Preventing School Failure

Examining the Potential of Inclusive Education Policies at System and Individual Levels

EUROPEAN AGENCY
for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

PREVENTING SCHOOL FAILURE

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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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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Full version
Agency / European Agency:	European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education
CPD:	Continuing professional development
EU:	European Union
NESSE:	Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education and Training
OECD:	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA:	Programme for International Student Assessment
PSF:	Preventing School Failure
Raising Achievement:	Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education
SDG:	Sustainable Development Goal
SEN:	Special educational needs
UK:	United Kingdom
UN:	United Nations
UNESCO:	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF:	United Nations Children's Fund
VET:	Vocational Education and Training

PREAMBLE

The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) is committed to ensuring more inclusive education systems (European Agency, 2015). As an agent for change, the Agency directly supports countries to meet the challenges of European and international guiding documents, such as:

- the EU Education and Training 2020 goals (Council of the European Union, 2009);

- Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006);

- the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989);

- UN SDG 4: 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (no date).

Echoing the principles of these documents, the Agency encourages member countries to further develop their education policies to:

Raise the achievements, outcomes and outputs of the system overall by effectively enabling all stakeholders to develop their attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, understanding, skills and behaviours in line with the goals and principles of an inclusive education system (European Agency, 2015, p. 2).

The Agency's [Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education](#) (European Agency, 2017a; 2017b) and [Organisation of Provision to Support Inclusive Education](#) (European Agency, 2013a; 2014a) projects highlighted that building school capacity and combating school failure are crucial for inclusive education systems. In addition, the [Early School Leaving](#) project stressed that 'the attempt to build supportive and responsive schools and school systems can be seen as an attempt to develop inclusive provision' (European Agency, 2016a, p. 52). The [Evidence of the Link Between Inclusive Education and Social Inclusion](#) project showed that attending and receiving support within inclusive education settings is linked with better academic and social outcomes and improved chances for further education, employment and independent living in the community (European Agency, 2018a).

Therefore, Agency work calls for inclusive policy frameworks at national/regional and local levels. These policy frameworks must effectively support schools to include all learners, prevent failure and ensure learner success in school and life.

Agency member countries have recognised preventing school failure as a priority. In the 2015 Country Survey, Agency Representative Board members requested a project focusing on school failure and inclusion. They later agreed that it would examine the potential of inclusive education policies to prevent school failure. The Preventing School Failure: Examining the Potential of Inclusive Education Policies at System and Individual Levels (PSF) project has built on prior Agency work on school failure and improving school systems' ability to meet diverse learner needs.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The thematic project [Preventing School Failure: Examining the Potential of Inclusive Education Policies at System and Individual Levels](the PSF project) examined the link between school failure and inclusive policies. This report outlines the project's main findings and provides a comprehensive overview of the issue of school failure. It aims to highlight the features of inclusive policy frameworks that enable progress towards preventing school failure.

The research and policy literature have focused on two main perspectives of school failure: how individuals might fail within the school system – the individual perspective – and how the school system might fail individual learners – the systemic/organisational perspective. According to the PSF project definition, 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.

The analysis of international and European policy documents indicates that they do not identify preventing school failure as a primary policy goal. Rather, it is an indirect outcome of policies aiming to reduce early school leaving, improve education, facilitate access to the labour market or tackle social exclusion and disadvantage. European countries are increasingly committed to developing more equitable and inclusive education systems. However, there are considerable international concerns about the low academic achievement of particular groups of learners and the wider systemic perspective of school failure.

Education systems have developed different policy responses aimed at attending to the diverse needs of learners, improving learner outcomes and preventing school failure. This report provides a deeper analysis of relevant policies and measures in the education systems of 14 countries that responded to the PSF project country survey.

Based on the countries' responses, the term school failure is implied rather than used directly in national policies. 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 shows

that while nearly all countries have developed relevant policy frameworks, the policy aims vary greatly. Some countries emphasise targeted measures directed at the individual, and others refer to comprehensive, school-wide or education system-wide measures.

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

- developing strategies to prevent early school leaving;

- targeting low learner outcomes;

- encouraging a whole-school development approach.

In particular, 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.

This report also draws on country survey information to discuss challenges that countries face in the effort to prevent school failure. These challenges include:

- effectively implementing inclusive education policy;

- building teacher capacity;

- improving the quality of support;

- developing more effective governance, funding and monitoring mechanisms.

The final part of the report presents the project's suggested framework to prevent school failure. The framework focuses on developing an inclusive system where all learners receive a high-quality education (including those at risk of failure and most vulnerable to exclusion). This leads to raised achievement and successful completion of compulsory education. It also goes beyond school organisation, aiming to address inequity to ensure wider community participation and transition to stable adulthood.

Policy actions for preventing school failure are organised into four essential ecosystem levels: national/regional, community, school and individual.

Key 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;

- developing effective on-going monitoring systems and quality assurance mechanisms.

Key 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.

Key policy actions at the 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;
- focusing on successful transitions over time.

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

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

Decision-makers at national/regional and community levels can consider these policy actions, and their underlying characteristics, as priority areas for preventing school failure. Countries can also use them as a reference for monitoring progress towards the goal of preventing school failure.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. About the project

The Agency's thematic project, Preventing School Failure: Examining the Potential of Inclusive Education Policies at System and Individual Levels (the PSF project), explored the link between school failure and inclusive policies.

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 questions guided the project activities:

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

- 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?

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

The project focused on primary up to the end of upper-secondary education, i.e. International Standard Classification of Education levels 1–3 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012). The main target group for the project outputs are national and local policy-makers for inclusive education.

The project's overall aim was to provide a comprehensive overview of available policy and research literature related to preventing school failure. The project's added value lies in identifying inclusive policy elements that can enable schools to become more engaging and equitable.

1.2. Project methodology

The PSF project encompassed desk research along two parallel activity strands.

The **first strand** reviewed and analysed international research literature on the prevention of school failure in relation to inclusive education. It examined international literature to identify key concepts and themes underpinning policy and practice for preventing school failure. This process resulted in the first project output, the PSF Literature Review (European Agency, 2019a), which provided an overview of European and international research on preventing school failure in relation to inclusive education. The review's findings informed and complemented the project's second strand and the development of this project synthesis report.

The **second strand** analysed existing national policy measures for preventing school failure. This involved a review of policy information at both international and EU levels. It also involved collecting information from Agency member countries through a survey, which aimed to identify their policy approaches to dealing with school failure. The analysis was based on 14 individual country reports received from Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Malta, Serbia, Slovakia, Sweden, UK (Northern Ireland) and UK (Scotland).

Overall, the project outputs include:

- the international literature review;

- the thematic analysis of country information;

- the current project synthesis report;

- a summary of the project findings.

The Annex provides further details about the project methodology and an illustration of the project activities and their associated outputs.

More information about the project can be found on the PSF project web area (www.european-agency.org/projects/PSF).

1.3. About this report

This project synthesis report combines information from the two PSF project activity strands and presents the project's main findings. Specifically, it includes information on the international and European policy context, the findings of the PSF Literature Review and the conclusions of the country information analysis.

This report aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the issue of school failure by analysing relevant policies and measures promoted by national education authorities. Its goal is to highlight the features of inclusive policy frameworks that enable progress towards preventing school failure.

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This report begins with a conceptual chapter (Chapter 2) presenting the project background. After briefly outlining the project aims and goals, it explains the term 'school failure' in the context of the project. It also presents the different types of policy approaches to preventing school failure, according to the project conceptual framework. Finally, it discusses the project's systemic approach to preventing school failure and explains how school failure is theorised within an inclusive ecosystem framework.

Chapter 3 provides a mapping of international and European directives, regulations and recommendations in a wide range of areas related to school failure. It also explains why this is an important issue for the inclusion of all learners, highlighting relevant international concerns about school failure.

Chapter 4 provides a more focused analysis of some of the policies and measures that directly relate to school failure in 14 education systems across Europe. The discussion is structured along three main conceptual dimensions that emerged from the country information analysis:

- Increasing engagement and reducing early school leaving

- Targeting low levels of academic achievement

- Promoting a whole-school development approach to teaching and learning.

Country information on main policies, measures and initiatives is presented and discussed under each dimension. Country examples are highlighted in boxes to illustrate some of the participating countries' key policy developments.

All excerpts from the country survey presented in this report were treated as data. Therefore, they are referenced with the country name in the text. Please refer to the country thematic analysis grids, which will be available on the PSF project web area.

Chapter 5 discusses the main challenges that the participating countries emphasised. It suggests inclusive policy frameworks that can resolve some of these challenges and have the potential to prevent school failure.

Please note that this report only examines national/regional regulations and recommendations that directly relate to school failure. Analysis of the wider context (i.e. the characteristics of the education systems or the socio-economic/political context) is beyond the scope of the report.

Moreover, the report does not lay out how the policies and measures are put into practice at the local/school level or are successful in preventing school failure. Rather, it aims to illustrate recent country policies that have the potential to prevent school failure.

2. PROJECT CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Definition of 'school failure'

This report focuses on school failure and, in particular, on inclusive policies that have the potential to prevent school failure. School failure is a complex phenomenon; therefore, it is important to define the term within the project context.

School failure is linked to a lack of inclusion and fairness in education. It frequently manifests as school drop-out (OECD, 2012). The PSF Literature Review identified various definitions of school failure from the research literature that fall into 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 policy literature contains different definitions and theoretical understandings of school failure and different policy orientations towards it. According to Psacharopoulos (2007), school failure may be conceptualised in two distinct ways, depending on whether it refers to the whole school system or to the individual learner. When it refers to the school, it means that the whole school system is failing to provide quality learning opportunities and desired educational outcomes for all. When it focuses on individuals, it means that learners themselves are failing to acquire the key competencies and skills that are essential for the labour market. It can also mean that they are failing to advance to the next educational grade or level, which might result in dropping out of school (ibid.).

Similarly, Skrtic (1991a; 1991b) suggests that school failure has been associated with two inter-related problems: 'inefficient organisations and defective pupils' (1991b, p. 54). He argues that blaming the individual, as opposed to the school organisation, prevents progress in mainstream education. In the same spirit, Slee and Allan cite Barton, who

considers the term 'special educational needs' a 'euphemism for the failure of schooling to meet the needs of all learners' (Barton, 1987 in Slee and Allan, 2001, p. 175).

These statements suggest that the individual perspective of school failure has previously prevailed. However, Faubert identifies a shift in thinking, noting that:

The cause of – and the responsibility for – students' failure is now seen as deficient or inadequate provision of education by schools, and by extension, school systems. More specifically, it is the failure of schools to provide education appropriate to different needs that leads students to fail. In this way school failure is, therefore, also an issue of equity (2012, p. 3).

According to the PSF Literature Review, research on school failure has examined both perspectives, i.e. how individuals might fail within the school system – the individual perspective – and how the school system might fail individual learners – the organisational perspective (European Agency, 2019a). Policy literature frequently mentions the importance of preventing school failure from an organisational perspective. However, it is only an aside in international and European policy documents exploring either early school leaving (see European Agency, 2016a; 2017c; European Commission, 2015; Dale, 2010) or school effectiveness and improvement (see European Commission, 2017; Flecha, 2015).

Taking the above into account, the PSF project has developed a definition of school failure.

> **Project definition of school failure**
>
> From a **systemic perspective,** 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. Specifically, at the **school level**, school failure is defined as a school's incapacity to provide fair and inclusive education and an adequate learning environment for learners to achieve outcomes worthy of their effort and potential. At the **societal/community level**, school failure occurs when the system fails to provide adequate mechanisms and services to assure participation in the wider community. This results in learners being marginalised.
>
> From an **individual perspective**, school failure is defined as the **failure of the learner** to either:
>
> - obtain adequate qualifications when completing school;
> - develop a minimum level of positive behaviour/knowledge/skills and advance to the next grade while at school – which can, in extreme cases, lead to school drop-out.
>
> (Adapted from European Agency, 2019a; Field, Kuczera and Pont, 2007; Psacharopoulos, 2007)

One of the project's specific aims was to identify the relationship between the systemic and the individual perspectives. According to the definition above, 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 can lead

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to raised achievement and successful completion of compulsory education. It also goes beyond school organisation, aiming to address inequity to ensure wider community participation and transition to a stable adulthood.

2.2. A systemic approach to preventing school failure

The project definition of school failure enables an analysis of education policies for preventing school failure. The different educations systems' national policies and measures may focus on the systemic and/or the individual perspectives. However, the project conceptual framework particularly emphasises the systemic perspective, supporting a human rights approach. Accordingly, systems should increase schools' capability to recognise and ensure 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, 2017a, 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.

Policy measures that have been taken or recommended to raise achievement and prevent school failure are categorised differently within the literature. Some policy documents distinguish between targeted measures directed at the individual, and others recommend comprehensive measures intended to be school-wide or education system-wide. European policy documents often categorise policy responses as prevention, intervention or compensation measures (European Commission, 2011; Council of the European Union, 2011). Similarly, some distinguish between strategic, preventive and re-integration measures (European Parliament, 2011).

Along the same lines, the Agency (2018b) suggests that policy actions combining prevention, intervention and compensation most effectively support inclusive education systems. These policy actions are in line with European-level work and wider thinking about educational quality. The PSF project underlines each of these three types of actions. They indicate the main focus of each policy approach to school failure.

> **Types of policy actions to prevent school failure**
>
> **Prevention** – policy measures supporting the effective implementation of inclusive education and aiming to prevent school failure, **before** it emerges (for example, legislation promoting a rights-based approach, avoiding disabling policies that lead to gaps in provision, lack of qualifications, etc.).
>
> **Intervention** – policy measures supporting the effective implementation of inclusive education and aiming to reduce school failure, **while or after** it emerges (for example, the existence of clear policies leading to school development and high-quality flexible support systems for mainstream education).
>
> **Compensation** – policy measures addressing the inability of legislation and/or provision to deal with school failure, **after** it emerges (for example, separate education programmes or provision, support for low-performing schools, second-chance education programmes).
>
> (Adapted from European Agency, 2018b)

The PSF project acknowledges that compensatory measures may be necessary for some learners and, therefore, are commonly used by countries. However, according to the project conceptual framework, they should be considered with caution, as they are often criticised. The PSF Literature Review highlights some of the criticisms:

First, they divert resources that could be used to improve 'first-chance' education and prevent school failure (Coffield, 1998). Second, they imply that those who failed the first time can catch up with those who have already succeeded and are continuing to move forward (Fernández Enguita et al., 2010). Finally, the approaches have a low uptake and do nothing to reduce the number of learners who experience school failure (European Agency, 2019a, p. 22).

