

# **Equal chances for every child: Education must be accessible and inclusive for every child**

**Eurochild's response to the public consultation Pathways to School Success Initiative by the European Commission**

**POSITION PAPER**



**Eurochild**  
Putting children at  
the heart of Europe

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## About Eurochild



Eurochild advocates for children’s rights and well-being to be at the heart of policymaking. We are a network of organisations working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. We influence policies, build internal capacities, facilitate mutual learning and exchange practice and research. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the foundation of all our work.

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This paper is Eurochild’s response as part of the Erasmus+ funded project ‘The ICAM Programme’ to the public consultation on the Pathways to school success – tackling underachievement in basic skills and early leaving from education and training.

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# Equal chances for every child: Education must be accessible and inclusive for every child

A position paper submitted by [Eurochild](#) on behalf of the [Including Children Affected by Migration Programme](#) to inform the development of the Pathways to School Success Initiative.

## Introduction

Education is often described as a gateway to children's futures. But for children living in poverty or social exclusion, this gateway is not accessible or inclusive, and it does not meet their needs. Therefore, for some children there is no gateway. They experience exclusion and are faced with social and cultural barriers to learning and development, which can have a long term impact on their future.

Many children living in poverty or social exclusion do not receive a healthy meal every day, cannot afford to attend school trips, buy the required books or school equipment, participate in after-school activities, or access online learning. Education is often assumed to be free for children, but for children growing up in poverty these extra costs are everyday barriers to their access and success in learning.

**To address these barriers, education needs to be child-friendly, child-centred, and accessible. Education systems [that focus on social inclusion and well-being](#) increase children's chances to reach their full potential.** Besides, school is not just where children learn, it is also where they have friends, form relationships, and establish social connections with peers.

It is now widely recognised that without the required social and emotional development children are unable to learn and reach their full potential while in school. This is a right, which children living in poverty and social exclusion are often denied. There are good examples of schools throughout Europe successfully addressing this issue and including social and emotional wellbeing as an inclusive part of a comprehensive curriculum. Additional social and emotional learning support, provided by experienced and knowledgeable staff, for children in need ensures no child is left behind.

Even before the pandemic, nearly one in four children lived in poverty or social exclusion across the European Union (EU). Eurochild's (2020) '[Growing up in Lockdown](#)' report demonstrated that the pandemic is massively impacting children's life chances and their physical and mental health across Europe. The school closures, due to the pandemic, have disrupted learning, social contact and exacerbated the digital divide that disproportionately impacts children living in poverty.

Children themselves have raised their concerns around mental health and well-being in education. According to the '[Our Europe, Our Rights, Our Future](#)' consultation with more than 10,000 children aged 11-17, **one in five children report growing up unhappy and**

**anxious for the future.** Children describe these alarming rates of mental ill-health as caused by anxiety about the future, bullying, challenges in coping with school-work and loneliness, and much of these experiences have been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Can the Pathways to School Success Initiative improve equitable access to education?**

The European Commission's new Pathways to School Success Initiative has the potential to support Member States look beyond academic results as the benchmark for 'success' in EU education systems. It is important that this initiative outlines a clear **framework for action at school and systems level to ensure well-being and inclusive education are prioritised.**

The Initiative should target disadvantaged groups who are more at risk of underachievement and early school leaving, including children with disabilities, with a migrant background or minority ethnic status, from low-educated families, children in alternative care and children living in remote areas.

The voices of children, especially those who are the most disadvantaged and marginalized by current education systems and practices, should play a central role in the development, implementation and evaluation of this initiative. Eurochild and RAND's [Study on child participation in EU political and democratic life](#) has shown that children are most familiar with participation practices at schools & offers valuable lessons for decision makers on how to ensure that the voices and rights of children are at the heart of all decision-making that affects them.

Finally, the Pathways to School Success initiative should make clear links with other EU tools, such as the newly adopted [Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee](#) and the new [EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child](#), to provide incentives and guidance for governments to increase public investment and support for accessible and inclusive education including the provision of social and emotional wellbeing as an inclusive part of the school curriculum. We need genuine commitment and strong political will to ensure these frameworks make a real difference to the lived experiences of all children.

### **Restoring relationships through social-emotional learning and well-being**

As part of the [Including Children Affected by Migration \(ICAM\) Programme](#), Eurochild brought together children, practitioners, civil society and policymakers in our recent conference, '[Equal chances for every child: Tackling inequalities and ensuring access to education for Europe's children in need during and after the pandemic](#)'.

During this conference, speakers and participants alike shared their views on how socio-emotional well-being and the inclusion of children are key conditions for ensuring equal access to education. Eurochild's President Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca captured these sentiments well:

*“There is no one-solution to ensure access to inclusive education - there has to be a comprehensive and integrated approach to meet the needs of all children in need. We must promote a systemic change that is focused on restoring relationships through social-emotional learning and ‘convivencia’ (living together in harmony). This also requires more investment in the professionals that work in education – not only teachers and pedagogues but also para-educationalists working in psychosocial fields.”*

It is also vital that the voices and rights of children are at the heart of all decision-making that affects them and to empower children to be themselves the agents of change. In his intervention, Victor, a member of the [Eurochild Children’s Council](#), closed the conference with a challenge for decision-makers: *“If not now, then when? If not us, then who?”*

## **Conclusion**

Given the clear need expressed by education professionals, civil society, policymakers and children alike, Eurochild and the ICAM Programme believe that the new Pathways to School Success Initiative can make a real difference in supporting school education to ensure more inclusive, fairer and more prosperous societies where all children and young people reach their full potential. We stand ready to support this initiative’s development and implementation.

Together, through focusing on inclusivity and accessibility, we can dismantle inequality in education, and build/develop equitable education systems that support all children to reach their full potential.