and analysed European and international research literature on the prevention of school failure in relation to inclusive education. The **PSF Literature Review** presents research that applies a range of methodologies to understand and identify solutions to school failure. The definitions of school failure in the literature focus on individual learners rather than on school improvement. These definitions fall under three main themes:

- Early school leaving
- Low academic achievement
- Inability to participate fully in society or poor well-being in adulthood (European Agency, 2019a).

The literature illustrates the complexity of factors that can lead to school failure. It also outlines steps that might be taken to prevent school failure at each ecosystem level. Each theme is characterised by a set of risks, protective factors, preventive strategies and interventions. These forces push and pull the individual between school success and school failure.

Forces associated with school failure and success operate at the societal level through national policies and local context. They function at the school level through school organisation and flexibility to respond to individual learners. They also operate at the

family and individual level, encompassing intra-personal factors (e.g. motivational, physical, sensory, genetic, cognitive and linguistic factors) and inter-personal factors (e.g. family needs, support available, social skills and opportunities).

Various approaches can be taken to reduce risks and prevent problems from arising and to reverse or decrease the likelihood of school failure. The literature suggests the following areas for action at each system level:

At the national, societal and community level (macro-system and exo-system), there is a need to:

- address social inequality;
- promote equity;
- tackle poverty;
- improve access to mental health services and therapeutic interventions for learners and teachers;
- increase the availability of community-based support services;
- develop drug and alcohol intervention programmes that also help families.

Therefore, national, regional and global policies that affect healthcare, employment, housing and social welfare are all relevant to this discussion.

At the school level (meso-system and micro-system), there can be significant barriers to learning and participation. Schools should create environments where learners feel safe and valued and parents are engaged. Overall, studies indicate that parental and family influence must go beyond shared activities. Schools should consider ways to enable parents to engage in their children's education, develop services to improve parenting skills, address generational changes in immigrant populations that might affect motivation and engagement, and assist marginalised families.

Schools and teachers can also take action to support bereaved learners, expose learners to a range of career roles to encourage aspirations, and maintain the quality of school buildings. The literature stresses the importance of teacher-learner relationships, positive teacher perceptions of learners, avoiding the use of shame as a teaching strategy and having fair disciplinary policies. The research literature also suggests strategies for monitoring learner progress. When it comes to ensuring learner motivation, it is important for teachers to encourage a growth mindset among learners and to understand that individual circumstances can require additional support.

At the individual level (micro-system), there are many nuances to consider. Learners may have special educational needs or disabilities, low levels of academic engagement, low expectations and low levels of self-efficacy. They may perceive school as having little relevance to their lives. Specific individual challenges may also include parental death, risky behaviours (such as drug or alcohol use), history of fostering or the care system and teenage pregnancy.

Schools and communities can help alleviate difficulties by:

- promoting co-operation between external agencies and schools and the development of services, such as childcare facilities in schools, speech therapy, counselling and mental healthcare;

- focusing on assessment for learning that is competency-based and on-going;

- developing curricula that are relevant to learners' interests, aspirations and needs, with an emphasis on study skills and independent learning;

- supporting learner motivation by involving the local community and developing individual resilience;

- strengthening individualised approaches, particularly for learners with special educational needs;

- addressing poor academic progress early on and providing support when necessary;

- avoiding grade retention.

Finally, it is necessary to regularly review the effectiveness of strategies for reducing school failure. Prevention should preclude the need for compensatory action. However, further interventions can address any unintended challenges that arise.

Overall, the research literature shows that education systems can be organised to effectively meet the diversity of learner needs and prevent school failure. The PSF Literature Review points to **universal design** to help increase inclusiveness and promote the success of all learners (European Agency, 2019a).

FINDINGS FROM THE POLICY LITERATURE

The **second strand** of project activities analysed existing national policy measures for preventing school failure. The policy review shows that European countries are increasingly committed to developing more equitable and inclusive education systems. However, there are considerable **international concerns about low levels of academic achievement among particular groups of learners**. There are also concerns about the wider issue of school failure from a systemic perspective.

Education systems have developed different policy responses to meet the different needs of learners, improve learner outcomes and prevent school failure. The PSF Project Synthesis Report analysed relevant policies and measures in the education systems of the 14 countries that participated in the PSF project country survey (European Agency, 2019b).

The analysis showed that national policies do not use the term school failure directly and its meaning is implied. Instead of linking school failure to individuals, some countries provide insights into how **progress towards preventing school failure could be understood from a positive system perspective, by promoting school success**.

The analysis also showed that nearly all countries have developed relevant policy frameworks. However, their policy aims vary greatly. Some countries emphasise targeted measures directed at the individual. Others refer to comprehensive measures intended to be school-wide or education system-wide.