Therefore, compensatory policy actions and measures should be a last resort. Countries should prioritise preventive approaches.

2.2.1. An ecosystem for inclusive education to prevent school failure

It has been argued that school failure must be prevented through a combination of national/regional and local policies, school organisation, and understanding and responding to individual circumstances (Lyche, 2010). The PSF Literature Review provided a conceptual model for preventing school failure that includes those elements, building on previous Agency work on early school leaving (European Agency, 2016a; 2017c; 2017d).

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 (Squires, 2019). Within this model, the ecosystem in which the forces operate is important (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; 1999; 2005).

Figure 1. Combined eco-systemic and force-field analysis model of factors influencing school failure (adapted from European Agency, 2017c; Squires, 2019)

The PSF project uses this ecosystem perspective to explore system-level approaches to school failure. It examines school failure in the context of the Ecosystem of Inclusive Education Model (European Agency, 2017e; 2017f; 2019b), building upon and extending recent Agency work (i.e. Inclusive Early Childhood Education, Raising Achievement and Supporting Inclusive School Leadership). The ecosystem framework aims to help education decision-makers to identify key areas for local and/or national review.

It 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 includes 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 relationships between them affect schools' capacity to accept and include all learners. If a school system is unable to provide equitable learning opportunities to engage and enable 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 others. For example, governance and funding of education systems at the macro-system level operate along with the provision of local services including health, social care, youth services and mental health services at the exo-system level. These are also linked to actions at the micro-system level, such as monitoring progress of individual learners and allocating resources within schools to improve engagement, motivation, attendance and academic outcomes (European Agency, 2019a).

2.3. Summary points

This chapter has outlined the project conceptual framework. Firstly, it discussed various definitions and theoretical understandings of school failure found in the research and policy literature. These have traditionally focused on two main perspectives, i.e. how

individuals might fail within the school system – the individual perspective – and how the school system might fail individual learners – the systemic/organisational perspective.

The chapter also presented the different policy orientations towards school failure, which can focus on prevention, intervention or compensation. Finally, it discussed the project's systemic approach to preventing school failure, which aims to identify and overcome institutional barriers at all levels that might cause school failure. In doing so, it promotes an inclusive ecosystem that ensures both equity and excellence.

Chapter 3 places school failure within the wider European and international policy framework.

3. EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL POLICY CONTEXT

3.1. European policy priorities and international mandates

This project fits within a wider policy context that supports international mandates, the Europe 2020 agenda on education (European Commission, 2010) and recommended policies on inclusive education in general and preventing school failure in particular.

At the international level, the participants in the 2015 World Education Forum in the Republic of Korea stated in the *Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action*:

Inclusion and equity in and through education is the cornerstone of a transformative education agenda, and we therefore commit to addressing all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities and inequalities in access, participation and learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2015, p. 7).

The same year, the UN SDGs included Goal 4, which is to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (UN, no date). More recently, the *Cali commitment to equity and inclusion in education* re-affirms the commitment to inclusive education that was adopted in the *Salamanca Statement* 25 years ago. It defines inclusion as:

… a transformative process that ensures full participation and access to quality learning opportunities for all children, young people and adults, respecting and valuing diversity, and eliminating all forms of discrimination in and through education (UNESCO, 2019a, p. 1).

The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities *General comment No. 4* calls for a 'whole systems approach' to inclusive education, where the entire education system is responsible for implementation (2016, p. 4). It also calls for a 'whole person approach',

which recognises every person's capacity to learn and sets high expectations for all learners (ibid.).

One of the four EU objectives to address challenges in education and training systems by 2020 is 'improving the quality and efficiency of education and training' (Council of the European Union, 2009, p. 3). In the *Paris Declaration* of 17 March 2015, EU Education Ministers re-affirmed Member States' commitment to reinforce education's contribution to:

- promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination;

- strengthening social cohesion;

- helping young people to develop knowledge, skills and competences and to become responsible, open-minded and active members of society (European Union Education Ministers, 2015).

The *Paris Declaration* supported the increasing focus on inclusive education and diversity, noting the importance of:

- strengthening education's role in 'personal development, social inclusion and participation' by conveying the values and principles that are 'the foundation of our societies';

- ensuring inclusive education for all learners that 'combats racism and discrimination', 'promotes citizenship and teaches them to understand and to accept differences of opinion', conviction, belief and lifestyle, 'while respecting the rule of law, diversity and gender equality' (ibid., p. 3).

Along these lines, the *Council conclusions on reducing early school leaving and promoting success in school* considered the impact of the organisation and quality of education systems on learner participation and performance. The Council acknowledged that several environmental factors could lead to school failure and force learners to leave education early. These factors include an unfavourable school climate, violence and bullying, inappropriate teaching methods and curricula, inadequate learner support, lack of career education and guidance or poor teacher-learner relationships. As a response, the Council stressed the need for more inclusive and co-ordinated efforts from both education and non-education stakeholders towards social integration, inter-cultural understanding and a sense of belonging (Council of the European Union, 2015).

Recent policy documents have re-affirmed the need to promote the inclusion of all learners and their full participation in education and society. For example, the European Commission's *A New Skills Agenda for Europe* communication sets out a joint agenda for EU Member States and stakeholders at all levels, aiming to reach a:

… *shared vision and commitment to work together on improving the quality and relevance of skills formation in order to keep step with the rapidly changing skills requirements of the labour market, equip everyone with a minimum set of basic skills and make qualifications easier to understand* (European Commission, 2016, p. 16).

Such goals are aligned with the *Conclusions on Inclusion in Diversity to Achieve a High Quality Education for All*. These invited Member States to promote a democratic, stimulating, nurturing and inclusive school environment that values diversity and provides flexible pathways for all learners, allowing them to realise their full potential (Council of the European Union, 2017). In the same spirit, the Council has also stressed the need for high-quality, inclusive early childhood education and care. This can prevent and mitigate disadvantages for vulnerable learners and, therefore, significantly contribute to addressing inequality and social exclusion (Council of the European Union, 2018a; 2019).

Finally, the *Council Recommendation on promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching* (Council of the European Union, 2018b) draws attention to recent PISA results and the 2017 Education and Training Monitor, which indicate the link between educational and social inequalities. The Recommendation stresses the importance of ensuring effective and equal access to quality inclusive education with the necessary support for all learners. It notes that:

… to prevent the marginalisation of young people, it is vital to have inclusive and equitable education systems that foster cohesive societies and lay the foundations for active citizenship and enhance employability (ibid., p. 2).

The Recommendation calls on Member States to 'promote inclusive education for all learners' by:

(a) *including all learners in quality education from early childhood and throughout life;*

(b) *providing the necessary support to all learners according to their particular needs, including those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, those from a migrant background, those with special needs and the most talented learners;*

(c) *facilitating the transition between various educational pathways and levels and enabling the provision of adequate educational and career guidance* (ibid., pp. 3–4).

These recent European policy directives affirm that reducing wider societal inequality, so that every learner starts school without disadvantages, is a necessary step for preventing school failure.

3.2. International concerns about school failure

Although education systems in most European countries are committed to the policy goals and priorities presented, they still face serious challenges. A report on SDG 4 suggests that its targets are unlikely to be met, foreseeing that:

The world will fall well behind universal completion of secondary education, the achievement of relevant and effective learning outcomes, and the distribution of equitable education opportunities (UNESCO, 2019b, p. 53).

The European Commission also raises relevant concerns:

70 million Europeans lack adequate reading and writing skills, and even more have poor numeracy and digital skills, putting them at risk of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion. More than half of the 12 million long-term unemployed are considered as low-skilled (2016, p. 2).

Internationally, the 2018 PISA survey results show that a considerable (and increasing) share of young people has severe difficulties in acquiring sufficient basic skills, such as reading (OECD, 2019). The fact that learners do not reach a 'basic minimum level of skills to function in today's societies' indicates a lack of inclusion (OECD, 2012, p. 9). The OECD specifically links the lack of inclusion with the risk of school failure:

Students from low socio-economic background are twice as likely to be low performers, implying that personal or social circumstances are obstacles to achieving their educational potential (indicating lack of fairness). Lack of inclusion and fairness fuels school failure, of which dropout is the most visible manifestation – with 20% of young adults on average dropping out before finalising upper-secondary education (ibid.).

Furthermore, the *Bologna Process Implementation Report* stresses that disadvantaged learners face serious access barriers to higher education:

Social dimension challenges have accompanied the Bologna Process throughout its existence. Yet, disadvantaged learners still face access barriers to higher education: students from low and medium-educated families are strongly under-represented, and are more likely to enter higher education with a delay; gender imbalances, if improving slightly, still persist and remain marked in some discipline areas with significant implications for the labour market and society; and life-long learning is not a reality for learners in many countries (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018, p. 15).

A UNESCO policy paper notes two main challenges that stand out for education systems:

First, raising learning outcomes in the world's poorest countries, where currently up to nine in ten children of primary school age do not achieve minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics, according to one definition. Second, identifying the skills, including social and emotional ones, needed globally for sustainable development and how education systems can deliver them (UNESCO, 2018a, p. 3).

A recent OECD report (2017) adds that learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds fall behind, as they receive inadequate support to succeed in school and in the labour market. The Council of the European Union also emphasises the link between educational inequalities and learners' socio-economic backgrounds. It notes:

Ensuring effective equal access to quality inclusive education for all learners, including those of migrant origins, those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, those with special needs and those with disabilities – in line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities – is indispensable for achieving more cohesive societies (2018b, p. 3).

The latest UNESCO guidelines stress that 'a well-functioning education system requires policies that focus on the participation and achievement of all learners' (2017, p. 21). According to the OECD, reducing school failure pays off for both society and individuals:

The economic and social costs of school failure and dropout are high, whereas successful secondary education completion gives individuals better employment and healthier lifestyle prospects resulting in greater contributions to public budgets and investment […] Therefore, investing in early, primary and secondary education for all, and in particular for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, is both fair and economically efficient (2012, p. 9).

3.3. Summary points

The policy information discussed in this chapter forms the wider international and European policy framework where the issue of school failure is situated. Policy documents do not identify preventing school failure as a primary policy goal, but as an indirect outcome of policies aiming to reduce early school leaving, improve education, facilitate access to the labour market or reduce social exclusion and disadvantage.

European countries are increasingly committed to developing more equitable and inclusive education systems. However, there are considerable international concerns about particular groups of learners' low levels of academic achievement and its longer-term impact. There are also concerns about the wider issue of school failure from a systemic perspective. It is thus important to consider how European education policies targeting school failure can support the achievement of inclusive education.

Chapter 4 examines specific policy approaches to school failure, as described by the 14 Agency member countries that responded to the project survey.

4. EXISTING POLICY APPROACHES FOR PREVENTING SCHOOL FAILURE

National education systems have developed policy responses aiming to meet the diverse needs of learners, improve learner outcomes and prevent school failure. This chapter summarises relevant EU policy developments aiming to prevent school failure. It provides an analysis of policies and measures directly related to school failure in the **education systems of 14 countries** that responded to the PSF country survey. These countries are: Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Malta, Serbia, Slovakia, Sweden, UK (Northern Ireland) and UK (Scotland). The following analysis seeks to answer the question: **what do Agency member countries do to prevent school failure?**

In this report, country information is summarised under the main themes that emerged as most relevant to preventing school failure.

The chapter begins with an overview of how countries define school failure. Following this, it outlines the countries' key policy areas that relate to preventing school failure, which are:

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

These general policy areas relate to the concepts identified in the PSF Literature Review (European Agency, 2019a). For each policy area, vignettes (in boxes) provide examples of key policies and initiatives from national education systems. These examples were selected based on two criteria: relevance to the policy area explored and equal country representation.

4.1. Countries' definitions of school failure

The PSF project country survey examined how countries' national policies perceive and define school failure. Almost half of the participating countries provided definitions of school failure. The responses indicated that none of those countries has a legal definition of school failure in their national legislation and policies.

For Serbia and Slovakia, preventing school failure is an indirect aim of national strategies. In Latvia, school failure is understood as a process where a learner continuously falls behind their peers and gradually disconnects from the education system. The end result of school failure is dropping out of school before graduation. From a system perspective, school failure in Latvia occurs when a school fails the accreditation process. Finland and Greece also connect the concept of school failure with 'student drop-out', which is defined as a learner's failure to complete a certain level of compulsory education.

Other countries take a rights-based approach to preventing school failure. For example, in Estonia, several legal documents describe all learners' rights to receive high-quality education and support, according to their needs. In Sweden, the concept of school failure is not commonly found in documents from top-level education authorities. At the national policy level, school failure is closely related to segregation and lack of equity.

In a broader context, school failure is often discussed in terms of the costs of exclusion. Countries stress the importance of counteracting school drop-out, absenteeism and ensuring safe transitions and mental health.

Official legislation and policy guidance in UK (Scotland) also rarely reference school failure. Relevant documents refer to 'needs or concerns' identified through national data analysis or evidence from national strategy groups. Policies define specific duties for ministers, education authorities and schools. These duties are designed to secure an inclusive and equitable education system. In Scotland, school failure is if the national policies and education system do not:

- ensure a minimum standard of education for every child or young person (inclusion);
- promote equality and ensure that socio-economic or personal circumstances do not become barriers to achieving educational potential.

Finally, policy in UK (Northern Ireland) aims to ensure schools deliver teaching and learning to the highest standards. There is a range of policies in place to identify when the risk of failure needs to be addressed.

To summarise, the countries' national policies do not directly use the term school failure 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 next sections discuss this.

4.2. Increasing engagement and reducing early school leaving

The Agency's Early School Leaving project highlighted current policy efforts relating to early school leaving (European Agency, 2017d). The PSF country information analysis confirmed that many education systems (Finland, Greece, Ireland, Latvia, Malta, Serbia, Slovakia, Sweden, UK – Northern Ireland and UK – Scotland) identify reducing early school leaving as a main policy priority. However, the scope and degree of precision in policy regulations and/or recommendations vary.

Some countries' official documents specifically refer to early school leaving. For example, Malta has an official national publication that focuses on preventing early school leaving, *A Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta*. This facilitates focused action that will support learners to make the best of their school years, from early childhood, to the end of compulsory school and beyond. The plan also includes a strategic measure to decrease the rate of early school leaving among people with disabilities. Similarly, one objective of the *Strategy for Education Development in Serbia 2020* is to increase the 'efficiency of the use of educational resources, that is, the completion of education on time, with minimal extension and reduced dropout' by the year 2020.

In Ireland, the Tusla Education Support Service helps parents and learners with school attendance. It also provides sanctions for dealing with non-school attendance. The Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018 introduced a more parent-friendly, equitable and consistent approach to Irish school admissions policy, aiming for a fair and balanced admission process for all learners. In addition, the School Completion Programme provides a range of interventions that support the retention of learners who are at risk of not reaching their full potential because of poor attendance, participation and attainment. It also supports young people who left school early to return to education.

> **Latvia's national project for reducing early school leaving**
>
> Latvia's *Guidelines for the Development of Education for 2014–2020* recognise the need to address the number of learners who are at risk of failure and early school leaving. For this reason, the State Education Quality Service is implementing a European Social Fund project called Support for Reducing Early School Leaving. It aims to reduce the number of children and young people leaving school and dropping out before graduation. Eighty percent of municipalities, covering 614 general and vocational education institutions, are involved in the project.
>
> The project aims to create a sustainable co-operation system between the municipality, school, educators and parents to identify learners and young people at risk of early school leaving and offer them personalised support. A database is being developed to provide a regular exchange of information at national, municipal and school levels. The database will identify learners at risk of dropping out, preventive measures taken and their outcomes.

The project also supports non-governmental organisations formed by young people to raise awareness about early school leaving and to reach out to learners through peer learning and activities.

Municipalities provide individual support to learners and young people who might quit education due to lack of resources. This includes reimbursement of the costs of transport, meals and hotels or the purchase of individual learning materials. The project is not focused on providing short-term financial assistance, but on creating a sustainable, comprehensive mechanism for a supportive and inclusive school environment for all learners.

The project's target group is learners in mainstream schools from grades 5 to 12, VET students from 1st to 4th year and those in general education institutions offering VET programmes.

Sweden uses a digital platform focusing on drop-out called PlugInnovation. It is the country's largest project to support young people to complete upper-secondary school. It offers almost 80 method workshops in 47 Swedish municipalities aiming to help reduce study interruptions in upper-secondary school and to get more young people to finish their education successfully. Common types of interventions include mentoring/coaching, identifying and mapping risk groups, outreach, transitioning from primary to secondary school, promoting learner health and person-centred approaches.

Finland offers flexible basic education in an effort to reduce drop-out from basic education and prevent exclusion. Its goal is to strengthen learners' motivation to study and to support life management. In addition to completing the basic education syllabus, it supports learners in their transition to the next stage of education and training. It pays particular attention to work forms that increase learners' participation in the school community and support the joint educational work of guardians and all those working in flexible basic education.

UK (Scotland) promotes a two-part strategy called *Included, Engaged and Involved*. The first part of the strategy includes guidance on managing attendance and absence in Scottish schools, aiming to promote good attendance. This guidance draws together best practices and establishes requirements for classifying and recording attendance and absence. Part two of the strategy provides guidance on managing school exclusions with a strong focus on positive approaches that can help prevent the need for exclusion.

Policy in UK (Northern Ireland) aims to maximise learners' attendance rates and support them to reach their full potential. The *Miss School = Miss Out, Improving Pupil Attendance Strategy* provides a framework for all those involved in managing and improving school attendance. It identifies four themes underpinning a successful approach to managing learner attendance:

- School leadership
- Early intervention
- Tailored support
- Collaboration and engagement.

For each theme, the strategy sets out a strategic goal, good practice indicators and roles and responsibilities for all relevant parties. It also recognises the need to enable schools to learn from techniques and approaches that other schools have used successfully. Good practice can be shared via formal local mechanisms such as Area Learning Communities, where schools directly engage with each other, through informal relationships between school leaders or through central provision like the Education and Training Inspectorate's good practice guide.

Some countries focus on data monitoring as a strategy to prevent and reduce early school leaving. For example, in Greece, the Institute of Educational Policy established an Observatory for Identifying and Tackling Student Dropout Issues, within the framework of the Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning operational programme 2014–2020. This initiative aims to reduce and prevent early school leaving and promote equal access to quality pre-primary, primary and secondary education. It also promotes formal, non-formal and informal educational capacities for re-integration into education and training.

> **Slovakia's use of statistical data**
>
> Slovakia collects and uses various statistical data at the national level. The data includes:
>
> - the number of early school leavers, i.e. those who leave school without completing primary and/or secondary education or without a professional qualification;
>
> - the participation of children from vulnerable, socially marginalised groups in pre-primary education;
>
> - the learning outcomes of primary school learners in international measurements.
>
> In 2015, for the first time, Slovakia also provided secondary schools with data showing how learners progressed from school entrance to school-leaving examinations. Proposals and models are currently being prepared for setting other school quality indicators to reflect school contexts and individual learner results. These indicators include, for example, school climate, teaching staff climate, learners' motivation and classroom climate.

Similarly, Finland collects data on discontinuation of education in upper-secondary vocational education. Finland's statistics describe how new entrants to post-comprehensive school education progress in their studies up to attaining a qualification or degree. This includes data on the start of education, duration of education, change of education and what learners do after they have discontinued education.

4.3. Focusing on low levels of academic achievement

According to the survey analysis, countries also focus on low levels of academic achievement as a way to tackle school failure. This section presents country information on this main policy aim. The information is structured around the following sub-aims:

- targeting at-risk learners;
- focusing on vulnerable groups of learners;
- increasing attainment in particular areas;
- supporting learners and schools with lower outcomes.

4.3.1. Targeting at-risk learners

Raising the academic outcomes of at-risk learners, such as those from a low socio-economic background, is a challenge for schools and closely relates to school failure. The European Commission notes that: 'Tackling the skills challenges will require significant policy efforts and systemic reforms in education and training' (2016, p. 3).

Towards that effort, half of the respondent countries (Czech Republic, Germany, Malta, Serbia, Sweden, UK – Northern Ireland and UK – Scotland) have promoted policies targeting specific learners at risk of school failure.

The UK (Scotland) Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000 includes a particular aim 'to reduce inequalities of outcome'. The policy reflects Article 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and specifically refers to learners who are socially and economically disadvantaged. More recently, the 2016 *Delivering Excellence and Equity in Scottish Education* policy is 'committed to raising attainment and making demonstrable progress in closing the gap in attainment' between the least and most disadvantaged learners. Part of Scotland's mission to ensure equity in education is Pupil Equity Funding, allocated directly to schools and targeted at closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

Similarly, a strategic and specific objective of Serbia's *National Youth Strategy 2015–2025* is to enhance the social inclusion of young people from socially vulnerable categories. This can be done by improving the adaptability, availability, scope and quality of inclusive programmes and services. The Law on Financial Support for Families with Children specifically defines rights and support systems for families with children from vulnerable groups.

> **Engaging socially disadvantaged learners in Czech Republic**
>
> The *Long-Term Plan for Education and Development of the Education System of the Czech Republic 2019–2023* includes a specific measure to engage socially disadvantaged children in pre-primary education.
>
> From September 2018, every child who has reached the age of three should be admitted to pre-primary education free of charge. Early pedagogical diagnostics (e.g. speech therapy, literacy) occur in kindergarten. These policies aim to reduce school failure.
>
> Related measures in the previous national plan (2015–2020) were promoting effective and targeted primary prevention activities to minimise or delay risky behaviour. This included developing and promoting effective counselling in the area of primary prevention of risky behaviour.

In UK (Northern Ireland), the Tackling Educational Disadvantage Team operates within the Department of Education. The team particularly focuses on children who have Free School Meals Entitlement (FSME). The team explores policies and interventions that are effective in helping FSME learners achieve their full potential and in closing the gap between FSME and non-FSME children, which is one of the Department's key challenges.

In addition, a considerable Targeting Social Need budget is distributed to schools every year. It is allocated directly to schools to target socially disadvantaged learners and those at risk of educational underachievement. The Department also continues to provide funding for disadvantaged communities and improving school-community links.

In Germany, the Praxis and School (PuSch) national programme started in 2015 and is financed by the European Social Fund. It enables learners with considerable learning difficulties to achieve their secondary school leaving certificate. After three years of implementation, PuSch was already supporting around 5,300 disadvantaged learners.

Along the same lines, Malta runs the Prince's Trust International Achieve Programme for young people at risk of underachievement or exclusion. The initiative offers learners a personal development programme as an opportunity to re-engage in education. According to data from June 2019, 44 centres have delivered and presented work in relation to the Achieve Programme.

> **Compensating for disadvantaged learners in Sweden**
>
> According to the Education Act, Swedish schools have a far-reaching compensatory duty. They are directed to compensate for factors that put some learners at a disadvantage in relation to their opportunities to develop and achieve learning and social educational goals. This compensatory duty often involves learners at risk of school failure, with absences and drop-out as a consequence and, in the long run, at greater risk of exclusion and mental illness.

> The Swedish government offers state grants for targeted efforts that aim to strengthen teachers' competence and, ultimately, raise the quality of education and learner outcomes. Targeted efforts can relate to sports and health, mathematics, reading and writing skills and school development.
>
> One of these efforts is the development of the SiSam-model for unbroken schooling, which targets children and young people in care. This means they have been placed in family homes, emergency homes or other homes for care and housing. The model supports and promotes collaboration between those who work with children and young people in care and in schools. The SiSam-model has inspired the SAMS-model for collaboration between social service and schools to support all learners in care. The SAMS-model includes all other types of placement except for special residential homes for young people.
>
> Currently, the two models work in parallel. The National Board of Health and Welfare, a government agency under the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, is responsible for operating the models. The purpose is to ensure unbroken schooling for placed children and young people when placements involve school changes.

4.3.2. Focusing on vulnerable groups of learners

Countries also consider approaches to preventing school failure in vulnerable groups of learners, such as migrant learners. The 2019 *Global Education Monitoring Report* notes that 'there has been a trend in high income countries to adopt an intercultural education approach, which celebrates migrant and refugee cultures and values cultural diversity' (UNESCO, 2018b, p. 5).

Some education systems have policies in place for migrant learners who do not have the language skills needed to participate fully and equally in mainstream classes (e.g. Finland, Germany, Greece, Malta). Those countries have indicated regulations for providing additional language instruction classes for migrant learners.

Malta has developed a policy document called the *Migrant Integration Strategy and Action Plan (Vision 2020)*. By setting up a Migrant Learners' Unit, it strengthened the provision of support for children from migrant backgrounds as they integrate into the school system. This involved developing a one-year induction programme for those learners. The programme includes teaching the Maltese language and sharing cultural heritage among migrant learners for better communication and inclusion.

In Finland, preparatory education for basic education is available for children and young people of immigrant backgrounds (aged 6–17 years) whose Finnish language skills are not adequate to study in Finnish-speaking groups in early childhood education and comprehensive education. During preparatory education, pupils learn Finnish and the skills necessary for comprehensive education. Each learner receives an individual education plan, which defines the objectives of preparatory education. Preparatory education is offered for 24–26 hours a week, depending on the learner's age, for a maximum of one year.

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Greece has similar structured efforts to support migrant and refugee learners, as the following example indicates.

> **School structures to support vulnerable learners in Greece**
>
> In Greece, there are two main supportive structures and practices aimed at increasing equal access to education and enhancing the inclusion of vulnerable social groups:
>
> - Educational Priority Zones (ZEP): ZEP Reception Classes aim for participatory, active and effective education for primary education learners with little or no knowledge of Greek (Roma, refugees, vulnerable social groups, etc.) for their inclusion in the Greek education system. One offering is an intensive Greek language course. There are also opportunities for learners with average competence in the Greek language, who can receive further support in the Greek language and/or other subjects. This can be provided either with parallel support in mainstream classes (second teacher in class) or out of mainstream classes.
>
> - Reception Structures for Refugee Education (DYEP): A Greek law from 2018 states that DYEP directly focus on learners becoming familiar with the ethics of school life and schoolwork. This is based on their individual educational needs, exposure to Greek and European culture and literacy background. DYEP attendance lasts for one school year and may extend to one more year, aiming to facilitate inclusion in mainstream classes.

Countries also indicated important developments in legal frameworks on learners with SEN and disabilities. These aim to ensure that those learners receive appropriate support to achieve their full potential (Czech Republic, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Malta, Serbia, Sweden, UK – Northern Ireland and UK – Scotland).

The legal framework for inclusive education in Serbia includes the 2017 Law on the Education System Foundations. This law recognises equality in the right to education. It is sensitive to the various reasons why learners may require additional support and recognises the risk of early school leaving.

In Sweden, a law from 2018 aims to reduce attainment gaps between different groups of learners. Learners with disabilities who might find it difficult to meet educational goals and requirements must be given support.

In Ireland, the Department of Education and Skills has reconfigured the manner in which additional resources are allocated to schools to assist them in meeting the needs of learners with SEN. This is reflected in the 2017 Resource Allocation Model policy, which removes the need for diagnosis and allocates teaching resources to schools based on their profiles. Giving schools autonomy to make decisions about the deployment of teachers is at the heart of the resource allocation model. Similarly, a recent review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme has recommended that learners be able to access support without a diagnosis.

In Finland, national-level prevention of marginalisation is one of the government's leading targets. A major part of that goal is trying to find ways to support educational equality,

learning and school attendance. According to the [Basic Education Act](#), an enrolled learner is entitled to guidance, counselling and sufficient support in learning and school attendance as soon as the need arises. There are three levels of support in pre-primary and basic education. General support is the first response to a learner's need for support and is given to all learners. Intensified support is more continuous, stronger and more personalised. For instance, learners can focus on certain subjects, studying only the key concepts. If intensified support is not enough, a learner may receive special needs support. Special needs support may include individually tailored syllabi and/or timetable adjustments.

[Czech Republic's Education Act](#) establishes that learners with SEN have the right to receive support measures from schools. The national *Action Plan for Inclusive Education 2019–2020* strategy document contains measures for verifying the role of the school social pedagogue. The social pedagogue's support is intended for primary schools with a higher proportion of Roma learners, learners from diverse cultural backgrounds and learners living in different conditions.

In all German federal states (Länder), mainstream schools are obliged to teach learners who travel because of their parents' work. These schools serve as 'base schools' during travel and are usually close to the host city. Learners attending these schools receive a school diary, have their own learning plan drawn up by the responsible teacher in the base school, and are supported to progress in school according to their age.

The German Land of Hesse has a [pilot project for travelling learners](#). Learners are taught by teachers online in eight mobile classrooms across Hesse and other Länder, so they do not have to attend a different school each week. The mobile classroom is a basic school and the school diary is the basis of the teaching work. During the winter break, the children attend classes at base schools.