Despite the variety of definitions and approaches to school failure, common patterns in country policies include:

- increasing engagement and reducing early school leaving;
- targeting low levels of academic achievement;
- promoting a whole-school development approach to teaching and learning.

Key policy priorities that countries indicate include identifying and supporting 'at-risk' learners, increasing attainment in particular areas, closing the attainment gap and developing curriculum, assessment and pedagogy.

The project country survey information also provided an understanding of the main challenges countries face in preventing school failure. These challenges are:

- effectively implementing inclusive education policy;
- building teacher capacity;
- improving the quality of support;
- developing more effective governance, funding and monitoring mechanisms.

Overall, the policy review indicates a need to include multiple dimensions and a balanced approach to tackle school failure. Validating the countries' approaches, the project findings suggest that instead of compensating for poor academic outcomes, an inclusive system should build school capacity and raise the achievement of all learners. **To reach this goal, national policies, measures and strategies need to adopt a systemic, whole-school approach. At the same time, they must be learner-centred, focusing on at-risk individuals.**

KEY POLICY ACTIONS TO PREVENT SCHOOL FAILURE

Combining the findings of the research and policy reviews, the PSF project has identified inclusive policy elements that can ensure schools become more equitable. The project uses the ecosystem model to suggest a comprehensive policy framework for preventing school failure. This includes several inclusive policy actions that can help countries make progress towards preventing school failure.

Key policy actions are organised into the four ecosystem levels: national/regional, community, school and individual.

Policy actions at the national/regional level (macro-system) include:

- reducing social inequality, promoting equity and tackling poverty;
- supporting cross-sectoral collaboration between Ministries of Education, Health, Social Care, Housing and Labour;
- improving school access and attendance.

Policy actions at the community level (exo-system and meso-system) include:

- improving access to and availability of community-based support services;
- promoting co-operation between external agencies/services and schools;
- meaningfully engaging with families.

Policy actions at school level (meso-system and micro-system) include:

- developing inclusive school leadership;
- broadening the curriculum, assessment and pedagogy;
- providing career support and flexible career pathways;
- supporting learner health and well-being.

Policy actions at the individual level (micro-system) include:

- strengthening personalised approaches;
- addressing low academic achievement as early as possible;
- reducing grade retention.

This framework for preventing school failure incorporates and complements the European Union and international frameworks for improving the quality of education for all learners. It can serve as a starting point for national/regional and local conversations on how education policy can help prevent school failure. Each policy area can be considered **a potential national target for action**. Therefore, the framework can be a basis for converting policy areas into indicators and/or including them within national standards for preventing school failure.

Finally, countries can use this framework as **a reference for monitoring progress towards preventing school failure**. It can facilitate peer learning and knowledge exchange on how to contextualise these policy areas, (re-)allocate financial resources and develop synergies between local and system stakeholders.

Overall, the PSF project has provided evidence to suggest that high-quality inclusive education systems can be organised to effectively meet diverse learner needs and to prevent school failure. Comprehensive policies that focus on equity and inclusion can improve education systems' general effectiveness and individual learner outcomes. Put simply, increasing the education system's inclusiveness can lead to success for all learners.

PROJECT OUTPUTS

The two project activity strands have resulted in four inter-connected project outputs.

The **PSF Literature Review** (European Agency, 2019a) resulted from the first strand of project activities. It gives an overview of European and international research on the prevention of school failure in relation to inclusive education. The review also identifies key concepts and themes underpinning policy and practice for preventing school failure. Its findings informed and complemented the second strand of the project and the development of the project synthesis report.

The **thematic analysis of country information** summarises policy information provided by the 14 countries that participated in the project country survey. The analysis is presented in the form of thematic tables, which also informed the project synthesis report. This output complements other sources of information that describe national education and training systems, such as the Agency's **Country Policy Review and Analysis** work and Agency audits in **Malta** and **Iceland**.

The **PSF Project Synthesis Report** (European Agency, 2019b) combines information from the two project activity strands and presents the overarching project findings. It includes information on the international and European policy context, the literature review findings and the outcomes of the country information analysis. The report gives an overview of the issue of school failure by analysing key policies and measures promoted by national education authorities. Finally, it highlights the features of inclusive policy frameworks that enable progress towards preventing school failure.

This **PSF Final Summary Report** summarises the main project conclusions.

These project outputs are available on the **PSF project web area (www.european-agency.org/projects/PSF)**.

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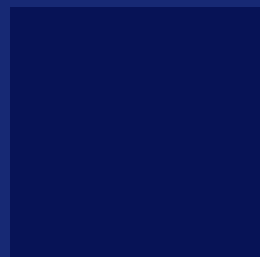
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