Some countries have policies targeting Traveller and Roma communities. Those groups of learners have among the lowest school completion rates in some European countries. In Ireland, for example, Irish Travellers show poorer educational outcomes. The *[National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017–2021](#)* outlines a range of actions to support and promote better school attendance, participation and retention among Traveller and Roma communities. Slovakia has made relevant efforts, with a national project called Pedagogical Employees' Education for Inclusion of Marginalised Roma Communities, which ran from October 2011 to October 2015.

Finland ensures educational opportunities for Roma and other minorities, as well as for people who use sign language. Education providers can apply for additional funding for organising instruction in Roma and Sami languages and in migrant learners' languages. There are educational institutions where all, or at least some, instruction is provided in an additional language, usually English. Education providers also organise preparatory education to enable migrant learners to enter basic or upper-secondary education.

Finally, Serbia aims to prevent or reduce all forms of discrimination towards Roma learners, as defined by the *[Strategy for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination](#)*. This strategy recognises the segregation of Roma learners as the greatest risk of discrimination in education. For this reason, it provides for a department exclusively for learners of Roma ethnicity.

4.3.3. Increasing attainment in particular areas

More than half of the participating countries (Finland, Germany, Ireland, Malta, Serbia, Sweden, UK – Northern Ireland and UK – Scotland) have introduced policy measures that aim to increase attainment in particular areas. The most common curriculum areas are literacy, numeracy and science.

In Ireland, the *DEIS Plan 2017* sets out new goals to improve outcomes for learners and opportunities for those in communities at risk of disadvantage and social exclusion. The plan sets down targets to be achieved in certain areas, including literacy and numeracy, increased retention rates to secondary school leaving certificate level and progression to further and higher education. In addition, the national strategy *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011–2020* seeks to address concerns about how well young people develop the literacy and numeracy skills they need to participate fully in the education system, to live satisfying and rewarding lives and to participate as active and informed citizens.

Legislation in UK (Scotland) includes Glasgow's Improvement Challenge 2015–2020. This holistic strategy seeks to raise attainment and achievement for all learners. It aims to improve numeracy and literacy across Glasgow's primary schools through a two-pronged approach. One part is Glasgow Counts, which aims to raise attainment in numeracy, and the other is Literacy for All, which aims to raise attainment in literacy.

Similarly, Malta has set up a National Literacy Agency, which is a strong focal point for literacy support in schools. It promotes and enhances lifelong and life-wide high-quality literacy practices among children, young people, adults, third-country nationals and persons with learning difficulties. It strives to improve literacy outcomes, resulting in inclusive practices, higher educational qualifications and better job prospects.

Improving basic skills in Germany

In December 2003, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder adopted basic principles for the individual promotion of learners experiencing particular difficulties with reading and writing. For this group of learners, schools provide general remedial instruction during school hours or complementary remedial instruction after hours. Individual remedial instruction should continue until the end of grade 10. The resolution of 2003 was revised in 2007 and enhanced by principles governing support for learners who experience particular difficulties in mathematics.

In addition, the SINUS national project is a trademark for improving mathematics and science education in Germany. This project was initially planned for five years and started with 180 schools throughout Germany. The project focuses on reviewing and evaluating teachers' maths and science lessons. Co-operation among teachers has played an exceptional role in this programme. Teachers in regional associations of schools (school groups) have improved their teaching methods considerably. This school-level approach ensures quality and optimises teaching and learning of mathematics and science.

In UK (Northern Ireland), the *Count, Read: Succeed* literacy and numeracy strategy supports teachers and school leaders working to raise overall standards in literacy and numeracy. It aims to close gaps in achievement between the highest and lowest achieving learners and schools, between the most and least disadvantaged learners and between girls and boys. Schools across Northern Ireland have also benefited from the Literacy and Numeracy Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 CPD Project. This project started in 2014 and is funded by the Department of Education. It aims to improve pedagogy in literacy and numeracy to raise standards and improve attainment. In particular, it strives to ensure progress in attainment during secondary education by improving learners' transition from primary to post-primary school. This programme serves the most disadvantaged learners in Northern Ireland.

A serious challenge for the Serbian education system is the low levels of reading literacy, in terms of comprehension and ability to work on the text. To tackle this, the *National Youth Strategy 2015–2025* aims for increased access to education and educational impact and improved functional literacy of young people. This strategy is important for reducing inequities in access to education that may lead to the lack of required competencies and/or drop-out.

Sweden has introduced new provisions in its Education Act as a guarantee for early support. According to the Read, Write, Count guarantee, learners should receive the right support at the right time. This means that special support or extra adaptations are in place as early as possible, designed according to learners' specific needs. The head teacher is responsible for ensuring sufficient organisational and financial conditions to fulfil the guarantee.

Finally, Finland has introduced a web-based service for learning difficulties in reading and mathematics. LukiMat is a public online information service for teachers, school staff and parents. It provides information about reading and mathematical learning and difficulties in mastering those skills. The service focuses on skills development in children aged five to eight years. It is funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture.

4.3.4. Supporting learners and schools with lower outcomes

Another set of countries' policies target low-achieving learners, aiming to promote more equitable learning opportunities and reduce attainment gaps. For instance, the Icelandic Ministry supports upper-secondary schools that enrol learners from lower-secondary level who have not achieved competences described in the National Curriculum Guide. In addition, it introduced national measures to support upper-secondary schools for three years, targeting learners at risk of drop-out and early school leaving.

Estonia's Basic Schools and Upper-Secondary Schools Act includes a legal provision for every school's duty to identify and implement the required support for learners in need. This provision stipulates that the school should provide extra support to a learner who has difficulties in attending school or lags behind in achieving the learning outcomes with general support. This involves individual additional instruction, support services provided by specialists and the organisation of study assistance lessons individually or in a group.

Finland puts forward a positive discrimination funding policy that targets specific comprehensive schools in Helsinki to eliminate social exclusion. This funding policy provides extra resources to schools based on the educational status and income level of

the learners' parents. The funding is also based on the number of immigrant families in the area. School leaders decide how the extra resources are spent. Most schools use the positive discrimination funding to hire special needs assistants. Evidence suggests that this policy has led to significant improvement in transitions to secondary education for low-performing native learners and learners from an immigrant background (Silliman, 2017).

Germany also has a national strategy that targets low-achieving learners. This multi-year funding strategy aims to improve the performance of low-achieving learners. This can substantially reduce the proportion of learners who do not reach a minimum level of competence development at the end of their education. At the same time, the chance for all learners to obtain a school certificate and successfully participate in professional and social life should increase. Within the framework of the support strategy, the German Länder have agreed on common guidelines to help low-achieving learners. These guidelines highlight the diversity of existing actions and support further efforts to raise the achievement of lower performing learners.

In Greece, lower-secondary school learners who lag behind or wish to improve their performance in particular subjects can opt for remedial tuition. Remedial tuition aims to promote learner progress, improve performance in order to complete compulsory education, decrease drop-out rates and increase learner access rates to upper-secondary education. Remedial tuition covers one to five teaching sessions per day after school. Each learner is entitled to attend from one to all subjects provided by remedial tuition.

Some of the 14 education systems under discussion particularly emphasise supporting schools with lower outcomes. For example, Slovakia has a national action plan for supporting schools in its least developed districts. This governmental programme aims to eliminate socio-economic disadvantages and reduce the high unemployment rates in these districts. Education is one area the Action Plan supports. It aims to create conditions for learners to access quality education in their local area. It also aims to increase social inclusion and to improve learner outcomes throughout schooling and for joining the labour market.

Likewise, a key focus in the recent UK (Scotland) National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan is to support and encourage the empowerment of school leaders and school communities and to create a culture of collaborative and system leadership. Similar policy initiatives are in place in UK (Northern Ireland), as described below.

Northern Ireland's school improvement policy: Every School a Good School

The *Every School a Good School* policy sets out the vision for a high-quality education system. It focuses on raising standards across all schools and addressing the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged. An important element of this policy is the formal intervention process for schools with lower quality of education provision.

> Specifically, if a school requires external support to bring about improvement, the necessary focused and appropriate support is provided. The local education authority partners with the school to prepare and agree on detailed action plans to address the areas identified for improvement.
>
> The education authority has a responsibility to support and, where necessary, challenge schools. This includes supporting schools to draft school development plans, appointing new school leaders, supporting schools to create senior leadership teams and building the capacity of school leaders. School progress is monitored regularly and schools are provided with suggested actions or changes to improve the quality of provision, leadership and management.

4.4. Promoting a whole-school development approach

The third main policy priority that emerged from the country information analysis is promoting a whole-school development approach. A whole-school approach to teaching and learning entails:

- building capacity for inclusion;
- supporting learner health and well-being;
- developing curriculum, assessment and pedagogy;
- improving transition between phases of education;
- providing career support and flexible career pathways.

The following sections discuss these aims.

4.4.1. Building capacity for inclusion

The Agency's Raising Achievement project highlighted the need to monitor school development through an 'inclusive lens', by focusing on equitable opportunities across all school structures and processes (European Agency, 2017a). In line with Raising Achievement project work, policy-makers have argued for reconceptualising schools as 'learning organisations'. They consider this the ideal type of school organisation to facilitate school development, change and effectiveness and improve learning outcomes.

The following example from UK (Scotland) shows how national policy supports such a vision:

> **Governance policies to promote capacity building in UK (Scotland)**
>
> In Scotland, national and international evidence-based research informs national and local policy and promotes effective practice in schools. At the local level, professional learning and support enable schools and practitioners to be more inclusive and equitable in their practice.
>
> This is achieved through capacity building, which focuses on developing teachers' skills and knowledge to raise attainment and promote the well-being of all learners. The system is moving away from top-down, directly delivered, generic and centralised supports. It is moving towards supporting co-design and development of local policies, strategies, resources and professional learning.
>
> Recent national policy changes in educational governance have the potential to directly affect 'capacity' at the school, local and regional levels to reduce or prevent school failure. These are:
>
> - the Education Bill Policy Ambition —Joint Agreement, which sets out agreed principles and measures to support and encourage the empowerment of schools in Scotland;
>
> - a new Bill proposal that will reform how schools are run and put schools in charge of key decisions about a learner's education. This Bill aims to provide:
>
>   - more freedom to make choices about curriculum, improvement and funding at the school level;
>
>   - more freedom for head teachers to choose school staff and management structure;
>
>   - streamlined and strengthened support for teachers, drawing on experts from local and national authorities;
>
>   - strengthened engagement with young people and parents in schools.

Teachers need professional competences to recognise learners' strengths and weaknesses and barriers they might experience, and to put in place appropriate pedagogical measures for prevention and support. According to the survey responses, countries emphasise helping education professionals to improve their ability to respond to the various needs of learners at risk of failure through continuing professional development (CPD) activities. Six out of the fourteen education systems investigated (Germany, Greece, Latvia, Malta, Slovakia and UK – Northern Ireland) have CPD activities in this area.

For instance, one of Germany's priorities is to educate teachers to embrace diversity. Co-operation and communication between teachers in different roles and between various education professionals have become a policy priority. Degree programmes that lead to teaching positions, in any type of school and at any level of schooling, should co-operatively prepare prospective teachers to take a constructive and professional approach to diversity. Inclusive education issues are expected to gain substance and

authority within the national Standards for Teacher Training in the Educational Sciences, thus creating the necessary framework for teacher education curricula.

In Slovakia, national projects funded by European Structural Funds (e.g. School Open to All, PRINED and More Successful in Primary School I and II) aim to improve competences of pedagogical and professional staff in inclusive education. One objective of the programmes is to create inclusive teams including psychologists, special pedagogues, teacher assistants and social pedagogues.

Similarly, Serbia's *Action Plan for Implementation of the Strategy for Development of Education by 2020* prioritises training programmes to further develop the inclusive education competencies of professionals in educational institutions.

Greece has a broad institutional framework for supportive structures and practices aimed at enhancing schools' inclusive capacity. This includes school co-operation with:

- the Regional Centres for Educational Planning (PEKES), which provide scientific and pedagogical support for teachers to tackle exclusion and discrimination;
- the Educational and Counselling Support Centres, which also support schools and teachers on issues of inclusive education.

Moreover, a recent Greek law (4547/2018) promotes the operation of School Networks of Education and Support and Interdisciplinary Educational Evaluation and Support Committees. These focus on supporting the whole school community in promoting learners' psycho-social welfare and ensuring equal access to education. The law also introduces teacher groups in schools and co-operating clusters of neighbouring schools as a way to enhance co-operation at different levels. These efforts address issues of equal access to education and building school capacity, e.g. lesson planning and evaluating the implementation of educational plans. They also provide training on inclusion and differentiated teaching for stakeholders and teachers.

A few country policies aim to increase the involvement of parents and local communities as part of building school capacity to prevent school failure. For example, in UK (Northern Ireland), the parental engagement campaign 'Give your child a helping hand' encourages parents and carers to support their children's education by giving them 'a helping hand'. This includes reading and counting with them from an early age, showing an interest in their day at school, talking to them about their homework and helping them make decisions now that will shape them into the adults they will become.

Similarly, UK (Scotland) has a national action plan on parental involvement, engagement, family learning and learning at home for 2018–2021. It outlines the national vision for parental involvement and engagement from pre-birth to age 18. It also takes into account the national and international evidence base and Scottish education system expertise.

Finally, some countries also focus on monitoring mechanisms to support capacity building in schools (Iceland, Ireland, Serbia, UK – Northern Ireland and UK – Scotland). Such mechanisms are key to the school improvement process. They can include inspection processes and national indicators and self-evaluation frameworks developed to ensure the quality of education provided within individual schools.

In Ireland, the Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate operates a comprehensive external evaluation programme using a range of inspection models. Some of these inspection models focus on evaluating whole-school efforts to meet the needs of children most at risk of failing in the school system.

UK (Scotland) also monitors impact and uses evidence to plan an improvement agenda. Currently, national data evidence drives policy change and allows for funding to be targeted to areas with the greatest need. Smarter data collection and use will allow for robust prioritisation, decision-making and improvement planning. Specifically, the *How good is our school?* (4th edition) national framework is at the core of Scotland's approach to evaluating quality. It provides a set of national quality indicators designed to enable providers to undertake self-evaluation and improvement.

Serbia's Monitoring Framework for Inclusive Education includes a set of indicators for the inclusion of learners from vulnerable groups, the quality of teaching provided and the co-operation of inclusive education stakeholders. These indicators are important for understanding what needs to be improved in Serbia's education system.

Similarly, UK (Northern Ireland) aims to ensure that schools deliver teaching and learning to the highest standards. The Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework is a resource that supports schools in the process of self-evaluation and transparently publishes its inspection key indicators. In addition, the School Development Plan is the school's strategic plan for improvement. It brings together the school's priorities, the main actions that will be taken to raise standards, the resources dedicated to these actions and the key outcomes to be achieved. Through effective self-evaluation, schools identify areas for improvement and implement changes that can improve learner outcomes.

School Development Days in Northern Ireland allow schools to take up to five days for self-evaluation and CPD in pursuit of school improvement and raising of standards. These days are devoted to matters identified in School Development Plans as priorities for school development and improvement. The days should involve all staff, teaching and non-teaching, in development activities. Schools are asked to set aside at least one School Development Day per academic year for whole-school development to support learners with SEN.

Finally, in Iceland, the evaluation of school activities is, by law, part of the supervisory work of schools and school authorities. This is to ensure the rights of learners and promote school improvement. In addition, the Ministry of Education stipulates a three-year plan for external evaluation, surveys and evaluations to provide information about school activities in pre-primary, compulsory and upper-secondary schools.

4.4.2. Supporting learner health and well-being

Much academic literature suggests that a climate pre-occupied with raising academic attainment in core curriculum subjects may not fully acknowledge and address the holistic needs of all learners. The PSF Literature Review findings show that learners with strong social-emotional skills have higher academic achievement and lower risk of school failure (European Agency, 2019a). In the project survey, seven of the fourteen countries indicated specific top-level policies for promoting learner health and well-being (Finland, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Malta, Sweden, UK – Northern Ireland and UK – Scotland).

Malta prioritises learner health and well-being through various learner support services. Psycho-social teams in local schools consist of counsellors, youth workers, social workers, career advisors and experts on discipline. These teams work in constant collaboration with school administrative staff, anti-bullying teams, psychologists and other professionals to address existing issues as early as possible. Nurture Classes (in primary schools) and Learning Support Zones (in secondary schools) support learners with social, emotional and behavioural issues. They provide programmes to develop learners' emotional skills and to equip them with appropriate resilience skills.

In addition, Malta has put forward the *Trans, Gender Variant and Intersex Students in Schools Policy* (2015). It aims to foster school environments that are inclusive, safe and free from harassment and discrimination for all members of the community. This includes all learners and adults regardless of sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and/or sex characteristics.

Greece prioritises learner health and well-being by providing various support services for learners at the school and local levels (i.e. provision of social workers and psychologists in schools, Interdisciplinary Educational Evaluation and Support Committees and Educational and Counselling Support Centres). School programmes that focus on issues of health education, career education, etc., also promote learner health and well-being.

> **Well-being promotion in Ireland**
>
> As set out in the *Action Plan for Education (2016–2019)*, Ireland aims to improve services and resources to promote well-being in school communities to support success in school and life. To implement this policy, every school and centre for education is required to use the School Self-Evaluation process to initiate a well-being promotion review and development cycle by 2023.
>
> There are many examples of well-being promotion already in place in schools and centres for education that are in keeping with this policy. In line with the 2017 *Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines*, the Department of Education and Skills lists the following key areas of well-being promotion:
>
> - Culture and environment
> - Curriculum (teaching and learning)
> - Policy and planning
> - Relationships and partnerships.
>
> The *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* helps to ensure effective implementation of a multi-component, whole-school approach that positively affects all learners in line with international best practice.

Sweden focuses on ensuring learner health through preventive measures. The Education Act promotes learner health through medical, psychological, psycho-social and other educational efforts. Health visits in schools support learner development towards educational goals. Each learner is offered at least three health visits that include general health checks in schools.

In Iceland, compulsory schools are expected to organise preventive measures and health promotion for learners' mental, physical and social well-being. Schools issue a prevention plan as part of the school curriculum guide. This plan includes preventive measures against addiction, alcohol and tobacco and violence. It also includes a plan for security and accident prevention and a policy on discipline. In addition, the plan lays out guidelines for what actions to take if school rules are violated. All members of the school community, including school staff, parents and learners, are made aware of the prevention plan.

> **Welfare services in Finland**
>
> In Finland, the Student Welfare Act includes two levels of learner welfare: common welfare services and individualised welfare services.
>
> Learner welfare for all is primarily preventive and supports the school community as a whole. It aims to promote learning, well-being, health, social responsibility, interaction and participation of learners. It also promotes the wholesomeness, safety and accessibility of the learning environment.
>
> Individualised welfare focuses on the learner. Services are based on the learner's right to sufficient support in resolving difficulties. This means access to school health services, social workers and psychologists, and other multi-professional services implemented by a team of experts. Multi-professional teams of experts come together if needed to clarify individual learner needs for support and to organise appropriate services.

According to the UK (Scotland) Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000, a school is 'health-promoting' if it provides 'activities' and 'an environment and facilities' that 'promote the physical, social, mental and emotional health and well-being of pupils in attendance at the school'. This policy reflects Article 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and specifically references learners who are socially and economically disadvantaged.

As mentioned, Scotland's national plan to raise standards in education includes Glasgow's Improvement Challenge. This prioritises improving learner health and well-being through nurturing approaches and increasing participation in physical activity and sports. Finally, Scottish services follow the Getting It Right for Every Child approach. This approach is based on children's rights and its principles also reflect the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). This approach is learner-focused and requires an understanding of the well-being of learners in their current situation. It focuses on early and effective interventions in their lives and requires strong partnerships between organisations.

In UK (Northern Ireland), the Children's Services Co-operation Act places a statutory duty on designated public authorities to co-operate with each other and with other service providers to improve learner well-being. The government is also developing an overall strategy outlining how it will work collaboratively to improve learner well-being. This will promote co-operation among policy-makers and service providers. The draft strategy contains eight high-level outcomes covering eight areas of well-being:

- Physical and mental health

- Enjoyment of play and leisure

- Learning and achievement

- Living in safety and with stability

- Economic and environmental well-being

- Making a positive contribution to society

- Living in a society that respects their rights

- Living in a society that promotes equality of opportunity and good relations.

In addition to the overarching strategy, supporting structures will include systems to encourage the participation of learners and parents/carers in the policy process. This will ensure policy-makers take account of their views and perspectives in addressing issues of potential school failure.

4.4.3. Developing curriculum, assessment and pedagogy

Other policy approaches linked to school innovation for better learning outcomes concentrate on further developing the curriculum, assessment and pedagogy. Some countries aim to widen curriculum frameworks and to increase learner-focused measures, such as mentoring, personalised learning, assessment for learning and the use of information and communication technology.

For example, the UK (Scotland) Curriculum for Excellence provides a coherent, flexible and enriched curriculum from the ages of 3 to 18. It enables all learners in Scotland to gain knowledge and skills for learning, life and work. These skills will help them become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. Moreover, the 2016 Digital Learning and Teaching guidance reflects governmental efforts to enable Scottish educators, learners and parents to take advantage of digital technology. This can help raise attainment, ambition and opportunities for all. The national strategy sets out a series of national actions and local expectations structured around four objectives:

- to develop teachers' skills and confidence;

- to improve access to digital technology for all learners;

- to ensure that digital technology is a central consideration in all areas of curriculum and assessment delivery;

- to empower leaders of change to drive innovation and investment in digital technology for learning and teaching.

Learning through different paths in Malta

In Malta, developing e-learning educational content to better respond to learners is a national priority. This includes investing heavily in staff training to specifically explore ways that e-content may address the learning needs of those at risk of school failure. As part of this, each primary school learner from Year 4 upwards receives a tablet to further enhance e-learning skills.

The national initiative _My Journey: Achieving through different paths_ has been implemented in lower-secondary schools since September 2019. It replaces the previous secondary school model with personalised, relevant and quality education for all learners. It aims to move from a 'one-size-fits-all system' to a more inclusive and equity-oriented programme catering to learners' individual aptitudes. Alongside the compulsory core subjects, this programme allows secondary school learners to blend relevant and quality academic, applied and vocational subjects in a personalised and inclusive learning environment, enabling them to reach their full potential.

The intended inclusive and comprehensive learning programmes for the compulsory secondary schooling structure are driven by values of inclusion, social justice, equity and diversity, and the four main targets of the _Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014–2024_.

Due to this important reform, some new initiatives are in place:

- Laboratories have been set up in 13 secondary schools to offer facilities for teaching vocational and applied subjects.

- The Secondary Education Applied Certificate (SEAC) is being introduced during the 2019–2020 academic year.

- A career guidance platform has been created to facilitate career choices for secondary school learners between the ages of 11 and 15.

This initiative values academic, applied and vocational learning programmes equally. Learners will be able to participate in different forms of learning and assessments. They will also have the opportunity to reach the same level of qualifications and be equally employable, regardless of their study options.

Through relevant amendments, Serbia's Law on Primary Education supports a learner-focused orientation of the educational process. It does so by changing terminology (e.g. moving from 'teaching' to 'teaching and learning') and by emphasising a holistic approach to education, focusing on general interpersonal competencies.

Similarly, in Iceland, completing lower-secondary school is viewed from a competence-based, individual perspective. The National Curriculum Guide defines competence criteria for each subject area and subject. Learners should have opportunities to achieve the competence criteria of the various subject areas and subjects in different ways. These are divided into five categories: expression and communication, creative and critical thinking, independence and co-operation, using media and information, and responsibility for and evaluation of one's own education.

The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education in Finland provides the possibility of grade-independent studies to prevent school failure. This is a flexible arrangement that enables individual learner progress. It may be used to organise the work of the entire school, certain grades or individual learners (for example, as a means to support gifted learners or to prevent learner drop-out). The curriculum states that learners may progress according to personal study plans, rather than a grade-by-grade syllabus, in various subjects. A learner's personal study plan consists of modules defined in the curriculum. The modules are based on the objectives and contents specified for various subjects. Learner progress and completion of study modules are monitored regularly.

Distance learning is another possibility for responding to individual learner needs in Finland. It can be used to intensify the support for learning and school attendance offered by the school. It can also serve to provide instruction in certain exceptional situations, such as during long periods of ill health. Telecommunications and different teaching technologies diversify learning environments.

Finally, in Latvia, the National Centre for Education implements a European Social Fund project to develop the individual competences of learners from grades 1 to 4. The project aims to ensure the diversity of education services in Latvia, based on a personalised learning approach in mainstream education institutions. As a result of the project, at least 253 mainstream schools throughout Latvia are developing and implementing learner-focused approaches. They introduce new learning approaches (such as lesson cycles, study visits, etc.) and provide alternative, non-formal education activities (such as thematic camps, competitions and innovative curricula to attract learner interest). Learners with diverse needs also receive support from specialists such as special education teachers, speech therapists and psychologists. The schools have access to a comprehensive support system and teacher professional development opportunities.

4.4.4. Improving transition between phases of education

According to the policy and research literature, transitions between levels and types of schooling require careful consideration for preventing school failure. For instance, Estonia's Basic Schools and Upper-Secondary Schools Act includes specific provision for developing learners' transition plans. A transition plan is made for learners who, due to their SEN, need additional preparation and support to continue with their studies or move to the labour market. This plan specifies the subject matter and daily schedule of their studies. The transition plan takes into account the learners' knowledge and skills, the requests and needs of the learners and parents, and the school's facilities.

Along these lines, in Malta, meetings are held to prepare transition documents for learners with an official decision of SEN when they move from primary to middle school and then to secondary school. A transition co-ordinator also supports learners with SEN in the transition from compulsory schooling to further education or employment.

In Finland, compulsory-level schools are obligated to share information during school transition phases and when progressing to the secondary level. Meanwhile, Latvia has specific regulations on the transfer of learners to the next class. These include additional training measures provided throughout the school year within the standard curriculum framework. If a learner fails in an academic area, they have to be involved in additional

learning measures. These last no longer than two weeks and are completed before the beginning of the following school year.

Swedish municipalities are responsible for monitoring how young people transition from education to the labour market. The home municipality offers young people appropriate individual measures to motivate the individuals to commence or resume education. The municipality documents its actions appropriately.

> **Individual transition plans in Serbia**
>
> According to Serbia's Law on the Education System Foundations, the institution a learner is transitioning from should co-operate with the institution the learner is transitioning to. Joint activities between the institutions should contribute to successful transition and continuity of education and childcare.
>
> Serbia has also recently published a new rulebook that describes the individual education programme. In addition to personalised teaching and learning, this programme can contain a transition plan for learners who move to the second level of education or to another educational institution. The rulebook regulates the criteria and standards for providing additional educational, health and social support to learners to facilitate their transitions.

Finally, in Ireland, the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme is a key element of the DEIS School Support Programme. The HSCL Co-ordinator works primarily with the key adults in a child's life to empower them to better support the child's school attendance, participate in education and develop positive attitudes to lifelong learning. The HSCL Co-ordinator supports transitions from early years to primary, primary to post-primary, and post-primary to further and higher education and employment.

4.4.5. Providing career support and flexible career pathways

Another group of policies on preventing school failure focuses on providing career options for learners. Career pathways in the participating countries encompass a wide range of legislation, education and training structures. Work-based learning has been strengthened, notably in the form of apprenticeships. Also, formal VET allows more learners to progress and upgrade their qualifications.

For instance, raising the quality of apprenticeships is a top priority for Malta's education system. The Work-Based Learning and Apprenticeship Act provides regulations, governance and administration of accredited training programmes for VET work placements, apprenticeships and internships. Malta has also identified the need to continue developing VET within secondary schools. It is doing so through the introduction of new VET and applied subjects. The Faculty of Education, the Institute of Education and the Ministry for Education and Employment are currently conducting teacher training for vocational and applied subjects. VET subjects form part of the Secondary Education Certificate.

> **Provision for career support in Estonia**
>
> If a school so decides, additional studies may be offered to basic school graduates who need additional preparation and support due to their special educational needs (Basic Schools and Upper-Secondary Schools Act, § 50). The duration of additional studies is one academic year. Learners are provided with general academic studies and assistance in developing social and independent skills. Vocational training is carried out in co-operation with a relevant vocational education institution or employer.
>
> The *Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020* also includes the following aims and measures on career support:
>
> - **Information and counselling services** to help individuals to make informed decisions about their career paths (career information and studies, information about employment opportunities, unemployment, wages and career counselling for different professions). Informed decisions allow a person to realise their potential while avoiding the pitfalls of societal gender and age stereotypes. An informed choice of specialisation helps prevent drop-out and creates a basis for the person to use the acquired knowledge and skills later in their work.
>
> - **Guaranteeing access to good quality vocational education and higher education** that addresses the labour market's needs. Financing principles will be developed to increase the efficacy of vocational education institutions, to decrease the number of drop-outs and to place greater value on quality. The results and effectiveness of these principles will be monitored. The Ministry of Education and Research has drafted an implementation plan and programmes to implement the strategy.

The UK (Scotland) strategy *Developing the Young Workforce* aims to produce qualified, work-ready and motivated young people with relevant skills to be the employees and entrepreneurs of the future. Additionally, the *Opportunities for All* policy supports all young people to participate in post-16 learning, training or work. It brings together a range of existing national and local policies and strategies as a single focus to improve participation in post-16 learning or training and, ultimately, employment. This is done through appropriate interventions and support until at least the age of 20.

In Finland, preparatory vocational education (VALMA) is intended for learners who would like to take a degree programme leading to a vocational upper-secondary qualification. VALMA education provides learners with knowledge and skills that will help them later in their vocational studies. VALMA education takes approximately one school year. During this time, learners can familiarise themselves with various fields and consider what they would like to study. They can also visit workplaces and participate in workshops.

Serbia's government adopted an annual plan for adult education and lifelong learning. This adult education programme was implemented in many schools across the country. It included part-time secondary education for learners older than 17. It also included retraining, additional qualification and specialisation activities in secondary schools.

The Irish Department of Education and Skills, the Tusla Education Support Service and other partners are reviewing alternative education options currently available. Their aim is to provide a more consistent alternative for young people who require an alternative to formal school-based education.

Finally, in Greece, the *A New Beginning for Vocational Education* policy initiative aims to improve the performance of the country's VET system and offer attractive and challenging pathways to all learners, including those at risk of educational disadvantage or labour market exclusion. In this framework, the Greek Ministry of Education has adopted specific educational VET policies with an inclusive focus, including:

- provision of newly designed, differentiated VET curricula based on the national economy's needs;

- provision of work-based training and learning both in and outside the formal education system;

- apprenticeship opportunities (i.e. introduction of an optional fourth year of vocational secondary schools combining school lessons with workplace training).

4.5. Overview of policy aims

This chapter has provided insights into 14 countries' policies on preventing school failure. The analysis shows that while nearly all countries have developed relevant policy frameworks, the policy aims vary greatly. Some countries emphasise targeted measures directed at the individual, and others refer to comprehensive measures intended to be school-wide or education system-wide.

Despite the varied definitions and approaches to school failure, common patterns among country policies include:

- the development of strategies to prevent early school leaving;

- targeting low learner outcomes;

- encouraging a whole-school development approach.

Table 1 provides an overview of the specific aims of comprehensive policies to tackle school failure at the educational level, as indicated in the survey responses of the 14 participating countries.

Each specific policy aim falls under one of the three broad thematic areas discussed in this chapter. It should be noted that the information in Table 1 is based on pre-existing concepts and ideas that were included in the country survey.

'Yes' appears when a country already has the given policy aim. 'No' appears when a country lacks the given policy aim. Such gaps may be possible indicators for future policy work. For example, in some countries, policy developments could focus more on increasing the involvement of parents/local communities, improving transitions, increasing learner-focused measures and/or addressing early tracking issues.

Table 1. Policy aims related to preventing school failure

Policy aim	Czech Republic	Estonia	Finland	Germany	Greece	Iceland	Ireland	Latvia	Malta	Serbia	Slovakia	Sweden	UK (Northern Ireland)	UK (Scotland)
Identify and support at-risk learners	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Develop curriculum, assessment and pedagogy	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Improve school organisation	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Increase engagement and reduce early school leaving	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

Policy aim	Czech Republic	Estonia	Finland	Germany	Greece	Iceland	Ireland	Latvia	Malta	Serbia	Slovakia	Sweden	UK (Northern Ireland)	UK (Scotland)
Reduce attainment gaps between different groups of learners	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Increase attainment in particular areas (e.g. literacy, numeracy)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Increase the use of learner-focused measures	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Improve transition between phases of education	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Policy aim	Czech Republic	Estonia	Finland	Germany	Greece	Iceland	Ireland	Latvia	Malta	Serbia	Slovakia	Sweden	UK (Northern Ireland)	UK (Scotland)
Increase involvement of parents / local communities	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Provide additional support for schools achieving lower outcomes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Address early tracking issues	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Support learner health and well-being	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Chapter 5 builds on this analysis to provide a comprehensive response to school failure. It suggests specific inclusive policy actions at different system levels.

5. INCLUSIVE POLICY FRAMEWORKS TO PREVENT SCHOOL FAILURE

The previous chapters provided an overview of existing policy information around school failure. Building on this overview, this final chapter suggests inclusive policy frameworks that policy-makers working to prevent school failure could consider.

The chapter begins with a section on the challenges for preventing school failure that countries indicated via the PSF country survey. It goes on to present key elements for preventing school failure within an ecosystem approach. It includes policy suggestions to overcome certain challenges.

In particular, this chapter recommends specific policy actions that can enable progress towards the goal of preventing school failure. It embeds evidence from the PSF Literature Review (European Agency, 2019a). It also discusses how policy for preventing school failure might support the achievement of current international and European policy goals, as presented in Chapter 3. The discussion references previous Agency project work and relevant policy recommendations from European and international policy documents.

5.1. Challenges in preventing school failure

In the PSF project survey, participating countries reported policy challenges that affect national efforts to prevent school failure. Particular areas of concern include:

- improving the implementation of inclusive policies;
- preparing school leaders and teachers to include all learners;
- widening the curriculum and assessment framework;
- reaching out to the most vulnerable learners;

- decentralising governance and funding;
- using effective monitoring systems.

The following sections discuss these issues in detail.

5.1.1. Improving the implementation of inclusive policies

In the project survey, several countries (Czech Republic, Estonia, Iceland, Ireland, Serbia and UK – Scotland) reported challenges in developing and implementing inclusive education policy.

Serbia recognises the need to bring its education system in line with the European Education Area. However, amendments to the 2017 Law on Primary Education allow for special classes for learners with disabilities, which is a form of segregation. Furthermore, regional differences in the resources available to schools, insufficient training of teachers and education professionals and the continued resistance of school staff and parents hamper the implementation of inclusive education.

UK (Scotland) also recognises regional disparities as a major challenge. There, local government authorities have the legal responsibility to implement policy. Each authority is different in terms of geography, wealth and demography. These factors can cause inconsistency in policy implementation. In addition, while consultation and collaboration with education authorities and other partners is a core element of the Scottish approach, gaining consensus for change can be difficult and time-consuming.

Czech Republic also stresses the need for appropriate legislative changes to improve the implementation of inclusive education. It is currently planning such changes. One specific issue is how to further develop pre-primary education to ensure learner engagement, and not only attendance.

Iceland points out the need to shift from compensation to intervention and prevention. It also seeks a rationalisation of all funding mechanisms to increase the system's capacity to be inclusive. The system needs to ensure that provision in schools is of the highest quality and that it enables schools to examine their own practices, as Ireland notes. Improving successful transitions for learners as they move through the education continuum is also a key challenge for Ireland.

Estonia suggests that removing obstacles and ensuring smooth transitions from one education level to another would help to prevent school failure.

5.1.2. Preparing school leaders and teachers to include all learners

Several sources in policy and research literature show that opportunities for learners to succeed in their studies greatly depend on school leader and teacher capacity (European Agency, 2016b; 2017a). Indeed, many countries identified increasing teacher competence as an area for improvement.

One of Slovakia's major challenges relates to implementing the National Programme for the Development of Education. Specifically, the challenge is to provide professional and methodological support for pedagogical staff in selecting and adapting the curriculum and developing school education programmes.

Greece stresses the need to increase incentives for inclusive education and enable stakeholders to act inclusively. Moreover, it recognises the need to provide appropriate pre-service and in-service training. This can empower teachers to respond to the diverse needs of all learners. Likewise, Latvia recognises that its present education financing model does not ensure that learners receive timely and relevant support. It also acknowledges the need for professional development of school leaders and teachers.

Finland highlights that multi-professional work in schools could be better focused and organised. Germany notes that co-operation and communication between teachers in different teaching functions and between the various professions is increasingly important. Therefore, degree programmes leading to teaching positions, in any type of school and at any level of schooling, should prepare prospective teachers co-operatively to take a constructive and professional approach to diversity.

On the surface, teaching standards continue to improve in UK (Northern Ireland). However, innovative work in teacher professional learning is not taking place consistently across the system. Similarly, one of the biggest challenges in Swedish schools is the provision of teacher skills. In-depth national investigations have led to suggestions on how to address the lack of trained and qualified teachers, school leaders and other school staff.

Finally, UK (Scotland) raises the issue of teacher recruitment and availability. Currently, there is a lack of appropriate practitioners to fully support policy implementation. This is particularly the case in some subject-specialist areas, additional support needs and rural areas. Furthermore, the recent mental health strategy has created a demand for counsellors who currently do not exist in the system.

5.1.3. Broadening the curriculum and assessment framework

In the project survey responses, countries consider a broad curriculum to be an important component of quality support for at-risk learners. Malta has pointed out that the standard curriculum is not appropriate for all learners and does not always meet their needs. Therefore, as Greece notes, it is important to set up curricula that promote inclusive principles in education.

Countries also comment on weaknesses in the current assessment frameworks, noting the need for different forms of assessment. For instance, Ireland acknowledges the challenge of reforming the state examination system to place more emphasis on continuous assessment. Ireland also raises the inconsistency of alternative educational options for learners who do not wish to remain in the formal school system.

5.1.4. Reaching out to the most vulnerable learners

In the country survey, Greece, Ireland, Malta, Serbia and Slovakia raised concerns about identifying and providing tailored support to learners from vulnerable groups. Serbia notes the inadequate provision of quality education for learners from vulnerable groups, including children with disabilities, children of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, children from rural areas, vulnerable children and children of Roma nationality. A strategic problem for Serbia is that only a small number of vulnerable learners are using the existing support and assistance systems. The country also lacks a standardised system for monitoring those learners' quality of life.

In recent years, Greece has faced serious challenges related to increased immigration and refugee flows and, consequently, the inclusion of immigrant and refugee children in its education system. The country has taken several steps in this area (i.e. Reception Structures for Refugee Education and Educational Priority Zones), but there is room for improvement.

Ireland notes that communities experiencing economic and other disadvantages may not place a high value on education. In Malta, learners who exhibit challenging behaviour may be suspended from school – occasionally for long periods.

These country-specific situations call for new and more intensified ways to support learners from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, including those who belong to national minorities.

5.1.5. Decentralising governance and funding

Some countries have highlighted the need to move away from top-down, centralised systems of support and funding. They favour the development of local governance and management of financial resources.

For example, Greece recognises decentralisation of the education system and firm funding policies for inclusive education as a necessity. For many years, some inclusive education measures (e.g. parallel support) were mainly funded by European Structural Funds. Recently, measures have been funded both by European Structural Funds and the country's public investments programme.

UK (Scotland) reports that different local authorities have varied needs, and funding allocation is not always responsive to local needs. Decentralisation of funding and decision-making may enable the system to be more responsive to local and learner needs at the school level.

5.1.6. Using effective monitoring systems

Another challenge for countries in preventing school failure is to develop empowered systems in which local data and evidence drive local priorities and improvement agendas.

Malta notes the danger that prospective school failures may go unnoticed and therefore the need for prevention and intervention may not be addressed. Finland points out the lack of national-level data on school attendance. Also, there are no national recommendations on when and how to tackle school attendance problems and early school leaving.

UK (Northern Ireland) faces the challenge of assessing which of its various policies and programmes are most effective. All national policies and programmes are delivered in school settings, many in parallel with other interventions. Therefore, it is difficult to disentangle one intervention from another. Additionally, school performance monitoring has not been as consistently robust as intended.

Finally, UK (Scotland) also notes that measuring the impact of any policy change is difficult. Thus, it stresses the need for smarter data collection and use. This can enable robust prioritisation, decision-making and improvement planning.

5.2. Specific policy actions to prevent school failure

The review of research and policy developments has revealed effective policy actions that can help to prevent school failure. These actions are mapped onto the Agency's ecosystem model (see section 2.2.1). This brings together the key issues related to preventing school failure that emerged from the analysis of the project findings.

The three wide policy areas discussed in Chapter 4 – increasing engagement and reducing early school leaving, targeting low levels of academic achievement and promoting a whole-school development approach – are inter-related and connected to the suggested policy actions. The policy actions are also situated within the four essential ecosystem levels (national/regional, community, school and individual), as discussed in more detail below.

5.2.1. Policy actions at national/regional level

According to the project findings, inclusive policy frameworks at the national and regional level (macro-system) that have the potential to prevent school failure should focus on:

> ### Reducing social inequality, promoting equity and tackling poverty

National and regional policies that affect healthcare, employment and social welfare are closely linked to preventing school failure (European Agency, 2019a). The rights-based approach that entitles all learners to high-quality education is firstly the responsibility of national- and regional-level education authorities.

In light of this vision, ministries can work to improve data monitoring, set policies around school leaving ages and develop targeted programmes in schools to prevent related difficulties from leading to school failure (ibid.). The UNICEF Office of Research specifically notes that: 'Greater equality does not come at the cost of average achievement; both are necessary to give all children a fair start' (2018, p. 4). Evidence also suggests that 'there is no systematic relationship between country income and any of the indicators of equality in education' (ibid., p. 10). Therefore, reducing social inequality, promoting equity and addressing educational disadvantage can and should be at the core of national efforts to prevent school failure.

> ### Supporting cross-sectoral collaboration between Ministries of Education, Health, Social Care, Housing and Labour

At the national/regional level, it is evident that preventing school failure is not simply the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. Ministries for Social Care and Welfare, Health, Housing, Labour and Employment should also be involved. Joint policies between ministries

that aim to reduce inequality and take a rights-based approach to equity and participation in society should be prioritised.

Cross-sectoral co-operation between Ministries of Education, Health, Social Care, Housing and Labour should run across multiple levels. This can encourage inter-agency and inter-disciplinary co-operation at the regional level. It can also promote cohesive provision of services and a continuum of support at community and school levels (European Agency, 2019a). Such overarching policy changes can make a difference for individual learners who might otherwise experience poor outcomes.

Improving school access and attendance

One primary action to prevent school failure is to improve access to and attendance at school. The PSF project has illustrated a wide range of country measures that focus on reducing early school leaving and preventing school drop-out. These are in line with the *Council Recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving*, which emphasises the importance of developing comprehensive education strategies to minimise early drop-out (Council of the European Union, 2011). These strategies should reach all groups of learners, especially those at higher risk of early school leaving. Groups include learners with a socio-economically disadvantaged, migrant or Roma background and those with SEN (ibid.).

As the OECD notes:

To be effective in the long run, improvements in education need to enable all students to have access to quality education early, to stay in the system until at least the end of upper secondary education, and to obtain the skills and knowledge they will need for effective social and labour market integration (2012, p. 38).

Developing effective on-going monitoring systems and quality assurance mechanisms

Policy strategies to reduce school failure are not enough; it is also necessary to regularly review the strategies' effectiveness. On-going monitoring mechanisms enable leaders at all levels, school staff and community stakeholders to identify unforeseen consequences. For example, some learners may have positive school and learning outcomes, while others do not (European Agency, 2019a).

Policy and public debates should also be informed by national data associated with preventing school failure. A recent Agency report on out-of-school learners calls for a better way to identify drop-out processes. This can inform the implementation and development of prevention policies (European Agency, 2019c). The report specifically notes the need for relevant staff training for identifying risk factors of school drop-out (ibid.). For example, if mental health is a factor, then schools should offer counsellors and psychological support for learners who need it. Furthermore, identifying processes within schools and systems that produce inequalities and discriminatory practices should also be part of monitoring mechanisms.

According to the UNICEF Office of Research:

International comparisons should consider not just how countries are faring in average educational performance, but also the degree of inequality among the students in each country (2018, p. 4).

5.2.2. Policy actions at community level

According to the project findings, inclusive policy frameworks at the community level (exo-system and meso-system) that have the potential to prevent school failure should focus on:

> **Improving access to and availability of community-based support services**

Several Agency projects emphasise the need for system leaders and policy-makers to improve access to and availability of community-based support services (European Agency, 2017e; 2018c; 2019b). These could include specialist services (e.g. health services, career support services, social services, etc.) to support all learners, particularly those at risk of failure and those with more complex requirements. They could also include mental health services and therapeutic interventions for learners and teachers (European Agency, 2019a).

In the project survey, some countries also stress the importance of promoting inter-connections between different system services. This can be a prerequisite for inclusive education that actively empowers school-level stakeholders to act inclusively for learners and their families.

> **Promoting co-operation between external agencies/services and schools**

Countries have indicated various policy developments related to learners' involvement in the local community, in the form of apprenticeships or work placements. Community involvement in schools has proved to have significant benefits for learner engagement and outcomes (European Agency, 2016b; 2018c). Community partnerships can be beneficial when schools work with community members, agencies, services, organisations, businesses and industry around a common goal: to promote learner outcomes (European Agency, 2018c). The PSF findings validate that when external agencies and services – such as childcare facilities in schools, speech therapy, counselling and mental healthcare – are in close contact with schools, learners can perform better (European Agency, 2019a).

> **Meaningfully engaging with families**

All relevant research and policy documents that were investigated emphasise that family involvement in school processes is key to preventing school failure. The PSF Literature Review added that parental and family involvement and influence in schools must go beyond shared activities (European Agency, 2019a). Country policies indicate different forms of meaningful family involvement to prevent school failure. Schools should pay

particular attention to the families of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. They could consider ways to enable parents to engage in their children's education, develop services to improve parenting skills, address family factors that might affect motivation and engagement and assist marginalised families (ibid.).

5.2.3. Policy actions at the school level

The project findings highlight the need for preventive measures to follow a whole-school approach and build capacity at the school level (meso-system and micro-system). Recent evidence encourages education professionals and policy-makers to transform schools into learning organisations to enhance learner outcomes (European Agency, 2018c; Kools and Stoll, 2016). For this effort, inclusive policy frameworks should promote effective school processes that have the potential to prevent school failure. Such frameworks include:

> **Developing inclusive school leadership**

Previous Agency work has highlighted the need to monitor school development through an 'inclusive lens' (European Agency, 2018c). School leaders are crucial in efforts to promote school development. They can play an important role in promoting a whole-school approach that is attentive to the needs of at-risk learners. However, there is still a lack of understanding of inclusive school leadership and how to ensure that all school leaders can attend to equity and meet the needs of all learners (European Agency, 2019b).

Indeed, analysis of the country responses showed that only a few participating countries address the role of school leaders in their top-level regulations or provide CPD activities and guidance materials targeting them specifically. Therefore, developing inclusive school leadership is a key policy area for improvement. In particular, policy should provide appropriate status for school leaders and enable them to:

- access support – benefit from opportunities to learn and develop, receive relevant information and have contact with a full range of stakeholders;

- access resources – develop the school workforce's capacity to support all learners, including those at risk of underachievement;

- have autonomy – make evidence-informed decisions and follow a course of action in all areas of school policy and practice;

- be accountable – take responsibility for their decisions and provide a clear rationale for their actions (European Agency, 2019b).

Preventing School Failure

Broadening the curriculum, assessment and pedagogy

Other policy approaches linked to building school capacity for better learning outcomes focus on broadening the curriculum, assessment and pedagogy. Slee (2018) stresses the danger of narrowing curriculum and pedagogy to compete with other school systems. In a think piece for the 2020 *Global Education Monitoring Report*, he states:

School systems compete with each other to improve performance in international testing programmes. This has a narrowing effect on curriculum and pedagogy as schools feel compelled to adopt strategies to train their students for improved test performance. This places great pressure upon schools, teachers and students. Students are streamed and banded – they are seen as the bearers of results. Some students show promise while others introduce risk (2018, p. 31).

The Agency's Organisation of Provision to Support Inclusive Education project recommends that rather than fitting learners into an existing system, countries should focus on a continuum of support. This can be done through 'more accessible curriculum and assessment frameworks' and 'greater flexibility in pedagogy, school organisation and resource allocation' (European Agency, 2014a, p. 23).

Providing a holistic curriculum is an important component of quality support for learners, especially those at risk of failure. One purpose of broadening the curriculum is to better engage learners so they see content as more relevant to life and work, not only subject knowledge. Broadening the curriculum can also ensure content is appropriate and accessible for all learners, including those with complex needs.

Finally, there is a need to introduce engaging teaching and learning approaches. Teachers should eliminate the idea of homogeneous grouping and learn how to work with heterogeneous classes. They must develop professional competences that allow them to account for learner diversity, recognise learners' strengths and barriers to learning and put in place appropriate pedagogical measures for prevention and support. To this end, it is necessary to ensure an effective continuum of support for all teachers' professional learning (including induction, in-service training and CPD) (European Agency, 2019d).

Providing career support and flexible career pathways

Easier access to VET and more flexible routes to qualifications for all is a current priority area in Europe (Cedefop, 2019). Providing appropriate career support in the form of information, advice and guidance to learners is a key strategy to prevent school failure (European Commission, 2018). The Agency project on VET formulated recommendations relating to the four areas or 'patterns' of successful practice that are likely to improve VET system effectiveness and the transition to employment. The project called on policy-makers to:

- set up a legal framework and agreement among all the services involved: education, employment and local authorities;

- put clear measures in place at the policy level so schools can establish and maintain resilient connections with local employers;

- provide adequate support for learners and employers in the transition phase from education and training to employment (European Agency, 2013b).

More recently, the Agency's report on out-of-school learners validates the need to provide adequate support to young people through appropriate career guidance and training programmes. Non-formal education programmes and those offering qualifications required by the labour market are also important and should be more recognised in society (European Agency, 2019c).

Supporting learner health and well-being

Health problems and poor mental health have been associated with a greater risk of drop-out and school failure. Creating a positive school climate and culture is a first and important preventive step. As the Agency's Raising Achievement project notes:

Learners who feel that they are part of the school community are more likely to perform better academically and be more motivated in school. This, in turn, can help to reduce feelings of isolation or rejection. The same principle applies to teachers and other stakeholders, who experience a sense of belonging (European Agency, 2018c, p. 15).

The PSF Literature Review has also indicated several studies that connect school failure to the long-term outcome of poor adult well-being. Therefore, it is vital to focus on school practices or targeted interventions that challenge low self-belief, eliminate barriers to learning and increase learner motivation and engagement. Improving access to mental health support for learners might also help to lower rates of poor academic outcomes and school failure (European Agency, 2019a).

Focusing on successful transitions over time

A common challenge for policy-makers is to find effective and sustainable ways to address transition issues throughout the different system levels. Fragmented learner pathways can create risk of drop-out and poor outcomes. The European Commission notes that:

Transitions … can be a moment where problems arise but also may reveal symptoms of other issues. Pathways encounter different ways of learning and being and this can be positive for learners, if these pathways are sufficiently flexible and provide appropriate guidance and support (2018, p. 1).

In addition to emphasising flexibility, guidance and support, the PSF Literature Review suggests avoiding early tracking into vocational or academic routes. It also suggests devising strategies to reduce anxiety for learners, especially those with learning difficulties, in the transition from school to adulthood (European Agency, 2019a).

5.2.4. Policy actions at the individual level

The PSF project indicates that focusing on system-level approaches to prevent school failure is important. However, a recent report on early school leaving in Europe notes that learners from poorer socio-economic backgrounds might benefit more from specifically designed policy measures (van der Graaf, Vroonhof, Roullis and Velli, 2019). The PSF project conceptual framework also stresses that preventive measures should preclude the need for compensatory actions, but further interventions can address any unintended challenges that arise (European Agency, 2019a). Therefore, member countries should develop policy frameworks that take individual learner needs into account.

These frameworks could include the following prevention and intervention measures supporting specific individuals (micro-system):

> **Strengthening personalised approaches**

Previous Agency work stresses the need for pedagogical approaches that go beyond teacher-led practices of 'differentiation' or 'individualisation' towards learner-centred, personalised classroom practices enabling 'deep learning' (European Agency, 2016b). A personalised approach to teaching and learning is particularly important to address the needs of at-risk learners, such as migrant learners and learners with SEN.

For example, a recent Eurydice report notes that migrant learners tend to under-perform and express a lower sense of well-being in school compared to native-born learners in most European countries (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019a). Therefore, personalised support may be especially necessary for individuals adjusting to new schools and environments, for example in the form of language education (NESSE, 2008). In addition, some learners may need to develop a stronger sense of belonging to school and community through clubs, extra-curricular activities and after-school programmes (European Agency, 2019a).

Finally, information and training about tiered models of support can increase the school workforce's capacity to respond effectively to individual needs. A promising approach that the PSF Literature Review suggests is that of Universal Design for Learning (Meyer, Rose and Gordon, 2014). This can help maximise teacher reach and foster motivated, resourceful, goal-directed learners (European Agency, 2019a).

> **Addressing low academic achievement as early as possible**

Adopting a national regulatory framework for high-quality provision from an early age is vital for ensuring positive outcomes when learners enter compulsory primary education. Early childhood education and care has recently been prioritised at the European policy level. High-quality early childhood education is now considered an essential foundation for lifelong learning and success in modern knowledge-based economies (European Agency, 2017e). This is validated in the recent *Structural Indicators for Monitoring Education and Training Systems in Europe* report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019b) and in

the *Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems* (Council of the European Union, 2019).

Investment in childcare and a well-developed system of inclusive early childhood education is about increasing educational environments' capacity to enable all children's inclusion, participation and engagement (European Agency, 2017e). For high-quality early childhood education, it is also essential to see children as active participants in their own learning and parents as partners of such services (Council of the European Union, 2019).

Investing in inclusive early childhood education does not necessarily mean raising the expected level of financial resources (UNICEF Office of Research, 2018). According to the country survey, some countries with limited financial resources ensure near-universal access to pre-primary learning and target inequality in reading performance among learners. This may not be the case in some countries with far greater resources.

Reducing grade retention

The idea that grade retention (holding learners back to repeat school years) can be beneficial for learning remains strong. Education professionals and parents often hold this view, while European policy documents treat it with scepticism (European Commission, 2012). The OECD notes the following:

Grade repetition is costly and ineffective in raising educational outcomes. Alternative strategies to reduce this practice include: preventing repetition by addressing learning gaps during the school year; automatic promotion or limiting repetition to subject or modules failed with targeted support; and raising awareness to change the cultural support to repetition (2012, p. 10).

The PSF project findings validate this notion and affirm that support structures should prevent early tracking and streaming of learners at an early age. According to the PSF Literature Review, as an alternative to grade retention schools can provide flexible individual support and targeted interventions for learners who fall behind their peer group (European Agency, 2019a).

Figures 2 and 3 summarise the aforementioned inclusive policy actions that are considered particularly important and explicit for preventing school failure. The specific areas are linked to the wider policy aims that are key priorities for preventing school failure (as discussed in Chapter 4).
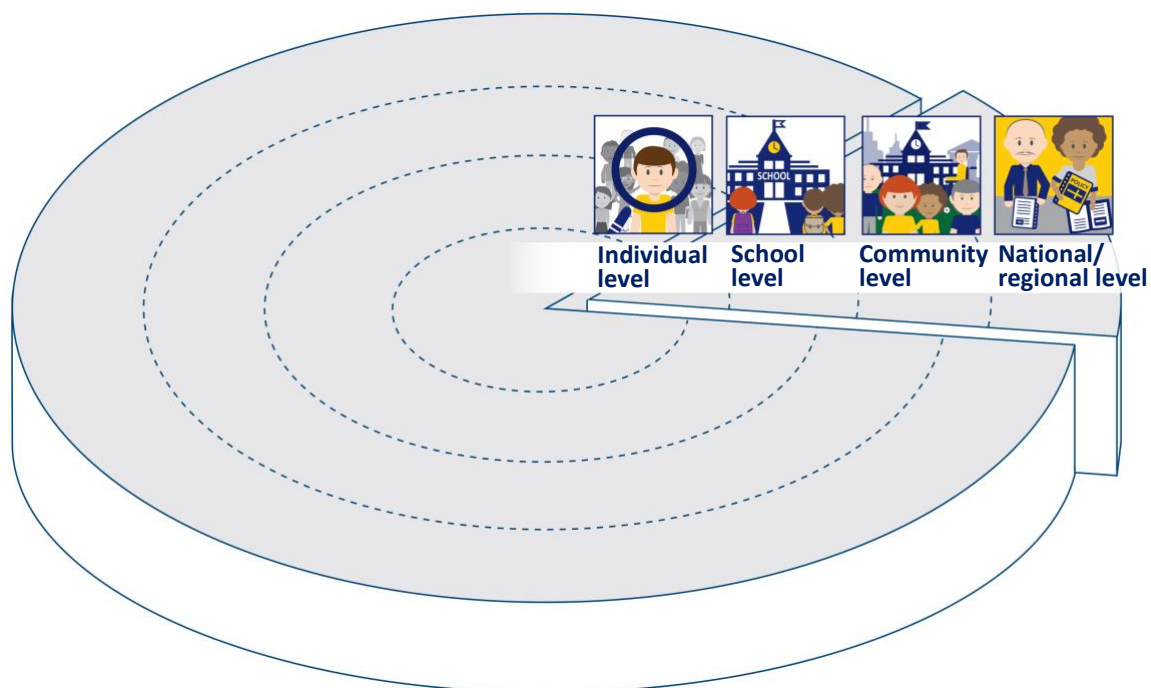
Figure 2. The four levels of the Ecosystem Model for Preventing School Failure

POLICY AIMS

1. Increasing engagement and reducing early school leaving
2. Targeting low levels of academic achievement
3. Promoting a whole-school development approach to teaching and learning

Individual level

- Strengthening personalised approaches
- Addressing low academic achievement as early as possible
- Reducing grade retention

School level

- Developing inclusive school leadership
- Broadening the curriculum, assessment and pedagogy
- Providing career support and flexible career pathways
- Supporting learner health and well-being
- Focusing on successful transitions over time

Community level

- Improving access to and availability of community-based support services
- Promoting co-operation between external agencies/services and schools
- Meaningfully engaging with families

National/regional level

- 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
- Developing effective on-going monitoring systems and quality assurance mechanisms
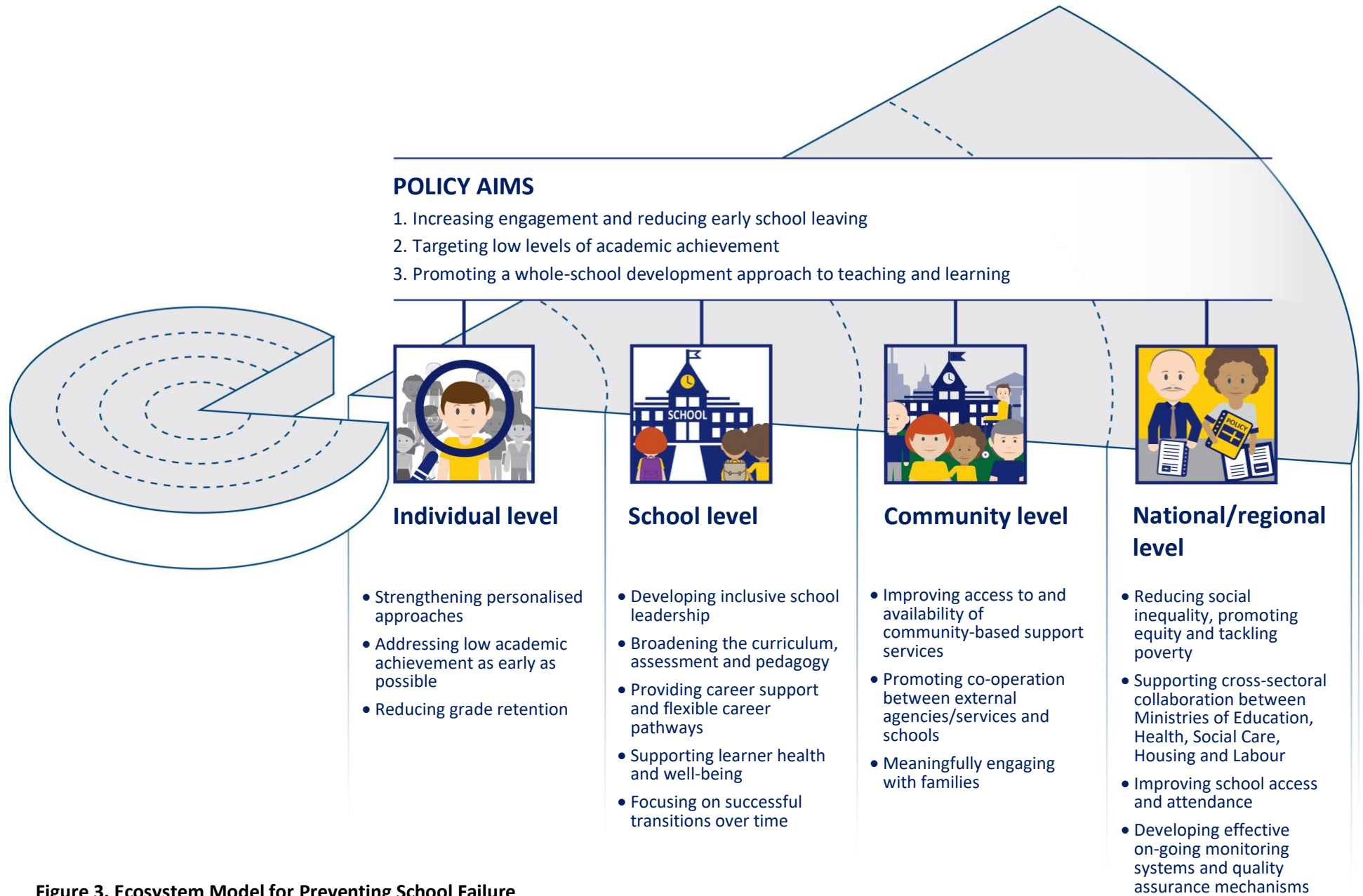
Figure 3. Ecosystem Model for Preventing School Failure

This overarching framework for preventing school failure incorporates and complements the EU and international frameworks for improving the quality of education for all learners. It enhances the frameworks' applicability by identifying inclusive policy actions for preventing school failure at the national/regional, community, school and individual levels.

The framework can serve as a starting point for national/regional and local conversations on how education policy can help to prevent school failure. Each 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 about contextualising policy principles and areas, (re-)allocating financial resources and developing synergies between local and system stakeholders.

6. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The Agency's PSF project has provided insights into research and policy on preventing school failure. This report captures those insights by focusing on two key objectives.

First, it presents perceptions and policy priorities around school failure. Despite the variety of definitions of and approaches to school failure, common characteristics emerge from reviewing the research and policy literature and the country information. Trends include developing strategies to prevent early school leaving, targeting low outcomes and adopting a whole-school development approach. Policy priorities that countries indicated include identifying and supporting at-risk learners, increasing attainment in particular areas, closing the attainment gap, developing curriculum, assessment and pedagogy, and focusing on the transition to adulthood.

Second, the report identifies factors within inclusive policy frameworks that have the potential to prevent school failure. It builds on the eco-systemic framework suggested by previous Agency projects (European Agency, 2017e; 2017f; 2019b). This framework includes key inclusive policies for preventing school failure at the national/regional, community, school and individual levels. Most of the suggested policies relate to key issues for high-quality inclusive education systems highlighted in other areas of Agency work. This project has identified and emphasised the specific policy areas that relate directly to preventing school failure.

The suggested policy areas for preventing school failure are interconnected with national/regional policies from different sectors of healthcare, employment and social welfare. Eventually, successful efforts to prevent school failure can ensure that all learners participate in their local communities, lead healthy lives and make meaningful contributions to society (European Agency, 2019a). This aligns with the international drive towards inclusive education (as per UN SDG 4) and the demand for a more inclusive society.

The PSF project indicates that the policy agenda should include multiple dimensions and a balanced approach to tackle school failure. Validating the countries' approaches, it suggests 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 should adopt a systemic, whole-school approach. At the same time, they must be learner-centred, focusing on at-risk individuals.

Overall, this project has provided evidence to suggest that high-quality inclusive education systems can be organised to effectively meet the diversity of learner needs and, ultimately, prevent school failure. Comprehensive policies that focus on equity and inclusion can have a transformative effect on the general effectiveness of the education system and on individual learner outcomes. Put simply, increasing the system's inclusiveness can lead to success for all learners. This report affirms that progress towards this goal is possible through a multitude of inclusive policy actions.

7. ANNEX

7.1. Project methodology

The PSF project encompassed desk research along two parallel activity strands.

The **first strand** reviewed and analysed international research literature on the prevention of school failure in relation to inclusive education. It aimed to identify key concepts and themes underpinning policy and practice for preventing school failure. This process resulted in the first project output, the PSF Literature Review (European Agency, 2019a), which provided an overview of European and international research on preventing school failure in relation to inclusive education. The review's findings informed and complemented the project's second strand and the development of this project synthesis report.

The **second strand** analysed existing national policy measures for preventing school failure. This involved a review of policy information at both international and EU levels, from:

- EU institutions (European Commission, Council of the EU, European Parliament);

- key international organisations with a focus on education (e.g. OECD, UNESCO, UNICEF);

- other organisations working at European level that analyse policy and produce guidance (e.g. Council of Europe, Cedefop, NESSE);

- previous Agency projects (e.g. Early School Leaving, Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education, Supporting Inclusive School Leadership, Country Policy Review and Analysis, Vocational Education and Training, etc.).

The review examined policy principles, regulations, measures and recommendations on preventing school failure. It included policy documents covering the period 2011 to 2019. Documents from before 2011 were only included when they provided relevant background information.

The second strand also involved collecting information from Agency member countries through a country survey. This survey was designed to collect information on the ways member countries define and deal with school failure in their national, regional and local policies. It focused on legislation, policies, strategies, approaches and actions related to school failure both in relation to the system and individuals. The information gathered from the survey made it possible to explore policy developments, taking different country contexts into account.

The analysis for this project synthesis report was based on 14 individual country reports received from Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Malta, Serbia, Slovakia, Sweden, UK (Northern Ireland) and UK (Scotland). These included up-to-date qualitative evidence of recent and on-going policy measures in the 14 countries.

The data analysis combined a deductive and an inductive approach. In an inductive or 'bottom-up' approach, the themes identified are strongly linked to the data. The deductive or 'top-down' approach is theory-driven, meaning that analysis is shaped and informed by pre-existing concepts and ideas (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Using a deductive approach, country information was first organised under broad thematic areas, similar to those identified in the PSF Literature Review. When country-specific data did not fall under the broad themes, an inductive approach was used to develop new themes or sub-themes.

Country information was synthesised into thematic tables. These were used as evidence to support the final analysis and to inform discussion of this project synthesis report. It complements other sources of information that offer descriptions of national education and training systems, such as the Country Policy Review and Analysis work (European Agency, 2018b) and Agency audits in Malta (European Agency, 2014b) and Iceland (European Agency, 2017g).

Overall, the PSF project outputs include:

- the international literature review (European Agency, 2019a);

- the thematic analysis of country information;

- the current project synthesis report;

- a summary of the project findings.

Figure 4 provides an illustration of the project activities and their associated outputs.
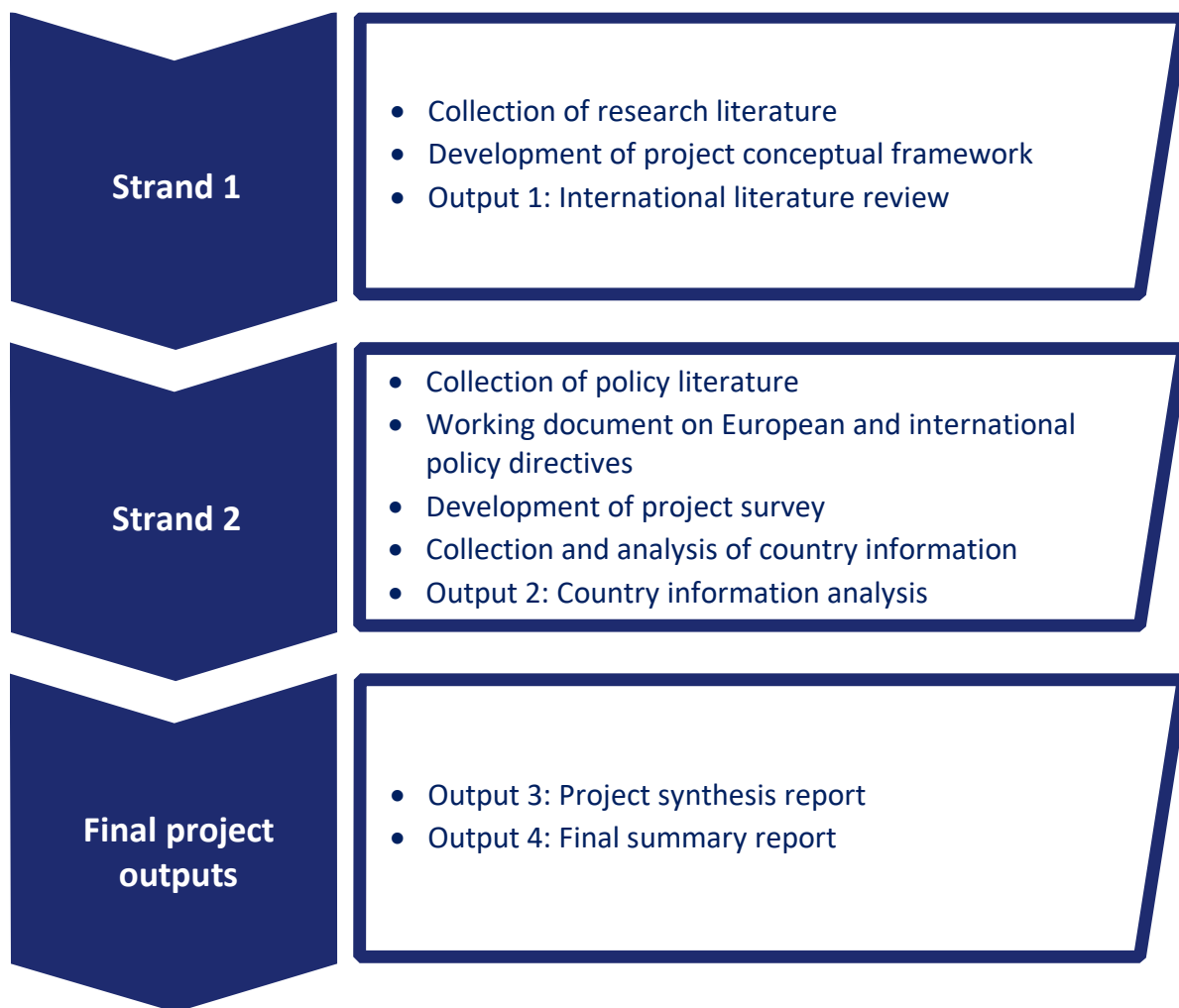
Strand 1
- Collection of research literature
- Development of project conceptual framework
- Output 1: International literature review

Strand 2
- Collection of policy literature
- Working document on European and international policy directives
- Development of project survey
- Collection and analysis of country information
- Output 2: Country information analysis

Final project outputs
- Output 3: Project synthesis report
- Output 4: Final summary report

Figure 4. Overview of PSF project activities

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